Creating a team agreement

Working effectively in groups is an important skill for all engineers. Given the current restrictions due to COVID19, we all must find new ways of working, and group communication can be even more difficult. To help your team work together more effectively, we suggest developing a team agreement. Below we provide a list of questions to discuss in your group. The answers to these questions will help you come up with a plan to work more effectively as a group. Ensuring the whole team agrees on these important aspects of teamwork will help prevent conflict. There are no right answers to these questions, rather the focus should be on finding agreement in the team. In each section, we also give an example of conflicts that have occurred in teams to give some context of why these discussions are important. We suggest drafting a team agreement and have provided a template for this at the end of this document. In creating this agreement, you can consider the questions below with respect to different criteria and potential conflicts that may influence your success as a team.

Just as there are no right answers to the questions below, there is also no best working style. A successful team needs to work together, even when there are differences in working styles. In fact, diversity in teams helps to produce more useful products (along with many other benefits like increased productivity). However, it can be useful to understand the working style of others on your team. Prior to your team's discussion, you may consider reading up on working styles or taking a quick working style quiz so you can better understand your own working style, so that you are more aware of how you like to work. These are some quick articles or quizzes:

- Quick quiz: https://www.idealist.org/en/careers/quiz-your-work-style
- Quick quiz: http://oml.eular.org/sysModules/obxOml/docs/ID_103/01_Working-Styles-Assessment.pdf
- Brief online article on working styles: https://www.fastcompany.com/3043600/3-ways-to-promote-a-different-kind-of-diversity-in-the-workplace

1. ***Team Values:*** Your agreement should clearly identify the common values of the team*.* Values are what guide you to where you are going. You know that no matter what happens you are working towards these. You might find it helpful to individually write down 5 things you want from this project first. Then when you come together pick 3-5 things you all like and that align you all. You can consider the following questions to help you:
   - What are the things you want to learn from this project?
   - What are the things you want to experience in doing this project?
   - What grade do you want from this project?

Example of conflict: Member X is feeling disgruntled, none of their team members have responded to the message they sent 3 hours ago. It's 5pm in the afternoon on Sunday. They want everyone together this evening on campus for a design meeting. Then they remembered their team values. One value was that everyone in the team was working towards the same goal of getting an A grade for the project. They also remembered a core value was to trust that each member was working to the best of their capacity, but people need space and time to learn. And the final one was that whilst everyone agreed that they wanted to take the project seriously, it was important to have work life balance, and everyone agreed they would take the weekends off. Suddenly Member X felt better.

2. ***Team Availability:*** Your agreement should clarify the availability of the team. You can consider the following questions to help you:
    - How much time does each member plan to devote to this project in an average week?
    - When is each member of the group available each week?
    - When are members not available? Keep in mind that different members of the team will have different schedules due to other course commitments, working hours, and sleep schedules. Note that communication should not be expected during periods of unavailability or preferred downtime.
    - Do we want to designate some portion of overlapping available hours as designated project time?

   Example of conflict: Someone on the team (member A) prefers to work late at night / early in the morning. There was never a discussion on working hours and availability, so when the other members of the team get messages from member A as they are getting ready to go to sleep, they feel pressured to stay up later and work so they can respond. The other team members feel their sleep is suffering due to the project work. A discussion on availability could have prevented this conflict.

3. ***Team Communication:*** Communication is one of the most important aspects of teamwork. To help it go smoothly, it is important to agree on a communication platform and on how, where, and when the team meets and communicates. Questions to discuss are:
    - How frequently will we meet?
    - When/Where will we meet? Note: we suggest having channels for both synchronous and asynchronous communication.
    - If virtual, will we have your video on during meetings?
    - How will team meetings be run? Who will lead them? What preparation should be done by team members prior to the meeting?
    - What happens if someone on the team cannot make a meeting? Who should be notified and when/how?
    - Outside of group meetings, what communication channels will be used?
    - For each communication channel, what is the expected response time?
    - If someone does not respond after the agreed response time, what is the expected followup action? When and how should a lack of response be escalated? Note: having some way to contact team members for urgent matters could be useful (see the next question).
    - What contact information is everyone on the team willing to share (e.g. email, phone number)?

   Example of conflict: Someone in the team (member B) sends an email looking for information from another team member. Several hours later there is no response. The team never discussed when to expect responses, so member B thinks the rest of the team is ignoring them. A discussion on response time could have prevented this conflict.

4. ***Working Together:*** Teamwork is about more than just working towards a common goal. It is about working together effectively and leveraging the knowledge and unique perspective of all team members. Among things to consider are:
    - What is the working style of each team member?
    - How far ahead of the deadlines do we want to submit?
    - How much time do we want to leave for other members to review our work prior to submitting?
    - How will work be divided between the team members?
    - How will we ensure workload is evenly distributed?

    Example of conflict: Someone on the team (member C) likes to finish everything early. They feel stressed if the deadline is days away and the work is not done yet. The rest of the team works best under pressure and see no reason to finish early. Since this hasn't been discussed, member C assumes everyone on the team has dropped the ball since the deadline is near and the work isn't done, so they take over all of the work and do the assignment themselves. The rest of the team does their tasks as planned and throws away all of the extra work done by member C. Everyone blames someone else on the team for the issues. A discussion on working styles and expectations could have prevented this conflict.

5. ***Delivering Status Updates:*** It is common for team members to struggle to meet deadlines due to a variety of reasons. As a team, it is important that everyone feels supportive and secure to talk about their challenges. In a supportive team, members can learn from each other, not just do work in parallel. It can help for the team to agree on how status updates, and potentially, any factors that may affect the deadline, will be handled. Some questions to consider:
    - How will we communicate project status with each other?
    - If a team member feels they are at risk of falling behind schedule or not delivering on their tasks, when should this be discussed?
    - What is the threshold for communicating a risk of a delay?
    - If someone is having trouble completing their tasks due to the challenge of the work, how should the team handle this?
    - What if someone finds their tasks are much easier than expected?

    Example of conflict: Someone on the team (member D) is struggling to finish their work, but they are afraid to ask for help, so they try to figure everything out on their own. Member D spends countless hours trying to do their work. One day before the deadline, member D tells the team they don't know how to do their assigned work. The whole team is angry, they finish member D's work, and tell the lecturer that member D did not contribute to the group at all. A discussion on when to escalate challenges or delays could have prevented this conflict.

6. ***Delivering Feedback:*** Providing and receiving frequent feedback is vital to improve team practices and to help team members. Nevertheless, how, when, and the manner in which feedback is provided can affect how the feedback is received. Feedback should be practical, supportive, and constructive with the intention to improve and learn from best practices rather than to disappoint or diminish team's confidence. Some things to consider:
    - How will we provide feedback to other members on the team?
    - If there are problems on the team, how should they be discussed?

○ What communication channels are appropriate for discussing team issues or giving feedback on work?
○ Do we want to set a time to discuss how the team is functioning with the goal of improving team dynamics (see Figure 1 for an example questionnaire to facilitate such a discussion)?

Example of conflict: Someone of the team (member E) wants to make sure the team submits high quality deliverables. Every time someone else on the team finishes their work, they quickly review the work and respond with feedback on what is wrong with the work. The feedback comes across quite rude to the other team members, and they feel attacked. They tell member E to fix all of the issues by themself. A discussion on delivering feedback could have prevented this conflict.

7. ***Maintaining the Team Agreement:*** You can have the best team agreement, but if the team does not accept and implement it, it has no practical effect. Hence, the team should agree on how to maintain and promote the agreement:
○ How will our team agreement be maintained?
○ Who will maintain it?
○ Do we want to revisit and revise the team agreement again?
○ What do we do if someone breaches the agreement?

TEAMWORK FAILURE PREVENTION QUESTIONNAIRE

The aim of this questionnaire is to improve the performance of each project group as it allows the early detection of functioning anomalies that may affect the final project result.

Please rate the six questions in this questionnaire on a scale from 0 (very negative, strongly disagree) to 10 (very positive, completely agree).

This questionnaire is anonymous, only the group reference is used for the results analysis.

Group Ref:_____

1 | I would rate the functioning of my group up to now as……. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

2 | The group members are clear about what they have to do.
This refers to each group member sharing the same views of the project goals and objectives and knowing their own tasks, those of other group members, and the steps ahead. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

3 | Work is being carried out as a team.
This refers to group members' perception of whether they are working as a team or not. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

4 | Timetable incompatibility has been solved.
This refers to the group having enough time to meet up and for several members to carry out tasks at the same time. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

5 | Each member of the group has his/her function.
There is a common understanding among group members regarding the role and tasks of each person in the project. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

6 | Task distribution is balanced.
The workload is shared evenly among the group members, and there are no important differences in the amount of time spent by the various members. | 0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
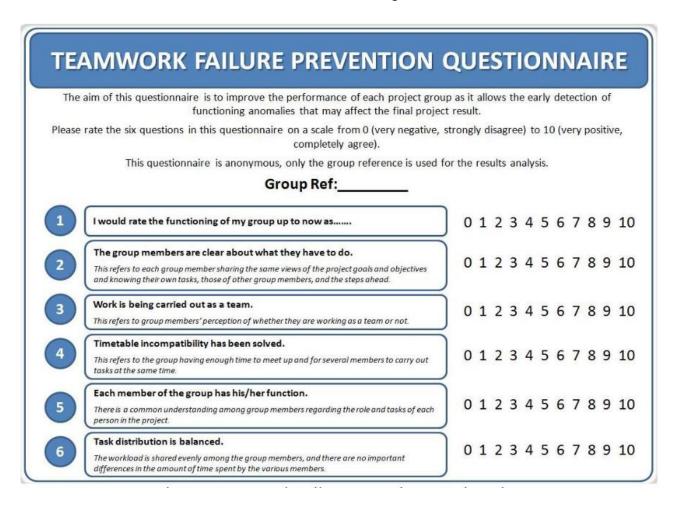
Figure 1. Teamwork Failure Prevention Questionnaire from Rebollar, R., Lidón, I., Cano, J. L., Gimeno, F., & Qvist, P. (2010). A tool for preventing teamwork failure: The TFP questionnaire. *International Journal of Engineering Education*, *26*(4), 784. Each team member could independently complete the questionnaire and the team can discuss each of these items. Ideally, this discussion will happen early in the group lifecycle, so any issues can be addressed and resolved early on.

Team agreement Template

Date:
Team Name:
Team Members:

Team Values:

Availability of team members:

Team Communication:

Working Together:

Delivering Status Updates:

Delivering Feedback:

Maintaining the Team Agreement: