

SmartBlog on Leadership

Engage. Innovate. Discuss.

Lessons on teamwork from really bad team members

By [Joel Garfinkle](#) on May 21st, 2012

The best managers understand that effective leaders are also solid team players. The workplace is filled with capable teammates — even some who take initiative, overdeliver and inspire colleagues. Unfortunately, there's also the occasional employee who has no idea how to collaborate or communicate effectively. Such poor performers aren't entirely useless, though. They offer some of the most poignant lessons on teamwork and leadership.

Here are seven things failing team members do — and what you can learn from them.

1. **Complain about everyone and everything.** The worst co-workers are often the most negative ones. Employees who complain regularly about others — or about circumstances in general — do little to help the team and much to hurt it. The most effective team members stay positive and find [good ways to provide feedback](#).
2. **Gossip regularly (about work or personal issues).** Nothing breeds distrust and paranoia like [gossiping in the workplace](#). Team members who spread — or worse, start — rumors are literally sowing the seeds of discord. The best team members and leaders express an interest in colleagues' personal life but respect everyone's privacy and dignity.
3. **Hoard knowledge.** There's nothing wrong with a lust for learning, but ineffective team members often accumulate as many secrets as possible and are loath to share helpful information with co-workers. Hoarders think their unique knowledge is valuable, but they don't realize that unshared knowledge is useless. The best team members establish themselves as experts by becoming go-to resources in their field of specialization.
4. **Talk almost completely about themselves.** There's nothing wrong with self-promotion and [increasing your visibility](#) at work, but poor team members take this quality to a fault. They're especially likely to use words such as "I" and "me" and take individual credit for their team's success. On the other hand, the best teammates promote their team's success, ask lots of questions, know when to listen and use words such as "we" and "us."
5. **Play the blame game.** Every team member — from executive to entry-level employee — should learn to take responsibility for his or her actions. By casting blame, workers actually diminish their sphere of influence, personal autonomy, others' trust in them and colleagues' respect. The most successful team members take responsibility for success and failure and right any mistake if possible.
6. **Look for reasons to exclude people.** Some teammates try to create small, insular groups and find every reason to limit the size and definition of their team. Such focus on exclusivity only limits the team's perspective and options. High-performing teams cast the widest net possible and examine every reasonable solution or resource.
7. **Lack empathy.** It might be easy for some workers to lose sight of their teammates' feelings, but there's almost never a good excuse for doing so. The worst team members show an actively callous disregard for colleagues' well-being. On the other hand, the most successful ones keep lines of communication open, pay attention to colleagues and make themselves as approachable.

If you want to become an effective, brilliant team member, take a look at your poorest-performing teammates — and do the opposite. Once you master the skills of clear and effective communication, building positive relationships at work, promoting yourself and teammates, and taking responsibility for your actions, you'll be on your way to becoming a highly effective team leader.

Joel Garfinkle is the author of ["Getting Ahead: Three Steps to Take Your Career to the Next Level."](#) As an [executive coach](#), Garfinkle has worked with many top international companies, including Cisco Systems, Oracle, Deloitte, Amazon, Starbucks, Google, Citibank, Microsoft and The Ritz-Carlton. You can view more than 100 [articles on leadership communication](#), and subscribe to his [Leadership Development newsletter](#) to receive e-book "40 Proven Strategies to Get Promoted Now!" for free.