Objectives

Participants will be able to
1. Define team and teamwork;
2. Understand a team problem-solving process;
3. Lead a team problem-solving discussion;
4. Understand that effective teams meet team goals, accomplish team tasks, and foster an attitude of mutual respect among team members.

Materials Needed

- Flip chart & markers
- Three or four stuffed toys for the Icebreaker activity
- Copies of the following materials for each participant:
  —“Teamwork Observer Worksheet”
  —“Reflection on Team Problem Solving”

Note: Before starting the workshop, read the pages on “Activities for Team Problem Solving” at the end of this module. The materials needed for the workshop will depend upon the number of people in the total group and the team activities you choose. It is recommended that each team have eight to 10 participants. Identify additional staff members (or more experienced participants) to facilitate each activity. Before the workshop starts, set up the activities in separate locations throughout the meeting space.

Workshop Outline

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<th>Minutes</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<td>Reflection, Application, &amp; Summary</td>
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<td>1 Hour 35 minutes</td>
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Note: Instructions to conduct this workshop are given in italics print. The “script” for a workshop facilitator is given in regular type.

Icebreaker – 10 Minutes – “Toy Toss”

Ask the entire group to form a circle so that everyone can see each other. If the group is very large, say more than a dozen people, break the group into two or three circles, and do the same activity. If there is more than one group, designate a person to start the activity in the other group(s). Make sure you have three or four soft stuffed toys per circle. Give the following instructions.

This Icebreaker is a way for us to get to know each others’ names and to have some fun. I will throw this toy to the person across from me and ask his or her name. Demonstrate this by looking across the circle to another member, asking his or her name, and tossing the toy to him or her while giving a greeting and saying his or her name. For example, say “Hi Jane. I’m Lisa,” and then throw the toy softly underhand to Jane.

As the person across from me catches the toy, her or he should say “thank you” and repeat my name. For example, Jane says, “Thank you, Lisa.”

Then, he or she (Jane, in this example) will toss the toy to a different person across the circle while repeating his or her name and giving a greeting and so on around the circle. You will always throw the ball to the same person and catch it from the same person.

After everyone has had one chance to catch and throw the toy, ask the group to continue but to speed it up. Continue asking for more speed as they get better and their confidence builds. Then introduce another ball or stuffed toy into the circle, adding another, and maybe a fourth toy into the circle. Note, the balls or toys will continue to come back to you; just keep throwing them!

Stop the activity after plenty of laughter, dropped toys, and interaction occurs. Ask participants to return to their seats.

Introduction – 5 Minutes

In Module 6, Building Teams, a team is defined as “a group of two or more people who share a common goal and are interdependent in that the tasks necessary to accomplish the goal require them to work together” (Gilbertson and Ramchandani, p.5). In other words, a team is able to accomplish a goal that individuals cannot accomplish acting on their own.

In this module, we focus on teamwork—the processes that a team uses as it works to accomplish its common goals. These processes include problem solving and decision making. We also discuss how effective teams not only accomplish their goals, but are also sensitive to the needs and differences of individual team members. Leadership is important in facilitating these processes that help the group keep its focus, consider various options, accommodate differences, and reach a decision that all team members support.

Topic Discussion – 20 Minutes

Agreeing on the Team’s Purpose

Teamwork starts with the ability of individual team members to come together around a common purpose that is generally supported by each person. This common understanding provides the context for team problem solving and decision making, provides team focus, and, consequently, helps the team
successfully accomplish its goals. It also helps prevent possible conflict down the road. If the team is newly formed, one of the first applications of a problem-solving process will be to develop a common understanding of the team's purpose.

As you think about the teams that you have been a member of, how did you know if your team had a common understanding of its purpose?

Allow a few minutes for responses.

An effective team leader knows that it is important to avoid the assumption that everyone has a common understanding of the team's purpose. One approach is to simply ask the question, "What is your understanding of the team's purpose?" and encourage each person on the team to respond.

Another technique is to hand out a blank sheet of paper to team members and ask them to write down their understanding of the group's purpose. Collect the sheets of paper, read their responses, and discuss any differences.

Both of these techniques create an opportunity for team members to discuss possible differences, assumptions, and misunderstandings. Effective team leaders don’t assume that everyone is thinking the same way about the team's purpose. Instead, they take time to ask questions about the team's purpose and encourage discussion.

An example of a team and its purpose is the Leadership in Action Team, whose purpose is described in the following: "A team of undergraduate students in the College of Agriculture who are trained and available to provide leadership workshops to student organizations."

Establishing Team Goals

Team goals derive from the team's purpose. Goals are more specific than the general purpose and are action-oriented. Thus, goals are achievable, can be measured, and have a timeline in which they are to be accomplished. The process of developing team goals requires that team members brainstorm ideas about the different ways in which the team's purpose can be accomplished. The team leader can facilitate this discussion. Ultimately, putting the goals in writing will help ensure that everyone has the same understanding of the goals and will keep the team focused.

An example is the team goals of the Leadership in Action Team:

• Identify five high-priority leadership needs of undergraduate student organizations by the end of the semester.
• Seek team training in the five high-priority leadership needs, and be prepared to offer workshops for undergraduate student organizations in the college by the end of the second semester.
• Prepare marketing materials to conduct leadership workshops by the end of the second semester.
• Conduct 10 leadership workshops to student organizations by (a specific date).

Ask participants to give an example of how their team identified specific goals. Allow a few minutes for responses.

Problem Solving in Teams

As a team goes about doing its work, in fact even in developing its mission and goals, it will go through a process of generating ideas, considering alternatives, and making decisions. It is important for teams, especially team leaders, to understand the problem-solving process. This will ensure that everyone is able to voice his or her concerns and ideas, explore a full range of solutions, anticipate adverse impacts, and work together productively to solve problems or initiate new opportunities.

You may want to write the following six steps on a flipchart ahead of time.
A common general problem-solving process has six steps.

1. Defining the problem;
2. Analyzing the problem;
3. Generating alternative solutions;
4. Selecting solutions;
5. Implementing solutions;

**Defining the Problem**

Teams often jump to solutions before the problem is clearly recognized and defined. Team leaders should make every effort to encourage the team to think about the problem and identify not only the most severe or obvious problem or highest priority opportunity but also broader issues that affect the problem and any issues that may lie beneath the problem. Ask questions like the following. “How do you understand the problem?” “What are the symptoms of the problem?” “How urgent is the problem?” “How widespread is the situation?” “What is at the core of the situation?”

**Analyzing the Problem**

Once the team is clear about the general nature of the problem, further research and analysis is necessary. Brainstorming, interviewing others, and conducting research will help further define the various components of the problem, especially if the problem is complex.

**Generating Alternative Solutions**

The team may quickly jump to a single solution without having first generated a full range of viable solutions. Team leaders may need to encourage free-flowing ideas, creativity, and adequate discussion about possibilities and to discourage “knee jerk” solutions. It may be helpful to seek out additional information or expert advice.

**Selecting Solutions**

Good solutions meet criteria that the team establishes. At this point in the process, team members should be knowledgeable about the problem and possible solutions. It is useful to establish criteria to help select the best solution. Criteria could be established by considering the following questions.

- How will we know if the proposed solution addresses or resolves the problem? In the short-term? In the long-term? What might be the anticipated outcomes of successfully resolving the issue?
- What is the desired timeframe for solving the problem?
- What are the cost constraints?
- Does the solution have to be politically acceptable?
- Does the solution have to be environmentally acceptable?
- What are staff and equipment constraints?
- Does the solution have to be reliable over time?
- Does the solution have to be flexible to adapt to changing conditions?

Answering these questions will help the team develop the criteria that will enable them to evaluate each proposed solution and select the best solution.

Through discussion and deliberation, the team can make its decision based on how well each alternative meets the criteria. Complex problems will require considerable discussion to work through different perspectives among team members. This can be a valuable time to learn from each other, but it can also be a time prone to conflict. Team leaders can set the tone for open and honest discussion and
keep comments focused on the issues. It is also important that team members are sensitive to each others’ needs to be heard, understood, and respected.

**Implementing Solutions**

Choosing a solution doesn’t immediately solve a problem. Putting a solution into action requires action planning. The team will need to consider the following questions:

- Specifically, what needs to be done?
- Who will do it?
- What is the timeframe?
- What resources will be needed?
- How will the necessary actions be carried out?

**Evaluating Outcomes**

The final step is to evaluate outcomes. This step will be much easier if the team has clearly identified its desired outcomes at an earlier stage. If the outcomes have been reached, the team should celebrate its success and acknowledge people who helped them in their success. If the team has not been successful, this is an opportunity for the team to evaluate itself, identify what they need to do differently, and establish where they go from that point.

Each team member should actively participate in all six stages. When team members don’t fully participate, not only is it detrimental to accomplishing the team’s goals, it may also create resentment and damage relationships.

Invariably, throughout this team problem-solving process, people will disagree with each other. Keep in mind that different skills, abilities, and perspectives are the reasons that teams are formed in the first place. As the team does its work, it is important that each person contributes to the team. Each person must feel free to be open and honest in expressing his or her views, as well as be a good listener and allow others to share their ideas, opinions, and suggestions. An effective team leader is sensitive to team members’ needs and feelings, facilitates people’s participation, and helps the team deal with its differences throughout the process.

**Activity – 30 Minutes – “Problem-Solving Team Activities”**

As noted earlier, you should read “Activities for Problem Solving in Teams” before starting these activities. It is important to have the materials needed for the activities. Set up the activities in different areas of the room. If the group is large, break it into teams of eight to 10 people each. If you have more than one team, identify other facilitators (staff or more experienced participants) beforehand, and go over instructions for the activities with them so they are familiar with the activities and know their role as a facilitator.

“Activities for Problem Solving in Teams” provides instructions and a list of the materials needed for four interactive learning activities:

- Team on a Tarp
- Minefield
- Hot Chocolate
- Helium Stick

Many other activities can be found in books and online. These four were chosen because they are inexpensive and easily portable and work well for team problem solving and/or communication in leadership workshops.

After breaking the group into teams of eight to 10 people, introduce the activity by saying the following.
Now you will have an opportunity to work in teams to solve some problems through a team-building activity. These activities are meant to stimulate problem-solving thinking and to help group members develop their capacity to work together effectively. During this activity, think about what you have learned about the problem-solving process, the importance of communication, and the various roles that team members play in solving a problem.

Identify two to three observers for each team, and give them a copy of the “Teamwork Observer Worksheet.” Ask if anyone has done this activity before. If so, ask them to be observers. Continue with the following instructions.

Each group will get a chance to solve at least one problem. For each activity, you will have part of your group “observing” and the other part solving the problem, and then we will switch. Observers just watch and should not interact at all, verbally or physically, with the participants completing the activity. The observer’s role is to listen to the communication that occurs and watch who starts or stops the activity, how the ideas to solve the problem are expressed, the interaction of the team, and the focus and climate of the team as a whole.

*Facilitators should read the basic rules of each activity and not provide any additional comments on how the activity should be completed. They should observe the interactions that occur as the teams attempt to identify the problems, generate solutions, adjust solutions, and evaluate what works and what does not work.*

As teams complete each activity, facilitators should ask the observers what they noticed and what the participants observed and then briefly discuss the successes and challenges of each activity. Depending on available time, the teams could move to another activity.

**Topic Discussion – 20 Minutes**

*If there were multiple teams doing different activities, ask the teams to gather into a larger group but to stay with their team. Ask someone from each team to briefly describe the activity before starting the discussion. Ask the following questions.*

- What happened?
- Who started the activity?
- Who decided how to complete the task?
- What did you notice about the communication that took place?
- What suggestions were made to complete the task?
- Was the group successful? What made it successful?

When a problem or task is identified, such as the team activities just completed, the team needs to start by determining and defining the problem. This process may include the team members asking the facilitator to clarify the task or the “rules” or simply asking for additional information. Different team members will have varying ideas about what the actual problem is and also start generating different solutions based on their analysis of the problem.

As the team started to generate solutions to the problem and to implement some of the solutions, what happened next?

- Who was quiet, and who was outgoing? What did that mean in terms of how decisions were made and how successful the team was?
- Give an example of how the problem was solved in different ways. Was one way better than the other?
- Did each team member have a chance to contribute to solving the task? What was the communication like while the task was being completed?
- Did anyone play the role of “cheerleader”? How did positive reinforcement contribute to the team’s effort?
• Was there an important solution missed because someone didn’t get heard?
• What did the Observers notice about the team’s communication?

There are often many ways that teams can go about solving problems. In many cases, the solution used to achieve success is related to the knowledge, skills, and abilities of the group members and who has the most influence on the team. Teams that work well together are able to share ideas, adjust the level of influence of each individual member, and recognize expertise in solving some problems one way and others in different ways.

There are three key factors that distinguish effective teams from ineffective teams: the degree to which team members are focused in their efforts; the quality of the climates in which they operate; and the extent to which their communication is open or closed.

• **Focus.** Teams need a goal. We commonly hear team members say “we need to stay focused” when discussion topics may be interesting but don’t relate to anything in particular that the team is trying to accomplish.

• **Climate.** Positive, relaxed, comfortable, and warm environments help members feel accepted, valued, and competent. Tense, overly critical, political, cynical, cold, or overly formal environments do not. Hidden agendas, power plays, and distrust stymie team efforts to solve problems.

• **Communication.** Open communication works best in teams, personal relationships, and life. Communication employing respectful language and respectful, clarifying inquiries, with team members sharing and not holding back, will help the team solve problems and avoid the negativity that can occur with miscommunication.

Success in problem solving within teams is more likely if the team’s goal is clear and compelling, and the team’s various energies are focused on the goal in a positive way. In fostering collaboration among team members, good leaders must be skilled in creating a climate of trust, facilitating positive interdependence, and supporting face-to-face interactions (Kouzes and Posner, 1995).

**Reflection, Application, & Summary – 10 Minutes**

Distribute the “Reflection on Team Problem Solving” activity sheet. Ask participants to think about a team in which they have been or are currently involved. Ask the following questions. Allow a few minutes for them to reflect and write their responses.

• What are some of the challenges you have experienced in teams?
• What did you learn today that you can use in teams?

*If time allows, ask them to partner with the person next to them and discuss. After a few minutes, ask a few people to share their reflections.*

Many situations in school, work, and everyday life require individuals to work together. Working together to solve problems requires good communication, focusing on the goal, and effective problem-solving skills. Try to keep some of the ideas brought up in this session in mind the next time you are asked to lead a team or be a team member.

**References**


Activities for Team Problem Solving

This handout is to be used by the workshop facilitator(s). It is important to gather the equipment needed and prepare for the activities in advance of the workshop. The instructions for each activity are given below. Read the team instructions to the participants. If time allows, consider the variations listed below each activity to challenge the participants in different ways.

Team on a Tarp

Equipment: 8’ X 10’ tarp or smaller if smaller group, with different color on each side if possible. Blindfolds for the variation.

Ask the team of seven - 10 people to stand on the tarp.

Team instructions: The tarp is your boat that just capsized in the ocean. You need to flip the boat back over to survive. The water is full of sharks, so you have to stay on top of the boat (stay on the tarp) or else the sharks will get you. You must flip the tarp over, with everyone standing on it, without anyone ever leaving the tarp.

Have the team do it once, and then add a variation and have them try it again.

Variations: Have only one or two members of the team who can talk. Or the team can only say certain words. Or use blindfolds on two – three members.

Minefield

Equipment: 30 or more “mines” (stuffed animals, discs, balls, sponges, Frisbees); One blindfold

Designate an area on the floor, about 8’ x 10’, and scatter the items mentioned above. Ask the team to pick one person, or ask for a volunteer, to be blindfolded. This is the person who will have to cross the minefield without touching a mine. Pull that person aside so he or she can’t hear your instructions to the rest of the team. Tell the blindfolded member that his or her team is going to help him/her navigate the minefield.

Team instructions: This area is the minefield, and these items are active mines. The team problem is to move this one blindfolded person through the minefield without hitting a mine. You, the team, are to guide the blindfolded team member through the minefield without letting him or her touch a mine. No one but the blindfolded member can be in the minefield. If the blindfolded member touches a mine, he or she has to start over. Identify one mine that the blindfolded member must pick up while going through the minefield.

Variation: After the first run (usually successful), ask for another volunteer to be blindfolded, and pull that person aside. Instruct the rest of the team that they can each use only one word to direct the blindfolded member through the field. They cannot say anything except their one word. Instruct the blindfolded member that each member can only say one word but that he or she (the blindfolded person) can talk at will.

Hot Chocolate

Equipment: Approximately 50 feet of rope to serve as a border for a “hot chocolate vat”; Carpet squares about one square foot (no bigger) that act as “marshmallows.”

Lay out the rope in a circle, and place the marshmallows in a stack at a starting point just outside of the rope border. The number of marshmallows should be two less than the number of participants. To make it more difficult, use half the number of marshmallows, plus one, than participants. Ask the team to assemble together near the marshmallows, just outside the chocolate vat at its middle.

Team instructions: This rope circle represents a vat of hot chocolate. The carpet squares represent marshmallows. Your team’s goal is to move all of the team members successfully across this vat of hot chocolate to the other side without anyone falling into the hot chocolate (in other words, touching
You will cross the vat by using the marshmallows as stepping stones. However, you cannot throw the marshmallows or move them backwards. The hot chocolate is extremely hot, so if anyone touches it, the whole team will have to go back to the starting point to start over. If any marshmallow is left unoccupied, it will dissolve and no longer be available as a stepping stone. (Note to instructor: if a marshmallow is left unoccupied in the vat, pick it up, and remove it.) Your team goal is accomplished when all group members have crossed to the other side of the vat successfully.

After the first team is successful or if they aren’t successful in 5-10 minutes, get another 10 participants to do the exercise. Tell them they can’t do it the same way as the other group did.

**Helium Stick**

*Equipment: One lightweight pole (A tent pole works well.)*

This activity works best with eight or more people. Line up participants in two rows facing each other.

**Team instructions:** Point your index finger, and hold out your arm. Lay the stick on their fingers, and have them adjust the level of their arms so that the stick is level and horizontal to the floor. Both index fingers of everyone’s hands should be touching the stick at all times, but only your index fingers. Pinching or grabbing the pole is not allowed—it must rest only on your index fingers. The goal is to collectively lower the stick to the ground without it falling.

*It seems easy, but often the stick appears to go UP rather than down. Encourage the team to continue trying to lower the stick together. Watch to make sure everyone keeps just their index fingers on the stick.*
# Teamwork Observer Worksheet

*Instructions:* Write the name of the activity you are observing in the upper left column. Write your observations in the boxes provided in each category. If you have a recommendation for how the problem-solving interaction could be better, write that in the recommendation column.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity Name</th>
<th>Observation</th>
<th>Recommendation</th>
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<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body language</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What worked? Why?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Problem solving ideas that didn’t get heard?</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Overzealous “leaders”</td>
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Write any other observations about the activity below.
Reflection on Team Problem Solving

Identify teams in which you have participated in the past or are currently involved with. Reflect on the following questions.

Identify teams in which you have participated.

What are some of the challenges you have experienced in teams?

What did you learn today that you can use in teams?
About Leadership in Action

Leadership in Action is a multi-state leadership development program for college-age students. It was funded in part by an USDA/CSREES HEP Challenge Grant, 2005-2009 to the University of Illinois, Purdue University, and the University of Wisconsin – Madison. Undergraduate students from those universities participated in a 21-month program during which the workshop modules were developed, used during the two cohort programs, reviewed, and revised.

We intend that students who have been trained in conducting effective workshops use these materials for leadership workshops with various student organizations. The materials can be used separately for individual workshop sessions, in any combination for a short-term program, or in their entirety for a long-term program.

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