



What to do when a team isn't working

Can you think of an example of poor teamwork (in your own life or elsewhere)? Why do you think that the team failed to achieve? Sometimes a team fails because there is no clear shared purpose. For teams to be effective, leadership is required (a team can have more than one leader though: different people can lead on different tasks). Teams can fail when there is an unclear or unfair allocation of tasks and roles, or where team members have different standards. See our **top tips for teamworking** for some positive ideas to help your team get off to a good start.

Some of the most common interpersonal problems that can arise within teams include:

The 'free rider': the team member who doesn't fully participate, but who stands to benefit from the efforts of the others. This person may not respond to messages, attend meetings, or do any work.

What to do: Nominate a team member – preferably someone who has not had a lot of previous interaction with the perceived free rider – to follow up with them. Don't make accusations. A short text or email to say that you have noticed that they are not fully participating, and asking if everything is OK, is fine. Offer to meet with them to discuss further. If you don't get a response, contact them again to say that it seems they no longer want to be a part of the team, and that unless you hear otherwise, you will let the team's lecturer/supervisor/course director know about this.

There are many reasons why a person might withdraw from a team: they may feel aggrieved by the behaviour of other team members, be experiencing illness or personal difficulties, be extremely shy, or find it difficult to work with others. Do try to find out why a team member has withdrawn before excluding them from your team.

The 'dominator': the team member who takes on the role of leader and proceeds to dominate other team members. This person may want to control all aspects of the team's work. This can work well if



the other team members are happy to take their lead from the dominator, but it can become problematic if they feel that they have no say or are being pushed around. Sometimes two or more people can 'take over' in this way, leaving other team members feeling 'pushed aside'.

What to do: In this situation, it is advisable to confront the dominating behaviour. You could say something like: "Jamie, it's great that you are so passionate about this project and you seem to have emerged as the team leader. That's good, because teams need effective leadership. The thing is, the rest of us are starting to feel as if this is your project, rather than our project. Do you think you can find a way to let us have a bit more input into the direction of the project than we have had up to now?" Directly raising the issue has its risks. The dominating personality may feel affronted and they could respond by accusing the others of not doing enough, or by withdrawing from the team. Remain calm, and repeat the point that teamwork means that everyone has a say in how a project should progress.

The 'weak link': Some teams will have a team member who, although willing to do their fair share, may not complete their portion of the work to the same standard as the others. Their team-mates may be annoyed about having to review and improve the work of the 'weak link', or worry that this person's contribution will reduce the team's overall grade.

What to do: This is tricky, as the 'weak link' may not be able to do much to improve their contribution. Provided that they are doing their best, it is probably best to accept that team-working sometimes involves accepting the deficiencies of others. In other words, 'suck it up' and, if it is important to you, do what you can to cover for the poor contribution of another.

If you feel that your team is not functioning as well as it could, call a team meeting to clear the air. Sometimes a full and frank discussion is all that's needed to get the team back on track. Sadly, some team disagreements result in the collapse of the team, or in open conflict. In such situations, you may want to consult our guide to **conflict resolution** to avoid long-term fallout.