

# Are your team-members willing to pass the ball? If not, it's not *really* a team.

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When we were kids playing football, there was always one guy who would never pass the ball, but instead would try and run the full length of the field and score all on his own. Almost invariably he'd hold on to the ball too long and be tackled, conceding possession to the other side. Even when he did score, the rest of us on his side wouldn't be particularly thrilled, since he seemed more concerned about competing with us for glory than beating our opponents.

Our sports teacher would tell him "You need to learn to become a team player". This has become a cliché (and the trouble with such clichés is that people nod when they hear them but don't actually think about what they mean). What *does* it really mean to be a team player? I think a lot of it comes down to a willingness to pass the ball.

Why did that kid hang on to the ball? I don't suppose he had insight into his motives, but I'm willing to bet that he enjoyed the feeling of control. And the possibility of personal glory appealed more to him than the risk of losing the game.

In any team sport involving passing and tackling, as a young player matures, they change their understanding of what it means to pass. Rather than it meaning "I'm losing control", it becomes something like "We're building something". Rather than it meaning "I can't handle this on my own" (accompanied by a sense of personal weakness), it becomes "I'm calling on the support of my team-mates" (a sign of maturity and effectiveness).

An intermediate stage of progress is passing the ball, but only in desperation! At this point it's usually too late for team-mates to save the situation. In a truly artistic team, players hold on to the ball neither for too long, nor too short, a time.

I think it's clear how this relates to work-teams. As Alan Weiss points out, most so-called teams in business are actually no such thing. They are just committees. The essential difference between the two is that a team wins or loses together, while the members of a committee can win independently of each other (in fact one member can actually win at the *expense* of another).

So here are three questions to consider in order to foster true team-work:

- Are people on your 'teams' willing to pass the ball (i.e. resources such as people, money, contacts) for the good of the others in the group?
- Do they perceive doing so as being for, or against, their personal interests? (and how accurate are their perceptions?).
- Do they act as custodians of the group's resources, neither holding on to long, nor passing responsibility on too quickly?

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## **If you would like to find out more**

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