



Working with Others

When you are on the job you will be working with other people. Having the skills to be a good team member is important.

Traits of a Strong Team

In a strong team people **trust** one another enough to share their thoughts, feelings and ideas. That doesn't mean someone letting loose with a string of swear words to share that they're frustrated ...it's about being honest while being work-appropriate and respectful. Trust is knowing that you can ask for help without being judged, suggest a new way of doing things without it being dismissed out-of-hand, and that you can admit you've made a mistake without being ridiculed or seen as weak. It also means that when other members of the team share ideas or feelings, you respond supportively too.

Much of what we just mentioned is rooted in good communication skills, but there's a behavioural element at play here too. Members of a strong team are **dependable** – everyone on the team can rely on everyone else to do the job or complete the task that they've agreed on. As a team, they know that each member can be counted on, takes their work seriously, and won't abandon it to do something they think is more interesting at the time.

Knowing team members can be counted on is also demonstrated in the way they **support** one another. Most teams can accomplish far more together than the members would individually – and not everyone is an expert at everything. We all need a little help sometimes, and strong teams do a lot of that helping... supporting each other as they work towards both individual and shared goals.

There's a really big difference between the way an individual sport is played compared to how a team sport is played. Take tennis or squash for example. In either of those sports you're playing one-on-one – just you against another player. While you need to observe your opponent and strategize about the best way to beat them, you're doing it on your own – you win or lose based only on how well you're matched, combined with your own strength and decision-making.

Finally, strong teams **respect** and value their members – not just because of what they can do for the team, but because they're human beings too, and everyone has value. It's important to point out that this is especially true when team members are very different from one another. Strong teams not only recognize the differences between the backgrounds, values, lifestyles, experiences and beliefs of their members, but see the value in the new perspective that those differences bring. Interestingly, different opinions within a team can be one of its greatest strengths.



Building Respect

You may have heard the phrase that respect isn't given, it's earned... but we would challenge that it's carefully and deliberately built. You want to be respected and valued, and so does everyone else. So how do you build a culture of respect?

First, learn a bit about your teammates – find out how they are different from and similar to you. Don't necessarily grill them but be observant and friendly – learn a bit about their backgrounds, what they like and don't like, and what's important to them. This knowledge is incredibly powerful, not only because it shows your teammates that you're interested in who they are, but because it helps you understand why they might see things differently than you do. It also gives you information you can use in casual conversation, and an understanding of what sort of topics you might want to avoid. For example, if a teammate shares that they're a vegetarian you can probably skip talking to them about the best way to cook a steak. In the process of demonstrating that you respect their dietary choices, you're also building trust – another key element of a successful team.

Second, remember that seeing things differently isn't the same as a disagreement. Everyone sees the world a little bit differently, according to their past experiences, their values and beliefs, and their perspectives. Too often when we don't see things the same way someone else does, it seems like an opportunity for debate or a contest to prove who's right. That sounds nothing like the supportive environment we just described. There's nothing wrong with different perspectives, and in fact hearing about them can help us grow and see the world around us differently.

When those differences of opinion are big, things get more complicated. As we just discussed, we all have different ways of seeing things, but when those differences are about ideas or topics that we value deeply, they can be harder to accept. This kind of difference of opinion is often interpreted as disrespect – and we're working hard to build respect with our teammates. With that in mind, let's look at a third way to build respect – it's in the way we deal with differences.

The first thing to consider is our own emotional reaction. When someone sees things differently than we do, it can upset us, make us angry, hurt our feelings, or make us feel threatened – depending on the topic. And when we get emotional, we can lose our ability to communicate effectively by lashing out or getting defensive. So the first trick to handling conflicting opinions is to pay attention to how you feel about them, and try to separate those emotions from the issue. Remember, the other person's emotions may be involved too, so those feelings of anger, threat, or hurt could be part of the conversation even if they're not coming from you. Take a couple of deep breaths and refocus your attention on the facts. Controlling our emotional reactions can be hard but recognizing that they can get in the way of communication is a good first step.

Recognizing our emotional response is closely followed by making choices about how we talk to the person we have a difference of opinion with. If someone's perspective seems really off-base, our gut instinct might be to tell them so – bluntly. But team conflicts don't get resolved by telling the other person their point of view is stupid. It actually works against us when we attack someone personally instead of talking about the issue. When we work against each other we're not working toward a solution. The language we use when faced with differing opinions should focus on the actual topic rather than on the other person.

These issues can sometimes arise from miscommunication, or not understanding the other person's experiences or perspective. Remember what we said about diverse teams being the strongest? That means there's a very good chance that you won't have the same experiences to draw from. So start the conversation by asking questions about your teammate's opinion so you can understand why they have it in the first place.

This is a good place to practice the idea of choosing your words wisely too. Consider ways to ask where the other person is coming from that are non-confrontational, like "can you help me understand that?" instead of "how could you think that?"

An important part of asking questions is listening to, and considering, the answers. Be open to the idea that in fact, you may not come to a place where you agree with your teammates completely – but you can arrive at a place where you understand and respect people's opinions or beliefs even when they're different than your own.



Another way words are powerful when you don't see eye-to-eye with a teammate is that they can emphasize the separation between the people involved (for example, "you always do this" and "I can't work with you") or they can reference teamwork instead (for example, "we're handling this really differently" and "we need to figure out how to get past this.").

Focusing on the impact these differences have on other people in the team, or on the overall goals you're trying to accomplish together, is another technique to focus the conversation. Is how you're handling this difference of opinion disrupting your team's ability to focus, damaging their reputation, or hurting their business? Often the impact of an internal disagreement is bigger than just the people immediately involved, and that can be an important shift in perspective.

You have the right to your opinion and so do others. And the goal here isn't necessarily to change someone's mind or debate until you reach an agreement, but to recognize that everyone has the right to different opinions. In strong, effective teams, people know how to express those opinions respectfully without trying to impose their opinions on others.

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