Twenty Ways to Undermine Teamwork

Being a part of a successful and highly performing team is a real pleasure. This group can produce results that are far greater than the sum of its individual parts. But these kinds of teams don't just happen. They must be formed intentionally.

Most of us have had experiences with teams that are less than optimal, where really bright people can somehow combine to do really dumb things. In that spirit, and with a huge tongue in a very large cheek, here are 20 ways to undermine great teamwork. (If you're really sharp, you may want to do the opposite to produce a great team…)

1. Be unclear about the purpose of the team. If people on the team aren't sure why they are there they will not know how to contribute effectively. Soon they will become demoralized, withhold creativity and energy, and become the negative stereotype of a "civil servant" (someone who is neither).

2. Repeat the mantra "that's not my job" as often as possible. The idea here is to frustrate the living daylights out of people. Ideally, others have to go to all team members two or three times before they put a hole in the wall with their heads. The really great practitioners of "that's not my job" make sure that no one actually is responsible for large parts of the team's work but create the illusion that this is not true.

3. Withhold information. To undermine the team, you don't have to withhold a lot of information. Just make sure it's important or strategic. The best thing is to be certain that no one has a complete picture. Above all, don't let anyone have too much information! Spend lots of time monitoring information flow.

4. Don't disagree openly with other team members. The best way to do this is to disagree with someone not on the team after a meeting, usually in the break room or with car pool partners. It's often effective to characterize the other position as "stupid", "idiotic," or "uninformed and incompetent." Advanced practitioners will be able to pit other team members against one another with very entertaining results.

5. Engage in power struggles. Use the team as a way to advance your own personal interests at the expense of others. Lying, power plays, going to other managers outside the team, and petty politics are all historically proven techniques for undermining team performance.

6. Never actively involve anyone outside the team (except to complain about other team members). Try to let the team operate in a vacuum without any sense of the big picture. In a large company, never involve other departments or levels. In a small company, never consult with competitors, vendors, and stakeholders. Do use these people, however, if you want to vent about your poorly functioning team. This gives outsiders the impression that your team doesn't know what in the world it's doing.

7. Always strive for comfort over discomfort. It's best to leave all the hard topics undiscussed so you can have as many "elephants in the room" as possible. Plus, not discussing the difficult issues will guarantee that no learning or improvement takes place. Be comfortable at all costs. Make sure many team members don't say anything at all.

8. Engage in the same behavior and expect a different outcome. This may be the easiest destructive team behavior to master. Just keep doing what you always do, and then get upset when things don't change. Ignore what Albert Einstein said: "You can't solve a problem on the same level you created it." What did he know?

9. Discourage creativity. Encourage people to stick to the tried and true, even when it doesn't work. Especially when it doesn't work. Frame all work according to policy and procedure. Use as many manuals and memos as possible. Never brainstorm without instantaneously judging and shooting down ideas. Always keep routines and office configurations the same. Use dull colors.
10. **Punish mistakes and embarrass those who make them.** View all mistakes as fatal. Be sure to tell everyone how ineffective and incompetent the mistake maker is. This way you can develop a corporate culture where nothing changes and no one has to learn anything new.

11. **Blame others without taking personal responsibility.** When something goes wrong always be the first to make other team members responsible. Never, under any circumstances, take personal or group responsibility. And never, ever take a problem-solving approach. The more shaming and blaming the better.

12. **Have really long meetings where nothing is decided.** Meet because you always meet, not because there’s a reason to meet. Don’t have an agenda, a purpose, an action log, or an evaluation of the meeting. Use a droning voice. Act bored. Avoid all excitement. Don’t mention progress made. Go over items from past meetings as if they were never discussed. Sit in uncomfortable chairs under fluorescent lights.

13. **Put off making decisions.** Make sure the people capable of making decisions are not in the meeting. Require lots of further study and evaluation. Try to give people the feeling they should be moving forward, but without the guidance of a key decision. Undermine and put down those who push for a decision.

14. **Put lots of energy into side issues.** Do everything you can to obscure the goal and end results you’re hoping for. Get bogged down with trivia and minor items. Distract people as much as possible. Make paper clips really important.

15. **Don’t develop relationships within the team.** Refuse to allocate time and resources to go on a retreat. Never communicate in person. Overuse e-mail. Make sure desks and workstations are as far apart as possible, ideally in different locations. Don’t let anything personal intrude in work. Ignore the well established fact that the best way to improve task performance is to develop relationships.

16. **Don’t worry about the feelings of team members.** Just speak the truth as you see it, knowing that it should be incredibly obvious to the other idiots in the group. Bend the group to your will, especially if you’re the leader. Explain that feelings have no place at work. Don’t take note of the fact that these ignored feelings inevitably surface as resentment, bitterness, sabotage, and non-communication.

17. **Make sure team members have responsibility, but no authority.** Hold them accountable, but make sure they are not empowered to get the task done. Be sure those with the authority are hard to find or, preferably, impossible to contact. Treat any attempt to gain authority as “power-mongering” or “selfishness” that undermines team performance.

18. **Make the team a dead end for personal growth.** Don’t give people opportunities to develop new skills and competencies. Stick with what they’ve always done before. Avoid cross-training. Assume that developing members will only leave the team, and not want to stay. Treat them like mushrooms: keep them in the dark and feed them manure.

19. **Solve problems alone, without consulting other team members.** Come to meetings with the problems all worked out from your point of view, and treat additional input as sabotage that undermines the group effort.

20. **Never evaluate the effectiveness of the team.** Recognize and reward individual performance, never team performance. Pin any mistakes or shortcomings on individuals, not the group. If you must evaluate, never act on the results of the evaluation.

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