

# Overcoming Impediments to Team Flow

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**Background:** For most of us, teamwork constitutes an important and prominent part of our working lives. It would be wonderful if collaborations in the workplace could be filled with passion, trust, and synergy, such that team members act and flow as one and the possibilities seem endless and effortless. Unfortunately, the reality is too often teams' crumbling under the pressure of high performance expectations and team members engaging in destructive competition despite sharing the same purpose. Instead of synergy and positivity, team members experience burnout and stress.

**Aim:** With teamwork being so critical to organizational success, businesses are in urgent need of tools that can help alleviate these problems and create conditions for teams to thrive. Building on Csikszentmihalyi's research on flow [1], team flow is defined as a shared experience of flow during the execution of interdependent personal tasks that serve the interest of the team, originating from an optimized team dynamic and typified by seven prerequisites and four characteristics at the team level [2]. Despite the noted potential for team flow to enhance team performance, subjective well-being, and a healthy team dynamic, there are potential pitfalls that can inhibit team flow that have not yet been researched.

**Method:** To remedy this, we collected interview and focus group data from both student teams (365 students comprising 60 project teams) and business teams (263 professionals of 28 teams). The focus group consisted of a team of 20 mental health care professionals working in shifts.

**Results:** In our search for impediments to the experience of team flow, we have seen that many factors can impede team flow experiences. Prominent factors for the student project teams were related to accountability and motivational issues (co-worker laxity, disengagement), interpersonal issues within the process of collaboration (miscommunication, negativity, disagreement, conflict), task-related issues (ambiguity, disorganization, work pressure, lack of challenge) and environmental issues (distractions). The teams in professional organizations generally experience the same impediments to team flow, though dissatisfaction with the work itself appears less common. For them, key factors involved the lack of engagement and communication in terms of receiving timely and constructive feedback, slowness, and distrust. The mental healthcare team listed insecurity as its foremost impediment to team flow as they experienced a culture of harsh punishment for mistakes both within the team and in the surrounding organization. This shows that a sense of security, that the workplace is a safe place both in the physical and psychological sense, is an essential precondition for experiencing team flow.

**Conclusions:** Not surprisingly, all reasons given by the teams for their inability to experience team flow correspond closely with the prerequisites identified in the team flow theory [3]. Based on this research, we offer guidelines for preventing and/or overcoming these obstacles.

## References

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