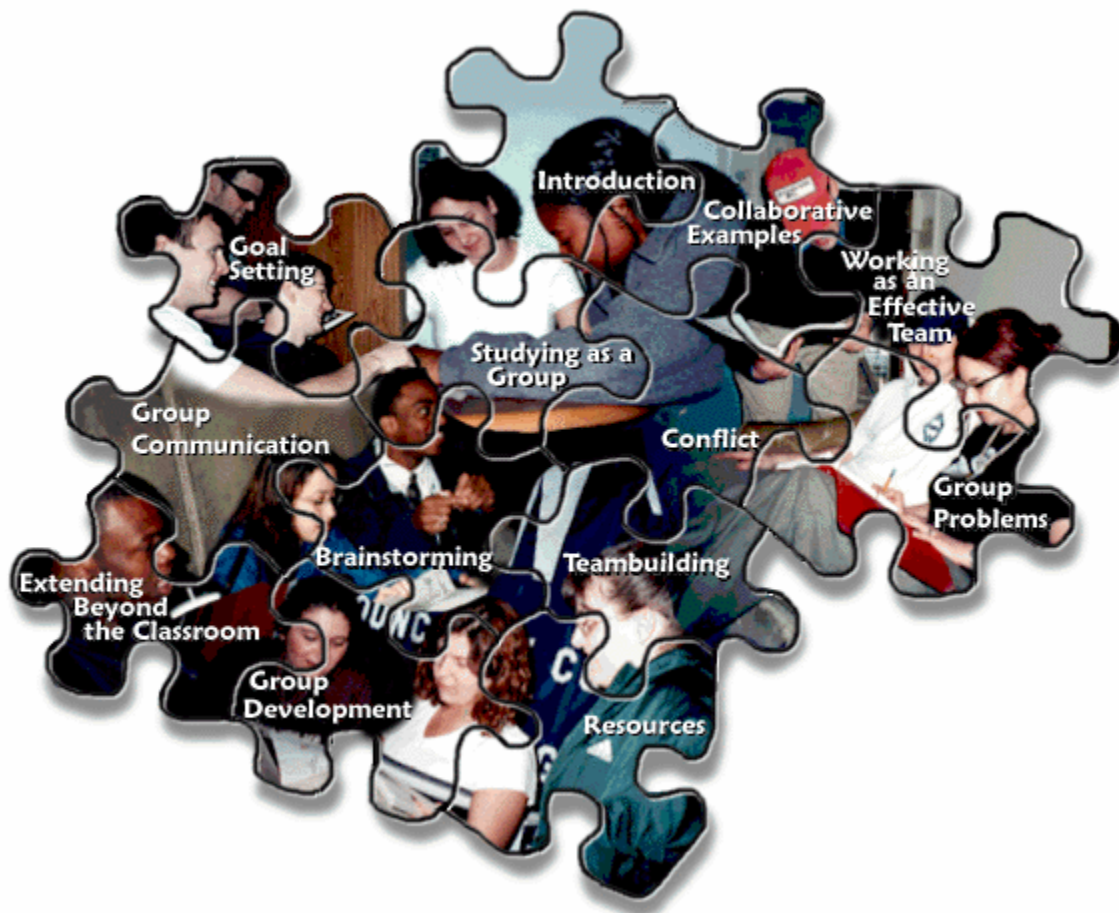


# Puzzled about Teams

This handbook has been developed as a resource for you. Separately, each piece focuses on a specific aspect of collaboration. Taken as a whole, the pieces can help you develop the collaborative skills you will need to succeed in the academic, professional and social worlds. You can begin by looking at the introduction and reading each section, or tailor the handbook to your individual needs by heading straight to a specific area.



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# Foreword

The Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence is happy to provide you with this electronic version of *Puzzled about Teams*. This electronic handbook has been widely used by Penn State faculty and graduate instructors, as well as faculty members at other institutions of higher education around the globe. This handbook was originally designed and developed through the efforts of honors students working at the Schreyer Institute for Innovation in Learning in 1998; consequently, some references may be outdated. We offer this handbook as an electronic resource so that you can benefit from their advice and guidance. If you are at an institution other than Penn State and plan to use this piece in your class, in whole or in part, we ask that you credit the students, Penn State, and the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence as the source.

Angela Linse,  
*Executive Director for the Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence  
and Associate Dean for Teaching Excellence*

# Introduction

*Have you ever found yourself in one of these situations?*

You walk into class, sit down and prepare to take notes during a lecture, when your professor informs you that today you will begin working on a project. As your instructor hands out your assignment, she also tells you that you will be assigned to work in a group...

You walk into your interview for a position on a spirit committee. You are excited because you have always wanted to get more involved. Everything is going well until the committee chair asks you, so how do you feel about working with others?...

You finally get the internship of your dreams. You arrive on the first day, ready to work in the 'real world' and discover the first thing on your agenda is a meeting. You walk into the room and your supervisor introduces you to your group, with whom you will be working all summer...

Yes, teams are everywhere. It is almost certain that at some point of your academic or professional careers you will be asked to work in a group setting. Over the last two decades, corporations and universities alike have come to realize the individual and organizational benefits of collaboration. But just because group-work has become commonplace doesn't mean that teamwork skills are common knowledge to everyone.

If you are uncomfortable working with groups or with your abilities as a group member, don't fear. Teamwork skills are not impossible to acquire. With time, experience and dedication you can easily master the skills you'll need to thrive in any group situation.

# Brainstorming

*When faced with a challenge, whether it be creative or managerial, how often does your group act on the first solution suggested rather than explore alternatives?*

*And out of those times, how often do you realize, two weeks down the road, that there are better, more effective or more innovative ways of doing things?*

This kind of myopia happens to groups all the time. Often, in groups, we try to solve our problems as quickly and painlessly as possible. Sometimes we do this because of deadlines or a lack of interest in the project and often we do it because we are not comfortable enough in the group setting to propose different ways of doing things. One way to combat this timidity is by brainstorming.

Brainstorming is a quick, effective method of idea generation that allows groups members to share a variety of ideas in a safe, nonjudgmental environment. It allows a number of ideas to be presented before the group so that the most promising alternatives can be examined and the best solution found. Brainstorming can be used to generate project themes, group duties, presentation methods, solutions to complex problems and just about any other challenge a group may face.

## **Before the brainstorming session begins:**

- Make sure all group members understand the problem at hand.
- Ask group members to take the time to generate some ideas individually.
- Write these ideas down before discussion begins so that good ideas are not lost in the shuffle.

## **During the brainstorming session:**

- Elect someone to be the recorder who writes down all of the ideas presented.
- Invite everyone to share his or her ideas with the group.
- Allow time for discussion of suggestions so that members can build off of each other's ideas, or "hitchhike."
- Write down all ideas so that they may be reviewed after the session is over.
- Do not decide on any solution until all members have had a chance to share all of their ideas.

## **Tips for effective brainstorming:**

- Don't be judgmental of others' ideas. This behavior increases group tension and may intimidate group members from sharing their own ideas. Even the craziest, most unrealistic solutions can work or produce another idea that may work.
- Practice good listening skills by concentrating on the person speaking and his or her ideas rather than just thinking about what you plan to say next.
- Try to encourage creativity and innovative thinking in order to generate the widest range of new ideas and maximize your chances of finding the best solution. One way to encourage creativity is to ask everyone in the group to come up with the most outlandish, yet ideal solution they can think of. When you start discussing these ideas, you may find that they aren't as outrageous as they seemed.
- Do not claim ownership of ideas. Allow other people to "hitchhike" in order to make the most out of every suggestion.
- Everyone in the group should participate, even if they don't think they can come up with any ideas. Once the discussion starts they may be able to offer valuable contributions to the conversation by building off of others' ideas.
- Don't stop too soon. Some people take longer than others to get used to the brainstorming process so you need to provide enough time for them to acclimate themselves.
- Be as honest as possible when discussing the feasibility of solutions so that you don't get stuck trying to make a creative but impossible idea work for you.

- Set realistic time limits for your brainstorming session so that you have time to finish the project when you have found a solution. Some types of limits include: allowing everyone to offer three ideas; giving ideas until the recorder has filled up one side of one sheet of paper; placing someone in charge of keeping time so that you only brainstorm for ten minutes. There is an unlimited amount of time limiting techniques, and no one way is the best. It is important to set your limits based on what works best for your group.
- There are no 'wrong' ideas. The only bad solution is silence.

### **After the brainstorming session:**

- Review all of the ideas presented during the brainstorming session and decide which alternatives are the most reasonable and appealing to the whole group.
- Discuss the merits and feasibility of each solution.
- Perhaps each person in the group can take a solution and develop a case for how and why your group should use it.
- Since you took the time to brainstorm, don't just settle on any solution. Carefully review your choices so that your decision is informed and well-thought out.
- Once you have decided upon your solution, or solutions in some cases, it's time to get to work on making your ideas realities.

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# Conflict

*Have you ever been in a group where you have not been able to work with someone?*

*Have you ever held back your comments because you were afraid of causing conflict?*

## **What is conflict?**

- Conflict is an inevitable part of life.
- Conflict signals a need for change.
- Conflict can be positive and productive. If people express their feelings and needs in a positive and constructive way, it reduces anxiety and prevents escalation of conflict.

## **Is conflict negative?**

The answer depends on how it is handled. Conflict in teams is not only inevitable, it can be healthy as well. It can be a way of resolving differences and responding to issues that are causing friction between group members. Conflict can bring on innovation and direct the group in ways that members would not have anticipated earlier.

However, conflict can also be something that tears a group apart and that increases tension among members.

## **How does conflict occur?**

Think back to a time when you were in a group setting, this can be for a class project or an organization that you belonged to. What situations do you remember experiencing conflict in? How did it begin?

### **Conflict may occur:**

When expectations are not stated from the very beginning

- Members may assume that everyone shares common goals and meanwhile, they work towards different things.

### **When members are having difficulty scheduling meetings**

- This needs to be taken care of at the very beginning. The group needs to decide when everyone in the group can meet. The easiest way to do this is to make a schedule with classes and other activities logged in. Compare and determine available time slots.

Ideally, it would be great if everyone could make it. However, there may be times when one member cannot make the meeting. What are you going to do then?

Options:

- Not have the meeting
- Have the meeting and have the notes emailed to the absent member

### **When members are not listening to each other**

- Members are enthusiastic about their own ideas and are thinking about how to articulate their own thoughts rather than listening to what is being said by other group members.

Often members do not take the time to restate and clarify what is being said. Instead, they are anxious to express their own ideas.

### **When members may have different ideas of commitment levels**

- They could talk about how much time that they want to allocate per week.

### **When members have different goals for where they would like to see the project head**

- If this situation occurs in the very beginning, you could discuss the desired end result. If members have different goals, then what can you agree on? What resolution would suit all parties while keeping in mind the requirements?
- If this becomes a problem in the middle of a project, then the group needs to refocus.

It is never too late to review the purpose of the project. A group needs to look at time constraints and prioritize its time investments.

### **To avoid some of the problems, think about the following things when the group first convenes:**

#### **Take the time to deal with expectations.**

Members may want to skip this part because it does not show immediate results and is often not graded. For example, the point of the group may be seen as solely task oriented; anything that is not contributing to that end goal may be considered unnecessary.

However, taking the time to resolve these issues could save a lot of effort and frustration in the future.

#### **How to do this?**

At the first meeting, have each person speak about what they expect the project to be. Write it down. Let each person say what commitment level that they are willing to give. This way, people know from the very beginning what they can expect from each other.

#### **When expectations are not being met, these are options to consider:**

- The team leader or another member of the team can meet with the team member separately.
  - Do not meet with the member in a group setting, he or she may feel that you are attacking them.
  - Ask them what is going on, do they need help?
- Sometimes the problem is that the member does not realize that they are doing something wrong. This person may be bogged down with other work and does not know how to effectively manage his or her time. Or, this person may feel overwhelmed with the amount of work that needs to be done and is avoiding dealing with the reality of it.
- Talk to the TA and ask him or her to intervene.

#### **Methods of dealing with conflict:**

When the team is trying to resolve a conflict, it is important to strive toward a "win-win resolution." Conflict need not result in "winners" and "losers."

There are two recommended methods to deal with conflict:

- **Compromise:**
  - This strategy emphasizes both parties giving up something they want in order to reach middle ground.
  - This is a good method to use when both parties are willing to listen to the other's position.
  - A group member may want to talk to both members separately to isolate what the misunderstanding is and then bring the two members to work it out.
- **Mediation:**
  - This method calls on a third neutral party to assist the members in reaching an agreement.
  - This is completely voluntary. Mediation assumes that the parties know their positions the best and enables them to come up with their own solution.

When trying to resolve a situation, focus on things you can change.

- You can't change someone's beliefs or values.
- You can change tasks or plans.

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# Extending Beyond the Classroom

*Have you ever been involved in a collaborative project outside of a classroom? A team project at your summer internship? A planning or special events committee?*

*Have you ever noticed a difference between teams in the classroom and teams outside the classroom?*

## **Extracurricular Activities**

Organizations, ranging from student government to a spirit activity, require people to work in teams. Extracurricular teams tend to differ from classroom teams in that people who join extracurricular committees:

- Often do not share the same educational background
- Have diverse reasons for being in the group
- Have different motivations and goals for the group
- Have many other commitments between school and jobs, and therefore, often have less time to devote to meeting with the group

### **For groups that meet less frequently:**

It is more important for groups to do teambuilding activities to promote cohesiveness. Groups that are cohesive are more likely to reach goals and to be effective. Even if a group does not meet regularly, it is vital to the success of the group that they spend time getting to know members and reinforcing goals and objectives.

- Set 15 minutes at the beginning of the meeting to go over items from the last meeting.
- Take good meeting notes.
- Set an agenda.
- Set aside a consistent time and place for meetings.
- Make sure that everyone knows what everyone else is doing.

## **The Workplace**

As the workforce becomes increasingly competitive, students will be required to bring in skills to help their organization thrive in the global marketplace. Among those skills are group work and communication skills. No longer is the working environment centered on an individual effort. The success of an organization depends on the ability of a diverse group of people to work successfully to reach goals.

It is essential that as we enter the workforce, we be armed with the skills necessary to work effectively in groups. Organizational groups differ from educational groups in many ways. Corporate teams, for example:

- Tend to have predetermined goals
- Are bound by the organization's rules of conduct and mission
- Have more than just grades at stake
- Tend to work on projects that are longer ranging in scope
- Have less trouble finding meeting times

Despite these and many other differences between educational and professional groups, the concepts of effective team management remain the same. The keys to remember are that each group situation should be viewed within its own context and that within each group people will have their own ways of perceiving and interacting. As long as you adopt a productive attitude and learn from your past experiences, working in a professional group can be an empowering and beneficial experience for both you and your company.

## **The Workplace: Skills Employers Want**

When students enter the workforce, employers look for specific skills. Graduates should possess both technical and social that will promote teamwork.

### **Employers often look for these skills:**

1. Learning to Learn: The ability to apply new information quickly and effectively
2. Listening and Oral Communication
3. Competence in reading, writing and computation: analytical and critical thinking will be valuable skills in a working environment where tasks are more ambiguous.
4. Adaptability: Creative Thinking and Problem Solving
5. Personal Management: Self-Esteem, Goal Setting/Motivation, and Personal/Career Development
6. Group Effectiveness: Interpersonal Skills, Negotiation and Teamwork
7. Organizational Effectiveness and Leadership

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# Goal Setting

*Have you ever been in a situation where your group was content to do a minimal amount of work in order to pass the assignment and no one understood your need to get an 'A' on the project?*

*When you leave your group meetings do you always have a clear idea of when you are getting together next and what is expected of you in the meantime?*

If you and your group are not in sync about what you want to get from and give to a group project, then you probably haven't taken the time to discuss your individual and group goals. Goals are important to a group because they provide the group with focus and motivation. As we accomplish our smaller or short-term goals, we are instilled with a sense of achievement and competence that motivates us to continue working toward the final product. Goals also provide a means by which group members can align themselves toward a common objective ensuring that all members know their place and role within the group and the project.

Developing effective goals isn't always as easy as it may seem. Goals need to provide members with a clear understanding of exactly what steps are required to finish the project as well as the motivation to perform to the best of their abilities. If goals are too broad or impossible to carry out, group members will become frustrated and confused.

## **Goals are best when they are:**

**Specific:** Specific goals illustrate concise needs or desires rather than make broad or sweeping generalizations about the project.

**Challenging:** Challenging goals inspire group members to work harder because they are more complex and require higher levels of commitment.

**Attainable:** Attainable goals instill a feeling of accomplishment and confidence within group members because they are then able to see the positive results of their actions.

**Clear:** Clear goals provide group members with a sound understanding of the project.

## **Tips for setting group goals:**

- Develop a list of goals that the group may consider important such as:
  - Getting an A on the project
  - Forming friendships
  - Having a good time
  - Learning about the issue at hand
  - Learning how to interact as a team
  - Being well prepared for class lectures and exams
  - Impressing the professor
- Ask each group member to rank these goals in terms of what they feel is important.
- Tally the responses and discuss the ratings.
- Decide upon those issues which group members find most important and write them down as your overall group goals.

## **Tips for setting project goals:**

- Brainstorm all of the steps necessary for finishing this project (i.e. researching topic, selecting areas of interest, taking photos, writing sections).
- Decide upon the format (i.e., a group presentation, a paper, a slide show) of your project, if one is not assigned by the professor in order to subdivide tasks.
- Create a timeline that will allow you to finish the project in the time allotted.

- Assign a deadline for each section of the project.
- Decide who will be in charge of making sure each section is completed by the deadline.
- Write down this timeline and make sure all members have a copy so that everyone can see where the group should be at any given time.
- At the start of each meeting, ask members for an update of where they are in terms of accomplishing their goals in order to make sure everyone is on track.

### **Things to remember:**

- Challenging goals are effective because they drive group members to work harder and achieve more; however, they require a high amount of commitment from members in order to accomplish them.
- If goals are too challenging, in other words impossible, they will be detrimental to the group because they will drastically affect the morale and confidence of the members.
- Don't be afraid to confront people who are not adhering to the goals set by the group. They may have good reasons for not pulling their own weight or they may just be lazy. Either way, the group cannot function effectively if all members are not contributing.
- Goals are important as they provide structure but they are just guidelines. Some situations require that you renegotiate your goals and you, as a group, must be flexible enough to do so in order to successfully complete the tasks at hand.

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# Group Communication

*Have you ever had an idea that you just couldn't express?*

*A solution to a problem that no one would listen to?*

It's frustrating when you want to communicate with people but you just can't. That's because communication is an integral part of human interaction. It is how we present ourselves, how we get across all the ideas that are in our minds, how other people create impressions of us. It's impossible to hypothesize what the world would be like without communication. However, sometimes in a group setting, communication can be just as detrimental as it is essential.

Communication is something we all have to be conscious of as we interact with the rest of the world. One of the fundamental theories of communication study states that "one cannot not communicate." That is to say, we are always communicating with others, whether we intend to or not. In that way it is important that we understand that what we say is just as important as how we say it. The misinterpretation of messages can lead to the kind of misunderstandings that can make or break a group. It is essential, then, that we understand how those misunderstandings sometimes arise and what we can do, as group members, to circumvent them. One of the most common problems that groups face is dealing with tension and defensive behavior within the group. By avoiding negative behaviors, providing constant feedback and practicing active listening, we can decrease these negative forces from becoming chronic problems within our groups.

## **Tension and Defensiveness**

*Did you ever notice that sometimes the people in your group just don't get along, as if there's some kind of tension always in the air? Or that people seem to jump down each other's throats with little provocation?*

Sometimes, within groups, people communicate messages that make others feel tense or defensive, without even realizing it. This can be very harmful to a group. It can make group members less likely to contribute their own ideas, agree with others' opinions (even when they are shared), and attempt to overcome conflict. These feelings can be circumvented, however, if you are conscious of the messages you are sending to others.

### **Tension and defensiveness are increased when:**

- People are kept from expressing their ideas
- Group members refuse to listen to or acknowledge the validity of other opinions
- People feel they are being judged or evaluated
- People act or talk with superiority
- Individuals do not trust the group enough to share their feelings or thoughts
- Ideas are misconstrued due to a lack of clear, open communication
- An individual's verbal and nonverbal cues are not congruent

## **Feedback**

*When was the last time someone commented on one of your ideas and made you feel really good? How about really bad? Now think about the last time you responded to someone's ideas. Did you do so because you felt the need to support or degrade them or did you do it without even realizing it?*

Feedback is when we respond to comments made by others. Very often we do it out of habit, without even realizing it. If used properly, feedback allows group members to provide verbal and nonverbal support for each other, clarify ideas, increase each other's confidence, promote group closeness and refine communication skills. If used improperly, it can also be detrimental, causing us to become defensive or withdraw from group discussion.

**Feedback is helpful when it:**

- Immediately follows the comment or idea
- Does not degrade the person
- Focuses on positive aspects of the idea
- Suggests improvement rather than criticizes
- Describes ideas rather than judges them
- Pertains to that particular situation (does not use words such as "always" or "never")

**Feedback is detrimental when it:**

- Judges the person or idea
- Is made in an attempt to control the conversation
- Evaluates the person or idea
- Is intended to make the other person feel inferior
- Is intended to increase your own standing within the group
- Focuses on negative aspects of idea

**Listening**

*Have you ever thought you were listening to someone speak only to realize when they are finished that you have no idea what they just said? Or are you usually on the other end, always having to repeat the things you say in order to get your point across? Did you ever notice that sometimes you don't 'listen as well as you hear?'*

Listening is very different from hearing. Hearing is a passive physical process involving sound waves and the inner ear. Listening is an active physiological process in which we analyze and interpret what we hear. In order to engage in effective, productive, interactive discussion, we must actively listen to the ideas of the other group members in order to provide feedback and formulate intelligent, informed arguments. We can easily become good listeners by avoiding negative listening behaviors.

**Listening is hindered when we:**

- Jump to conclusions before a person has finished speaking
- Focus on how people are communicating rather than what they are communicating
- Concentrate on our own responses before the other person is done speaking
- Allow ourselves to go off on mental tangents
- Make the choice not to listen

**Listening is aided when we:**

- Concentrate on what a person is saying rather than how they look or talk
- Make mental connections between our own lives and the ideas being presented
- Listen with an open mind rather than assuming the person speaking is wrong or uninformed
- Focus on the ways in which we agree with the speaker rather than the ways we disagree
- Remind ourselves to provide the speaker with positive feedback
- Restate, in our minds, what we think the person is saying in our own words
- Remember how frustrated we feel when people don't listen to us

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# Group Development

*What is a group? What is a team? Is there is a difference between the two?*

Before reading any further, try to answer those questions. Here are our answers:

- A group is 5-6 people who are working together to accomplish a project.
- A team is a group that shares common goals and realizes that members are interdependent.
- Is there a difference between them? Think back to a time when you were working on a project or activity with other people.

It is a common mistake to assume that group members automatically signify a team. Placing people together in a group is only the beginning of the team formation process. This process takes the effort of everyone involved.

A model of group development by Barry Tuckman was designed to explain how groups formed and evolved. Though every group may not follow this exact pattern of development, this model reduces the complexity and ambiguity of the process. There are four stages of development (Michael Reynolds, *Groupwork in Education and Training Ideas In Practice*, 1994, British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data, pg. 50-51).

**Forming:** This is when the group comes together.

- Members get to know each other
- Expectations are discussed
- Members become more familiar with the project

For example, a professor selects groups of five people to work collaboratively on a project.

**Storming:** This is when the honeymoon period is over, and the group begins to experience conflict. Members realize that they do not agree on certain issues and have not resolved them.

- There is still ambiguity over each other's roles.
- At this stage, members may begin to resist working together and want to work independently.

For example, member A and B do not agree on how to execute a project. They do not understand exactly what their assignments are and how they fit into the whole group. Why can't they just work alone?

**Norming:** At this stage, groups are able to speak about their concerns and expectations.

- Members may be used to each other and feel comfortable expressing their concerns.

For example, after wanting to work independently, the group meets and begins to understand how their specific duties are complementing each other.

**Performing:** Groups are able to perform. They make progress on their project.

- Members take advantage of each other's strengths. Conflicts are focused on problems, not people and enhance the quality of the project.

For example, members understand how they are interdependent. They see that in order to complete their project, they have to work together.

## Reference

Woods, John. (1997). *10 minute guide to teams and teamwork*. New York, NY: Alpha Books.

# Group Problems

*Do you feel as though your groups spend more time dealing with problems than working on the project?*

*Have you ever noticed that many of your groups seem to suffer from the same conflicts?*

You aren't alone. Every time people with different backgrounds, ideals and values get together to work on a project, especially one which carries great importance such as a graded class assignment, problems are bound to arise. Luckily, many of these problems are easy to solve if you are willing to take the time to deal with the issue rather than ignore it in an attempt to complete the project as quickly as possible.

Many of the common problems that groups face can be avoided if you spend time when you first get together discussing your project goals and group expectations. By putting your deadlines and goals in writing, you will have a quick and easy reference to help you deal with many of the problems you may encounter. If everyone knows what is expected of them, then they will be able to meet those expectations, thereby avoiding possible conflicts over who is supposed to do what by when.

Some problems, however, will arise throughout your project no matter how well prepared you are. It is important that you take the time to deal with them rather than allow them to disrupt your group. Some common problems that groups face are discussed below.

## **Frustration over size of project**

- Often at the start of a project a group is overwhelmed by the amount of work necessary to complete the project.
- Usually at this point group members are thinking of the project as an individual endeavor rather than a group one. They may not realize that the work will be broken up and much easier to handle than they think.

### **Dealing with frustration:**

- Start by breaking up the project into its different components (i.e. the presentation, the report, etc.).
- Brainstorm all of the tasks that will need to be completed in order to finish the project.
- Set tentative, but realistic, deadlines for the completion of these different parts.
- Divide the project up so that group members can determine their individual responsibilities.

## **Arguments over what the group should be doing**

- Group members often have different ideas about how the project should be handled. If the group is united by common goals and ideas, members will work more efficiently and productively.
- If, as a group, you have broken the project into manageable parts, assigned responsibilities and set goals, these arguments should not arise.

### **But if these issues do arise:**

- Deal with them immediately rather than ignoring the problem.
- Listen to each idea.
- Discuss what each idea means for the group and the group project.
- Do not refuse to listen to an idea on the basis of who is making the argument.
- As a group, decide which ideas best fit into the goals the group has developed.
- Find the course of action which is best for the group and make sure everyone in the group is aware of what that plan is.
- Don't waste time debating that you don't have time to finish the project. Learn to choose which ideas are worth debating.



## **Unbalanced participation from group members**

- If the group discussion is dominated by one or two individuals, the group will lose its most valuable commodity--the variety of opinions and ideas expressed by its members.
- While some people are naturally more talkative or comfortable in group situations than others, everyone in the group should be encouraged to participate and no one should be allowed to control all of the group's encounters.

### **Ideas for balancing participation:**

- When your group has a problem that needs a solution, try brainstorming as a way of inviting everyone in the group to participate.
- Try teambuilding activities in which success requires participation from all group members in order to draw out the quieter members.
- Try teambuilding activities that will help your group become more familiar and comfortable with each other. This may open up lines of communication and put members more at ease talking to and sharing ideas with each other.
- Assign someone the role of gatekeeper during each meeting. The gatekeeper's job is to make sure everyone is given a chance to speak and that no one person dominates the conversation. The gatekeeper can ask people for their opinions or ideas directly, ask everyone in the group to share one idea or employ any other tactics that will keep participation on an even level.

## **Frustration over lack of progress**

- When a project takes a long time to complete, group members often feel as though the end will never come and that they haven't accomplished anything.
- This frustration may also occur when the group comes across a problem they are having trouble solving.

### **Dealing with frustration:**

- If you have made a list of all of the tasks necessary to complete the project, you can go through that list and check off the things that have been completed. Then the group members can see how much they have accomplished.
- If you haven't made a list, ask each member to list two things they have done for the project so far and two things they still need to do. Someone in the group can then record all of the things the group has accomplished and all of the things they still need to do.
- If your group is really frustrated, step away from the project for a few minutes. Play a game or do a teambuilding activity for 15 minutes to get your minds off of the project. Then, you can come back to it refreshed and relaxed.

## **Resistance to being a team**

- There are many reasons why group members may be resisting being part of a group. They could have had negative group experiences in the past. They could be afraid the group will reject their ideas. They may not feel comfortable speaking in front of strangers. They may not trust that the other members will do their share of the work. They may simply feel groups are a waste of time.
- People who are resistant to working in a group may agree to any idea the group has in order to get the project done quicker.
- When people in your group resist the idea of being part of the group, they usually withdraw from the group, work on their own, and keep their ideas to themselves. If this happens, the group loses a valuable resource.

### **Tips for combating resistance:**

- Teambuilding activities that allow members to get to know each other are good for increasing comfort levels within the group.
- By setting deadlines and asking everyone to give an update of their section of the project at each meeting, group members are able to keep track of each other. This ensures that everyone

is doing their part of the work and helps those members who are afraid they will have to do all of the work.

- Try teambuilding activities in which one member is blindfolded and forced to rely on another member in order to increase levels of trust within the group.
- If many of the people in your group have had negative group experiences, have everyone list two positive things about working with groups. Discuss how you can incorporate those characteristics into your group.
- You can also have each member name one thing that went wrong with a previous group and discuss how you can avoid having the same problem arise within your group.
- Establish norms that ensure each member the opportunity to speak openly and candidly without threat of criticism and ridicule.

### **Tangents and divergent conversations**

- Although forming new friendships can be a great benefit of group work, if group members focus more on socializing than working, the project will suffer.
- It is important that you maximize the time you have together by staying on topic rather than going off on tangent conversations.

#### **Tips for managing tangents:**

- If you find your group spends more time socializing than working, you should try writing up an agenda for each meeting.
- By deciding, as a group, what issues you want to deal with at the meeting, you can all be aware of how much you need to accomplish during the meeting, which may help deter tangent conversations.
- Have someone in the group play the role of meeting facilitator. This person will be in charge of bringing up agenda items, watching the time and, most importantly, keeping the conversation focused.

### **Too many opinions, not enough facts**

- Often when people feel strongly about something they will state their personal opinions as facts.
- While opinions can be very useful to a group, they must be regarded as subjective and you must recognize that everyone may not necessarily agree.
- It is important that your group is objective and critical when dealing with opinions so that you do not act on false information.

#### **Telling fact from fiction:**

- Institute a group norm where everyone must back their opinions with facts or sources.
- Assign someone the role of devil's advocate. This person is in charge of questioning statements and giving opposing viewpoints so that other group members are forced to make sound arguments and think through their statements.

### **Unclear understanding of the assignment**

- If your group does not understand the assignment, arguments over your course of action can arise.
- Extra work may result if everyone does not clearly understand the assigned project and individual responsibilities.

#### **Dealing with ambiguity:**

- At your very first group meeting, discuss the assignment to make sure everyone understands the task at hand.
- If you have any questions, one or two group members should contact the instructor or the TA to clear up confusion before you begin working.

**Uninteresting topic**

- In order to successfully complete a project, group members need not completely devote themselves to it. However, they must have at least enough interest to motivate them to do their share of the work.

**Enhancing interest:**

- If your group is fortunate to pick your topic, avoid any topic that even one group member hates. Extreme dislike of the topic can lead to resentment or hostility over the project.
- If your group isn't at all interested in a topic that was assigned to you, look for a creative angle.
- You may also want to speak with your professor. He or she may be able to change your topic or help you find a way to make the project interesting for you.

# Studying as a Group

*Have you ever noticed that you understood material better after discussing it with someone?*

*Have you wondered if you could benefit from studying in a group setting?*

## **Methods for group studying**

People who study in groups tend to do better in class exams. People benefit from discussing ideas and learn from others with strengths and weaknesses in relation to the topic. When you discuss things with other students, it becomes more evident how well you understand a topic.

There are different methods by which students can form study groups and assign roles.

- Each person can learn a section and teach it to the group.
- Each person can learn all the material and can form questions for each group member.
- Each person can take turns talking about a section. At the end, people can jump in with facts that may have been left out.

## **Relating acquired and new knowledge**

Learning new information can, at times, be overwhelming. It is important for students to be able to relate the concepts that are being examined with past experiences and blocks of relating information (Novak and Gowin, p. 6). This makes the new material easier to understand. It is also a way for students to develop ownership of the material. The more personal connections that are made, the more control that students have over their learning (Reynolds, p. 17). By building connections, students remember material for a longer time period.

### **For example:**

In a class examining organizational structures, the topic at hand is bureaucratic organizations. The focus is on theorist Max Weber who defined bureaucracy as the most efficient way to run an organization. To better understand the theories, relate them to your own or someone else's experience working in a large organization. Evaluate Weber's perspective against your own.

# Teambuilding

*Have you ever found yourself in a group that didn't click, that didn't seem to get along or that didn't accomplish anything, and you couldn't figure out why?*

*Did you ever notice that when you are friendly with the people in your group, the project seems to go a lot smoother?*

Sometimes groups just don't work, not because no one in the group cares about the project, but because they aren't comfortable working with each other. Open lines of communication, trust, and a willingness to come together are all essential ingredients of any effective group.

One way that group members can become familiar with each other is by teambuilding. Teambuilding involves group activities designed to increase levels of trust and comfort within the group. Although these activities are often facilitated by an outsider, there are hundreds of teambuilding activities that you can, as a group, engage in on your own. The goal is for the group to talk on a more personal level and to feel more comfortable and open with each other.

## **Some teambuilding activities you can use:**

### **Tree Huggers**

This activity takes place outside and requires blindfolds.

Group members pair up, and one person from each group is blindfolded. The non-blindfolded person leads the other to a tree. The blindfolded individual can then feel the tree (hug it), trying to commit it to memory. They are then led back to the starting point, and the blindfold is removed. That person then attempts to find 'their' tree. Once they do, everyone returns to the starting point and trades places.

### **Human Camera**

This activity takes place outdoors and requires blindfolds.

Group members pair up, and one member is blindfolded. The non-blindfolded member leads the blindfolded member to something they find interesting and places them in front of it much like a camera. The blindfold is then removed, and they talk about why that view was chosen. Group members then trade partners and do the activity again.

### **Boundary Breaking**

This activity can take place anywhere with any number of group members.

Group members sit in a circle. They then take turns asking the group questions. Answers must follow a few basic rules:

- You cannot steal anyone's answers.
- You cannot debate anyone's answers.
- You cannot comment on anyone's answers.
- Members can pass to think about an answer, but they will have to answer before the round proceeds. In other words, everyone must answer.

Sample questions:

- What's the best movie you've ever seen?
- What's the most beautiful thing about people?
- What do you do on a free afternoon?
- What is the greatest problem in the U.S.?
- If you could smash one thing, what would it be?
- What do you look for in a really good friend?
- What gives you the most security?
- What is your greatest fear?
- If you could paint a picture of anything, what would it be?
- What do people like best about you?
- How do you feel about fast food?
- What is the most common topic of discussion between you and your friends?
- What is one thing you could never give up?
- What is the best advice you ever received?
- What cheers you up?

### **Who here...?**

This activity requires a large open space.

Group members stand in a circle and remove one shoe, placing it in front of them. One shoe is removed from the circle, and one person volunteers to ask the question "Who here...?". Everyone who can answer 'me' to that question has to run out from behind their shoe and find an open shoe. Whoever is left without a shoe asks the next question. Questions can include anything, from 'who here rode their bike to the meeting' to 'who here is failing a class' to 'who here has traveled to another country,' etc.

### **Pass the Chicken**

This activity takes place outdoors.

This game is just like "tag" or "it." However, the catch is that home base, or goal, is an object that can be thrown around, such as a rubber chicken.

### **Developing your own teambuilding activities:**

- Your group should only engage in activities that everyone in the group feels comfortable with because it is important that everyone participates.
- Activities should take into account the number of group members.
- Activities that get your body moving are great for getting your mind moving as well.
- Activities can be great for getting group members to interact in new and interesting ways; it may be all your group needs.
- A quick activity at the start of every meeting may be useful in order to set an open and friendly tone for the meeting.
- If you have a specific problem, you can devise activities that address the issue directly. For example, if you find your ideas are dull, you may want to play a game that encourages creativity. If you think that people in the group are holding back ideas or opinions, you can play a game that requires everyone to talk. If one person seems to be dominating the group, you can play a game that requires everyone to participate equally in order to succeed.
- Games such as tag, I-spy, red rover or tug-of-war may be all you need to energize your group both physically and mentally.

**Reference**

3M Meeting Network Community Forum Meeting Advisor is a virtual space designed to share strategies to organize and manage effective meetings.  
([http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/interact/meeting\\_advisor.html](http://www.3m.com/meetingnetwork/interact/meeting_advisor.html)).

# Working as an Effective Team

*Have you ever been in a situation where you knew you could produce a great project, if only you could be more organized?*

*Have you ever found that your group meetings were unproductive? where no one seemed to know what to do?*

Working effectively in a team is a skill that can be learned and developed.

## **Holding effective meetings:**

Effective meetings enable members to cover relevant information and make progress on the project in an organized fashion. Read on for some important tips on how to run effective meetings:

Make sure that each member is able to give a status report on the progress of his or her area.

## **Forming an agenda**

- An agenda is a road map during the meeting; it lets teams know what topics will be covered during the meeting and how much time is allotted for each issue.
- The agenda for the next meeting should be created after each meeting, when everyone is present to contribute what needs to be covered at the next meeting.
- Send the agenda to all team members before the next meeting.
- When the meeting is in progress and issues emerge that were not accounted for in the agenda, the facilitator can ask the team if they would 1) like to cover the issue at that point or 2) wait till the end of the meeting.

## **Taking notes**

- Document problems and decisions that are discussed at each meeting (Scholtes, The Team Handbook).
- Documentation is extremely important because it enables members to track their progress.
- Members who missed the meeting can review the notes.

There are many different methods of taking notes during a meeting. You may even want to use something that you have used in previous meetings. The following method was adapted from Peter R. Scholtes suggestions for note taking from the book, "The Team Handbook." If you choose to use this method, you may want to adapt it later on.

## **Project Team Members & Role for the current meeting:**

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Name and Role \_\_\_\_\_

Name and Role \_\_\_\_\_

Name and Role \_\_\_\_\_

Name and Role \_\_\_\_\_

Goals (For the project, the ones that you agreed on at the very beginning)

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**Review the agenda:**

- At the end of a meeting, you should go over things that you need to cover at the next meeting.
- The recorder should send the tentative agenda to all group members.
- Rank the items to be discussed and set a tentative time limit for each item. i.e. Status reports (20 minutes)
- Status report: Where are members in their projects?
- Review how the group is doing on a whole, where is it now? Are you on schedule with the due dates and the dates that you decided on at the beginning?
- After everyone has given their status reports, make a list of items for an "action list and a "future list." What tasks are top priority? What items do you need to set target deadlines for?
- Make a tentative agenda for the next meeting.

**Making a time line**

- Time lines enable team members to chart and assess their progress in accordance with set dates.

**Assigning Roles**

Members can play different roles during a meeting. These roles enable all members to take an active part in the group process. Consider rotating the roles from meeting to meeting.

- **Facilitator:** Leads the meetings and makes sure that all relevant topics are covered.
- **Time Keeper:** This person makes sure that the team sticks to at time limit.
- To do this, the group should allocate each agenda item a specific amount of coverage time.
- **Record Keeper:** This person takes the meeting notes.
- Gate Keeper: This person makes sure that everyone has had a chance to contribute and be involved.
- **Devil's Advocate:** This person in this role finds weaknesses in the group's ideas and questions them. This role serves the purpose of preventing a "groupthink" mentality where everyone agrees with an idea. It gives the team other points of view.

**Processes of breaking up a project into manageable parts:****Have a checklist:**

- Make a checklist of all the necessary components of the project; remember the goals that your group has discussed.
- Each person should be assigned a section. This can be based on personal experience of the person or interest. Discuss the possibility of setting a due date for each person's research or work.

**Make a time line:**

- A time line will help guide you and make the process seem more manageable. i.e. bibliography, outline

**Make note of all the due dates for rough copies or drafts for your projects:**

- If there are no established dates, have the group set some to help them stay on track. Or ask the professor or TA to help.

**During the middle of the project:**

- List the necessary components of the project (this can be done by the sections that everyone was assigned).
- Talk about how far along everyone is.
- For those who are having difficulty: what do they need to progress quicker? Do they need members to actually help them become more organized or help them find resources?

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