Working in teams and groups: A guide for students

At some point in your university studies it is quite likely you will be set an assessment that requires you to work with other students as a team or group. This guide is designed to give you some tips on how to work in groups, and a checklist so that you can monitor how you are going.

What is teamwork?

Teams need to work in a coordinated way towards achieving their particular goal. Teams, therefore, have a purpose: they exist in order to get something done, which requires working together effectively. This can often be quite challenging for a variety of reasons.

What are the characteristics of effective teamwork?

If you take a look at the characteristics displayed by effective teams you can see how well your team rates. According to Hoegl and Gemuenden (2001), how well a team works can be broken down into six components: communication, coordination, balance of contributions, mutual support, effort and cohesion.

This means that, in order to work effectively, members of teams need to:

- *communicate* with each other openly and freely
- *negotiate* who is doing what and coordinate the different roles
- make sure the workload is *shared equitably* and that every member agrees that their share is fair
- give positive *support* and *feedback* to each other
- put in a more or less equivalent amount of *effort* into the project
- work *cohesively* together to make sure that everything comes together at the right time.

Why are these characteristics important?

Regular and open *communication* allows a team to keep track of how their project is going, identify any potential problems before they get too big, and helps team members to feel that their contribution is valued. It is important to keep lines of communication open and to include everyone in the team.

Negotiation of roles allows everyone in a team to be clear and to agree on who is supposed to be doing what. Roles can also be re-negotiated if circumstances change. Make sure everyone is sure of, and has agreed to, what their role is before you move on.

Being clear about how the *workload* is distributed gives everyone a chance to negotiate and to agree the workload is distributed fairly. This can also head off a lot of potential problems before they get too big. It also helps to keep a written record of what each team member has agreed to do.

Positive feedback helps team members to feel their contribution is valued by the team. This does not necessarily mean saying everything is great even if it's not. It can involve positive and constructive suggestions on how to improve the way the team is working. This relates closely to *communication*. How you say something is often at least as important as what you say.

Sharing the *effort* more or less equitably means that no one team member is overloaded and nobody is under loaded. One of the most common sources of discord in teams is when one or more team members feel that they are doing most of the work and the rest of the team members are not pulling their weight.

Working *cohesively* is important because a team needs coordinated and cohesive effort to make sure all the different parts of the job come together into a finished project at the right time.

Each of these characteristics is, of course, related to the others. For example, the amount of effort each member needs to put in is clearly related to negotiation of roles and how the workload is initially distributed. Getting the project finished properly on time means that all the pieces have to come together at the right time. This is easier to achieve if the workload is shared fairly, everyone agrees to how it is shared, team members are supportive of each other and team members communicate regularly with each other. Getting a few things worked out at the beginning can head off a lot of potential problems before they get out of hand.

Checklist for teamwork

The checklist below will help you work out how well your team is working together. If each member of your team can answer 'yes' to each of the questions in the checklist then your team is very likely to perform well:

Teamwork checklist	Question	Answer Yes/No	Comments
Communication	Do members of your team communicate with each other frequently? Is the communication positive and directed towards achieving your team's goals? Do you and other team members have a clear idea of what the team's goal is?		
Coordination	Are you clear about what you are supposed to be doing? Are you clear about what other team members are supposed to be doing? Are other team members clear about what you are supposed to be doing?		
Workload	Is the workload in your team allocated fairly? Did all team members agree to how the work is to be shared?		
Feedback	Do team members acknowledge the efforts of other members?		
Effort	Is everyone doing their fair share?		
Cohesion	Are all team members working together to achieve the same goal? When you put the parts together do they make a coherent whole?		

If you answered 'No' to any of the questions in the table you will need to work on these areas for your team to work effectively. You can find more information and tips to help you by exploring the link below.

Link to teamwork resource

- *http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/tt/h-articl/tb-basic.htm*

Reference

Much of the information in this guide is based on:

Hoegl, M. & Gemuenden, H. (2001). Teamwork Quality and the Success of Innovative Projects: A Theoretical Concept and Empirical Evidence. *Organization Science*, *12*(4), 439–449. *https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.12.4.435.10635*.