13.5 Barriers to Effective Teams

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

1. Recognize common barriers to effective teams and how to address them

Problems can arise in any team that will hurt the team’s effectiveness. Here are some common problems faced by teams and how to deal with them.

**Common Barriers to Effective Teams**

**Challenges of Knowing Where to Begin**

At the start of a project, team members may be at a loss as to how to begin. Also, they may have reached the end of a task but are unable to move on to the next step or put the task to rest.

Floundering often results from a lack of clear goals, so the remedy is to go back to the team’s mission or plan and make sure that it is clear to everyone. Team leaders can help move the team past floundering by asking, “What is holding us up? Do we need more data? Do we need assurances or support? Does anyone feel that we’ve missed something important?”

**Dominating Team Members**

Some team members may have a dominating personality that encroaches on the participation or airtime of others. This overbearing behavior may hurt the team morale or the momentum of the team.

A good way to overcome this barrier is to design a team evaluation to include a “balance of participation” in meetings. Knowing that fair and equitable participation by all will affect the team’s performance evaluation will help team members limit domination by
one member and encourage participation from all members, even shy or reluctant ones. Team members can say, “We’ve heard from Mary on this issue, so let’s hear from others about their ideas.”

**Poor Performance of Some Team Members**

Research shows that teams deal with poor performers in different ways, depending on members’ perceptions of the reasons for poor performance.


In situations in which the poor performer is perceived as lacking in ability, teams are more likely to train the member. In situations in which members perceive the individual as simply being low on motivation, they are more likely to try to motivate or reject the poor performer.

Keep in mind that justice is an important part of keeping individuals working hard for the team.


Be sure that poor performers are dealt with in a way that is deemed fair by all the team members.

**Poorly Managed Team Conflict**

Disagreements among team members are normal and should be expected. Healthy teams raise issues and discuss differing points of view because that will ultimately help the team reach stronger, more well-reasoned decisions. Unfortunately, sometimes disagreements arise because of personality issues or feuds that predated the teams’ formation.
Ideally, teams should be designed to avoid bringing adversaries together on the same team. If that is not possible, the next best solution is to have adversaries discuss their issues privately, so the team’s progress is not disrupted. The team leader or other team member can offer to facilitate the discussion. One way to make a discussion between conflicting parties meaningful is to form a behavioral contract between the two parties. That is, if one party agrees to do X, the other will agree to do Y.


**KEY TAKEAWAY**

Barriers to effective teams include the challenges of knowing where to begin, dominating team members, the poor performance of team members, and poorly managed team conflict.

**EXERCISES**

1. Have you ever been involved in a team where one or more dominating team members hurt the team’s performance? Share what happened and how the team dealt with this.
2. Have you ever been involved in a team where conflict erupted between team members? How was the situation handled?