

Working together to change the world

Tip sheet for students on teamwork

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." — Margaret Mead

Effective and efficient teamwork often goes beyond individual accomplishments. It is important that you learn to work in team environments to achieve a common goal, so that you will have the ability and skills to work collaboratively when you enter the workforce.

The keys to successful teamwork:

- create and establish clear goals
- stay active and involved
- ask questions and work together to find answers
- brainstorm and collaborate on ideas
- share your views

Working in a team will also allow you to learn more about:

- leadership
- decision-making
- trust
- communication and articulating thoughts and beliefs
- conflict management
- sharing
- learning from constructive criticism

Begin with an exercise in teamwork

In a team, discuss the answers to the following discussion points. Not only will you get to know your teammates better, you'll have accomplished your first task as a team.

- What kinds of attitudes and behaviours are productive in a co-operative setting?
- What do we have in common? What qualities make us stand apart from others?
- What does it mean to be a team and work together to succeed?
- What is our common goal?

Take advantage of natural abilities

Every team needs a leader to help clarify objectives, coordinate group efforts, ensure that decisions are made and the group makes progress, and see that everybody is involved, committed and motivated. If your team has more than one "natural leader," consider ways to share the leadership role.

A great team is comprised of people who have one or more of the following qualities:

- creativity
- organizational skills
- artistic abilities
- good writing and communication skills
- enthusiasm
- logic
- math skills

As you work through your project or action plan, you may find yourself switching from one role to another.

Develop and demonstrate teamwork characteristics

- Work interdependently and towards both personal and team goals.
- Feel a sense of ownership towards your role in the group, based on your commitment to the goals you helped create.
- Collaborate and use your talent and experience to contribute to the success of the team's objectives.
- Base your team's success on trust, and encourage all members to express their opinions, diverse points of view and questions.
- Make a conscious effort to be honest, respectful and listen to every person's point of view.
- See conflict as a part of human nature, and react to it by treating it as an opportunity to hear about new ideas and opinions.
- Resolve problems constructively.
- Participate equally in decision-making, but understand that the leader might need to make the final decision if the team cannot reach a consensus.

Create a constructive environment

How do you build and maintain a comfortable, supportive and non-threatening environment?

Each member of the team should make the effort to:

- gather, share and reflect on knowledge and information
- encourage each other to learn by explaining what each member understands
- present ideas, consider their validity and arrive at an agreement
- discuss and debate ideas
- demonstrate mutual appreciation, trust, respect and consideration
- allow collaborative learning where every person's ideas have value
- be active and engaged in the group's work
- do their share of the work
- help others to demonstrate competence and achieve learning

Sometimes it may be helpful for members of the team to review and comment on each other's work. This will lead to the group as a whole to being accountable for the final product.

Keep on track with team evaluation

As a team, you should engage in continuous evaluation of your group's effectiveness. That includes monitoring team and individual progress, regular status reports or meetings with the teacher, and scheduling and assessment. At the end of each phase of your project or action plan, revisit your stated goal and consider whether you're still on track.