

# **LEARNING FROM TEAMWORK**

**A Workshop for Organizing Human Services  
at Gabriel Dumont**

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**INTRODUCTION**

This report is a follow-up to the team-building workshop held at Gabriel Dumont on Saturday, December 2, 1995. The report will serve to ...

- Summarize the key ideas from the workshop
- Identify the core values and principles of teamwork
- Identify teamwork issues that surfaced during the workshop and the steps taken to respond to these issues
- Provide a team building self-assessment check-list

Also, the report gives me an opportunity to reflect, “after the fact”, about some of the future needs of your team, and offer some recommendations.

## **WHAT IS TEAMWORK?**

Teamwork is simply a way of organizing work between people. Rather than working in isolation in separate units, departments or programs, teamwork is the periodic or even regular coming together of staff. The teamwork principle of organizing work is used in many different organizations, including business corporation, hospitals, schools and universities, human service organizations, research projects and many other settings.

Although most people working in all types of work settings value the importance of teamwork as a way of organizing, experience has shown that management and staff in all settings must work hard to make it work. One way of achieving teamwork success is to think about what it means, and what value it has to the flow and quality of work.

One of the first things we did during the workshop was to identify everyone’s sense of what teamwork is, and why it is important. When asked to “think about the first things that come to mind when you think of the word “team”, the following descriptions were shared:

### **Teamwork is ....**

- **Sharing experiences**

- **Clarifying and sharing one common goal, and the objectives to reach that goal**
- **Supporting each other**
- **Collaborating in one's thinking**
- **Sharing perspectives**
- **Contributing to group improvement and individual learning through feedback**
- **Sharing the responsibilities**
- **Creativity**
- **Introducing fun into work**
- **Believing in what one is doing**
- **"The Montreal Canadians"**
- **Carrying out tasks and responsibilities**
- **Using and building skills**
- **Leadership**
- **Being approachable**
- **Being dependable**

I followed up this sharing of experiences with....

## **The Core Principles of Teamwork**

### **Communication is essential**

This acknowledges that each person has important information to contribute about the community. Different team members can communicate their unique perspective

concerning such things as the causes of problems and the effects on people, what might be useful ways of helping, and the possible difficulties and best ways of putting a service into place.

Broadly speaking, communication is enhanced within teams when there are ...

- opportunities for regular communications
- the appropriate roles to support communication within the group (e.g. facilitator, minute-taker, peace-maker, etc)
- communication skills (e.g.. active listening, feedback, checking-out, etc.) and attitudes (“everyone’s ideas are important”)

### **Collaboration in Planning and Delivery**

In the human services, teamwork provides the opportunity for **collaborating** on the planning for specific activities that will be taken in pursuit of **common goals**. In many cases, this collaboration provides the necessary **co-ordination**, resulting in **consistency** of programs and services to the community. All of this is more likely to result in positive **outcome**.

Collaborate planning also increases the likelihood that a **variety of strategies, treatments and techniques** will be incorporated in the various mix of programs. This is where the various experiences of the team members will come into play.

### **Conflict Prevention and Resolution**

Conflict is an inevitable part of work, and it can be quite healthy if surfaced and resolved. Unresolved conflict is a block to good service, and a creator of stress for people. Unnecessary conflict can be avoided with good team communications.

The team is a good organizational arrangement for resolving conflicts between programs and people. Teamwork can help surface the different values and priorities which lie behind disagreements. It clarifies misunderstandings and renews a shared sense of common purpose. If well done, conflict management can actually lead to new ideas and excitement!

### **Personal and Professional Development**

A well-functioning team can be an excellent **environment for learning**. **Feedback** among colleagues leads to immediate learning about oneself and one’s work. There can be **emotional support** in demanding stressful environments. Time permitting, some

teams provide **training opportunities** for each other. Ultimately, teamwork can promote **higher morale** and **satisfaction** with one's job and career.

## **TEAMWORK ISSUES AT GABRIEL DUMONT**

One of the useful team-building activities during the workshop involved the identification of issues that were creating some dissatisfactions among program staff.

In each case, the issues were discussed freely and were resolved through specific actions. These actions were done during the workshop or were planned for the future.

In the following discussion, I summarize the issues and indicate the steps taken to resolve the issues. **It is noteworthy that the steps taken both (i) resolved the specific issues, and (ii) established conditions for stronger teamwork in the future.**

As a background to a review of these issues, three points should be made. **First**, because of recent expansion and adding new staff, the three programs have not had sufficient opportunity to work together and build their team on a regular basis. **Secondly**, all members of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program have been hired on a part-time contractual basis. This does not allow the time for sufficient co-ordinating efforts between teams.

**Thirdly**, the following issues were not discussed in a “blaming” way, but rather in a good way. People recognized that these issues were related to “growing pains” among the programs, and that resolution could easily be achieved through discussion, clarification, and stronger co-ordination between programs. It is my intention to describe the issues in the same spirit.

## **1. The Role of the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program**

Members of the Youth Program were unclear about their program’s relationship to the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program. They felt that, in the past, they had been asked to re-arrange their own planned work activities at the last minute when called upon to assist the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program. They were unclear about the implications of Mino being viewed as a “priority program” who would “give direction” to the others.

### **Resolution**

During the ensuing discussion, the following steps were taken to resolve this issue. It was first clarified that the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program was not in a position of authority over the Youth Program. What is really intended is that because of the greater experience among Mino staff, they are available to give advice or consulting to the Youth Program.

In the future, collaborative planning and “checking in” would happen in the team meetings. This would assure that no unintended power differences would be seen, and that overlap of activities would be avoided. Collaboration would also be helped by a visible program schedule of activities, and by mailboxes.

The group affirmed a sense of respect for the Youth Program, acknowledging its importance in the over-all system of services.

## **2. Internal Communication**

The Program Co-ordinators have met in the past. The main issue here is that the information shared at those meetings have not been fully communicated to the program staff. This may be partly the reason that they were not fully aware of program details or scheduling.

### **Resolution**

The Co-ordinators made the commitment to share key information during their own program meetings. Also, minutes of the Co-ordinators' meetings will be circulated. Monthly "all-staff meetings" will also contribute to improved communications.

### **3. Referrals from the Community Watch Program**

During the discussion of the Community Watch Program, Debby sought clarification concerning the kinds of referrals that were expected from her. For example, should he make individual referrals when she becomes aware of specific tenants having personal problems? Or, does referral mean making the tenants generally aware of the programs available, and the kinds of services available from each program.

#### **Resolution**

The follow-up discussion clarified the three major functions of the Community Watch Program: (i) outreach (ii) support, and (iii) referral. "Referral" refers primarily to "program awareness", that is, helping to educate the community about available programs. Presumably, this will help individual persons with problems seek more detailed information from specific Co-ordinators, and possibly make a self-referral.

Making tenants aware of existing programs may happen while Debby provides support to clients during a crisis. On such occasions, Debby may sense that tenants need to talk during a particularly bad time. This supportive response is one of listening, understanding and showing empathy, and not depth counseling. If tenants express their need for further help, it would be appropriate for Debby to share information about specific programs.

Terry added that the Community Watch Program will be useful for rebuilding the community. By circulating information about programs, and by equipping local volunteers to offer support, the program empowers community members as individuals and as a group to take action against their own problems.

### **4. Community Training**

One of the services provided by the Community Watch Program is training. Training builds knowledge of the issues in the community (e.g.. Family violence), and helps to establish the appropriate reporting system. The main issue is that turnout by Community Watch members has been disappointing. No specific time (Week-days, week-nights, week-ends) is good for all members. Also, the part-time Mino-Yaa-Daa staff are limited in their availability.

#### **Resolution**

In addition to experimenting with various times, the use of a **video** was considered.



A training session could be videoed from beginning to end. This video could be played for other groups at times that were more appropriate for them, in the evening or on week-ends. Group viewing could be followed by discussions, led by Debby. The video-taped training sessions could be used in many ways: individual reviews; documentation of report systems for community sharing or proposal writing; and later assessment of the system.

## 5. Cross-Program Links

Everyone agreed that communications and other links across the four programs needed to be strengthened. Many of the above issues and changes address these concerns. It is generally agreed that the strength of the Gabriel Dumont service system will come from (i) the quality of the individual programs, and (ii) the extent to which they can work and co-ordinate their individual efforts toward a common goal.

### Initiatives to Strengthen Program Links

The following is a summary of the processes for strengthening links.

- **On-going sharing of program details.** A good start was made during the workshop as Co-ordinators summarized the goals, objectives and activities of their respective programs. Keeping each other up-dated will continue during the all-staff meetings. Also, the documentation of the programs in a general brochure is almost complete.
- **Role clarification specific to program links** is also very important. During the workshop, the clarification of such roles as **making referrals** and **providing guidance** were important role clarification activities. This will be an on-going process, since it is very difficult to anticipate in advance each and every way that programs can link with each other.
- **Offering help to each other** on a voluntary basis is another way that programs can link up and support each other. For example, Debby volunteered to help with some of Mino-Yaa-Daa's administration needs. Walter offered to help with sweats and other activities. This is a voluntary flexible process in which contributing to others' tasks may be negotiated as needed.

Establishing strong program links can be done in an on-going way through daily communications and good will. However, links can also be established through regular collective planning and monitoring. I now turn to this important step.

## 6. Planning and Co-ordination

Planning and co-ordination are two important ways that the various programs can maintain strong, creative working relationships. Workshop participants agreed that the core planning and co-ordinating activities will occur in team meetings. Some meetings will involve only the Program Co-ordinators; others will involve all program staff. I have referred to the latter as “all-staff meetings”.

**All-staff meetings** will take place once a month during an initial development period, after which they will likely happen less often, perhaps every six weeks. During these meetings staff will (i) “check in” with each other concerning past and future program activities (ii) identify issues primarily related to program co-ordination, and resolve these issues, and (iii) provide positive support and affirmation for good work.

The **Co-ordinators’ meetings** will be scheduled more frequently, likely every two weeks. These will function as major planning meetings in which both long- and short-range plans are clarified. Program activities will be scheduled and co-ordinated at these meetings. I assume that major organizational issues will be identified, and management discussions and decisions will be made. I assume also that any issues related to the “community at large” ( including funders, aboriginal community, other service providers) will be addressed, but this should be clarified.

In addition to making on-going contributions as participating members, the main **roles for team meetings** were identified as (i) agenda development (ii) minute-taking, and (iii) facilitating.

## 7. Administration

The main issue here is that, because of budget limitations, there is no administrative staff available to human services at Gabriel Dumont. This means that such activities as typing, developing forms, posting, petty cash, etc. are handled by the Program Co-ordinator. The issue mostly affects the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program, since the staff are part-time.

### Resolution

Towards resolution of this problem, several options were considered: using volunteers from the community or outside the community; trying to raise money in the future; and using placements from the Futures Program. Issues of responsibility, confidentiality and the time for training and supervising administrative were addressed. Using a community volunteer may enhance program visibility and credibility in the community at large.

Debby volunteered some time to the Mino-Yaa-Daa Program, as did Alan for art work, and Chris when he is available. Also, Marcel will make a computer and printer available to the program.

## 7. Program Management

The over-all management of the various programs was also discussed during the workshop. The management functions are fulfilled through the Program Manager position, and through the positions of Program Co-ordinators.

I started off this discussion with a brief review of the main functions of program management in the human services. I summarize these as follows:

### **Program Management Functions in Human Services**

- Providing leadership
- Creating and maintaining an appropriate organizational culture (shared values, attitudes, beliefs, traditions, thinking and behavior)
- Planning
- Supporting the implementation of plans
- Problem-solving
- Facilitating productive contacts between parts of the organization (e.g. Meetings)
- Sustaining good communications
- Managing conflict
- Supervision
- Assessing performance
- Financial compensation of work and rewarding performance
- Enhancing employee productivity (e.g.. Time management, training and development)
- Dealing with unproductive employees
- Humanizing the organization (stress management, dealing with inequities)
- Raising and managing finances
- Dealing with the program environment

- Managing space

Although the Program Manager is responsible for making sure that these functions are carried out, many of them can be shared with the Program Co-ordinators.

### **Program Management Issues at Gabriel Dumont**

The following management issues were discussed during the workshop:

**First**, it was recognized that Marcel has several responsibilities in addition to program management. His position as “Tenant Counsellor” means that he is responsible for a whole range of tenant-related duties, including helping to fill vacancies, keeping tenants informed of policies, handling disputes, recommending evictions, and many others. This matter was discussed and at least partly resolved by recognizing that Program Co-ordinators must handle many management issues within their program team or in collaboration. In the future, Marcel should not be involved in matters that could be handled at other levels in the organization.

**Second**, Marcel recognizes that at times he must take a hard line with tenants, eviction in the most extreme case. He and Cyndy pointed out that this is consistent with the over-all service philosophy of educating, helping and healing. Tenants whose behavior is unacceptable are initially made aware of the available programs, and given every opportunity to change. Tough responses, such as eviction, are taken as a last resort.

Marcel believes that his image as Tenant Counsellor may undermine the service programs, and for this reason he tries to distance himself from the programs in the community.

### **Staff Expectations of the Program Manager**

Asked to identify what they wanted from the Manager, staff identified the following priorities:

- information on new tenants
- human and financial resources
- appropriate space and materials for the programs

Chris expressed his satisfaction with Marcel’s commitment to wellness in the community. Everyone generally expressed their appreciation for his contributions to program development at Gabriel Dumont.

### **Recommendation**

I recommend that the earlier list of “Program Management Functions” be used a check-list for reviewing the various management activities and how these get accomplished throughout the Gabriel Dumont service system. This could be introduced at the Program Co-ordinators’ meetings, and could be done gradually over time. If need be, issues could be raised and resolved.

## **A CHECK-LIST FOR TEAMWORK SELF-ASSESSMENT**

Successful teams usually spend some time thinking about or assessing how they are functioning as a team. This does not have to be done all the time. For example, it could be done every several meetings, or even at a retreat. To assist you with this teamwork self-assessment, I have put together the following check-list questions to ask yourselves from time to time. Many of these factors were touched upon in one way or another during our workshop.

### **A Clear Elevating Goal**

Is your over-all goal clear and focussed? Is there a shared sense of urgency? Does it take precedence over individual work goals? Is it challenging?

### **Results-driven Structure**

Do you have a clear idea of your objectives over the long and short-run?

Have you negotiated clear criteria of success: how will you know when you have been successful?

### **Competent Members**

There are different types of competence in different teams for different purposes. Most people are competent in some ways; teams should help each other recognize each others’ competence, and grow in the competence they want to

acquire.

Competence may be broken into (i) knowledge (ii) skills, and (iii) attitudes which are acquired through (i) life experiences (ii) formal education and (iii) on-the-job experiences.

In a team approach, it is important that...

- . the various competencies required for the three programs are identified
- . the special competencies throughout the group are known
- . competencies are available\shared with others as needed
- . if gaps exist, arrangements are made to acquire them and share them with others

### **Unified Commitment**

Is there a high level of team spirit, with strong loyalty and dedication to the team?

Do members think of themselves as team members, as well as program members and individuals?

### **Collaborative Climate**

Are there clear roles, and opportunities to negotiate new roles and tasks as needed?

Is there flexibility, when needed?

Are the responsibilities clear, particularly in relationship to other programs or members?

Are lines of communication clear?

Do people trust each other?

### **Standards of Excellence**

Are there expectations and values regarding individual work and teamwork?

Concerning quantity, quality, and how people work together?

### **External Support and Recognition**

Are sufficient and suitable human and material resources available?

Have you spent some time establishing relationships or networks with those who are important to the team's success, thus building support from key individuals and agencies?

Are there recognitions and rewards?

### **Leadership**

Have the leaders...

Established and communicated a clear vision?

Created change, when needed?

Unleashed the various talents of team members?

Confronted and resolved issues related to poor performance of team members?

Help team identify priorities, and help them stay on track?