

## **Working in Groups**

One way to frame college expectations is as a training ground for the workplace. Thus one has the opportunity in college to develop and practice strategies that lead to successful work teams / groups.

If one's goal is aimed at cultivating strategies for successful group development, interaction, and production to meet tasks and relational needs, positive results can be added to one's college success.

These positive outcomes then can be shared as part of an ongoing portfolio of teamwork / group work competencies.

When it comes time to articulate on a resume or in a job interview one's specific abilities of working with others and in teams / groups, one's college experience should provide ample examples of such abilities.

Work teams or groups are part of the college experience as well as the landscape of the workplace.

Annual surveys "conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers report 'the ability to work well in groups' is one of the top ten skills sought in college graduates" (as reported by Verderber, Verderber, & Sellnow, 2012).

## **Benefits of Effective Group Work**

According to Verderber, Verderber, and Sellnow (2012), "Leaders in business and industry realize that when groups work effectively to solve problems, they provide a deeper analysis of problems, generate greater breadth of ideas and potential solutions, promote positive group morale, and lead to increased productivity" (p.127).

## **Definition of Group**

Adams and Galanes in *Communicating in Groups* define a *group* as "three or more individuals, who have a common purpose, interact with each other, influence each other, and are **interdependent**." Interdependence can be defined as "members rely on each other's skill and knowledge to accomplish group goals" (Verderber, Verderber & Sellnow, 2012)

## **Effectiveness of Small Groups**

Hybels and Weaver report research on small group effectiveness as "a sense of solidarity, and ability to focus on their task, and a task that is appropriate for a particular group .... [as well as] a truly effective group must be of a workable size, must meet in appropriate surroundings...and must inspire its members to feel cohesiveness and commitment."

In Ron Adler's text *Communicating at Work*, he cites Larson and LaFusto research on teams. These researchers list *eight characteristics of winning teams*:

- Clear and inspiring goals
- A results driven structure

- Competent team members
- Unified commitment
- Collaborative climate
- Standards of excellence
- External support and recognition
- Principled leadership

## Stages of Group Development

Based on research from Tuckman (1965) group development can be understood as occurring in four major stages:

**Forming**...is characterized by orientation, testing and dependence. Members try to understand precisely what the goal is, what role they will play in reaching the goal, and what other members are like. As the goals become clearer, members assess how their skills, talents, and abilities might be used in accomplishing it. Members also begin to develop relationships and to test what behaviors will be acceptable in the group. Group interactions are likely to be polite and tentative as members become acquainted with each other and find their place in the group. During the forming stage, you should express positive attitudes; refrain from abrasive or disagreeable comments; make appropriately benign self-disclosures and wait to see if they are reciprocated; and try to be friendly, open, and interested in others.

**Storming**...in this second stage, members begin to “express their honest opinions and vie for power and position. ...constructive disagreements help the group clarify its goal and the resolution of power plays clarifies the group structure and what is expected of each member. ...[to manage the storming stage] encourage constructive disagreement, avoid name-calling and inflammatory language, and use active listening skills with an emphasis on paraphrasing and honest questioning”.

**Norming**...“is characterized by increased cohesion, collaboration, and emerging trust among members, and motivation to achieve the group goal. Having expressed honest opinions, resolved major differences, and sorted out specific roles, members become loyal to each other and to the group goal. During this stage, members come to appreciate their differences, strengthen their relationships, and freely express their ideas and opinions. Members accept the norms established by the group and provide positive and constructive feedback to each other”

**Performing**...”is characterized by harmony, productivity, problem-solving, and shared leadership....conversations are focused on sharing task-related information and problem solving”. (as cited in Verderber, Verderber, & Sellnow, 2010)

## Group Roles

From: <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/management/Gr-Int/Group-Dynamics.html>

In formal groups, roles are usually predetermined and assigned to members. Each role will have specific responsibilities and duties. There are, however, emergent roles that develop naturally to meet the needs of the groups. These emergent roles will often replace the assigned roles as

individuals begin to express themselves and become more assertive. Group roles can then be classified into work roles [or task roles], maintenance roles, and blocking roles [also known as dysfunctional and individual roles].

**Work roles** are task-oriented activities that involve accomplishing the group's goals. They involve a variety of specific roles such as initiator, informer, clarifier, summarizer, and reality tester.

The **initiator** defines problems, proposes action, and suggests procedures.

The **informer** role involves finding facts and giving advice or opinions.

**Clarifiers** will interpret ideas, define terms, and clarify issues for the group.

**Summarizers** restate suggestions, offer decisions, and come to conclusions for the group.

Finally, **reality** testers analyze ideas and test the ideas in real situations.

**Maintenance roles** are social-emotional activities that help members maintain their involvement in the group and raise their personal commitment to the group. The maintenance roles are harmonizer, gatekeeper, consensus tester, encourager, and compromiser.

The **harmonizer** will reduce tension in the group, reconcile differences, and explore opportunities.

**Gatekeepers** often keep communication channels open and make suggestions that encourage participation.

The **consensus** tester will ask if the group is nearing a decision and test possible conclusions.

**Encouragers** are friendly, warm, and responsive to other group members. The last maintenance role is the compromiser. This role involves modifying decisions, offering compromises, and admitting errors.

**Blocking roles** are activities that disrupt the group. They make take the form of dominating discussions, verbally attacking other group members, and distracting the group with trivial information or unnecessary humor. Often times the blocking behavior may not be intended as negative. Sometimes a member may share a joke in order to break the tension, or may question a decision in order to force group members to rethink the issue. The blocking roles are aggressor, blocker, dominator, comedian, and avoidance behavior.

The **aggressor** criticizes members' values and makes jokes in a sarcastic or semi-concealed manner.

**Blockers** will stubbornly resist the group's ideas, disagree with group members for personal reasons, and will have hidden agendas.

The **dominator** role attempts to control conversations by patronizing others. They often interrupt others and assert authority in order to manipulate members.

**Comedians** often abandon the group even though they may physically still be a part. They are attention-getters in ways that are not relevant to the accomplishment of the group's objectives.

The last blocking role, **avoidance** behavior, involves pursuing goals not related to the group and changing the subject to avoid commitment to the group.

[Role] ambiguity results when members are confused about the delegation of job responsibilities. This confusion may occur because the members do not have specific job descriptions or because the instructions regarding the task were not clear. Group members who experience ambiguity often have feelings of frustration and dissatisfaction, which ultimately lead to turnover.

### **Leadership Roles**

Some groups, especially formal groups, will have a designated leader assigned. Other groups will experience emerging leaders as part of the group process. Leadership responsibilities may involve setting meeting times and places, creating agendas, facilitating discussions by asking questions, keeping the group on topic, summarizing, helping to resolve confusion and conflict, and keeping the group moving toward their goal. The concept of **functional leadership** emphasizes that leadership duties are not the sole responsibility of any one person or exclusive to a formal role, but that members share a concern and responsibility for meeting group needs and goals and thus share the leadership function as needed.

### **Group Norms**

Group norms are appropriate ways of interacting and behaving; these are often informal and not written down or talked about and tend to reflect the larger cultural norms or co-cultural norms in which the group exists (Pearson et al., 2008, p. 231). Here are some examples of group norms:

Be on time, formal / informal greetings, formal / informal meeting setting, sitting in the same seats, listening, eye contact, taking notes, not interrupting others, not dominating the conversation, showing respect to others, participating, asking questions, etc....

### **Factors Affecting Group Norms**

From Human Communication edition 3

**Within-group diversity** is the presence of observable and/or implicit differences between group members. We observe within-group diversity when group members differ based on visible characteristics. For example, to visually distinguish between males and females or between members of certain ethnic groups is easy. Group diversity can be implicit when members of a group have differing values, attitudes, and perspectives—personal characteristics [such as religious orientation, educational background] that cannot be seen. Differences between group members can have an impact on how they interact with one another and how effectively the group functions (p. 236).

### **Establishing Group Norms**

From

<http://www.berea.edu/brushyforkinstitute/handoutpapers/projecttoolboxes/estgroupnorms.asp>

Norms can help or hinder a group in achieving its goals...

While many norms operate without the member's conscious awareness, a team can decide to intentionally set norms that every member can endorse. In addition to the long-term benefits such a set of guidelines offers, the act of setting norms itself can be a team-building activity.

Setting norms does not mean regulating every aspect of group interaction; rather it is an opportunity for the group to express its values. For example, values such as mutual respect, egalitarianism and punctuality are reflected in this model:

#### Rand Countians for a Bright Tomorrow Group Norms

- Our meetings will begin and end on time.
- We will listen to each other and not interrupt.
- We will make sure everyone has had a chance to speak.
- We will support our facilitator's efforts to moderate discussions.
- We will avoid ethnic or gender-based humor.
- We will speak respectfully to each other.
- We will bring before the whole all group concerns regarding our group cohesion.

How does a group go about setting norms? There are probably many ways; the process outlined below is one suggestion:

On a flip chart list all the members' ideas for norms they'd like to see the group adopt.

- Have a period for questions and clarifications so that everyone understands what each of the proposed norms mean. Re-word as seems appropriate. Continue until every team member is satisfied that everyone understands each others' suggested norms.
- Go through the list item by item to see which norms all team members want to adopt. No member should be pressured into accepting any norm that he or she cannot fully endorse. If any team member does not approve of a proposed norm, eliminate it.
- If the list of approved norms is longer than ten items try to reduce the list by simplifying and combining complementary items.
- Make sure all team members are comfortable with the revisions.
- Adopt the set of group norms.

Norm setting can only work if the team is truly able to arrive at consensus. Norms won't stick if members have reservations about them. However, once consensus is reached, the team is equipped with a guide that can serve to strengthen positive practices. A set of norms can serve as a common reference if contrary behaviors arise.

Finally, written norms are handy for potential members and newcomers who want to quickly get a sense of how a group operates. Norms in hand, a team can move forward inspired and motivated to uphold group principles and confident in the security such guidelines provide.

## Collaborating

From The Confident Student 7<sup>th</sup> edition pages 305-307

Collaboration is another word for teamwork. To collaborate means to work together cooperatively, as on a sports team. The following guidelines suggest ways in which you can interact with others for the successful completion of a group task. To remember the guidelines, think of them as the four “Be’s” of successful group interaction.

1. **Be supportive of group members.** Practice strategies for listening actively, speaking civilly, and avoiding communication barriers to show your support. In addition, watch your body language. Assume the posture of involvement, and keep your expression friendly and encouraging.

2. **Be considerate.** Do not monopolize the conversation, interrupt when others are talking, stray from the topic, or begin socializing instead of working. Stay on task, and when you ask a question or add your opinion, make sure that it is relevant and to the point. Acknowledge the contributions of group members. Say encouraging words such as “That’s a good idea” or “I hadn’t thought of that.”

3. **Be accepting.** In working with students from **diverse** backgrounds, remember that their perspectives and behavior patterns may differ from yours. Students who come from cultures that do not value individualism may hold back from participating in a group setting for fear of standing out. Reach out to these students and show them that their ideas are important to the group as a whole. You can also point out to international students that in American colleges and workplaces, everyone is expected to have an opinion and to express it. Another way to be accepting is to focus on similarities rather than differences. Look for ways to connect with others through shared ideas and interests.

4. **Be organized.** As soon as the group has an assignment, choose a leader, divide up the work, and assign each person a role or a task. Make wise use of the time available. For example, if you have 30 minutes to complete the task, appoint someone as timekeeper and divide the time according to what must be done. Allow the last few minutes to assess what you have accomplished and compile a report.

## Resolving Conflicts

From The Confident Student 7<sup>th</sup> edition pages 305-307

In any group, conflicts may arise, and they are generally of two types. *Procedural conflicts* occur when one or more group members are confused about who is in charge, what the task is, how to do the work, and so on. That is why organization, the fourth “Be,” is so important. As soon as a group is formed, the first order of business is to appoint a leader and assign a portion of the work to each group member. If you will do this, then procedural conflicts may not arise.

*Behavioral conflicts* are the second type. These conflicts fall into three categories, and they describe types of behavior that cause verbal and nonverbal communication barriers:

aggressive behavior, passive behavior, and manipulative behavior. **Aggressive behavior** is rude, domineering, and intimidating. Students who behave aggressively may try to impose their ideas on others or to monopolize the conversation. They may react hostilely to those who question their ideas or may show insensitivity to others' feelings. **Passive behavior** is submissive and dependent. Students who behave passively wait for others in the group to tell them what to do. Some may not participate at all, and most of them will refrain from expressing their feelings or opinions. At times it may be hard to tell whether a student is passive because of shyness or for some other reason, or because he or she comes from a **culture** where speaking out in class is neither valued nor rewarded. **Manipulative behavior** is devious. For example, a manipulative student plays the victim. The manipulators are the ones who always have an excuse for not getting their work done, yet they somehow manage to make you feel sorry for them.

One way to **deal with conflicts** is by being assertive with those whose behavior interferes with the group's work or makes people feel uncomfortable. **Assertive behavior** is polite, strong, and independent. Being assertive means standing up for your rights without denying the rights of others. For example, if someone in your group gets angry and starts using profanity and you don't like it, say so calmly and firmly. If an aggressive student is monopolizing the conversation, an assertive group leader will say something like "Thank you for sharing your opinion, now let's hear from someone else." To deal assertively with a passive student, all group members should try to draw this person into the conversation. At the same time, they should recognize that a student's seeming passivity may simply be a **cultural** difference. If this is the case, perhaps after class someone could reach out to the student in a spirit of friendliness and explain the rules. When manipulative students try to get out of doing work, don't take no for an answer. Insist that they do their share, but do so in a polite way.

### **Group Cohesiveness**

Cohesiveness is the feeling of attraction that group members have toward one another. It is the member's ability to stick together, to work together as a group, and to help one another (Hybels & Weaver, 2004). Members genuinely like and respect each other and work cooperatively to reach the group's goals (Verderber, Verderber, & Sellnow, 2012, p.18).

Commitment is the willingness of members to work together to complete the group's task. When members are committed, the group is likely to be cohesive (Hybels & Weaver, 2004).

### **Individual Responsibility**

According to the AAC&U, teamwork is "...behaviors under the control of individual team members (effort they put into team tasks, their manner of interacting with other on a team, and the quality and quantity of contributions they make to team discussions.)"

The AAC&U provides a rubric with five categories that can be used to measure one's individual contribution to a team. These categories and criterion represent another model of characteristics of successful groups.

#### **1. Contributes to team meetings**

Helps the team move forward by articulating the merits of alternative ideas or proposals

**2. Facilitates the contribution of team members**

Engages team members in ways that facilitate their contributions to meetings by both constructively building upon or synthesizing the contributions of others as well as noticing when someone is not participating and inviting them to engage

**3. Individual contributions outside the team meetings**

Completes all assigned tasks by deadline; work accomplished is thorough, comprehensive, and advances the project. Proactively helps other team members complete their assigned tasks to a similar level of excellence.

**4. Fosters constructive team climate**

Supports team, climate by doing all of the following:

- Treats team members respectfully by being polite and constructive in communication.
- Uses positive vocal and written tone, facial expressions, and/or body language to convey a positive attitude about the team and its work.
- Motivates teammates by expressing confidence about the importance of the task and the team's ability to accomplish it.
- Provides assistance and/or encouragement to team members.

**5. Responds to conflict**

Addresses destructive conflict directly and constructively, helping to manage/resolve it in a way that strengthens overall team cohesiveness and future effectiveness.