

Introduction to Teamwork

By the end of this lesson, you will be able to: describe the distinction between group and teamwork, discuss why we work in teams, discuss why early experiences with teamwork in the classroom are important, name some of the key skills associated with teamwork, discuss key characteristics of high-performing teams.

In its simplest form, we can think of what is often interchangeably referred to as group or team work as two or more people working together to achieve a common goal. But there's an important distinction between the two.

A team is a special type of group where members need to work interdependently and coordinate their efforts when completing tasks in order to achieve the desired outcome. Let's take a hockey team as an example, players depend on one another and to win the game they need to coordinate and collaborate to score points and keep the puck out of their own net. This means that at the end all team members are mutually accountable for the outcome and so they share responsibility for their team's success.

In a group, however, members come together to achieve a common purpose or goal, and while they can mutually influence one another and have a relationship, they can also carry out tasks while working independently of each other. For this reason, a group can range in size from two members to thousands of people, but teams are formed of smaller numbers of members, for example it may be a team of four or a team of twenty individuals.

Another distinction between a group and a team is that different members of a group may not always share the same level of consensus about goals as do members of a team.

In a university setting, you will find yourself assigned to different types of group work. This can include group projects or completing certain activities as a group in class. Group work really just refers to the structure of the type of work you're completing, but the collaborative process you go through and the key to success, is teamwork.

Working successfully in teams requires organization and planning, setting expectations and determining roles, and effective communication. It's not just about dividing and conquering, and then bringing things all together as the deadline approaches.

Instructors often require group projects and assignments because teamwork is a valuable skill for students to develop. The early experiences you have with teamwork in an academic setting become important building blocks for more complex tasks and situations, like being part of a research team or designing and testing a prototype.



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These scenarios will require effective communication, active listening, decision making, leadership, self-awareness, and conflict resolution. Skills and areas that even the most seasoned leaders and teams continue to nurture.

As you enter the later stages of your university degree, work and student placements may come your way, which will require you to navigate working in teams and groups in new settings, outside of the classroom.

So, the experiences you gain and the foundational skills you develop by working in teams as a student provide you with valuable insights and tools to draw on as you enter your professional career too. We work as teams because this allows us to collaborate in various ways, share responsibility, and spread workload. More importantly, when we work together, we can tackle complex tasks, find and solve problems quicker, create new solutions and innovate, and gain awareness of diverse perspectives.

Of course, working in groups can also be challenging and problems can arise, like communication and workload issues, and difficult team dynamics. Getting along with your team is important but learning to work effectively together can make a better project when each team member contributes their strengths and voice to the project.

So, what do high performing teams look like? There are five key characteristics that we know successful teams have, whether you're a student working on a group project or find yourself working on an interdisciplinary work team one day, here's what we know great teams do and have in common:

1. **Communicate effectively and meaningfully:** this not only includes clear, proactive and respectful communication, but also active listening and an effort to ensure each team member has a chance to speak as much as the other. Great ideas and innovative solutions can often be thwarted when conversations are dominated by one or two people.
2. **Set clearly defined, balanced roles and expectations:** this means that each team member understands their role and tasks, shares responsibility, and is accountable. The tasks or objectives are understood and accepted by everyone.
3. **Practice emotional intelligence:** this includes being aware of our own emotions and others, empathy, as well as recognizing each team member's diversity in skills, experiences, and needs so you can develop strong working relationships and a great working environment.
4. **Care about the process:** effective teams understand the importance of process and operating procedures, or, how they will work together. This includes frequently evaluating team performance to resolve potential conflict.
5. **Share a common sense of purpose:** team members are ultimately guided by the same goal, and that each member is willing to work toward achieving this goal. When



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mistakes happen or problems arise, they are seen as opportunities to learn, course correct, and find solutions. The team is committed to problem solving whatever may come up, to achieve their bigger goal.

In conclusion, teamwork can often evoke different feelings and thoughts, and perhaps not always the best ones. But one of the most important things to remember is that each experience with teamwork is a unique opportunity for new insights and growth, which will be helpful to you as you tackle your next group assignment or join a new work team.



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