10 Tips for Working in Student Teams

Learning to work in teams is vital to academic and career and job success. The key to successfully working in student teams is following these 10 tips. *by Randall S. Hansen, Ph.D.*

Chances are pretty strong that you'll be placed in student groups and teams in several of your classes while in college. Successfully working in teams is not only a vital skill to learn for your academic success in college, but a career skill high-valued in today's workplace.

So, how can you become a successful member of a team -- whether it's your first group experience or your twentieth? Review these 10 tips for working in student teams.

1. Choose Team Members Wisely.
In some cases, your professor will assign students to teams, but in many more cases, students will be given the option of choosing team members. You may feel some pressure to choose your roommate or sorority sister, but your choice of team members should revolve less around who you are friends with than who has the right skills and motivation to excel in the team assignment.

2. Get to Know Your Team Members.
One of the best things any team can do to help individual members bond as a team is to share information about each other and seek out common experiences, cultures, attitudes, etc. A team-building, team-bonding session is important for the overall functioning of the team -- especially by the end of the project when things sometimes get a bit crazy.

3. Exchange Vital Information.
Share all the key communications information -- phone numbers, email addresses, IM screen names -- as well as other important pieces of data, such as class and work schedules, and best times to meet. Create a master list with all the key information and distribute it to each team member.

4. Choose/Agree Upon a Leader.
For some team projects, the professor may appoint the leader. In situations in which no team leader has been identified, take the time in an early team meeting to identify and choose a team leader (or leaders). Regardless of the size or composition of the

team, every team needs a leader to make certain the things that need to get done get completed.

5. Identify Each Member's Strengths.
Depending on the context of the assignment, identify each team member's strengths. For example, some people are better writers while others are brilliant at researching. Some people love to make presentations, while others would rather design the presentation (but not partake in it). Once you have identified each other's strengths, divide the critical tasks according to abilities and interests.

6. Actively Participate/Complete Assignments.
You cannot be mad at other team members who do not complete their work (the so-called slackers of the team) if you do not actively participate and complete your assignments. Even if you dislike the class or dislike your team members, or even if you are simply taking the class pass/fail, put all that aside and treat the work with the respect it deserves. You'll learn more -- and the team should earn a better grade because of it.

7. Don't Monopolize Conversations.
Even if you think you have the best ideas -- or even if you are the best student in your group, do not monopolize the team meetings. The best teams are the ones in which team members bounce ideas off of each other, leading to collaborative -- and often better -- ideas and decisions. As an extravert myself, I know how difficult it can be to sit quietly when you have something to say, but some members who are shy or introverted will not speak up if you don't stop talking.

8. Don't Pout/Retreat When Ideas Not Chosen.
Group projects are ALWAYS a compromise of ideas, so you should go into these situations with the notion that even if you have a brilliant idea for the project, it might not be chosen by your teammates. Be flexible and open to compromise. The key here is accepting the idea and moving forward with whatever decisions the team makes -- and fully supporting those efforts.

9. Monitor Team Progress.
Sadly, almost all teams have social loafers -- so-called slackers at the college level -- that will not complete their tasks, or not complete them well. Certainly if you are the

team leader, one of your key roles is making certain every one in the team is completing their assigned tasks. But there is no reason for you not to check in on the progress of the team when you are not the leader; remember, it's your grade at stake, so request the team leader keep the entire team abreast of every member's progress.

10. Use Peer Pressure to Motivate.
While the better students will often be motivated to perform their team work to the best of their abilities for the grade and/or the value of the learning experience, other students may need to be motivated to complete their work -- or complete it at a higher level. Because these students are most likely not motivated to work like you are, the best tool you have for encouraging them to work harder is using peer pressure -- using the power of the entire team to motivate them to work harder.

Final Thoughts on Working in Teams in College

Working in teams is something that most people will do their entire lives, so it should be a welcome opportunity to get the practice of doing so while in college. Teamwork can be exhilarating, educational, challenging, and frustrating -- all in the same team experience. The key to successfully working in teams is following these 10 tips. And the more team experience you gain, the more comfortable you'll be working in groups.

Manual for Working in Teams

This manual contains a number of suggestions that have been found useful for working in teams in general. The suggestions are not particular to this class: they apply to working in teams in general

1. Getting to Know One Another

This may sound elementary, but many teams screw this up. One thing you will eventually learn is that team members have very different abilities, motivations and personalities. For example, there will be some team members that are totally involved, and others that just want to disappear. If you let people disappear, they become dead weight and a source of resentment and frustration. You must not let this happen!

Here is something that you should try to take to heart (but will be very hard for many to accept): When team members disappear, it is not entirely their fault. It is your fault too. Take someone who is introverted. They find it stressful to talk in a group. They like to think things through before they start talking. They consider others' feelings and don't want to tell them when they are wrong. In a group full of extroverts, this person cannot find a way to participate: it is not in their nature to fight for attention. It is the extroverts' responsibility to consciously include the introvert, to not talk over them, to not take the floor away from them. If you want the team to succeed, you have to accept that you must actively manage others. If you think "Why should I do that? It's their responsibility to carry their own weight. I'm doing my part, they should do theirs" you are dead meat: you will need all the human resources at your disposal.

One of the first things you should do as a group is make sure everybody knows everybody's name. Don't just introduce yourselves once because some people will immediately forget the names or never quite hear them the first time. So make sure that everyone has written down everybody's name. Then go on to talk about each other -- what major, where you live on campus, who you know, etc.

Since teams are not (just) social groups, it is also important to get an idea about what each person is good at, and what resources they can bring to bear. For example, one person might have a conveniently large apartment where the group can meet. Another might have great computer skills, useful for creating presentations and typing papers.

One thing to realize is that when teams are new, each individual is wondering about their identity in the group. Identity is a combination of personality, behavior, competencies, and position in the social structure of the group. Some people will fight for dominance. Some want to be seen as smart. Others play the role of comedian. Others want to be liked. As you watch this process occur, it is helpful to think that much of what people do is not so much a choice as a need or a habit. The person who seems hellbent on dominating everyone has a strong need to do this, and won't feel comfortable not doing it. Thinking this way will help you to be less judgmental, which in turn will help you to avoid unproductive hatreds. Remember: it is just a team, not a marriage.

2. Vision

If the word "vision" makes you want to puke, think instead "what are we really trying to accomplish? Besides the explicit tasks, what are our real goals?". For example, for a class team, does the team want to do whatever it takes to get an A? Or is having a comfortable workload more important? Does the team want to really get involved with each other socially, or keep interactions to just what's required to do the work? Does the team want an atmosphere of military efficiency, or do they want to horse around and have a good time?

A useful exercise is to create a vision statement. This is basically a short paragraph that says what you're about, what your strategy is, what you are ultimately trying to accomplish. Think of it as a description of your positioning in the market place.

The best vision statements are usually those that synthesize each individual's team-member's personal vision for what they are trying to accomplish, not just in the team but in their careers. In other words, each person should separately figure out what they think the team should accomplish, then the group should get together and see if there are any common elements out of which you can build a single, coherent vision that each person can commit to. The reason why it is helpful to use common elements of the individual visions is that part of the purpose of writing a vision statement is to provide common direction and to motivate team members. But if nobody believes in the vision statement, it will just be words on a piece of paper. It has to be real to be useful.

3. Structure

It is difficult for teams to succeed without a leader. So you should designate someone to play that role. However, you don't need to make the leader omnipotent. There are certain **task & maintenance** functions that need to be performed, and you can have one person do all of them, or you can split up the job among different people.

One key function is that of facilitator/coordinator. This is a person who calls meetings, keeps people on track, and pays attention to group processes. For example, the facilitator makes sure that everyone is involved and notices when someone is upset. Here are some of the things that successful facilitators try to do:

- focus team on task
- engage participation from all members
- protect individuals from personal attack
- suggest alternative procedures when the team is stalled
- summarize and clarify the team's decisions

Here are some tips for accomplishing these goals:

- stay neutral
- don't let the meeting run too long, even if it's going well (or people will try to avoid coming next time)
- express out loud what seems to be happening (e.g., "nobody seems to be saying much since Jenny suggested ... ")
- don't let snide comments, put downs, etc slide by without comment
- after a person has been quiet for awhile, ask them for their opinion

Another key function is that of boundary manager. This is a person who serves as liaison between the team and the rest of the world (the team's "stakeholders"). In the context of class teams, this person interacts with the professor, and keeps an eye out for what the other

teams are doing, they also make themselves aware of the obligations that team members have to others (like boyfriends/girlfriends, part-time jobs, etc). The boundary manager is responsible for learning who the key stakeholders are (a stakeholder is someone who affects the team, or is affected by the team), and working out a strategy for dealing with them (e.g., sucking up to the professor).

Finally, there is the project manager. The project manager organizes the work plan and sees that it is implemented. In the context of class teams, there might be different project managers for each assignment, or a single one that organizes all the assignments. Project managers need to be able to take a whole task, such as a paper assignment, and break it down into bite sized pieces that can be doled out to people to do. Project managers have to be able to figure out time budgets and get people to do their part at the right time.

4. Process

Meetings can be useless if not done right. One simple thing that helps a lot is having an agenda. Having a written agenda makes it easier for the facilitator to steer things back to the task. Otherwise, if, say, two popular and dominant people in the group start talking about sports, it may difficult for a third party who is not as socially central to bring them back. But if there is an agreed-upon agenda and an agreed-upon length of meeting, a facilitator can say 'I don't know about you guys, but I really want to get out here at 5: if we really want to talk about all the things on the agenda we kind of have to get going...'.

The first item on any agenda should usually be a "check-in" which is where the facilitator asks each person how things are going and whether there is anything on their minds that needs to be discussed.

For certain kinds of meetings it is useful to go into brainstorming mode. Brainstorming is a process of generating ideas (e.g., for a paper). There are certain dos and don'ts for good brainstorming:

- don't evaluate until much later in the process. accept all ideas, no matter how stupid they appear
- encourage mental hitchhiking (building on other's ideas)
- don't stop at the first silence. just wait a bit, no matter how uncomfortable
- for hard problems, it helps to summarize the problem, then let people think on their own and write down some answers, then get together and pool them on a blackboard
- after you get a bunch of ideas, ask each person to vote for two or three of them. Take all the ideas that get at least one vote, and start classifying them according to similarity. This will usually get you down to just a few basic types of ideas, which you can then make decisions about.

There will be many situations in which you need to give feedback to others in the team. Like, they have just written a draft of a team paper, and you need to suggest changes and point out problems. When you give feedback it is extremely important to avoid any

negative comment that would seem to be about the person, rather than the work or the behavior. You should also focus on yourself and your objection rather than on them and their problem. For example, you might say "I don't understand why on this page we jump from this topic to that, and then come back to the first topic" instead of "You made a mistake on this page" or "You are not being logical here". The moment you say "You" people's defenses go up.

It is very important that teams assess their performance from time to time. Most teams start out ok, and then drift away from their original goals and eventually fall apart. This is much less likely to happen if from time to time, the team facilitator or leader asks everyone how they are feeling about the team, and does a public check of the performance of the team against the mission/vision statement.

Good luck!

--- Steve Borgatti