

Introduction to agile teams and agile teamworking skills

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What is teamwork?

The concept of teamwork is widely accepted as a collaborative effort to achieve a common goal or complete a task in an effective and efficient manner. Team members who display a wide range of teamwork skills are likely to increase the team's overall effectiveness. This unit will highlight the characteristics of successful, agile teams and provide a list of teamwork skills that are required in 21st century workplaces.

How do agile 21st century workplaces look like?

Many employees are facing similar challenges: the speed of markets is increasing, customers' wishes are becoming more specific, and collaboration with a wide variety of stakeholders is taking place across national borders. Entire industries are changing. This also entails new requirement profiles, which focus on competencies such as creative problem solving for occupational profiles. From public administration to large corporations, the need for innovation currently runs through all departments. Due to factors such as globalization, digitalization, networking, our world is becoming faster and faster. Faster means that the time intervals between changes or even innovations are becoming shorter and shorter. This permanent rapid change is called VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous). This means that although we know that a lot is permanently in motion, we cannot foresee where the world will go. We cannot prepare ourselves but must be able to react quickly when a change occurs. Therefore, teams in workplaces need the ability to adapt quickly to new, changed situations. This ability is called agility.

How to structure an agile team?

Nowadays, most endeavors are so complex that they can be accomplished only by a team, so it makes sense to know what make agile teams effective. Larson and LaFasto (1989) undertook a three year study to understand the characteristics of successful teams across different occupational fields. They found that all the highly effective teams always had these characteristics:

- I. A clear, elevating goal
- II. A results-driven structure
- III. Competent team members
- IV. Unified commitment
- V. A collaborative climate



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Let us have a look at the different characteristics:

I. Clear, elevating goal

A clear, elevating goal is necessary for achievement. Clarity means that the goal is precisely defined. A goal is elevating if it is important or worthwhile to the team members. For example, it can be a technical challenge that tests the skills of the team and brings it to their limits. It can also be a goal that instills a sense of urgency. People tend to be wanting to be involved in something that gives them an opportunity to make a difference. If the goal is clearly formulated but is not elevating, achieving it could be difficult, since it could be perceived as uninteresting and unimportant.

In agile professional teams, iterative and incremental development plays a key role in keeping the goal visible and clear at all stages of the process. The usage of incremental development allows not only the developers but also the customer to define and to work on smaller but clear goals. The usage of short iterations allows the team to leave room for feedback to understand if what they have done is what the customer expected.

II. Results-Driven Structure

A team has a results-driven structure when it is organized according to the goal that it attains. Team members comprehend the process, utilize (digital) communication channels, understand their roles, as well as the skills of the team members. Agile teams are also structured to deliver results on time and on budget in a setting of frequent changes and requirements. An effective team structure has clearly defined roles and accountabilities.

Above all, an effective communication system is integral to the success of any agile team. Agile development emphasizes face-to-face communication—the most effective communication channel between human beings. Agile team members work near one another, preferably in the same room—so the speed of communication is optimized. Digital communication tools are used if team members do not work in the same location.



III. Competent Team Members

Agile development methods challenge people's digital, agile, and interpersonal skills. They also challenge people's ability to learn new skills, to adapt to changing situations, and to apply acquired skills in new ways. Furthermore, the high level of interaction required by agile methods, require people to effectively collaborate with others. This a competence that has an important influence on achievement motivation. Achievement motivates people challenging, but potentially attainable goals. Lack of competence can make the goal impossible to reach. There are two types of competencies, both equally important: technical competencies and interpersonal competencies. Technical competencies include the skills necessary to achieve the team's goal. Interpersonal competencies refer to the interpersonal skills of the individual plus the ability to work effectively in a team—they can make a big difference regarding team performance. A team of star developers who cannot work well with each other, is likely to be outperformed by a team of average developers who excel in teamworking. But what exactly do team members do who work well together? Becker (n.d.) has identified these personal and interpersonal skills as team-oriented behavior:

- Communicate with others in an appreciative manner
- Mediate conflicts with other team members
- Communicate important information to others on the team
- Contributing ideas and thoughts
- Being open and flexible to important changes
- Motivate others
- Be self-motivated, wanting to grow
- Protect and enhance own performance through learning
- Fulfilling one's own tasks reliably and independently
- Addressing unclear tasks and ambiguous situations
- Remain calm in critical situations
- Respect and understand others' areas of expertise

IV. Unified commitment

Unified commitment is synonymous with “team spirit,” which is formed when team members find the goal worth achieving and feel a strong identification



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with the team. It is when all team members are willing to devote time and energy for the achievement of their common goal. Involving the team in all the stages of the project is crucial as it boosts commitment. If unified commitment is lacking, even if there is a clear, elevating goal, the chances of success are immensely reduced.

V. Collaborative Climate

Agile methods put a strong emphasis on collaboration. Creating a collaborative climate is one of the main objectives in agile working. The emphasis on face-to-face communication, shared spaces, common design and development sessions, incremental and iterative development, are all factors that help in creating an atmosphere that facilitates collaboration. It is important to foster unified commitment, a sense of belonging and trust, and to give team members a possibility for growth. If the setting is right, team members can focus on the attainment of the goal and the quality of the outcome is greatly improved.

Why is it important to teach and to develop teamwork skills in secondary education?

The importance of teamwork in secondary cannot be stressed enough. Not only because it is essential to prepare students for 21st century workplaces, but also to build collaboration among students. This can be achieved through team-based activities that will:

1. Challenge your students
2. Bring their strengths and weaknesses to light
3. Improve their interpersonal skills
4. Build their leadership skills
5. Boosts their self-confidence
6. Develop a growth mindset
7. Help students thrive in their future careers
8. Improve their personal relationships



In the upcoming units of this module, you will be introduced to various agile methods and activities that can be implemented in the classroom and will challenge and foster your students' teamwork skills.



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