4.03 What Does It Mean to Be a Team Player? Being a good team member takes work.

Most people are used to working on their own—making decisions, prioritizing tasks, and being accountable for their own work. Working with others requires a different approach than working alone. To be a successful part of a team, you need to consider several issues. You should be prepared not to be in charge of everything. For some people, this requires a great deal of effort; for other people, it is less taxing. At times, you will be the supervisor; other times you will be supervised. You need to be flexible and understand that a team consisting only of leaders (or only of followers) is not likely to perform well.

Also be prepared to have some interesting (and some frustrating) encounters with your new work mates. Be prepared to exchange points of view and to learn from those around you. Everyone on a team is responsible for success and is accountable for failure.

Most importantly, prepare to learn how to be a team member. Share your strengths with the team and be willing to contribute. Remember, the combined efforts of all team members should yield a better outcome than the efforts of one individual. Learn new team skills and be adaptable.

Many teams have problems when everyone tries to be in charge or when no one tries to be in charge. The result can be the same: uneven distribution of work, incomplete work, missed deadlines, subpar performance, and frustration. Even though a team is a united effort, each individual is accountable for the overall performance of the team.

Individuals generally react differently in groups than they do on their own. If you miss deadlines or produce inferior work as an individual, you can expect to be held accountable if your work habits are the same when you are part of a team. Conversely, if you produce high-quality work on your own and do the same as part of a team, you will be rewarded accordingly. Remember that team members are accountable first for their individual performance and second for the group’s performance. Keep everyone informed of your progress.

4.04 Differences between Teaming in the Classroom and Teaming in the Real World

Selecting personnel and identifying skills are the most important tasks of assembling a team to work on a real-world project. While it may be advantageous to pick people who have worked together previously and who have established a good working relationship, you need to make sure that all of the skills required for the completion of the project are represented by at least one person on the team. For example, if the team is designing a building, the team must have a member who understands, among other things, the:

■ Design of a foundation.

■ Design of the structure.

■ Design of elevator and/or escalator systems.

■ Design of air-conditioning systems.

Additional skills are likely to be on the list if the building is to be made of reinforced concrete, or if it is to be constructed in Alaska or California or Louisiana. In the real world and in the classroom, the goal is to complete a successful project on time and within budget. However, the skills and training of potential team members in the classroom are all virtually the same (unlike the real world). Furthermore, the primary goal in the classroom is for each member of the team to learn about each task required in the project. Whereas a mechanical engineer is not expected to teach other members of a building-design team how the air-conditioning system works or why the particular components were selected, each member of a classroom team is expected to explain her part of the team project. Unless the team members complete all of the tasks together, each member must teach the rest of the team what she did on her part of the project.

4.05 Team Roles

For your team to operate like a “well-oiled machine,” you need to understand that the members must fill specific team roles, if effective collaborative work is to result. Typically, well-functioning teams have a leader, a timekeeper, and a note taker at a minimum. If there are additional team members, assigning someone to the role of devil’s advocate is also a good idea. The team leader does just that—she leads. This does not mean the team leader dictates or makes all of the decisions for the group. The team leader sets the meeting time, sets the agenda for the meeting, and generally keeps the meeting moving. The team leader also makes sure the team stays on target and remains focused on the task at hand.

The note taker keeps a written record of the team’s progress. He or she records what tasks have been assigned to whom and records the expected completion dates of the tasks. The note taker is responsible for sending the minutes of the meeting to all team members. The minutes are a written record of what transpired during the meeting and serve as a reminder of who is responsible for completing what task(s).

The timekeeper makes sure the schedule is maintained and that meetings do not run over the allotted time. If meetings routinely last longer than planned, team members may skip them or resent coming to them—either of which leads to less productive team encounters.

Finally, the role of the devil’s advocate is to challenge ideas without being too overbearing or unpleasant. The devil’s advocate makes sure that all options are considered and that ideas are sound. However, a devil’s advocate should not challenge ideas just for the sake of the challenge; doing this can annoy teammates and detract from the overall effectiveness of the team’s operation.

Depending on your personality, you might be naturally inclined toward one role over another. For example, you may naturally be a critic who performs the role of devil’s advocate very well. In the classroom setting, you should try out other team roles, so you can develop additional team skills. You may need to hone your note taking skills, and filling that role on the team may help your personal development. In classroom projects, team members can rotate roles so everyone has a chance to experience each role. By performing roles that are unfamiliar to you, you learn to appreciate people who work in these roles. Developing an appreciation for and respecting the skills of the other members of your team are the first steps toward your becoming an effective team member.