

What is a Team Player?

We've all heard the phrase. Sometimes it's about us. Sometimes it's about someone we know. Why didn't I get the promotion? Why didn't she get the raise? Why am I not valued in this organization?

"You're just not a team player."

Is it just an excuse? Is it an easy way for a manager to get back at someone he or she doesn't like? Or is there really something to that phrase? Just what, really, is a team player?

The truth is that there really is such a thing as a team player, and it isn't just a euphemism for a yes-man or the boss's pet. A team player is an employee that understands exactly what it is that the organization expects from them, and consistently meets that expectation. In many ways, it is a simple concept. Give the organization what it expects. Be the kind of employee the company wants. What could be easier?

In other ways, it is not so simple. Often the organization has expectations that are not clearly written into your job description. There are cultural norms that differ from organization to organization, and even from unit to unit within an organization. There are behavioral norms, traditions, and even dress codes that may be written or unwritten. Many organizations have expectations of their employees that they simply are not good at communicating. Some employees stumble across these expectations, meeting them almost by accident of personality, or because they know someone with more experience who clues them in.

There are two groups of other employees who, unfortunately, are not so lucky, and often their careers suffer for it. The first group is new professionals who regularly enter the workforce with great educational experience and credentials, but without a mature understanding of what organizations expect from their employees. All too often these new professionals eventually become the second group, middle managers whose careers have stalled because they have never been taught how to meet their organizations expectations. Both groups need to learn how to become team players.

The good news is that there are some overarching expectations that all organizations have of their employees. These expectations apply to all types of organizations and all types of employees at all levels of management.

First, your organization expects you to have its best interests at heart. The interests of individuals, offices, departments, divisions and any other subunit you can think of are secondary to the best interest of the organization as a whole. Units and people should pursue their goals and objectives, but any time there is a conflict between the interests of a unit and the interests of the larger organization, the interests of the organization win.

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By Steve Eubanks, July 1, 2008

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Second, your organization expects you to trust management. Whatever your opinion about the skills, abilities, personalities, looks or smells of your supervisors, you should keep to yourself. The organization pays your supervisors to supervise you and pays you to be supervised, and as such expects you to trust the leadership of the leaders.

Third, the organization expects you to support its decisions. You may, on occasion, be given an opportunity to have input on an organizational decision, in which case you should give your opinion competently and passionately. Once a decision has been made, however, the organization is paying you to support it, whether you agree with it or not.

Fourth, the organization expects you to understand the context that you work in. The organization does not do business or make decisions in a vacuum. There are all kinds of constraints, advantages, obstacles and opportunities both inside and outside the organization that effect and sometimes drive decisions. The organization expects you to pay enough attention to context that you can understand and effectively support organizational decisions.

Lastly, the organization expects one hundred percent effort from its employees. This seems obvious, but there are two subtleties to remember. One is that one hundred percent is an average. Just as there are down-times during which you will enjoy a lighter workload, there are also up-times during which the organization expects you to give a little extra without complaining. Also, just as the organization does not want you to consistently give eighty percent, which means you're lazy, it does not want you to consistently give one hundred and twenty percent, because that leads to burnout.

In exchange for your paycheck, your organization expects each of these five things in return. If there is any one of these things that you don't feel you can legally, ethically or morally give to your organization, you need to consider carefully whether you can continue to work for them. However, giving these five things consistently and enthusiastically will make you a valuable member of your organization.

In other words, a team player.