

Teaching teams to succeed

Students express the stress they feel when working in team settings and often the anxiety it causes for them as individuals aspiring to achieve or improve within their learning

As teachers, we are responsible for sharing knowledge, inspiring a passion for learning and developing students' social intelligence to support their long-term future beyond school and into the workforce and global community. We can all reflect on times or situations where we have been part of a team. Often these are productive however at times they do challenge us and create conflict in our wellbeing and lives. When working in these ineffective teams our lives are thrown into chaos with frustration, upset and potentially anger.

In our work with High School students, they frequently express the stress they feel when working on team projects and note the anxiety it causes for them as individuals aspiring to achieve or improve within their own learning. As a time poor profession, we cannot always invest the time into assessing best partnerships for students or invest in programs encouraging ownership to empower students in electing their own productive team for a project.

There are challenges with student-designed teams as initial motivations frequently relate to social and self-based motives, not always reflecting the mature decision making we are asking of them. As such, there is immense value in providing tools and techniques to students, equipping them as individuals. Understanding themselves and their peers well enough to establish mutually beneficial relationships in these situations and so support decisions beyond the classroom.

How do we educate students to make active choices in their relationships then?

Dissection of a team

Teams are seen as one cohesive unit however they are in fact a group of unique skills, talents, abilities and personalities brought together to achieve a common goal. To ensure motivation within the team



we need to allow time for common ground as to:

- How we are motivated or energised
- Our natural style of communication
- The need for diverse skills for elements of the project or task.

In sharing the aspects of a team and what you expect them to achieve, outside of the technical needs or assessment guidelines, students are better positioned to recognise the importance of effectiveness and the quality of the skills of each individual.

- **e-Shortcuts** – Wisdom for successful school leadership and management
- **e-Leading** – Management strategies for school leaders
- **e-Technology** – Technology in the classroom
- **e-Early Learning** – Thinking on early learning

Whether teams are pre-determined or designed by the students, considering how this combination has come together, what each individual represents and how they will be advantaged by each other is essential

Clear roles and responsibilities

Each team requires engagement in a variety of roles with clear responsibilities. Students need time to consider the roles required to attain completion of their task and so the duties or accountability of each person. As tasks are distributed teachers are in an ideal position to pose deep questions to students on the needs of their team, and so the importance of taking time to establish a framework for action.

Questions to pose to students at this stage include:

- What skills are required to complete this project?
- Who is best to lead [organisation, research, note taking, editing, etc.]?
- What skills can you offer the group?
- How do you work best?
- How are you motivated?
- What skills are you lacking?
- What role will you play in the group?

Valuing difference in teams

Students involved in small to medium groups have a fabulous opportunity to implement workplace skills in the classroom. Recognising that we cannot get along with everyone and that we need diversity in our world, teamwork provides an opportunity to appreciate the value of others in improving your output, offsetting your weaknesses and challenging your thoughts. Proactively presenting students with the need to find others with opposing talents to theirs reiterates the balance required and provides a need to reach out to and work with those we could otherwise avoid or misunderstand.

Students should seek out combinations to improve their capacity, for example:

- Great thinkers can benefit from strong communicators
- Highly organised individuals require someone to be innovative
- Those with the ability to include others need challenge to the status quo
- High energy people value those with a calm persona to consider greater detail.

Rationalising team composition

Whether teams are pre-determined or designed by the students, considering how this combination has come together, what each individual represents and how they will be advantaged by each other is essential. Rather than running into tactical aspects, engaging in discussion around the consideration placed on each selection and the unique qualities brought by each person helps to set a positive tone of inclusion to progress the task with. There is also great understanding that the choice has been evaluated and assessed rather than a random collation of students based on generic factors such as surname, roll or seating.

Focus on self

Encouraging students to embrace constructive team allocation focuses them on their behaviours, choices and motivations. It offers them the chance to deepen their understanding of how they work with others and potential skills they could develop or enhance to better their performance with others. Essential to success in the workplace is the ability to:

- Interact with others
- Learning agility
- Identify areas to develop in self and actions to take to improve
- Adapt our communication to suit our audience or situation in a genuine and considered fashion.

Specifying expectations

Rather than teacher-led expectations, provide opportunity for students to establish expectations of the group and individuals responsible for different factors within the project. Prioritise the need for clear expectations of:

- The project or task as a whole
- Each other and their responsibilities
- Timelines and commitment
- Input and ideas
- The quality of the final product
- Accessibility and communication.

Supporting teams with challenges

The best laid plans will always face issues, obstacles and alteration; these challenges are critical situations for students to be able to practise skills that will be required in their life beyond school. Our role as educators is to facilitate responses to problems, not to overcome them. As professionals we have highly-developed communication skills to be able to negotiate a solution to conflict through creating a neutral and non-emotional environment to address the root issues. We need skills in:

- Managing dominant personalities
- Empowering submissive personalities
- De-personalising situations
- Providing solution-focused meetings
- Ensuring voice is balanced
- Supporting students in applying their skills in resolution.

Respecting that many adults continue to struggle with the dynamics of working within teams or delivering to group objectives, our role is to create a candid yet respectful classroom and school where all parties feel heard and valued, able to perform at their best while developing themselves through their peers and behaviours. This collaborative environment assists students in emerging their own confidence and self-esteem as they mature and face the increasing demands of working with others in a safe space.