

Building Blocks for Teams

Student Tips

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About this Guide

Although team and group work is a part of more courses at Penn State, many students find team work very frustrating. This is a short guide on what teams are and what you can do to make your team experience more rewarding.

Below are some frequently asked questions which lie at the heart of why students can find teamwork sometimes a bewildering experience. Click on the question or on the side menu to find out more about these issues.

Frequently Asked Questions

[Why are we in teams?](#)

Teams are not only used in the modern workplace, but may help you learn course material more effectively.

[What's my role on the team?](#)

There are many possible roles on a team, but it's important not to become too "stuck" in them. Everyone should be able to contribute ideas on the entire project.

[What do we do in meetings?](#)

Meetings function most efficiently when members come prepared and ground rules are laid out.

[How can I communicate my ideas effectively?](#)

The first step to effective communication is listening. Then you will be better able to understand how to phrase your ideas more effectively.

This page also includes tips for working online such as using emoticons, sharing work schedules and establishing time limits for replies.

How can the team get organized and stay on track?

Defining the task, then maintaining a central archive and checklist can help the group stay on track.

What happens if a team member is not doing his or her part?

Try contacting and discussing the issue with that person before going to your instructor.

What happens if we do not get along?

Disagreement among team members is inevitable and even good for the team. But you do not want to let it escalate.

Why Teams? - The Benefits

The General Education Requirement

Teams are found throughout the modern workplace, so much so that the Penn State alumni recommended that the Penn State undergraduate educational experience include more teamwork experience. As a result, the General Education program now encourages General Education and other courses to include a collaborative or teamwork component.

The Modern Workplace

No matter what profession you choose, more than likely, you will be asked to contribute to a team. Teams are found in many modern workplace environments in fields ranging from engineering and health care to journalism and foreign policy.

More than ever employers are looking for ways to combine individual talents and harness the synergy of a high performance team. Some of the specific benefits include:

1. **Complete large-scale projects** - Many projects in the workplace are too large or too complex for one individual to complete alone. Imagine trying to build the Golden Gate Bridge all by yourself!
2. **Develop More Solutions** - Different people looking at the same problem will find different solutions. A team can review ideas and put together a final solution which incorporates the best individual ideas.
3. **Detect Flaws** - A team looking at different proposed solutions may also find pitfalls that an individual might miss. The final solution is that much stronger.
4. **Build Social Connections** - Working on a team allows you to interact with your colleagues much more than sitting in neighboring cubicles - or lecture seats - would.

Deeper Learning

Team work allows you to experiment with real world issues and problems instead of memorizing dry facts. Team projects at Penn State have asked students to:

- Develop a sample marketing plan for a cable TV network
- Create a Web site about Penn State written in a foreign language
- Write and present sample weather forecasts
- Design mobile robots
- Manage a hypothetical hospital
- Write online mystery stories in French

Team work also gives you a chance to connect with your fellow classmates and learn from them. While working on a project, you will hear new ideas and even get a chance to articulate some of your own.

Defining Your Roles

Roles in General

What roles are available will depend much on the project and the wishes of your instructor. For instance, if the project is to create a Web site, your instructor may ask your team to have a leader/editor, a writer, a graphic artist and a Webmaster/HTML specialist.

If your instructor does not give any guidance, the team is free to organize itself as it chooses, but it is important that:

1. **Everyone agrees on appropriate roles** - This may take some negotiation to decide.
2. **Everyone is satisfied in their roles** - Individuals must feel a sense of satisfaction in order for the team to function. Fortunately, teams will typically have people with different temperaments and skills who will want different roles. In addition, your team may want to **rotate roles** throughout the semester.

Flexibility

Whatever role you may have, it is still important that the **entire team** provide input **on every facet** of the project. For instance, if you were a "writer", it is perfectly acceptable for a "graphic artist" to evaluate and comment on your work. He or she may provide a unique perspective that will enhance your work. The same would be true for the "graphic artist" or any other member of the team.

The Leader

Most teams will have a leader, and this is a very important position because he or she is responsible for the management of the entire project. However, it is important **not to have too "heavy" a hand**, or team morale may be lowered.

A leader is typically responsible for setting a base agenda, facilitating meetings, and monitoring progress with communicating with members as needed. But all actions must be agreed to by the team. Although you may suggest a course of action, you must be sure the team agrees to it. If the team wants to go in another direction, you should be willing to compromise.

Other Roles

If your team is looking for a way to organize, these are some other roles that can be used, especially when formulating and testing ideas. Again, it suggested that you be flexible with these roles. Teams can rotate them or combine them in one person, for instance, a recorder/summarizer.

Initiator - Someone who suggests new ideas. One or more people can have this role at a time.

Recorder - This person records whatever ideas a team member may have. It is important that this person quote a team member accurately and not "edit" or evaluate them.

Devil's Advocate/Skeptic - This is someone whose responsibility is to look for potential flaws in an idea.

Optimist - This is someone who tries to maintain a positive frame of mind and facilitates the search for solutions.

Timekeeper - Someone who tracks time spent on each portion of the meeting.

Gate Keeper - This person works to ensure that each member gives input on an issue. One strategy to do this is to ask everyone to voice their opinion one at a time. Another is to cast votes.

Summarizer - Someone who summarizes a list of options.

What do we do in meetings?

Many people dread meetings (partly because they have attended so many bad meetings), but when structured correctly, meetings can be an effective place to discuss group project issues together. Here are some tips which may help you have more productive and even more enjoyable meetings.

Build Rapport, But Make it Light

Meetings can either be a dreaded bureaucratic ritual or a time to gather with colleagues to get some work done and share some small talk. Even though many people equate meetings with "serious work", the reality is that **you may actually achieve more during a meeting if you take the time to establish a cordial relationship** with your project mates.

While it's important to keep an agenda, meeting notes and maintain other "formal" meeting protocols, many successful project teams find they **transition back and forth between formal business and small talk**. Sometimes the flow even enables teams work through all agenda items quickly (although possibly out of order).

You may be spending a lot of time together, so you might as well try and like each other! So why not

- Talk about what's happening in class
- Ask each other about other classes you may be in together
- Discuss what you may be doing this week-end

As long as you get through your meeting agenda, it won't matter what side conversations you've had along the way. When a conflict does come up, you may find that you are all able to discuss the issue as only a minor disagreement rather than a major conflict because of the rapport you have built up. This may not work for all projects, but it's worth trying to establish rapport from the beginning rather than having to do it after a major blow-up.

First Meeting Protocols

The goal of the first meeting is usually to "reaffirm" the project goals and establish ground rules/communication lines for how the team should operate and what the intended goals are. Some suggestions include.

1. **Bring Project Assignment Documents** - Remember to bring any project assignment notes, drawings or files your instructor may provide. Being able to refer to original documents during the meeting will help you clarify your planning.
2. **Introduce Yourselfs** - It's often easier to work with someone you know, so this is the chance to break the ice. Everyone should have a turn to state their names, say something about their backgrounds and why they are taking this course.
3. **Restate project goals** - Even if your instructor has given you the goal already, it is important to make sure everyone has the same understanding of the assignment. One way to do that could be to have everyone write down or state five goals for the project, then compare notes.
4. **Name your team** - This may sound very trivial but having a common name is a good way to feel closer to the project. Team names could be a number, a project name or something more lighthearted.
5. **Share contact information** - You will probably want to share e-mail addresses, but phone numbers or AOL Instant Messenger usernames could also be valuable depending on the project. You should also establish when and how different tools should be used.

6. **Establish a timeline and assign tasks** - For longer team projects, you may need to establish an initial work plan and decide who will do each task. See the [Organize page](#) for tips on how to establish a work plan.
7. **Set etiquette ground rules** - Although disagreements will arise, it is possible to voice opinions in such a way so that conflicts do not escalate. Typically, it is suggested that personal attacks be avoided. See the [Ground Rules section](#) for other tips on communication groundrules.

Project Meetings

In order for teams to achieve anything in meetings, the group needs a certain amount of structure to guide the goals. First, each team member should be clear on what his or her [role in the meeting](#) will be.

Before Each Meeting

A successful meeting starts before the meeting when a project manager or [team leader](#) informs members of the following.

1. [Meeting agenda](#)
2. Purpose of the meeting (information sharing, problem solving, decision making, coordination, planning, etc.)
3. Whose attendance is required
4. Where to find background or support materials required
5. Schedule information (time, place, duration.)
6. Minutes of the previous meeting and any specific pre-meeting assignments

The Agenda

The meeting agenda is similar to a contract or agreement among team members and all team members should have input in the agenda. The meeting agenda should include:

1. Date, time and location of meeting - Sending reminders the day before the meeting may be wise in some cases.
2. List of attendees expected - It may be all project members by default, but sometimes only a few people may need to be there to discuss a specific issue
3. Purpose of the meeting
4. Order of business to be conducted at the meeting

Since a team should be empowered to govern its own affairs, all members should be open to the fact that **any team member may modify an agenda.**

For a project meeting, you may want to make sure that you leave plenty of time allotted for "open discussion" (maybe even the entire meeting). This allows the team to discuss any ongoing issues that the leader may not be aware of.

During the Meeting

Teams often develop ground rules that extend to how they want a meeting conducted. Some possible team ground rules are:

1. **Be prepared** for the meeting - Make sure you have read all revisions, viewed all messages, visited all the links and bring hard copies of documents with you (in a folder or notebook).
2. Come to the meeting **on time** - If you know you will be late and can send off an e-mail or message, you should do so.
3. **Participate** in the meeting. Don't be a lurker - Even if you're not a talker, other team members may need reassurance that you are following the discussion and are
4. Start and **end meetings on time** - Some meetings run over a little bit, but no one wants to stay 30 minutes late each week. **Note:** If meetings are consistently long, then the agenda may be too crowded.
5. **Be prepared to drop a topic** - If a team gets stuck on a topic, it may be wise to delay discussion of it for another time.
6. **Keep records** of your own work and the team's compiled work - this will make it less likely that you will "forget" what went on in previous meetings.
7. **Value the diversity of team members** - Unless the member is a "shirker" (never attends meetings or does work), then each person has something to contribute to the team. Make sure you know what it is.
8. Support the team concept and process. Maintain **positive group dynamics**.
9. Make decisions by consensus of all necessary team members.
10. **Listen and have an open mind** - Make sure you understand what is being said and why it is being said. Speak up if you think you missed a crucial point.
11. **Summarize decisions and future plans before you leave** - The team leader or another team member should summarize what was decided, where the project is and make sure each item in the agenda was covered. This catches many oversights that might be missed otherwise.

Self-Check

Evaluate the meetings with the intent of improving future meetings. Ask yourselves the following as a team (or you as a member).

1. Was the purpose of the meeting clear?
2. Did the set up of the room help or hinder the meeting process?
Could it be improved for meetings?
3. Was jumping to conclusions allowed? Did the group help to suspend judgment and explore alternatives?
4. Did the group use conflict in a positive way to differentiate ideas?
5. Did the group work toward consensus?
6. Did the team leader document the interaction when the process seemed ineffective?
7. Did the group insist on action commitments (what is to be done, by when and who)?
8. Did the group identify a follow-up processes?

Tips for Effective Communication

Here are some skills that can help you express your ideas to your team mates more effectively.

Listening and Critiquing

1. **Active Listening** - Communication is a two-way street, so it is important that you listen carefully to your team mates when they are speaking. Don't tune speakers out or get caught in the trap of planning ahead to what you want to say next. You may miss an important detail, and in the worst case, you *repeat* the detail you missed because you were not listening.
2. **Ask Questions** - If you hear something that confuses you, you should ask about it. Maybe you missed a detail or maybe you remembered something others forgot. In any case, it's important that everyone understand exactly what's going on. Chances are that if you're confused, then others are too. Conversely, if a team member asks you a question, you should **answer it courteously**. The team member may be bringing up a crucial detail that could make or break the team's plans.
3. **Constructive Feedback** - Although it is important to evaluate proposed ideas and suggestions, critiques need to be presented with tact. Some tips that may help:
 - a. *Don't express an opinion as a fact* - You may hate orange text on green, but that is an opinion unless you can cite a legitimate reason for your concern (such as that this color combination may be harder to read).
 - b. *Explain your reasons* - If you do have an strong opinion, explain why you feel that way. This will allow others to evaluate your comments more effectively.

- c. *Restate the original idea* - To be sure you have correctly understood someone else's idea before you respond to it.
- d. *Compliment another's idea* - Even if you do not think it would work, some part of it may be valid and could be usable in another form.
- e. *Respond, don't react* - If you feel like you're ready to explode, give yourself a few seconds before speaking.
- f. *Don't interrupt*
- g. *Critique the idea, not the person*
- h. *Be courteous*
- i. *Avoid jargon*

Chat a Little - A meeting does not have to be 100% business. It is perfectly fine to ask team members how they are doing or what they are planning next weekend. This can really help ease tension when disagreements occur later. Of course, you should not socialize for the entire meeting.

Presentating Ideas

These tips also work if you are **presenting an idea**.

1. **Body Language Awareness** - If you are having a bad day or are feeling unhappy with the team project, you could be giving off negative signals with body language or a harsh tone. Even if you are saying the right thing, team members may still react negatively if you send the wrong body language signals. If you are feeling tense before going into a meeting, try taking a deep breath to relax.
2. **Humor** - While you would not want to make fun of your teammates or tell jokes that may offend others, there are plenty of topics that your team mates may find humorous - some of them may even be project related.

3. **Patience** - You may have the best idea, but not everyone may understand it the first time. The same question may be asked more than once. A member may forget a deadline unless reminded. Disagreements may occur over small details. Or conversely, team members may decide an issue too hastily, and may have to backtrack later. But, in most cases, it will all work out.

Online Communication Tips

Your teammates or your instructor may ask you to communicate through e-mail, a bulletin board or chat. In fact, e-mail or bulletin boards can be an effective way to get more input from shy teammates. Below are some tips that make your online messages more effective.

TECH TIP - If you need to set up an area for online communication, you may want to set up a [group in ANGEL](#) which includes utilities to set up message boards. Students can set up ANGEL groups even if the instructor is not using ANGEL. Click on **Help** in ANGEL link for more details.

1. Review the [Student Guidelines for Electronic Communication \(New Site\)](#) as a reminder of what kinds of language and headers facilitate online communication.
2. **Use Emoticons or "Communication Tags"**- Since your teammates will not be able to hear your tone of voice, emoticons can add a touch of personality to your messages and defuse comments that could be misinterpreted. Some famous emoticons include:
 - Friendly Smile - :) or =) or <grin>
 - Apology/Frustration - :(or =(or <grrr!>
 - Shocked Face- :o or =o
 - A Wink - ;) (or <irony>...</irony>)

3. **Don't write when you're angry** - There's no time limit on e-mail so give yourself a chance to calm down before writing a response.
4. **Re-read your message before sending** - Confusion is even more likely over the Internet, so it's important to be as clear as possible.
5. **Share daily schedules** - This will give you a good idea of when a team member might be available. For instance one person could be doing homework at night, while someone else is out working.
6. **Establish a time limit for replies** - Usually somewhere between 24-48 hours.
7. **For serious disagreements** - You may want to call or talk to someone in person before sending another angry e-mail to the group. Sometimes it's easier to discuss things on the phone or in person.
8. **If you're sharing files** - Establish a naming convention for tracking versions and a system for determining who is providing revisions and comments.

TECH TIP 1: Some word processors such as Microsoft Word allow users to highlight text or change the font to different colors.

TECH TIP 2: If you receive a revised version of a file, put the old one into a separate "old versions" file right away.

How can the team get organized and stay on track?

Guidelines

These guidelines can help a team stay collectively informed and on track

1. **Define the goal for the project** - Be as specific as you can. What needs to be covered in the assignment (read any material from your instructor carefully)? What options are allowed? What format is the best? How will it be delivered to the instructor? What else does the team want to add?
2. **List tasks to be completed** - List out all tasks in reasonable chunks. For instance, don't just say "graphics," but list how many graphs, photos, or logos may be needed for a project. Don't forget to include "project management" tasks such as taking meeting notes.
3. **Assign responsibility for all tasks** - Tasks should be divided so that all members receive a significant portion of the tasks. You should also ensure that all team members are satisfied with the tasks the team has assigned to them.
4. **Develop a timeline and checklist** - Start from the deadline and work your way backwards. Make sure the timeline has some cushion built into it. Make sure the entire team understands and agrees to it.
5. **Post a timeline and checklist** - Once the timeline has been finalized, it should either be posted somewhere or sent or given to everyone electronically. Use team meetings to get timeline updates, then post or send updated versions. As items get checked off, the team will feel a sense of progress.

- 6. Set up a central repository for all electronic files** - If you are working with electronic files, try to find a common area which the entire team can access.

ONLINE FILE OPTIONS

1. You can create a [Group in ANGEL](#) and enroll all team members as editors. You can create groups in ANGEL even if your instructor is not teaching with it. Click on the **Help pages** for more information.
2. The [CLC Labs U: drive](#) service which allows students to store files on the Penn State Student Computing Labs network.

Remember to **always back up** and keep extra copies of files so the chances of permanently losing them are less.

- 7. Post or send all team meeting notes** - Sending out team meeting notes electronically can ensure that everyone understood what the team decided. If someone asks for clarification or says that's not what he or she remembered, then double-check that item with the team and send a new update.
- 8. Maintain a central archive for all communications** - If possible, maintain an archive of all electronic communications in case questions arise later. If you use a Group in [ANGEL](#), you can use the message board, ANGEL e-mail and chatroom tools.
- 9. Send reminders when deadlines approach** - As crucial deadlines approach, it can be beneficial to send reminders of what needs to be done to the appropriate team members. This could be something that the team agrees to as part of the [ground rules](#).
- 10. Send confirmation when tasks are completed** - If you have finished a task, it is also a good practice to send a note to the team that you have, in fact, completed it.

What happens if a team member isn't doing his or her part?

Some [*conflict or disagreement*](#) is a normal part of team work, and it is best to set [*meeting ground rules*](#) or procedures to deal with disagreement in meetings calmly.

However, one or team members may show "unproductive" behaviors which interfere with completing the task or team dynamics.

What is "Unproductive Behavior"?

Clearly Unproductive

Some behaviors are **clearly detrimental** to the functioning of the team. These include:

1. Consistently missing meetings
2. Consistently missing deadlines
3. Never coming prepared to meetings
4. Not answering e-mail or messages in a reasonable time
5. Discourteous or disrespectful language

When Excessive "Team Behavior" is Unproductive

Other behaviors may be acceptable and even beneficial in moderation, but in an extreme form, can be disruptive to the team. For example

Normal/Productive	Extreme/Unproductive
Raising a Concern	Nitpicking - Questioning or objecting to every possible detail on the project
Asking Questions	Missing Details - Constantly asking questions because you were not paying attention the first time
Ownership/Responsibility	Possessiveness - Refusal to allow anyone to alter or critique the work you have done for the project
Principled	Uncompromising - Never accepting any proposed compromises
Listening & Reflecting	Lurking - Never contributing in team meetings or other communications
Staying in Touch	Nudging - Always sending reminders and not allowing members a reasonable interval before responding before sending out more notes
Follows Procedure	Inflexible - Not allowing for changes in a plan or agenda
On top of things	Doing Everything - Not allowing other members to make contributions

What to do?

Generally, it is best to make a significant effort to resolve problems within the team before contacting the instructor.

If one or more people are showing unproductive behavior, try these steps:

1. First, the team should decide if the behavior in question is really unproductive or just a part of the team process. Does the behavior?
 - a. Interfere with the team's ability to complete project work?
 - b. Interfere with the team's ability to reach true consensus?
 - c. Significantly interfere with team morale? Morale may not be perfect all the time, but people should be able to work together.
2. Make sure a specific behavior has been identified as unproductive. The problem is with the **behavior not with the person.**
3. When discussing the behavior with a person, try to frame the issue as: **"I/We feel (frustrated/concerned) when you (fill in behavior) because it (explain how it affects the team)."**
4. When appropriate, acknowledge that the person may be acting with the best of intentions.
5. **Allow the person to express his or her side of the issue**, but make sure he or she understands why the team is concerned.
6. If necessary, attempt to reach a compromise so that both the individual and the person are satisfied.

In some cases, a team member may be **"missing in action."** If

that person has not responded to the team's repeated attempts to get in touch or never appears to meet with the team, it may be best to **inform the instructor**.

The team and the instructor can work on a solution agreeable to the team.

Conflict Resolution Tips

- I [Conflict Happens](#)
- II [Clarify Expectations](#)
- III [Types of Conflicts](#)
- IV [Identify Team Needs](#)
- V [Depersonalize Conflict](#)
- VI [Structuring Discussion](#)
- VII [Key Questions](#)

I. Conflict Happens

Most members of a team have to learn two fundamentals:

1. Having different opinions is one of the **essential benefits** of teamwork.
2. Team members have **strong feelings and emotions**.
A team cannot achieve its full potential if all that is allowed is logic or information.

Fortunately, it is possible to take steps to minimize disagreement and conflict and to resolve those disagreements that may be dangerously escalating.

II. Clarify Expectations

Stating expectations clearly will give the team a common ground to begin any discussion. Some ways to clarifying expectations include:

1. Developing a clear **statement of team mission** or purpose
2. [Ground rules](#) governing participation, sharing of responsibilities
3. Agreement to [depersonalize conflicts](#)
4. Team recognition that team process, including discussion and brainstorming, is important to results and needs regular attention

5. Use of **structured processes for problem solving** and conflict resolution
6. Awareness of stages of project development and maintenance priorities of each stage
7. Clearly and appropriately **defined *individual responsibilities*** for real work for each other; clear linkage between individual responsibilities and the team mission
8. Clearly defined **project standards and time lines**

If conflict escalates, the following tips may help the team resolve disagreements in a step-by-step manner.

III. Identify the Type of Team Conflict

Internal conflict - An individual or team member is experiencing a personal conflict that may or may not be related to the team, but which is interfering with the person's ability to perform.

Individual conflict with one other team member - One team member is in conflict with another

Individual conflict with the entire team - One team member is experiencing conflict with the entire team

Conflict between several team members - The entire team is experiencing conflict with several other team members

Conflict between teams - The entire team is in conflict with another team

Team conflict with one person outside of the team (such as a faculty member or GA responsible for content)

IV. Identify Team Needs

Define the team's problem as a shared need. As a group:

1. Identify the causes.
2. Determine the criteria for a solution.
3. Generate options.
4. Determine possible solutions.
5. Develop implementation plans.
6. Review results later on a regular basis.

At this step, it is especially critical that every member of the team provide his or her view.

V. Depersonalize Team-Internal Conflict

During the problem-solving phase focus on issues **not** personalities. Use these guidelines to help depersonalize conflicts.

1. **Encourage each side** to objectively explain his or her bottom line requirements. When the team is determining a solution, each person's criteria should be evaluated.
2. **Remind the team of ground rules** while generating options such as "no criticizing statements by other people until all ideas are posted."
3. Encourage everyone to **listen to other points of view**.
4. During the process keep **encouraging points of agreement**.
5. **Don't stifle new anger**, but also **don't dwell** on it.

Another set of steps to consider as a team:

1. Acknowledge that the conflict exists.
2. Gain common ground.
3. Seek to understand all angles.
4. Attack the issue not each other.
5. Develop an action plan.

VI. Structuring Discussion

Here is a structured way to handle conflicts:

1. Let each person state his or her view briefly.
2. Have neutral team members reflect on areas of agreement or disagreement.
3. Explore areas of disagreement for specific issues.
4. Have opponents suggest modifications to their own points of view as well as others.
5. If consensus is blocked, ask opponents if they can accept the team's decision.

VII. Key Questions

Questions that can help teams work through conflict:

1. What are we supposed to accomplish as a team?
2. What are each of our roles and responsibilities in accomplishing that goal?
3. Who and when do each of us need to get information from?
4. If we get into trouble, whom can we ask for help?
5. How will we arrive at decisions?
6. What strengths do each of us bring in accomplishing our goals?
7. How are we going to make ourselves more accessible to one another?
8. What are we doing that is blocking the resolution of this problem?
9. How can we express differences without blaming others?
10. Which behaviors are *unproductive*? How can we help individuals take ownership of their unproductive behavior. Don't excuse a team member when he or she behaves badly.