Are You Really a Team Player?

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It seems that everyone is talking about teams these days. The popular business literature is brimming with books and articles about teams. Although teams have been used in academic health centers (AHCs) in the past, AHCs have begun to embrace the use of teams as a new way of addressing "old problems." The NIH Roadmap is explicit in describing the expected use of "research teams of the future." The days of the isolated but dedicated scientist toiling away in the lab accompanied only by a faithful assistant (undoubtedly a postdoctoral fellow) are already long gone in most AHCs.

Although nearly everyone has some familiarity with teams and teamwork, it has been my experience that most people don’t know about or understand what it means to be a member of a real team. Your future success may depend on your ability to be a real team player. Many readers may already be a part of a team (or will be). How can you tell if you are really a team player?

Teams Are Different
Many team members may be members in name only. Although they may be participating in a group called a “team,” the approach may be no different than that of a committee, task force, or other work group charged with completing a task or tasks. Real teams are different. A team is a small group of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

Teams differ from other groups in many ways. Shared leadership, members holding each other accountable, embracing conflict, measuring performance, and creating collective work products are only a few of the salient differences between real teams and other work groups.

Different Behaviors Are Necessary
Real teams require a different behavioral repertoire. One cannot expect success if the approach to team membership is the same as the approach to other work group activities. Successful teamwork demands behavior conducive to meeting the common purpose of the team, setting and reaching performance goals, and creating collective work products. Real team players need to determine if they are on target. This requires team members to assess their own behavior and to modify it to meet the needs of the team.

Self-Knowledge
Team members have complementary skills. In fact, selection of team members should be based on the unique skills and perspective each of the members brings to the table. All team members should be fully cognizant of why they have been selected for the team and of the expectations of them as members of this team. Individuals need to ask of themselves: Am I bringing what is needed? Are my skills up to date? If you don’t have the skills, it may be best to decline to participate. If your skills are out of date, you should sharpen them in order to bring your best to the team. After all, the other members are depending on you. In turn, teams need to assess whether or not the members bring the necessary skills or perspective to the team.

Another important aspect of self-knowledge is related to temperament. While learning about temperament may precede joining a team, many teams engage in a period of assessment at the outset of their formation. Administration of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator or similar measure offers valuable information that can be very helpful in building good relationships amongst the team members as they learn to communicate, build trust, and work together.

Commitment
Real team members demonstrate commitment to the team through their behavior. A real team player makes a commitment to the goals of the team—and honors that commitment consistently. Attending team meetings, arriving on time, and coming prepared are clear demonstrations of commitment. Too often, I’ve encountered persons who repeatedly announce "I’m a team player," but attend meetings only sporadically, arrive late, or fail to have completed tasks integral to achieving team goals.

Commitment to the team process is important, too. Rather than approaching team membership with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude, real team players recognize the question must be rephrased to “What’s in it for us?” This approach requires not only a full commitment to the team goals, but also a continued focus on results.

Bravery
Effective teams demand trusting relationships amongst team members. While the phrase “trust has to be earned” has some truth, one has to take the risk other team members are skillful, conscientious, and committed to the goals of the team. This can be very challenging to the “rugged individualist” who typically espouses a perspective of “if you want it done right, do it yourself.” Trust builds over time, especially as other team members demonstrate their skills and “deliver” as expected. However, some level of trust must exist from the outset or the team will never have a chance to grow in trust. Many teams engage in trust-building exercises early on in order to establish as much trust as possible.

Real team players are unafraid of conflict. Team members exhibit maturity and bravery in addressing conflict openly, especially if the organizational culture is one where ignoring, denying, or avoiding conflicts represent the status quo. All teams will experience conflict—it should be expected. Teams deal with conflict openly, recognizing that conflict often prompts creativity, which results in
collective work products that reflect the wisdom of the entire team. Patrick Lencioni argues that “fear of conflict” represents one type of team dysfunction. Real team players have the confidence, maturity, and patience to actively engage in eliminating, reducing, or managing team conflicts. Development of skills related to resolving, reducing, or managing conflict may require specific training for the entire team.

Listening Skills
Knowing when to keep one’s mouth shut is a virtue. Nowhere is this more evident than in the work of teams. Real team players listen keenly to other team members and often elicit more information from others (“tell me more about . . .”) in order to be certain the speaker’s message is received accurately. Good listeners ask open-ended questions (“What is your perspective on the problem?”) and often take time to “state the obvious” by summarizing the message. Asking other team members if the summary is accurate and if not, where the inaccuracies exist allows the group to build consensus. Finally, good listeners recognize that their perceptions and opinions may not be as important or as good as the perceptions and opinion of the team.

Consensus Building
Real team players respect and honor the wisdom of teams. Just as truly listening to others is an attribute of real team players, communicating with other team members in a manner that builds consensus is an important skill demonstrated by real team players. Taking an adversarial position and “digging in heels” is unlikely to lead the team to creating better work products. Real team players understand the outcome or product may not be as they initially envisioned. Building a coalition or bloc of votes in support of one’s position may lead to a “win” on the part of the individual. Unfortunately, however, this is often at the expense of the team. In other words, real team players subordinate their own desired outcome in deference to the desired or preferred outcome of the team.

Shared Leadership
Real team players are able to share leadership according to the task at hand. Leadership roles are shared and “move around” the team according to which member’s skills and perspective are best suited taking the lead. One person might be formally designated as “team leader,” but this is typically limited to securing a location for team meetings and other logistical tasks. Shared leadership requires knowing when to “step up” to assume a leadership role and when to “step aside” to allow another team member to assume leadership.

Discipline
Real team players are disciplined. They are relentless in pursuit of the team’s goals and don’t give up easily. Discipline is very important in the formative stage of team development as it is often protracted, especially as compared to the other work groups. It takes time to build trust and to establish consensus. At times, teams may require the assistance of an expert from outside of the team to facilitate trust and build team cohesiveness. Real team players have the discipline to “stick with” the team as it forms, as it weatheres “storms” of intrateam conflict, and as it establishes norms in becoming a team that truly performs.

Accountability
Real team players hold the team and themselves accountable. In AHCs, there is an inherent conflict in holding teams accountable, as rewards and recognition are predicated upon individual performance. Subordinating personal success in deference to the success of the team is a new skill for many persons in AHCs. Real team players have the confidence to acknowledge personal shortcomings and to take action to acquire the skills needed to best serve the team. Truly accountable team players solicit support—and criticism—of other team members individually and collectively in order to improve personal and team performance.

Summary
Self-knowledge, commitment, bravery, and good listening skills are some of the behaviors required of real team players. Even those persons who seem to have a natural affinity for teamwork need to develop these skills to maximize team performance. As these skills are developed, discipline and shared leadership build team consensus. Real team players are unafraid of holding themselves accountable as individuals and as a team. Not everyone is a team player. As such, it should be expected that some persons would not be able to be a part of a team. In these cases, allowing them to be productive in their own way of working is preferable to trying to force them to fit into a team. Participation as a team member who is not really committed to the team “holds back” the progress of the team.

For those of us privileged to be members of high-performing teams, it is hard to imagine working in any other way. The benefits of having team members who are real team players are easily seen and measured through high quality collective work products. The benefits of high-performing teams far outweigh the investment of time and energy in training real team players.

References