

Processes and Attributes of Highly Effective Teams

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Overarching Attributes of Effective Teams

The Waterloo Organizational Research and Consulting Group (WORC Group), which draws its members from the Graduate Programs in Personnel and Organizational Psychology at the University of Waterloo, undertook a review of academic and popular literature concerning team effectiveness.

In our review of the literature, we found nine broad attributes that distinguish high performing teams from other teams.

Mission and Goals: *High performing teams have a clear mission and/or goals.* The organization's mission describes its overall direction and general goals for accomplishing the mission¹. These broad goals must then be narrowed down into more specific tasks¹. It is these more specific goals that the team will be working towards. For example, while an organization's mission may call for the development of five new products within a ten year span, a more specific goal for a team to work towards would be the completion of one product within a time frame of two years.

Team Leadership: *Leadership functions are performed reliably.* Leaders direct and coordinate activities of other team members, assess team performance, assign tasks, motivate team members, plan and organize, and establish a positive atmosphere².

Communication: *Members learn enough of what others believe, soon enough.* Communication is the process by which information is clearly and accurately exchanged between two or more team members and between team members and non-team members. Effective communicators clarify or acknowledge the receipt of information; listen to other team members; and share understanding of others and teamwork.

Decision Making: *Systematic, agreed-upon decision processes are used.* Decision making is the process of choosing between two or more alternatives. Usually, decision making occurs in relation to solving a problem. Following the identification of the problem, decision criteria must be identified and weighted, alternatives must be generated and evaluated, and a choice must be made and implemented³.

Culture: *The cultures of high performing teams provide predictability and alignment.* Culture refers to the norms and values held by individuals in an organization. In a team setting, these norms and values relate to the ways in which team members believe they should interact with each other. The team's culture can either help or hinder team performance by affecting team members' patterns of interaction⁴.

Group Motivation: *Psychological membership in a valued group can be a source of motivation and a resource for overcoming problems.* Specifically "group" motivation refers to those team processes in which team objectives are defined and the team is energized to achieve the objectives, through norm development, conflict resolution, and reinforcement². Motivation also relates to the extent to which team members identify with the team, and devote persistent effort directed toward the team's goals.

Conflict: *Effective teams address task conflict productively and prevent personalized conflict.* Conflict is the tension experienced between individuals or groups as a result of perceived differences⁵. There are generally two types of conflict in teams: task and person conflict. Task conflict in team decision making refers to disagreements about the work to be done, including issues such as the allocation of resources, application of procedures, and the development and implementation of policies. Person conflict refers to the occurrence of identity-oriented issues, whereby personal or group beliefs and values come into play. Such personalized disagreement typically includes tension, animosity and annoyance among team members⁶. Task conflict is usually felt to be beneficial to team performance whereas person conflict is felt to be dysfunctional and detrimental to team performance.

Meetings: *Meetings facilitate communication and decision making.* Every work team conducts meetings where most, if not all, of the important decisions and issues are discussed. Properly managed, meetings can improve decision making and increase the efficient use of a manager's time. Additionally, improperly managed meetings frustrate and reduce the motivation of team members¹⁶

Self-Management: *Individual members are effective self-managers.* Self-management skills are the personal skills that team members must have in order to fulfill their team obligations, work well with others and succeed in a team environment. Skills and attributes including organization, patience, stress management, humility and assertiveness are aspects of self-management.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Mission and Goal Setting**

- In effective teams, members have a clear understanding of its objective and a belief that the goal is worthwhile⁷
- A goal should be clear, stating a specific performance objective in concrete language, such that team members are able to tell whether the performance objective has been obtained⁷
- To achieve optimal success, a goal should be elevating. It is challenging and makes members that the performance objective “makes a difference”⁷
- The team’s goals must be related to the mission, but not too specific. When goals are too specific, innovation is less likely to occur because team members have little freedom to experiment¹
- Goals should be specific and challenging. However, goals should not be too challenging, because people tend to reject unrealistic and unattainable goals. Further, goals that are too easy will not bring about performance improvements¹
- Goals should be attainable, and represent a moderate amount of risk for the team members¹⁰.
- Involving team members in goal setting increases their commitment to achieving the goal and they work harder towards achieving the goal¹
- To encourage commitment, goals should be agreed upon. When goals are imposed, this can be perceived as domineering, patronizing or condescending^{9, 10}.
- Clear objectives and agreed upon goals enhance motivation and problem-solving, and place fewer demands on management⁹
- It is important to give feedback regarding the extent to which goals have been achieved¹
- Team members should have a shared sense of task in order to coordinate efficiently⁴
- When team members have well-defined missions, they are likely to reach the same team goals¹¹
- A shared vision and mission can increase performance quality²

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Team Leadership**

- Teams that are composed of individuals with diverse backgrounds tend to perform better on unstructured tasks than teams composed of individuals with similar backgrounds¹². Therefore, when selecting members for a team, their background knowledge, characteristics (e.g., race, gender, etc.) and personalities should be taken into consideration.
- Increases in team size are related to increases in difficulty in coordination, increases in conformity and decreases in participation of team members¹². Therefore, careful attention should be paid to keeping team size to the minimum number necessary to effectively complete the task.
- Leaders who display high levels of concern for both people and performance are considered to be the best leaders¹²
- Effective team leaders establish a vision for the future (i.e., a clear, elevating goal). They articulate what the team can accomplish in a way that inspires commitment⁷
- Effective leaders avoid compromising the team's objective with political issues⁷
- Effective leaders keep the team's goal focused and undiluted by other priorities⁷
- Leaders should display personal commitment to the goal⁷
- Leaders should be fair and impartial to all team members⁷
- Effective leaders should be able to resolve issues surrounding inadequate performance by team members⁷
- Leaders should be open to new ideas and information from team members⁷
- Effective leaders establish a supportive, decision-making climate⁷
- Leaders should provide team members with meaningful levels of responsibility⁷
- Leaders should recognize and reward superior performance⁷
- Effective leaders provide team members with challenging opportunities⁷

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- An uncontrolled ego can get in the way of effective leadership⁷
- Leaders should focus on building trust and inspiring members rather than on directing people¹
- Effective leaders concentrate on expanding team capabilities rather than on training individuals¹
- Team leaders should help members to identify their unique contributions to the team⁴
- Team leaders should try to create a group identity¹
- Team leaders should encourage idea-centred conflict¹
- Leaders should foresee and influence change rather than react to change. This allows the team to adapt more readily to change¹
- Effective leaders spend time with team members to identify strengths and weaknesses⁸
- Team leaders should work to create a climate of continuous learning⁴
- Effective leaders are authentic⁹.
- Effective leaders adopt an open approach, which builds trust⁹.
- Effective leaders are clear about performance standards⁹.
- Effective leaders should ask open-ended questions and allow room for the individual to answer honestly, without fear that he/she did not provide the "right" answer¹⁰.
- Effective leaders should be empathic toward other team members, to understand how others feel¹⁰.
- Effective leaders encourage cross-discussions between members of the group¹⁰.
- Effective leaders listen actively¹⁰.
- Effective leaders openly accept others' ideas¹⁰.
- Team leaders should serve as effective models of teamwork².
- Team leaders should listen to other team members who have special expertise².
- Team leaders should provide team members with feedback².

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Communication**

- Informing team members of the nature of others' subtasks enhances performance¹³
- Informal communication, in which team members freely communicate with each other when they want to, is important to team success⁷
- Information should be easily accessible⁷
- Information should come from credible sources⁷
- There should be opportunities for team members to raise issues not on the formal agenda (e.g., "informal chat time")⁷
- Effective communication involves methods for documenting issues raised and decisions made⁷
- Communication is most effective when it is both written and oral¹
- Team members must be able to communicate their ideas to each other in an open, non-hostile manner¹
- Team members should be able to adapt to unpredictable situations, monitor each other's behaviour, and give constructive feedback to each other⁴
- Team members should be able to provide motivational reinforcement, structure, and organization for each other⁴
- Team members should be encouraged to be assertive. When all team members practice assertive skills there are more ideas to evaluate, weak decisions are questioned, and all viewpoints can be taken into account⁹.
- To avoid prematurely judging other team members, active listening skills should be encouraged. The key characteristics of effective listeners are the following⁹:
 - They pay attention to what is being said.
 - They suspend judgment until they have heard the 'whole story'.
 - They look at the person that is talking to them.
 - They check that they understand what is being said.
 - They 'park' things in their minds and deal with them later.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- An effective team member shares ideas and feelings and encourages others to do the same¹⁰.
- Providing team members with effective and positive feedback strengthens individuals, relationships, and team identity⁹.
Feedback to group members should be:
 - Specific
 - Descriptive
 - Clearly express views
 - Time to be near the event being discussed
 - Take into account the needs of the receiver
 - Checked to ensure clear communication
 - Concentrate on things the persons can do something about
- Sharing information with other team members builds trust¹⁰.
- Effective team members do not openly criticize other team members. Criticism, when delivered in public is a form of punishment that will inhibit people from openly sharing ideas and making suggestions¹⁰.
- In high performing teams, team members acknowledge and correct each other's errors, thank other members for correcting errors, and praise other members².

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Climate**

- Team members must have autonomy to perform effectively in a creative team⁷
- The working atmosphere should be open and “safe” in order to promote the development of new ideas⁷
- Each team member should have a clear role and accountability⁷
- A climate of trust greatly enhances collaboration⁷
 - Trust allows team members to stay problem-focused
 - Trust promotes efficient communication and coordination
 - Trust leads to compensating. That is, if a team member falters, another will “pick up the slack”
- Trust for team-mates and the leader results in an effective team⁸
- Trust is built through involvement and autonomy⁷
- Team members should not intimidate each other from contributing their ideas or the positive effects of having a heterogeneous group will be negated¹
- A supportive environment leads to team success⁸
Team members should be encouraged to participate in decision-making¹⁴.
- Teams that encourage minority dissent (i.e., when a minority opposes the majorities’ attitudes, opinions, or policies), and participation in decision-making are more innovative than those that do not¹⁴.
- Minority dissent encourages divergent thinking¹⁴
- Team members that participate in decision-making are more likely to feel committed to those decisions¹¹.
- Trust plays a significant role in team problem solving¹⁰.
- Trust encourages open-communication, where members are respected by their co-workers².
- Allowing team members to play a devil's advocate can improve the quality of group decision making¹⁵.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Group Motivation**

- Team members should be allowed to develop flexible work structures (coordination)¹³
- A sense of “team spirit” (loyalty, dedication, enthusiasm, intense identification with the team) is an important factor contributing to the effectiveness of a team⁷
- Participation in the team’s efforts, especially in the planning of strategies to achieve the goal, increases commitment, motivation, and effort⁷
- A balance between individuality and unity must be achieved for optimal results. Teams that are extremely individualistic become stagnant as a result of conflicting visions and values. On the other hand, teams that present too much unity risk conformity and the stifling of creativity⁷
- Cohesive teams set goals more easily, and are more likely to achieve these goals².
- Cohesive teams are better performers².
- In order for team members to be motivated to perform the necessary teamwork behaviours, they must be confident that the team can master the task objectives².

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Decision Making**

- Sound decision making requires objective and factual data from reliable sources⁷
- Diversity among team members results in better decision making, since each one has complementary knowledge that allows the team to consider each side of the problem more fully¹
- Effective decision making occurs when team members express their unique ideas and opinions instead of challenging the rest of the group in order to maintain harmony¹
- Team decision making should have¹⁰:
 - A clear definition of the problem.
 - A clear understanding of who has the responsibility for the decision.
 - Effective communication for idea production.
 - Appropriate size of group decision-making.
 - A means for effective testing of different approaches.
 - A method for building commitment to the decision.
 - Honest commitment of the leader to the group decision-making process.
 - Agreement on the procedures and methods for decision making prior to deliberation on the issue.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- **Conflict Management**

- Conflict should be worked out, not suppressed¹⁰.
- Suppression of conflict allows negative feeling to fester and causes a breakdown in communication⁹.
- Team members' differences should be brought to the surface. That is, problems should be resolved, which tends to increase team cohesiveness and effectiveness¹⁰.
- Teams should encourage openness and positive confrontation⁹.
- As co-operation increases, teams learn to use conflict positively and constructively⁹.
- Positive conflict can increase creativity, and can minimize complacency and laziness as truthful opinions are expressed⁹.
- Build a strong foundation of trust and respect among team members. When operating from the point of what is best for the team and not just for themselves, their disagreements will be framed in mutual trust and respect.
- Share (and continually return to) common goals. A strong shared knowledge of common goals can help guide teams through conflict.
- Collect information on the sources of conflict.
- Keep feeding the dialogue with facts. Avoid making the dispute a personal one by using unfounded and personal comments. Base your comments on facts.
- Brainstorm your options. When teams become polarized on issues a good way to break out of the black and white, right or wrong deadlock is to brainstorm new ideas and ways of viewing the problem. Often new and better ideas emerge.
- Decide how to decide. A general framework of how decisions will be made should be determined and agreed upon at the beginning of the teams lifespan. When followed, this helps people feel that themselves and their ideas were treated fairly even if not accepted.
- Don't be afraid of conflict. Avoiding conflict at all costs can lead the team (especially the team leader) to sheepishly accept ideas that no one really likes but all are afraid to challenge.
- Take a break when the discussion becomes unproductive. When discussing issues, a team conversation can become unproductive and stray towards dysfunctional personal remarks. Take a time out from conversations that are going nowhere and revisit them later on.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

- o Tips for mediators of the conflict
 - Acknowledge that a conflict exists and propose a problem-solving approach for resolving it¹⁶.
 - Seek out the perspective of both parties.
 - Manage the discussion to insure fairness. Keep the discussion issue oriented, not personality-oriented.
 - Facilitate exploration of solutions rather than judge responsibility for the problem
 - Explore options by focusing on interests, not positions.
 - Make sure that all parties fully understand and support the agreed-upon solution and that follow-up procedures have been established.

Specific Attributes of Effective Teams and their Members

Five conflict management approaches with suggestions for when they should be used

Approach	Objective	Use only when
Collaborating	Solve the problem together	at all times unless certain conditions dictate the use of another approach.
Forcing	Get your way	issue is extremely important to you. A close ongoing relationship is NOT necessary; there is a high sense of urgency; you have much more power than the other person
Avoiding	Avoid having to deal with conflict	the issue is not important to you; the relationship is not critical; your relative power is equal to high; time is not a factor.
Compromising	Reach an agreement quickly	the issue is very complex and of moderate importance to both parties; the relationship is of moderate importance; the parties have relatively equal power; time constraints are low.
Accommodating	Don't upset the other person	the issue is not important to you; a close, ongoing relationship is critical; you have no other option (low power); time is not a factor

Processes and Attributes of Effective Teams

- **Meetings**

- Effective teams hold regular meetings in order to determine progress and determine the tasks that are required to reach the goal⁸
- Meetings can be a source of stress for team members. Thus, team leaders should ensure to make adequate time in meeting to discuss issues, ensure that team members stay focused during meetings, and encourage meeting participation¹⁷.
- Meetings should have a clear agenda¹⁰.
- Meetings should be fun, and stimulating to avoid boredom and encourage participation¹⁰.
- Meetings should not be too long¹⁰.
- All team members should be encouraged to participate in meetings; that is, one or two team members should not dominate meetings¹⁰.
- A more detailed list of considerations when planning a meeting is:¹⁸
 - What is the purpose of this meeting?
 - What are the expected outcomes?
 - Who are the key people who should attend this meeting, and what are their roles (e.g., decision-makers, information/idea/expertise providers, facilitators, and observers)?
 - What is the specific agenda for the meeting?
 - What types of work/discussion/decisions should occur during the meeting? What could/should occur outside the meeting?
 - What equipment/facilities will accommodate the team's work (e.g., table setup, flipcharts, and overhead projectors...)?
 - Are there materials that should be read or pro prepared in advance?
 - Who should receive the agenda/notice of the meeting?

Processes and Attributes of Effective Teams

- An agenda is a vital roadmap for each meeting that informs people ahead of time the topics that will be discussed and keeps people on track and focused as the meeting progresses. Points to consider when developing an agenda¹⁸ are:
 - Meetings should start and finish on time, unless participants agree deviations otherwise. Each meeting item should be allotted an amount of time for discussion.
 - A preliminary agenda should be circulated at least two days before the meeting to allow participants to request additions or question the relevancy of agenda items.
 - An action plan should be created at the end of each meeting to guide between-meeting activities, and then reviewed at the next meeting. The action plan specifies who will do what for the next meeting.
 - Meeting minutes (a record of the meeting) should be circulated within two days of the meeting and should include the action plan.

Processes and Attributes of Effective Teams

Self-Management Skills

- Team members should be assertive, employ effective communication skills, and be able to resolve conflicts⁴
- Team members should be willing to remain in the group, receive and value information from others, and believe that the team has the ability to succeed⁴
- Team members should be able to set individual goals, manage their own performance, plan, and coordinate tasks with others⁴
- Team members should be assertive in presenting their ideas in order to promote examination of an issue from multiple angles⁴
- Active practice and feedback are important in improving task-related assertiveness. Thus, assertiveness training should involve active practice instead of, or in addition to, lecture and behavioural critiques⁴
- Assertiveness may be necessary when: providing feedback to others, stating opinions, initiating an action, requesting assistance, or offering potential solutions to problems⁴
- Team members should be empathic toward other team members, to understand how others feel¹⁰.
- Team members should be able to manage the stress of working within deadlines and with minimal resources along with periods of intense work demands¹⁶
- Team members should clearly understand their roles in order to effectively reach goals⁸
- Team members should know appropriate team strategies, teammate characteristics, and the roles, tasks, and informational requirements of teammates⁴

Endnotes

1. Greenberg, 1999
2. Guzzo and Salas
3. Robbins, 2001
4. Cannon-Bowers & Salas, 1998
5. De Dreu, Harnick & Van Vianen, 1999
6. Van de Vliert and Veenstra, 1999
7. Larson & LaFasto, 1989
8. Lennox, 2001
9. Woodcock & Francis, 1994
10. Varney, 1991
11. Greenberg et al., 2000
12. Morgan & Lassiter, 1992
13. Salas, Dickinson, Converse, & Tannenbaum, 1992
14. Carstein & West, 2001
15. Schwenk, 1990
16. Whetton and Cameron, 1991
17. Katz, Russ-Eft, Moran, & Shankar, 1995
18. McDermott, Brawley, and Waite, 1998

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Additional Training Resources

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