

How to Build a Teamwork Culture

Do the Hard Stuff for Teams

By Susan M. Heathfield, About.com Guide

Fostering teamwork is creating a work culture that values collaboration. In a teamwork environment, people understand and believe that thinking, planning, decisions and actions are better when done cooperatively. People recognize, and even assimilate, the belief that “none of us is as good as all of us.

It's hard to find work places that exemplify teamwork. In America, our institutions such as schools, our family structures, and our pastimes emphasize winning, being the best, and coming out on top. Workers are rarely raised in environments that emphasize true teamwork and collaboration.

Organizations are working on valuing diverse people, ideas, backgrounds, and experiences. We have miles to go before valuing teams and teamwork will be the norm.

You can, however, create a teamwork culture by doing just a few things right. Admittedly, they're the hard things, but with commitment and appreciation for the value, you can create an overall sense of teamwork in your organization.

Create a Culture of Teamwork

To make teamwork happen, these powerful actions must occur.

- **Executive leaders communicate the clear expectation that teamwork and collaboration are expected.** No one completely owns a work area or process all by himself. People who own work processes and positions are open and receptive to ideas and input from others on the team.
- **Executives model teamwork in their interaction with each other and the rest of the organization.** They maintain teamwork even when things are going wrong and the temptation is to slip back into former team unfriendly behavior.
- **The organization members talk about and identify the value of a teamwork culture.** If values are formally written and shared, teamwork is one of the key five or six.
- **Teamwork is rewarded and recognized.** The lone ranger, even if she is an excellent producer, is valued less than the person who achieves results with others in teamwork. Compensation, bonuses, and rewards depend on collaborative practices as much as individual contribution and achievement.
- **Important stories and folklore that people discuss within the company emphasize teamwork.** (Remember the year the capsule team reduced scrap by 20 percent?) People who “do well” and are promoted within the company are team players.
- **The performance management system places emphasis and value on teamwork.** Often 360 degree feedback is integrated within the system.

Tips for Team Building

Do you immediately picture your group off at a resort playing games or hanging from ropes when you think of team building? Traditionally, many organizations approached team building this way. Then, they wondered why that wonderful sense of teamwork, experienced at the retreat or seminar, failed to impact long term beliefs and actions back at work.

I'm not averse to retreats, planning sessions, seminars and team building activities – in fact I lead them - but they have to be part of a larger teamwork effort. You will not build teamwork by “retreating” as a group for a couple of days each year. Think of team building as something you do every single day.

- **Form teams to solve real work issues** and to improve real work processes. Provide training in systematic methods so the team expends its energy on the project, not on figuring out how to work together as a team to approach it.
- **Hold department meetings to review projects and progress**, to obtain broad input, and to coordinate shared work processes. If team members are not getting along, examine the work processes they mutually own. The problem is not usually the personalities of the team members. It's the fact that the team members often haven't agreed on how they will deliver a product or a service or the steps required to get something done.
- **Build fun and shared occasions into the organization's agenda.** Hold pot luck lunches; take the team to a sporting event. Sponsor dinners at a local restaurant. Go hiking or to an amusement park. Hold a monthly company meeting. Sponsor sports teams and encourage cheering team fans.
- **Use ice breakers and teamwork exercises at meetings.** I worked with an organization that held a weekly staff meeting. Participants took turns bringing a “fun” ice breaker to the meeting. These activities were limited to ten minutes, but they helped participants laugh together and get to know each other – a small investment in a big time sense of team.
- **Celebrate team successes publicly.** Buy everyone the same t-shirt or hat. Put team member names in a drawing for company merchandise and gift certificates. You are limited in teamwork only by your imagination.

Take care of the hard issues above and do the types of teamwork activities listed here. You'll be amazed at the progress you will make in creating a teamwork culture, a culture that enables individuals to contribute more than they ever thought possible - together.