Everything I Needed to Know About Teamwork, I Learned in High School Theatre

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I was recently thinking about how people learn the fundamentals of teamwork, and how to deal with the challenges of working on a team. Most college courses won't expose you to working on a team - with the exception of maybe small teams in science lab courses or in programming classes. When you get to your first job, it's likely that you'll be working on larger teams and you'll have to develop teamworking skills real fast. A young friend of mine told me about his first-day experience as a software engineer in a meeting: "People just looked around the room and had no idea of how to interact with each other."

I thought about what opportunities helped me to figure out the good and bad parts of teams, and I realized that high school theatre productions taught me all the elements of good teamwork:

- **People have different skills; recognize them and use them appropriately** - People are different and have different talents. Tryouts and auditions are a way to figure out how to match the talents of the actors to the 'job requirements' (ie, the role in the play). I was good in comedy roles (like The Man Who Came to Dinner), but you wouldn't want to cast me as a romantic lead. And of course, it's not just the actors who have individual talents. The production needs costumers, set designers and builders, techs to run the lighting board, publicity people, ticket sellers, and so on. Recognizing and matching skills to the jobs available is what makes good directors and producers - or project managers.

- **You may have skills you didn't think you had** - Many times plays (or projects) can't fill a role with someone who has experience with the part. Or two guys try out for the single role of the sidekick and one gets cast as the heavy instead. In a play, you may have to develop skills that you didn't think you had for the benefit of the production. I was asked to play the male dance lead in Brigadoon at summer camp - despite having no formal dance training at all - probably because of my high tolerance for humiliation. It was both terrifying and fun. Likewise, on a project you might be asked to accept some responsibility or perform a task which is outside of your expertise. Embrace opportunities to develop new skills.

- **The people off stage are as important as the people on stage** - It takes a big ego and a lot of self-confidence to get up on stage. Sometimes (if not frequently) those personality traits turn into narcissism and an exaggerated sense of self-importance. But some actors (George Clooney comes to mind) make an effort to acknowledge that the show won't go on without everyone's help. Whether you are working the lights, taking tickets, or painting the set, your success is important to the success of the show (or project). My actor friend Olivia put it this way "Without the crew, we'll be on stage naked and in the dark". It's the same with projects: the people in the limelight need to recognize the contributions of all the team members.

- **Deadlines matter** - If you've been on a software project that missed a deadline, raise your hand. Hmm, looks like everyone. There is nothing like a deadline in the theatre. You've got maybe hundreds of people who paid money sitting out front waiting for the curtain to go up. There aren't many good excuses for not meeting that deadline. It's
the same with projects: identify the problems early, solve them, overcome obstacles and deliver what you promised on time.

- **Emotions are a part of life; deal with them** - Yes, actors and others in theatre have a reputation for being emotional. I was a science geek and usually found those emotions to be frightening and irrational. But you know what? When you are on a team you are working with people, and people have emotions. The sooner you learn to accept and channel emotional energy - not ignore it - the sooner you'll become a more successful a team member.

- **Someone has to be in charge** - Can you imagine a play run as a democracy? "OK, let’s vote. How many think it should be 'To BE or not to be' and how many like 'To be or NOT to be'? The director has the ultimate responsibility for the show's vision and execution. Sure, she may solicit other's opinions and will work closely with the set, lighting and costume designers and the actors to make the show work, but the director makes the ultimate decision. I have rarely seen a project succeed without a strong and accountable manager who is totally invested in the success of the project.

I realize now that what I thought was a lot of fun and a distraction from the challenges of my other high school courses was actually preparing me to work together with people of different talents toward a common goal with a strong leader. For me it was theatre, but it could be dance, music, sports, clubs - anything where you are working with a team. If you're in college now, make time to develop your teamworking talents.