Creating Effective Teams

A Guide for Members and Leaders

Susan A. Wheelan
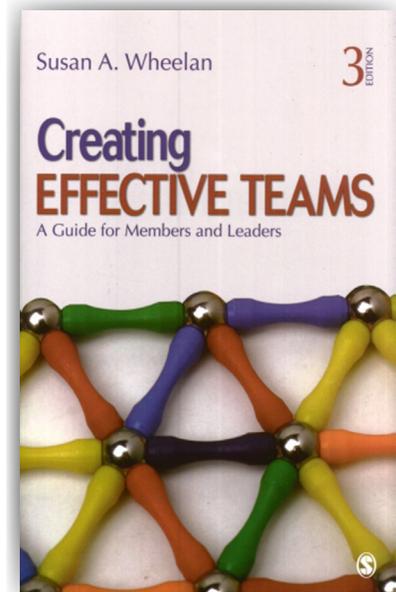
KEY CONCEPTS

- There are four stages of group development:

  1. *Dependency and inclusion.* The purpose of stage one is to create a sense of belonging and the beginnings of predictable patterns of interaction.

  2. *Counterdependency and fighting.* The purpose of stage two is to develop a set of goals, values, and operational procedures.

  3. *Trust and structure.* Stage three is characterized by more mature negotiations about roles, organization, and procedures. Also, members work together to solidify positive relationships.

  4. *Work and productivity.* At stage four, work groups become teams. Leaders and members need to do certain things to keep performing at a high level, such as clearly defining their problems and being evaluated regularly.

- High performance teams focus on ten things: goals; rules; interdependence; leadership; communication and feedback; discussion, decision making, and planning; implementation and evaluation; norms and individual differences; structure; and cooperation and conflict management.

- Effective team members follow certain behaviors, such as not blaming others for group problems, promoting an appropriate ratio of task and supportive communications, and promoting group cohesion and cooperation.

- Effective team leaders follow certain behaviors, such as not taking every leadership position offered to them and adjusting leadership style to meet the needs of groups.

INTRODUCTION

In **Creating Effective Teams,** Susan Wheelan, who has many years of consulting experience with teams in the public and private sectors, presents a straightforward practical guide for group members and leaders about building and sustaining effective teams. Groups have a long history of success, and people have formed

work groups to accomplish tasks and goals since the beginning of human history. Wheelan covers why teams are important, how they function, and what makes them productive. The four developmental stages of a group are discussed in depth—forming, storming, norming, and performing—with separate chapters on being an effective team member and an effective team leader. Also, strategies for creating and supporting well-managed, high performing teams are presented, and checklists and examples help team members and leaders evaluate their performance and work through common problems.

Why Groups?

Work groups have a long history of success, and because the nature of work in the 21st century is complex, more and more tasks require collaboration. It is important that companies consider that bad experiences in work groups are common and unsurprising. Even groups that are eventually successful go through stressful periods.

A work group is made up of members who are striving to create a shared view of goals and to develop an efficient and effective organizational structure to accomplish them. A work group only becomes a team when shared goals have been established and effective methods to accomplish these goals are in place. When this happens, work is fun, and members of high performance teams feel involved, committed, and valued.

Effective Organizational Support for Teams

Organizations play a key role in helping work groups become effective. Work groups and teams function better in an organizational structure that follows these eight principles:

1. *Clearly define the organization's mission.* In order to flourish, groups need to be clear about what the business is, but they also need to understand and believe the mission statement.

2. *Support innovation.* Organizations need to encourage new ideas and new ways of doing things so that group members feel energized and supported.

3. *Expect success.* If group members believe that giving 100 percent is not encouraged or valued, they will not give their best effort.

4. *Value superior quality and service.* If organizational members perceive that profit is more important than quality, they will become dispirited and cynical.

5. *Pay attention to detail.* Organizations need to give a group leader a clear definition of the group's task, all backup materials, and awareness and planning about group membership, timelines, meeting times, availability of potential members, and similar information.

6. *Value team recommendations.* If group members believe that whatever they come up with will be rejected or changed, the chances of group success are lessened.

7. *Set clear expectations for group output, quality, timing, and pacing.* Groups need realistic guidelines and goals to increase their chances of success.

8. *Reward teamwork rather than individual performance.* Organizations need to reward teamwork rather than individual performance, although this can be difficult.

For work groups to function better, organizations need to do the following five things:

Further Information

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By Bob Frisch

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1. Establish meaningful group goals and tasks that require skill, have variety, and require interdependence. Many organizational tasks are routine or boring but still must be done; these types of tasks may not be best for a team format.

2. Establish meaningful group goals and tasks that require continuous learning. In these types of groups, members learn from each other and will seek out information to learn more about how to proceed.

3. Establish access to the human resources necessary to accomplish group goals. Group members need help to succeed.

4. Establish access to the technical resources necessary to accomplish group goals. Groups need computer equipment, computer programs, archival materials, and other resources to accomplish their goals.

5. Establish defined team work areas. While some research suggests that conference calls, video conferencing, and group discussions via email can work,

Wheelan recommends periodic face-to-face meetings. For groups in the same location, a defined work area is best.

Team members should be chosen based on their ability to do the task and contribute to group success. Research shows that personalities or style compatibility of group members is not key to group success. Also, research concludes that group members do not have to like each other or socialize outside of work in order to have a successful group. Instead, research suggests that to be good group members, people need to be trained in the technical aspects of the job, in how groups function, and in what members and leaders can do to help the group function more effectively.

Effective teams are more productive, and that means that companies and organizations win, too. The trick to creating teams is to learn enough about how work groups function so that we can increase the chances that work groups will become high performance teams.

About the Author

Susan Wheelan is president of GDQ Associates, Inc. Until 2001, she was a professor of psychological studies and faculty director of the Training and Development Center at Temple University. Wheelan received Temple University's Great Teacher Award in 1992. She has also worked as a psychologist in a number of hospital and clinical settings. She is the author of *Facilitating Training Groups: Group Process: A Developmental Perspective; Creating Effective Teams: A Guide for Members and Leaders;* and *Faculty Groups: From Frustration to Collaboration*. She is the editor of the *Handbook of Group Research and Practice* and co-editor of *The Lewin Legacy: Field Theory in Current Practice and Advances in Field Theory.* She has also written 60 research articles for publication.

Efforts to develop intervention strategies to assist groups in meeting goals and maximizing effectiveness have been used for many years, but most team interventions do not work. An analysis of 330 group intervention strategies found that interventions that included goal setting and feedback had the most positive effects on group productivity. Interventions that take group development into consideration are also useful.

Another thing organizations need to do is to avoid helping groups too much, because doing so increases group dependency on experts and reduces the group's ability to be successful on its own. As research suggests, groups need regular feedback to be successful. Groups also need sufficient autonomy to do their work. But at the same time, groups must stay in contact with other organization members and groups. Plus, group members, along with others who interact with the group, should conduct reviews to determine the group's level of organizational support and to make changes as needed.

From Groups to Teams: The Stages of Group Development

As people develop across time, so do groups. Research shows that groups experience periods of dependency,

conflict, trust and structuring, work, and disengagement. Studies have confirmed four stages of group development:

1. *Dependency and inclusion.* Characteristics of groups in this stage include members who are dependent on the designated leader, concerns about safety, and concerns about feeling included in the group. Group members often engage in "pseudowork," such as exchanging stories that are not relevant to the task at hand. Members also may wait for the group leader to take charge and make decisions. Also, members are unlikely to express different points of view.

2. *Counterdependency and fighting.* The group begins to free itself from its dependence on the leader, and members fight about group goals and procedures. The group's task during this phase is to develop a unified set of goals, values, and operational procedures, which usually generates conflict. Task conflict is necessary for the establishment of trust, but when disagreements become personal, trust is lost and members do not feel safe in the work group.

To date, the most promising intervention type appears to be goal setting combined with feedback that includes attention to group development issues. The likely reason for the effectiveness of this combined intervention strategy is that group members set the goals and determine the strategies for improvement themselves.

3. *Trust and structure.* If a group works through conflicts in stage two, then member trust, commitment to the group, and willingness to participate increase. Characteristics of groups in this stage include more mature negotiations about roles, organization, and procedures. Members also work to solidify positive working relationships with one another.

4. *Work and productivity.* This stage is a time of intense team productivity and effectiveness. This is when groups become high performance teams. The quality and quantity of work increases significantly during this stage, but most groups do not get this far.

Groups do not always proceed in a positive direction; they can get stuck at one stage, or they can regress. Some studies estimate that between 80 percent and 90 percent of all groups have difficulties with performance. To make the process of group development easier, there are things people can do and attitudes people can take on to survive, and even enjoy, the process of group development:

- *Learn about group development.* When group members know that all groups go through predictable stages of development, they make better group members and leaders.

- *Be patient.* Groups develop over time; they do not function at high levels from the beginning. Typically, no group has reached the high performance team stage in less than six months.

- *Expect things to be murky at the beginning of a group.* Things are never clear at the beginning of a group.

- *Expect conflict and treat it as a positive sign of progress.* Most people avoid conflict, but conflict in groups is a normal, natural, and a necessary part of group life.

- *Help the group limit conflicts to those about tasks, roles, structures, and the like.* This means not getting involved in personal feuds or personality conflicts.

- *Compromise on issues when possible and help others resolve differences.* Compromise is essential to group productivity.

- *Do not sit on the sidelines.* Members should take responsibility for what is going on, even if it does not involve them directly.

- *Be supportive of other members and the leader.* According to Wheelan, in groups that are doing well, 15 to 20 of every 100 statements made by group members are supportive statements.

- *Complete tasks in a timely fashion.* Failure to accomplish tasks in a timely manner slows down a group's progress more than anything else.

- *Embrace subgroups or coalitions emerge.* Subgroups and coalitions are natural and generally good things, but they make some people upset.

- *Groups should regularly assess how they are functioning.* Even though it can seem like a waste of time, discussing how the group is working together will save time and aggravation in the long run.

- *Show up.* Unstable membership will slow group development.

How Do High Performance Teams Function?

Some people think focusing on team development is a waste of time, but it does make a difference to the bottom line. Research studies have identified a number of characteristics of high performance teams. These are ten key areas members should pay attention to in order to ensure group productivity:

1. *Goals*. The most important characteristic of high performance teams is that the members are clear about the team's goals. Group goals should be thoroughly discussed, as well as what those goals mean to different group members. Members need to agree with the team's goals and see the relevance of them if the team is to be successful.

2. *Rules*. After discussions about how tasks might be accomplished, decisions about which member or members will work on each task must be made. Three things are crucial: Members must be clear about the role they are asked to play; members must have the ability and skills necessary to accomplish their assigned or chosen tasks; and each member must agree with and accept their assigned roles.

3. *Interdependence*. In successful teams, tasks require members to work together.

4. *Leadership*. A leader's style should change when necessary to meet emerging groups' needs.

5. *Communication and feedback.* High performance teams must have open communication that allows all members to participate. Regular, constructive feedback and using feedback to make improvements are signs of high performance teams.

6. *Discussion, decision-making, and planning.* Members of high performance teams spend time planning how they will solve problems and make decisions, and they spend time defining and discussing problems they must solve.

7. *Implementation and evaluation.* High performance teams implement the solutions and decisions of members. They hold each other accountable and follow up.

8. *Norms and individual differences.* Successful teams establish norms that encourage high performance, quality, and success. Members are encouraged to be creative and innovative, and members who behave differently are accepted as long as their behavior is perceived as helpful to task accomplishment.

9. *Structure*. Three factors are important to the structure of successful teams: they contain the smallest number of members necessary; members are able to form subgroups; and teams must have sufficient time together.

10. *Cooperation and conflict management.* According to research, high performance teams are highly cohesive and contain cooperative members.

Research tells us that task conflict is essential for teams to become effective and productive. However, interpersonal conflict can stop a work group in its tracks. When disagreements become personal, trust is lost and members do not feel safe in the group.

Effective Team Members

Leadership training abounds, but Wheelan believes more membership training is needed. She trains work groups in both effective membership and effective leadership, where members and leaders work together and learn each other's roles. According to research, the following are behaviors and attitudes members should adopt to be effective:

- *Do not blame others for group problems.* The social science term "fundamental attribution error" means that humans tend to attribute the actions of others to personality characteristics without taking other factors into account. Most of the time this is an error, and this tendency to misinterpret increases conflict. Many groups get in a pattern of blaming, which has negative results for the group. But if members accept shared responsibility for group function, each member will feel compelled to accept blame for group failure as well.

- *Encourage the process of goal, role, and task clarification.* When members do not know what's going on, they should ask questions until they do.

- *Encourage the adoption of an open communication structure in which all member input and feedback are heard.* Communication patterns get established quickly, but the problem is that who talks to whom and how much they talk is usually determined by status characteristics. Group performance suffers when member role and status assignments are inappropriate or when member contributions are ignored. Researchers have identified strategies and conditions that increase the status of women and minorities in groups. Wheelan believes these findings may be helpful to anyone whose group role or status is not aligned with their abilities. To increase the likelihood of improving their status, people should not accept the status assigned to them, they should act in group-oriented ways, instead of individual-oriented ways, and they should demonstrate their competence and abilities to the group.

To engage in a task conflict with others and to work it out is an exhilarating experience. It provides energy, a shared experience, and a sense of safety and authenticity and allows deeper trust levels and collaboration.

- *Promote an appropriate ratio of task and supportive communications.* Members of successful work teams spend between 70 and 80 percent of the time talking about goals and tasks. Supportive statements are the next highest kinds of statements, and the remainder express disagreement, focus on topics unrelated to the task or express some form of dependency.

- *Promote the use of effective problem-solving and decision-making procedures.* As research suggests, not all employees are capable of contributing to problem-solving and decision-making processes. Group members need expertise in the problem; confidence in their ability, knowledge, and experience related to the problem; interest in participating; and problem-solving skills. The amount of time spent discussing the problem and potential solutions increases the quality of the outcome. Groups need to outline, in advance, the strategies they will use to solve problems and make decisions.

- *Encourage the establishment of norms that support productivity, innovation, and freedom of expression.* Groups need to agree to do the best possible job and to remove as many obstacles as they can. Also, members need to feel free to offer their ideas about things. But underlying differences, such as personality, education, and life experiences, do not have as much impact on work groups.

- *Go along with norms that promote group effectiveness and productivity.* Norms that promote group effectiveness and productivity should be followed. These include norms that support superior quality, service, innovation, and attention to detail.

- *Promote group cohesion and cooperation.* When goals and methods to reach those goals are clear, cohesion increases. Also, successful conflict resolution reduces individual fears of rejection and increases trust between members; increased communication increases cohesion.

- *Interact with others outside the group in ways that promote group integration and cooperation within the organizational context.* Groups must interact regularly with the rest of the organization to be successful. There are four proposed external activities that group members should perform: Negotiation to secure needed resources, negotiation when conflicts arise, gathering facts in order to determine current and future conditions and their potential impact on the group, and protecting the group from too much external information or pressure.

- *Support the leader's efforts to facilitate group goal achievement.* Effective team members ask questions for clarification, offer advice to the leader when appropriate, and actively participate in the leadership function.

Effective Team Leadership

Leaders do not need to be special people with tremendous amounts of skill; instead, the average person of good will, who is flexible and willing to learn some basic skills, can be an effective leader.

Effective leaders have more task-related abilities, are more social, and are more motivated to be leaders

than others, but they will not necessarily be an effective leader in every context. They are selective when accepting leadership roles.

Leadership style should be adjusted to meet the developmental needs of the group at a particular time. At stage one, leaders should be directive and confident. They work to:

- Reduce members' anxiety, fears of rejection, and concerns about safety.

- Provide positive feedback.

- Facilitate open discussion of goals, values, and tasks.

- Help members feel competent by providing supervision, training, and education in task- and process-related activities.

- Set high performance standards and provide guidance as necessary.

- Manage the external environment for the group.

At stage two, leaders slowly begin to empower members to participate more, and they act in ways that facilitate open discussion and resolution of conflicts regarding values, goals, and leadership.

At stage three, members should be involved in leadership. Leaders should also encourage and support members' efforts to share in the leadership function, and encourage their groups to make any necessary changes in structure to facilitate group productivity.

At stage four, leaders should participate as expert members of their teams, continue to monitor team processes, conduct organizational support reviews regularly, and continue to be effective group members.

Navigating Stage 1

The purpose of stage one is to create a sense of belonging and the beginnings of predictable patterns of interaction. To achieve this, members should act in ways that increase the likelihood of making others and themselves feel like they belong and are included. Also, they should not undermine leaders' authority or credibility, but should help them do a good job. And

if members make suggestions or ask questions, leaders should thank them for their help. Another thing leaders should do is to try not to be too perfect or too dominant.

Surviving Stage 2

The second stage is a period of counterdependency and fighting. The group's goal is to develop a set of goals, values, and operational procedures. Oftentimes, people do not feel safe in stage one to discuss things, so in stage two, it can feel like the group is going in circles or rehashing topics that already have been discussed and resolved. But it is a good thing to revisit issues after members have time to think.

Many norms emerge during the first stage of group development that will be challenged in the second stage. There are two important things to consider about norms. One, groups should not make norms about important things. And two, norms should be scrutinized for their contributions to group effectiveness and productivity.

Unless all members work to ensure group success, it won't happen. Leaders and members all have to put their oars in the water and row in the same direction to reach the group's goals.

Dissatisfaction with roles may surface, so if a member does not feel like his role matches his abilities and talents, he should try to negotiate for one that does. And if dissatisfaction occurs when subgroups begin to occur, members should remember that subgroups are important to the success of groups. One idea is to have subgroups report regularly on their work so that everyone knows what is going on.

Reorganizing at Stage 3

The third stage is characterized by more mature negotiations about roles, organization, and procedures. Members also work together to solidify positive relationships. As members begin to take over some leadership functions, moments will occur when the group reverts to its previous ways of behaving. This is normal, but if people begin to get away from working on the task at hand for too long, it is important to steer them back to task-oriented discussion.

When members do not participate often, ignoring them or insisting that they become active will not help.

Instead, leaders should notice what types of issues people speak up about and then when those topics come up, ask for their thoughts. Another common occurrence is moments when feelings of mistrust surface. To minimize issues, members should try to be helpful and understanding. One final thing to consider about groups in stage three is that sometimes they focus too much energy on building relationships rather than getting organized. Members should only spend between 15 and 20 percent of their time supporting each other.

Sustaining High Performance

At stage four, a work group becomes a team. Staying at stage four is not easy, but team members can do certain things to keep performing at a high level. It is important to remind members of the norm for quality as well as high performance. Team members should be encouraged to be innovative, but teams need to also make sure their goals are not too ambitious.

Before decisions are made, the team needs to define the problem clearly, which may mean going beyond the team for information, and all options should be discussed again. In conflict situations (which will continue to occur), the trick is to intervene quickly and stay focused on the task.

To maintain high performance, it is important to evaluate team processes regularly. One way to do this is to do process checks halfway through the meeting. Another idea is to do periodic reviews of team functions about once every six to eight weeks. Checklists are included in the book to help this process. The third way to evaluate team performance requires feedback from sources outside the team.

As teams progress, they experience process losses. Even high performing teams start to falter. When work becomes too routine, tasks can be redistributed or members can find other ways to revitalize themselves, such as adding new goals or teaching each other new aspects of the work.

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Features of the Book

Estimated Reading Time: 2–3 hours, 133 pages

The third edition of **Creating Effective Teams** would be beneficial for group members and leaders. Also upper management would benefit from discovering how groups work and how to help them succeed. This jargon-free, how-to book, which is based on research evidence, will help groups become high performance teams. Real-life examples appear throughout the book, including step-by-step directions for becoming a high performance team. Checklists are also included at the ends of chapters to monitor a group's performance. The book should be read more than once to fully grasp how groups function and progress.

Contents

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