

“None of us is as smart as all of us.”

“TEAM=Together Everyone Achieves More.”

Working in a Team

<http://sydney.edu.au/engineering/it/~isys3207/readingsontteams/working%20in%20teams.pdf>, 2001

Working in teams is certainly not a new concept; in fact, a small group of people working together for mutual benefit is the oldest type of social organization, dating all the way back to the cave people, who formed groups to improve their chances for survival. Indeed, the ability to work in groups not only has contributed to the endurance of the human race, but also has allowed the development of civilization. Thus, from the beginning of human history, people have formed teams to generate new ideas and get things done.

Whenever you read of a scientific breakthrough, a miraculous new medicine, or a school where student achievement has improved substantially against all odds, an outstanding, high-performance team made it happen. Why? Because in the twenty-first century, there is far too much to know and do for any single person to take it all on and succeed. Thus, those who learn how to work productively as a member of a team will be at the forefront of America's future.

A Team Defined

A team is a group of people working collaboratively to achieve a common goal.

Collaboration indicates a joint effort, especially in an intellectual capacity. A team functions properly when all the team members cooperate with one another, rely on one another, and plan together to make their goals a reality. In any situation, two or more people working together can refine one another's suggestions and come up with viable solutions using each other's ideas as a springboard to new paradigms. Teamwork is the cooperative effort by the members of a group to achieve a common goal.

Football provides an ideal example of teamwork because the players on a football team work together to score a touchdown. The team members need to trust each other's skills, pass the ball to a teammate when necessary, and meet before each game to plan a strategy. In the same way, a business team is comprised of people working together to produce a product or service with high quality at a competitive price. The members of a business team rely on each other's talents, experience, and knowledge; listen to each other's ideas; and participate in productive meetings where decisions are made and adhered to by all. Another example of teamwork takes place in government, where almost all of the work conducted by congressional representatives occurs in small committees.

Reasons Businesses Utilize Teams

Within the past two decades, American industries have discovered the truth in the old adage “Two heads are better than one.” Every person has unique talents, strengths, experiences, and abilities.

Each person also has individual viewpoints, concerns, and instincts. When people join together in a team, they begin sharing these things with one another. All the members of the group grow in knowledge by learning from each other. Idea sharing is perhaps the most valuable reason for the creation of teams. In a team, people do not hoard essential information or ideas in an attempt to gain an advantage over their coworkers. Instead, good ideas and best practices are presented to the entire group.

In addition, the combined brainpower of a team, however small its number, exceeds that of any one person. By harnessing this power, a team can go beyond simple, useful improvements to achieve amazing results. In one company, when an engineering team was asked to double machine reliability, they initially proclaimed it impossible; but by working together, they devised a plan that *tripled* performance.

Advantages of a Team

Research has shown four major advantages that the team concept brings to any organization:

- More cost-effective work processes
- Increased employee morale
- Better use of workers' time and talents
- Improved decision making

As a result of these advantages, more than two-thirds of Fortune 500 companies utilize teams.³ Companies have found that by organizing people into a team, managers can easily identify and use the specific strengths of each individual member to the best advantage. This results in greater work capacity because the members of the team work at peak efficiency—doing what they know best. No longer does Jody have to spend her time writing, editing, and revising the documentation to accompany her software code; she can rely on Tom to handle that

part of the project for her because he excels at writing cogent documentation. Now Jody has more time to devote to what she does best: debugging software code.

Challenges Facing Today's Firms

The complex nature of work in the twenty-first century practically requires employees to work in groups. Teams offer the best means of responding to the five major challenges faced today by firms throughout the world: rapid and extensive technological change, industrial globalization, intense competition, changing customer expectations, and workforce diversity. Implementing teams has been the common element among firms that have met these challenges successfully.

- **Rapid and extensive technological change:** Computers and the World Wide Web have put pressure on businesses like never before. Often by the time a company has purchased and trained its entire workforce in the use of new software, the software is already obsolete. The Internet has revolutionized the sales and entertainment industries with the rise of e-commerce, which significantly impacts virtually every entity doing business today.
- **Industrial globalization:** Improvements in information technology, transportation, and international trade barriers have led to global corporations. Today many products are designed in one country and assembled in another from parts manufactured in other nations.
- **Intense competition:** Globalization and technological change have caused an increase in competitors. An aggressive newcomer can move into a market and quickly obliterate the advantages of a large, well-established company that believed it had cornered that market.
- **Changing customer expectations:** Technological advances virtually assure consumers of falling prices. For example, videocassette recorders that once cost \$300 can now be purchased with more features for \$50. Consequently, customers have begun to expect more features at a lower price.
- **Workforce diversity:** Women and minorities make up a growing segment of the United States workforce. Today 20 percent of people in American metropolitan centers were born outside the country, and current trends point to continued growth of foreign-born workers.

Deere & Company stands as a shining example of how one company did a complete makeover using teams to address these issues. After 161 years of creating farm equipment, Deere & Company had to reinvent itself to survive in the early 1990s. Today when a farmer visits his local Deere dealership, a salesperson asks him to describe his particular crop problems. Using this information, the salesperson sends an electronic order to a Deere factory. In less than 24 hours, a team that operates a customizing shop inside the factory creates a totally unique piece of farm equipment. Deere's personalized products offer over 6 million possible configurations. Such customization can only occur because of teamwork.

Due in part to the stunning success of Deere & Company and other businesses, many companies now see teamwork as a necessity. A survey of 230 executives conducted by the American Society of Training and Development found that teamwork led to a substantial increase in productivity, quality, employee satisfaction, customer relations, and expense and waste reduction. Another survey of 232 organizations showed that of 39 high-performance practices that researchers examined, self-managed work teams and team building were the top predictors of positive business incomes. That's because effective teamwork can really pay off. Over the past few years, team members at Norwest Corporation, a financial institution, have identified revenue, service, and cost-efficiency practices resulting in more than half a billion dollars in pretax earnings opportunities.

High-Performance Teamwork

Teamwork makes a large task easier. By breaking an overwhelmingly large project down into smaller, more manageable parts, people immediately perceive their goal as more achievable. In addition, when people know they will use their strengths to help achieve the objective, team members feel more enthusiastic. Thus, organizing and working as part of a high-performance team provides a "win-win" situation for both an organization and its employees.

The best teamwork occurs when a team faces an urgent, significant performance challenge. In the examples that follow, you will see how teamwork focused on achieving a crucial goal delivered results far surpassing what individuals acting independently could ever have hoped to accomplish.

Teamwork in Action

Teamwork results when individuals join together into a cohesive group and function as a single unit to meet a common goal. American citizens used teamwork during World War II in a single-minded effort to win the war. Each person did his or her part to help America to triumph. Besides the obvious examples of the men who fought in the war, women worked in the factories to keep the tanks, ammunition, guns, and planes rolling off the assembly lines. People bought war bonds to financially support the war effort, and almost everyone kept a

“victory garden” to supplement their food rations. Most Americans endured gas, rubber, and nylon shortages without complaint because they felt the common goal superseded their individual needs. Not only did their teamwork pay off, it helped make the United States a world superpower.

Another dramatic example of teamwork came in April 1970 during the Apollo 13 crisis. Just 56 hours into the moon-destined flight, an explosion in the service module of the spacecraft left the three person crew of Apollo 13 in a deadly situation. The explosion left them without enough oxygen or power to return to the earth. A team of NASA engineers at Mission Control in Houston was handed the same materials that the crew had on board and told they had two hours to design a life-support system that would keep recycling oxygen yet use minimal power. By using each other’s ideas and expertise, the team managed to create the necessary device and explain to the astronauts how to build it within the allotted time, thereby saving the lives of the Apollo 13 crew.

In the 1980s, a new-model car development process called “platform teams” brought Chrysler Corporation back from the brink of bankruptcy.⁷ Each platform team had a member from engineering, design, finance, purchasing, and marketing. These teams, empowered with broad decision-making power, assumed total responsibility for the success or failure of an automobile’s design from start to finish, doing everything from coordinating their designs with manufacturing to consulting with dealerships. Shortly thereafter Ford and General Motors established their own design teams.

The Saturn Corporation represents a thriving example of teamwork today. The company is organized into groups at all levels, and shared decision making about everything from capital expenditures to vehicle pricing extends from the assembly lines to the executive offices. As a result, a J. D. Power survey reports that Saturn consistently receives the highest possible customer satisfaction ratings.