

Four strategies to increase the likelihood of creating and sustaining successful research teams



*Modern scientific expertise rests heavily upon work carried out by teams, rather than scholars working on their own. Proper preparation is key, with some research suggesting that the effectiveness of collaborative work is determined before any of the work is carried out. **Howard Aldrich** and **Akram Al-Turk** have identified four structural elements that increase the likelihood of creating and sustaining collaborative relationships. These cover the importance of focused definitions of a project's scope; explicit agreement on individual responsibilities; cast-iron deadlines and timely feedback; and innovative coordination mechanisms.*

The scientific community celebrates individual achievements by conferring prestige and honours on scientists who win out in the competitive game of being the first to publish innovative research. Paradoxically, however, modern scientific expertise rests heavily upon work carried out by teams, rather than scholars working on their own. Tensions between the forces of competition and cooperation thus infuse every aspect of scholarly activities: grant writing, publishing, leadership in scientific organisations, and so forth. Thus, it is understandable that graduate students and junior scholars would be perplexed by how to manage such tensions.

We believe the key to successful collaborative relationships lies in preparing for them ahead of time, rather than attempting to deal with problems as they arise. In fact, [some research](#) suggests that the effectiveness of collaborative work is determined before any of the work is [carried out](#). We have identified four structural elements that increase the likelihood of creating and sustaining collaborative relationships.

Define the scope and logic of the project

At the start, the parties to a collaborative relationship should agree on a project's scope and logic of inquiry. The researchers should ask themselves a few questions that will ensure that they are all on the same page. For example, will the project be open-ended, continuing until all possible avenues of interpretation have been explored and as many papers as possible published? Or, is the project more self-contained, with target journals or conferences identified and the project ended when a paper is accepted? Is the relevant data for the project already in hand or clearly identified, or will building a new dataset be a major thrust of the effort? Sharing "mental models" of the work to be done and how it should be carried out leads to [effective teamwork](#).

In addition to being able to answer these questions, the *types* of goals a team comes up with will likely affect how well the collaboration goes. Although "write a paper together and get it published" is a common goal for academic collaborations, the success of the research project may depend on having a compelling goal. Is the research question challenging and (by academic standards) [somewhat consequential](#)? And, is the goal focused enough so that researchers are working toward a final product but open-ended enough that researchers have some level of autonomy and [can be creative when the need arises](#)? Interdisciplinary teams need to communicate with one another the reward systems of their disciplines, as some may place higher values on books than journal articles, or may value certain kinds of journals over others.



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Agree about responsibilities

Teams should also be deliberative and explicit about each researcher's responsibilities. External factors often dictate how well an organisation (or group) does, but individual interventions, especially by team leaders, can lead to more [effective team performance](#). Teams should decide whether one person will be identified as the "leader" of the project, ultimately responsible for taking major decisions (after consulting with the team) or whether leadership responsibilities will be rotated. In either case, a leader can increase effectiveness by ensuring that the research team comprises individuals whose skills and competencies complement each other and all contribute to the overall goal of the project, designing tasks that give everyone enough autonomy to make their contributions personally fulfilling and meaningful to the project and establishing norms of how the group will work and interact. Teams should identify each team member's competencies, clarify what that member will do to move the project forward, and make sure [everyone on the team knows the others' roles](#).

Enforce deadlines and give/receive timely feedback

Failure to meet deadlines often sinks collaborative relationships. However, failure to even set deadlines is probably a bigger headache. Without deadlines, members have no way of holding one another accountable for holding up their end of the relationship, as a member can always say that they're not quite finished yet or they will have their part done "soon". To receive the benefits of collaborating with people who have complementary skills, team members must be ready to comment in a timely fashion on intermediate products produced by others. First, team leaders can make sure that all researchers on the team are kept in the loop about how the project is going. Second, leaders can try to encourage everyone on the research team (and model ways) to provide good, timely feedback; e.g. by scheduling regular feedback sessions.

Use coordination mechanisms that facilitate the collaboration process

Coordination and communication challenges can hinder the success of collaborative research. Although email and video conferencing services such as Skype have become ubiquitous, these technologies do not necessarily ensure that collaboration is successful. For example, although email and video conferencing allow researchers to communicate more easily, these kinds of tools may not be the best for task coordination, information sharing, and [intra-project learning](#). One of the main challenges for teamwork is juggling multiple and simultaneous work tasks. Researchers, therefore, should use tools that help them manage these multiple tasks, allowing them to know what's expected of them and see changes to the project almost instantaneously. A plethora of programmes and software now allow for this. We recommend that researchers start with one that has low start-up costs – both in terms of time and money – and not be lured by fancy features, as they can be a time sink. Sometimes, investing in innovative technologies is worth the time, but teams should be deliberate about whether the investment is worth it for their project.

Summary

We have identified strategies for mitigating or eliminating collaboration problems in team-based research. At the beginning of a project, face-to-face meetings can establish the ground rules and expectations for all members of the team. Free-riding, shirking, and social loafing are much harder when team members agree on responsibilities and create monitoring and enforcement mechanisms. Candid and timely feedback limits the damage that emergent problems can create, but requires strong leadership and commitment by all members to be effective. Finally, as in other collaborative efforts, having state-of-the-art coordination and communication technologies facilitates effective team governance.

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