

TEAM WORK

"Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, working together is success" Henry Ford

INTRODUCTION

Teamwork is the process of working collaboratively with a group of people in order to achieve a goal. It is usually a crucial part of a business because it means that people will try to cooperate using their individual skills and providing constructive feedback despite any personal conflict between individuals.

But apart from being a main aspect in any successful business or task, teamwork is also a process which happens naturally in any human life. That is, in any community like the members of a family, a group of friends, sport teams, etc., people always need to have interaction with each other to perform any specific task. And these groups usually work well when their members feel equally responsible for the group, remain flexible to accomplish team tasks, promote communication, and exchange data. It is usual in these groups to value decisions for the benefit of the group which is deemed effective due to the mutual cooperation.

How and when did the human being turn into a social animal? Two million years ago the Homo erectus sets himself up as a successful predator thanks to the ability of becoming organized and therefore to take advantage of the power of the group. So it was then when cooperative hunting began and that required a careful planning for attacks on animals, and task specialization: some men were hunters, some prepared food, others made the hunting tools or the dressing from animals' skin, etc.,

In all this evolutionary process LANGUAGE plays a fundamental role. Language means sharing knowledge through a code of sounds which became little by little more sophisticated and accurate. The Homo sapiens will arise from this evolution. He was a new kind of man who learned behaviors rapidly to adapt himself to the environment, and for this purpose he started using language to evolve instead of just paying attention to inherited habits. This is how human culture was born.

Nowadays, companies are using terms such: motivation, leadership, cooperation... It is a "new language" that confirms that team work is considered a key concept for any successful business. So economic rewards are directly related with nonmaterial

aspects that also become rewarding. This new trend to foment teamwork in modern companies, is as successful now as it used to be in the past.

In a classroom, teamwork does not happen easily because it is not a natural environment, so some training is required in order to teach students to work cooperatively. Students will also have to change former working habits into new ones. So from being passive one must turn to be active, from taking isolated decisions one must adapt to the involvement of others, from directing one must go to guiding, from competing to collaborating... Also, knowledge and processes must be shared.

As previously said, teamwork has become an important part of the working culture and many businesses now look at teamwork skills when evaluating a person for employment. Therefore, it is important that students learn to function in a team environment so that they will have teamwork skills when they enter the workforce. Also, research tells us that students learn best from tasks that involve doing tasks and involve social interaction.

Collaborative learning should be included in almost every classroom, but some teachers struggle with having students work cooperatively. There are a number of reasons for this struggle, which include the need to develop good team exercises and the added difficulty in assessing the individual performance of the team members, among others. This is where understanding how to teach effective teamwork becomes a crucial task for the teacher.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS PRESENT IN TEAMWORK

These are the characteristics usually present in team work:

- **Cohesion and flexibility.**

Team cohesion in a group refers to the personal attraction each member of the group has to the group and the task.

Flexibility is the ability to maintain an open attitude, to accommodate different personal values and to be receptive to the ideas of others.

- **Open communication.**

Open communication is the ability to get access and shared information resources. For this to happen, it is necessary to work in a comfortable atmosphere.

- **Coordination.**

Coordination is the skill to perform interpersonal actions in the right order to achieve complex tasks. Usually the team leader takes care of this.

- **Confidence**

Confidence happens when everyone relies on the others.

- **Complementarity and interdependence.**

Both terms refer to groups whose members regard each other's skills as valuable contributions to complete the whole project.

- **Balance in members' participation.**

All members of a team will share tasks and will bring the group mutual support work to achieve the final objective.

BENEFITS

Team work enables the members of any group with a common goal to benefit in ways that otherwise would not be possible as individuals.

- To get better results.
- To learn to listen.
- Individual work quality improves.

This is all due to an improvement in communication with others.

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

When working as a team, all members share the responsibility of communicating in the best possible way for the benefit of all. This means, that each member must be listened to and feel that his or her ideas are understood and respected. This is the only way communication can be effective.

No one is a perfect communicator. Throughout people's lives, little patterns and habits are developed. Some of these habits are helpful, while some create challenges when working with others. In most cases, it is just little habits that get in the way of solid teamwork.

When communication among the members in a group is not so fluent, it is important to have in mind some ideas to develop good communication skills.

To start, it is important to have one conversation at a time. It is important to give the other person focused time. A good idea is to take turns or raise hands up to talk.

Secondly, it is necessary to develop effective listening skills. Not only should the members of a group be able to speak effectively, also they must listen to the other colleagues' words and engage in communication, on what the others are speaking about.

It is also important to remain flexible to other's opinions and accept critics. But what is also relevant is not to judge others, make fun of them or try to moralize. In order to listen, the first thing to do is to stop talking, show interest and ask questions. In addition, it is necessary not to jump immediately to conclusion and control anger. Moreover, any reaction should be to ideas and not to the speaker.

This all relates to the concept of "constructive feedback", which means to communicate regarding the effect that the message has on the other members of the group, that is, the response of the group to a message or an activity. Regarding this, a good way to show recognition and give a positive feedback is to thank people's effort in public.

Thirdly, a core communication skill is assertiveness. Being assertive is the quality of being self-assured and confident without being aggressive. Some people seem to be naturally assertive but it is also a learnable skill and mode of communication. Because assertiveness is based on mutual respect, it is an effective and diplomatic communication style. On the other hand, aggressive communication is not effective and causes conflict and people's rejection. Also, passive people may cause frustration and anxiety too.

Finally, it is also important to take into account that words are not the only elements present in communication. In fact, when we are talking face to face nonverbal elements such as the voice tone, intonation, body language, eye contact, etc, take a very important role. That is, whether somebody is listening or speaking, looking into the eyes of the receptor can make interaction more effective because eye contact conveys interest and encourages the other to be interested.

THE PROCESS OF DECISION MAKING

Decision making is the study of identifying and choosing alternatives based on the values and preferences of the decision maker. It is one of the central activities of management and it is a huge part of any process of implementation.

Every group has to make decisions sooner or later. Many decision-making processes have been proposed. The one by Pam Brown of Singleton Hospital in Swansea, Wales, breaks decision-making down into seven steps:

1. Outline your goal and outcome
2. Gather data
3. Develop alternatives (i.e. brainstorming)
4. List pros and cons of each alternative
5. Make the decision
6. Immediately take action to implement it.
7. Learn from and reflect on the decision.

In all the process it is recommended to listen carefully before acting. It is necessary not to rush and to evaluate the different alternatives and their consequences before making the decision. It is advisable to speak in a friendly tone and be assertive, that is, having in mind the idea that my rights are as important as the others' rights. All this can contribute to attract others to our positions.

There are several group decision-making techniques, for instance: consensus, voting-based methods, the Delphi method, Dotmocracy, etc.

Consensus decision-making, which tries to avoid "winners" and "losers", is the most desirable technique but it is not always possible. Anyway, the group should also decide about this aspect taking into account that democratic voting schemes reduce the decision making time and limit interpersonal conflict at a cost of decreased acceptance and participation on the decision made. In contrast, when the team members are fully informed and participate actively in decisions, they are usually more committed and productive.

INDIVIDUAL COMMITMENT LEVEL

In a group, not everybody does the same thing, there are roles: a meeting leader, a recorder, members... This works like a football or volleyball team in which some

players defend and others attack. There are also tactics to be successful, so that the team can score a goal.

Each team member has specific talents and by combining individuals in a team all these talents are assembled and that may have an enormous impact on the group's results.

Ideally, partners should be able to negotiate their roles to perform unique and meaningful tasks and team roles could be interchangeable because the first stages are dedicated to exploring and learning. Later on, roles should be kept.

These are some of the roles in a group:

- A **team leader** who coordinates and prepares the agenda, makes contact between the team and the instructor, takes care of administrative details, etc. A leader usually has energy, determination and initiative to overcome obstacles. They recognize the skills of each individual and how they can be used. They are outgoing people who have to be careful not to be domineering.
- **Team members** should consider their participation as a prior responsibility which must be chosen carefully. They are usually partners with complementing abilities who share information and contribute to the progress of the task.
- The **recorder** takes notes and makes sure the process is being documented. He can also encourage the silent members, maintaining a balanced level of participation for all the members. He can also measure individual performance and select tasks.
- The **evaluators** are the logical, analytical, objective people in the team and offer dispassionate critical analysis. They contribute when it is the time of crucial decision making. They may suggest alternative ideas.
- There may be other roles such as a **researcher, a specialist, the ideas person...**

Conflict

Although team work releases stress and improves the working environment, misunderstanding and conflict are possible and almost inevitable. Conflicts arise due to factors like seeking power in a group, poor communication, weak leadership, clashes due to behavioral style frustration, lack of motivation, lack of help by the team, etc.

When individuals do not get what they expect, there is always a certain degree of discomfort. Sometimes a member regards his tasks as too easy or too complex or feels he or she is being exploited while others are just going with the flow.

Holding different views is natural and healthy but not when it prevents the group from developing. The positive side about conflict is that it can help to clarify ideas and it gives an opportunity to change disturbing situations.

Some early indicators of conflict are body language, disagreements all the time regardless the issue, and comfortable environment and lack of motivation.

Conflict management

Conflict management is the process of limiting the negative aspects of conflict while increasing the positive aspects of conflict. The aim is to enhance learning and group outcomes. Properly managed conflict can improve group outcomes.

Conflicts are inevitable, but in a sense, conflicts also mean that people care enough to disagree strongly. They are usually likely to happen when new ideas or new commitments are introduced.

Conflicts must be handled as soon as possible because, with the passing of time, they only get worse. Unsolved problems make people unhappy while working in a team, resulting in antagonism and communication breaks down. Thus, the productivity of our team will be inefficient.

There are three key aspects to conflict management: awareness of the self, awareness of team dynamics and taking action.

Fortunately, there are various conflict resolution techniques that may be put into practice like competing, win-win, compromising, withdrawing, smoothing... And there are also methods such mediation, negotiation and arbitration. Usually, mediation and negotiation are the most common ones in the classroom.

Some basic tips to assure the good functioning of a team are:

First, simply asking nicely (and the word nicely is important) if somebody does not understand the other person's point of view can make a great difference. It should also be thought that maybe there is a good reason why a person acts in a particular way.

Second, it is necessary to forget about solving the problems in terms of winning or losing, because when a member of a group gets the outcome expected regardless of what the other person wants, the underlying issue has not been solved. Sooner or later it will reappear.

Third, it is important to see the problem in neutral objective terms: what is actually happening. And just talk about facts, without trying to guess others' reasons or thoughts.

Fourth, speak calmly about the situation with the other person, a hurried conversation at your desk between emails and phone calls will not solve anything. It is desirable to be in a quiet place with enough time to address the issue.

Fifth, it is important to attend the meeting prepared to listen carefully to the other part, even if it is difficult to do so. By the same token, ask the other person to listen respectfully to what you have to say, without interrupting.

Sixth, to clarify the disagreement, a technique which may be used is to have the other part write a bulleted list on a white board of conflicts and issues. Sit quietly while the person explains each point. When the person finishes, go down the list, and restate the complaints in your own words, as accurately as possible. This way, the person knows that you have listened and understood. Then write down *your* list and reverse the process. Usually just being clear on the conflict makes it easier to find a mutual solution.

Seventh, the intersection between positions is what should be looked for. One should be able to see the issue from the others' point of view as a first step to understand the conflict. Then it is necessary to identify positions' overlap, and eventually select issues. First, those points of view close to the intersection and later, the more distant ones. Anyway, it is always a good idea to take the part of responsibility of the situation, because usually everyone has done something wrong helping the conflict to arise.

A great way to move forward is saying why it is worth it to solve the conflict. Describing the consequences of the problem may help this process and it also helps members of the group to look beyond themselves and see the conflict "from the outside."

Eighth, you can propose a solution, or more than one, you can let it open. The kind of sentences useful for this would be of this kind:

- "What would be a good exit?"

- "Would this solution be acceptable for both?"

Also, specific actions may be proposed so that to be implemented right away. For example:

- "I suggest that we introduce a new rule about disagreements, instead of arguing in front of the whole group, members should meet and talk about it in private, does it sound good to you?"

Ninth, inviting the other person to discuss the issue may be the hardest part of the whole process. It can be remarkably hard to take that first step. It is worth doing it, anyway!

Tenth, some conflicts cannot be solved by the participants alone, and mediators can help, a neutral person with some training in conflict solving, someone who is trusted by the people involved. That could be for example the teacher, the headmaster, another respected member, etc.

Finally, do not forget that being too rigid, self-centered, always angry... are dysfunctional behaviors we have to know how to deal with in advance. It is wise to develop a team agreement on how the group will resolve a conflict if it occurs (it will).

There is no guarantee that by doing all this, a conflict will be resolved. It may, or it may not. But even if it does not work, one has the satisfaction of knowing that everything has been tried to rise above the conflict for a while and try to address to it positively and constructively. No one can ask more from the situation.

Anyway, no matter what happens, it always good to remain optimistic. It helps!

Stages in team building

Forming. A high degree of guidance is needed. Processes are still not well understood and individual roles and relationships are still to be set definitively. Members cautiously explore the boundaries of acceptable group behavior. They search for their position within the group and test the leader guidance.

Storming. It is probably the most difficult stage for the group. Conflicts among individuals can occur and little by little the atmosphere can deteriorate from a first willing friendly team to confrontation. It can vary from disagreements to open confrontation. Members become impatient about the lack of progress but are still inexperienced with working as a team. Much of the members' energy is focused on each other instead of achieving a goal.

Norming. There is a growth in cohesiveness, less oversight is needed, the members develop their skills and the performance begins. Emotional conflict is reduced as relationships become more cooperative. The team is able to concentrate more on their work and start to make significant progress.

Performing. By this stage the team members have discovered and accepted each other's strengths and weaknesses, and learned what their roles are. Members are open and trusting and many good ideas are produced because they are not afraid to

offer ideas and suggestions. They are comfortable using decision making tools to evaluate the ideas, prioritize tasks and solve problems. Much is accomplished and team satisfaction and loyalty is high.

Building a team code

It is a good idea to develop a code, some kind of rules of behavior, which all members should adopt, maybe by signing. The main purpose of this is to prevent many possible conflicts which may arise among the group members. The code should be negotiated at early stages of team working and it should be visible for everyone.

This is an example for a **code** of cooperation:

- 1- Every member is responsible for team progress and team success.
2. Attend every meeting: BE on time.
- 3- Come prepared.
- 4- Carry out assignments on schedule.
5. Listen carefully and show respect for contributions of other members
6. Pay attention about disruptive behavior.
7. Criticize ideas not persons.
8. Only one person speaks at a time.
9. Everyone participates no one dominates.
10. Be short, avoid long anecdotes and examples.
11. Ask when you do not understand.
12. Have fun.

Conclusion

Nothing affects more the prosperity of an individual than a community around with whom one can cooperate peacefully.

One of the main basis of our society is free cooperation, that is, I do what I do best and I receive the best from others. In this way, everyone profits from others' efforts.

People's lives can only develop fully among society. We choose to meet and exchange something (information, energy, matter, feelings, whatever) when we agree on that with somebody else, because we both think we get some kind of benefit.

Since working as part of a team can improve learning and is a much needed skill in today's workplace, some team exercises should be included in the classroom. With well-planned out tasks, careful guidance, and close observation, instructors can make team exercises extremely valuable learning experiences.

GOOD PRACTICES INVOLVING TEAMWORK IN THE CLASSROOM

Introduction

Ten years ago a group of Maths teachers working in a Secondary Education High School tried to find different methods and new techniques for teaching Maths due to the continuously poor results of students. Then, for the first time, this group became aware of teamwork teaching techniques, and from then on, this way of working has always been present in their classes.

Now, we want to put the teaching techniques and procedures coming from this group of teachers into practice so that more teachers may benefit from this former experience. Moreover, we want to implement this teamwork method experience in our classes for adult students.

We are choosing to work with two different methodologies, "Learning Together" (Johnson and Johnson, 1975) and "Jigsaw" (Arosón, 1978). We like the first one because it is very flexible and the teacher assumes a strong role as conductor of the groups. We also choose the second one for organizing the groupings.

It is necessary to point out that a teacher who wants to apply teamwork in the classroom does not have to read a lot of specialized bibliography to start. The most important aspects at the beginning will be common sense, the teacher's experience and ability to observe.

First of all, some recommendations:

- Teamwork will not be the magic solution for all problems in the class and it should not be present in all the lessons of the school year.
- It is also important to have in mind that it is not always possible to implement teamwork in a class. And sometimes, even if possible, it cannot be implemented to the degree we would like to. The varied circumstances in a classroom may favor or be detrimental to develop teamwork tasks. And it is a teacher's job to determine whether it is possible or not to apply this method.
- Working with groups of adults may be difficult because they already have a rigid idea about their own intellectual capacity, motivation and attitude. All this may lead them to rigid thoughts about their own limits, which may or may not be truth.
- Sometimes difficult students or circumstances may eventually work very well together despite the initial difficulties (storming period). It is recommended to give the class a chance even if the beginning is hard.

- Teamwork is an excellent method when the students in a class have the attitude to cooperate (empathy, cohesion, balance, open communication, etc.) together with a high academic motivation.
- It is necessary to bear in mind that students may also get tired. And sometimes, groups of students may start working not so well due to other academic circumstances. The pressure experienced due to final exams or graduation may break cooperative dynamics which will transform into others based on individualistic aims and competition. The teacher should know by observation when to stop team working.

GROUPINGS

- Groups should be small, formed by three, four or exceptionally five students.

PROCEDURE

- Teachers form groups after a couple or three weeks of classes that allow them to get to know the students. Groups must be heterogeneous according to factors such success/failure, facility/difficulty, attitude towards studies, genre, conflicts, etc.
- Each group will be assigned a “group of experts” according to different lessons. These experts will be students from each group who will explain certain contents to the rest of members of their group. In this case we do not apply completely the Jigsaw technique, because we recommend the group of experts to learn contents in a different classroom and directly from the teacher.

For instance: In a classroom with seven groups of **four** students each we would design **four** tasks to be worked and explained by the group of experts. We would choose one student from each group for each task so that all members of each group participate in teaching and learning.

TIMING AND SPACE ORGANISATION

The group distribution must be in a way that it is easy for the teacher to walk around and it should also guarantee that each group can work independently from the rest.

In each group, proximity and comfort among members are also necessary.

It is also important to take into account that each group working with experts will need the time necessary to obtain good results. This difficulty leads us to two different solutions:

a.- We apply teamwork just for some contents and a shorter period of time so we can cover all the curriculum, or most of it.

b.- We select contents and procedures so that we cover the most important parts of the curriculum and 2/3rds of the contents may be taught team working.

GROUP ASSESSMENT

Apart from other assessment tools, direct observation assessment and interview of all the groups' member is highly recommended.

Teachers should not only supervise and value the groups according to the acquired contents but they also they should value the skills developed by students to work in a group, that is, open communication without aggression, know and respect of the partners, the skill to listen, the ability to help to others when they need it, the ability to ask for help, the ability to solve conflicts, etc.

There are numerous observation guides and assessment material published. But we also recommend the use of a "Group Diary". The diary is used at the end of each session when a student, each session a different one, will explain to the rest of the class about the task accomplished by the group, doubts, difficulties they found and the number of times they required the teacher's help due to the group lack of skills to act as a group. The teacher will assess not only the information given by the student but also the accuracy and neatness to elaborate the Diary reflect how well the group works.

GROUP GRADING

Sometimes the exam may be the only grading tool. But it may also be interesting to pose group tests, raise the individual final mark when the group performs well (that is, the average mark of all the members of a group is passed).

