

Teamwork: myths, realities and tips



Preparation is key to building a top-flight team, whether it's with three people or several dozen. And one of the first issues to address is separating teamwork fact from fiction.

You'll find it easier to get everyone to buy into the teamwork concept by throwing out old myths about building teams.

Here are three myths and the realities behind them, with tips to work around each:

Myth #1: *If employees are getting along well they are practicing good teamwork.*

Reality: How well your employees get along is not the true test of good teamwork. In order for teamwork to be effective, employees must be willing to have honest discussions about job assignments and be willing to accept challenges, changes and compromise. Congeniality should never be confused with productive collaboration. Team members should be able to disagree with one another without embarrassment or the fear of starting a petty fight.

Tip: Do this first to resolve conflict

When you must mediate a conflict between co-workers or employees, before you do anything else, first decide if it is hot or cold.

Hot conflict: At least one person is emotional and is being loud, aggressive, insulting or threatening.

Cold conflict: At least one person appears completely unemotional and is muttering, pursing lips, turning away, being passive aggressive or remaining silent.

You are hoping for warm conflict, where both people are willing to talk, but neither is hostile, so:

If the conflict is hot: Set some ground rules for how people will conduct themselves and gain agreement from everyone. Then begin discussion. If anyone breaks the agreement, stop and remind everyone of the rules.

If the conflict is cold: Engage both parties in constructive communication. Don't let emotional people monopolize the conversation. Ask "cold" people specific open-ended questions to encourage them to share their side.

(Adapted from ["To Resolve a Conflict, First Decide: Is It Hot or Cold?"](https://hbr.org) Mark Gerzon, *Harvard Business Review*, <https://hbr.org>.)

Myth #2: *Outstanding employees always make exceptional team members.*

Reality: Coaches of successful sports teams are well aware of the individual who has outstanding "stats" but always seems to play for a loser. The basketball player who always goes for the shot, the hockey player who hogs the puck when he should be passing it, and the baseball player who refuses to "sacrifice" to move the runner ahead are good examples of people who are good players but not good team members.

Tip: Establish attainable goals for everyone. Listen closely for expressions of interest and ambition, and do your best to fuel them. Work together to establish clear, attainable goals. Agree on achieving levels of productivity, and set some skill development targets, too.

Myth #3: *Good employees always eventually become good team members.*

Reality: Some of your veteran employees will prefer individual to team achievement. Hardened attitudes and a long experience of doing things their way do not prepare them for a successful work team experience. Not everyone takes to a team environment initially; but with patience and understanding, they can become valuable contributors.

Tip: Keep an open mind.

As a supervisor, you play a key role in developing all your employees, regardless of their backgrounds. It's up to you to determine objectively what will help the employee "click" as part of your team. His previous experiences may provide some useful clues—but avoid using past failures to predict the future. Instead, learn what you can about the new employee's strengths and weaknesses from previous supervisors. Then ask the employee himself to discuss his role in the team. Encourage him to talk about aspects of the what he likes, as well as things that make it difficult to work in a team.