Teamwork: Teaching Reality, 25 Years Later

Teamwork consists a group of individuals working together to reach a common goal. Highly effective teams have the same desired end goal as any group of students or business workers, and that is to achieve a shared purpose. Successful teams exhibit distinct characteristics such as effective communication among team members, conflict resolution, and complete participation by all team members.

In my Principles of Management course, I always assigned students to groups for projects and tasks. In 1991, employees from Texas Instruments and Boeing shared with me that instructors needed to incorporate teamwork into their courses because very few college graduates received training in working in teams. Without knowledge of and experience with teams, my management graduates were essentially unemployable in team-based organizations.

In 1993, I wrote the *Innovation Abstracts*, "Teamwork: Teaching Reality," and discussed how my fellow faculty members and I tried to incorporate teams into courses at Collin County Community College (CCCC). Initially, my colleagues and I received a lot of opposition to integrating team-based projects and tasks into courses from faculty members who did not believe in the teamwork concept.

Initial Observations

My fellow faculty members and I experienced significant issues when incorporating team-based learning into a variety of college courses. Students were familiar with being assigned to student groups throughout their educational careers. Therefore, they mistakenly considered "teams" and "groups" as interchangeable terms that involved collaborative learning. However, group work usually consists of a single project—a debate or presentation—completed within a week during the semester. Teamwork involves setting up permanent teams to be used in all aspects of a course—projects, quizzes, exams, exercises, and simulations—throughout the entire semester.

A more basic problem observed when first integrating teamwork into courses was that students did not know how to work together in teams. Students did not understand how having team members with different skill sets could positively enhance the team. When team members' skills are similar to each other, the team's solutions to tasks and challenges aren't as comprehensive as a team consisting of individuals with a variety of skill sets. Intra-team communication was also lacking.

Students did not follow up with their team members to make sure work got completed, or to help those team members who struggled to complete an assignment. In 1993, many CCCC faculty members did not believe that students could be held individually accountable for work performed as a team, and that individual student learning could not be proven to have taken place in a team or group setting.

How Has Teamwork Changed Since 1993?

Over the 25 years since authoring my *Innovation Abstracts*, I have noticed that many of the faculty members who were initially opposed to the idea of assigning teamwork are now more willing to use teams in their classes. Sadly, however, the situation mentioned above about students' perceptions about teamwork is still basically the same. Students have a lot of experience with group work, but no exposure to student teams or team-training exercises.

Team Communications

Many student teams do not take the time to get to know each team member. It is common for students to simply get together and immediately solve the assigned task. However, each team has members with a variety of hidden skills and talents: persuasive speaking skills, video production skills, photography skills, writing skills, and computer skills, to name a few. Many of these skills are often not revealed in rushed conversations when students are focused solely on quickly completing the assigned task. Therefore, it is critical for instructors to encourage student teams to get to know each other before starting a task or project. Instructors can set aside class time for team icebreaker activities during which students learn more about their team members. For example, while in their teams, students provide three words they would use to describe themselves. There are no limitations on the words students can select to describe themselves. This activity often fosters conversations between team members and helps them learn more about their peers.

Ropes Challenge Courses

One of the most useful tools I use to teach teamwork are rope-challenge courses. Rope-challenge courses are obstacle courses that are low risk and focus on team-based problem solving and communication. I have created my own portable ropes courses that I store in a closet at the college gymnasium. Numerous rope-challenge courses can also be done in the classroom, as well as outdoors, and are excellent for teaching teamwork,

leadership, bonding, decision making, problem solving, trust building, cooperation, risk taking, self-confidence, brainstorming, communication, and relationship building. Examples of indoor rope-challenge courses include:

- Example 1: Helium Stick
    While standing, students lay a long, thin, lightweight rod on top of their index fingers and lower the rod to the ground. Students' fingers must be touching the rod the entire time. Students are not allowed to grab or pinch the rod. This exercise is great to use when teams are just getting to know each other and are acclimating to their teammates' communication styles.
- Example 2: TeePee Shuffle
    While positioned on a balance beam or long wooden board, each team must arrange themselves from shortest to tallest without falling off the balance beam or wooden board. The instructor can also add rules to the activity, such as completing the task without talking or allowing students to only use one arm to complete the task. The TeePee shuffle helps team members build confidence in each other because they work together to solve a problem.

Having students work through rope-challenge courses is an important teaching tool. However, the debriefing session held at the end of each exercise is critical because it reiterates the importance of working together as a team, stresses the value of each team member, and identifies the strengths and weaknesses the team may have.

Below are examples of questions an instructor, the rope-challenge course facilitator, might ask during a debriefing session:

- How well did the team communicate during the task?
- How did the team discuss, plan, and carry out a solution to the challenge?
- Did every member in the team understand the solution to complete the task?
- Did the team successfully complete the activity?
- What could the team have done differently?
- How did leadership roles change during the activity?

Peer Evaluations

Teamwork brings a number of implementation challenges. One of the most critical challenges is varying contribution levels that occur among team members. Peer evaluations allow instructors to understand and evaluate information about the individual efforts of each team member that would otherwise be unavailable.

Peer evaluations should measure how the team worked together, specifically, the quantity and value of each person's contributions to the collective effort of the team. I like to conduct routine peer evaluations after every team project, task, or activity. By conducting routine peer evaluations, instructors are able to intervene if there's a problem brewing within a team, and while there is still time for a team to improve and perform better.

Conclusion

Since writing my 1993 Innovation Abstracts, I have that found many instructors today use collaborative projects and exercises in their courses. However, most of those faculty members are still using what can best be described as groups and not teams. As mentioned earlier, those terms are not interchangeable. Hopefully, by teaching team communication strategies, facilitating rope-challenge courses, and using peer evaluations to assess individual team member contributions, faculty members can continue or begin incorporating effective teamwork into their classrooms.

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