

STUDENT GUIDE TO GROUP WORK

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Teamwork Skills: Being An Effective Group Member

Introduction

For small groups to function effectively in a course context, students must attend to both the climate within their group and the process by which they accomplish their tasks. Critical to a healthy climate and an effective process are strong communication skills. Below you will find the basic characteristics of effective communication, plus tips to help you with group climate and process.

Communication Skills

To function successfully in a small group, it is important 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 a group is willing to communicate openly with one another, a healthy climate will emerge and an effective process can be followed.

Skills for a Healthy Group Climate

- **Openness:** Group members are willing to get to know each other, 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

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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 individualist 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

Skills for an Effective Group Process

- **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 do so too

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- **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

Resources & References

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