

# PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM HANDBOOK

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The Professional & Graduate Studies division of Cornerstone University recognizes the distinction between the younger college student and the adult learner who has assumed responsibilities for accomplishment in the workplace and for continued professional development. Therefore, throughout the program, individual courses require a variety of team assignments designed to accomplish the learning objectives. These assignments include projects, presentations, papers, worksheets, discussion questions, and others. Significant collaboration and communication is necessary to successfully complete these assignments. Professional Learning Teams (PLTs), generally formed in the first course of a program, may have face-to-face meetings, electronic/online communication, or telecommunication to meet the project objectives. It is up to the discretion of the team members to determine how their communication will occur.

## Outcomes

Many outcomes are possible from the team process. The following outcomes are those considered most important to the adult learning experience.

### Strengthen Decision-Making Ability

Through active participation, students learn the dynamics of how a team makes decisions and solves problems. Any team of three or more individuals follows a different process in reaching a conclusion than occurs when a person works independently. It is possible that the team may reach a conclusion that differs from what any of its members would have reached individually. The team provides a realistic laboratory for the exploration of team dynamics.

### Build Self-Confidence in Dealing with Real-World Problems

An individual's role as a member of a team extends beyond the working environment to include family, friends and organizations. The student's participation on a learning team extends his or her ability for participation in a variety of other groups.

### Learn How to Work with Others Under Pressure

As a student gains confidence, anxiety concerning team participation is reduced. An understanding of team dynamics removes the uncertainty or fear of participation in groups. The amount of work assigned and the deadlines imposed mirror the working environment in a way that is very results oriented. As the student learns how to interact within the learning team, the ability to work effectively in other group situations improves.

### Learn to Lead and to Follow Others

As feedback within the team makes students more sensitive to personal characteristics and behavior of themselves and others, students gain self-understanding and achieve a greater capacity for self-assessment.

### Achieve a Higher Level of Quality and Performance in Class Projects

The student can learn more from a learning team than from working individually. The sheer volume of work assigned for team projects would be impossible to accomplish alone. The team makes use of the strengths of each individual and reduces weaknesses by offering support, camaraderie, incentive and direct assistance.

### Share Teaching as Well as Learning Responsibilities

Comprehension of conceptual material improves through team discussion. The interaction and involvement in asking and answering questions strengthen understanding of material. Those more knowledgeable about a subject gain new insights by sharing their knowledge with others; less knowledgeable members receive explanations and input that improve their understanding.

### Develop Interpersonal Communication Skills

By observing others' communication methods and by implementing a variety of interpersonal communication strategies, students learn how to differentiate effective and ineffective behavior. These experiences help students improve their personal communication skills.

## **Philosophy and Purposes of PLTs**

### **Shared Resources**

Not only is the team process designed to help students accomplish the rigorous workload required by the academic programs, but it also helps students practice interaction skills to achieve a common objective. Through the sharing of talents, experience and learning resources, adult students assume greater self direction and responsibility for their own learning. Sharing responsibilities also allows students to disseminate more information to the team within a shorter period of time. More content is covered by the team than can be achieved through individual effort.

### **Role of the Student**

In traditional learning environments, students assume a relatively passive role. By contrast the accelerated degree programs at Cornerstone University demand active participation by students in their educational development and place greater responsibility for knowledge and skill acquisition on the learner. With the exception of the first course in each program, all courses in the degree programs utilize project/learning teams. To help these teams get started, a portion of each program's first course focuses on the formation of teams. Through various class exercises, students learn of their cohort members' backgrounds, experiences and goals. Students are also exposed to small group dynamics that are helpful in team processes.

## **Group Dynamics**

The process employed by the teams in the accomplishment of projects is as important as the learning outcomes. Both the faculty member and students should understand the methods used by the teams and the dynamics that help or hinder these teams in accomplishing their tasks. This section describes some key elements of team dynamics.

### **Creating a Positive Environment**

The faculty member is a key individual in setting the proper tone for the team process at the beginning of the course. An atmosphere that encourages positive feedback and creates mutual trust and support should be established as quickly as possible. The faculty member's attitude toward the team process helps establish the tone for productive learning outcomes.

### **Uncovering Hidden Agendas**

Obstacles to achieving a positive learning environment are the hidden agendas students may bring to the team. If students have goals or personal issues that are inconsistent with the team's goals, friction and conflicts may result, undermining the team learning process. Hidden agendas can be dealt with easily if team responsibilities and tasks are clearly understood. Teams must recognize and address individual needs. If the individual needs are not fulfilled, team performance is likely to suffer.

However, the needs of one or more individuals should not be allowed to override the needs of the team.

### **Handling the Non-Contributor**

Non-contributors can also create obstacles for the team. If an individual does not accept his or her share of the workload, or fails to complete work on time, the team faces a choice. It can decide to carry that share of the work, or it can confront the non-contributor. The best approach is to let the non-contributor know that his or her performance is hurting the team. Team members must ask the individual to try harder.

## **When Uneven Contributions Occur**

Uneven contributions within the team present a different issue. It is normal to expect some team members to provide more input than others based upon experience and/or capability. Roles may shift from one subject area to another since members have differing backgrounds and levels of knowledge to contribute. However, when one student consistently contributes less than other members, it is up to the team to determine the cause. If the individual displays effort but his or her abilities do not match those of the other members on the team, the other members should encourage and help the individual. This strengthens the team and the end product is stronger.

## **Leadership**

When team members contribute equally and are comfortable with the team's goals, the team functions as a leaderless group. Under these circumstances, the team's purpose and priorities may be established quickly and the tasks agreed upon jointly. Generally, the leaderless team evolves over time as members rely on one another and come to understand that they benefit from the harmony of strengths and weaknesses within the team.

When a leader does emerge, it is because he or she is viewed as competent in helping the team achieve its goals. It is possible to rotate the leadership role from one member to the next as long as each new leader is seen as giving proper direction and accurately summarizing team input.

A leader's style can be:

- Information Giving (perceived as directive)
- Information Seeking (perceived as supportive)

A leader that is "information giving" is seen as more organized, but this may cause unhappiness within the team if it is perceived as being too heavy-handed. A leader that is "information seeking" may be more effective due to the increased participation of the team. However, there is the danger of too little direction that may result in failure to complete tasks on time. Leaders who can blend these two communication techniques appear to provide the most effective leadership.

## **Conflict Resolution**

If conflict in the learning team cannot be resolved through discussion of the problem within the team, assistance should be sought from the faculty member. Faculty members may request further help from the Director of Student Services if a resolution cannot be reached.

## **Factors That Affect Team Interaction**

The three factors that affect team interaction and learning are the following:

### **Level of Intensity**

This is defined as the degree to which team effort is focused on the tasks at hand. When individuals on a team work with great concentration and are focused on the tasks at hand, they display a high level of inner activity. This inner activity creates a more constructive and efficient interaction among the members and produces a higher level of performance than is possible when members work alone.

### **Level of Friendliness**

The degree of camaraderie among team members is important. Teams that establish a high level of congeniality and helpfulness set a very positive atmosphere for interacting with each other and accomplishing their work. A positive and friendly tone strengthens the learning process and encourages effective performance.

### **Amount of Activity**

This is defined as the number of tasks generated and the degree to which team members are actively involved in performing tasks. Teams that are animated strive to complete an assignment or project by having individuals display such actions as looking something up, asking questions, making statements, or debating the issues. Their productivity is evidenced by the quality of the completed assignment or project.

Four learning patterns can emerge within the team. Students may:

- Compete with one another to win.
- Work alone to achieve individual goals.

- Work alone to achieve team goals.
- Work cooperatively.

When students work cooperatively within a team rather than competitively or by themselves, the team learning process is most successful. This does not mean that a reasonably competitive spirit among teams should be discouraged. Healthy competition among teams can be used to raise the quality of performance.

### **Team Behavior Techniques**

The faculty member must stress the importance of a critical/creative thinking process for problem solving with the learning team. This process can be established by using the following team behavior techniques:

- Establish a tone that is relaxed, non- stressful and supportive.
- Encourage originality and unusual ideas.
- Place a positive value on dissent and diversity.
- Encourage spontaneous communication without focusing on a single leader.

## **Faculty Member's Role**

### **Positive Tone**

Generally, the faculty member should avoid interfering in the dynamics of the team. His or her role is that of the facilitator. The faculty member is responsible for establishing a positive tone, monitoring implementation and guiding the team process.

A positive tone concerning the team process must be established. Students will take their responsibilities more seriously when they understand the importance of team learning. The faculty member will set a positive tone during the first course, and each faculty member should express this attitude throughout the program in which learning teams are required. Positive reinforcement of learning goals is the key to consistent performance by teams.

### **Monitoring Implementations**

Team performance must also be monitored. The faculty member must provide direction on tasks and expectation guidelines for performance without dictating team activities. A clear understanding of team goals and expectations assists in the monitoring process. The faculty member needs to track team progress to ensure the following:

- Team performance is not sidetracked by conflicts.
- Team members contribute to the accomplishment of tasks in a positive manner.

A form has been developed for the faculty member to use in monitoring the team process. The "Professional Learning Team Evaluation" form (at the end of this section) should be prepared by each team member at the completion of each course. The evaluation form allows each member to focus on the team's productivity in achieving the project's learning outcomes and to discuss any problems with individual contributors. This provides a non-threatening outlet for students to use in expressing concerns. The faculty member can use the individual ratings as part of the grading criteria.

### **"Splintering"**

One team behavior that must be avoided is "splintering." This happens when a learning team splits up the work on its project in the first meeting and works on its tasks as individuals without team involvement. While teams inevitably assign certain tasks to individuals to support the team process, the give-and-take of the process itself, carried out in a series of meetings, forms the essence of the learning team learning experience.

"Splintering" negates this valuable aspect of learning team interaction and deprives students of the primary value inherent in team interaction. "Splintering" can be discouraged by advising students that the project must flow together conceptually. This is possible only when the team builds its strategies and solutions as a cohesive, problem-solving unit.

## **Grading**

### **Individual Performance**

One of the dilemmas in grading team projects is deciding whether to include individual performance evaluations in the appraisal. Evaluating individual performance is one way to identify non- performers on the team. This may

reduce teamwork and dedication by placing greater emphasis on individual performance. The decision on a single team grade or to include a portion of the team grade on individual performance is left to the discretion of the faculty member.

### **Team Grades**

A single team grade motivates students to help one another and work closely toward achieving a common performance standard. The team should intensify efforts to raise its performance level, to confront non-contributors, and to work with members who are not strong in a given subject area.

### **Alternative Grading Methods**

Aside from the single team grade, another method is to assign a portion of the grade to individual members based upon their own evaluation form (at the end of this section). Students should be honest, open and accurate on the Learning Team Evaluation form as it may be used to help determine grades on learning team assignments. It is often surprising how strictly students will assess themselves if they feel that they or fellow students have not measured up to expectations.

## **Team Rules**

### **Clear Roles**

There are rules that need to be established within each team. At the beginning of each project, individual roles and responsibilities must be clearly identified. Clear direction reduces anxiety and lessens the likelihood of an assertive individual taking over the team.

### **Team Constitution**

All teams in the on-ground programs create a “team constitution.” This should be a one- to two-page, typewritten document and should include the basic philosophy of the team (are you all trying for straight A’s in your program or just trying to get by?) and the “operating procedures” on which you agree. For instance, will you tolerate members arriving late or will there be a penalty?

Things to consider in the team constitution:

- What attendance policy should team members be expected to follow? What happens when a team member fails to attend a learning team meeting?
- Does the team expect members to be on time for scheduled meetings? What happens when someone is late or leaves early?
- Will the team set an agenda for each meeting and how strictly will it adhere to that agenda?
- How does the team deal with members who fail to contribute to meetings, who do not carry their “weight” in team assignments, or who tend to dominate the team meetings?
- What procedures will the team follow when conflicts arise within the team?
- How will the team handle a member who does not respect others’ opinions?
- How would the team handle a serious personality conflict within the group?
- What measure will be taken when a team member fails to abide by the team constitution?

### **Team Agenda**

A team agenda and project calendar will help teams meet the project’s goals. This also gives team members a clear vision of the tasks to be completed and of the deadlines that must be met.

### **Meeting Location**

When learning teams have face-to-face meetings, it is important that the team choose a location that is conducive to learning with the following characteristics:

- Individual seating area for each member of the learning team.
- A desk or flat surface writing area for each student.
- Adequate lighting to ensure the ability of all students to read.
- A quiet area with no ambient noise, such as loud music.
- Adequately controlled temperature to allow for the comfort of each student.
- Electrical and phone service to allow students access to the Institution’s library services or the Internet (if needed in a specific course).

- Adequate restroom facilities.
- Adequate parking for student convenience.
- Accessible to all students.
- Consistent with facilitating learning objectives of the specific course.

The following types of locations shall be presumed to be conducive to learning:

- Institution classrooms.
- Non-institution classrooms (schools, corporate training facilities, church classrooms).
- Institution meeting areas (for example, at the main campus these areas could include the library conference room, the Warren Faber Hall atrium and the Seminary lounge).
- Corporate meeting rooms.
- Libraries (institution, state, local, or college).
- Student residences (if in accordance with the characteristics listed above and capable of facilitating the learning objectives of the specific course).

### **Total Participation**

Participation by everyone within the team is another important consideration. Total participation is necessary if the team is to achieve its best performance.

### **Internal Team Evaluation**

Internal team evaluation and feedback are also important. This can be accomplished by holding a postmortem on each project after it is completed. Students should be encouraged to evaluate their team's performance. Individuals can also be assessed when appropriate, but this must be done in a non-judgmental manner. The point is to learn how the team can improve its learning process, not to criticize team members. Feedback should be kept positive and supportive.

## PROFESSIONAL LEARNING TEAM EVALUATION

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Faculty Member: \_\_\_\_\_

Course No: \_\_\_\_\_

Cohort: \_\_\_\_\_

In the space below, list the names of each member of your learning team, including yourself. Then use the following scale to rate how effectively each member of the team, **including you**, contributed to the project assigned in this course.

Name	No contribution	Slight contribution	Moderate contribution	Significant contribution	Outstanding contribution
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5
	1	2	3	4	5

Write a brief paragraph answering each of the following.

1. How did your team function in completing the assignments for this course? (E.g., How was the work divided? Was there collaboration on the assignments? How did your team communicate throughout the course – weekly meetings, e-mail, Odyssey? Etc.)

2. What was your contribution to the completion of assigned tasks? Please be specific, e.g., “prepared the PowerPoint for our presentation.”

3. What was the contribution of each of the other members of the team? Please be specific, e.g., “John researched the business.”