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## Teams & Teamworking

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### What is a team?

There are a number of definitions of teams and team working. Examples are:

- groups of employees, normally between 3 and 15 members, who meet with some regularity in order to work interdependently on fulfilling a specific task (Mueller et al, 2000);
- a group with a defined organisational function and identity, shared objectives or goals, where the members have interdependent roles (West, Borrill and Unsworth, 1998);
- A group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose and hold themselves mutually accountable for its achievement (Constructing Excellence)

These definitions can be synthesised into four core features of teams:

1. A group with a defined organisational function and identity;
2. a group with shared objectives and goals;
3. interdependent roles (i.e. team members need to cooperate to get the job done)
4. mutual accountability (i.e. team members holding each other individually and collectively responsible for the team's performance).

### What is effective team working?

Parker and Williams, 2001 identify four key criteria for a team to be considered effective:

1. High levels of performance (e.g. high productivity, quality and cost effectiveness);

2. Team member well-being (e.g. high job satisfaction, commitment to the organisation and low stress);
3. Team member behaviour (e.g. low absence and/or turnover);
4. Team viability (i.e. a team that can continue to work together).

### How is effective teamworking achieved?

The question arises how this high level of effectiveness can be achieved. In addressing this question, it should be noted that there are a variety of different forms of teamworking used within organisations. Teams differ from one another in a number of ways - whether they are temporary or permanent, where people in the teams are drawn from, and whether team members are voluntary or not.

One key criterion that distinguishes between different types of teams is whether the team processes information (e.g. planning, creating and deciding, such as in a process improvement team) or produces goods and services. Teams delivering RSL projects are clearly producing goods and services.

Another criterion relates to whether the team is temporary or permanent. Teams that produce goods or services tend to be relatively permanent. Teams delivering RSL property development or reinvestment projects are relatively permanent, because of the length of time involved in delivering the project.

Another dimension is the extent to which the team activities involve core tasks. Sometimes the team activities are carried out of the job (such as an internal review seeking to improve processes and procedures), whereas in other teams the team activities are a core part of the job of the individuals. Again, teams delivering RSL projects are undertaking activities that are very much part of their "mainstream job".

Other factors that will determine the type of teamworking involves the degree of autonomy that the team has in decision-making, the control it has over how it organises its work, recruits its team members and manages its relationships with the team member's various organisational managers. Type of team leadership (ranging from managerial/supervisor through to self-managing) will also affect the type of teamworking.

As there are a variety of ways of teamworking, there will be different solutions for these different styles. However, Constructing Excellence considers that effective Teamworking is primarily dependent upon a number of factors being in place:

- A team whose membership, size and resources match the task;
- good leadership and attention to teambuilding;
- commitment by team members to understand and identify with one another's goals;
- the development of team goals - a shared vision;
- A sense of common ownership of the task at hand joint responsibility for its achievement;
- coordinated effort and planned sharing of tasks evenly across the team;
- the open exchange of information within the team;

- honesty and frankness among team members.

## Key Processes

The Key processes required for effective teamworking may be summarised as:

1. Clarity over the teams objectives (agreed and set by the project sponsor and key stakeholders);
2. Selecting appropriate team members (ensuring that the team has the requisite mix of technical still skills needed to deliver the project objectives, but also selecting team members for their social and teamworking skills, having regard to personality types [Belbin etc] as much as is possible);
3. Effective leadership (helping the team to clearly articulated the team objectives and goals, creating a supportive climate of openness trust and respect, devising a work plan that allocated to find task that are meaningful and challenging, ensuring effective communication between all parties, ensuring good-quality feedback to the team on it's performance over time etc);
4. Social contact (delivered through working meetings that progress the task is to be undertaken, but also achieving the important team-building requirements of team members meeting and forming the important social bonds that can make teams operate much more effectively than groups of individuals);

## Teamwork Matrix

Constructing Excellence has produced an effective teamwork matrix which allows teams to score their performance across six aspects of effective teamworking. These are:

1. Team identity
2. Shared vision
3. Communication
4. Collaboration and participation
5. Issue negotiation and resolution
6. Reflection and self-assessment

If the team is able to progressively improve their scores against these aspects of teamworking, and if this is coupled with successes in the delivery of the project objectives (as measured by the projects performance indicators) then the team will consider itself to be a success, which further stimulates effective teamworking and higher levels of performance in a virtuous cycle.

(from "Constructing Excellence")  
**Leadership and team-building**

Leadership is critical to teamwork: the team leader is responsible for ensuring that members work together to achieve the goal or objective. On occasion, the leader must be able to inspire team members to 'go the extra mile'. Tasks allocated to individual members of the team should be meaningful and challenging ' people work better if the tasks they face are interesting, motivating and enjoyable.

Effective leaders aim to:

- keep participants focused and make the project as a whole demanding for individual team members
- ensure that the team has the resources and information necessary to complete its task
- create opportunities for all members to contribute to the task, and ensure that all feel their contribution is visible to, and valued by, the team as a whole
- avoid blaming individuals for problems in the project or in the team
- be aware of participants' loyalties to people - or organisations - outside the team
- be fair and impartial
- be willing to share credit with the entire team.

**Developing a shared vision**

In order to work effectively, a team needs to have a clear vision of what it wants to achieve. This must be one that motivates and inspires team members ' a future they feel is worth striving for. If a team is set an unattainable goal, it can have a de-motivating effect.

Teams are more motivated to deliver a vision that they themselves have developed. When team members believe they have made a real contribution to the overall vision they are likely to work hard to achieve it. Shared aims help to create a sense of common purpose and ownership, and promote team identity.

A short paragraph or set of bullet points are useful to summarise and encapsulate the principal elements of the team's vision and provide a mission statement. Team meetings are an opportunity for a periodic reminder of the team's vision. Individual goals underpin the mission statement, and an action plan sets out how each member's goals will be met.

A shared vision, expressed as a mission statement, should be:

- developed through negotiation by the team itself
- clearly articulated and coherently expressed
- re-stated from time to time
- periodically reviewed for its continuing appropriateness, particularly if circumstances or requirements change.

## Communication and collaboration

Communication is the process of transmitting and understanding information and ideas. Good communication is essential if a team is to collaborate successfully and make best use of its pooled knowledge. Open communication and information sharing:

- help team members to anticipate what they can expect from one another and when they can expect it
- eliminate surprises and make it easier for members to work together
- engender trust and familiarity among team members
- allow more forceful group behaviour, including the willingness to question and challenge in the search for better solutions.

Team members need to strive for clarity in communication, and to be patient, explaining and expanding where their ideas are unclear. It may be necessary to make underlying assumptions explicit, as options are negotiated and proposals explained.

Open communication requires:

- expressing ideas clearly and using body language ' relaxed posture, good eye contact and occasional pauses ' to show feedback is welcome
- good listening habits, such as re-stating others' ideas
- where necessary, seeking constructive clarification and asking supportive questions focused on what, where, how and why issues
- being flexible enough to take on board others' suggestions and to build on others' ideas
- between team meetings, keeping all those who need to know regularly informed of individual progress.

## Resolving conflict

Differing views and opinions among team members are inevitable. Ideally the team welcomes divergence and treats its members' expertise, experience, values and priorities as a source of energy and an opportunity for creative problem solving. Nevertheless, disagreements can occur among team members. They may arise from different expectations, ambitions, objectives or priorities, and concern the team's directions, goals, procedures or decisions. Identifying and resolving these is an inevitable part of the team process.

In practice, much apparent conflict often arises from simple misunderstanding, or from the assumptions or suppositions made by team members. Through communication, explanation and negotiation, conflict can often be resolved. Finding a middle ground that all parties are reasonably satisfied with, may be necessary. Less desirably, in the attempt to avoid conflict, some teams deliberately skate over contentious topics or adopt a superficial agreement that results when issues have not been directly addressed. Team members often feel dissatisfied by the inevitable compromises that result from this approach.

Conflict can also arise when people compete for a particular role in the team ' as leader, ideas-person, progress-chaser or critic. An awareness of each others' roles ' and how they can effectively complement rather than compete with one another ' is needed to resolve these kinds of conflicts.

In order to deal with conflict constructively the team should:

- discuss competing views, assumptions, opinions and priorities openly
- seek members' initial thoughts or guesses, and avoid recriminations if initial ideas subsequently need to be modified
- ensure communication, negotiation, information-sharing and co-operation are all encouraged.

### **Reflection and self assessment**

Teams often focus exclusively on the task at hand, and only rarely on the 'process' of teamwork. Yet teams which take time out to review processes are likely to be more effective than those which do not. Reviews of the interactions between team members can help to identify deficiencies and address how best to improve future performance. One of the first steps can be for team members to discuss and agree what exactly 'teamwork' means to each of them. Such a discussion might range across:

- the importance of identifying individual roles and responsibilities, and defining individual and team goals
- how to get the best from team meetings and encourage participation
- how to achieve effective communication and collaboration between team members
- how teams develop, and how to harness the collective energy and expertise of the members
- how to foster team identity, improve team effectiveness and cope with conflict.

Teams can also benefit from considering the social climate they create for themselves, and whether it provides adequate levels of mutual support for team members.

## Refs

*Belbin RM, 'Management Teams: why they succeed or fail'. Heinemann (1981)*

*Constructing Excellence: "Effective Teamwork - a Best Practice Guide for the Construction Industry"*

*Mueller, F., Proctor, S., & Buchanan, D. (2000). "Team working in its context(s): Antecedents, nature and dimensions". Human Relations, 3 (11), 1387 to 1424.*

*Parker and Williams: "Effective Teamworking: Reducing the Psychosocial Risks" Health and Safety Executive 2001*

*West, M. A., Borrill, C. S., & Unsworth, K. (1998). "Team effectiveness in organizations". In C.L. Cooper & I. T. Robinson (Eds.). International review of industrial and organizational psychology, Vol. 13 (pp. 1-48). Chichester: Wiley.*