



PRIMER: COLLABORATING AND BUILDING TEAMS

Essential Question

How do teams form and collaborate effectively?

Unless you are a hermit or a one-man band, at some point in your life you will have to work with others as part of a team. It could be in a job or in some other part of daily life. Teams are essential to achieving goals and getting things done. As Sam Walton, the founder of Walmart and one-time richest person in America once stated, “Individuals don’t win; teams do.”

When it comes to business, two heads are better than one. And three heads are better than two! Well-functioning teams comprised of individuals who know how to *collaborate* are essential for success.

Teams come together to achieve a goal through collaboration, or working together. Individuals on a team do this best when they realize each of us has our own particular set of skills and abilities or our own *comparative advantage*. Teams that are diverse, with a wide range of skills, can improve performance in ways that individuals operating in isolation can’t.

To make sure individuals on a team collaborate effectively, a three-step process is necessary.

1. Understand that you have your own set of skills and find out what they are.
2. Find out and appreciate the skills of the other members of the team.
3. Ensure all team members use individual *skill sets*, in pursuit of the team’s common goal.

You may think you already have a good idea about strengths, and perhaps you know your weaknesses or areas in which you might improve. But there are personality quizzes you can take to discover things about yourself that you may have missed. Tests can tell you if you are orderly, agreeable, extrovert, or open, or which combination of these and other personality types best describes you. These tests can also tell you which careers might

VOCABULARY

collaborate

to work with another person or a group of people to achieve something

comparative advantage

the ability of an individual or nation to produce a product at a lower opportunity cost than another individual or nation

skill set

a person’s particular combination of skills or abilities



suit you best. Knowing yourself helps you to understand the roles you can best undertake in a shared project. Knowing how you can best contribute makes you a more effective collaborator on a team.

When you are part of a team, you must work with diverse personalities and skill sets. Consequently, you will have to understand that other people have strengths and weaknesses, just as you do. In addition to having different skills, people have different work styles. Some people might be high energy and others low; some might seem passive and others very assertive; some attentive to the opinions of their colleagues and others always convinced they alone are right.

Understanding these differences is especially important when *friction* and conflict arise in a team. There may be times when you feel annoyed that one team member doesn't seem to be working as hard as the others. A member might become frustrated if another isn't good at a certain task. All teams will have these kinds of frictions. It's important to be aware that people have limitations as well as abilities and all different styles. This knowledge allows you to begin to overcome conflicts when they start to arise and get the team to work together effectively in pursuit of the team goal.

You will need various tools to help you in team collaboration. In business as in life, successful collaboration requires compromise, flexibility, *empathy*, understanding, sensitivity, and respect. This is a tall list of needs, but your ability to demonstrate these skills will help the team succeed. You will be able to anticipate that some people will roll up their sleeves and jump right into a task, while others will prefer to be strategic in their approach and consider all of the options before beginning. You will know ahead of time that some people will be communicators, telling everyone else what they think should be done. Others will be listeners, absorbing ideas and thoughtfully analyzing before commenting. You will need to appreciate both roles for the strengths they bring to team collaboration.

In a team, all of these abilities and styles can come together in pursuit of a common aim. One member may have to accept that he doesn't always get his way, or that he has to work with someone he just doesn't like, or even someone he feels isn't a strong contributor. The group must assume shared responsibility for collaborative work and appreciate the contribution each member makes. Ensuring the team succeeds is one of the jobs of a leader.

VOCABULARY

friction

conflict caused by a clash of wills

empathy

to understand and share someone else's feelings

**WHAT DO YOU THINK?**

1. In the business world, teams come together to achieve common goals. What teams exist in other areas of life and what common goals do they pursue?
2. When you were on a team that had members with different skills and styles, did the differences cause friction?
3. How can team members with different skills and styles best collaborate?
4. Think of a possible future career and the kind of team you might join in pursuing that career. After considering your own skills, which other member skills would be helpful in achieving the team's goals?