

Working Effectively in Groups

As students, and as professionals, you are expected to work with others productively to accomplish tasks. The contexts may vary—academic study groups, group projects for a particular class, committee work, professional project teams, or high-stakes work meetings.

In effective groups, members reach their goals and are satisfied with their experience. They recognize the contributions of all members and share a sense of accomplishment.

In some of these contexts, you can be assertive and take steps to increase your chances of working effectively together. General guidelines follow:

- Get to know your group members and acknowledge their strengths
- Establish ground rules
- Have a facilitator (even a rotating one)
- Communicate frequently and openly
- Learn strategies to avoid or deal with common group problems

A. Strategies for Effective Group Work

Successful group work requires a willingness to participate and to focus: it also requires a willingness not to dominate and to discourage others from doing so.

1. Show good listening skills. Give physical attention to each speaker through effective body language and listening expressions. Be sure you understand a speaker's point before you react. Use expressions of clarification.
2. Support every group member's right to speak. Encourage discussion by acknowledging all ideas. Use expressions like "Let's consider X," not "That won't work because..." Disagree with ideas, not with group members. For example, "Can you explain how X will work?" is more productive than "Joe's idea won't work." Look for places where you can agree and for places where you can ask questions.
3. Stick to the agenda. Avoid extraneous topics. Make your points quickly at the appropriate time. Unless you are giving a formal report during a meeting, you should never speak for more than a few minutes at a time.
4. Prevent dominance. Avoid interrupting, arguing, criticizing or over-defending. The group facilitator should
 - Be sure that everyone has a chance to speak
 - Use tactful reminders of the ground rules
 - Deliberately seek comments from the less assertive members

B. Establishing Group Ground Rules

As you establish your group ground rules, consider the following questions:

1. Work norms. How will you distribute the work? How will you establish the schedule and the guidelines? How will you handle cases when group members do not fulfill their commitments? How will the work be reviewed? What if members have different opinions about the quality of the work? How will you handle different work habits?
2. Facilitator norms. What responsibilities will the facilitator have? How will you choose a facilitator? Will you rotate the position?
3. Communication norms. Between meetings, which medium is preferred: telephone, e-mail, instant messenger? How frequently will you check for messages? Does everyone understand the concepts of active listening and appropriate participation?
4. Meeting norms. What is everyone's schedule? Should one person be in charge of coordinating meetings? Where will meetings be held? How will you handle latecomers or absent members? Can people eat or smoke at meetings? What if someone dominates the discussion? How can you change norms if someone is uncomfortable with the team dynamics?

C. Active Listening

Active listeners:

1. Look at the speaker as s/he talks.
2. Notice nonverbal communication (gestures, tone, eye contact).
3. Listen for a speaker's structuring cues.
4. Limit their own talking.
5. Use feedback cues to show they're paying attention: nodding, murmuring agreement.
6. Check for comprehension and use clear expressions of clarification to minimize misunderstandings.

Poor listeners:

1. Frequently interrupt a speaker or finish his/her thoughts.
2. Ask too many questions about details.

3. Change the focus of the discussion (e.g., That reminds me of ...; That's nothing; let me tell you about")
4. Rush a speaker, making him/her feel that your time is being wasted.
5. Show interest in something other than the conversation, discussion or presentation.

D. Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Anglo-American communication is characterized as “direct” and “to the point.” However, we tend to soften our approach when discussing potentially sensitive issues in several ways:

1. We couple uncomfortable truths with positive observations. For example, “Your research sounds very exciting. More examples of how it is used in the transportation industry would have been useful.”
2. We use question structure. For example, “Can you provide a few examples to help make this concrete?”
3. We use our needs to point out weaknesses. For example, “I’m sorry—I’m having a hard time hearing you.”

E. Essential Gambits for Constructive Feedback

Providing and responding to suggestions for change and improvement can be challenging. The following list provides some key expressions:

- **Making Suggestions**

May I make a suggestion?	We might want to consider. . . .
Don't you think . . . ?	Are we sure . . . ?
Wouldn't you say (agree or think) . . . ?	Why don't we try
Wouldn't it be better if we. . . ?	I'd like more . . .
Let's . . .	Perhaps we could . . .
Why not . . . ?	How about . . . ?
I suggest that we . . .	

- **Asking for Suggestions/Advice**

Do you have any suggestions?	Can you think of anything we've missed?
What do you think?	

- **Accepting and Rejecting Suggestions/Advice**

That's a good point (idea, approach)

Thanks for reminding me.

Yes, why don't we try that?

I want to think about that

I hadn't thought about that.

That's a good idea, but ...

That would be great, except.

Yes, but don't forget ...

Yes, but keep in mind

Yes, but consider ...

Possibly, but ...

Well, the problem is...

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