

COLLABORATION

# Six Common Misperceptions about Teamwork

by [J. Richard Hackman](#)

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Teamwork and collaboration are critical to mission achievement in any organization that has to respond quickly to changing circumstances. My research in the U.S. intelligence community has not only affirmed that idea but also surfaced a number of mistaken beliefs about teamwork that can sidetrack productive collaboration. Here are six of them.

**Misperception #1:** Harmony helps. Smooth interaction among collaborators avoids time-wasting debates about how best to proceed.

**Actually:** Quite the opposite, research shows. Conflict, when well managed and focused on a team's objectives, can generate more creative solutions than one sees in conflict-free groups. So long as it is about the work itself, disagreements can be good for a team. Indeed, we found in our earlier research on symphony orchestras that slightly grumpy orchestras played a little better as ensembles than those whose members worked together especially harmoniously.

**Misperception #2:** It's good to mix it up. New members bring energy and fresh ideas to a team. Without them, members risk becoming complacent, inattentive to changes in the environment, and too forgiving of fellow members' misbehavior.

**Actually:** The longer members stay together as an intact group, the better they do. As unreasonable as this may seem, the research evidence is unambiguous. Whether it is a basketball team or a string quartet, teams that stay together longer play together better.

**Misperception #3:** Bigger is better. Larger groups have more resources to apply to the work. Moreover, including representatives of all relevant constituencies increases the chances that whatever is produced will be accepted and used.

**Actually:** Excessive size is one of the most common—and also one of the worst—impediments to effective collaboration. The larger the group, the higher the likelihood of social loafing (sometimes called free riding), and the more effort it takes to keep members' activities coordinated. Small teams are more efficient—and far less frustrating.

**Misperception #4:** Face-to-face interaction is passé. Now that we have powerful electronic technologies for communication and coordination, teams can do their work much more efficiently at a distance.

**Actually:** Teams working remotely are at a considerable disadvantage. There really are benefits to sizing up your teammates face-to-face. A number of organizations that rely heavily on distributed teams have found that it is well worth the time and expense to get members together when the team is launched, again around the midpoint of the team's work, and yet again when the work has been completed.

**Misperception #5:** It all depends on the leader. Think of a team you have led, or on which you have served, that performed superbly. Now think of another one that did quite poorly. What accounts for the difference between them? If you are like most people, your explanation will have something to do with the personality, behavior, or style of the leaders of those two teams.

**Actually:** The hands-on activities of group leaders do make a difference. But the most powerful thing a leader can do to foster effective collaboration is to create conditions that help members competently manage *themselves*. The second most powerful thing is to launch the team well. And then, third, is the hands-on teaching and coaching that leaders do after the work is underway. Our research suggests that condition-creating accounts for about 60% of the variation in how well a team eventually performs; that the quality of the team launch accounts for another 30%; and that real-time coaching accounts for only about 10%. Leaders are indeed important in collaborative work, but not in the ways we usually think.

**Misperception #6:** Teamwork is magical. To harvest its many benefits, all one has to do is gather up some really talented people and tell them in general terms what is needed—the team will work out the details.

**Actually:** It takes careful thought and no small amount of preparation to stack the deck for success. The best leaders provide a clear statement of just what the team is to accomplish, and they make sure that the team has all the resources and supports it will need to succeed. Although you may have to do a bit of political maneuvering to get what is needed for effective collaboration from the broader organization, it is well worth the trouble.

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**Pamela Holt** 5 years ago

Can you give me an idea of what you mean by "large" team? I've recently attended a seminar in which they told us 5-7 members are most productive, but I've traditionally used teams of four for projects, so I'm wondering what makes a team large. Is it the literal number of members? The number compared to the whole organization? or some other factor?

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