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Abstract

One might assume that whenever a group of people works in pursuit of a common goal, we have team work. It is rather more complicated than that, however. Bringing a group of people together to pursue a common purpose does not always produce the kind of results to be expected from team work. That is why the challenge today is how to make team work effective, that is, how to ensure that people really do work as a team. To work as a team is to work together in an organized manner to achieve a common goal. This requires understanding the interdependencies among team members and using them effectively in order to achieve the common goal (mission). Each team member has his own personality and brings to the task particular skills, knowledge and experience, which are different from those of other team members. That is to say, each team member has a certain aptitude and position. All these aptitudes and positions must be manifested and brought into play, so that they interact with one another in a coordinated way in pursuit of the goal. All are necessary for team work to be effective.

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TEAM WORK

What a team is and what it is not

There is a lot of talk about team work nowadays. People say, for instance, that football teams are a good example of team work, that the members of the government work as a team, that associations and NGOs team up with one another, or that business and industry are unthinkable without team work. There is no question that team work is an essential tool for tackling increasingly complex tasks in an ever-changing environment. In fact, one of the features of organizations in the last two decades of the twentieth century was their emphasis on team work¹. Teams are created in specific areas of the company to achieve common goals. There are supervisor teams, management teams, cross-functional teams, etc. Presumably, whenever a group of people works in pursuit of a common goal, we can say we have team work. However, it is rather more complicated than that. Bringing a group of people together to pursue a common purpose does not always produce the kind of results to be expected from team work. That is why the challenge today is how to make team work effective, that is, how to ensure that people really do work *as a team*. Accordingly, it may be helpful to first stop and consider what team work is and what it is not.

To work as a team is to work together in an organized manner to achieve a common goal. This requires understanding the interdependencies among team members and using them effectively in order to achieve the common goal (mission). Each team member has his own personality and brings to the task particular skills, knowledge and experience, which are different from those of other team members. That is to say, each team member has a certain aptitude and position. All these aptitudes and positions must be manifested and brought into play, so that they interact with one another in a coordinated way in pursuit of the goal. All are necessary for team work to be effective.

If people use their aptitudes and positions in an isolated way without taking other team members' aptitudes and positions into account, they are not working as a team. Rather, they are working "on their own in company", like workers on an assembly line, even though the result occasionally may be more than the sum of their individual efforts. The team members' aptitudes and positions emerge but do not effectively engage with one another in pursuit of the common goal. The opportunity to achieve all that could be achieved given effective coordination is wasted. This problem can become ingrained in cross-functional top management teams, for

¹ See *When Teams Work Best*, Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson, Sage Publications, 2001.

example, where general, marketing, finance and sales managers do not always see the point of joining forces and tend to treat each department as a watertight compartment. They fail to detect the needs of other areas and the interdependencies between them. In short, individualism prevents them from grasping the interdependencies among team members.

Nor is it team work when each person's personality, knowledge, skills and experience are diluted among those of the other team members. If each member's aptitude and position do not add specific value to the team, then the team is not working as a team. Instead, the team obeys a homogenous "schoolyard" dynamic and the wealth that comes from diversity is squandered. People's aptitudes are not manifested or put to work, and nobody knows either his own position or that of his fellow team members. The opportunity to achieve all that could be achieved if each person were in his proper place is wasted. This problem can become ingrained among the members of a department, for example, where there is a tendency for everybody to do things in the same way. In other words, homogeneity can prevent a team from benefiting from the interdependencies among its members in the same way that individualism can.

Team work requires the exercise of certain essential capabilities, such as giving and receiving feedback, being adaptable and managing time well. Also, team members must adopt certain inner attitudes in order to make the most of the abovementioned interdependencies. Listening, collaboration and optimism are essential ingredients of the sporting attitude or "team spirit".

Lastly, in order to work as a team we must understand that every work team goes through different phases, following a natural pattern. It is important to set the right atmosphere and pace for each phase. In doing so a lot may be gained from the different aptitudes of team members.

Personality in team work

Personality emerges as one of the key factors of individual aptitude in the play of interdependencies among team members. We shall therefore look at how personality influences the roles people play in teams.

We all have certain genetically inherited traits of temperament and a certain character resulting from our upbringing and education, the circumstances and experiences of our lives, and our personal freedom. Personality is thus the sum of temperament and character. When people work in a team, their personality is expressed in a tendency to take on certain roles and avoid others. This is what Belbin and his team analyzed and tested in a large sample of work teams. Their results led to the development of the "Belbin test", which analyzes a person's preferences for particular team roles. The main roles in the Belbin model are:

- *Plant*. Creative, imaginative, solves difficult problems, finds new solutions and new ways of dealing with situations. Therefore, follows no rules or fixed, static procedures. Weakness: ignores incidentals and practical difficulties and is too preoccupied to communicate effectively.
- *Resource Investigator*. Extrovert, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities. Develops contacts. Weakness: may be over-optimistic, liable to lose interest in the task once the initial enthusiasm has passed.

- *Coordinator*. Mature, confident. Clarifies goals, promotes communication in team meetings to get everybody involved in the common project. Weakness: can be seen as manipulative and overly reliant on delegation, offloading work onto others.
- *Shaper*. Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. Has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles. Weakness: prone to provocation and liable to hurt people's feelings.
- *Monitor Evaluator*. Sober, strategic, analyzes all the options and makes accurate judgments. Weakness: may lack drive and ability to inspire others
- *Team worker*. Cooperative, perceptive, mild and diplomatic. Listens and avoids conflict. Weakness: may be indecisive in crunch situations.
- *Implementer*. Disciplined, conservative, reliable, turns ideas into practical actions. Weakness: somewhat inflexible and slow to respond to new possibilities
- *Completer Finisher*. Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors and omissions. Delivers on time. Weakness: inclined to worry unduly, reluctant to delegate.
- *Specialist*. Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides scarce knowledge and skills. Weakness: contributes on only a narrow front and dwells on technicalities.

Knowing what our own dominant role is and also that of other team members will help us to benefit from the variety of aptitudes and *interdependencies*. Diversity is enriching, as it helps us achieve more and better results. However, there are other things to be taken into account besides personality.

Aptitude in team work

Aptitude is capability, sufficiency, suitability. Knowing one's own capabilities is the first step toward finding the best way to contribute to team work. A person's capabilities are not confined to personality or the dominant role she tends to adopt when working in a team. Prior experience and acquired knowledge are capabilities too. In fact, people often are brought into a team because they are experts in a particular field, through experience or training. Therefore, besides knowing our preferred or dominant *team role* (e.g. "monitor evaluator"), we need to be aware of our *position* in the team and the knowledge and experience we are expected to contribute (e.g. financial expertise).

Once I know my own aptitude and position, I need to ask myself the following questions: What is my personal mission, my differential contribution going to be? And more immediately, how I can actually make that differential contribution? The answer to the first question follows almost instantly once I know my personal aptitude and position. We shall therefore consider the second question: How can I fulfill my personal mission and make my differential contribution?

The first step will be to orient our dominant role toward optimizing and integrating our knowledge and skills, so as to strengthen our position in the team. Continuing with the previous example, assuming I have been brought in as an expert in finance, I can orient my dominant role as "monitor evaluator" in such a way as to reinforce my financial expertise. I can analyze all the financing options and possibilities, for instance, and try to form strategic judgments about them. Besides strengthening my position as a finance expert, the results will

no doubt be more conducive to successful team work than if I try to build a huge network of contacts when I lack the skills of a “resource investigator”.

A second step will be to focus on interdependencies. In other words, I need to analyze my internal suppliers and customers in relation to my position and aptitude in the team. That is, I must stop and think who can best support me in my personal mission (internal suppliers) and who can I help to fulfill his personal mission more completely (internal customers). Continuing with the same example, if I am a finance expert and my dominant role is “evaluator”, then I might need the help of a “completer finisher” to meticulously check through certain Excel spreadsheets. Or I might want a “resource investigator” to put me in touch with certain bankers. Conversely, if I want to contribute to the success of the team as a whole, I must ask myself how I can best contribute to the work of certain team members. For example, there may be a “plant” in the team who needs my capacity for precise strategic analysis and judgment in order to know whether her ideas are feasible or not. Or I may be able to provide a “team worker” with the detailed and accurate financial information she needs in order to decide on a certain matter.

Lastly, there are certain essential capabilities that all team members must exercise. The fact that they are essential does not mean that they are easy, however. They include the ability to give and receive feedback, the ability to adapt, and the ability to manage time effectively. Let’s take a brief look at these three.

- *Giving and receiving feedback.* To give a person feedback is to give him information about his work and the way he does it. And to receive feedback is to receive information about our own performance at work and the way we work. Giving and receiving feedback is a necessity in team work, yet it is not always handled properly. Why are we so imprecise when giving and receiving feedback? We tend to get carried away by immediate feelings and emotions, which color our judgment, making the feedback less objective. When giving negative feedback, we find it difficult to say exactly what is wrong and in what way the actual results fall short of expectations. If the feedback is positive, we tend to be very sparing in our praise, perhaps out of misplaced modesty or perhaps out of laziness, or because we underrate the person who has done a good job. When receiving feedback, we tend to take criticism personally and refuse to accept it as an aid to personal growth. If the feedback is positive, sometimes we reject it, again out of misplaced modesty or obsessive perfectionism. Other times, we are so euphoric we are unable to carry on improving.
- *Adaptability.* Adaptability is the ability to accept and adjust to new people and circumstances. We may find it difficult to bow to the opinion of the majority if we have strong views of our own. It sometimes takes a great effort to accept other personalities, other ways of doing things, other preferences, a change of plans, etc. Without a constant effort to be flexible and adaptable, we are in danger of falling prey to individualism. That is why it is important to learn to manage conflicts and try to understand others without judging them.
- *Managing priorities and commitments well.* To manage priorities and commitments effectively is to plan ahead, giving each matter the importance it deserves, organizing ourselves so that we deliver our part of the job on time, avoiding interruptions, being punctual, and so on. It is important to respect and give priority to team meetings and do our best to ensure that, whether they are conducted face-to-face or online, they start punctually, time limits are respected, and the agenda is adhered to.

In short, knowing our own aptitude and position and those of other team members will help us make the most of the interdependencies among us. And if we deal successfully with the interdependencies, we will work well as a team. Nevertheless, to handle the interdependencies effectively, we need certain essential capabilities, such as the ability to give and receive feedback, the ability to adapt, and the ability to manage priorities and commitments. And we also need certain *attitudes* that are associated with each of these capabilities.

Attitudes in team work

An attitude is a mental willingness or predisposition. Working as a team is clearly no simple matter. We all find it difficult to give and receive feedback, adapt to other personalities and circumstances, and manage priorities and commitments effectively. That is why we badly need to adopt certain inner dispositions that will help us broaden our limited view of the world and open our mind to other perspectives. The following are some of the inner attitudes required:

- *Attitude of listening.* To listen to is to pay attention. It may seem easy enough, but in practice this is a difficult attitude to adopt. All too often we have prejudices about situations, people and things that distort our view of reality and prevent us from seeing things as they are. One way to overcome this is by taking an attitude of receptive and active listening, making an effort to understand other people's point of view and promoting constructive dialogue among team members. We need an attitude of listening in order to give and receive feedback properly. Constructive feedback always starts with effective listening.
- *Attitude of collaboration.* To collaborate is to be always willing to work toward the common goal and share successes and failures with others. The first manifestation of an attitude of collaboration is respect: respect for people, their time and their needs, and respect for team decisions, even if they contradict one's own personal opinion. Another way of collaborating is by taking on certain roles² or attitudes when one realizes that the team needs a push in a certain direction. For example, if the team needs more data and technical information, we can help to gather it. If a particular issue needs more discussion and closer involvement, we can do our best to promote communication. If the team's principles, or even its goals, need reconsidering, we can question them. If I find myself unable to contribute, communicate, or question on my own behalf, I can ask a natural contributor, communicator or questioner in the team to do it for me. Another way of collaborating with the team is by neutralizing roles and attitudes that undermine team cohesion. For instance, we might encourage a doubter to voice his opinion, tactfully cut short a rambling digression, prevent a dominant speaker from monopolizing the debate, or challenge a defeatist to come up with specific solutions. We need an attitude of collaboration in order to manage our priorities and commitments well. Effective management of priorities and commitments is founded on respect for people, their time and their needs.

² See "Los roles en un equipo de trabajo: luces y sombras", Pablo Cardona and Nuria Chinchilla, technical note of the Research Department at IESE, 1998 and "Leadership in work teams", Pablo Cardona and Paddy Miller, technical note of the Research Department at IESE, 2004. See also *Making groups effective*, Alvin Zander, Jossey-Bass, 1994.

- *Attitude of optimism.* To be optimistic is to see things in the most favorable light. It helps boost morale and give team members encouragement. When a person is positive, she is more likely to enjoy her work, get involved in the team's goals and feel more strongly motivated. She is also more likely to be ambitious, that is, to set challenging goals for herself and others and pursue them resolutely. It is important that we accept successes and failures as an opportunity to learn. We need an attitude of optimism in order to develop our ability to adapt. We will find it much easier to adapt to other personalities and circumstances if we have a positive attitude and are willing to learn.

The list could be extended, but the essential idea is clear enough already. These attitudes make up what we know as the “sporting attitude” or “team spirit”. To foster this spirit we need to *encourage the social side* of team work, because a team is a social organization. This means that team meetings, dinners, coffee breaks, or outings are not a waste of time, but a stimulus to sociability. Having discussed aptitudes and attitudes in team work, we shall now consider how they interact with the typical team dynamic.

Phases of team work and how they relate to the aptitude and attitude of team members

The phases of team work have been widely discussed. We return to the subject in order to draw attention to the fact that the pace and atmosphere of each phase can be improved by exploiting team members' aptitudes and interdependencies.

In the classic model there are four phases in team work. The first is team building, which is when the team members get to know one another and explore the possibilities. Until everybody feels she is accepted by the other team members, this phase tends to be accompanied by anxiety and insecurity. The second phase is one of debate, or defending one's own ideas and views against group challenges. Often there is a struggle for leadership within the group and disagreements arise that may end in emotional conflict if they are not stopped in time. The third phase is one of organizing, or formulating an action plan: goals, rules and processes. In this phase the codes of acceptable and unacceptable behavior are present in the atmosphere, even if unwritten. Lastly, the fourth phase is that of implementing the action plan, of collaborating and cooperating to obtain results. In this phase the team members feel they are close to their goal and so have a sense of achievement and unity.

How can the team members' aptitudes be used to assist these phases?

The roles of “resource investigator”, “coordinator” and “team worker” may be particularly important in the first phase. Why? Because team building requires a good communicator who explores opportunities and contacts; a person who inspires trust and confidence in the team and promotes discussion; and a good listener and who is constructive and avoids friction. Through trust building the team becomes more cohesive.

In the second phase the roles of “plant”, “specialist” and “evaluator” may become more valuable. Why? Because debate calls for a person with imaginative ideas; someone who contributes substantial knowledge on the main issue; and someone who can make sound strategic judgments on the practical feasibility of the options under discussion. Through information exchange and communication the team learns to make decisions.

The role of “implementer” may prove fundamental in the third phase. Why? Because rule making requires a person who is disciplined and practical, and who can organize what the team has agreed to do. Through organization the team establishes an action plan.

Lastly, in the fourth phase the decisive roles are likely to be those of “shaper” and “completer finisher”. Why? Because implementation calls for a dynamic and challenging person who is undaunted by obstacles; and also for someone conscientious who cares about the details and goes all out to achieve the goal. Through collaboration on the team obtains results.

In summary, the play of interdependencies is part of the characteristic dynamic of team work. Attitudes are important in every phase if the team is to benefit from the interdependencies.

A final question is whether team work nowadays is best done on-site or online.

Widespread adoption of new technologies has opened hitherto unforeseen possibilities for team work. Team members can be in touch and communicate via e-mail at any time of day or night. They can also work independently. This has advantages and disadvantages.

The main advantage of “virtual team work” is that it can be continual. There is no need to wait for the next meeting. Face-to-face meetings are no longer indispensable, as people can meet across huge geographical distances. Thanks to the Internet, people have better access to information and useful resources can be made available to all team members very easily. Used properly, online communication is fast and fluid. The new technologies not only save costs in space and time, but also make team members more independent. As they do not have to meet in person so often, they are free to concentrate on the *specific value* they will contribute to the team. Having too many face-to-face meetings often leaves people with little time to do their job properly. Virtual team work gives people more time to expand their knowledge and so reduces the risk of a “schoolyard” dynamic.

On the other hand, virtual team work also has certain disadvantages. Coordination and collaboration may suffer if specific circumstances are neglected. First, when working as a virtual team it is more important than ever that team members know and share the same goals and working methods. Coordination is vital to prevent rampant individualism. It may be necessary to appoint someone specifically to coordinate. Collaboration is especially important in teams made up of people from different countries, where everyone must take cultural diversity into account. This may influence the way people work and fulfill their personal obligations. The organizational culture in which a person is embedded also plays a role. It affects the way people work, their expectations and the team dynamic³. These special challenges of coordination and collaboration make it highly advisable to hold face-to-face meetings at regular intervals, as well as using videoconferences. It can be a great help to meet other team members in person and so be able to place them mentally in the place where they work.

In fact, the distinction between on-site team work and virtual team work is becoming blurred, as team work tends to take place in both dimensions. Virtual work may be more important in number of hours, but regular face-to-face meetings will be essential for two reasons. The first is

³ See *Mastering Virtual Teams*, Deborah L. Duarte and Nancy Tennant Snyder, Jossey-Bass, 2001.

that if the team members are not physically present, they may have more difficulty appreciating different ways of seeing and doing things. The second is that without regular face-to-face meetings the social side of team work will be neglected. It is important not to forget that a team is a social organization and if the team does not socialize, it may not have any team spirit. And that means it may cease to exist as a team. Therefore, for teams to work properly, regular face-to-face meetings are almost a necessity. Within these coordinates, combining physical presence and virtuality, it is even more important to have a common mission, clear goals and a thorough grasp of the play of interdependencies.

In today's intensely competitive world, individualism is doomed to failure. Yet team meetings are not enough on their own either. We must learn to work as a team. To achieve that we must know our own aptitude and position and that of the other team members, take the characteristic team dynamic into account, combine virtuality with physical presence, and adopt a team spirit of sporting collaboration and continuous learning.