

Building a team

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In sports, some teams win simply because they have the best [players](#). However, other teams with equally good players regularly finish far from the top, and some teams with only average players nonetheless become champions. Part of the secret is teamwork: no matter how good the individual players are, if they don't operate as a unit, they won't win as many games.

What's true in sports can be true in community work as well. Successful community leaders often have good teams behind them. In many situations, teams can accomplish what individuals can't.

Working on a successful team is an important learning experience for future leaders. It demonstrates that not everything can be done by one person, and shows them what it takes to [create](#) a team. A leader who's been part of a good team will be able to build good teams because she knows what they look and feel like.

One of the most important tasks of leadership, in fact, is being able to put together a good team and to support its members in doing their best. This section will provide a guide for assembling and building teams that can help your organization or initiative be effective

WHAT ARE TEAMS AND TEAM BUILDING?

WHAT IS A TEAM?

The answer to this question isn't as obvious as it might seem. Everyone knows what a team is: a group of people working together toward a common goal, right? Well, yes and no. A team *is* a group with a common goal, but lots of groups have a common goal. And a team works together, but lots of groups work together. The members of the United States Congress work together toward a common goal (making the laws that are best for the country), but each member has her own private interests and beliefs -- her own agenda.





The Congress is no more a team than is a soccer "team" of six-year-olds, each of whom plays as if he's the only person on the field.

A *team* is a group of people with a commitment to one another, to the team, to a high level of achievement, to a common goal, and to a common vision. They understand that team success depends on the work of every member.

A good team functions as a single organism. Not only do **members** work together toward a common goal, but they complement and support one another so that their work seems effortless. Compare that soccer team of six-year-olds and their individual agendas with the Brazilian national team in its heyday. Everyone seemed to know not only what all his teammates were doing, but what they were going to do. Passes always hit their mark, as if there were some sort of mysterious force among team members that directed their kicks. Obviously, their "magic" was the result of endless practice, but it was also the result of a shared passion for accomplishment and a shared vision of just that effortless, automatic play that made all other teams look clumsy.

So a team has a shared interest in accomplishment and a shared vision, both of which are different from a shared goal. The need for accomplishment provides a driving force. The vision provides not only a goal, but directions and a compass for reaching it. It keeps everyone moving in the same direction, at the same speed, working together to create as little friction and as efficient a journey as possible.

One of the ways that teams reduce friction is through their members' commitment to working *as* a team. They're willing to give up most of their need for individual recognition for success in reaching the goal. It's the accomplishments of the team as a whole that become important, and members of good teams hold themselves and one another accountable.

When it's working well, a team is more like a single individual doing a lot of things at once than it is a conglomeration of single individuals, each doing their own thing. The whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts: the team can accomplish more as a team than all its individual members could achieve if each were working alone.

WHAT IS TEAM BUILDING?

So how do you create that kind of team, a group of individuals that functions as a single unit, even if each has a different task? There are really two ways to look at team building. The first is putting together a team from scratch for a specific purpose. That purpose may be for the **short term** (e.g., running a fundraising campaign with a limited scope) or much more momentous and lengthy (starting and staffing a long-term initiative meant to change the community permanently).

Members of teams need three kinds of skills: technical or functional (i.e., the expertise in the field that they and the team are working in); problem-solving; and interpersonal. The ideal would be to find individuals who embody all these skills, but the reality is you'll probably have to choose some people specifically for each of these strengths. All are obviously important. Effectively accomplishing the tasks of the team requires technical and



functional skills; approaching those tasks in a reasonable way calls for a high level of problem-solving skills; and keeping the work of the team from being derailed by internal conflict, jealousy, or other similar issues demands a great deal of sensitivity and interpersonal skill.

In addition to looking for skills, you have to [find](#) the right people for the right jobs on the team, and assemble a group that fits together well. Judging how people will fit in with one another is a matter, to some extent, of following hunches, listening to what your instincts tell you about personalities and the ways people present themselves, the kinds of words they use, their body language, etc. These are often as important as their backgrounds and training for determining whether they would be good additions to a particular team.

Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith, in *The Wisdom of Teams*, specifically advise choosing people for their skills, rather than for their personalities. For an industrial production team, this may well be sound advice, but community work [requires](#) a different mindset. Personality, both as it relates to team "fit" and to the contact of team members with others in the organization and in the community, is in fact extremely important.

So much of the success of community work relies on relationships -- with participants, with colleagues, with officials, with the community at large -- that personality and personal style cannot be ignored here. Hiring someone who's uncomfortable with the target population, for instance, can be disastrous to the work of an organization. Choosing a team member who can't get along with her teammates, or who disagrees with them on philosophical issues or on the importance of the team's goal, can be equally troublesome. It's absolutely vital to be keenly aware of the ways in which people will affect other team members and the community when choosing a team.

In some ways, assembling a team from scratch is easier than the [second](#) type of team building, which requires turning that group you've just hired or an already-existing group into a real team that works well together. In the case of an already-existing group, you have few choices about who's going to be a member. There may be long-standing antagonism or conflict between some of the people involved, or some may be difficult personalities to deal with. If people weren't chosen to fit together in the first place, they may or may not fit together well now.

Building a team in this second sense takes strong leadership and a vision that the team can buy into. In addition to trying to help team members learn to work together as a unit, you have to find ways to build commitment to the idea of a team and to the team itself, as well as to meeting the challenge the team has been given. Sometimes, an existing group is already a team, or almost a team. They may already [share](#) a vision, and have some idea about how to realize it. If that's not true, however, it can take a lot of time and effort to make it true, and you have to be willing to be patient.

WHAT ARE THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF TEAMS?



Putting together a team of skilled people may be the best choice for accomplishing a particular task . . . or it may not. Like most other ways of addressing tasks, teams have advantages and disadvantages. Some of their strong points include:

- *A team broadens what individuals can do.* Team members gain from the fact that being part of a group makes it possible to do things they couldn't necessarily do alone. A good team supports and enhances the skills and learning of its members, and brings out the best in them. Humans are, after all, social animals, and, as a species, we've worked in teams for a **long time**. Try killing and butchering a mammoth single-handedly.
- *Several heads mean a wider range of ideas.* Teams can be more imaginative than individuals, and come at things from a larger number of perspectives.
- *Teams can have a greater array of talents and skills than can be found in a single individual.* That obviously increases both their effectiveness and the variety of what they can address.
- *Team members learn new skills from their colleagues.* This increases their own range, and also constantly broadens the team's capabilities.
- *Teamwork is more efficient than a number of individuals working solo .* The members of a good team know how to assign tasks to the appropriate people, and how to coordinate what they're doing for the maximum effect.
- *Teamwork provides relief when someone is having a problem.* There is always backup and help available, and the stress is less because you're not the only one doing the job.
- *By the same token, the fact that each member knows he's responsible to others works to make him more effective.* No one wants to let others down, or to be seen as the weak link. When a team is working well, all its members are aware of their parts in the overall mission, and try to **make sure** that others' work isn't wasted because of them.
- *A team member has more ownership of what she's doing.* She's involved in the planning of the team's actions, and she can see how her job fits into the larger purpose of the team and the organization. She doesn't feel like she's working in a vacuum.
- *Good teams can build leaders.* They give everyone a chance to show what he can do, and to exercise leadership when that's appropriate.
- *A shared vision keeps everyone moving forward.*

That's a pretty impressive array of strengths, but there are weaknesses as well.

- *Team decision-making takes longer than individual decision-making,* and can be a great deal more difficult.
- *Depending upon the task or problem, team effort can be wasted effort.* Some things can be more easily dealt with by individuals.
- *The team's success may hang on the work of the weakest or least effective team member.*
- *Once a team gets rolling in a particular direction, even if it's the wrong direction, it develops momentum.* It may be harder for a team than for an individual to get back on a better track.



- Especially at the beginning when members are still getting familiar with one another, *the work of teams can bog down in interpersonal issues, resentments, and blame.*
- *On the other hand, once team members are bonded and committed to one another and the team, they may be reluctant to tell others when their work is unsatisfactory or to point out that the team isn't getting anywhere.*
- *Individuals on the team may lose motivation because of the lack of individual recognition for the value of their work.* The balance between team effort and individual recognition is a delicate one.

A question that could be asked here is "Why build teams, as opposed to groups?" The [answer](#) is that a group is simply a number of people assembled to work toward a goal. Its members may have very little connection to one another, may care little or nothing about actually accomplishing the goal, and may have no interest in the goal itself or its implications. A group may provide some of the advantages ascribed to teams above, but that's not a given. It is a given that it won't have a common vision, and that it probably will have most of the disadvantages that teams can have.

A group becomes a team when it has created a commonly-held vision, developed a sense of itself as a team, dedicated itself to the quality of its accomplishment, embraced mutual accountability, and become invested in its goal and purpose. A team becomes a "high-performance team," in Katzenbach and Smith's view, with the addition of the commitment of members to one another's personal growth and success. And it is that commitment that can create some of the greatest benefits a team can [offer](#).

WHEN SHOULD YOU BUILD TEAMS?

Social psychologists have looked at the differences between the ways people perform when there are others around and when there aren't. From these observations have come some general guidelines for when a team is likely to be more effective than an individual. Some of the most important are:

- The people in the team, in general, have the skills to tackle the task at hand.
- The task requires the complementary skills of a number of people.
- The task specifically requires several people (moving a piano, for instance).
- The success of the task is not based on the performance of the weakest team member.
- Team members have experience working in teams.
- The perceived importance of the task is high.
- Group commitment to the task is high.

Not all of these conditions need to be obtained for a team to be a good choice, but some should. The more of them that are present, the more likely that a team will be successful.

By the same token, the negatives of these guidelines (e.g, people in general don't have the skills to handle the task) indicate that a team is not likely to be an effective way to deal with



the task at hand. In addition to those negatives, teams are unlikely to be necessary or successful when one expert member alone is capable of handling the task, and/or when there is an immediate deadline.

Given those guidelines, a team can be used in almost any situation that requires the work of several people. There are, however, some particular times when teams might work especially well.

- *[Creating a strategic plan](#) for addressing community issues.* A participatory approach to planning would involve building a community team to develop a strategic plan.
- *[Starting up a new organization or initiative.](#)* You might form a community team to plan for a new entity.
- *[Starting a new program](#) or intervention within an organization or initiative.* A community team might plan or begin to implement a new intervention.
- *[Starting a coalition.](#)* Once again, a community team might be helpful in getting a new coalition planned and going.
- *[Planning and carrying out a community assessment.](#)* A diverse team to plan, communicate with the community, gather and analyze information, and report on findings would make for an accurate and efficient assessment.
- *[Evaluating an organization, initiative, or intervention.](#)* Evaluation is often best accomplished by a team of evaluators who bring different perspectives to the process.
- *[Spearheading an advocacy campaign](#) with a specific goal.* Here, a team to handle communication, outreach to the community, and contact with legislators and other policy makers could make all the difference.
- *[Running a fundraising event or campaign.](#)* Whether you're putting on a tag sale to finance a new fax machine, or trying to raise \$50,000 to support your initiative, a good team can spread the work around, and make success more probable.
- *[Staffing and running an organization or initiative.](#)* Staff members might be organized into teams with each team having responsibility for some area of the work of the entity. Another possibility here, especially in smaller organizations, is that the whole staff functions as a single team, working toward a shared vision.
- *[Engaging in ongoing advocacy.](#)* A team approach might make advocacy more effective, especially if team members represent different elements of the population.
- *[Performing a particular function within a community program or initiative.](#)* Many health and human service organizations form teams to address specific issues or populations. A health clinic might have a physician, a social worker, a nurse -midwife, one or two physician's assistants or nurse practitioners, and some RNs all working together as a team to assess and treat families. [Mental health](#) centers often take a team approach, with a case manager and several therapists serving a number of people. Child care providers, teachers (especially in middle schools, where the team approach is standard), street outreach workers, and others often also work in this way.
- *[Changing the community over the long term.](#)* Community organizing and community development are long-term processes. They're often difficult and frustrating, and they rely on the dedication of those engaged in the work. A team approach not only makes more activity possible, it keeps everyone involved aware of what everyone else is



doing. This means that the team can be more efficient and not duplicate services, and that it has the ability to change what it's doing as new information comes in. Mutual support can also add to a team's effectiveness and staying power over the long haul.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD TEAM?

Every good team is not the same, but really good ones often have a number of similar characteristics. In their book, *Organizing Genius: The Secrets of Creative Collaboration* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1997), Warren Bennis and Patricia Ward Biederman looked at six famous groups, including the Manhattan Project team, to understand the factors that foster creative collaboration. Here are their 15 "Take Home Lessons" (pp. 196-218) about "Great Groups" (thanks to Steve Fawcett). A "Great Group" is Bennis and Biederman's version of Katzenbach and Smith's "high-performance team":

- **Greatness starts with superb people.** Those who see things differently, have a knack for finding interesting and important problems, have skill in problem solving, see connections, and are "deep generalists" with broad interests and multiple frames of reference.
- **Great Groups and great leaders create each other.** The best leaders create and maintain situations in which others can make a difference.
- **Every Great Group has a strong leader.** Leaders might act as "pragmatic dreamers" with original but attainable visions, as "curators" who recognize and select for excellence in others, as coordinators of volunteer associations around "great projects," or as "conductors" who understand the work and what it takes to produce it.

Bennis and Biederman base their conclusions on the six teams they studied. In other cases, successful teams have functioned well with collaborative leadership of various sorts. It is probably fair to say that *some* sort of leadership is necessary, and it may be that a single strong leader is the most effective embodiment of that leadership.

- **Leaders of Great Groups love talent and know where to find it.** Talented people smell out places full of promise and energy where the future is being made. Leaders help connect groups to networks of people, ideas, and resources that enhance the group's work. More diverse networks increase the chances that new connections will be made. Participants know that their inclusion in the group is a sign of excellence.
- **Great Groups are full of talented people who can work together.** Members accept their responsibilities to share information and advance the work. They tolerate personal idiosyncrasies, and try to be good colleagues who advance the common purpose.
- **Great Groups think they are on a mission from God.** Members believe that they are doing something vital. The work is more a crusade than a job. A powerful vision helps them see losses as sacrifice. Their clear, collective purpose makes everything they do



seem meaningful and valuable. Members of older generations tell newer ones what they are doing and why, and how new members can contribute.

- **Every Great Group is an island, but an island with a bridge to the mainland.** People trying to [change](#) the world need to be isolated from it, free from its distractions, yet able to tap into its resources. The work should be intense and fun.
- **Great Groups see themselves as winning underdogs.** They are feisty. They are Davids slinging fresh ideas at Goliath. They see themselves as wily opponents in the face of bigger competitors.
- **Great Groups always have an enemy.** They are involved in a "War on Drugs" or a "War on Poverty." This raises the stakes of the competition, helping the group rally and define itself.
- **People in Great Groups have blinders on.** They have a passion for the task at hand. They are unusually devoted to the work.
- **Great Groups are optimistic, not realistic.** They are talented people who believe that they will accomplish great things together. The difficulty of the task adds to its joy.
- **In Great Groups the right person has the right job.** Talented people are allowed to do the work they are best suited to doing.
- **The leaders of Great Groups give them what they need and free them from the rest.** Leaders help bring in a "worthy challenge," a task that enables people to use their talents fully. They provide the tools needed for the work, and help share information and ideas by convening weekly colloquia in which problems and dilemmas are addressed and new ideas are explored. They help members manage stress, model and support a climate of civility, and protect the group from the broader institution and environment.
- **Great Groups ship.** They are places of [action](#), not merely think tanks. They do hands-on work that delivers products and services by deadlines.
- **Great work is its own reward.** They are engaged in solving hard, meaningful problems. The work matters to people -- to those served and to those doing it

HOW DO YOU BUILD A TEAM?

Building a good team involves a great deal more than simply choosing members. That's only the [first step](#), and you may not even have the chance to do that if you're working with an already-existing group. Developing and communicating a vision, planning the team's mission to match the vision, working out how people will function together, and then fine-tuning it over time are only some of the other elements of team building.

The following are guidelines, and are not meant to be a step-by-step guide to team building. Some elements of the process may get worked out over time in the course of the team's activities. Others may reach critical points and be dealt with then. Each team is unique, and there is no single formula for success or excellence.

CHOOSING TEAM MEMBERS



The factors below are stated as if one person will be choosing the team. Often, this is the case, but perhaps equally often, teams **choose** their own members, or team members participate in choosing the rest of the team as they come on board. This is, in many ways, ideal, as long as everyone understands what's important for the task and has at least a basic understanding of how a team needs to fit together.

Whether you're hiring new staff people especially for a team, or choosing from among the existing staff members of an organization, there are a number of factors to consider.

- **Start with the best people you can find.** No team is any better than its members, and **finding the best people** for the jobs at hand is tremendously important. "Best " doesn't always simply mean someone who can do the work better than anyone else, however. Someone may be a terrific practitioner, but difficult to work with, or jealous of others' successes. It may make more sense to choose someone who's only second best (although still very good) at the work, but better at being a member of a team.
- **Choose team members so they'll have a good fit.** The issue of fit was mentioned earlier, and it can't be overstressed. In order for team members to fit together well, they must connect on a number of levels.
 - *Personality.* People don't necessarily need to become best **friends**, but they need at least to respect, and, better yet, to like one another. They're going to be spending a lot of time together: it's far more conducive to the team's success if time spent together is seen as pleasant. In addition, the more people like and respect one another, the more they'll communicate, and the more loyalty they'll feel to the team and its work. Both of these conditions add to the effectiveness of the team. As team members are chosen, therefore, it's essential to consider whether each person is likely to get along well with the others, and what she'll add to or take away from the personality of the team.
 - *World view.* Especially in health, human service, and community work, it's important that the overall goals of everyone involved be similar. If some team members see participant empowerment as paramount, and others see participants as annoying and obstructive, there will be friction. Not only will team members disagree and perhaps work against one another, but the whole purpose of the team's work will be weakened. It's vital, therefore, that the basic vision of the team's purpose be shared. In choosing team members, people's attitudes and general world views need to play a large role.
 - *Work ethic.* Team members don't have to be workaholics, but they need to have similar work ethics and similar conceptions of what doing a good job means. If that 's the case, then no one will get upset because he's doing more work than others, or because one person isn't pulling his weight.
 - *Ability to use disagreement and conflict well.* Team members need to be able to disagree positively, and to use their disagreements and differences about the work to come up with better solutions. They have to be willing to voice those disagreements, because disagreement is often a wellspring for good ideas. At the same time, they have to be able to remove such disagreements from the



personal, and look at them as problems to be solved with creativity and mutual respect.

- **Look for members with a diversity of backgrounds and perspectives.** It seems obvious that the more different frames of reference that can be brought to bear on an issue or a community, the better. Teams that are diverse in a number of ways -- background, training, culture, etc. -- bring a range of skills and perspectives to the work they do. Choosing team members with an eye for what they bring to the mix can create a more dynamic and creative group.
- **Look for members with a commitment to the concept of working as a team.** Teamwork often requires that people put aside their individual interests in order to accomplish the team's goals. Team members need to understand just what it means to work as part of a team. They have to be willing to compromise -- especially when they know they 're right -- and to maintain a team atmosphere of civility and mutual respect. More to the point, they have to check their egos at the door if the team is to work well.
- **Look for team members committed the team's guiding vision.** The vision may be one that's jointly developed (see below), or it may already exist before the team is formed. In either case, belief in it and a willingness to strive toward its realization are a large part of what will make a team successful in the long run. Anyone you choose needs to have the passion needed to make that kind of commitment, and the sense of the world that will allow commitment to the team's particular vision.
- **Find people with a sense of humor.** The work of community-based and grass roots organizations and initiatives is always hard, often frustrating, and seldom pays well, if at all. People need a sense of humor and fun attitude to maintain their enthusiasm, and to deal with the disappointments or failures that are an inevitable part of even the most successful efforts. The gallows humor that some people find appalling in health and human service situations is often just as necessary to the smooth functioning of the organization as the competence and devotion of the staff in the work they do.

In the [TV series](#) "MASH," doctors and nurses in a Korean War field hospital faced horrendous conditions and the agony of horribly-wounded patients. Humor was their way of keeping themselves sane. If they hadn't been able to joke about their situation, it would have been unbearable for both them and the viewers.

BUILDING THE TEAM

Once a group of team members is assembled (whether by hiring, by choosing from among the staff of an existing organization, or by taking an existing group) has to be turned into an actual team. The less care taken in assembling the group, the more difficult this task will be. All of what follows applies both to teams chosen carefully for specific purposes and to preexisting groups that must become teams. Some of the points, however, (working out personal issues, or making the team concept clear) are particularly relevant for those groups not as carefully selected.



- **Start with the vision.** As mentioned several times above, a team needs a vision to be passionate about. ("Great Groups think they are on a mission from God.") This vision can be developed in a number of ways:
 - *It may be the vision of a strong and creative leader.* A [transformative leader](#) has a vision that draws others with it.
 - *It may simply be putting flesh on the bones of what the team is already doing.* Changing the form of the work of an organization to a team approach, for instance, may not involve a change in vision, but simply a clearer statement of, or a new commitment to, what has already been the organization's goal and purpose.
 - *It may be a group vision.* One way to start building the team is to get it to develop its guiding vision. For a team where the leadership is collaborative, the vision almost has to come out of a group process. Where there is a designated leader, she can simply join the group in developing the vision, so it will be hers also.
 - *It may come out of an organization-wide or community-wide strategic planning process.* The [vision](#) may speak directly to the needs of the community or of the target population.

Regardless of how the vision is arrived at, the team needs to buy into it if it is going to be successful. That means either the vision has to be consistent with what team members are already committed to, or that they have to be part of its development.

- **Build team bonds.** At the outset, it's often useful to build cohesiveness through some type of bonding activity appropriate to the nature of the group (e.g., You wouldn't take a team of seniors on a rigorous wilderness experience.) Some possibilities:
 - *A retreat.* A full-day or several-day meeting in a place where team members can get to know one another and develop their commitment to the team and its purpose.
 - *Specific bonding activities.* Activities where success is only possible through teamwork. Where it's physically possible, Outward Bound-type activities like rock climbing, mountain hikes, or cooperative games can serve these ends. Group problem-solving, perhaps centered on the team's task, is another possibility. Laughter is an important element here, as well as the chance to work together.
 - *Socializing.* Preparing and eating meals together, doing some enjoyable activity such as a picnic, making music, going to a play, etc. with or without families, can create ties among team members.
 - *Creating team traditions.* Eating lunch together, a regular lunchtime or after work card game, fake "awards," or a continually passed-on e-mail story that everyone contributes to can help cement the team.
- **Make sure that the concept of a team is absolutely clear,** and that everyone understands what that means for themselves.



- **Involve the team in jointly planning how it will function and what the team and each of its members will do.** The more control team members have over their work, the more likely they are to do it well.
- **Address personal issues.** (This may be an ongoing necessity. It should start at the formation of the team in order to try to resolve issues as early as possible.) Any personal issues that get in the way of the smooth functioning of the team need to be confronted and resolved at the beginning. Some of these can be worked out privately with a single person, while others may need the whole group's attention. Some common issues to address:
 - *Conflicts or other issues between or among members of the group.* You can't necessarily make people like each other. But you can insist that they face and resolve conflicts, that they be civil, and that they not let their antagonism get in the way of the work of the team.
 - *A need for individual recognition.* Individuals may put themselves forward constantly (correctly or incorrectly) as the originators of ideas, the solvers of problems, the driving force behind team successes, etc. There are times when this is appropriate, but if it's constant, it can destroy the cohesiveness of the team.
 - *An inability to compromise or let go of ideas.* Flexibility is a prime characteristic of a good team member. It's important to put ideas on the table, but it's also important to understand when to let go of them, or to incorporate some aspects of them into someone else's conception for the sake of progress.
 - *Lack of commitment to the work.* In order for a team to function well, every member has to believe in what he's doing, and do his job as well as he can. If folks aren't committed to the work, that simply won't happen.

Problems arising from these kinds of issues can be the hardest to solve, but if they're left to fester, they can destroy a team.

- **Establish team norms.** Teams should be in agreement about the ways members treat one another and how issues are resolved. The team standards should be generated by the team as a whole, and hashed out so that everyone sees them as fair and reasonable.
 - Areas that might be covered include:
 - *Civility.* Even in the heat of argument, there should be general agreement that name-calling, personal attacks, threats, and the like are off limits. Discussion can be heated, but shouldn't threaten the glue that holds the team together.
 - *Conflict resolution.* There should be clear avenues for dealing with conflict that minimize the possibility of leaving it unresolved, or of it resulting in permanent splits between or among team members.
 - *Communication.* Team members need easy and direct access to one another, and also need to pass information around quickly and efficiently, so that no one is left out of the loop. Establishing systems to



maintain this level of communication is an important piece of team formation.

- *Responsibilities.* Team members already know their job responsibilities, but they also need to understand their personal responsibilities for maintaining the team. Someone having a problem with another team member's behavior, for instance, should be responsible for bringing it up in the appropriate way, rather than waiting for the other to change, or for someone else to notice and take care of it. Other similar responsibilities might include helping to keep everyone focused on the task, offering help when others are struggling, calling attention to problems in the work or among team members, etc.
 - *Importance of the team and the mission.* It can't be forced, but it adds greatly to team effectiveness if one of the norms is that the collective goal comes first, and if everyone on the team buys into it. If that can be established, the team is almost sure to be successful.
- **Hash out the logistics of working as a team.** How does a team work best? Your team needs to establish how it can do its best work. Who's going to be responsible for what? (Remember that a good team assigns its members the tasks at which they're most competent.) What kind of meeting, conference, and consultation schedules can you establish to make sure that everyone always knows everything she needs to know? How can you keep team thinking and decision-making dynamic, i.e. able and ready to change a course of action or an idea when needed? All of these and many other questions must be addressed in order for the team to work smoothly and well.

One possible way to approach some of these issues is to confer with other successful teams, either within or outside of your organization. They may be able to help you avoid some of the mistakes that they made, and to guide you to some questions you may not have thought of asking.

- **Start the team with a task that is both doable and requires teamwork to accomplish.** As in spring training for baseball, this will give people a chance to [practice](#) working as a team on something relatively simple. Starting with a success will help cement the team, and give it a positive outlook upon which to base its work.
- **On a regular basis, go back over both successes and failures to understand what happened and learn for the future.** It's important to look at errors and failures as chances for learning, not occasions for blame.

A story is told about Tom Watson, founder and original CEO of IBM. An executive had made an error costing the firm \$30,000.00, at the time a considerable sum of money. Watson called him in and grilled him about how the error had been made and what he'd learned from what he'd done. The executive, sure he was simply being toyed with, finally burst out, "Why don't you just fire me and get it over with?" Watson, genuinely surprised, answered, "Fire you? We've just spent \$30,000.00 training you."



- **Provide both individual and team support.** Make sure that everyone has what she needs to do her job. Pay attention to team members' personal needs as well. They'll work better if they don't have other things gnawing at them. If they need flexibility because of the needs of small children or elders, make sure they have it. If it will help the team to have food or amusement, or just space available for breaks, see what you can do about accommodating it. If people need resources such as a library, access to particular Internet sites, etc., try to provide it for them. If someone needs an afternoon off, make sure she takes it. In other words, do everything you can to make people happy, comfortable, and functional. It will pay dividends in quality of work life and quality of work for everyone.
- **Give people something extra for working as a team.** You can pay people more . . . if you have the money to. More likely, you can offer them more flexibility, more power over their jobs, a better chance at successfully achieving their shared vision, better working conditions and quality of working life. Whatever it is, offer something to let people know you appreciate what they're doing.
- **Reward accomplishments like crazy.** Reward the whole team for successes, and reward individuals for particularly good work. You may want to institute a system whereby team members recommend their colleagues for recognition. Use praise unsparingly, and criticism only when it's absolutely necessary, and your team will accomplish wonders.

IN SUMMARY

A team is more than just a group of people working together toward a common goal. It's a group that functions as a single unit, working toward a powerful shared vision of accomplishment. In situations where teams are called for, a team that works well can accomplish more than all of its individual members working alone, because each member's work supports and complements the others'.

Building a team involves both choosing the members (if you have that option), and forging those individuals into a working unit. That involves thinking about how people fit together, and helping them to establish group and individual bonds.

Team building also requires looking at the characteristics of good teams. It means providing or generating with the team at the outset a vision that everyone can be passionate about. The next step is clearly defining the concept of a team, and making sure everyone knows how he fits into that concept. Once that's in place, the team needs to plan jointly how it will function (who will do what, how everyone will communicate effectively, what the team's norms will be). Any personal issues need to be addressed at the beginning and resolved as quickly as possible.

Teams need to examine their work and understand the reasons for successes and failures, so they can continue to improve and develop. Teams need recognition for their accomplishments, so they'll know their work is appreciated. If you can build a team of good people using these guidelines, the achievement of your goals is practically in the bag.



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Online Resources

Note: These first two sites are oriented to the corporate world, but include ideas, resources, links, etc. that can be valuable to health, human service, and community work as well.

[Building Healthy and Effective Nonprofit Leadership Teams](#) by Leslie Bonner. This report includes key findings, recommended “remedies” and it also provides self-diagnostic tool that nonprofit organizations can use as a [first step](#) in building healthier and more effective leadership team.

[Team Bonding](#)

[Triaxia Partners](#)

Print Resources

Baron, A. R., & Donn B. (1997). *Social Psychology* (8th edition). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

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James, G. (1996). *Success Secrets from Silicon Valley: How to Make Your Teams More Effective*. New York, NY: Times Books (Random House).

Katzenbach, R., & Douglas, K. (1993). *The Wisdom of Teams: Creating the High - Performance Organization*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

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