



# What makes a group a team

**TN41** Training Notes series: Management

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**People talk a lot about teams but their understanding of the term is often inadequate. Christians, in particular, are apt to use the term too freely, without recognising the challenge that the idea brings.**

They may feel there is a team when a group of people work together well. But if that is all it is, any group of friends would be a team. And it does not explain why some of the best teams are made up of people who would not naturally get on with each other.

So, before you start talking about your church's staff 'team', the 'team' ministry you belong to, the Catering 'Team', or any other T you can think of, check it out against my four essentials for a group to work as a team. Then join my Real Team campaign!

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## 1 **One task and vision** – *answering the Why? and Where to? questions*

This first point sounds obvious, but rules out plenty of groups. The so-called team must have some task that its members, together, are seeking to undertake, and a clear idea of what they are aiming to achieve through this. A sports team is seeking to win matches and then the championship. The members do this together; it is a common aim. A sales team is seeking to get the orders in, and often has specific sales targets to reach. Again, the members do it together. It is, as they say, a 'team effort'.

One point to grasp is that this team task is not the same as any individual member's job description. Each player in the sports or sales team has their contribution to make. But the team task is different, and not exactly the sum of the parts.

So a church staff team may meet every week to pray and check diaries, but just because they are all employed by the same church, or just because they have a weekly meeting, does not turn the members into a team. Most church staffs are simply groups.

Mind you, there is nothing wrong with being a group, but there is no need to try to be a team, to go through team training, to work out your Belbin team role (don't worry if that means nothing to you) if you are not a team in the first place. Such things are irrelevant.

## 2 **An agreed way of working** – *answering the How? question*

This relates to the distinctive ways in which the members go about their team task, or the 'values' they work to. Team A in Church A and Team B in Church B may have the same task to achieve. But one may have a strict ethical code and the other a more relaxed one; one may take their task seriously and work long hours whereas the other may be much more laid back and seek to have a lot of fun achieving their purpose.

The point is that if there is lack of common mind about such values, the team will not function well. (Think of Wife Swap on Channel 4 – OK, I don't watch it either but, from what I've read of it, the basic idea is built on a clash of value-systems.)

I find it helpful to think of three different levels of values, to get away from the term.

- **Non-negotiable principles** – may be a statement of faith, or a belief in the organisation, or an enthusiasm for teamwork itself. There should not be more than two or three of these.
- **Community culture** – the ethos of the team which individuals need to know about before they sign up – a small number of key descriptions about how the team works or what it stands for.
- **Internal rules** – lower level issues as to how the team will work together which may include ideas such as confidentiality, reliability, availability, and so on.

Values can be imposed by the leader, created over time by the team, taken from a wider context (eg. the church's values), or inherited in some way. They are usually some of all of these, but it is worth noting where each part of the value-system came from.

## 3 **A committed membership** – *answering the Who? question*

Vital point: we have only reached this feature at No. 3. Good teams depend on the close relationships between members, but when forming a team you don't have a get-together at the pub (or a church service if you would prefer that) to build commitment until you have sorted out Nos. 1 and 2. Don't get touchy-feely too soon (if at all!).

Strong teams are made up of people who will do anything for each other. Each person depends on their interaction with the other members. But you build to that point over time through four sets of pairs:

- Definition of who belongs and who does not (if the team is defined by who turns up at meetings, it will never work – membership boundaries need to be clear).  
AND  
Overlap with other related teams (are both membership and task boundaries clear, or is there muddle?).
- Understanding each other (good team members are excellent listeners and observers).  
AND  
Recognising others' needs (which may be past, present or future; and practical, emotional or spiritual).

- Valuing everyone as the people God has made them (not just the role they play or the office they hold).  
AND  
Recognising and celebrating each other's skills, experience and team-roles which may not be what you would expect.
- Dependency/trust/vulnerability – so people know themselves well and are prepared to be real rather than to hide behind a mask.  
AND  
Discipline/authority/handling conflict and failure – they are therefore able to cope with the difficult side of working closely together. And, it is likely to be difficult.

All this has implications for team size, selection and role definition. When working with a specific team I often challenge along the lines of Romans 12:9-21. It is worth meditating on each point. Note the word 'harmony' – it's not 'unison'.

#### 4 **An identified leader** *To feel the responsibility for all the above questions*

Teams still need leaders. Someone has got to feel the responsibility for 1 to 3 above. By all means aim for a flat structure, but without a leader you will be in trouble before long. Leaders, though, should be accountable to their teams. Which means team leadership is likely to be tough, because you won't get your own way. The point about leadership is to ensure the team task is achieved through everyone's contribution, and the team never loses sight of the direction in which it is seeking to move. The leader too should be ensuring that everyone's individual needs are met – by the team not by the leader. In Christian terms, it is a role and a gift, ***never a matter of status***.

Weak leaders pick underperforming clones for their teams. Strong leaders pick those who can outshine them in many areas. Uniformity kills a team. Diversity strengthens it. Leadership however needs to be team and not solo leadership; these are different.

There is a lot more to teams than just this, but those are my four tests for any group of people who claim to be working as a team. Does it matter whether you are a G for group or a T for team? Yes: because if you are a G but not a T there is no need to go through the trauma of learning to grow into a team if you are not one in the first place (and all that will have to wait for a later set of notes). The challenge to be part of an effective team is immense and the personal cost can be high, but the rewards are great.

These notes are available at [www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/training/tn41.pdf](http://www.john-truscott.co.uk/resources/training/tn41.pdf). See also Article A13, the second of two on *The leader as a shepherd*. For indexes of all items available on the site, visit the [resources page](#).

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on team-working either in general or for one specific team.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN41 under Management.

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