

CHAPTER 7

GROUP WORK

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GROUP WORK

INTRODUCTION

The ability to work as part of a team is one of the most important skills in today's job market. Employers are looking for workers who can contribute their own ideas, but also want people who can work with others to create and develop projects and plans. The activities in this chapter seek to teach you about the importance of teamwork to workplace success and the specific role each individual on a team may play. You will learn about positive teamwork behavior and discover how your own conduct can impact others on a team. The chapter also discusses possible obstacles to teams working successfully and offers the opportunity to build constructive strategies for overcoming these challenges.

OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this chapter you should be able to team working, that involves building relationships and working with other people using a number of important skills and habits:

- Working cooperatively
- Contributing to groups with ideas, suggestions, and effort
- Communication (both giving and receiving)
- Sense of responsibility
- Healthy respect for different opinions, customs, and individual preferences
- Ability to participate in group decision-making

DEFINITIONS

Definition 1: Group Work is a technique within the field of social work wherein various groups (as educational and recreational) are guided by an agency leader to more effective personal adjustment and community participation (According to Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Definition 2: Group Work is a method, used by professional social workers, of aiding a group or members of a group toward individual adjustment and increased participation in community activity by exploiting the mechanisms of group life (According to Random House Unabridged Dictionary).

Definition 3: Group Work is a form of cooperative learning. It aims to cater for individual differences, develop students' knowledge, generic skills (e.g. communication skills, collaborative skills, critical thinking skills) and attitudes (According to Wikipedia).

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF GROUP WORK?

“More hands make for lighter work.” “Two heads are better than one.” “The more the merrier.” These adages speak to the potential groups have to be more productive, creative, and motivated than individuals on their own.

The personal benefits of group work are important: you will improve your communication and negotiating skills, practise time management and planning, and build rapport and friendships.

But in addition to the personal aspects, group work is important because of the way it provides solutions beyond the scope of individual effort. Working in a group can be very successful when all the participants find a role and contribute their best.

When individual contributions form a whole solution, you may find, as Aristotle said, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts”!

Group work has special attributes:

- It is focused

Working in a group focuses your attention on problems and solutions differently than working by yourself. Your ideas won't be the only ideas – there may be as many attitudes and answers in your group as there are members. All the decisions won't be made by you. Solutions are reached by consensus, and may not be a matter of right or wrong.

- It encourages interaction

In a group, you are working in an interactive way.

Undoubtedly, you will have skills and expertise in some areas and not in others, but that will be true of other members of the group too. Interaction among all members is crucial, and the group will need to find ways to communicate, share information, reach decisions, and put ideas into practice.

By pooling resources, your group will be able to achieve more – there are more brains working!

- It is inclusive

It emphasises and encourages participation and is very successful when all participants find a role and perform to the best of their ability.

- It helps motivate

The camaraderie implicit in group work can be very encouraging.

Being “in it together” creates shared responsibility, with all members having a stake in the group’s success or failure.

- It broadens attitudes

Working toward a common goal with colleagues – who also may be strangers – highlights different perspectives and interpretations (Northumbria University Library, September 2013).

You may learn about cultural priorities and discover that attitudes toward group working vary according to experience and background. In discussion and debate you will find the best solutions through compromise.

Properly structured, group projects can reinforce skills that are relevant to both group and individual work, including the ability to:

- Break complex tasks into parts and steps
- Plan and manage time
- Refine understanding through discussion and explanation
- Give and receive feedback on performance
- Challenge assumptions
- Develop stronger communication skills.

Group projects can also help you develop skills specific to collaborative efforts, allowing you to...

- Tackle more complex problems than you could on your own.
- Delegate roles and responsibilities.
- Share diverse perspectives.
- Pool knowledge and skills.
- Hold one another (and be held) accountable.
- Receive social support and encouragement to take risks.
- Develop new approaches to resolving differences.

- Establish a shared identity with other group members.
- Find effective peers to emulate.
- Develop your own voice and perspectives in relation to peers.

(Caruso & Woolley, 2008)

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF GROUP WORK AND HOW CAN I ADDRESS THEM?

Unfortunately, groups can easily end up being less, rather than more, than the sum of their parts. Why is this?

Your group may challenge:

Misunderstanding the assignment

Understanding what you want to do and how you want to do it, early in the process, will save your group from disagreement later on. Discuss your assignment and make sure every member participates. Make sure you all agree to the same outcomes and record and share your agreed points in notes, or in your blog or other online tools. Once you decide on an action plan, you can consider details such as presentation software options or report styles.

Disagreement on how to proceed

Write your action plan as an outline so that tasks are listed logically and you can see if there are gaps. Be sure to incorporate a timeline. Stick to your plan if possible, but if you adjust it, make sure everyone agrees. Meet regularly, and take turns leading and making good notes. Share your notes so that everyone has access to what has been agreed. Divide work evenly, since uneven division of labour can lead to resentment and lack of motivation.

Differing personalities

Member too dominant? Try setting an agenda with a time slot for each person to speak. Work around the table and have each person contribute for a set amount of time.

Member too quiet? Arrange seating so everyone can be seen and heard. Make it easy for people to participate. Listen carefully when quiet members speak so that they feel included.

Discussion degrading into grumpy criticism? Suggest that each person's comments start with a positive observation. Ask members to offer a possible solution for each point of criticism.

Somebody always the joker? Allow some time for people to socialise, then use a set agenda to make meetings flow smoothly.

Are there cultural or language barriers? Attending a large institution in a different culture may be a new experience for some students. A personality ‘problem’ may not be a problem at all, just trepidation. Try talking about it—you all may learn some new perspectives.

Bad behaviour and conflict

Disruptive behaviour should be dealt with promptly. Don’t let little disagreements grow into big arguments! If you don’t have a chance to speak in meetings, practise your assertiveness. Raise your hand and repeat your point if you think you have not been heard. Ask that group members take turns speaking.

Are someone’s personal problems getting in the way? Try to stay on task, but if a member is obviously distressed, he or she may wish to discuss what has happened. Be aware of student support services—don’t be reluctant to ask for help, even on someone else’s behalf. If you experience sexism or racism, tell the person quietly and firmly that you don’t approve, but don’t argue. Offensive beliefs can be very ingrained, and you will need to speak to your tutor promptly.

Is someone not doing his or her work? Or is he or she always late or forgetful? Ask for an explanation—you never know what’s happening in someone’s life. Review the action plan and timeline, and refer to meeting notes to remind the person of their responsibilities. If there is no satisfactory response, discuss the problem with your tutor.

Common challenges of group work include:

Coordination costs:

represent time and energy that group work consumes that individual work does not, including the time it takes to coordinate schedules, arrange meetings, meet, correspond, make decisions collectively, integrate the contributions of group members, etc. The time spent on each of these tasks may not be great, but together they are significant.

Coordination costs can’t be eliminated, nor should they be: after all, coordinating the efforts of multiple team members is an important skill. However, if coordination costs are excessive or are not factored into the structure of group assignments, groups tend to miss deadlines, their work is poorly integrated, motivation suffers, and creativity declines.

You should note that coordination costs increase with:

- *Group size:* The more people in the group, the more schedules to accommodate, parts to delegate, opinions to consider, pieces to integrate, etc. Smaller groups have lower coordination costs.

- *Task interdependence*: Tasks in which group members are highly reliant on one another at all stages tend to have higher coordination costs than tasks that allow group members to “divide and conquer”, though group members may not satisfy the same collaborative goals.
- *Heterogeneity*: Heterogeneity of group members tends to raise coordination costs, especially if there are language issues to contend with, cultural differences to bridge, and disparate skills to integrate. However, since diversity of perspectives is one of the principle advantages of groups, this should not necessarily be avoided.

Strategies: To help reduce or mitigate coordination costs:

1. Keep groups small.
2. Designate some class time for group meetings.
3. Use group resumes or skills inventories to help teams delegate subtasks.
4. Assign roles (e.g., group leader, scheduler) or encourage group members to do so.
5. Point group members to digital tools that facilitate remote and/or asynchronous meetings.
6. Warn group members about time-consuming stages and tasks.
7. Actively build communication and conflict resolution skills.
8. Designate time in the project schedule for the group to integrate parts.

Motivation costs

refer to the adverse effect on your motivation of working in groups, which often involves one or more of these phenomena:

- **Free riding** occurs when one or more group members leave most or all of the work to a few, more diligent, members. Free riding – if not addressed proactively – tends to erode the long-term motivation of hard-working students.
- **Social loafing** describes the tendency of group members to exert less effort than they can or should because of the reduced sense of accountability (think of how many people don’t bother to vote, figuring that someone else will do it.) Social loafing lowers group productivity.
- **Conflict** within groups can erode morale and cause members to withdraw. It can be subtle or pronounced, and can (but isn’t always) be the cause and result of free riding. Conflict – if not effectively addressed – can leave group members with a deeply jaundiced view of teams.

Strategies: To address both preexisting and potential motivation problems:

1. Explain why working in groups is worth the frustration.
2. Establish clear expectations for group members, by setting ground rules and/or using team contracts.
3. Increase individual accountability by combining group assessments with individual assessments.

4. Learn conflict-resolution skills and reinforce group members by role-playing responses to hypothetical team conflict scenarios.
5. Assess group processes via periodic process reports, self-evaluations, and peer evaluations.

Intellectual costs

refer to characteristics of group behavior that can reduce creativity and productivity. These include:

- **Groupthink:** the tendency of groups to conform to a perceived majority view.
- **Escalation of commitment:** the tendency of groups to become more committed to their plans and strategies – even ineffective ones – over time.
- **Transparency illusion:** the tendency of group members to believe their thoughts, attitudes and reasons are more obvious to others than is actually the case.
- **Common information effect:** the tendency of groups to focus on information all members share and ignore unique information, however relevant.

Strategies: To reduce intellectual costs and increase the creativity and productivity of groups:

1. Precede group brainstorming with a period of individual brainstorming (sometimes called “nominal group technique”). This forestalls groupthink and helps the group generate and consider more different ideas.
2. Encourage group members to reflect on and highlight their contributions in periodic self-evaluations.
3. Assign roles to group members that reduce conformity and push the group intellectually (devil’s advocate, doubter, the Fool).

(Teaching Excellence & Educational Innovation, www.cmu.edu/teaching/index.html)

HOW TO FORM GROUPS

Small groups or learning teams can be formed in four ways: randomly, instructor-selected, by seat proximity, or one-selected.

Random and instructor-selected group assignments avoid cliques. You may also want to consider using your group members’ attitudes toward group work as a mechanism to help you create groups. Take a one-question survey, or add this question to the initial survey you use at the beginning of team building:

Which of the following best describes your experience of group work?

- A. I like group work because my group helps me learn.
- B. I question the value of group work because in the past I've ended up doing all the work.
- C. I have little or no experience working in groups.
- D. I have different experience of group work than the choices above. (Please explain.)

Those who check “B” can be put into a group of their own. They might find this to be the first time they are really challenged and satisfied by group work (adapted from Byrnes and Byrnes, 2009).

(McCurdie, 2014; Barkley, E., et al., 2005)

GROUP SIZE AND DURATION. ROLES.

Group size can vary, as can the length of time that you work together. *Pairing* is great for thirty-second or one-minute problem solving. Groups that work together for ten to 45 minutes might be *four or five people*. (If there are more than four or five, some members will stop participating).

Groups can be formal or informal. *Informal groups* may be ad-hoc dyads (where each member turns to a neighbor) or ten-minute “buzz groups” (in which three to four members discuss their reactions to a reading assignment).

In large groups it is useful to assign roles within each group (examples: recorder, reporter to the class, timekeeper, monitor, or facilitator). If members are not used to working in groups, establishing some discussion guidelines with the group about respectful interaction before the first activity can foster positive and constructive communication.

It is useful to arrange the members in groups before giving them instructions for the group activity, since the physical movement in group formation tends to be distracting.

(McCurdie, 2014; Barkley, E., et al., 2005)

The Structure of Group Work

Successful group work activities require a highly structured task. Make this task clear to group members by writing specific instructions on the board or on a worksheet. Include in your instructions:

- **The learning objective.** Why are the members doing this? What will they gain from it?
- **The specific task:** “Decide,” “List,” “Prioritize,” “Solve,” “Choose.” (“Discuss” is too vague.)

- **Structure the task** to promote interdependence for creating a group product.
- **The expected product.**
- **The time allotment.** Set a time limit. Err on the side of too little rather than too much. You can decide to give more time if necessary.
- **The method of reporting out;** that is, of sharing group results. Reporting out is useful for accomplishing closure.
- **Closure.** Summary remarks from you can weave in the comments, products to close a group-work activity.

(McCurdie, 2014; Barkley, E., et al., 2005)

The roles you or your group members assign will depend on the goals of the assignment, the size of the team, etc. They can be fixed or rotating. Here are some possible group roles, but the list is not exhaustive. Think creatively and come up with your own!

- **Facilitator:** Moderates team discussion, keeps the group on task, and distributes work.
- **Recorder:** Takes notes summarizing team discussions and decisions, and keeps all necessary records.
- **Reporter** serves as group spokesperson, summarizing the group's activities and/or conclusions.
- **Timekeeper:** Keeps the group aware of time constraints and deadlines and makes sure meetings start on time.
- **Devil's Advocate:** Raises counter-arguments and (constructive) objections, introduces alternative explanations and solutions.
- **Harmonizer:** Strives to create a harmonious and positive team atmosphere and reach consensus (while allowing a full expression of ideas.)
- **Prioritizer:** Makes sure group focuses on most important issues and does not get caught up in details.
- **Explorer:** Seeks to uncover new potential in situations and people (fellow team members but also clients) and explore new areas of inquiry.
- **Innovator:** Encourages imagination and contributes new and alternative perspectives and ideas.
- **Checker:** Checks to make sure all group members understand the concepts and the group's conclusions.
- **Wildcard:** Assumes the role of any missing member and fills in wherever needed.

(Barkley, E., et al., 2005;)

Roles That Contribute to the Work:

- ***Initiating*** - taking the initiative, at any time; for example, convening the group, suggesting procedures, changing direction, providing new energy and ideas. (*How about if we.... What would happen if... ?*)
- ***Seeking information or opinions*** - requesting facts, preferences, suggestions and ideas. (*Could you say a little more about...Would you say this is a more workable idea than that?*)
- ***Giving information or opinions*** - providing facts, data, and information from research or experience. (*In my experience I have seen...May I tell you what I found out about...?*)
- ***Questioning*** - stepping back from what is happening and challenging the group or asking other specific questions about the task. (*Are we assuming that... ? Would the consequence of this be... ?*)
- ***Clarifying*** - interpreting ideas or suggestions, clearing up confusions, defining terms or asking others to clarify. This role can relate different contributions from different people, and link up ideas that seem unconnected. (*It seems that you are saying...Doesn't this relate to what [name] was saying earlier?*)
- ***Summarizing*** - putting contributions into a pattern, while adding no new information. This role is important if a group gets stuck. Some groups officially appoint a summarizer for this potentially powerful and influential role. (*If we take all these pieces and put them together...Here's what I think we have agreed upon so far... Here are our areas of disagreement...*)

Roles That Contribute to the Atmosphere:

- ***Supporting*** - remembering others' remarks, being encouraging and responsive to others. Creating a warm, encouraging atmosphere and making people feel they belong helps the group handle stresses and strains. People can gesture, smile, and make eye-contact without saying a word. Some silence can be supportive for people who are not native speakers of English by allowing them a chance to get into discussion. (*I understand what you are getting at...As [name] was just saying...*)
- ***Observing*** - noticing the dynamics of the group and commenting. Asking if others agree or if they see things differently can be an effective way to identify problems as they arise. (*We seem to be stuck... Maybe we are done for now, we are all worn out...As I see it, what happened just a minute ago...Do you agree?*)

- **Mediating** - recognizing disagreements and figuring out what is behind the differences. When people focus on real differences that may lead to striking a balance or devising ways to accommodate different values, views, and approaches. (*I think the two of you are coming at this from completely different points of view...Wait a minute. This is how [name] sees the problem. Can you see why she/he may see it differently?*)
- **Reconciling** - reconciling disagreements. Emphasizing shared views among members can reduce tension. (*The goal of these two strategies is the same, only the means are different... Is there anything that these positions have in common?*)
- **Compromising** - yielding a position or modifying opinions. This can help move the group forward. (*Everyone else seems to agree on this, so I'll go along with... I think if I give in on this, we could reach a decision.*)
- **Making a personal comment** - occasional personal comments, especially as they relate to the work. Statements about one's life are often discouraged in professional settings; this may be a mistake since personal comments can strengthen a group by making people feel human with a lot in common.
- **Humor** - funny remarks or good-natured comments. Humor, if it is genuinely good-natured and not cutting, can be very effective in relieving tension or dealing with participants who dominate or put down others. Humor can be used constructively to make the work more acceptable by providing a welcome break from concentration. It may also bring people closer together, and make the work more fun.

(Parts adapted and quoted from the following training materials:

Heller Hunt and Cunningham. "Advanced Facilitator" Brookline, MA 1992

J.Sketchley, A. Mejia, I. Aitken et al. Work Improvement in Health Services, Geneva World Health Organization, 1986)

(Working in Groups: A Quick Guide for Students, 2003)

TECHNIQUES & STRATEGIES

Getting Started

- Groups work best if people **know each others' names** and a bit of their background and experience, especially those parts that are related to the task at hand. Take time to introduce yourselves.
- Be sure to **include everyone** when considering ideas about how to proceed as a group. Some may never have participated in a small group in an academic setting. Others may have ideas about what works well. Allow time for people to express their inexperience and hesitations as well as their experience with group projects.
- Most groups **select a leader** early on, especially if the work is a long-term project. Other options for leadership in long-term projects include taking turns for different works or different phases of the work.
- Everyone needs to **discuss and clarify the goals** of the group's work. Go around the group and hear everyone's ideas (before discussing them) or encourage divergent thinking by brainstorming. If you miss this step, trouble may develop part way through the project. Even though time is scarce and you may have a big project ahead of you, groups may take some time to settle in to work. If you anticipate this, you may not be too impatient with the time it takes to get started.

Organizing the Work

- Break up big jobs into smaller pieces. **Allocate responsibility** for different parts of the group project to different individuals or teams. Do not forget to account for assembling pieces into final form.
- **Develop a time-line**, including who will do what, in what format, by when. Include time at the end for assembling pieces into final form. (This may take longer than you anticipate.) At the end of each meeting, individuals should review what work they expect to complete by the following session.

Understanding and Managing Group Processes

- Groups work best if everyone has a chance to make strong contributions to the discussion at meetings and to the work of the group project.

- At the beginning of each meeting, decide what you expect to have accomplished by the end of the meeting.
- Someone (probably not the leader) should write all ideas, as they are suggested, on the board or on large sheets of paper. Designate a recorder of the group's decisions. Allocate responsibility for group process (especially if you do not have a fixed leader) such as a time manager for meetings and someone who periodically says that it is time to see how things are going (see below).
- Save some time toward the end of the first meeting (and periodically as the group continues) to check in with each other on how the process is working.

Including Everyone and Their Ideas

Groups work best if everyone is included and everyone has a chance to contribute ideas. The group's task may seem overwhelming to some people, and they may have no idea how to go about accomplishing it. To others, the direction the project should take may seem obvious. **The job of the group is to break down the work into chunks, and to allow everyone to contribute.** The direction that seems obvious to some may turn out not to be so obvious after all. In any event, it will surely be improved as a result of some creative modification.

Encouraging Ideas

The goal is to produce as many ideas as possible in a short time without evaluating them. All ideas are carefully listened to but not commented on and are usually written on the board or large sheets of paper so everyone can see them, and so they don't get forgotten or lost. **Take turns by going around the group** - hear from everyone, one by one.

One specific method is to **generate ideas through brainstorming**. People mention ideas in any order (without others' commenting, disagreeing or asking too many questions). The advantage of brainstorming is that ideas do not become closely associated with the individuals who suggested them. This process encourages creative thinking, if it is not rushed and if all ideas are written down (and therefore, for the time-being, accepted). A disadvantage: when ideas are suggested quickly, it is more difficult for shy participants or for those who are not speaking their native language. One approach is to begin by brainstorming and then go around the group in a more structured way asking each person to add to the list.

Examples of what to say:

- Why don't we take a minute or two for each of us to present our views?
- Let's get all our ideas out before evaluating them. We'll clarify them before we organize or evaluate them.
- We'll discuss all these ideas after we hear what everyone thinks.

- You don't have to agree with her, but let her finish.
- Let's spend a few more minutes to see if there are any possibilities we haven't thought of, no matter how unlikely they seem.

Group Leadership

- The leader is responsible for seeing that the **work is organized** so that it will get done. The leader is also responsible for understanding and managing group interactions so that the atmosphere is positive.
- The leader must **encourage everyone's contributions** with an eye to accomplishing the work. To do this, the leader must observe how the group's process is working. (Is the group moving too quickly, leaving some people behind? Is it time to shift the focus to another aspect of the task?)
- The leader must encourage group interactions and **maintain a positive atmosphere**. To do this the leader must observe the way people are participating as well as be aware of feelings communicated non-verbally. (Are individuals' contributions listened to and appreciated by others? Are people arguing with other people, rather than disagreeing with their ideas? Are some people withdrawn or annoyed?)
- The leader must **anticipate** what information, materials or other resources the group needs as it works.
- The leader is responsible for **beginning and ending on time**. The leader must also organize practical support, such as the room, chalk, markers, food, breaks.

(Note: In addition to all this, the leader must take part in the discussion and participate otherwise as a group member. At these times, the leader must be careful to step aside from the role of leader and signal participation as an equal, not a dominant voice.)

Focusing on a Direction

After a large number of ideas have been generated and listed (e.g. on the board), the group can categorize and examine them. Then the group should agree on a process for choosing from among the ideas. Advantages and disadvantages of different plans can be listed and then voted on. Some possibilities can be eliminated through a straw vote (each group member could have 2 or 3 votes). Or all group members could vote for their first, second, and third choices. Alternatively, criteria for a successful plan can be listed, and different alternatives can be voted on based on the criteria, one by one.

Categorizing and evaluating ideas

Examples of what to say:

- We have about 20 ideas here. Can we sort them into a few general categories?
- When we evaluate each others' ideas, can we mention some positive aspects before expressing concerns?
- Could you give us an example of what you mean?
- Who has dealt with this kind of problem before?
- What are the pluses of that approach? The minuses?
- We have two basic choices. Let's brainstorm. First let's look at the advantages of the first choice, then the disadvantages.
- Let's try ranking these ideas in priority order. The group should try to come to an agreement that makes sense to everyone.

Making a decision

After everyone's views are heard and all points of agreement and disagreement are identified, the group should try to arrive at an agreement that makes sense to everyone.

Examples of what to say:

- There seems to be some agreement here. Is there anyone who couldn't live with solution #2?
- Are there any objections to going that way?
- You still seem to have worries about this solution. Is there anything that could be added or taken away to make it more acceptable? We're doing fine. We've agreed on a great deal. Let's stay with this and see if we can work this last issue through.
- It looks as if there are still some major points of disagreement. Can we go back and define what those issues are and work on them rather than forcing a decision now.

(Working in Groups: A Quick Guide for Students, 2003)

Commonly used group work techniques:

BUZZ GROUPS

- *Size:* any
- *Time frame:* 3-10 minutes
- *Setting:* no limitations
- *Purpose:* generate ideas/answers, re-stimulate student interest, gauge student understanding

THINK-PAIR-SHARE

- *Class size:* any
- *Time frame:* 5-10 minutes
- *Setting:* no limitations
- *Purpose:* generate ideas, increase students' confidence in their answers, encourage broad participation in plenary session

CIRCLE OF VOICES

- *Class size:* any
- *Time frame:* 10-20 minutes
- *Setting:* moveable chairs preferable
- *Purpose:* generate ideas, develop listening skills, have all students participate, equalize learning environment

ROTATING TRIOS

- *Class size:* 15-30
- *Time frame:* 10 or more minutes
- *Setting:* a fair bit of space, moveable seating helpful (they could stand) *Purpose:* introduce students to many of their peers, generate ideas

SNOWBALL GROUPS/PYRAMIDS

- *Class size:* 12-50
- *Time frame:* 15-20 minutes, depending on how many times the groups “snowball”
- *Setting:* moveable seating required
- *Purpose:* generate well-vetted ideas, narrow a topic, develop decision-making skills

JIGSAW

- *Class size:* 10-50
- *Time frame:* 20 or more minutes
- *Setting:* moveable seating required, a lot of space preferable
- *Purpose:* learn concepts in-depth, develop teamwork, have students teaching students

FISHBOWL

- *Class size:* 10-50
- *Time frame:* 15 or more minutes
- *Setting:* moveable seating and a lot of space preferable; if necessary, have inner group stand/sit at front of lecture hall and the outer group sit in regular lecture hall seats
- *Purpose:* observe group interaction, provide real illustrations for concepts, provide opportunity for analysis

LEARNING TEAMS

- *Class size:* any
- *Time frame:* any
- *Setting:* no limitations
- *Purpose:* foster relationships among students, increase confidence in participating
- (Jaques, 2000; Race, 2000).

FOSTERING GROUP INTERACTION: SUCCESSFUL TEAM

Characteristics of a Group that is Performing Effectively

- All members have a chance to express themselves and to influence the group's decisions. All contributions are listened to carefully, and strong points acknowledged. Everyone realizes that the job could not be done without the cooperation and contribution of everyone else.
- Differences are dealt with directly with the person or people involved. The group identifies all disagreements, hears everyone's views and tries to come to an agreement that makes sense to everyone. Even when a group decision is not liked by someone, that person will follow through on it with the group.
- The group encourages everyone to take responsibility, and hard work is recognized. When things are not going well, everyone makes an effort to help each other. There is a shared sense of pride and accomplishment.

(Parts adapted and quoted from the following training materials:

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(Working in Groups: A Quick Guide for Students, 2003)

Some Common Problems (and Some Solutions)

Floundering - While people are still figuring out the work and their role in the group, the group may experience false starts and circular discussions, and decisions may be postponed.

Examples of what to say:

- Here's my understanding of what we are trying to accomplish... Do we all agree?
- What would help us move forward: data? Resources?
- Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.

Dominating or reluctant participants - Some people might take more than their share of the discussion by talking too often, asserting superiority, telling lengthy stories, or not letting others finish. Sometimes humor can be used to discourage people from dominating. Others may rarely speak because they have difficulty getting in the conversation. Sometimes looking at people who don't speak can be a non-verbal way to include them. Asking quiet participants for their thoughts outside the group may lead to their participation within the group.

Examples of what to say:

- How would we state the general problem? Could we leave out the details for a moment? Could we structure this part of the discussion by taking turns and hearing what everyone has to say?
- Let's check in with each other about how the process is working: Is everyone contributing to discussions? Can discussions be managed differently so we can all participate? Are we all listening to each other?

Digressions and tangents - Too many interesting side stories can be obstacles to group progress. It may be time to take another look at the agenda and assign time estimates to items. Try to summarize where the discussion was before the digression. Or, consider whether there is something making the topic easy to avoid.

Examples of what to say:

- Can we go back to where we were a few minutes ago and see what we were trying to do?
- Is there something about the topic itself that makes it difficult to stick to?

Getting Stuck - Too little progress can get a group down. It may be time for a short break or a change in focus. However, occasionally when a group feels that it is not making progress, a solution emerges if people simply stay with the issue.

Examples of what to say:

- What are the things that are helping us solve this problem? What's preventing us from solving this problem?
- Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.
- I understand that some of you doubt whether anything new will happen if we work on this problem. Are we willing to give it a try for the next fifteen minutes?

Rush to work - Usually one person in the group is less patient and more action-oriented than the others. This person may reach a decision more quickly than the others and then pressure the group to move on before others are ready.

Examples of what to say:

- Are we all ready-to make a decision on this?
- What needs to be done before we can move ahead?
- Let's go around and see where everyone stands on this.

Feuds - Occasionally a conflict (having nothing to do with the subject of the group) carries over into the group and impedes its work. It may be that feuding parties will not be able to focus until the viewpoint of each is heard. Then they must be encouraged to lay the issue aside.

Examples of what to say:

- So, what you are saying is... And what you are saying is... How is that related to the work here?
- If we continue too long on this, we won't be able to get our work done. Can we agree on a time limit and then go on?

Ignoring or ridiculing others - When someone consistently ignores or ridicules what others say, criticizing their experience or knowledge, good-natured humor or a private conversation outside the group can be effective.

(Working in Groups: A Quick Guide for Students, 2003)

ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

There is No “I” in Team (Skills to Pay the Bills. www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/)

The purpose of this activity is to enrich your understanding of what it means to be part of a team and why being a good team player is important for your career success.

Time: 15-20 minutes.

Materials: Chart paper or sentence strips with markers and/or Activity #1 printed out for each participant.

Directions: Choose and display five “teamwork” quotes:

“Individual commitment to a group effort - that is what makes a team work, a company work, a society work, a civilization work.” - Vince Lombardi (football coach)

“Coming together is a beginning. Keeping together is progress. Working together is success.” - Henry Ford (pioneer of the assembly-line production method)

“There is no such thing as a self-made man. You will reach your goals only with the help of others.” - George Shinn (former owner of Charlotte, now New Orleans, Hornets basketball team)

“It is amazing what can be accomplished when nobody cares about who gets the credit.” - Robert Yates (politician in the 1700s)

“Teamwork divides the task and multiplies the success.” - Author Unknown

“I am a member of a team, and I rely on the team, I defer to it and sacrifice for it, because the team, not the individual, is the ultimate champion.” - Mia Hamm (retired American soccer player)

“Respect your fellow human being, treat them fairly, disagree with them honestly, enjoy their friendship, explore your thoughts about one another candidly, work together for a common goal and help one another achieve it.” - Bill Bradley (American hall of fame basketball player, Rhodes scholar and former three-term Democratic U.S. Senator from New Jersey)

“Talent wins games, but teamwork and intelligence wins championships.” - Michael Jordan (former American basketball player, businessman and majority owner of the Charlotte Bobcats)

“Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much.”- Helen Keller (American author, political activist, lecturer, and the first deafblind person to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree.)

“The strength of the team is each individual member...the strength of each member is the team.” - Phil Jackson (widely considered one of the greatest coaches in the history of the NBA)

“Unity is strength... when there is teamwork and collaboration, wonderful things can be achieved.” - Mattie Stepanek (advocate on behalf of peace, people with disabilities, and children with life-threatening conditions who died one month before his 14th birthday)

“Lots of people want to ride with you in the limo, but what you want is someone who will take the bus with you when the limo breaks down.” - Oprah Winfrey (American television host, actress, producer, and philanthropist)

“Finding good players is easy. Getting them to play as a team is another story.” - Casey Stengel (baseball hall of famer)

This can be done on chart paper, using the accompanying worksheet, writing quotes on sentence strips, or reading each quote aloud. What is important here is the quote – and not necessarily who said the quote.

Ask participants to choose the quote they like best. Divide the larger group into smaller groups according to the chosen quote (i.e., all participants who liked quote #1, etc.). Participants should spend approximately two minutes discussing the quote and coming to consensus on the reason they liked it the best. One member of each team should be prepared to offer the group’s feedback and reflection.

For another, more hands-on version of this activity, write each of the quotes on sentence strips. Cut the sentence strips into individual words or manageable chunks/phrases. Have groups work together to arrange the words/phrases into the correct order.

Extension Activity: Have participants create their own personal quotes about teamwork...why it is important... what can be accomplished...etc. The quote should be one that encourages peers to gain a better understanding and perspective on the importance of teamwork AND why it is often a core value shared by many different cultures, populations, and groups.

Offer the opportunity for participants to research and share proverbs related to teamwork from their own cultures (Annex 7C, 7D).

Conclusion: employers rate the ability to be a “team player” as one of the most important qualities and characteristics of their current (and future) employees (i.e., the job candidate). Why this is might be so? Elicit responses and an interactive discussion.

ACTIVITY 2

I’ll Give You Some of Mine if You Give Me Some of Yours (Skills to Pay the Bills. www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/)

Part of becoming a functional member of a team is learning to understand what you bring to the group and what you might need from others. This exercise is designed to help participants begin to identify their individual strengths and needs regarding teamwork.

Time: 30 minutes

Materials: Pens or pencils; hands-out (Annex 7A), Chart paper and markers.

Directions: Introduce this activity by reflecting on some of the quotes discussed in Activity #1 (if you have not completed Activity #1, choose some of the quotes to discuss with the group – and offer a brief discussion on their meaning).

Ask participants for a list of some of the characteristics they think make up a good team player. This might be phrased as follows: “What does it take from each person on a team to make a team really work?”

Students will be completing an individual inventory of the skills they possess related to teamwork. This inventory is for personal reflection and need not be shared.

Extension Activity: Have participants ask someone they know and trust to rate them using a blank copy of Annex 7A. Were the scores/checks similar or different? What does this tell them? Does this change any of the notes made related to skills to improve?

Have participants redesign the activity with words and/or actions that better describe the elements of teamwork from their perspective. Another option is for participants to schedule a meeting with an employer and get additional input as to how an employer might identify or describe the characteristics listed (Annex 7E).

Conclusion: As part of the concluding activity, ask participants to share one of their identified areas of strengths – and one area they would like to improve. This discussion allows each to hear from others their areas of strength and need. This process may help those in need of assistance identify who might be able to offer it.

ACTIVITY 3

How Many Shapes Does it Take? (Skills to Pay the Bills. www.dol.gov/odep/topics/youth/softskills/)

It takes all types of team members to create a balanced, cohesive team. This activity will give you the opportunity to gain a better understanding of the roles different people play on a team and the importance of each role.

Time: 20 minutes

Materials: five large pieces of paper, each with one of the following shapes drawn: square, rectangle, circle, triangle, and squiggle

Directions: Before beginning this activity, place each of the five shapes in a different location in of the room. Ensure there is enough room for participants to move around for this activity. Discuss the fact that teams are all made up of people who perform different roles. Think about a sports team (football, basketball, soccer, hockey, etc.). What might happen if one basketball player hogged the ball all of the time? What might happen if the quarterback tried to run the ball all of the time instead of passing? So, it takes all different types of players to make an efficient and winning team, right?

Now, switch gears. Tell participants that not only does it take all different types of players to make a team effective; it takes all kinds of shapes, too.

Say something to the effect of: “I want you all to look around the room. Five different shapes are hanging up. The shapes are a square, a rectangle, a circle, a triangle, and a squiggle. What if I told you that knowing whether you, your co-workers and friends are squares, rectangles, circles, triangles, or squiggles could help you build better teams and better careers?”

Ask participants to stand up and take a few moments to think about the shape they like best or find most appealing. Then ask participants to walk over to that shape.

Once everyone has chosen their personal shape, use the information in Annex 7B to tell them a little bit about each shape’s “personality.” In fact, when you are finished with this activity, many participants will want to have a copy of what the shapes mean.

Extension Activity: Spend some time with participants to explore different types of personality assessments for the purpose of team building. Have students take different assessments and determine the validity of each. Research further and find out which occupations are best suited for which types of personalities.

Another option is to have participants think about and describe their favorite sport and compare players on those teams with the different roles found in the workplace. Examples might include: boss – coach; customer – fan; player – co-worker; etc. See how many different types of comparisons can be made and how important it is for all of these roles to work together in order to create harmony on a team.

Conclusion: Discuss the following questions with the group:

- Do you think people have the characteristics of more than one shape?
- Why do you think it is important to have all different shapes working on the same team? Offer some of the information below, if appropriate:

The Square, Rectangle, and Triangle are all convergent. This mean they are working TOWARDS something specific and finite, and they do it in a logical and systematic way. But they might be lacking in personal creativity.

The Circle and Squiggle are divergent. This mean they are creative, extroverted, and intuitive. They will reach out around them into new areas and to other people. But they aren't particularly systematic or dependable.

ACTIVITY 4

Concentration (Gharba, 2012)

If your team is feeling drained and stressed, this fun exercise is a great way to refresh and energize them.

Time: It doesn't require much time.

Group: The recommended group size is 10-20 people.

Directions:

- Participants will need to form two equal lines facing each other.
- The game starts when one line turns around, giving the second line 40 seconds to change 10 things about themselves. This can include anything from jewelry or clothing being swapped with other people, untied shoelaces, a different hair do, or a switched watch or ring to the other hand. All changes must be something the other group can see.
- After 40 seconds, the first group turns around and tries to find all the changes the other group made.
- Once the changes have been recognized, the groups switch, giving each team a chance to make changes.

Conclusion: This game will stimulate the participants' minds and challenge their memory. Incorporate this activity when a lack of energy is apparent.

ACTIVITY 5

The snowball: Mapping for Change conference (Mccall, Ashley, Rambaldi, 2006)

Snowballing (or pyramiding) involves participants working first alone, then in pairs, then in groups of four, and then in groups of eight.

The participants work on an issue by responding to particular questions, e.g. lists of keywords, or answers to a valued question, or they are asked to agree or disagree with a given phrase. The participants are also asked to give the reasons for their responses. The facilitator then asks a representative from each group to present the outcomes of their debate to the other groups, by placing their findings (one each on separate pieces of paper or card – meta-cards) on large sheets of paper, put up on the walls.

Directions: At the conference sessions, two people facilitated each session and a note-taker was chosen to write up the findings at the end, to present at the closing plenary session each day.

The facilitator opens the session by introducing a specific question or questions for discussion. For example, on Day 1, each working group was asked to consider the following question:

In your experience and knowledge, what internal and external factors and conditions influence your work practice?

These are already written on large sheets of paper pinned to the wall or projected onto a screen. The question should be as clear and unambiguous as possible.

1. Participants begin individually, by writing down her or his individual responses (to discuss it later with a partner). You can write on metacards, or you can use a notebook.

Time: keep it brief – 3-5 minutes depending on the length and complexity of the question, and on the age and experience of the participants.

2. Participants join together in pairs and discuss their responses with their partner. They may reach a consensus agreement on the responses. If not, they should be clear about what are their differences, and why. Using A5 meta-cards, the pairs write down their thoughts – for example, funding, training, etc. Not more than two to five words per card if possible.

Time: 5-10 minutes.

3. Pairs join together into groups of four. All meta-cards are put on the floor in the middle of a circle. Cards are grouped and re-written if necessary to capture similar content.

Repeat the same process as for step 2. This new group shares its thoughts and reflections and any new ideas each pair has brought to the group.

Time: 5-10 minutes.

4. Groups of four may join together into group of eight, and repeat the process, or until the session has reached 'critical mass' – i.e. there are only a few main groups left. But eight people is a big group and may not be suitable for easy discussions, although at the conference groups were as big as 16 people.

Time: 5-10 minutes.

5. Next, the groups sort out the cards on the floor, showing the issues they have identified. As before, the cards can be easily mixed and sorted and re-organised etc. into sets or groups of types of response. Use new cards to make main headings for each group of answers. Participants do this themselves, with help from the facilitator. This stage is not easy – sorting the cards into logical but distinct groups or sets with appropriate headings (names) requires organizational, conceptual and verbal skills.

Time: 10-15 minutes.

6. When everyone is agreed on the responses and the grouping of the responses, the facilitator asks a representative from each group to stick the cards on to the wall (with masking tape, pins, etc.), so that everyone can see them. The representative explains the group's reasons for the responses.

Time: 5-10 minutes per group.

7. At this stage, and if there is time or it is felt appropriate, the groups can collectively re-organise the cards on the wall into headings/types of response, as done in step 6.

Time: 10-15 minutes.

8. The note-taker then writes up the session findings, ready to present at the closing plenary session. An easy way to record the results is to take a digital photo of the cards on the wall.

Conclusion: This tool allows for easy comparison between the findings of each group. If used in subsequent parallel working group sessions, the participants are already familiar with the tool. Full involvement – everyone is involved in the first three rounds of single, pairs, and probably the foursomes. It is more inclusive and participatory than e.g. a plenary meeting, a general discussion, or a question and answer session. Shy participants feel more confident about giving their views in pairs or in small group because they must begin with writing down their own response. There is limited eye contact, as cards are grouped on the floor and the focus of discussion is centred on them. It is focused on an issue and questions of interest (at least to the organisers and facilitator). The original questions come from outside, i.e. the organisers – but the questions could have been developed in a participatory way.

ACTIVITY 6

Mental-circle: getting to know (www.qualitylogoproducts.com/blog/3-fun-team-building-exercises-employees/)

As your business grows, it's inevitable that you will have new team members. You also might possibly have to form new teams as people move to different positions and job responsibilities change. This game is perfect for promoting communication, listening skills, and motivation. It's a great game if you're attempting to work towards a theme or problem you would like to address as a company.

Time: 10-30 minutes

Materials: a whistle; a stopwatch; pens or pencils & paper.

Group: you can use as little as 10 people to play this game and can go up to as many as you would like

Directions: Begin Circle of Questions by splitting the group into two equal teams (if there is an odd number, then either find another participant or let someone sit out until the next game). Ask one team to stand in a circle facing outwards, then ask the second team to create a slightly larger circle around the first one facing inwards.

First have both teams greet each other. Then the people in the inner circle will ask a question (of a manager's choice) of the person opposite them in the outer circle. That employee will have 30 seconds to give an answer before the whistle blows. **Pro tip:** make these open-ended questions to get interesting answers.

After the allotted 30 seconds is up, the person in the outer circle will ask the person in the inner circle the same question. After both people have asked each other a question, then the inner circle will move clockwise one place and the outer circle will move counter clockwise one space to find a new partner.

Expect some confusion at first, but after several tries you will get the hang of it. Repeat this exercise by asking more questions, each time alternating which circle gets to ask the question first. Stop the exercise when everyone has asked and answered a question, or whenever you get to an appropriate stopping point, or if you run out of pre-approved questions.

Example questions: Where would you like to be in 5 years? What does success look like to you? What's your greatest strength? What kind of management style do you like? (Try to ask questions that gradually work toward a theme you would like to address).

FURTHER READING

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