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Teamwork Skills: Being an Effective Group Member

Audio version of "Teamwork skills: Being an effective group member" tip sheet (MP3).

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 communicators, plus tips to help students with group climate and process.



Although students can gain many of the skills described below through informal social interactions, they still benefit from having them made explicit. To hone their skills they also need opportunities to practice as well as to receive regular feedback on how they're doing. Share the information below with your students, use it to set activities for them, and work to incorporate three components of feedback into your plan: instructor comments (oral and/or written), reflective group discussions and/or peer assessment, and self-reflection (see the reflection prompts in Appendix A for ideas).

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.

Skills for a healthy group climate

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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.

As an instructor, you can use several strategies to encourage students to develop a healthy climate within their small groups:

- Assign students into diverse groups so that they encounter others with different backgrounds and interests.
- Design activities that break the ice, promote awareness of differences within the group, encourage reflection on the stresses of working within a group, and point out the demands of working in a group.
- Have students participate in trust challenges. For example, try the trust-fall, in which individual group members fall backward off a table and are caught by their fellow group members. Or blindfold individual students, and have their group members guide them orally through an obstacle course.
- Encourage students to participate willingly and ask questions of others. To encourage listening skills and ensure that everyone in the group speaks, try the “circle of voices” exercise. See Centre for Teaching Excellence (CTE) teaching tip “[Group Work in the Classroom: Types of Small Groups](#)”.
- After students have worked in their groups for a couple of weeks, have them fill in a “Are we a team?” checklist individually, then discuss their answers within their group. Have them repeat this exercise when they have completed their task. See appendix B for an example of this checklist.

Skills for an effective group process

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:

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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.

As an instructor, use some of these strategies to encourage students to develop an effective process within their small groups:

- Design the group task so that the students must work together. Group members will be more motivated and committed to working together if they are given a group mark; if you choose to evaluate in this way, be sure to make your expectations extremely clear. See the CTE teaching tip sheet "[Methods for Assessing Group Work](#)" for additional ideas.
- Once students are in groups, have them develop, as one of their early assignments, a group contract in which they articulate ground rules and group goals. See the teaching tip "[Making Group Contracts](#)" for details. Be sure that groups discuss how they will respond to various scenarios such as absentee or late group members and those who do not complete their assigned tasks.
- Distribute a list of decision-making methods and strategies for conflict resolution. The CTE teaching tip sheet "[Group Decision Making](#)" is a good place to start. Have each group articulate, based on this list, a set of strategies for decision making and conflict resolution; this list should become part of the group contract. You may also want to offer yourself as an impartial arbitrator in emergency situations, but encourage students to work out problems among themselves.
- Provide students with guidelines for running a meeting, such as setting and following an agenda, specifying time limits, and monitoring progress on the agenda. Consult the CTE teaching tip sheet "[Meeting Strategies to Help Prepare Students for Group Work](#)" for additional suggestions.
- Teach students effective methods for giving and receiving feedback. For sample methods, see the teaching tip "[Receiving and Giving Effective Feedback](#)". Create an assignment that involves them giving feedback to group members, and make it part of their final grade.

To help students recognize and make the most of their own and one another's preferred roles, outline with them a list of team roles (see the teaching tip "[Group Roles](#)" for one such list), have them determine which role(s) suits them best, and give them time to discuss within their groups how their particular role(s) will complement those of other group members. Requiring them to rotate their roles helps them to expand their skills set.

Appendix A: encouraging self-awareness and reflection in group work

One of the most important things you can do as an instructor is to have students reflect regularly on their group experiences. Their self-reflection will reinforce and further develop critical teamwork skills. Based on your objectives for the group project, create a set of prompts using the questions below. Have students then use these prompts to journal about their reactions to group climate and process. The journals encourage self-reflection and can help students see teamwork issues in new ways and create ideas for resolution. They can also provide a good basis from which students can choose comments to share with their group members in debriefing sessions. If students submit their journals periodically throughout the semester, give them feedback orally or in writing, and to the extent appropriate, discuss in class any trends that you have identified through observation or in the journals (e.g., reassure groups that many are facing similar challenges). Also, requiring all students to submit a final reflective report after the group project can help them to see the value of the teamwork expertise they have developed through practice.

Climate

- What have you enjoyed the most/the least about getting to know your group members?
- How is your attitude towards your group members demonstrated in how you function within the group?
- How do you demonstrate trust and openness towards the other members and their ideas?
- Do you give honest opinions? If not, why not?
- How much do you feel you can rely on your group members to complete the required task(s)?
- How do you make sure that group members feel supported, encouraged, and appreciated for their work?
- How does the team ensure that all voices are heard?
- Do you participate willingly in the discussion? If not, why not?
- Do others appear to understand your ideas? If not, why not?
- What do you do if another person's ideas are unclear?
- What do you focus on when others speak? How could you improve your listening skills?
- How do you respond to others' ideas? How do they respond to yours? What could be improved?

Process

- What are your group's ground rules and goals? What changes to these rules and goals might improve the functioning of your group?
- How is everyone encouraged to stay accountable to the tasks they have been assigned?

- To what extent do you and others follow the feedback methods laid out in class? How could you and your group members improve the way you give and receive feedback?
- To what extent does your group reflect on how well its goals are being achieved? How would more (or less) discussion about goals help or hinder your group's functioning?
- How are decisions made in your group? Who is involved and in which ways? What has been effective about the processes you have used? How could your decision-making processes be improved?
- What happens if a group member is unhappy or uncomfortable with a decision made by the group?
- What conflicts have arisen within your group? How (if at all) have the conflicts been resolved? What role do you play in resolving these conflicts? What could you (or others) do to improve your group's ability to deal productively with conflict?
- How do your meetings typically proceed? What do you accomplish and in how much time? What is effective about your group functioning during meetings? What changes would improve your meetings?
- Who has emerged as the leader in your group? Which other roles do you see team members playing? Which role(s) do you play? Which role do you prefer and why?

Appendix B: "Are We a Team?" checklist (Levin & Kent, 2001)

Check off the statements that accurately represent your group. Be prepared to discuss your choices afterwards with your group. Also consider ways to improve your group's functioning, especially as it relates to the statements you did not check off.

- We all show equal commitment to our objective.
- We all take part in deciding how work should be allocated.
- We are committed to helping each other learn.
- We acknowledge good contributions from team members.
- We handle disagreements and conflicts constructively within the team.
- We are able to give constructive criticism to one another and to accept it ourselves.
- We all turn up to meetings and stay to the end.
- We are good at making sure that everyone knows what's going on.
- When one of us is under pressure, others offer to help him or her.
- We trust each other.
- We remain united even when we disagree.
- We support each other to outsiders.
- We feel comfortable and relaxed with one another.

Resources and References

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- Breslow, L. (1998). Teaching Teamwork Skills, Part 2. Teach Talk, X, 5.
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- Reynolds, M. (1994). Groupwork in Education and Training. London: Kogan Page.
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More Resources

- UWaterloo's [Student Success Office](#)
- UWaterloo's [Office of Academic Integrity](#)