

Seven Myths About Nice Teams

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Nice teams mistakenly believe that playing nice is what cooperation and teamwork are all about. They believe that getting along requires people to be nice to each other—all the time. They collectively believe the seven most common myths about nice teamwork.

Myth 1: We only praise each other, and we do it often!

We have nothing but positive, uplifting things to say to each other. We don't waste time and energy criticizing each other or finding fault. Constructive feedback and developmental feedback are negative, and we don't need that stuff pulling us down.

The Sad Truth: We really share only part of the story with each other. Our praise is usually vague and insincere. It consists of hollow platitudes and can even come off as dismissive. Constructive or negative comments are saved for private conversations far from the earshot of the person we're discussing.

SO, we don't help each other improve. Our positive feedback is not specific enough to truly reinforce beneficial behaviors. If we do try to give constructive feedback, it's usually so whitewashed or vague it has no real meaning. When truly helpful constructive feedback is actually given, we—or even the giver—quickly jump to the receiver's aid. We rescue the receiver from the feedback by justifying, excusing, or otherwise minimizing the quality and potential impact of the feedback.

We justify backbiting by calling it "venting" or "seeking help from a trusted colleague on a relationship issue." Some of us just bottle up our thoughts and feelings, and we explode every once in a while. When this happens, everyone is devastated. The person who blew up is usually ostracized—at least temporarily—for breaking the peace or hurting someone's feelings.

Myth 2: We stay focused on the task and don't get sidetracked by talking about things that aren't directly related to the task that needs to get done!

Positive and optimistic, we come to agreement quickly and efficiently. We don't let negative thinking get us down. We are quick to take action!

The Sad Truth: We really don't plan well. We take action before we really think things through. We neglect contingency planning, assuming our course of action will work every time. We get caught up in groupthink and discourage differing opinions. We celebrate those with similar thoughts, approaches, and styles, thereby maintaining an environment that is far from diverse or inclusive.

SO, we dismiss those who want to play devil's advocate. When someone wants to look at the risks, we roll our eyes, become impatient, groan out loud, and dismiss them as quickly as possible.

Myth 3: Our clients love us because we always find a way to say "yes!"

We're not here to say "no" to them. It may be tough, but we'll find a way to include everyone's request on our master work plan. We'll do anything to keep them happy!

The Sad Truth: We really say "yes" to everyone because we are afraid to say "no." We haven't done the real work to get everyone in the team on the same page with our mission, vision, and strategy. As a result, we can't expect them to weigh an incoming request against our purpose and plans and make an intelligent decision.

SO, we miss targets and deadlines. We have good reasons (we're overwhelmed), but that doesn't help our reputation with key clients. We overload ourselves with work, and then we either have to work a lot of overtime or outsource some of the work to get it all done. We feel overworked (and underappreciated) a lot. We end up renegotiating deadlines and other commitments. Things may fall off the table—not deliberately and with purpose, but by oversight and from lack of planning and prioritization. The more overwhelmed we feel, the more justified is our belief in Myth 2.

Myth 4: We respect each other and the strengths each team member brings to the team!

As acknowledged professionals, we don't doubt, challenge, or second-guess each other. Our leader is especially revered and respected. When our team leader makes a decision, we are saved the time and trouble of working out which way to go.

The Sad Truth: We really defer tough team decisions to our leader or to someone equally "deserving." Deference allows us to avoid having to wrestle with each other. We each put in our opinions without debate, and then look to our leader to choose, or we defer team decision making to a team member who is deserving. A pecking order influences decision making. Team members who are closest to an issue or the most vested have more say than the rest of us. Those new to the team and those with lower positions in the organization have less say, regardless of their expertise or qualifications.

SO, we can't be held accountable if an individual makes the decision. Moreover, if that individual is the team leader, all the better because then we're sure of his or her support. If things don't go well, we're not to blame; so we're off the hook. If someone other than the team leader decides, such as the person closest to the issue, we only have to support it halfheartedly. When the project fails, we can claim minimal involvement (and not look bad), while blaming the decision maker.

Myth 5: We refrain from unnecessary conflict and confrontation!

There's no place here for fighting and arguing. We get along well, and we all play NICEly together. Everyone likes each other and cooperates for the good of the team!

The Sad Truth: We really avoid all conflict and confrontation--even the necessary stuff. We sweep things under the rug so that we don't have to deal with the difficult stuff. We gloss over real problems. No one points out any elephants in the room. We don't deal with anything directly. We deal indirectly by pulling another person into our conflict, and we expect that person to negotiate some kind of resolution for us--without our having to do the work. We don't debate or even explore possibilities: We just talk around things. If a team member is brave enough to object to something, everyone else backs off the current position. The objection is not explored; it's accepted immediately and without question. Or it's countered with another statement that is then accepted immediately.

SO, we never resolve real problems, and they keep coming back to haunt us. We end up creating all kinds of work-arounds: We work around issues or problems or even each other, instead of dealing with things. This tactic usually means more work, more time, or more expense; but we find it's worth it to avoid actually having to deal with the problem.

Myth 6: We are open and flexible and freewheeling!

We are always open to new information whenever it is available. We don't allow ourselves to be tied to agendas and timelines in meetings. We don't bind each other with roles and responsibilities but remain flexible in how each of us approaches work.

The Sad Truth: We really only rarely make any real decisions. Each time we get close to a decision, we can get sidetracked easily by just about anyone or anything. Meetings drag on as we get caught up in tangents. When we do make a decision, it is always subject to revision when more information is available or when someone decides (later) to consider a new perspective.

SO we remain unclear on our roles and don't confront each other to clarify them. We assume it's the team leader's job to do that. Decisions that do get made are supported only halfheartedly and are frequently reversed or altered later when new information is available. Reversing and altering decisions are done in private, with one or two members and the team leader. Communication following a meeting is rare.

Myth 7: We are efficient!

We don't waste time talking about feelings and emotions. We focus on the task, not on each other. When interpersonal relationship issues come up, we move to resolve them as quickly as possible so that they don't get in the way of the real work we're doing.

The Sad Truth: We really just brush over real interpersonal problems in the name of efficiency. When team members try to address interpersonal issues, the rest of us hush them with a desire to stay focused on the task at hand or to use our time most efficiently—on the work, not on relationships. All of a sudden, we violate our attachment to Myth 6, and the agenda becomes paramount. We have no time for so-called tangents, we must now stay within our time constraints. We expect relationships to take care of themselves. After all, how can there be any serious issues when everyone is so NICE to each other?

SO, resentment builds over unresolved issues. Playing NICE takes on a sinister tone. Individuals who feel wronged get passive-aggressive in their attempt to even the score because they are not permitted true resolution. Time and resources are wasted in attempts to sabotage the team's (or an individual's) effort for personal gain or revenge. Trust dissolves. Team members become suspicious of hidden agendas and ulterior motiv. They work hard to protect themselves from each other.

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