

Quickstart for Team Projects

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Cohesive mature teams of diverse backgrounds, knowledge, and perspectives can accomplish amazing things, but it takes a lot of time, work, and understanding of team process to get a team to that point. Unfortunately, many teams in classes and in the workplace lack that knowledge, never build the cohesive approach to work, and can be a disaster as an experience and in terms of output. The following “Quickstart” points are offered to help newly assembled teams get started well in the first meetings. These are based on our work with cross-functional multi-cultural teams in a variety of industries at a variety of levels. There is a great deal of available knowledge in each of these areas that will help teams perform better and with less pain. Seeking out and exploring that knowledge is definitely worth the time.

Rule Number One: Discuss process!!

There are many different areas of potential conflict and confusion in team projects. The solution is not to ignore these conflicts but to bring them up and discuss them. Do not assume that everyone else agrees with what is going on, with what seems to be decided. Ask the question!! Every team member has not only the right, but the duty to bring up issues that seem to be interfering with team success and get the whole team to decide the appropriate next steps.

Different ideas of teamwork and power

Among team members there are many different ideas of teamwork. It is probably best that team members should work together to plan their own work, but some believe that every team needs a strong manager to tell everyone what to do and to make sure they do it. Depending on culture and other factors people have a different idea of who is “supposed” to be the leader. In some cultures it is automatically the oldest. In others, the one who speaks most clearly or forcefully. In others, it is the person who seems to know the most about an aspect or issue. Others respect the one who sits quietly until everyone else has had their say, then has the last word. Watch for these differences and how they affect the discussion, and get the team to discuss how this team wants to operate, and who should have those roles.

Knowing what the project really is

The varying project experience of different team members can lead them to interpret the project, its objectives, and its constraints in different ways. It is very useful to share the different ideas about the project definition and to seek clarification from the client, teacher, or someone who knows.

Being selfish about your involvement

Whether a school project, a work project, or a volunteer project, your involvement does more than create an output. It has an affect on you and your potential for the future. Research on school projects shows that teams assigning the most able to each task have the best outcome, but the worst learning. Teams assigning the least qualified suffer a bit in outcomes, but have the greatest learning impact. Even in company projects it is important to set assignments that not only produce results on this project but also develop capacities for the future. In my classes I encourage students to look for ways to use the project for their benefit. If someone is looking for a job in a certain industry and volunteers to contact people in that industry for project information, it is wonderful that they might also develop contacts that get them a job. I strongly suggest that team members tell each other what they would like to personally get out of the project, and that team members make reasonable accommodations.

Manage the process

Effective teamwork is not a natural skill. The most productive teams decide when and how long to have what kinds of conversations about what aspect of the project. Any aspect can be discussed forever!! Process is that set of decisions that are not about the content of the project, but about how you do it. Should you follow a formal creative or decision making process? Should a team member just be put in charge of an element? How long should the team discuss each issue?

Teamwork generally consists of meetings (and sub-meetings), individual work, and communication among members. Meeting time is a critical resource and should be used for things that really need team involvement. Other things can be simply drafted by an individual and discussed through e-mail or shared drafts.

So, team meetings should run to an agenda, a list of things you expect to do and about how much time you should spend on them. At the beginning of the meeting you agree on the agenda, and at the end of the meeting you discuss how you did and draft the agenda for the next meeting.

In meetings you will be laying out different tasks that need to be done outside of the meetings or in later meetings. It is important that these tasks are agreed upon and that someone is responsible to accomplish the task by a certain date. It is helpful if an individual or process tracks the progress so that

tasks that are falling behind can be given additional resources, or additional encouragement. The team's effectiveness at dividing up the work, getting it done, and adjusting to problems greatly determines the timeliness and quality of the result.

Group Dynamics and Teams

People act differently in groups. Somehow, the immersion in and interaction with a group can lead us to behaviors that we would never ordinarily do, whether extraordinary creativity and leadership, or terrible treatment of fellow team members, or of those outside the "group".

While teams are groups with a shared task, and are certainly subject to the best and worst of group dynamics, process management can help teams move quickly through all the stages into effective collaboration.

Group behavior emerges in any group of people who have repeated interactions. While ten people sitting on a commuter train are not a group, if they start to take that same train every day and sit in the same seats, and begin to talk to each other and share the details of their lives, group behavior begins to emerge.

One of the most famous descriptions of the steps in group formation is: forming, storming, norming, performing. As groups emerge from the mass of people, forming is the process of deciding who is in the group and who is not. This is the skill we over-practice in high school when it is so important to know who is in what group: jocks, nerds, gamers, etc. If you try to join the conversation of a group of "train buddies" it will quickly become clear to you that you are not in the group.

Storming is like pecking order in chickens. It is about hierarchy and power. Once group membership is defined, many of the interactions are really about pecking order. Whether it is someone making fun of a group member about something or the use of jargon or stories of success to build oneself up, these statements are completely about determining the pecking order. In multi-cultural groups, when people have different rules for hierarchy, this can be a very difficult conflict.

Once a group has established a pecking order, deciding who gets to make final decisions in conflict, the group sets norms of acceptable behavior in group interactions. Is it acceptable for those higher in the hierarchy to bully others? Is it acceptable for people to skip meetings or arrive late? Is it acceptable to skip tasks you have committed to do? Are assignments given out by the group or volunteered? What can be talked about in meetings and what cannot?

All groups do these steps. Effective teams explicitly discuss team membership, who has hierarchy on what issues, and what group norms will best serve group effectiveness.

Deliberate creativity and team projects

Projects vary in the level and type of creativity expected. I suppose a team could be assigned to do 100 math problems,

divide the work, and do it, but that does not seem to be much of a team project. Most projects seem to have some level of creativity expected in their output, and creativity certainly can have a positive impact on the productivity and effectiveness of the team.

Many people think they are not creative, but fortunately we do not have to rely on "natural" creativity. There are many well established ways to get people and teams to perform creatively, regardless of their individual creative history and tendencies.

What else? Using Brainstorming

Too many people stop thinking when they think they have a "good enough" answer, or if all the answers they immediately think about are not good enough. Brainstorming is the process of rapidly listing many different possibilities, including the silliest you can think of. Research seems to show that the best ideas are in the last half of the list. Brainstorming is actually a great team builder, whether you are creating lists of titles for the paper, places to have the next meeting, sub-tasks that need to be done, etc. The essential trick is to avoid judging the ideas until after you stop listing. A good brainstorming session moves fast and makes the team laugh. Some of the best ideas actually come when you are more focused on making them laugh than the actual problem. If your team interaction sounds slow and calm and wise, you are not brainstorming.

What do you really want to do?

The most powerful trick for making brainstorming effective is to first change the question. Given a task, what are you really trying to do? The saying "Don't raise the bridge, lower the water" is often given as an example of creativity. However, if the team asks why you are raising the bridge and brainstorms ways to make the gap bigger for boats to pass, the idea of lowering the water doesn't take as much creative horsepower.

For every part of the planned process of executing the project and even for many parts of the content you are working on, the question "What are we really trying to do?" can really get to better answers.

Instant Creativity

Putting this together, one simple process for quick creativity is to share the facts and goals about a problem and discuss three questions:

- What are we really trying to do?
- What are some ways to do that?
- Which works best here?

Applying this simple process to various issues and problems will greatly improve the project and its process.

For further resources, go to <http://cocreativity.com/teams>