

The power of commitment: A case study



Teams are an integral part of many organisations and working in teams is on the rise. Successful teamwork relies upon collaboration existing between all team members creating an environment where they are all willing to contribute and participate in order to promote and nurture a positive and effective team environment.

During a recent study, comprising a literature review, a range of attributes considered necessary for successful teamwork were identified. The aspects pertaining to team commitment are listed below:

1. Commitment to team success and shared goals: Team members are committed to the success of the team and their shared goals for the project. The team's success is of the utmost importance.
2. Interdependence: Team members create an environment where together they can contribute far more than as individuals. It is not just about

individual impact; it is also about how each team member positively impacts the group. Individuals encourage their fellow team members to achieve, contribute, and learn.

3. Interpersonal skills include the ability to discuss issues openly with team members, be honest, trustworthy, supportive and show respect and commitment to the team and to its individuals. Fostering a caring work environment is important including the ability to work effectively with other team members and supporting individuals to achieve the team's goals.

Using these attributes, final year multimedia students completing a project-based module at an Australian University were compared. There were 82 students (20 teams) completing this module. The project required the teams to develop skills and expertise in managing the design and development of client websites. The aim was to have students experience project management issues that occur when dealing with "real" clients in "real" projects and was heavily focused on teamwork and problem solving.

Two of the 20 teams were selected for investigation. One team was highly successful in developing a quality product and collaborated in a highly successful manner. The other team, experienced severe team problems, which caused it to become dysfunctional and had to be split. Each person was required to keep a journal of their experiences throughout the project.

Successful Team

This team of students were highly successful in developing a quality product, as well as being highly collaborative. Their journal entries continually reflected positive comments about other team members, and at no stage during the semester was there a request or requirement to transfer marks from one team member to another. Team meetings were always friendly, and at no stage were team issues discussed as being problematic. The team always focused on the project's goal and how the process of development could be improved. An analysis of the data collected from this team indicated

that they showed the attributes needed for successful teamwork. In almost all of their responses in interviews, focus group meetings and questionnaires it was evident that this team was committed to:

1. Commitment to team success and shared goals: The team was highly focused on delivering a quality product, and not pre-occupied by personal issues that might have interrupted this objective. They facilitated and nurtured positive, cooperative-working relationships based upon the focus of developing a quality final product that would impress their client tutor, peers and end users. The whole team was strongly motivated to outperform other teams and shared a strong common goal of wanting to develop a product that would support their chances of gaining employment at the end of the course. The team members were focused on the team's goal and no one person put their personal goals ahead of the team's ultimate goal.
2. Interdependence: The team members felt that they had a responsibility towards the other members of the team and that the success of the project was based upon each team member's contribution. Team members were always happy to help peers when they were experiencing difficulties. The team would proactively brainstorm problems individuals team members were having and offer assistance if needed.
3. Interpersonal skills: The team recognised that team members had different personalities and experienced problems at different stages. They showed consideration for each other, respected and supported others in difficult times.

Unsuccessful Team

The other team of students experienced severe team problems, which caused it to become dysfunctional and had to be split. At the first peer assessment session, marks were transferred between team members, as it was perceived that some team members were not contributing. This indicates that team members had their own interests ahead of the team's. Even though agreement was made at this meeting that marks should be transferred, and suggestions were made about how to improve the situation, resentment amongst team members escalated. This was clearly evident from the comments being made

through the confidential online journal entries each week. At one of the team meetings a serious disagreement occurred, in which one of the team members verbally berated another, from which point there was no reconciliation. After this altercation, team members felt they could no longer work together, so even though they would experience a heavier workload, they unanimously agreed to split and form two separate teams. Comparing responses from this team against the key attributes needed for successful teams, it was evident that this team was not congruent with these criteria:

1. Commitment to team success and shared goals: One team member was highly motivated to achieve a high-quality product, though two others were content with merely just gaining a pass - they were happy to put in minimal effort. This mismatch of commitment levels caused many problems and frustration for team members early in the project.
2. Interdependence: Two team members were highly competitive in this team that negated the development of a collaborative team environment. They were highly focused on their own tasks and were not interested in helping others who may have been having problems. If others were not performing, then the attitude was that peer assessment should be applied, rather than trying to support and help the individual. There was no consideration regarding how each team member positively impacted the group.
3. Interpersonal skills: The team showed little consideration for each other and gave almost no support for others in difficult times. Team members seemed unaware and very surprised that they had upset other team members by their comments. They seemed to have not detected they were hurting others' feelings by their comments and the approaches taken to solve team problems.

This case study demonstrates how important and pervasive shared commitment in a team is, and how a negative result can occur when it is not consistently demonstrated.

When team members understand the team's purpose and share the same goals, are all committed to succeed, there is a belief that one cannot succeed unless the other members of the group succeed and that together the group can deliver more than the individuals in the team, a

team is geared towards success.

Reference

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