Understanding Your Role as a Team Member

With multiple people involved in accomplishing a project, it's critical that everyone know what is and is not expected from them in their team activities. In most cases their technical contributions are the primary reason they were selected for team membership, and that expertise will form the foundation of their participation. However, there is much more to being an effective team member than knowing how to perform specific tasks. How well you end up working together, and therefore, how well you meet the team's objectives depend on how well you understand your role.

You need to:

- Commit to team goals.
- Ask for clarification if necessary.
- Identify and define related roles.

Commit to Team Goals

Team goals are often established by the person who assembled the team. Generally, the task is identified first, and then the decision is made to form a team to tackle it. But sometimes the team sets its own goals at the beginning of its life cycle. In either case, to be a fully empowered and effective team member, you must clearly understand the team's purpose, goals and objectives, and vision for success and feel that they are yours.

Ask for Clarification

Team members often leave their first meeting with even more questions than they had when they arrived. If there is one word that describes what it takes to be an effective team member, that word may be initiative. From the beginning, you need to take responsibility to clarify anything you don't understand.

Asking clarifying questions is particularly vital in a team setting. The difficulty of communicating effectively increases exponentially with the number of people involved, and a misunderstanding on a team can be very expensive in hard costs and human costs alike.

Asking clarifying questions also helps your team leader overcome the challenges he or she faces. The more you seek and obtain answers, the less the team leader has to worry about whether you understand, are committed, and are on board. So, ask questions, and don't wait for someone else to notice that you need answers!

Identify Related Roles

You are on the team to provide some professional or technical expertise required to accomplish the team's goals. If it's not clear to you why you were included, ask your team leader. If others with related expertise are on the team, identify how you can integrate your efforts to avoid redundancy and ensure that all bases are covered.

You have another role besides a technical one-that of team member. Do you have responsibilities related to getting the team going, helping it function, pulling it back on track, performing administrative tasks? Clarification of roles and responsibilities is an important team process, and if your leader doesn't do it in a formal way, you can request that it be done. Being aware of the roles of others on the team will facilitate smooth working relationships.

Effective teams don't spontaneously occur just because a group of people has been put together in a room and given an assignment. High performing teams start their development process with a shared vision of what it means to be a team and how the team will work together to accomplish its goals.