



Team Skills



A short guide to help you discover the variety of skills that go to make a successful team and to appreciate what you can get out of teamwork at University.

*"The nice thing about teamwork is that you always have others on your side."
- Margaret Carty*

During your time as a student, you will undoubtedly spend some time working in a team: participating in a workshop or tutorial, preparing a group presentation or carrying out a practical project. Amongst your team there will be a variety of expertise and skill to draw on; you will be able to support and encourage each other. These experiences will fit you well for life as a professional graduate in the world of work.

*"Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success."
- Henry Ford*

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What will I get out of teamwork?

Working in a team will enable you to accomplish much more than you could on your own. You will get

out from teamwork as much as you put into it. If you are willing to give your best, you will:

- easily get to know others and make friends;
- enhance your own learning by helping each other;
- increase your self-confidence through the team's encouragement;
- benefit from each other's knowledge, experience and skill;
- improve your [team skills](#);
- make yourself more attractive to employers.

In the professional world, most work is carried out in teams and it is the team which is rewarded and praised for a job well done. A good exam record may be a requirement for your first job, but being able to work well with other people may be as important in the long term. Employers will usually look for some evidence that you have been part of a team at interview. Opportunities also exist to practise **team leadership**. You will learn how to organise projects, how to resolve conflicts and motivate other people. Such experience will ensure that you are highly valued by prospective employers.

*"He who wished to secure the good of others, has already secured his own."
- Confucius*

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What makes an effective team?

Your team must have an agreed goal: helping each other understand a workshop; completing a project together; making the best team presentation. Every member of the team should own that vision, and give their best to seeing it fulfilled.

You should also all agree on some [ground rules](#). This will save on unnecessary arguments, because everybody will know where they stand. Be honest with each other, on a day to day basis. If you have problems or are struggling with something or someone, say so. A problem is always better out than in! It can be difficult to challenge somebody to do better, but if done tactfully and constructively then you will stretch them and build them up. But don't forget to give deserved encouragement too.

You should also welcome **feedback** about your own performance. Other people can often see things about you that you cannot and if you are open to their ideas and suggestions then you will learn much about yourself and improve your skills.

Everybody brings their own strengths and skills to a team and there are certain [team roles](#) which best suit certain characters; good teams need people to play all these different roles. Find out what you are

good at and give the best you can offer; realise that if you weren't on the team it would be lacking your experience and character.


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What are team skills?

Some key skills need to be practised for effective teamwork.

At the beginning of each of the following sections there is a check list, to help you determine whether you need to enhance that skill. If you do, note the two or three skill-building tips that you would like to implement now.

 [Self Awareness](#)

 [Communication](#)

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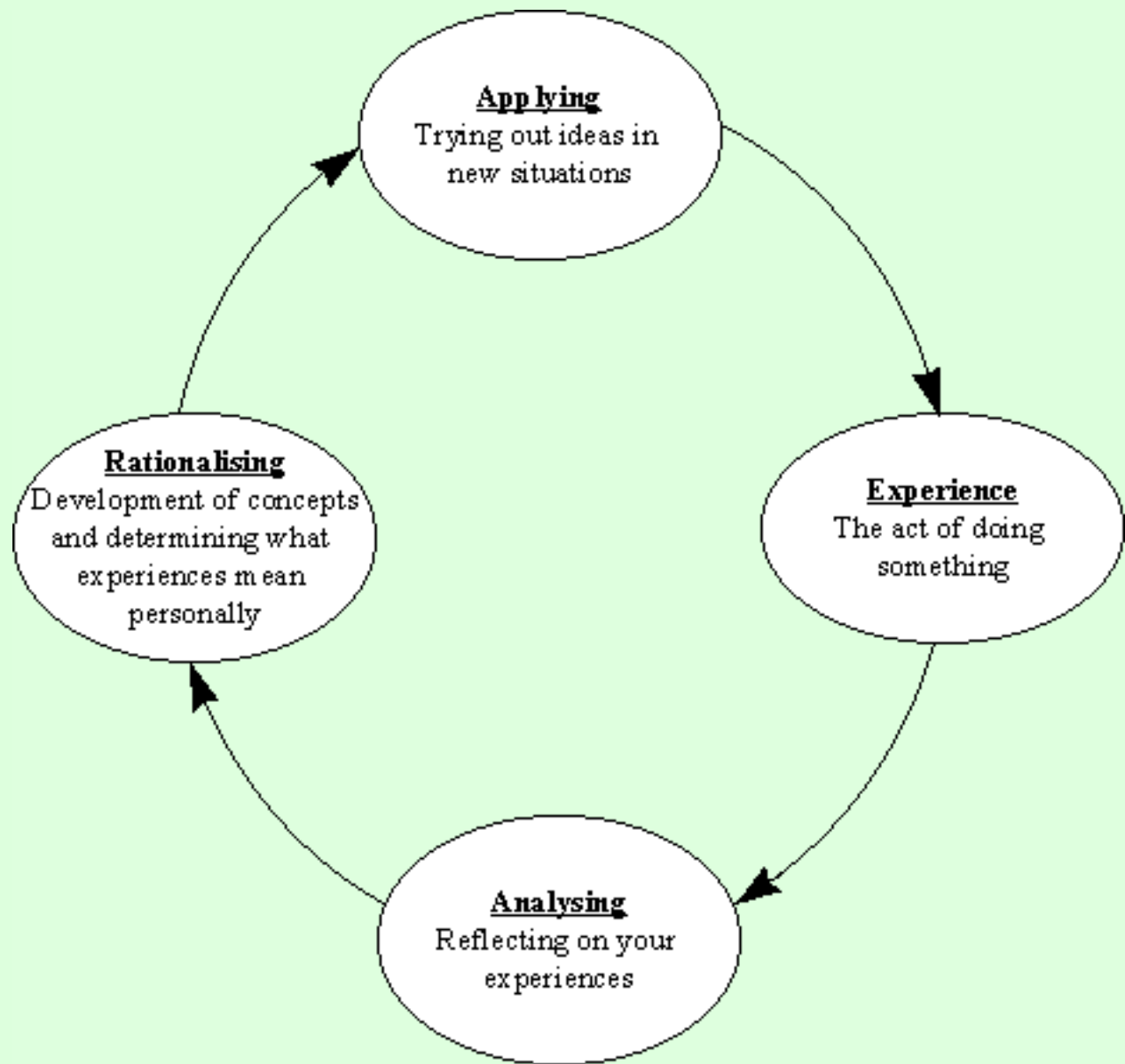
 [Leadership](#)

You can review your progress and make further changes later.

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Learning through team activities

As well as giving your best to the team you must also be prepared to take. Take away your personal experiences and reflect on them together with any feedback you have been given. In this way you will be able to improve on teamwork in general and the variety of team skills in particular.



The above **experiential cycle**¹, starting with the first experience, illustrates the learning process. Remember that you will learn as much from your mistakes as from your successes. Be open to suggestions from others on your team and from outside your team too. Be willing to adapt and try out new ideas.

(1) D. A. Kolb, I. M. Rubin and J. M. MacIntyre, *Organisational Psychology: An Experiential Approach 4th Edition*, Prentice Hall, (1984)

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Further Information about Team Skills



There is a wealth of information available about teamwork and team skills. Listed below are some of the best web sites on the subject, from which you may be able to glean some helpful tips.

- [Teamwork Quotations](#) - A selection of quotations about the benefits of teams and teamwork.
- [Purdue University Chemistry Department](#) - A helpful page giving advice about teamwork in laboratory based projects.
- [Clemson University Teamwork Page](#) - Includes information about decision making, conflict resolution and team roles.
- [Team skills questionnaire](#) - Assesses your strengths and advises you on how to improve your team skills.
- [Organisation Effectiveness Group](#) - General advice on some relevant aspects of team life.

Useful books on the subject of team skills include:

"The Complete Student Handbook" - Chapter 8, D. Saunders, Blackwell, Oxford 1994

This chapter gives a brief introduction to teamwork.

"Enterprise Skills for Students", M. Guirdham, K. Tyler, Butterworth-Heinemann, Oxford 1992

Highly recommended. This book gives a complete coverage of all the skills covered in these pages and more, plus ideas about how to improve your skills and learning.

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Ground Rules for Teams



If asked to work in a team it is always tempting to join up with your friends, but the likelihood is that you will be assigned to a team with people that you don't know! So what do you do? It's a good idea to set a few ground rules for working together right from the start. For example, the following sample guidelines should help to make your team function well. You might want to add to this list, but make sure that everybody agrees.

- Encourage contributions from everyone
- Speak for yourself; don't be afraid to ask questions or contribute
- Be as open and honest as you can
- Listen to the others in your group
- Be constructive and supportive
- Maintain confidentiality
- Make democratic decisions
- Share tasks fairly
- Complete tasks by agreed deadlines

On the other hand you can ensure your team doesn't function well!

- Let one person dominate
- Don't get involved; sit back and let everyone else do it all
- Don't set yourself any specific objectives or tasks
- Turn up late or not at all
- Waste time by having aimless conversations
- Ignore the ideas of others in your team
- Don't complete the tasks which you have agreed to undertake

Every team has the potential to work effectively. It's everybody's responsibility to make sure it does.

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Team Roles



The members of a team normally adapt to certain roles depending upon their character and the nature of the team. Have a look at the descriptions of five common team roles below to find your match. You may find that more than one description applies to you.

- 1. Leader**
 - Creates a common purpose
 - Provides and communicates a vision
 - Clarifies objectives
 - Makes sure everybody is involved, committed and motivated
 - Co-ordinates the efforts of the group
 - Ensures that decisions are made and the group makes progress
- 2. Thinker**
 - Collects and analyses information
 - Listens to what is being said and watches what is going on
 - Is sometimes quiet before contributing ideas
 - Thinks through the problem
 - Sees solutions and anticipates problems
- 3. Achiever**
 - Wants to succeed and strives for results
 - Wants to progress towards the goal / objective quickly
 - Becomes impatient with delays
 - Challenges assumptions and proposes improvements
 - Has lots of enthusiasm
- 4. Carer**
 - Is concerned that everybody is fitting in
 - Contributes humour and builds bridges around the team
 - Works to develop a team spirit
 - Is keen to get everybody to agree
 - Watches out for others' feelings and attitudes
 - Eases tension and fosters a positive spirit

5. *Doer*

Always wants to be active

Is prepared to get involved to help others

Wants to see progress and adherence to plans

Gets bored with too much discussion

Hates wasting time

Works hard to finish the task

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Courtesy of Chalybeate



Self Awareness



It's essential to know your feelings to be able to relate effectively to others. Often, the most successful people are those who know exactly what they want from life and how they are going to get it. You must appreciate your own expectations, strengths and limitations before you can give effectively to the team. But beware, a balanced self-appraisal is difficult; it is easy to under-estimate your strengths and over-estimate your weaknesses.

Problems check list - do these problems seem familiar?

- I don't always know what I want to do.
- I never seem to achieve much.
- Sometimes I don't understand why I do things.
- I tend to start things which I cannot finish.

Skill-building tips - read these through, noting the ones you find most helpful.

1. Carry out a personal analysis. With the help of your [Skills Profile Document](#), review your strengths and weaknesses, including personal attributes as well as [key skills](#).

2. Ask a friend to analyse you. Others may have a very different opinion of you than you do yourself ! Get a good friend to spend a few minutes writing down what they think are your good and bad points. This may be an illuminating and encouraging experience, as you may see yourself in a completely different light.

3. Reflective analysis. Thinking about and reacting to your recent experiences is an essential part of any development process. What were your responses and reactions to the latest teamwork event? What inhibited or motivated you?

4. Set yourself realistic targets. Often people don't succeed because they set themselves goals which are difficult to achieve in one go. Marathon runners aim to reach the finish line, but to sustain themselves mentally they satisfy a series of smaller targets, aiming for successive landmarks along the way. It is good to aim high, but you also need to set yourself smaller targets which you can reach along the way, on a realistic timescale.

Prioritize these tips and select up to three that you will implement now.

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Communication



Communication - verbal, written, artistic, physical - is a two way process. You must not only make yourself understood, but you must also ensure that you listen to and try to understand others.

Problems check list - do these problems seem familiar?

- I am not very good at listening to others' opinions.
- I don't understand other peoples' instructions very well.
- Although I ask, I never get the information I need.
- I cannot explain things effectively.
- I find it difficult to express how I feel.
- Other people tend to ignore my point of view.

Skill-building tips - read these through, noting the ones you find most helpful.

1. Repeat what is said to you. If someone expresses an opinion or tells you something factual repeat it in a more concise format. You can say, for example, "So you think that", or something similar. This will help you listen, as you have to force yourself to process another persons' information in your own mind.

2. Ask open questions. Often we ask closed questions, requiring a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Open questions can elicit much more information. So to find out about a video recorder, rather than asking a series of questions such as "Is this the on button?" etc. it may be better to ask something like "How do I record the next episode of Red Dwarf?". While this sounds elementary, it can make a lot of difference.

3. Be specific. When giving information try not to be vague. Be succinct and to the point - one or two short sentences can be more effective than a two minute monologue.

4. Act confidently. Much interpersonal communication is non-verbal; your body language can often betray your inner thoughts and feelings. People who mumble and look at the floor are more likely to be ignored because their body language is negative. Simply keeping your head up and looking people in the eye conveys self-confidence and demands respect.

5. Use your voice. It is estimated that 38 % of person to person communication is achieved through voice intonation, with only 7 % of communication being dependent on the actual words that are said. Speak clearly without mumbling, and make sure you are interesting to listen to, varying your pitch and tone.

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Interpersonal Skills



Working as part of a team may not come naturally but it is particularly rewarding. Besides effective communication, there are a variety of other interpersonal skills which can serve to enhance professional relationships. These include **negotiating** and **networking**: you may want to persuade the team to adopt a particular course of action; you may need to source advice or expertise outside the group. Finally, showing sensitivity towards and support for others is also an essential attribute of a valued team member.

Problems check list - do these problems seem familiar?

- I'm not very good at working with other people.
- I feel that I always come off worse in a conflict of interest.
- Other people don't act upon or respond to my ideas.
- I don't know who to ask when I need help.
- I cannot understand why other people have problems.

Skill-building tips - read these through, noting the ones you find most helpful.

1. Share a small task. When working as a team there will be jobs that you need to do alone and others that you will have to share. If you find it difficult to work with others, start by carrying out a simple 5 - 10 minute task with someone else. Write down the things you think were good and bad about your behaviour and feelings, and about how you worked as a pair. Give yourself credit for the good things, but reflect on how you can improve.

2. Be friendly. People are more likely to respond to your ideas and suggestions if you are pleasant and amicable towards them.

3. Sort out conflicts together. If you have a conflict of interest with another person, see it as a problem which you need to sort out together. Co-operation is far better than stubbornly fighting your corner to the detriment of the team.

4. Build up a list of useful contacts. You already know a number of fellow students with a wealth of useful information and skills. If you have a problem you need help with, ask your tutor,

supervisor or a friend who to go to. Keep a list of useful people - in Southampton and other academic institutions, in industry etc. - who you can contact again if necessary. This should help others on your team to network too.

5. *Take an interest in the people you are working with.* Showing an overt interest in the opinions, welfare and aspirations of the other people on your team will not only promote team spirit. You will be better able to support them if you know their background and character. Knowing something about each team member will also help you show them the personal benefits of your ideas.

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Organisation



At the start, any team project may seem a daunting prospect. For a practical group project, for example, there are lots of things to be done - team planning meetings, background reading and data searching, experimental work followed by an analysis of the results, report writing and preparation of the group presentation.

Problems check list - do any of these seem familiar ?

- There is too much work to do.
- I never know who is supposed to be doing what.
- There never seems to be enough time.
- I always get the bum job.
- I can't find out what the others have done.
- I might just as well have done it on my own.

Skill-building tips - read these through, noting those you find most helpful.

1. Make an overall time plan for your project. At the start of your team project, write down all your deadlines and important dates on your calendar. Agree on an overall plan which includes the big steps along the way, e.g. a date when background information must be in, when lab. work will be completed, when draft report sections must be circulated etc. This will help to break your project into smaller, more manageable pieces.

2. Assign team responsibilities. As a team, you should agree how you are going to organise yourselves and assign responsibilities for checking that the project is going according to schedule and that the variety of jobs are being done. To keep on top of it all the team will need to be well organised and you will each need to [manage your time](#) efficiently.

3. Allocate tasks appropriately. Before you start work, find out what skills everybody in the team has and what each particularly wants to get out of the project. It may make sense to distribute tasks to people who have previous experience, but also accommodate learning aspirations. Also make sure that nobody is overworked or underworked.

4. Include regular planning meetings. You will need to update each other regularly on your

progress. You may want to set weekly schedules including short term targets, agreeing exactly what everybody is going to work on. Be prepared to revise your overall plan as the project develops.

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Leadership



The role of a leader is to motivate the team to achieve specific aims and objectives, whilst taking overall responsibility for progress. Decision making processes in the professional world now tend to be inclusive and democratic.

Problems check list - do these problems sound familiar?

- My team doesn't seem to achieve much
- I always seem to end up doing most of the work
- I can't get other people to do what I say
- The people on my team are just not motivated enough
- There seem to be lots of conflicts in my team

Skill-building tips - read these through, noting the ones you find most helpful.

1. Make a plan of action. Separate all that needs to be done into smaller stages, and sub-stages, and set realistic deadlines for the completion of each step. Simple time-management will increase your productivity.

2. Delegate responsibility. Giving other member of the team responsibility for a particular part of the project will offer a sense of value and provide motivation.

3. Reward team members. Giving praise and encouragement for a job well done will boost morale, but remember to treat everyone equally otherwise you could generate tensions within the team.

4. Make sure everyone is involved. Some members of the team can be overlooked - especially naturally quieter people, who may have the most to contribute. In meetings, make sure that their opinions and ideas are heard. Find out about their strengths, and make the best of their skills and abilities.

5. Sort out conflicts. If there is a conflict of interest or a personality clash within the team, you should deal with it sooner rather than later. Get the people involved communicating with each other, so they have an opportunity to air their grievances, and understand each other's position.

Help to show them that their disagreement is a common problem which they need to work through together, for the benefit of the team and themselves.

6. *Be approachable.* Leaders who are amicable, and willing to spend time with their teams will gain respect from this approach. Listen to problems and ideas from team members, and take an interest in their work and progress.

Prioritize these tips and select up to three that you will implement now.

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