

Developing Your Teamwork Skills

Ads for both academic and nonacademic jobs highlight teamwork, writes Pallavi Eswara, who give tips on how to develop those skills and then demonstrate you possess them.

By [Pallavi Eswara](#) January 28, 2019

“A good team player” or “has strong interpersonal skills” are phrases often found in job ads for both academic and nonacademic positions. What are these skills and why are they important? How can a graduate student or postdoctoral researcher develop good interpersonal skills and then demonstrate that they possess them?

Academic research in many disciplines is becoming team based, with each team member contributing their own knowledge and expertise but also leveraging and complementing the strengths of other people. Complex problems with a broad scope and impact require a range of experts who can join one another and cooperate to solve them. That brings together people with a range of skill sets, experiences and working styles. If a team is to be successful, the members must be able to work with each other collaboratively and bring out the best in each other.

The ability to work with colleagues toward a common goal or project is an important skill to learn and demonstrate for career advancement. Teams are made up of people with different expertise, so the team can be energized and prepared to deliver results -- especially since results are often expected in a short time. Diverse skill sets allow people to innovate in ways that fuel improvement and progress. And independent of the degrees or qualifications of the team members, the purpose and strength of each member should be valued and encouraged.

What are the key skills you should work to develop to become a successful team member?

Good communication. Students and postdocs should be able to explain their ideas and also actively listen to those of the other members of the team.

Important communication skills include: understanding body language, establishing and using avenues to discuss new ideas, and creating opportunities to talk about differences to prevent future conflicts.

Emotional Intelligence. People with strong emotional intelligence skills often make the difference between high- and low- performing teams. When members show empathy toward one another, trust one another and understand the challenges and competing factors of each other's lives, a stronger team identity and greater team spirit emerge.

Motivational abilities. Although it does not seem obvious, motivating others and positively influencing the behavior of team members is a skill that you can learn. By asking questions that bring out the best in your colleagues, and helping them identify what their goals are for themselves and the team, you can increase people's level of involvement in and engagement with the team.

Relationship management. Respecting other people and their values and ideas is central to establishing good relationships. Taking full responsibility for your words and actions also goes a long way toward creating a strong team.

As a team member, you should also always have a clear understanding of what is expected of you. If you don't know your role, or it is not clearly defined, make sure to clarify it when you join the group or soon thereafter.

Acquiring Interpersonal Skills

As a graduate student or postdoc, working with collaborators requires competence in your area of expertise but also that you be able to work with those outside your area of expertise. If you are in a situation where you are a part of research networks with partners from other departments or institutions, then the process of setting up a plan of deliverables for a project, sharing information and methods of research, providing and getting feedback, acknowledging the contributions of other people, and supporting others when things do not work will all help build your teamwork skills.

But how do you develop these skills if you are working mostly by yourself or with your adviser?

You should consider serving on committees within your department, graduate program or student or postdoc associations. If such a committee is not available, find like-minded people and form your own. By participating in these types of group work, you will experience good and bad examples of teamwork and improve your own skills.

Joining teams of a graduate student association or a postdoc society that are specifically working toward a common goal or mission can especially help you develop skills outside your formal training. At the same time, you can contribute to the growth and fulfillment of the team's vision and have a significant impact. Some committees or groups that have a specific defined goal include fund-raising or marketing committees or networking groups. Participation in such teams requires synchronization, timeliness and often some specific talents when it comes to completing tasks. If you develop the skills that are of relevance to that team or committee, you can become an important contributing member.

All these types of experiences will add to your résumé when you are job seeking and are asked to describe your interpersonal or teamwork skills. In interviews, you'll be able to cite how your role was essential for the team's performance and success, the particular strengths you contributed to the team, the positive influence you had on its performance, and how you effectively managed relationships.

Ultimately, being a good team player is just as important as being a leader. Building the required skills will greatly contribute to your career satisfaction and success.

http://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2019/01/28/grad-students-need-improve-their-teamwork-skills-become-more-attractive-employers?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=01ec63e326-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-01ec63e326-199133009&mc_cid=01ec63e326&mc_eid=6f67a838c9