Research collaboration in today’s academic environment can be required or born out of necessity, but it is essential to be successful as a scientist in the 21st century. Collaboration among scientists is becoming more and more of a requirement by many granting agencies and will continue to be emphasized as the world continues to become smaller and smaller. There is no doubt that when collaborations are formed and implemented successfully the outcome is truly greater than the sum of each of the individual parts, but collaborations that are not well structured and properly developed can lead to disasters and animosity. I think we can all agree that nothing occurs in a vacuum, except maybe quantum mechanics, but the need for systems-based collaborative research is needed now more than ever. Granting agencies have identified well-executed collaborations as a way to increase the “value” of their funding. Successful collaborations that receive grant funding and complete the research can oftentimes write their own ticket for future projects. Collaboration increases progress, efficiency, and the quality of deliverables, but only when executed correctly.

So what makes a good team of collaborators? I think the key to any successful collaborative group is making sure that all of the team members have complementary goals, skills, and personalities. Being able to work together in a group is essential for collaboration, but have you ever noticed how some grown adults don’t like to share their “toys”? I think that every successful team has some key components or members that allow each other contribute to the overall success of the project. When forming a research/collaborative team, seek out the following individuals and recruit them as they will be essential to the team’s long-term success.

The Communicator

Although not the point or lead of a collaborative team, the communicator is an essential component that facilitates open dialog with the group, aids in the dissemination of research findings, develops reports, and facilitates productive interaction among group members. I am sure you have all been in a situation where you are trying to explain something to a colleague, let’s say the importance of using method A over method B, and no matter how hard you try to convince them and how frustrated you get, they still don’t get it. Then out of nowhere someone chimes in and rationally and calmly talks through all possible scenarios and it hits you—method B is the way to go. Tada! That’s the communicator. This person is usually the most even-keeled member of the team, never getting too excited or too frustrated, but is always there to talk through the sticking points. Having a communicator that is tech savvy will also go a long way to helping facilitate team goals and communication. Collaborative teams can exist within a hallway or across the world thanks to modern technology, but the magic of bringing teams together in a setting where they can thrive is a dying art. Yes, we can instantly video chat with team members worlds away, but understanding the makeup of a team and how they work best together via email, calls, or video is a key component of effective communication and team success.

The Cheerleader

Scientist is our name, and research is our game. We are one of a kind, and we win with our mind. GO TEAM! Ah yes, the cheerleader. Every successful team needs a cheerleader. They can be over the top and ooze with joy and pride or they may simply be there to pick you up when your first proposal gets rejected, but they play a role that few can. Cheerleaders help keep us on track, always moving us forward, and no matter what the odds (you know that 1% success rate at most granting agencies), they help remind us why we do this. Each team needs a cheerleader, and sometimes they may not contribute much to the meat and potatoes of a project, but they boost morale and keep you going when the going gets tough. Find a cheerleader to put on your collaborative team, and you will be surprised how far a little positive team spirit will go. I’ll confess that I am not a cheerleader, nor am I an eternal pessimist, but if I hear the words “minor setback” one more time…

The Critic

Malcolm X once said, “If you have no critics, you’ll likely have no success.” When we think of critics, we most often think about the negative aspects of criticism, but it’s all in how you look at it. Remember that not all criticism is negative, and even the negative criticism can be productive. Every successful team needs a good critic—not to bring the
team down, but to give a touch of reality every now and then. Critics serve a vital role in keeping the team grounded, reminding them of team goals and objectives, editing deliverables and assessing progress. I will be the first to admit that I get tired of the “Devil’s Advocate”—just be on my side for once—but that is why we need both the critic and the cheerleader. Critics serve a vital role in reminding team members of what is really achievable within a given project within a given timeframe. The best part about having a critic on your team is they will help you identify flaws or errors in your work and help you correct them before the world sees it. In my experience I learn more from my critics when I know that is the role they are playing, so I am prepared for their review—good or bad. A good critic will go a long way in aiding the success of a collaborative team and the feedback that they can provide will allow you to be proactive and prepare for outside reviews and comments. Just like friends and enemies, keep your cheerleader close and your critic closer.

The Captain (Coordinator)

This person is oftentimes the principle investigator, or PI, as we like to call them. They are tasked with developing or identifying the team and helping outline the goals, objectives, deliverables, and potential funding sources for the research. Project coordinators come in all different shapes and sizes, but you don’t want a stunt or circus coordinator, you want a research coordinator. Of all the team members, the coordinator may have the greatest task, and at some point, will most likely have to be a communicator, a cheerleader, and a critic. It is the coordinator’s responsibility to ensure that the team is successful by setting deadlines, keeping team members on task, and unfortunately, picking up the slack when someone else drops the ball. Being a team captain will get you a lot of attention—just make sure it is positive and not negative. The success of the team depends on the captain’s ability to lead, listen, and delegate.

At some point in your career, you will most likely serve in one of these capacities, especially if you are part of several different collaborative groups. Find out which of these characters best suits your personality, and try to play that role on the team as best you can. So much of being a successful team or collaborative research group are the non-technical, non-scientific intangibles that you bring to the group. As adults, we can generally work together and accomplish a task, but surrounding yourself with good team members or being an effective team member will allow you to accomplish so much more. Identifying your role on a collaborative team and doing it well will pay dividends not only for the current project but in the future as well. Take some time to think about the collaborations you are currently a part of—are you the critic or the communicator? If you feel more like a circus ringleader than a captain, it might be time to find a new team.