Solving Challenges and Barriers to Teamwork

SECTION: *WORKING AS A TEAM*

Learning Area: *Solving Challenges and Barriers to Teamwork*

Even well-planned studies may need to solve problems. Examples of such problems or challenges include:

- **Changing circumstances.** New laws, changes to policies or procedures at the research organization, or changes in team member availability due to personal circumstances can add new challenges to a study.
- **Failure or unintended outcomes.** Even well-planned strategies to recruit participants or collect data do not always work as intended. Failure is an opportunity to learn and improve.
- **External events.** Events such as environmental or natural disasters can affect the study timeline and how the team works together.

Sometimes, problems suggest that the team is not working well together. Examples include:

- **Personal conflict.** Sometimes team members may have a personal conflict with one another instead of engaging in productive disagreement (see Leading and Contributing to Team Decisions in the Working As A Team section of the website). Personal conflict is based on a negative judgment of someone's personal characteristics or work style rather than the person's ideas and perspectives. Team members can reduce personal conflict when they recognize and address biases and stereotypes (see Inclusion: The Starting Point for Effective Teams in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website) and commit to team norms of respect and collaboration (see Best Practices in Multi-Stakeholder Team Science in the Working As A Team section of the website).
- **Limited productivity.** Team productivity—the ability to make decisions and complete tasks as a team—can be affected by a lack of a shared vision or unclear roles and responsibilities. Limited productivity can also result from discussions that are not well-managed (see the Working As A Team section of the website).
- **Fading interest and involvement.** Long periods of time between team meetings, limited involvement, or a lack of clarity about team member contributions can reduce team members' interest in the study. Reduced interest often results in inconsistent attendance or participation.

Solving Problems and Challenges Can Lead to Innovations in Multi-Stakeholder Team Research.

Multi-stakeholder team research is relatively new. Understanding or reflecting on the challenges to effective multi-stakeholder teamwork can provide lessons that advance the field. The solutions that you and your team develop will be valuable to other multi-stakeholder research teams in the future.

Resources on Problem Solving

The following provide information and resources on how teams can solve two common issues collaboratively: personal conflict between team members and sustaining team member involvement in a study.

- **Collaborative problem solving.** Both leaders and contributors play an important role in solving problems. The process for team problem solving is easy to learn and apply to most situations.
- **Negotiating conflict.** Although disagreement can be a positive force that leads to team synergy (where decisions made by the entire team are stronger than those made by any one member), unmanaged conflict between team members can slow down progress and make a team less effective. Understanding personal conflict and how to resolve it is an essential skill for the entire team.
- **Sustaining engagement.** Even the most enthusiastic team members can lose interest and commitment to the team. Practical ways exist to ensure that team members stay involved throughout the entire study.

Collaborative Problem Solving

Solving problems as a team is different than solving problems as an individual. Collective problem solving can benefit from multiple perspectives and opinions that lead to a broader range of solutions. To realize that benefit, two factors are critical in team problem solving: **cognitive diversity** across the team and a sense of **psychological safety** among all team members.

What is a Cognitively Diverse Team?

The cognitive diversity of a team refers to how members of the team think differently from one another. A cognitively diverse team is made up of people who process information and draw conclusions in various ways.

How do people think differently from one another? Some people like to think about the big picture while others like to focus on the details. Some people view information using logic while others focus on their emotions. Some people need to read an idea to process it, while others need to talk about it and ask questions. Some people find clarity in numbers, while others prefer words.

Cognitive diversity is not the same as demographic diversity. Research suggests that a demographically diverse team may not also be cognitively diverse. Both cognitive and demographic diversity are important aspects of effective multi-stakeholder teams.

No one person on a cognitively diverse team is right or wrong in how they think about any topic, and so far, research has not found that one way of thinking is better than any other. Together, a team of cognitively diverse people can view a problem from multiple angles, creating broader insights and better solutions. In the example below, team members are designing a study comparing treatments for depression. Each team member thinks differently about how to identify the research questions.

Example of a Cognitively Diverse Team

Person A is a concrete thinker.	Person B is an abstract thinker.	Person C is an analytical thinker.
This means that person A likes to look at facts and data points and likes to draw concrete logical conclusions about what can be seen directly. Person A encourages the team to conduct an informal review of the most recent studies to identify gaps and unanswered questions.	This means that person B likes to consider multiple perspectives and is interested in the nuanced differences across experiences. Person B encourages the team to gather stories from people being treated for depression to hear possible research questions that might emerge from their experiences.	This means that person C likes to follow a step-by-step approach to collect group ideas and then compare and contrast them. Person C encourages the team to group treatments into categories, taking one treatment at a time to list the options and what is known about them.

What is Psychological Safety?

Psychological safety is believing that you can share your thoughts or ideas without feeling criticized or dismissed. Although few people intend to make another person feel badly, they may do so without knowing it through certain verbal and non-verbal responses to other peoples' ideas. For example, looking uninterested, rolling your eyes, or sighing may communicate disdain for someone's ideas, or worse, disdain for the person themselves. In addition, making judgmental comments rather than acknowledging the idea and then explaining why you disagree can also make people feel psychologically unsafe.

How can teams create an environment where all team members feel psychologically safe?

- Pay attention to and control verbal and non-verbal responses to suggestions and ideas.
- Revisit team norms often, especially those that focus on establishing psychological safety such as showing all team members respect and trying to understand ideas before commenting on them.
- Set ground rules for every discussion. Ground rules are expectations about how people should act based on the team's norms. Ground rules address how the team should listen and respond to one another. These rules should be framed positively, identifying what team members should do rather than what they should avoid. For example,
  - Share your opinion of the idea, not the person.
  - Give positive feedback and reactions before expressing disagreement.
  - Be specific when disagreeing with an idea.
- Check in with team members outside of team discussions to see if they feel psychologically safe. If they do not, ask them what would increase their sense of safety. Attempt to address their concerns or make changes to team norms as appropriate to help the team member feel psychologically safe.

Reducing the Impact of Hierarchy in Team Problem Solving

Hierarchy refers to people's position in a team or organization. Most often, titles indicate an individual's level of power or authority. For example, a chairperson or director has more authority and power than an administrative assistant. Credentials, such as a medical degree, can also indicate hierarchy.

Most people respond to hierarchy in one of two ways. One response is to accept the opinions of people with professional degrees (such as an MD) or titles (such as president). Another response is to question their opinions and distrust their motives. Teams that identify members by their degrees or titles may undermine the full participation of the entire team. Using titles and degrees or only acknowledging team members in positions of authority can alienate others. To limit the effects of hierarchy, many teams use only first names during discussions; they don't use formal titles or degrees. This practice helps everyone to feel like they are on equal ground.

Establishing a Process for Collaborative Problem Solving

Using a formal process can help guide problem-solving discussions. At each step in the process, the team should raise several questions to help focus team members' comments and responses and keep the discussion moving forward.

- **Define the problem.** Share information about the problem so that everyone has the same understanding of the problem and its effect on the study.
  - What is happening?
  - What is the effect?
- **Analyze the problem.** Share opinions, experiences, and perspectives about the cause of the problem and any factors that are contributing to the problem.
  - What is the cause of the problem?
  - What is contributing to the problem?
- **Identify and select potential solutions.** Come up with solutions together.
  - How can we brainstorm solutions that address the root cause?
  - What criteria should we use to evaluate different options?
  - Using the criteria, what are the benefits and drawbacks of each solution?
  - What solution(s) should we choose?
- **Develop and implement the plan.** Develop and implement a plan for the solution, while monitoring for additional problems.
  - Who is responsible for implementing the plan?
  - What progress are we making?
  - What additional challenges have we encountered?
- **Evaluate the effectiveness of the solution.**
  - Did the solution solve the problem?
  - What, if any, unintended consequences emerged?
  - What have we learned from this process that can inform future efforts?

Common team error:
Rushing to a solution before the team fully explores and understands the problem and its root cause.

Negotiating Conflict

The Importance of a Healthy Team Culture

To help avoid personal conflicts between team members, team organizers and leaders can create a culture of mutual respect and understanding. To do this, they should follow the steps below.

> Regular and in-depth exchange of ideas, conveyance of respect even within difficulties, and ongoing investments in building personal relationships and trust are essential to navigating conflict, as are the ability to manage one's emotional reactivity and to either resolve or put aside difficult disagreements.
>
> *—Bennett and Gadlin, 2019*

- **Help team members get to know one another.** Have team members talk about their background and interests, what motivates them, how they think about things, and their communication style. Taking time to build positive relationships among team members is worth the investment (see Best Practices in Engaging Stakeholders in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website).
- **Establish valuing and respecting differences among team members as the norm.** Leaders can regularly highlight the benefits of having a diverse team (see Inclusion: The Starting Point for Effective Teams in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website). They can make it clear that having different experiences, perspectives, and ways of expressing themselves is a good thing.
- **Model productive disagreement.** It is important for team members to see productive disagreement in action, where two people can disagree with each other's opinions or ideas while showing mutual respect (see Leading and Contributing to Team Decisions in the Working As A Team section of the website).
- **Hold individuals accountable for disrespectful behavior.** Not holding someone accountable for being disrespectful only enables and reinforces the behavior while undermining team norms. Team members can hold each other accountable by providing feedback. Team members can also make clear requests for behavior change and establish a clear set of consequences for unproductive behavior. It may also be helpful to offer support through training or coaching. If a team member's behavior continues to violate team norms or codes of conduct after several attempts have been made to address the behavior, then you may need to think about asking the person to leave the team.

The information below describes what personal conflict is, causes of personal conflict, and strategies to address it.

What is Personal Conflict?

Personal conflict between team members involves negative feelings and judgments about another team member. Personal conflict is an emotional reaction that can range from discomfort to disdain and even to hostility. Often, personal conflict comes from a judgment one team member may have about the character, intelligence, personality, or worthiness of another team member. When expressed, personal conflict can lead to tension, arguing, and criticizing others in meetings, which can make team members feel uncomfortable and undermine the team's cohesion and productivity. Personal conflict can also affect individual member commitment and involvement as members grow uncomfortable and feel psychologically unsafe interacting with other members of the team.

What Causes Personal Conflict?

- **Biases and stereotypes.** Individuals may have negative feelings about other people based on their biases (see Inclusion: The Starting Point for Effective Teams in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website). These biases may involve a person's race, gender, education, profession, ethnicity, age, choice of clothing, or any number of personal characteristics. In other words, conflict can start simply because, on the surface, one team member does not view the other person in a kind way.
- **Emotional hot buttons.** A *hot* button is an area of sensitivity someone may have that makes them more likely to have a negative emotional reaction. For example, someone who is insecure about their technology skills may have a negative emotional reaction when someone laughs at them because they are having trouble accessing an electronic document. The hot button in this case is the insecurity in weak technical skills. Team members may or may not be aware of this insecurity or the need to avoid behavior that might "*push the button*". Sometimes, team members may push the button on purpose. We all have different hot buttons. It is important to remember that other team members may be completely unaware that someone has a hot button.
- **Power differentials.** The perceived imbalance of power or privilege can create personal conflict. For example, team members may compete against each other for attention, acknowledgment, or influence on the team. A team member may react to a lack of respect for their title or credentials, or to a team member exercising power based on their position of authority.
- **Different work or communication styles.** Team members may have different work or communication styles that result in conflict. For example, a team member may assign a motive or a character flaw when they see a team member who communicates more directly than they do, or who waits to start a task.

Strategies

You can use several strategies when you feel a negative emotion about another team member.

> Some degree of self-awareness and emotional intelligence contributes positively to successful participation in collaborative ventures. One needs to be aware of one's impact on others as well as of one's own areas of sensitivity and vulnerability.
>
> *—Stipleman, Rice, Vogel and Hall, 2019*

- **Try to understand the emotional reaction and its cause.** Understanding what is making you feel the way you do can help you find solutions to change your emotions. Identify the specific behaviors that are causing the emotion. In some cases, you may adjust how you feel by gaining a new perspective about the person or your interactions. One way to do this is to identify one positive aspect of the person for every aspect that causes a negative reaction.
- **Get to know the person better.** Some negative reactions are caused by a lack of understanding about who someone is and why they think or act the way they do. Spending time with the person and getting to know more about their background, experiences, and culture can often create more accurate perceptions and soften negative emotions and reactions.
- **Openly express your feelings with the intent to resolve them.** Sharing how you feel gives you a chance to clarify the other person's motives or intentions or identify a different way of interacting with each other. It is important to separate their behavior from your emotions. A common technique to do this is called "When you/Then I." This technique lets you identify and describe a person's behavior while

owning your reaction to the behavior. They can change their behavior, or they can explain their intent or reasons for the behavior so you can react differently.

For example, you may want to express how you feel disrespected when another team member checks their phone while you are talking during a meeting. Using the "When you/Then I" technique, you might say something like this: "*When you check your phone while I'm speaking in the meeting, I feel disrespected*." You can then follow up this statement with a request: "*I would appreciate it if you would put your phone away during meetings so you can make eye contact with me when I am speaking*."

The other person can then explain why they checked their phone in the meeting and clarify that they did not mean to disrespect you. You may choose to state that you understand but ask that they check their phone less often. In this way, you can arrive at an agreement that works for both of you along with a new understanding of each other's feelings and behaviors.

- **Manage your reactions.** Both verbal and nonverbal behaviors can increase personal conflict, so be aware of how you react around the person. Sometimes people avoid talking about the conflict directly, but passively, they still show their disapproval. This passive aggressive communication often looks and sounds friendly but can increase the conflict without resolving the problem.
- **Negotiate boundaries.** Sometimes you can't avoid a negative emotional response. For example, the other person may be unable or unwilling to change their behavior. Negotiating your boundaries—deciding when and how you will interact with the other person—can limit your exposure to the person and the triggers to your emotions.
- **Use a third party.** If you feel unable to address the conflict directly or if you feel unsafe, it may be time to bring in a third party to help resolve the conflict. A third party can help find solutions by making the intent of a specific behavior clear, finding ways to change behavior or emotional reactions, or setting boundaries within the relationship. Many team leaders bring in individuals—who are trained in mediation or conflict negotiation—to take on the third-party role. An effective third-party negotiator should:
  - Have no relationship or an equal relationship with both parties and not show favoritism.
  - Guide the conversation rather than answer for either party.
  - Not express preferences or opinions about the conflict or the people.
  - Keep what is discussed confidential.

Sustaining Engagement

Maintaining and Growing Stakeholder Engagement

Enthusiastic and lasting participation among stakeholders is often a sign of successful teamwork. Sometimes keeping stakeholders engaged in long-term projects can be a challenge. Understanding the reasons for decreased involvement can help reduce these challenges.

Reduced involvement due to changes in personal circumstances may be unavoidable. For example:

- Increases in workload or changes in employment status may make the stakeholder less available.
- Changes in health status may make it hard for stakeholders who are patients or caregivers to continue their involvement.
- Life events—such as births, deaths, or other life changes—can affect availability.

When personal circumstances affect availability, it may be helpful to adapt current responsibilities or assign them to others. Discuss what would work best for the person and the team.

Other reasons for reduced stakeholder engagement may be signs that the team is not functioning well. Common problems that may lead to low interest or participation—and that can be avoided—are:

- Limited communication for long periods of time between study activities, such as during data collection.
- Lack of meaningful involvement in study activities or team discussions.
- Limited acknowledgment of individual contributions.
- Lack of interpersonal or social connection with other team members.
- Unresolved negative experiences or personal conflict.
- Too much communication, too many meetings, or too many requests for input.

The information below provides strategies to maintain and grow stakeholder engagement.

Strategies to Maintain Engagement

Strategies to help sustain interest and engagement include the following:

- **Communicate regularly and set expectations.** During lulls in study activities, update stakeholders on progress or connect them to another aspect of the study. Being up-front about lapses of time between team interactions can help set expectations so that stakeholders don't feel forgotten.
- **Connect stakeholders with activities that match their interests and reasons for involvement.**
- **Lead and contribute to productive meetings and discussions** (see Leading and Contributing to Team Decisions in the Working As A Team section of the website).
- **Acknowledge the impact of stakeholders' contributions on the study.** For example, a team may record and share the results of all stakeholder contributions between meetings. Other teams may include stakeholder contributions as an agenda item at every meeting.

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- **Foster interpersonal or social connections among team members.** Team-building activities are one way to do this (see Best Practices in Engaging Stakeholder in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website).
- **Check in regularly with stakeholders**. One-on-one meetings with stakeholders are a chance to strengthen relationships and identify and resolve potential negative experiences and conflicts with other members.

Don't Just Sustain Stakeholder Interest, Grow It.

- Give stakeholders opportunities to learn more about research by attending trainings, seminars, and workshops.
- Trust stakeholders to take on certain roles in the study—even leadership roles—such as recruitment, enrollment, or data collection.
- Involve stakeholders and other team members in conferences, presentations, and publications about the study, as well as efforts to share results with research partners and patient support groups.
- Find opportunities for experienced stakeholders to recruit and mentor new stakeholders.
- Make engagement as easy as possible for stakeholders by eliminating barriers and providing the necessary resources (see Addressing Contextual Challenges to Engagement in the Engaging Stakeholders section of the website).