

Teamwork  
isn't just a  
group process.  
This time,  
it's personal.

# Individual-Based Teamwork

“Members worked together above and beyond their job descriptions.”

That's how participants of the high-level, cross-functional team with which I was working accounted for the team's extraordinary success. Their individual and collective efforts saved a \$60 million account from being desourced, and the customer committed to an additional \$250 million worth of business annually.

**T**hat example shows how, contrary to traditional belief, teamwork isn't just a group process. It's also a personal responsibility and skill, especially in this new and flatter work world of teams, partnerships, and collaboration.

Nowadays, all work is teamwork, and the challenge is to perform well when having to share the responsibility to get something done with other people over whom you have no authority.

Here are several key guidelines for working responsibly with others no matter who reports to whom.

Develop your ability to respond. It's helpful to make a distinction between accountability and responsibility. Accountability is an agreement to be held to account for some result. Responsibility is a feeling of ownership. You can assign account-

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ability between yourself and others, but responsibility can only be self-generated. Responsibility means to completely own—rather than deny, blame, or rationalize—your situation.

Think of the cause-effect equation. Instead of seeing yourself as the effect and something else as the cause, responsibility means seeing yourself as both cause and effect of your situation.

Accept that your past choices placed you in your current situation. Also accept that you are in complete charge of your learning, improving, and growing in order to produce the results you want. Several years ago, the Eagles had a hit called “Get Over It,” in which they railed against blaming others for one’s misfortune. The only true way out of a fix is to get over it and develop your ability to respond—call it, your *response-ability*.

**Commit to exercising your responsibility every day.** That may sound odd—as if, like any competency, responsibility can be developed. But the personal and professional rewards are substantial. Affirm, “I choose to be 100 percent responsible for every aspect of my life and work.”

**Retain your personal power.** Individuals can make a huge difference in the dynamics of a team, but most people don’t accept their power to make or break a collaborative relationship. The most frequent excuse I hear for poor performance from otherwise highly skilled professionals is, “I got put on a bad team.” To that I say, “How did you know the team was bad before you got there?”

Retain your personal power by treating every action and decision that affects you as one to which you consent. No action or decision can stand unless you allow it. Gandhi said that what people most fear is not their lack of power but rather their abundance of it. Speak up when you disagree with your team’s purpose and direc-

tion. Understand that going along without passion or commitment takes your team where no member wants to go. Worse, complaining about other team members behind their backs is treasonous to team relationships and will earn you little respect or trust. When you have an issue with a teammate, the most productive response is to state your concern directly to him or her so the two of you can resolve it.

To build your personal power, make only agreements—no matter how small—that you fully intend to keep. Then consistently improve your ability to do that. When you fail to honor an agreement, clear it up with the other person at the first opportunity by acknowledging that you didn’t keep the agreement, apologizing for not coming through as promised, asking how you can make amends, and recommitting to the relationship.

**Increase your provocability.** Here’s an actual scenario: When the team leader walked into the meeting eight minutes late and asked if everyone was ready to start, Ned said, “No.” He then addressed the leader in a compassionate and even tone, “There’s something I need to check. We all agreed to start and end team meetings on time. Everyone else was ready to start the meeting on the hour. Do we need a new or different agreement with you about this?”

Ned was obviously provoked, and the team leader recognized that Ned had good reason to be. He also saw that instead of attacking him, Ned just called “foul” and gave him an opportunity to account for his behavior. The leader realized that the responsible thing to do was to own his mistake and apologize to Ned and the team for not keeping his agreement. He then recommitted to begin and end meetings on time, and he did that thereafter.

Ned acted on—rather than denied or vented—his frustration with the team leader’s behavior. Had Ned allowed the

broken agreement and his frustration to slide by without comment, it’s likely that team meetings would’ve started later and later. Ned and the group could have built up resentment and cynicism, and team performance could have suffered.

Practice that lesson of personal responsibility by becoming increasingly intolerant of a difference between what you say and what you do. Then, expect collaborators to honor all agreements you’ve made and to act only in your collective best interest. Call “foul” at the earliest sign that agreements aren’t being honored, and do it with equal or lesser force than the force of the foul. The secret to successful confrontation is to confront without inviting escalation or shaming the recipients. That leaves room for them to respond. Where greater force leads to escalation of a conflict, compassionate intolerance allows for reparation and correction.

**Experience judgments fully, then let them go.** Traditional wisdom admonishes us to “judge not.” That advice most often results in denial and resentment because not judging is nearly impossible. Perhaps a better way to state it is, “Understand and clear your judgment before it gets in the way of your communication.” Your resourcefulness is limited when you’re stimulated from anger or right-wrong thinking. When you feel upset with someone, explore your judgment completely to discover exactly what it is and where it comes from.

Here’s a hint: The source of your judgment probably isn’t the other person but you. You might be mad at him or her, but you’re the one who’s choosing to be mad. When you completely understand the source of your judgment, then and only then can you release it, let it go. Sometimes, it helps to assist physically with the mental process of letting go. You might open your hands as if releasing a bird to fly away or exhale as if breathing out the emotion.

Learn from every upset. High performers recognize that an upset is an opportunity to learn. You can harvest value by asking yourself how your choices and actions landed you in the negative situation. Determine how you can change your behavior to strengthen the team. If you need to ask for new agreements with teammates, do it. The key is not to avoid, eliminate, or cover up mistakes and upsets, but to learn, correct, and improve each time.

Master your intentions. Psychologists say that we manifest whatever occupies our minds. Golfers know that a dirty trick to play on the player at the tee box is to advise, “Watch out for the woods on the left.” Then, because the woods occupy the player’s thoughts, that’s where the ball lands. A reporter once asked golfing great Jack Nicklaus how he could step up to a 40-foot putt so confidently. He answered, “Because in my mind’s eye, I’ve never missed one.”

Clear intentions are the secret behind extraordinary performers. The key skill is simple to explain: *Know and picture your outcome. Hear the desired sounds. Feel the intended feelings. And specify the results you expect to achieve.* Clear intentions guide your behavior to deliver the desired results. Use that awareness to develop integrity in your relationships. Make your collaborative intentions known to your teammates. Remember that intentions exist in the conscious and unconscious mind. So, the next time you catch yourself taking words back by saying, “I didn’t mean it,” reflect on how you really might have meant it at some level.

Live and work on purpose. If mastering your situational intentions provides power, consider the power of a clear and sustained purpose in your life. By working with the conscious intention that comes from determining and knowing your purpose in life, you’ll integrate all of

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your actions and attract people who will help you achieve your purpose and who are served by it.

How do you discover a purpose? First, ask yourself what’s the best and most valuable use of your unique abilities. Next, ask what you love to do that provides value to others. Start designing your life and work to combine those two elements and you’ll be “on purpose.” You’ll even appreciate learning from upsets and mistakes because you’ll be doing so with a purpose.

Open a new relationship with a contribution. Heads of state usually present gifts when calling on leaders of a foreign land. The gifts symbolize a willingness to invest in the relationship before expecting a payoff. Consider how that’s different from the typical instructions given to a taskforce by executives: “Listen politely, but don’t share or commit to anything yet.” Even less responsible are people who approach a new relationship demanding an immediate answer to the question, “What’s in it for me?”

Responsible collaborators start a new relationship by contributing intention, information, energy, access, or resources.

They demonstrate a willingness to invest and are willing to make a significant investment before demanding a payoff. A successful practice attributed years ago to DuPont’s partnering with new entrepreneurs is to distribute the risk of a venture not according to investment, but according to who has the greater capacity to absorb it. That’s a gift by the larger and more stable partner for the good of the partnership.

Be a present hero by serving yourself and your team simultaneously. When any one person could remove a barrier that everyone is stepping around, the hero is said to be missing. My friend John is an example. I’ve seen him stoop to pick up trash on the sidewalk or running trail dozens of times when I ignored it. John doesn’t say anything about it or break stride. He just carries the trash until he’s able to toss it into a bin. Each time, I realize how responsible he chooses to feel for the space he shares with others, and I’m a little embarrassed by my apathy.

Present heroes are people like John who are mindful of the abundance they enjoy as members of their families, teams, and communities. They assume that it’s in their self-interest to invest a little personal energy to help the group, the community, society. To put that attitude to work for you, choose one of the dozens of annoyances that you’ve been wishing someone on your team would take care of—such as confronting a teammate’s difficult behavior or redesigning an inefficient work process—and take care of it yourself.

Remember: Teamwork requires personal, individual action. TD

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