

Innovation *insights*

OFFICE OF PLANNING AND
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Enhancing Teamwork and Collaboration in Your Unit

How to recognize a collaborative team environment

Katzenbach and Smith (1999) provide a widely-accepted definition of a team: “A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.” At Penn State, a collaborative team environment is characterized by values and beliefs that support the principles of continuous quality improvement (CQI). It includes participative decision-making, collaboration, and continuous learning. Members share a common vision and respect for one another. Staff are organized and/or organize themselves in formal and informal, temporary, or longer-term teams. This may include work teams, problem-solving teams, centers of excellence, research teams, and cross-functional teams.

What are the potential benefits?

A collaborative team environment:

- Encourages the participation of staff at all levels of the University in decision-making. The specific knowledge that each person brings and the broadened input of a team lead to better decisions. It also heightens morale and enables people to take pride in their work.
- Fosters a focus on customer needs, which increases effectiveness and overall performance.
- Increases efficiency by cutting down steps,

eliminating redundancies, etc.

- Supports a positive attitude toward change that can help the University adjust to future changes in the environment, economy, technology, and market.
- Provides a common language that creates more efficient and effective communication both horizontally and vertically across the University.
- May reduce costs and improve overall performance in many ways, including faster and more reliable decisions, doing things right the first time, improving customer satisfaction, and eliminating redundancies.

One effective model: Penn State’s Office of Student Aid

The Office of Student Aid at Penn State is organized for continuous teamwork. Their staff members are organized into six standing teams and many informal teams. The Office’s leader, Anna Griswold, places emphasis on the interrelationship of teams in the office. She believes that the team structure has helped staff grapple with constant change, and remain flexible.

Teams improve services for students, ensure compliance with federal and state regulations, and improve interoffice processes to help them work better for staff. Team leaders are expected to practice CQI principles.

“We almost forget that teams are in operation now,” says Griswold. Most teams are informal, and use data to review current processes, brainstorm, and identify problems. When more is at stake they use formal CQI teams. Anyone within the Office can identify the need for a team.

Decision-making in a team environment

“Staff are involved in most of the decisions in the office,” says Griswold. Each team meets every 1-2 weeks. The team leaders meet once a week with Griswold to anticipate the week’s activities and potential concerns.

The importance of communication

“Communication is critical for achieving effective outcomes,” says Griswold. Channels of communication in the office support the integration of CQI principles into Student Aid’s everyday activity. Griswold encourages each team leader to understand the dynamics of effective communication. The entire office is informed of team progress at weekly meetings and via email. Griswold emphasizes that it’s important for her to periodically ask staff how their teamwork is going. Student Aid’s teams consult with each other to discover the effects of process changes, and they use flowcharting to ensure that all staff impacted by the improvement understand the effects of process changes. Flowcharting is important when a process is changed to give an overview of how a decision or change will impact other teams.

Leader as coach

In the team-structured environment at Student Aid, Griswold tries to operate primarily in the role of coach. She helps teams when they are at a crossroads—for example, when they need resources or need help dealing with a particularly problematic regulation. She takes care to continually ask, “Why are we doing what we do in the way we do it?” She helps teams follow up to make sure their recommendations are implemented, and makes sure the recommendations are given a “home” within the team structure.

Reinforcing the team environment

At Student Aid, the collaborative team environment is fully integrated into daily work. Griswold’s philosophy is, “If ‘team’ isn’t the way we do work, then it’s getting in the way of our work...the use of teams is a part of what we do rather than apart from what we do.” She creates the climate for the team culture to thrive. She stays in touch with the team’s progress so there are no surprises, and she implements all solutions they generate. This action sends the message that she values quality and purposeful change.

Staff at Student Aid state that “to see the results of the team implemented is a great reward.” Griswold trusts and values the recommendations of those who are doing the work. She feels that it’s important to acknowledge team successes, so she makes sure that this happens at least once a month.

The Staff Review and Development Program (SRDP) has been modified for the organizational team structure in the office. Each team works together to assess its progress and accomplishments of the past year and to set team goals for the new year. Each member of the team signs the SRDP. Numerical ratings are not assigned to teams or to individual team members. The development goals for each team support the office-wide strategic plan and goals.

How do we get started?

If you are interested in building an environment that is more team-based, it may be helpful to start by informally assessing the current environment within your unit. This can be done using questions such as those in the checklist below. If possible, involve all staff in the assessment. The assessment will give you a baseline measure of your current environment as well as ideas about possible areas for improvement.

Team Effectiveness Checklist

The following checklist has been developed from the Workforce Focus component of the Baldrige

National Quality Program *Education Criteria for Performance Excellence* (National Institute of Standards and Technology, 2007):

In your unit, how do you:

- Assess team capabilities and needs?
- Assess team performance and provide feedback and recognition?
- Foster a culture of:
 - Cooperation
 - Communication
 - Information flow
 - Skill sharing
 - Goal setting
 - Empowerment and initiative
 - Innovation
- Develop new skills and competencies?
- Develop leadership?
- Transfer knowledge from departing faculty or staff?
- Recruit and retain team members?
- Reinforce a focus on students, stakeholders, and the organization?
- Reinforce a focus on achievement of action plans?

Additional resources

National Institute of Standards and Technology
Baldrige National Quality Program. (2007).
Education Criteria for Performance Excellence.
www.quality.nist.gov/

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Scholtes, P.R. (1998). *The Leader's Handbook—Making Things Happen, Getting Things Done*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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