

Teamwork: What Is It?

By Nick Arnette

What is teamwork? How do we define it? Most would say something like “a group of people working together to accomplish a common purpose or goal.” Would that be correct?

Let’s take a little teamwork quiz. □ Which of the following is an example of teamwork?

- A. One person on the team does all the work, while everyone on the team gets the credit.
- B. Everyone on the team does an equal amount of work, and everyone gets an equal amount of credit.
- C. Everyone on the team does an equal amount of work, except one person, who does nothing, but that person gets all the credit.
- D. Some people do all the work, the rest do nothing, but the entire team gets credit for it.

E. All of the above.

What did you guess as the correct answer? You probably chose: “B. Everyone on the team does an equal amount of work, and everyone gets an equal amount of credit. “That is *a* correct answer, but it is not *the* correct answer. The right answer is: “E. All of the above.” Yes, ALL of the above are correct. □ How can they all be correct? Because teamwork is a very vague term. It needs to be defined so that everyone on the team will know what’s expected of them. If the *team* doesn’t know what teamwork is, how can they function as one? You’ve probably all been on a team in one of the aforementioned scenarios. It can be very frustrating and demoralizing if you’re on the working end of the team while the rest, well...they just rest! But how can you say someone is not a team player if they don’t know how a team is supposed to operate? □ And teamwork doesn’t just apply to the folks at the office.

There are teams all around us: volunteer organizations, athletics, school clubs, etc. Your family is a team, too! Yes, even your family is a team, and just like your family, all teams are a little dysfunctional at times. The principles in this chapter will show you how to build great teams. As long as there is more than one person involved, there’s a need for teamwork.

I used to teach high-risk children from the inner city of Los Angeles. The first thing I would do when I met them was shake their hands while I introduced myself. More often than not, I got a “noodly” handshake and no eye contact at all. As improbable as it seems, no one had ever taught them the proper way to shake hands. It didn’t take long to teach them, and I reinforced it until it came naturally to them. The point is, don’t take for granted what you think people may already know.

It takes a lot less time to sit down with your team and define exactly who and what your team is than to be enveloped in a team project with no clear direction or clear goals.

Teamwork does not come naturally. At some point every child will come down with “mine” syndrome. He will be holding something precious, and if you so much as pass within five feet of it, he’ll grab it and cry out, “Mine, not yours.” It doesn’t matter how good his or her parents are, every child does it. Why? Because we want to take care of our own needs first. It’s a natural instinct.

Furthermore, Americans don’t place a lot of value on teamwork. What? We arguably have the best football, basketball, and baseball teams in the world. Take a moment to think of your favorite team in any sport and name all the players on the team. Can you do it? How about the starting lineup? If you’re like me, you can only name a few of the top players on the team. That’s because we tend to place more value on individual achievements than collaborative efforts.

How about the performing arts? Think of your favorite band. You might be able to name all the band members. How about the people who mix the sound or run the lights? Can you name them? Aren’t they all part of the team, too?

In America, we’re taught, “Be the best *you* can be.” We’re not taught, “Let’s all work together so everyone can share in the victory.”

One summer, I taught English to a group of students from Indonesia. During recess, they were playing basketball, and I was impressed with their skills; however, I was more impressed by how they played as a team. They didn’t take wild shots from far away. They passed the ball often. No single player dominated the game. When there was a hard foul and a player was knocked down, everyone stopped, helped the player up, then the game resumed as if nothing had happened. Here I was expecting to break up a fight, and instead I learned what teamwork might look like in another part of the world. Why did they respond as a team? Because that’s the way they were taught, and they placed value on it.

Simply put, in our society teamwork is often ill-defined and undervalued. It is not ingrained in us as individuals or in our culture.

Nature has provided us an excellent example of teamwork in the California redwood trees. They are the tallest trees on earth; the tallest stands at more than 379 feet.

What's remarkable about these giant trees is their root system. Instead of a large taproot that grows down and deep into the soil, the redwood has myriad smaller roots that are relatively shallow. They grow laterally, intertwining with the roots of the other redwood trees. These very large and tall trees are literally holding each other up! They can't grow alone because they can't stand on their own. They hold on to each other so they can survive life's strong winds and storms.

The California redwoods have an advantage over us humans. They know how to function as a team without even being told. As for us, we need to communicate with one another. Herein lies the key: Good communication skills are the "root system" of teamwork. In my opinion, teamwork is synonymous with clear, well-defined communication.

The preceding article is an excerpt from *Me, We and Glee: How to have a great attitude, work as a team and keep your sense of humor*, by Nick Arnette. Known as *The Feel Good Funny Guy*, Arnette is a popular keynote speaker at business meetings throughout the United States and Canada. You can contact Nick Arnette at www.NickArnette.com, email: nick@nickarnette.com

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