

Challenges Facing Interprofessional Teams:

Tips for Effective Teamwork

BY

AFSANEH ALAVI MD
FRCPC(DERM)
LAURIE GOODMAN RN
BA IIWCC
PATRICIA COUTTS RN
IIWCC

Introduction



There are many reasons why teamwork in medicine is effective and beneficial. Over the past few years, healthcare professionals have experienced the benefits of interprofessional teams and have become more eager to work together in providing patient care. Patients prefer to be managed by a team because it gives them a sense of confidence and instills the belief they are receiving optimal care. When healthcare professionals with different areas of expertise work together as a team to identify a patient's problems, the treatment is likely to be more effective.¹

Healthcare professionals who practise as a team are better able to balance responsibilities and workload, particularly in challenging cases. It is imperative that healthcare professionals share their knowledge and unique expertise with each other. Such a collaborative environment provides a good resource that can be integrated and applied into shared patient care plans. Teamwork provides friendship and support for an entire group, and since teamwork facilitates being dynamic, the quality of care will be increased.

Development stages of teams

As described by Tuckman in 1965, every team develops through different stages: forming, storming, norming and performing.² In the *forming* stage, team members begin to get to know each other but lack sufficient confidence to work together. At this stage the group is analogous to a person who wants to swim but is standing at the side of the pool, cautiously dipping a toe into the water.

The second stage is *storming*. This is considered the most challenging phase for individuals and leadership. The attitude of every team member is crucial. If the team has a positive forming stage, including effective selection, clear objectives and outlines, then the challenges brought about during the storming phase can be easily overcome. By resolving conflicts and challenges, the group members begin to know each other and to

realize their responsibilities and the amount of work ahead. They are analogous to swimmers who jump into the water and splash around until they learn how to float.

During the *norming* period, team members become accustomed to working with each other, accepting responsibilities and helping other members – analogous to swimmers floating together smoothly. Team members now work effectively as a team as they enter the final stage, known as *performing*.

Challenges facing healthcare teams

Healthcare teams encounter significant challenges when working with individual patients and their circle of care. This holds true regardless of where care is provided, be it in a private office, clinic, community, hospital or long-term care setting. Some difficulties are common, while others are unique to the specific culture and healthcare system.

Not only does the healthcare system require changes to facilitate teamwork, but also individual staff from various disciplines should develop the knowledge and skills required to create a shared vision and collaborate. It is crucial to be able to work with those from different disciplines.

According to Krasner and colleagues, the concept of a trans-professional team means that team members do not think within the confines of their own individual disciplines or professions.¹ Team members may perform the function of another, but within the boundaries of their own professional scope of practice. Trans-professional teams can minimize delays in care delivery while optimizing patient care. Each team member works together for the common goal – to provide the best care for the patient. The following 12 recommendations provide practical ways of overcoming barriers to effective teamwork.

- 1. Promote group interaction.** Clear communication is key for any group to function, and establishing a weekly or monthly meeting can be an effective way to achieve this goal. The facilitator or leader of

Afsaneh Alavi

is with the Department of Medicine (Dermatology) at the University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario

Laurie Goodman

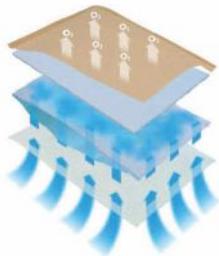
is a nurse clinician, skin and wound care, with Credit Valley Hospital, Mississauga, Ontario

Patricia Coutts

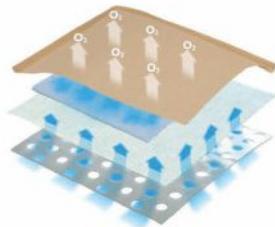
is Wound Care and Clinical Trials Co-ordinator, Dr. R. Gary Sibbald Dermatology Practice, Mississauga, Ontario



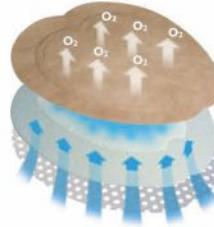
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Contact: Beth Trewin VP Sales & Marketing
btrewin@frems.ca 416-456-1477



the group must be a good listener, as communication provides a positive working relationship. In addition, documentation methods should be similar within the team to prevent duplication and enable team members to cover each other's work in case of absence.

2. **Encourage mutual flexibility**, adaptability, openness and willingness to share in the workload and leadership.
3. **Define the goals** and objectives of the team. Each individual might have different aims – some join a team for education, others for income and some for publication – but all team members should work in the same direction toward common goals.
4. **Empower the members** and request their opinions in group decision-making sessions, so they feel they belong to the group.
5. **Identify anxieties** and try to resolve them.
6. **Encourage some independence** and self-directedness of team members by avoiding excessive interference.
7. **Create an atmosphere conducive to effective team functioning.**
8. **Balance the responsibilities** within the team. It is very important to avoid providing too much external input to the team, as they may find it exhausting.

Some team members may dominate quieter ones, which can detract from the overall effectiveness.

9. **Prevent barriers** or silos by avoiding the formation of smaller groups within the larger team.
10. **Consider professional adulthood a requirement.** Addressed by Laidler in 1991, professional adulthood is important to crossing professional boundaries.³ Staff should feel confident with their roles and professional identities, so that team members do not feel uncomfortable in helping others or taking on certain parts of other roles. This also prevents jealousy within the team.
11. **Provide a supportive and safe environment** for working together on the same playing field. Flattened team structures are more effective, so avoid establishing a hierarchy.
12. **Provide mutual respect** for all members and acknowledge the unique contributions and successes of each. ☺

References

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