

## How To Collaborate Successfully

According to dictionary definitions, to collaborate means to work jointly with someone or a group of people on an activity, especially to create or produce something. Regardless of your profession, it’s rare when you work alone. You spend most of your time working with people in your company as well as external parties, including customers, suppliers, partners and consultants. These people play a key role in determining how successful you will be.

### **Why Having Good Collaboration Skills Is Important**

Before we delve into the strategies, let’s first understand the benefits of being a good collaborator.

- You normally spend a lot of time working with other people on a team project. Everybody needs to do their part and deliver on their commitment in order for the whole project to be successful. Because a project is only going to be as strong as the weakest link in the chain, team members are dependent on each other and need to work together closely. Collaborating effectively is the key to a successful project.
- Effective collaboration enables you and the team to work more efficiently. Teams who don’t collaborate well often have miscommunication, confusion and conflicts – all of which result in loss of critical time. For example, I have been on teams where we had multiple meetings rehashing the same topic, revisiting decisions or clarifying unnecessary confusion. Teams who work well together only meet as needed and use meetings to set goals, review project status and resolve issues. If you have good collaboration skills and use them to help your team work effectively together, you not only help your team but also yourself by saving time to work on other important activities.
- How you perform on a project and how you work with other people is a major factor in your yearly performance review. Your team members and other managers’ feedback have significant influence on how you will be evaluated. Positive feedback along with delivering excellent results will earn you good performance reviews, salary raises and consideration for promotions. I consistently noticed during my career that high performers share one common trait – the ability to work with people to get things done successfully.
- In collaborating with people, whether in a leading role or as a team member, you have a great opportunity to grow professionally, develop leadership skills, enhance communication skills and improve your ability to work effectively with others. Moreover, demonstrating good collaboration skills is a great way to make you stand out at work and get the attention of company executives.

Companies spend a significant amount of money to train their employees on teamwork. I once had an employee, Mark, who was an expert in his field, knew his stuff inside out but was not good at working with people and getting people to do what he needed to complete the project. If Mark could develop and

improve this skillset, he would be a star. I sent him to a one week professional development training program in Florida at the cost of five thousand dollars, not including hotel, travel and food expenses. This not only cost the company a lot of money, but more importantly, five days of productive work from him. If you have or develop these skills early in your career, you will have a leg up in your career and a great head start over other people.

In this chapter, I’ll cover how to effectively collaborate with other people and to get them to collaborate with you.

## **Skills And Qualities Needed For Effective Collaboration**

I’ll discuss three important skills and qualities – Adaptability, Communication and Negotiation.

- **Adaptability.** People you work with may come from different cultures, different backgrounds, have different personalities and work styles. Since there is no “one size fits all” approach to working with others and getting the most out of their effort, you need to be able to adapt to them. Invest your time on your team members to develop a rapport and understand how best to work with them - what motivates them, what work method they prefer, what makes them tick, etc. Investing your time with them will go a long way to gain their trust and set you up to work well with them.
- **Communication skills.** Having good communication skills goes hand in hand with collaboration skills. I covered this in detail in the “How to communicate effectively” chapter. Specifically, I talked about the importance of being a good listener. Moreover, I covered ways to communicate in different work situations. Lastly, I discussed the importance of maintaining professionalism, staying focused on the business issue and not react personally in difficult situations.
- **Negotiation skills.** This is the ability to influence people to achieve a mutually desired outcome. Even without being aware of it, we frequently negotiate. We negotiate with our manager on work assignments and priorities, with our project team members on project tasks and deadlines, with our suppliers on material cost and delivery schedule, etc. Negotiating with other people plays a key role in collaboration. Refer to the “How to be a good negotiator” chapter for details. I described a strategy and approach to use in any negotiation, the need to gather as much information as possible, to be creative, and most importantly, to achieve a win/win outcome.

## **Collaboration Strategies**

Try these strategies for collaborating effectively on a team project.

- **Start of a project.** This is more applicable to the project manager, but even if you are not, you can play an active role in spending time in the beginning of a project to:
  - Clarify the goals/objectives to make sure everyone is on the same page. If there is any confusion, this is the time to clarify and confirm project goals and objectives. If and when issues arise causing the project to get off track, going back to the project objectives is a good way to refocus everyone.
  - Discuss and gain clear understanding of deliverables and timelines expected of the team. Moreover, it’s important to align with management on the deliverables since they will hold the team accountable to these commitments. If the team cannot commit to the expected deliverables and timelines, they must negotiate with the management team.
  - Clarify your specific tasks/responsibilities, negotiate and prioritize your deliverables and deadlines. Be thorough in assessing your tasks and schedules before committing. While you want to be aggressive, try not to over commit to action items you don’t have control over or confidence to deliver on time. All things being equal, it’s better to under promise and over deliver.

## Excerpts from “Thriving At Work: What They Didn’t Teach You in School” by Michael Dam

- Understand your dependencies on other people and vice-versa. Know specifically whom you need to work with to make sure they deliver to you what and when you need for you to complete your job.
- Determine how team members prefer to work together – method of communication, frequency of meetings, forums to resolve issues/conflicts, etc.
- Spend time to figure out effective ways to work with your team members as discussed in the “Adaptability” section earlier.
- At the end of each meeting, make sure there is a meeting recap which summarizes decisions made, action items/owners, and next steps. This helps eliminate confusion among team members and prevent wasting time from having another meeting to clear things up. Confusion can easily happen when many topics were discussed at the meeting. To ensure team members have the same understanding, the project manager should send out a summary message after the meeting.
- Create a central online share work space for sharing information, work in progress, and capturing up to date changes and status. This enables everyone to see the same work being done as well as changes made in real time and ensures everyone has the same information at all times. There are many online share workplace tools available. Check with your company IT group (Information Technology).
- Lead by example. Meeting your commitment and completing your deliverables on time gains you credibility and trust from team members. Moreover, looking for opportunities to put the team above individual results is a good way to show your leadership skills. For example, offer your team members a hand when they need help.
- Identify problems/conflicts early and resolve as soon as possible. Refer to the “How to resolve conflicts and deal with difficult situations” chapter for ways to handle these situations. Focus on the business issue and not on personal matter is important to solving problems.
- Seek regular feedback from team members and give constructive feedback as appropriate. This enables any confusion between team members to get cleared up and gives everyone the opportunity to make improvements on their work.
- Keep your manager updated on the project status and your progress. This enables your manager to keep her manager up to date and allows you to seek help if and when you need it.
- Know when to escalate for help. You need to use your judgment here. While we may want to try to solve problems ourselves, sometimes we need help from our management. It’s always better to ask for help than to miss your deadline. Your manager would much prefer you ask for help than hearing the bad news about the project. Her obvious question then would be “Why didn’t you ask for help sooner?”
- Compliment and reward people for excellent work and teamwork effort. People appreciate being recognized for their work, so even a small gesture of sending an email to thank them for their effort and copying their manager goes a long way in building strong teamwork.
- Celebrate key milestones and accomplishments. Many of us put our heads down to finish our work and then move on to the next project without taking time to celebrate the team’s accomplishments. It’s an opportunity to catch our breath, enjoy each other’s company and to recognize our own contribution to the success of the project. Moreover, it offers a great way to gain visibility and recognition.

### **Resolving Conflicts And Challenges**

Inevitably, there will be conflicts or issues that arise during the project. The team’s ability to stay on track and complete the project on time depends on the team members’ ability to address and resolve these issues timely and productively. Here is a summary of steps to follow when a conflict arises:

- Recognize and identify issue early. Don’t ignore and hope it will go away.

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- Focus on the work issue and not personal issue.
- Identify the root causes of the issue – be honest and objective.
- Once root causes are identified, hold frank discussion to brainstorm potential solutions.
- Decide which solution is best to implement. If need to, escalate to management for help.

Let’s take an example: a team member is not meeting his commitment and that is impacting your work. Because your specific project deliverables are dependent on his deliverables, you cannot perform your work without his output. As a result, the team risks not meeting the deadline. You are in a bind, what should you do?

- Seek to understand the root cause. Talk to this team member to understand why he’s not able to complete his work and help him understand this is impacting the entire team’s project. Don’t make any assumption on why he is not delivering on his commitment and avoid making any accusations. Maintain your professionalism and focus on the business issue.
- Once you understand why, offer to brainstorm with him ways to help him complete his work so you will be able to do your work and the project can get back on track. Let’s assume that he was late because he had to take time off to attend to a family matter. Knowing this was the reason and not his competence or motivation, you can offer to take on some part of his work so both of you will be able to catch up. This will earn you goodwill and trust which will be helpful in future projects. If you found out he was just lazy and not motivated to do his work or if he rejected your offer to help, you should escalate to the project manager to help resolve the issue. Before escalating, let him know the action you plan to take. While he may not like this, he should understand you have tried your best to resolve the issue with him, but you must put the team first and do what is needed to help keep the project on schedule.

While I have covered collaborating in the context of a team project, much of the same strategies and techniques apply to other situations such as working one-on-one’s, working with people in other functions and even with people outside the company.