

CREATING EFFECTIVE TEAMS IN A CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT: For over a decade, companies have been concerned that new graduates are often not prepared to work in jobs where they are required to contribute as a member of a team. In response, many educators have adopted team-based learning pedagogies, often referred to as cooperative learning. The use of teams has created additional class management issues and added to the complexity of class dynamics. While most students find team activities helpful, the authors have experienced a variety of problems encountered by various teams. For example, some class teams never function as a team, and the members end up working in subgroups or individually. There is also the risk that one member dominates the other team members or shirks his/her responsibilities.

It is important to give students time to develop their interaction skills. To help students get the most out of the team-learning experience and help them develop habits that promote positive team interactions, we present ten in-class team development activities. Because enhancing team skills is of secondary concern (first being mastery of course content), each activity is designed to take at most 15 minutes. The exercises may be used throughout a semester, or the professor may elect to implement one or a few of the activities. Regardless, these activities will help even the best performing teams become more functional, will reduce the likelihood of team conflicts, and help students develop team skills. These activities were modeled after those in Lencioni's *Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Leadership Fable* (2002).

INTRODUCTION: The typical business environment has become a place where in order to be successful, an employee must have specific competencies including technological, strategic, interpersonal, and cross-functional skills that add value to the organization (Van Eynde and Tucker, 1997). Teaming across organizational boundaries has become the normal way of conducting business in organizations. For example, a production manager will almost certainly have integrated product teams whose members evaluate existing operations, recommend improvements, and implement changes throughout the production process. In another example, rather than simply preparing cost reports and variance analyses, the controller is now a business partner who must successfully interact with others and is involved in making strategic decisions. Successful

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companies are those that can attract, develop, and retain talented employees (Barney and Wright, 1998; Stewart, 1999; Ulrich, 1998).

More than ever, firms expect their new-hires to be team players, creative thinkers, and articulate communicators. As organizations have changed their needs, structure and work patterns, business schools and faculty have been called to task to provide graduates capable of meeting these requirements. In response, many faculty now use some sort of team-based learning pedagogy. Students are encouraged by these faculty to be responsible, contributing team members in a variety of classroom activities that require self-initiated effort and encourage student preparation. However, few of us have been trained in educational methods and sometimes feel the need to intervene when a team is dysfunctional. The problem becomes what should one do when a team is not functioning well. This paper provides some tools to improve the chances that the team experience in your classroom is productive and positive.

The structure of this paper is as follows: First covered is the initiative behind adopting a cooperative learning pedagogy, followed by a review of the theory supporting team management. The next section describes ten team enhancement exercises, and the final section provides concluding remarks.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND TEAM THEORY: Although the traditional teaching model (lecture) continues to dominate contemporary education, this method is often criticized as failing to develop the necessary skills that students need (Albrecht and Sack 2000). For more than a decade, many groups have urged the academic community to modify business school programs so that graduates develop the skills required by employers. The AACSB, the Accounting and Education Change Committee, the Institute of Management Accountants, and the Boyer Report, among others have called for change in how graduates are being taught (AACSB 2001; Russell et al., 1999; Siegel and Sorensen, 1994; Boyer, 1992; AECC, 1990). Participative learning has been suggested as an alternative methodology because (1) it more actively involves students in the learning process; (2) it prepares students for the business world where they will work in teams; and (3) it reinforces and develops communication, intellectual, and interpersonal skills.

According to Kolb (1999), the ability to work as both effective team members and team leaders has become a critical management skill for the 1990s. The Corporate Design Foundation claims that US higher learning institutions are failing to keep up with business's need for professionals who know how to team up with other disciplines (Boyatzis, et al., 1994; Pierson, 1993; Behrman and Levin, 1984). In response to these concerns, most business and management schools have begun a systematic reevaluation of the quality and application of team methods and evaluation (Bilimoria and Wheeler, 1995). Many business school educators are now experimenting with cooperative learning innovations to help their students develop the critical skills that corporate America demands.

Business schools are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that teamwork and cross-functional team skills are important in preparing students for success in corporate America and globally. Teamwork helps students develop skills in cooperation, collaboration, and interpersonal interaction. To ensure that students gain cross-functional work skills, many business schools are experimenting with integrated curricula that require students from various backgrounds to work together in cross-functional teams to solve business problems (McQuaid and Stebbins, 1997; Boyer, 1990]. These integrated programs attempt to teach students skills that will help them deal with the increasingly complex organizational environment (McKinney and Yoos, 1998). Additionally, these integrative programs are intended to allow students to become engaged in the educational process by "learning to learn" (Boyatzis et al., 1994).

In sum, today's business education environment is responding to the challenge by organizations to fundamentally change the process of preparing business students for success in their careers. The introduction of active learning, team-based projects, and student responsibility for education are methods by which business schools are adapting their pedagogies.

Johnson and Johnson (1999) point out that asking students to access the team learning process and evaluate how well their team functions enhances the cooperative learning environment. Ellis and Fouts (1997) note that the cooperative learning experience may take a variety of different forms in the classroom, but the success of the experience depends on students working in groups or teams to achieve certain educational goals. They provide a structure in the Learning Together Model, which is a generic group process theory that places students in formal or informal base groups charged with solving problems, discussing issues, and carrying out projects and other tasks. This model is based on the following five key elements:

1. The professor must ensure that each student perceives that (s)he is linked with others such that the student cannot succeed unless the others do (positive interdependence);
2. The professor must structure individual accountability so that each individual becomes a stronger person in his or her own right;
3. The instructor must ensure that students promote one another's success by helping and supporting each other (team interaction);
4. The students must be taught the necessary social and small group skills, such as decision-making, trust-building, and conflict-management; and
5. The professor should schedule time for the student teams to engage in group processing, which is a form of continuous improvement (Johnson et al., 1998).

Based on the fourth and fifth elements, it is important to give students time to develop their team interaction skills. To help students get the most out of the team learning experience and help them develop habits that encourage positive team interactions, we present ten in-class team development activities. Because in most classes enhancing team skills is of secondary concern (first

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being mastery of course content), the activities are designed to take at most 15 minutes. The exercises may be used during a semester as a package or the professor may elect to implement one or a few of the activities. However, it should be duly noted that the effectiveness of the exercises is dependent on how they are administered and implemented in the class setting. In addition, there may be some problems that arise between team members that most faculty are not trained to adequately address. On those isolated occasions, it may be appropriate to because the activities build upon each other, maximum effectiveness is achieved when the ten exercises are used in a thorough and linear fashion. Regardless, these activities will help even the best performing teams become more functional and will reduce the likelihood of team breakdowns.

AN OVERVIEW OF LENCIONI'S MODEL AND DISCUSSION OF THE TEN ACTIVITIES:

A student in one of the author's classes was an intern at the Table Group, a management-consulting firm that specializes in executive team development, which was founded by Patrick Lencioni. This student shared some of her experiences and recommended Lencioni's books. One, in particular, *The Five Dysfunctions of A Team: A Leadership Fable*, was relevant to the authors' experiences with team learning. In the book, Lencioni describes in pyramid form the five issues that make up an interrelated model on team dysfunctions. The first dysfunction described by Lencioni is absence of trust, which easily leads to fear of conflict (second dysfunction) and lack of commitment (third dysfunction). Without commitment, teams develop the fourth dysfunction, avoidance of accountability, which is followed by the fifth dysfunction, inattention to results. Although designed for improving teams in a business setting, the authors use this model as the foundation of a somewhat modified set of ten activities designed to improve team interaction in the classroom setting. Each dysfunction is discussed below along with two suggested activities for each dysfunctional area.

The two most common examples of team dysfunction experienced by the authors are as follows: (1) One member does not contribute to the will of the team, or (2) one person dominates the will of the team. In both cases, the dysfunction of the team leads to a compromise in learning and in the quality of the project. The authors have also noticed that dysfunction within teams can lead to an ineffective use of time.

Dysfunction 1—Absence of Trust: The first dysfunction is an *absence of trust*, which stems from a member's unwillingness to be vulnerable within the group. Team members who are not comfortable sharing with one another about weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust. The desired outcome of the two following exercises is for students to become more aware of their team members and develop trust with other team members that serve as the

foundation for their team and class experiences. Either of these exercises may serve as an ice breaker on the first-day.

1. Each member will share two strengths that they can contribute to the team and two weaknesses. The benefit to sharing strengths and weaknesses amongst team members is that they will get to know aspects of each other outside of class (as another human being). When that occurs, it increases the likelihood that team members will be more involved and personally committed to each other as people as well as to the assigned project.
2. Each member will share what grade they expect to earn for the class and why. In sharing what grade each student anticipates earning, the benefit is that students become more aware of each other's priorities. For example, if one student is enrolled with 22 units and has a low priority for this particular class, the other students can avoid having unrealistic expectations about that particular student's contribution. Another benefit of sharing what grade each team member wants to earn is that if there are different grade expectations, the team as a whole can discuss the ramifications of wanting to earn different grades. It opens up a very healthy and functional dialogue from the very beginning of the team's interactions.

Dysfunction 2—Fear of Conflict: An absence of trust leads to *fear of conflict*. Teams that lack trust are incapable of engaging in open dialogue of creative ideas and solutions to problems. Without open dialogue, team members will partially contribute to discussions with guarded comments. The desired outcome of the two following exercises is for students to acknowledge that regular, unguarded discussions are healthy to a team's success.

1. Each team member will agree on a set schedule of meetings for the duration of the class or for a specific class project. The benefit to this exercise is that students will have an amount of time set aside to allow for any unforeseen problems to be dealt with. It will keep students on course throughout the duration of the project.
2. Each team member will verbally agree to put the most important and most difficult issues on the table for resolution at meetings. The benefit to this exercise is that team members will have a system in place to maintain open dialogue, which will allow for the flow of creative ideas and solutions to problems. Without such a system in place, it is nearly impossible to move forward with discussions and the learning environment is compromised. If is agreed to deal with problems openly in designated meeting times, team members will be able to contribute to discussions and each other's without feeling guarded.

Dysfunction 3—Lack of Commitment: Any fear of conflict that exists within the group can create a *lack of commitment*. Without feeling confident in openly sharing their opinions in a passionate and open debate, team members will choose to not commit to decisions that the team makes, and difficult issues may

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not get resolved. The desired outcome of the next two exercises is for students to take responsibility for their contribution to the team's success.

1. Each team member will verbally commit to each other's success and explain how their commitment will be generated. The benefit to this exercise is that it is much more difficult for a team member to not follow through with their commitment to the team when they have verbally committed to each other's success. Verbal commitment to each other's success creates an underlying foundation for conflict resolution. A verbal commitment to each team member's success creates a sense of accountability that may otherwise not exist.
2. Each team will create a system for communicating what each team member is working on (plan of action) and how it contributes to the success of the team. The benefit to this exercise is that students will be able to see how each team member's commitment contributed to the overall success of the team. It re-enforces a sense of accountability to one's self as well as to the team. Team members will begin to see themselves as the team as opposed to a part of a team.

Dysfunction 4—Avoid Accountability: When there is a lack of real commitment to team success by individual team members, it becomes easy to avoid accountability. Without a commitment to an agreed upon plan of action, team members may hesitate to address actions and behaviors that are counterproductive to the success of the team. The desired outcome for the two following exercises is for students to challenge one another on their plans, approaches, or any limitations that members may be feeling.

1. Each team will agree to start each meeting dealing with any deficiencies or unproductive behavior(s). The issue will be discussed in the meeting until the party(ies) involved come to a resolution. The benefit to this exercise is that problems will not be allowed to stifle the progress of the team. It provides a system for always moving forward, and by having time set aside to deal with unproductive behaviors, the group will be using the time that they have in the most effective manner possible.
2. Each team member will keep a journal for the duration of the course to be used for peer review(s) at the end of the class. Periodic reviews will be conducted at each meeting. Many faculty require students to evaluate their team members and include that evaluation as part of their grade or as a weighting for team activities. The benefit from this exercise is that it serves as a reminder for what each member has agreed to as his or her responsibilities and helps the student remember how each person contributed to the team's success.

Dysfunction 5—Inattention to Results: When team members are not held accountable to each other and to the overall success of the team, *inattention to results* occurs. When individual team member's attention and intention is out of alignment with the collective team goal(s), the team's success is jeopardized. The

desired outcome of the last two exercises is for students to make decisions for the good of the team rather than making decisions for their own individual needs.

1. Each team member will acknowledge a contribution from another team member such that each person on the team is acknowledged one time per meeting. The first person acknowledges another team member, and then that person chooses someone else, until everyone has acknowledged and has been acknowledged only once. The benefit to this exercise is that acknowledgements inspire each team member to work harder for the team because his/her contribution has been recognized. Being recognized for something also inspires team members to be more cognizant of each other's contributions and to pay attention to the smallest details of the project.
2. Each team will compare the outcome, or the collective results, of their individual contributions with the grade earned on the assignment(s)/project(s). The benefit to this exercise is that each team member will recognize the importance of collective work and effective teams. It will serve as a template for future team experience and team projects.

CONCLUSION: The purpose of this paper was to present a series of exercises that the professor can incorporate to make the team learning environment more effective. The exercises are easily adopted with minimal preparation by the professor and help the students work more effectively and efficiently in a team-based environment. The intention is to help students develop their team interaction skills without detracting from the course content. In fact, in our experience, greater team skills not only enhances the learning of course content, but it also raises the bar as far as the quality of student activities. The team-learning environment encourages students to claim responsibility and be accountable for their actions and the decisions they make.

Two of the most profound benefits the authors have seen are an increase in the quality of work and improvement in overall class dynamics. The professor can be less rigid with project guidelines and allow the students to be more generative in their learning. The authors have found that more effective teams in the classroom leads to enhanced learning in team-based projects.

Overall, the experience of having more effective teams in the classroom has made the entire class dynamic a much more positive experience. It enhances class discussions and creates an openness of dialogue that otherwise did not exist. It allows for greater learning outcomes among students when placed in different teams for various in-class projects. The results that the authors have experienced have led to greater sharing of ideas in the classroom and greater synergy of the class. The authors have noted that students come into class with a greater willingness to participate, and in-class group assignments are easier to manage because the foundation has been laid by the ten exercises, even if teams are made up of different members.

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