



Breaking
the Ceiling



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EFFECTIVE COOPERATION

TEAMWORK TRAINING MODULE



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1. Introduction



In this module, we are going to learn about the skill of effective cooperation, which is a key element of teamwork. Cooperation is a core life skill and can be defined as the act or process of working together to achieve a common goal. In modern workplaces, people of different nationalities and backgrounds are asked to work together to complete a work task. Not always do they undergo activities to get to know each other and recently, with remote working becoming more and more widespread, sometimes they only meet and collaborate virtually. This, and the fact that teams become bigger and bigger, and always more multicultural, has made effective cooperation even more difficult.

But effective cooperation is key to success in a workplace, regardless of the size of the company. The question is: what can ensure effective cooperation in a work environment? The first thing that matters is the company culture which usually reflects the philosophy of top executives. To make sure effective cooperation is ensured it should be a top priority for the leaders of the organisation. It is their responsibility to create opportunities for coworkers to join, like sponsoring group events. Research shows in fact that companies who have invested significantly in building and maintaining social relationships throughout the organisation are those with better cooperation.

Mentoring and coaching also play a crucial role in creating effective cooperation at the workplace. Informal coaching has proven to be even more effective than formal. For example at Nokia, new employees are presented with a list of colleagues they can connect to in different scenarios.

Effective cooperation is more likely to happen when coworkers have received specific training on the following skills: appreciating others, being able to engage in purposeful conversations, productively and creatively resolving conflicts, and program management. Effective training examples are also: teamwork, emotional intelligence, networking, holding difficult conversations, coaching, corporate social responsibility, and communicating the firm's strategy and shared values.

The leadership of an organisation can ensure that similar training activities take place regularly at work, enabling all coworkers to improve their skills and in this way implement more effective cooperation.

2. The module in the professional environment



We are now going to give an overview of two different (and opposite) leadership styles and effective ways to develop trust in teams. There has been a long debate about which is the most effective leadership style, whether relationship- or task-based. According to the enlightening theory of Erin Meyer, one of the eight scales of intercultural communication is trusting. People from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds build trust more by working together on a task- such as US-Americans and people of northern countries- or by establishing a relationship- such as with people of Mediterranean, Asian and African countries.

As stated at the very beginning of the module, teams at work are becoming more and more multicultural. This is probably why leaders with a mixed style, relationship- AND task-based, have proven to be the most effective ones when it comes to establishing a community. The ideal way to consolidate a team is then to set clear goals at the beginning (task-based), but then switch to relationship-based activities. Actually, this same approach- building trust by working together on a task and by spending breaks together, is very effective also for team members.

Are (the majority of) women naturally more task- or relationship-oriented?

In their private lives, women are (known to be) very much relationship oriented, more than men. Most women invest time and effort in building meaningful love, family and friend relationships- on average more than men. When at work, on the contrary, to be taken seriously and to be viewed as professional, they run the risk of being too task-oriented when it comes to teamwork. So basically women are both capable of building trust with a task- and with a relationship-based approach. For this reason, women can become ideal leaders and team members since they are able to build trust both by working together and by creating a relationship.

Another key element in effective cooperation is role and task-definition. Women tend to be flexible about role and task definitions, always ready to jump in when needed. But, according to research conducted by the Harvard Business Review, to ensure effective cooperation, employees need a clear definition of the roles and tasks of the team members. So when there are many women in a team, they possibly need some more reminders about role and task definition.

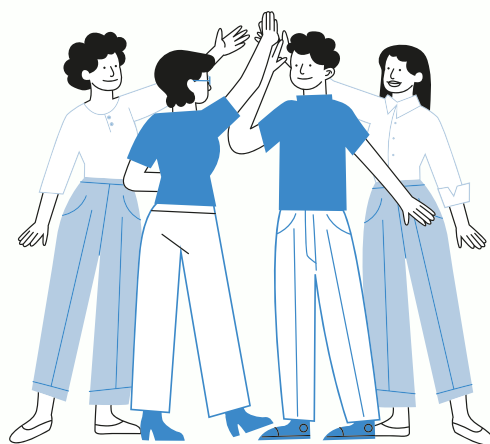
3. Impacts recognized through gender stereotypes



When talking about effective cooperation, it is impossible not to consider the famous stereotype of women being their own worst enemies. Following that, women should be less cooperative than men. On the contrary, women are more likely to care for the collective. The researcher and consultant Pam Heim found that women are more likely to agree with the statement “Being a good team player means helping all of my colleagues with what they need to get done.” In contrast, men are more likely to agree with the statement “Being a good team player is knowing your position and playing it well.”

Women in the workplace are excellent team players, in the sense that they tend to intervene when they see a gap or difficulty. But this means also running the risk to become overscheduled and overloaded, which can have negative consequences on their careers. Research has shown that women are less likely to carve out time during the workday to focus on their priorities. The reason? Women admitted to feeling guilty when doing so. The conclusion is that women, being always ready to help their colleagues, can benefit from less focused time for work. Not only: for the same reason, women in management positions experience far greater burnout and frustration than men.

Bringing awareness to this aspect can be very helpful for women. There is a lot team leaders can do about it. Every employer, but especially women, can be invited to one-to-one conversations and asked how much of the collaboration burden every person is carrying. And again, role and task definition should be clearly stated at the very beginning of every task, but also reminded through management apps or calls.



4. Good practices and tips



To develop effective cooperation and to support a sense of community, among the different activities organisations can sponsor and promote, in the sense of the BTC project, women's networks could be extremely beneficial. But also social activities of different kinds could be promoted to help people connect at the workplace: social breakfast/brunch, lunch concerts, and family days.

Women should also be encouraged to introduce a more relationship-based approach at work when being a team member or a team leader. To make sure employees, and especially women, remain on task, a task management app can be introduced. So that everyone is always updated about what others are doing at the moment.

To find a good balance between cooperation and focused time for completing the tasks one tip could be to schedule blocks of time for distraction-free work. Doing so increases the ability to assimilate complicated information, produce better results more quickly, and feel more fulfilled. In one organisation studied, people were asked to experiment with blocking 90 minutes per week for focused work. The people who successfully did it reported a significant jump in productivity and fulfilment. However, men were more likely than women to continue with the practice.

So a good practice to be introduced could be to invite employees, but especially women, to block 90 minutes every week/two days/day for focused work. At this time they should not attend any meeting, whether online or in presence, or help colleagues. Last but not least following workshops could be organised:

- appreciating others;
- being able to engage in purposeful conversations;
- productively and creatively resolving conflicts;
- program management;
- teamwork;
- emotional intelligence;
- networking;
- holding difficult conversations;
- coaching;
- corporate social responsibility;
- communicating the firm's strategy;
- shared values.

5. Conclusions

Effective cooperation is a core life skill and can be defined as the act or process of working together to achieve a common goal. To make sure effective cooperation is ensured it should be a top priority for the leaders of the organisation. It is their responsibility to create opportunities for coworkers to join, like sponsoring group events.

Women can be excellent team members and leaders since they are able to build trust among team members using both a task-based and relationship-based approach. For teamwork to be effective, roles and tasks should be defined from the beginning.

Effective cooperation means also finding a balance between teamwork and work on its own. Coworkers, especially women, should also be encouraged to focus on their own tasks before helping others. A good strategy could be to block 90 minutes sessions of focused work that cannot be interrupted.

Workshops and training about emotional intelligence, teamwork, appreciating others, coaching, conflict management, networking and purposeful conversations can create opportunities to learn and to create a community.



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