

Group work combines goal setting, scheduling (time management), effective communication, leadership, collaboration, and conflict management, while enabling students to work on projects that are larger and more complex than reasonable for individual work. Working effectively as part of a group (or team) is an essential skill for both the workplace and university.

Communication Skills

To function successfully in a small group, students need to be able to communicate clearly on intellectual and emotional levels. Effective communicators:

- can explain their own ideas,
- express their feelings in an open but non-threatening way,
- listen carefully to others,
- ask questions to clarify others' ideas and emotions,
- can sense how others feel based on their nonverbal communication,
- will initiate conversations about group climate or process if they sense tensions brewing,
- reflect on the activities and interactions of their group and encourage other group members to do so as well.

Regular open communication, in which group members share their thoughts, ideas, and feelings, is a must for successful group work. Unspoken assumptions and issues can be very destructive to productive group functioning. When students are willing to communicate openly with one another, a healthy climate will emerge, and an effective process can be followed.

Healthy Group Climate

To work together successfully, group members must demonstrate a sense of cohesion. Cohesion emerges as group members exhibit the following skills:

- **Openness:** Group members are willing to get to know one another, particularly those with different interests and backgrounds. They are open to new ideas, diverse viewpoints, and the variety of individuals present within the group. They listen to others and elicit their ideas. They know how to balance the need for cohesion within a group with the need for individual expression.
- **Trust and self-disclosure:** Group members trust one another enough to share their own ideas and feelings. A sense of mutual trust develops only to the extent that everyone is willing to self-disclose and be honest yet respectful. Trust also grows as group members demonstrate personal accountability for the tasks they have been assigned.
- **Support:** Group members demonstrate support for one another as they accomplish their goals. They exemplify a sense of team loyalty and both cheer on the group as a whole and help members who are experiencing difficulties. They view one another not as competitors (which is common within a typically individualistic educational system) but as collaborators.
- **Respect:** Group members communicate their opinions in a way that respects others, focusing on "What can we learn?" rather than "Who is to blame?" See constructive feedback in the process section for more details.

Effective Group Processes

Besides knowing how to develop a healthy group climate, students also need to know how to function so that they are productive and accomplish their tasks effectively. An effective process will emerge as students exhibit these skills:

- **Individual responsibility and accountability:** All group members agree on what needs to be done and by whom. Each student then determines what he or she needs to do and takes responsibility to complete the task(s). They can be held accountable for their tasks, and they hold others accountable for theirs.
- **Constructive Feedback:** Group members are able to give and receive feedback about group ideas. Giving constructive feedback requires focusing on ideas and behaviours, instead of individuals, being as positive as possible, and offering suggestions for improvement. Receiving feedback requires listening well, asking for clarification if the comment is unclear, and being open to change and other ideas.
- **Problem solving:** Group members help the group to develop and use strategies central to their group goals. As such, they can facilitate group decision making and deal productively with conflict. In extreme cases, they know when to approach the professor for additional advice and help.
- **Management and organization:** Group members know how to plan and manage a task, how to manage their time, and how to run a meeting. For example, they ensure that meeting goals are set, that an agenda is created and followed, and that everyone has an opportunity to participate. They stay focused on the task and help others to do so too.
- **Knowledge of roles:** Group members know which roles can be filled within a group (e.g., facilitator, idea-generator, summarizer, evaluator, mediator, encourager, recorder) and are aware of which role(s) they and others are best suited for. They are also willing to rotate roles to maximize their own and others' group learning experience.

Points to Share During the First Meeting

- Names, phone numbers, and email addresses.
- Study habits, past experiences with group work and typical communication style – do you typically finish an assignment early or pull an all-nighter handing it in just in time? Do you think as you speak or prefer to observe then speak?
- Desired grade or goal for the project. It's important to have a conversation during the first meeting to lay out each person's expectations and priorities. Once you know personal goals, as a group you can determine an overall goal for the project. This will reduce potential conflict.
- 1 or 2 strengths and weaknesses of skills you bring to the project (e.g., strong grammar skills, experience with leading a group, weak organizational skills, struggle with note taking). The strength and weakness should relate to either group work or the project at hand.

Discussions & Decisions

Establishing a solid framework and making clear decisions as a group before you begin your project or assignment will help everyone to focus on the collaboration aspect of group work.

- Select a group identifier or project name to be used to identify your group/project. Appoint a group member to liaise with the professor/instructor.
- Develop a solid understanding of the project requirements and due date.
- Allocate roles for each person at meetings (e.g., facilitator, note taker, progress tracker, timekeeper, mediator, challenger, summarizer). Note that all roles interconnect. Assign the first week roles based on strengths and desired roles, and alternate roles in following weeks to give everyone a chance to develop these skills.
- Set up a schedule of weekly meetings (in person, online).
- Agree upon a method of online collaboration. Decide how group members will communicate, be it through email or an online document/project management system.
- Create a set of group norms (e.g., cell phones off during meetings, only one person talks at a time, listen to understand).
- Discuss how group challenges such as disagreements, lack of communication and lack of participation should be handled.
- Break the project down into smaller tasks, determining which tasks can be completed individually, as a group, online or need to have group meetings to facilitate.
- Allocate tasks to individuals based on current strengths and skills, and strengths and skills each person wants to develop. Try to keep the amount of work evenly distributed.
- Create a project schedule, setting due dates for each task. Leave at least a week before the project due date to combine the parts, verify data, proofread, and edit.

Information adapted from University Library. (n.d.). A Guide to Group Work. University of Saskatchewan.
https://libguides.usask.ca/ld.php?content_id=15329201

Teamwork Skills: Being an Effective Group Member. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.
<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/catalogs/tip-sheets/teamwork-skills-being-effective-group-member>

Have questions? Contact the Senior Manager of Student Learning Support & Disability Resources.
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