What Is a Team?

By Sherry Heinze, Senior Test Consultant
March 31, 2015

I have worked on teams ever since I started in software development in, what was then called the Systems Department; some teams were as small as three people and others were well over a hundred people. I never really thought about what I meant by a team until years later. I have stayed in IT for as long as I have for two reasons: most of the smartest and most interesting (to me) people I know work in IT, and we usually work in teams.

“IT teams can be competitive too where there is a hierarchal structure.”

People work and play on teams in a lot of different situations – work, sports, communities, etc. Team members can be competitive with each other, collaborative or sometimes both. Sports teams are usually both, the teams competing against each other and the team members competing for better spots on the team. IT teams can be competitive too where there is a hierarchal structure. In the ideal scenario, we simply collaborate with each other and the competitive drive many people have is directed towards the problems we are trying to solve together. Different people lead, depending on the situation. In other companies, the teams have a leader and assigned positions. There is a hierarchy and you are expected to obey the people in charge. If you don’t play exclusively your own position or follow the leader, you will probably get in trouble. You may even be thrown off the team. Some of us aren’t very good at working in isolation or following the leader. I never was.

Lately, I have been reading about leadership, various kinds of intelligence and how companies can keep their employees engaged. Leaders need to be competent in emotional intelligence, which includes things like self-management, adaptability and having a positive outlook. They also need to consider social intelligence, which includes things like teamwork, conflict management and coaching and mentoring. [3] [4] These are all things that build both leaders and team players. Management skills and technical skills are more respected in many companies than soft or people skills. Many kinds of skills are needed in any business. If you think your staff is your greatest asset, which your people certainly are in knowledge work, remember that you can only keep them if they are engaged.

In systems work, the needs and demands change quickly. Most of what we do is research and development, which has never been done before, and will never be done again. The hierarchal model of management, the unchangeable requirements and the enforced roles don’t work well in this environment. We
have to leverage the whole team to do really
good work. We have to work together to create
something new. We have to work fast to get a
product to market, to keep up with government
regulations, to satisfy the business departments
and the shareholders. Studies show that
employees with emotional intelligence
competencies are significantly more productive
[1] [2]. We all need emotional intelligence and
social intelligence to be effective, whether or not
we are leaders or managers.

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Before I worked in Systems / Information
Systems / Information Technology, I worked for
someone who was the first good manager I ever
had. I would take ideas to him and we would talk
about them. He never seemed to like them at the
time. However, a few days later, he would often
come back with his great new idea, which would
sound very familiar. It made one of our
colleagues crazy that he did not give me credit.
In the three years I worked for him, I never got
credit for a good idea. In the same three years,
he promoted me from junior clerk to supervisor,
and taught me, and encouraged me to learn,
about the business. He also tripled my salary and
wrote a recommendation that got me a job in
the company’s Systems Department. I was more
engaged by him than most of the managers I had
later.

In 1990, I worked on a large project team that
designed and built several systems and
integrated them with each other. The project
included a couple of existing systems and a
vendor accounting application with three
separate but connected modules. We started
with about twenty people doing analysis and
design from both the user company and the
consulting company. A year later, we had a
hundred and thirteen people doing training and
implementation. At the beginning of the design
stage, I worked with a user company developer
and a consulting company analyst on two of the
subsystems. One day, the project manager sat us
down together to discuss the individual
assignments we had been given. When she was
finished, the developer said that he and the
analyst had discussed them and decided I had
too much to do, and that each of them would do
some of my assigned tasks. The project manager
was very upset. She asked who would be
responsible, essentially who could be blamed if
they were not done. The developer said “The
team will be responsible and the team will get it
done.” And we did, even when he was recalled
to work on a production system for a month.
Ever since then, that has been my definition of a
team.

“Teams share ideas and team
players share credit.”

Recently, I read Jowett’s Law "The way to get
things done is not to mind who gets the credit for
doing them." To me, that is one characteristic of
a team. Teams share ideas and team players
share credit. In a variety of ways, teams interact
and engage each other, regardless of their role
on the team. Teams may have one leader or
many, depending on what is needed. A manager may also be a leader and / or part of the team. We all need to cultivate Emotional Intelligence and Social Intelligence to work together as a team.

That’s my idea of a team. What’s yours?


About The Author

Sherry Heinze is a Senior Test Consultant with Professional Quality Assurance (PQA Testing) with over 30 years of Information Technology experience, as a Test Lead, Tester, QA Analyst and Trainer. With a broad background in analysis, design, testing, training, implementation, documentation and user support, Sherry has focused on testing from the analysis phase forward, developing testing related and quality assurance processes, training and mentoring.

Sherry has extensive experience working with users and technical staff to identify and test requirements; design, create, implement and support systems in a number of industries, including oil and gas. She has worked for large corporations with detailed standards and guidelines for development projects, both working alone and within large groups, along with companies who are just introducing processes or testing to their culture.