

Academic teamwork

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Ensuring successful collaboration with peers who may not be natural team players

Teamwork is essential to many academic endeavours. But according to Ewart Wooldridge, chief executive of the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, team-working does not come naturally at senior levels in the sector.

“Often you find that at the top level a team is actually talented group of individuals,” he says.

Gloria Moss, research fellow at Glamorgan University’s business school, says that many academics working in the UK are not aware of the extent to which their thinking is fashioned by individualistic assumptions that underlie our society.

She recommends training to explain and counteract these assumptions.

Meredith Belbin, of teamworking consultancy Belbin Associates, says academics may have a problem with working in teams because of the emphasis on top scores throughout their education, and on doctoral dissertations’ “own work”.

“It is small wonder that the outstanding entrepreneurs of our times have been educational dropouts or have suffered from dyslexia,” he argues. “Learning to rely for some things on others is a necessary first step to becoming a significant innovator.”

Paul Tosey, senior lecturer in Surrey University’s school of management, says those leading research teams may need to work at developing a culture in which collective success and individual rewards go hand in hand, while teaching teams must recognise that students expect them to operate in a joined-up way. It is important to share information and think about what links a series of teaching sessions, he says.

Particular effort may be needed from people working in close proximity. “An inverse law of proximity seems to mean that academics in the same building can interact less effectively than a virtual teaching team spread across national boundaries,” he says.

Tosey urges academics not to discount the validity of views from other disciplines and professions, including those of administrators.

“Quiet, detail-oriented people may appear to contribute little, yet their skills will complement those of others who are more vocal, and will probably compensate for some weaknesses.” Having different points of view also prevents “groupthink”, whereby groups develop self-sealing beliefs.

For Belbin, the key to good teamwork is to assess how best to combine all members’ particular strengths. This cannot be done without acquiring relevant information on colleagues and subordinates, which can be a problem with those uncomfortable with personal probing. An independent facilitator or consultant can be useful here, he says.

“Values can bring a team together even if the individuals have different agendas,” Wooldridge says. As long as all the members share an understanding of what they want to achieve together, it doesn’t matter if they differ in their ideas of how to get there.

Bruce Tuckman, an educational psychologist who developed a model of different stages of group development in the 1960s, said groups first go through “forming” (getting to know each other); “storming” (allowing conflicts to surface); “norming” (developing shared rules and expectations); and “performing” (achieving the task).

Tosey says a team is unlikely to perform effectively if you neglect the earlier stages.

Wooldridge adds that teams need to work in an organised way and have a strategic plan, a set of deadlines — and a leader. “A team without a leader will cease to

be a team,” he says. But teams also need to involve fun. “In my experience, a good team uses laughter to bind itself.”

Some associates will never enjoy the company of others, however. Belbin notes that it is always possible to consult experts on an individual basis. “One must accept the fact that some individuals are unsuited to teamwork. It is better that they do not attempt to do anything against their nature.”

Links

- The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, www.lfhe.ac.uk
- Belbin Associates, consultants in teamworking, www.belbin.com