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# 8 How to succeed in group work

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## **Aims**

To consider the role of group work in the academic environment – and to focus on developing group work skills.

## **Learning outcomes**

It is intended that after reading this chapter and engaging in the activities set you will have:

- developed an awareness of the role and potential of group work in the academic environment
- engaged in activities designed to develop your group work skills.

## **Introduction**

Group work can be one of the most emotionally charged areas of a student's life. Many students see only the problems associated with working in a group. Perhaps because they never get heard in a group, perhaps because they usually do all the work – whatever the problem, group work makes them unhappy. If you have doubts about group work or if you just want to get the most out of it, then this section is for you.

Colleges and universities are increasingly building group activities into their programmes. Some because they have an ideological commitment to collaborative learning – they believe that we are inter-dependent beings and should recognise and build on that. Others feel that group work offers support to their students – tasks are easier when they are shared. Still others feel that they are pragmatically preparing students for the world of work – for if you cannot work with other people, you are unlikely to be able to keep a job.

Whatever your college or university's reasons for asking you to engage in group work, we recommend that you try to get the most from it – and to help you, we are going to explore the what, why and how of group work. In order to do that we have drawn very heavily on the group work theories of Business – for it is in Business that group work is particularly valued.

### **Group work made simple: the pyramid discussion**

A simple group starting activity is the pyramid discussion. When asked to start a group project:

- think about the topic on your own
- discuss ideas in pairs
- build arguments in fours
- feed back your whole group thinking in a plenary.

### **What is group work?**

A group has to have a membership of two or more people. Typically there should be a sense of shared identity – that is, you should all have a sense that you are a group and that you have shared or common goals. Further within the group there should be a feeling of interaction and inter-dependence – a sense that you can achieve something together.

Perhaps it is in these initial definitions of a group that we have hit upon some of the problems with academic groups. How many people in an academic group do feel that sense of identity and inter-dependence? How many embrace the task and the sense of shared goals?

If this sounds like groups that you have been in – or that you are in now – what are you going to do to make your group feel and operate like a group?

#### ***Students in groups***

In school, college or university there can be many forms of group work. For one thing, and as we keep reminding you, you can sort out a study partner or a study group to make study more collaborative and supportive. You can build your own groups to share the reading for assignments, to discuss assignment questions – to proof read your work (as the tutors did in Chapter 7).

There can also be group activities organised by the tutor – from class discussions to the formal, assessed group project. Typically the best thing you can do is participate in these as positively as possible.

### Academic groups

- Class discussion or activity – based around something that has come up in a class.
- Tutorials – two or more students meeting with a tutor and working together on a topic or task.
- Seminars – a group of students meeting with a tutor. Typically working together on a topic covered in a lecture programme.
- Group assignments – where students are asked to produce something collectively. For example you may have to prepare a presentation or a seminar, or write and produce a report, magazine or a video. Perhaps you will be awarded a collective grade.

#### ● Tips:

- Group work is typically designed to reduce the workload whilst increasing the amount of active and interactive learning that takes place – take advantage of this.
- Sometimes the process, as well as the product, is assessed. Here, students will be asked to reflect on the whole group work process. That is, how you worked as a group – roles that were adopted – problems that occurred and how they were solved. Make notes as you go along!

### Why groups?

Group work offers many advantages to students of all ages – yes, really! For one thing it offers an opportunity to share the workload. It really is easier to do all the reading for a module if you share it out. Further, group work at its best fosters active learning. You are expected to discuss things in a group – that reading for instance; in this way, everyone in the group will learn more than if they had just done something on their own. Not only this, you also get to refine your personal and inter-personal skills if you learn to discuss ideas and negotiate strategies with tact and diplomacy in your group: you do have to be assertive rather than aggressive in a group. Another advantage of group work is that a good group offers social support that can break down some of the isolation sometimes associated with being a student.

### **Disadvantages**

Of course there can be disadvantages to group work. One disadvantage is linked to the fact that many group activities are now assessed. Students have become increasingly aware of the importance of good grades. Thus they are incredibly resentful of those in the group who do not pull their weight, who do not stay on track, who dominate or bully or distract. There can also be groups where members stay silent – or groups where the same people always speak. None of this feels satisfactory and it causes much resentment.

### **Resolving conflict**

But every disadvantage can become an advantage if you work out how to resolve the problems that you encounter. So notice what is happening in your groups. Notice how difficult situations are resolved. Notice how unmotivated people are encouraged to give of their best... And put these notes in your *curriculum vitae* file. When you apply for a job you will be able to prove that you are good at group work by giving examples from your time at college or university. It is the examples that you give – and the way that you discuss them – that will make all the difference in that vital job interview!

And this does refer to another ‘why’ of group work – it can and does prepare you for your future employment.

### **How to ‘do’ group work**

The best way to get the most from group work is to approach it positively, determined to get the most from it. If you really dislike group work, but have to engage in it – fake it to make it: role play being an active, positive student.

Another simple and very effective strategy is to choose your groups with care. Do not just team up with those people sitting next to you – or those nice chatty people from the canteen! Group tasks normally involve hard work: choose people who are as motivated, positive and industrious as you when you are choosing your group.

#### **SWOT your group work**

SWOT stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats.

- What are your group work strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What opportunities are there for you in group work?
- What threats?

Once you have answered these questions, think about your answers – discuss them with your study partner:

- What do they tell you about yourself?
- What do they tell you about how you should approach group work?

### **A business-like approach to group work**

Management theorists like Belbin and Adair (see boxes) have worked to de-mystify group work forms and processes so that businesses can run more effectively. Have a look at the information in the boxes and see what they tell you about how to make groups work. As always ask yourself, ‘How will knowing this make me a more successful student?’ For, in the end you must work out how knowing those things will help you to succeed in the group activities that you will be expected to undertake at college or university.

● **Tip:** If you are expected to reflect on your group work experiences – using the following information will definitely improve your grade!

#### **Belbin’s group roles**

There are eight key roles that management experts like Belbin (1981) have identified in group activities. We have listed these below indicating the possible strengths and weaknesses involved:

- *Company worker* – a dutiful, organised person, who may tend to inflexibility
- *Chair* – a calm, open minded person, who may not shine creatively
- *Shaper* – a dynamic person who may be impatient
- *Creative thinker* – one who may come up with brilliant ideas, though these may be unrealistic
- *Resource investigator* – an extrovert character who may respond well to the challenge but who may lose interest
- *Monitor* – a sober, hard-headed individual who keeps everything on track, but who may lack inspiration
- *Team worker* – a mild social person with plenty of team spirit – may be indecisive
- *Completer/Finisher* – conscientious, a perfectionist, maybe a worrier.

Let's pause here to go over the list.

- Which description most fits you?
- Are you happy with this?
- What are you going to do about it?

### ● Tips

- Experiment with group work. Adopt different roles in different academic groups. Each time you vary your role in a group you will develop different aspects of your personality; this is a good thing.
- Decide to use your group work experiences to develop your c.v. – and get you that job. So as you move through team worker, leader, information gatherer, creative thinker, completer, etc. make notes on your experiences for your c.v. folder.
- Whilst eight roles are indicated here, research indicates that academic groups work best if they only contain four or five people – any more and you start to get passengers.
- In a small group, allocate roles wisely, but make sure that you have a chairperson and that everyone does know what the task is, what they are doing – and when it all has to be completed.

### Adair's processes

As there is theory as to the **roles** adopted in group situations, so there are arguments as to the **processes** that groups go through. Adair argues that groups have distinct forms, or pass through distinct transformations, as they encounter the task, settle down to it and finally pull it off. These are known as forming, storming, norming and performing – some people also speak of a fifth stage, mourning.

**Forming** is where the group comes together and takes shape. This forming period is a time of high anxiety as people work out:

- who is in the group – and what they are like
- what the assignment is – what it involves
- what the 'rules' are – about behaviour, about the task, about assessment
- what they will have to do to get the job done – and who will be doing 'all the work'.

**Storming** is where conflict arises as people sort out all the confusions highlighted above. This is where people seek to assert their authorities, and get challenged. Typically this is a 'black and white' phase – everything seems all

good or all bad: compromise is not seen. At this stage people are reacting emotionally **against** everything as they challenge:

- each other
- the value of the task
- the feasibility of the task (you cannot be serious!).

● **Tip:** If you do not like group work, ask yourself, is it because you do not like conflict? Perhaps you just find this phase uncomfortable? If this is so, remind yourself that this phase passes.

**Norming**, as the name suggests, is where the group begins to settle down. Here that sense of inter-dependence develops as:

- plans are made
- standards are laid down
- co-operation begins
- people are able to communicate their feelings more positively.

**Performing** is where the group gets on and does what it was asked to do. It is now that the task can be undertaken and completed – and success can be experienced! Here it is useful if:

- roles are accepted and understood
- deadlines are set and kept to
- communication is facilitated by good inter-personal skills.

● **Tip:** Share your phone numbers and your e-mail addresses. Do have a group leader who will take responsibility for chivvying people along. Do set people tasks that they **can** do.

**Mourning:** The fifth stage, mourning, is supposed to follow a successful and intense group experience. As you work hard to complete an assignment with people, you develop links and bonds. Typically you enjoy the sense of mutual support and commitment. The feeling of inter-dependence is very satisfying. When all this ends as the task ends, there can be a real sense of loss.

● **Tips:**

- Be prepared for the sense of loss.
- Work to keep in contact with good team players – you may be able to work with them again.

*Queries:*

- Do you recognise any of these stages?
- Now that you know about them think how you might use this knowledge to your advantage.
- How will you draw on this information in your next group activity?
- Make notes so that you do not forget.

***And of course it can be like any other assignment!***

There are many things that good groups have to do to work well, that is, for everyone involved to have a good time and for the task to be accomplished: we have referred to some of them above. Remember also to treat group work like any other assignment (see Chapter 9 – how to prepare better assignments).

***How to succeed in group work***

It still helps to:

- 1 Prepare to research: open your research folders, analyse the task, making sure that you know exactly what you have been asked to do or make – essay, report, presentations, seminar, etc. Then:
  - analyse the question – all of it
  - have the overview – and fit the task to the module learning outcomes
  - use creative brainstorming and notemaking strategies
  - action plan – work out **who** is doing what, why, where and when!
- 2 Follow the action plan – undertake targeted research and active reading.
- 3 Review your findings.
- 4 Plan the outline – of the report, seminar, presentation or whatever.
- 5 Prepare the first draft.
- 6 Leave a time lag.
- 7 Review, revise and edit – agree on a final draft.
- 8 Proof read – or rehearse if it involves a group presentation.
- 9 Hand work in on or before a deadline.
- 10 Review your progress!

● **Tip: If your group work review forms part of the formal assessment:** Ask your tutor exactly what it is that they are assessing **before** you even start the group activity. In this way you can note the relevant information as it arises and have it there ready for when you perform your formal review of your group project.

## Conclusion

We have used this section of the book to explore group work in the academic setting. We have stressed that group work can be a positive, supportive and interactive learning experience – especially if you tackle group activities with enthusiasm and commitment and with the co-operation of committed group members. At the same time we stressed that you can benefit even from problem groups by noting how your problems were overcome – and that you use such reflections in a formal group review and in your job applications.

We stressed how an awareness of group roles and processes can help you understand and succeed in your group activities. Finally we compared success in group assignments with success in any assignment – making links with the ten-step plan, prepare and review strategy introduced in Chapter 9.

Good luck with your group activities. Enjoy your group work – groups really can be supportive, exciting and productive.

### Group building activities

There are management team building games that you might like to experiment with to develop your group work skills – and for the fun of it. We have included one below; you can search out others if you wish.

#### The Paper Tower

In this activity you will need to gather together some students who want to develop their group work skills and some simple resources.

The goal will be for groups to construct a paper tower with a given supply of resources. Variations on this include: designing, producing and testing a non-breakable egg container or balancing a spoon on a paper tower. The egg container is the more dramatic!

#### Aim

To develop group work skills through practical activity, observation and feedback.

**Learning outcomes**

By the end of this activity participants will have developed:

- a sense of the social support offered by group work
- an idea of their own approach to group work
- a sense of the fun of group work
- an idea of the positive benefits of undertaking tasks in a team rather than alone
- some strategies for successful group participation.

**Resources**

Large quantities of newspaper, cellotape, paper clips and rubber bands – sufficient for all participants.

**The Paper Tower Exercise**

- 1 Divide participants into groups of 5-6 people. Each group has to choose an observer who will not participate but who will note how the other people do so. The participants have to build a tower with the resources to hand. Each group will 'present' their tower to the other groups. Each observer will feed back how his or her group performed. (Allow 20-30 minutes tower building time.)
- 2 Whilst the students build their towers the observer makes notes as to the roles adopted by individual members or the processes engaged in by the group. The observer notes how people engage in the group task.
- 3 Groups report back on the criteria they had chosen for their tower; the tower itself – and how they felt the group performed. The observer feeds back (in constructive terms) on the roles and/or processes of the group.
- 4 Plenary: hold a plenary to discuss what the participants have learned from the activity – and how they will draw on this in the future.

**Review points**

When reviewing this activity participants might note that they:

- enjoyed it – it was fun
- benefited from being part of a team
- have some idea of how they performed in a group activity
- have learned something useful about group work that they will build on in the future.

### Review points

When thinking about what you have read and the activities that you have engaged in, you might feel that you have:

- developed an awareness of the forms and processes of group work – so that you are in a position to make the most of group activities in the future
- developed an awareness of the potential of group work in the academic environment
- developed an awareness of how to use your group work experiences at college or university to improve your job applications.

### Further reading

If you are interested in this topic you may wish to have a look at the following:

Adair, J. (1983) *Effective leadership*, (1987) *Effective team building*, (1987) *Not bosses but leaders*

Belbin (1981) *Managing teams: why they succeed or fail*, Heinemann: London