Teams That Work: Preparing Student Teams For The Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Organizations today often require collaboration in the form of work teams. Many tasks completed within organizations, whether in the workplace or in academia, however, can be beyond the capabilities of individuals alone. Productive teamwork and cooperative activities in business are expected and can begin very early in a person's career. The pedagogy for teamwork instruction in the classroom may not simulate real workplace events or parallel organizational behavior in order to attain a successful outcome. In universities, teamwork often breeds frustration and dysfunction, since the teams often do not perform at a high level or reach their full potential. This paper will provide best practices for creating productive teams in the classroom in preparation for the workforce. This insight will include ideas that will bond team members through collective values and goals, resulting in effective teams and a productive environment.

Keywords: Teams; Groups; Student Teams; Work Teams; Best Practices

INTRODUCTION

Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success. (Henry Ford)

There are many different varieties of teams as well as a myriad of definitions to describe them. Robbins & Judge (2011) describes a work team as one that "generates positive synergy through coordinated effort. "Individual efforts result in a level of performance that is greater than the sum of those individual inputs" (p.295). Teamwork is not always warranted, however, so caution should be taken to assess whether the work is better completed in a team or individually.

In sports, education, business, family, and life, teams are a critical component for collective success. Most people are involved in teams every day regardless of the institution in which they serve. The National Association of Colleges and Employers's (NACE) Job Outlook 2012 survey reported that nearly 80% of the employers surveyed said they search for evidence that the potential employee can work in a team. Edwin Koc, NACE Director of Research, stated, "Overall, results show that the ability to work in a team is the number one soft skill that employers seek in their new hires (www.naceweb.org).

Unfortunately, in a classroom setting, the term 'teamwork' often elicits negative responses due to students' past experiences that have shaped their perspective and resulted in sub-optimal outcomes, including lower grades. Professors often do not teach teamwork prior to assigning activities that require students to function as teams. Including teamwork activities as part of a semester's coursework then may result in students who are frustrated, angered, overworked, etc., while they attempt to influence other group members to perform as a team with a common goal, delegating tasks and assigning roles. These assignments may be well-intentioned, although the assumption that all students understand the attributes of a high-performing team seems to be a false one.

School curricula should also adapt to the changing workplace and community needs by ensuring that students are proficient in the skills necessary for today, like teamwork. Sir Ken Robinson, author and educator, believes that the educational paradigm should shift from a mechanical and industrial process to one that is more personalized, organic and human. He uses a garden metaphor whereby students are provided a nurturing

environment to grow and develop in order for talent to be harvested and maximized (Fifield, 2012, pp.34-35). Also, the authors agree that educators should have experience working in teams in order to offer professional advice to students.

In view of the fact that teamwork is important for organizational and career success, how can we, as professors, teach teamwork skills and concepts to our student population to prepare them for the future? This paper will offer some insight and prescribe a number of best practices to improve student teams in preparation for work teams.

BRIEF HISTORY

The concept of people working collectively to accomplish mutual goals is not new. Early hunters, clans and tribes worked cooperatively as teams for food, safety and the protection of their young. One early example of teamwork, spanning over 20 years and including 100,000 workers, is the Great Pyramid of Giza, built around 2,650 BC. This famous architecture was constructed of 2 million blocks of limestone, each weighing 1.5 tons, that traversed 500 miles (Bodwell, 2006). This phenomenal structure is labeled as one of the 'seven wonders of the world' and stands as a depiction of a work team with a mutual goal sustained over time. Historical leaders from the Babylonia Hammurabi (in 2123-2071 BC) to Sun Tzu, the Chinese General in (600 BC), to modern day illustrate the challenges inherent in teamwork (Steen & Vanderveen, 2011, p. 28). Wren (2005) outlines the history of management thought through the work of such researchers as Mary Parker Follet and Elton Mayo who point to the essential nature of worker collaboration through teamwork.

Frederick Taylor, the American Father of Scientific Management was noted for his attempts to maximize organizational effectiveness through engineering principles, by assigning specialized tasks to individuals. This developed into the term 'bureaucracy'. Technology and the age of computers emerged with Americans predominately working in functional teams as well as in specialized departments. Robbins & Finley (2000) state that by the early 1990's and into the 21st century, teams in America displaced older hierarchical models and bureaucracies with new, more nimble teams. Developed largely in response to the success of Japanese teams and the notion of (kaizen) or continuous improvement, teams became more prevalent in the American workplace.

Table 1 reflects Four Great Business Teams in History as identified by Palfini (2008).

Table 1: Four Great Business Teams in History

Teams That Work	Team Goals	Guiding Principles for Success
Java Team - Sun Microsystems	Add Interactivity to the Web	Independence
Ford Motor Company	Mass Production - Affordable Cars	Efficiency
Google Team	Most Popular Website	Stay Lean
Walt Disney	Create Memorable Films & Characters	Determination

Other successful business teams, from the authors' perspective and experience, include General Motors Corporation's *Corvette Team, Generation IV* in 1980, whose goal was to re-design the Corvette vehicle similar to a European sports car with a guiding principle of total quality management.   Another example is Rockwell International Corporation's creation of the B1 Bomber to replace the aging B52 Bomber. The B1 Bomber was built in 1983 with a sleek, new stealth design, utilizing a guiding principle of leading- edge technology.

GROUPS VS. TEAMS

All groups are not teams. Katzenbach & Smith, management consultants at McKinsey & Company, explain that these two terms are not interchangeable. They define a team as "a small number of people with complementary skills, who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach & Smith, 1999, p.45). According to Rico, Sanchez-Manzanares, Gil & Gibson (2008, pp. 183-184), a group may develop into a team when:

1. Leadership becomes a shared activity.
2. Accountability shifts from strictly individual to both individual and collective.
3. The group develops its own purpose and mission.
4. Problem-solving becomes a way of life, not a part-time activity.
5. Effectiveness is measured by the group's collective outcomes and products.

In addition, work groups and work teams are dissimilar, just as students may have group activities in some classes and team activities in others. Robbins and Judge (2011) describe work groups as those who share information, have individual accountability and possess varied skills. In contrast, work teams are characterized by collective performance, both individual and mutual accountability, and the members have complementary skills (p.315).

Furthermore, there are stages of team development first posited by Bruce Tuckman (1965).

Table 2: Stages of Team Development

Forming:	Group members learn about each other and the task at hand. Indicators of this stage might include Unclear objectives, Un-involvement, Uncommitted members, Confusion, Low morale, Hidden feelings, Poor listening, etc.
Storming:	As group members continue to work, they will engage each other in arguments about the structure of the group which often are significantly emotional and illustrate a struggle for status in the group. These activities mark the storming phase: Lack of cohesion, Subjectivity, Hidden agendas, Conflicts, Confrontation, Volatility, Resentment, Anger, Inconsistency, and Failure.
Norming:	Group members establish implicit or explicit rules about how they will achieve their goal. They address the types of communication that will or will not help with the task. Indicators include Questioning performance, Reviewing/clarify objective, Changing/confirming roles, Opening risky issues, Assertiveness, Listening, Testing new ground, and Identifying strengths and weaknesses.
Performing:	Groups reach a conclusion and implement the solution to their issue. Indicators include Creativity, Initiative, Flexibility, Open relationships, Pride, Concern for people, Learning, Confidence, High morale, Success, etc.
Adjourning:	As the group project ends, the group disbands in the adjournment phase. This phase was added when Tuckman and Jensen updated their original review of the literature in 1977.

These stages involve interpersonal relationships and task behaviors. Success of the team will depend on individual learning and whether the members learn to work together. The fifth stage of adjourning was added later after additional review of studies (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

Figure 1 illustrates the specific steps regarding issues as a team develops. Tuckman's phases address the individual as s/he integrates into a team environment, while team issues are identified and synthesized. To accomplish goals, members must be competent, collaborative and committed to specific goal attainment.
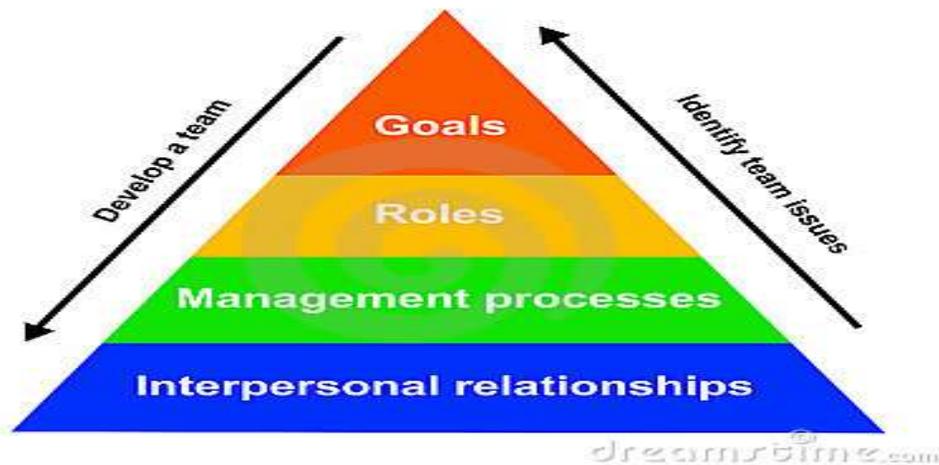

Figure 1: Team Issues

BENEFITS OF TEAMS

Synergy is the highest activity of life; it creates new untapped alternatives; it values and exploits the mental, emotional, and psychological differences between people. (Stephen Covey)

"Two heads are better than one, the whole is more than the sum of its parts, there is no 'I' in team", or TEAM - **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**ccomplishes **M**ore are all phrases that people have heard that refer to the collective nature of teams. There are many benefits of teams, such as collaborative learning, diversity, synergy and experience, that collectively provide positive outcomes. Bovee & Thill (2013) point to a number of advantages of teams, such as higher-quality decisions, increased diversity of views, lower levels of stress and destructive internal competition, increased commitment to solutions and changes, and improved flexibility and responsiveness (p. 177). From a workplace perspective, teams save money, improve processes, make better use of resources, and increase productivity according to Robbins & Finley (2000).

CHALLENGES - DYSFUNCTIONS

The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime. (John Wooden)

Just as there are numerous benefits of teams, a variety of problems often surface. After all, teams can be as complex as the individuals that comprise them. University faculty who assign group projects assume that the students will function as a team without additional instruction. Lencioni (2002) lists five dysfunctions of teams:

	Issue	**Remedy**
1.	Absence of trust	Ask for help, take risks
2.	Fear of Conflict	Understand conflict is productive/ coach each other
3.	Lack of Commitment	Clear direction, learn from mistakes
4.	Avoidance of Accountability	Reward team performance
5.	Inattention to Results	Shared goals, pressure to perform

Other reasons that many groups do not function as a team are that they have at least one 'social loafer', described by the German psychologist as the 'Ringelmann Effect' who acknowledges that people may tend not to work as hard in groups as they would individually (Schermerhorn, 2008, p. 220). A second issue is groupthink. Psychologist Irving Janis (1972) coined the word "groupthink*"* as a situation that "occurs when a group makes faulty decisions because group pressures lead to a deterioration of "mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment" (p. 9). Groupthink occurs in the workplace in such scenarios as Enron, and WorldCom and in class teams when there are conditions like pressure to conform, opposing ideas are dismissed, there is an illusion of invulnerability, a belief in their own inherent morality and a feeling of unanimity. Lastly, the 'control freak' personality may disrupt the functionality of the team. He or she usually is disruptive to the team as the individual(s) refuse to delegate tasks and feel as if they have to take over and take control of the team.

TYPES OF TEAMS

In Table 3, all of the teams listed can be present in both the classroom and the workplace, with the exception of functional teams. Sales/marketing, operations, or finance are usually required in functional teams and these skills are usually undeveloped in the traditional college student. Also, Research and Development teams may be found in both, but they are usually workplace teams.

Table 3: Types of Teams

Team	Classroom	Career
Problem-solving	X	X
Presentation	X	X
Panels	X	X
Committees	X	X
Formal/Informal	X	X
Functional		X
Research & Development Teams	X	X
Virtual	X	X

BEST PRACTICES - EFFECTIVE WORK TEAMS

Jack Welch, former CEO of General Electric, along with his wife Suzy (2011), listed four components of a successful team in an article entitled *How to Build a Winning Team*.

1. The leaders of winning teams always-always-let their people know where they stand.
2. Winning teams know the game plan.
3. Winning teams are honest.
4. Winning teams celebrate (Newsweek, 7/11/2011).

Bovee & Thill (2013) - Teams should be comprised of the right number of the right people with the following characteristics: clear sense of purpose, open and honest communication, creative thinking, accountability [to each other], focus, and decision by consensus (pp. 178-179).

BEST PRACTICES - EFFECTIVE STUDENT TEAMS

Young people need models, not critics (John Wooden, Legendary Coach)

For teamwork to be effective in the classroom, professors and students need to be motivated toward a unified goal. Daniel Pink (2009), in his book entitled *Drive,* speaks to the elements of true motivation which he defines as autonomy, mastery, and purpose. For students to bond as a team, sufficient time needs to be allotted as well. Group work may be completed in a class or two, while teamwork may require a semester project.

The Alfred P. Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology suggests universities should assist students in acquiring the needed skills to succeed professionally and personally when it becomes time for them to experience teamwork in the workforce (Breslow, 2005). The authors' experience in the classroom with assigning teamwork is usually insufficient for several reasons, but normally we approach the assignment as a "collaborative learning work group" rather than real teamwork. The students need to be taught the skills for team membership in a teamwork assignment in order to be successful in the classroom as well as in the workforce.

A collaborative learning work group assignment in class generally has the following characteristics:

1. Less facilitating on the part of the instructor
2. Size of the work group can be larger than the team group.
3. Generally the assignment takes less time for the work group.
4. Assignment facts are clear and the work group performs a question and answer response.
5. Answers come from assigned readings and minimal research is required.
6. Collaborative work groups practice group study skills.
7. The key is to interpret and report findings from the required readings.

A true teamwork assignment in class generally has the following characteristics:

1.   There should be more facilitating and teaching of teamwork basics.
2.   The size of the team is typically three to five members.
3.   The assignment is more detailed and takes more time to complete.
4.   Selection of team members varies between volunteers and assigned members.
5.   Facilitator provides more detailed feedback and assistance to team.
6.   Periodic peer reviews are essential to address the social loafer.
7.   Team members will display more skills and abilities to obtain results.

The above distinction is critical for classroom instruction since the students should not get the wrong impression of what true teamwork will be like in the workforce.

Guiding principles or best practices for teaching teamwork in the classroom are essential for students entering the workforce. As teachers/instructors/professors, we need to create the experience of teamwork for the students so they understand what it takes to be an effective teamwork member. For those of us who have years of business experience in teamwork, we understand how teamwork helps members develop action plans for improving the way they work together and the results they accomplish. Teamwork should be data-based and involve a high level of participation by all team members. High performance teams have a clear and shared sense of purpose, as well as strong internal commitments to accomplishments.

Best practices for teaching teamwork in the classroom could be as follows (Schermerhorn, 2008; Breslow, 2005; Robbins, 2000):

1.   Teach teamwork principles before making a team assignment.

If students are expected to succeed, professors have an obligation to teach on the subject of teamwork so that goals and objectives are clear.

2.   Set up a system for choosing team members.

Possibly assign them, ask for volunteers, choose a team leader, or have the class members interview for a team. The authors' experiences have shown greater success when the instructor selects the team leader to ensure a sufficient range of skills/experience/abilities.

3.   Regularly monitor the team's progress…provide feedback and assist.

It is essential that the professor remains actively involved by monitoring progress and suggesting adjustments when necessary. The goal is for a successful outcome, so periodic and consistent feedback brings assurance and confidence to the students that they are on the proper course for completion.

4.   Require periodical "peer" reviews and or team assessment of performance.

These provide an opportunity to review each person's progress from a peer perspective. This is critical since every team member has a role and is fulfilling his/her responsibilities.

5.   Take action to correct the "social loafer", "groupthink", and the "control freak".

Ultimately, individual members need to become cohesive members of the team with a unified identity. These personalities and attributes must be addressed as soon as they are identified by the professor or other peers through active communication.

6.   Provide guidelines for productive team meetings.

Tips from organizations, like Franklin/Covey, provide a valuable blueprint for effective meetings, such as the establishment of an agenda, specific timeframes and objectives, use of planners, etc.

7.   Explain that mutual risks and rewards are present for team members.

The team will succeed or fail based on the amount of cooperation and collaboration of the members.

8.   Identify decision-making and/or problem-solving stages for the students.

Students will learn and utilize a variety of decision-making models, such as the rational model with four stages - identify the problem; generate alternative solutions; evaluate alternatives and select a solution; and implement and evaluate the chosen solution (Kinicki & Fugate, 2012, pp. 252-253).

9.   Utilize an outdoor experiential course for teamwork activities, when available.

Outdoor courses often designed by the military can be used for a few hours or days throughout a semester to teach teamwork and leadership skills. Tuckman's Model can be observed as students progress through each stage. These personal experiences reveal attributes such as trust, bonding, strategic planning, and communication which can all be assessed. Examples of activities are included in Appendix A.

10.   Practice communication skills, such as e-mails, face-to-face, voice mail, etc.
Explain that at times there will be frustration/floundering as the team progresses, so active listening, compromising, and the sharing of information is key to resolving the issues.

11.   Use team rubric - Assess final outcome and role of each team member.

Grades and assessment criteria should include the overall outcome and also an individual component to assess whether the individual performed as a team member.

12.   Allow team members to rate and rank each other.

This brings objectivity to the process and, as a result, rating is based on truth versus the 'everyone did great' mentality. Ranking forces each member to evaluate all of the criteria and assess each attribute of the rubric. A sample of a rubric is included in Appendix B.

CONCLUSION

Teamwork is the ability to work together toward a common vision; the ability to direct individual accomplishment toward organizational objectives. It is the fuel that allows common people to attain uncommon results. (Andrew Carnegie)

The modern workforce is dynamic and continues to change. Our current educational system should also evolve to meet the needs of employers. The collective workplace sentiment is demanding skilled employees who are creative, innovative, collaborative and team players, not just group members. Teams that work have the ability to achieve their goals, fulfill the needs of their members, and maintain their survival through a collective blend of skills, personalities, and motivation. Effective teams afford organizations the ability to be nimble and respond and adjust to continuous changes in the workplace. Professors can effect change in the classroom by implementing some of the aforementioned practices and rewarding team performance. Figure 2 illustrates a model of teams that work.
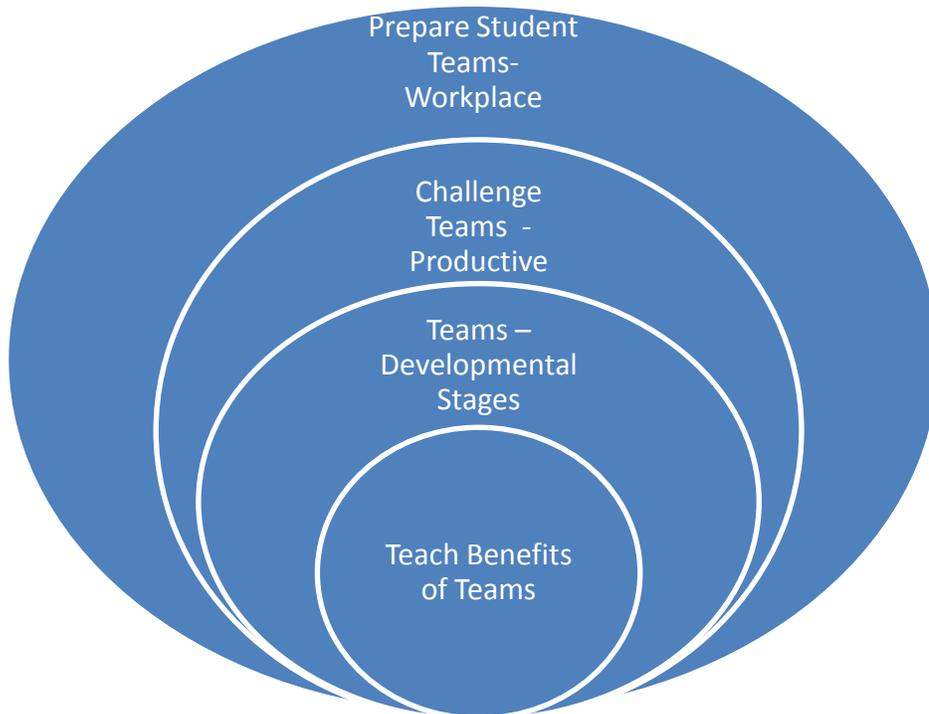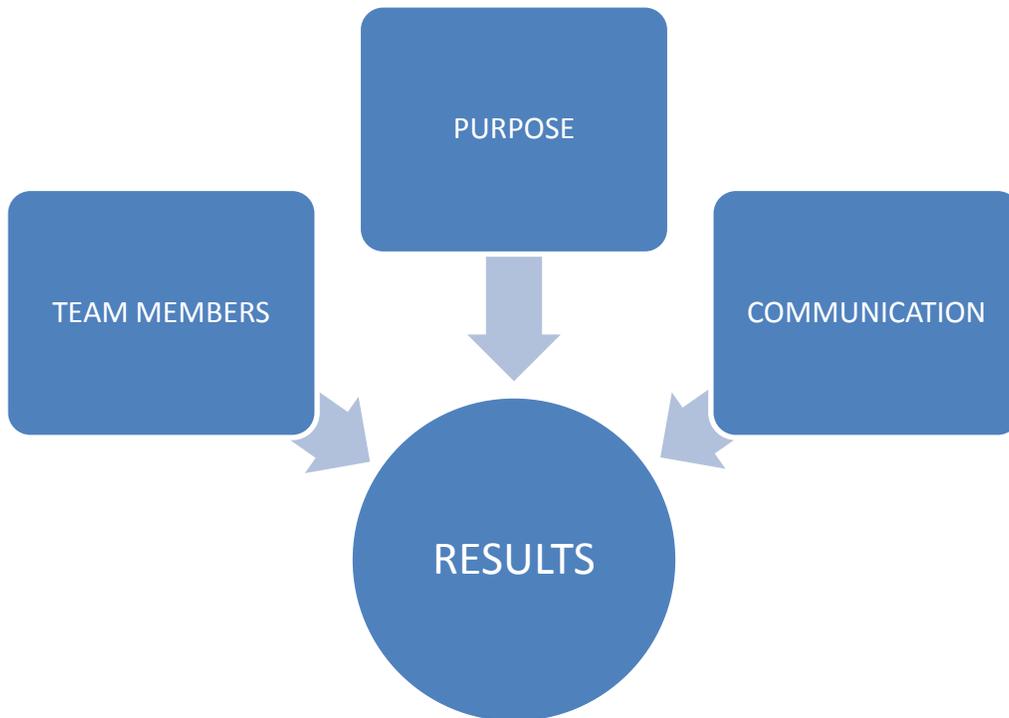
Prepare Student Teams- Workplace

Challenge Teams - Productive

Teams – Developmental Stages

Teach Benefits of Teams

Figure 2: The Model - 'Teams That Work' (above)

PURPOSE

TEAM MEMBERS

COMMUNICATION

RESULTS

Skilled Members With A Well-Defined Purpose Will Achieve Or Surpass Their Team's Goal.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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APPENDIX A

Sample Tasks/Exercises on a Leadership Reaction/Outdoor Experiential Course to Develop Teamwork Skills

Students are given tasks to be accomplished in a period of time that requires planning and teamwork skills. Other skills include:

- Confidence building
- Positive risk taking
- Setting goals
- Supporting team members
- Getting out of one's comfort zone

APPENDIX B

Appraisal Of Peer Performance

YOUR NAME:
CLASS:
DATE:

The purpose of this form is for each person to evaluate the contribution made by each individual team member during the project. All members should be evaluated on their total performance during the entire assignment. Appraise each person plus yourself (using the following scale):

5= Superior, outstanding positive impact
4= Excellent, significant positive impact
3= Adequate, moderate positive impact
2= Less than fair share, less than adequate, let down the group
1= Poor, let down the group significantly

An honest assessment of each team member's performance is expected, even when the results are substandard.

Names	Attendance	Effort	Knowledge	Preparation	Contribution

Please describe below anyone's performance deserving special recognition (name and reasons):

Please describe below (using the back if needed) anyone who failed to meet their obligations to the group (name and reasons):

Please rank each member of your team based on the criteria above. They will be ranked based on their respective performance as compared to each other.