

Lil's LISTS for More Effective Groupwork
Lecture Notes

TOP FIVE REASONS PROFS GIVE YOU
GROUPWORK

5. Project is too much work for one person
4. Projects tasks require multiple specialties
3. Groupwork resembles workplaces: professionals work with other professionals
2. The more people involved in a project, the larger the network of potential allies
1. To minimize marking for overworked TAs

PROPERLY HANDLED,
group projects are often much stronger and more creative than solo projects

BADLY HANDLED,
group projects give inconsistent to poor results and create enormous emotional stress

GROUPWORK PROBLEMS (a small selection)

1. Difficulty contacting group members: 30% of groups studied
2. Feeling that you had to take the leadership role to get anything done: 30%
3. Difficulty accepting feedback from team members: 25%
4. Insufficient brainstorming: 25%
5. Misunderstandings due to poor expression/poor listening: 25%
6. Failure of some individuals to do what they promised: 25%
7. Failure to divide tasks fairly: 20%

PART ONE: GROUP FORMATION

A. Four things to say as soon as group has been formed:

1. Can we give each other all relevant contact numbers RIGHT NOW?
2. Can we agree to check our e-mail/voice mail every day?
3. Can we let one another know if we will be unavailable for communication (i.e. out of town) for any period of time?
4. Can we agree now to meet once a week at a specific time?

B. One policy for all group members to agree on:

1. If we screw up by missing a meeting or not carrying out what we had promised, can we admit it, do whatever damage repair needs to be done, and move on to the next task?

When people begin to become nonproductive and are letting others down, they waste energy denying, blaming, and making excuses; thus, further dragging the group behind.

"Where were you at the last meeting? You should have phoned. I guess you expect us to do all the work."

Reply: "You're right. I'm sorry. I should have phoned. I must have inconvenienced the whole group. I'll do whatever I can to get back on track today."

Message Least Likely to Create Defensiveness

** Specific Behaviour: "You said you'd show up at Tuesday's meeting, but you weren't there and you didn't call."

** Interpretation: "There's probably a good reason why you missed the meeting. I'm wondering if you are overbooked with commitments and sometimes lose track of where you're supposed to be."

** Consequences: "When you don't come to meetings, we waste time waiting for you. We have to make decisions that you may not like and then we spend the next meeting hearing you out. The rest of the group members are beginning to feel resentful and are having trouble staying focussed."

** Intention: "We'd really like to know if you can commit yourself to this group."

C. One more thing to say after group has been formed:

Let's clarify the skills and strengths that we bring to the group and be open about the areas where we have less confidence.

D. Ten areas of diversity that will enhance your group's effectiveness (Label below: "strong", "adequate," or "weak.")

1. Knowledge of Project Area
2. Writing/Editing
3. Document Creation, Layout and Graphics
4. Research Skills: Awareness of Trade Magazines, WWW
5. Research Skills: Conducting Client/User Interviews
6. Creative Understanding of Computer Technology
7. Awareness of Marketing Techniques and Issues
8. Understanding of Finances and Financial Projections
9. Public Speaking
10. Organization/leadership skills to keep group focused and moving forward

"Teams that are diverse are more productive and more innovative than homogeneous groups, but they take longer to get started."

E. Four questions groups should consider:

1. How are decisions going to be made?
2. What are our goals?
3. What is important to us about how we work together?
4. How are we going to have fun?

If problems arise go back to the these questions.

F. One tip on how to run a meeting:

Meetings must be productive. Use a form like this at each meeting. Groups that record their activities in an organized way, generally work more consistently and are happier as a group. When minutes are taken, people are more inclined to take individual responsibility and ensure their contributions are included in the final product.

CSC454/2527S: The Business of Software Group Activity Record

Your records should have these headings for each meeting:

Meeting # date/time

Attendance

Discussion Topic Name- Action to be taken

** At the end of each meeting agree on the date, time, location, and agenda of the NEXT MEETING.

** Groups that keep records of their meetings tend do better.

** Records can protect you.

PART TWO: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

G. Three things to say when one group member's ideas seem unclear:

1. I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Could you explain it again?
2. Can you draw me a picture?
3. So you're saying.....
Is that it?

One frequently cited frustration was misunderstandings due to unclear expression of ideas. Listeners must let the speakers know when they do not understand. Even if you think you DO understand, it is wise to seek verification. (This is called active listening.)

H. Two things to say when it seems that your opinions were not considered:

1. I can see your point about...., but let me repeat my previous idea and perhaps you can tell me why you think it won't work.
2. I won't feel right going ahead with that unless we consider this idea as well.

I. Four things to do if you find yourself going ahead with an idea you don't totally believe in:

1. Share your doubts and reasons via e-mail.
2. Offer alternative suggestions.
3. Respond to other's doubts. Show them you are listening.
4. Remember, It is in the group's best interest to find an approach that all group members can agree on -- but considering time limitations, it might be a good idea to agree at the outset to go with the best idea after xx time limit.

J. Three improvisational skills needed for effective brainstorming:

1. Flexibility: in the brainstorming phase, don't get too attached to one idea until all members have bought into it.
2. Fearlessness: Put your doubts and inhibitions aside and say whatever comes to mind.
3. Attentive Listening: Someone may have just a scrap of an idea. Build on it. Write it down. Use it later.

The students who cited insufficient brainstorming as a problem

encountered by their group may just be saying: "The group got going on one idea and I was frustrated because I had a better idea that I didn't get a chance to express."

K. Seven Guidelines for Brainstorming

1. Give everyone the chance to suggest ideas.
Have group members call out ideas and later have them give their ideas and opinions in sequence.
2. Disallow criticism during initial phase.
All suggestions should be welcome.
3. Encourage freewheeling.
Outlandish ideas often prove quite useful. It's easier to tame a wild idea than to originate one.
4. Encourage quantity and variety.
The greater number of ideas put forth, the greater the likelihood of a breakthrough idea.
5. Encourage combinations and improvements.
Building upon the ideas of others, including combining different ideas is very productive. "Hitchhiking" or "piggybacking" is an essential part of brainstorming.
6. Have one group member take notes during the session.
7. Do not follow any suggestion too rigidly.
Brainstorming is a spontaneous group process.

L. Three things to say to shut down communication:

1. That's dumb.
2. That'll never work.
3. I don't think so.

M. Three things to say to open up communication:

1. Go on.
2. What do you mean?
3. What else were you thinking?

PART THREE: LEADERSHIP

N. Two questions to ask group members regarding leadership:

1. How can we effectively share leadership responsibilities?
2. In a conflict, how will decisions be made? (Aim for consensus for major decisions.)

O. Four things to ask yourself if conflicts occur:

1. What do I not know about this situation?
2. What are my expectations for the behaviour of others. Are my expectations realistic?
3. Do the members of the group have a shared goal? What is it?
4. How can I present my concerns clearly?

P. Four parts of a clear assertive message:

1. State the behaviour that you find problematic.
2. Offer your interpretation of the behaviour (I think you did this because...) Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.
3. Explain the consequences the behaviour has had on you and other team members.
4. State your intention, make a request, point the way.

Q. Three behaviours most likely to reduce defensiveness:

1. Describing a problem reduces defensiveness. Evaluating others increases defensiveness.

Description: "The paragraphs don't seem to follow logically. I think a step is missing." Evaluation: "Your writing sucks."

2. Focussing on the problem reduces defensiveness. Controlling the problem-solving increases defensiveness.

Problem Orientation: "We have a problem. We have to get the prototype built by Wednesday and no one has done it yet. Let's look at some ideas for completing this."

Control: "This is how we should do this!!"

3. Showing a willingness to hear other opinions reduces defensiveness (provisionalism). Being absolutely certain that your opinion is right increases defensiveness.

Provisionalism: "I'm not sure that'll work because.....What do you think?"

Certainty "That won't work."