

# Collaborative problem solvers are made not born – here's what you need to know

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Challenges are a fact of life. Whether it's a high-tech company figuring out how to shrink its carbon footprint, or a local community trying to identify new revenue sources, people are continually dealing with problems that require input from others. In the modern world, we face problems that are broad in scope and great in scale of impact – think of trying to understand and identify potential solutions related to climate change, cybersecurity or authoritarian leaders.

But people usually aren't born competent in collaborative problem-solving. In fact, a famous turn of phrase about teams is that a [team of experts does not make an expert team](#). Just as troubling, the evidence suggests that, for the most part, people aren't being taught this skill either. A 2012 survey by the American Management Association found that higher level managers believed recent college graduates [lack collaboration abilities](#).

Maybe even worse, college grads seem to overestimate their own competence. One 2015 survey found nearly two-thirds of recent graduates believed they can effectively work in a team, but [only one-third of managers agreed](#). The tragic irony is that the less competent you are, the [less accurate is your self-assessment](#) of your own competence. It seems that this infamous [Dunning-Kruger effect](#) can also occur for teamwork.

Perhaps it's no surprise that in a 2015 international assessment of hundreds of thousands of students, [less than 10% performed at the highest level of collaboration](#). For example, the vast majority of students could not overcome teamwork obstacles or resolve conflict. They were not able to monitor group dynamics or to engage in the kind of actions needed to make sure the team interacted according to their roles. Given that all these students have had group learning opportunities in and out of school over many years, this points to a global deficit in the acquisition of collaboration skills.

How can this deficiency be addressed? What makes one team effective while another fails? How can educators improve training and testing of collaborative problem-solving? Drawing from disciplines that study cognition, collaboration and learning, [my colleagues and I](#) have been studying teamwork processes. Based on this research, we have three key recommendations.