

**PART II**  
**Managing Group Relationships**

# 5

# Relating to Others in Groups

“In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than the tasks, functions, roles and positions.”

— Margaret Wheatley



## CHAPTER OUTLINE

- Roles
- Norms
- Status
- Power
- Trust
- The Development of Group Relationships over Time

## OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you will be able to:

- Identify the task, maintenance, and individual roles that group members assume.
- Identify several group norms that often develop in small-group discussions.
- Describe several effects of status differences on small-group communication.
- Describe how five power bases affect relationships in small groups.
- Identify factors that foster trusting relationships with others.
- Describe how relationships develop over time among group members.

**D**o you tend to be a leader or a follower in a small group? Do you talk a lot or little? Perhaps your answers would depend on the quality of your relationships with other group members.

Communication scholar Joann Keyton notes that relational communication in groups refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members. It is the affective or expressive dimension of group communication as opposed to the instrumental, or task-oriented, dimension.<sup>1</sup>

Relational communication theorists assert that every message people communicate to one another has both a content dimension and a relationship dimension. The content dimension of a message includes the specific information conveyed to someone. The relationship dimension involves message cues that provide hints about whether you like or dislike the person with whom you are communicating. Whether you give a public speech, talk with your spouse, or communicate with another member of a small group, you provide information about the feelings you have toward your listener in addition to the ideas you're conveying.

This chapter emphasizes the relational elements that affect the quality of the relationships you establish with other group members. Specifically, it concentrates on variables that have an important effect on the relationships you establish with others in small groups: (1) the roles you assume, (2) the norms or standards the group develops, (3) the status differences that affect the group's productivity, (4) the power some members wield, (5) the trust that improves group performance, and (6) some additional effects of cultural differences.

## Roles

Stop reading this chapter for just a moment, and reflect on the question "Who are you?" Now, write down ten different responses.

### Who Are You?

1. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
2. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
3. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_

4. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
5. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
6. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
7. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
8. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
9. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_
10. *I am* \_\_\_\_\_

As we noted in Chapter 2, these responses are part of your theory of yourself—your **self-concept**. Your self-concept—who you think you are—shapes your communication and relationships with others. Your self-concept also affects how others relate to you.

In trying to reduce the uncertainty that occurs when communicating in groups, people quickly assess the behaviors of others. They assign **roles**—sets of expectations—to others. In a small group, roles result from (1) people's expectations about their own behavior—their *self-concepts*, (2) the perceptions others have about individuals' positions in the group, and (3) people's actual behavior as they interact with others. Because self-concepts largely determine the roles people assume in small groups, it is important to understand how self-concepts develop.

### **Self-Concept Development: Gender, Sexual Orientation, Culture, and Role**

How do you know who you are? Why did you respond as you did when you were asked to consider the question “Who are you?” Many factors influence your self-concept. First, other people influence who you think you are. Your parents gave you your name. Perhaps a teacher once told you that you were good in art, and consequently you think of yourself as an artistic. Maybe somebody once told you that you cannot sing very well. Because you believed that person, you may now view yourself as not being very musical. Thus, you listen to others, especially those whose opinions you respect, to help shape your self-concept.

One important part of everyone's self-concept is *gender*.<sup>2</sup> Whether you experience life as male or female affects your communication with others. While it is natural to assume that people's communication differs depending on their biological sex, research suggests that the psychological aspects of gender—how “feminine” or “masculine” a person is—may be at least as important a variable.<sup>3</sup> Some research supports small differences that “characterize women as using communication to connect with, support, and achieve closeness with others, and men as using communication to accomplish some task and to assert their individuality.”<sup>4</sup> More recent studies reinforce the notion that gender still makes a difference. Researchers Priya Raghuram and Ana Valenzuela, for example, showed through a study of the television show *The Weakest Link* how men and women both use sex in a strategic way to achieve a competitive advantage.<sup>5</sup> The same researchers also observed that, in this competitive setting, female players perform better when women constitute a majority on a team.<sup>6</sup>

Sexual orientation also affects a person's sense of self-concept, as well as how he or she relates to others. Whether you approve or disapprove of another person's sexual orientation should not reduce your effectiveness when communicating in groups and teams. You already know that it is inappropriate to use racially charged terms that demean a person's race or ethnicity; it is equally important not to use derogatory terms or make jokes about a person's sexual orientation. Being sensitive to attitudes about sexual orientation is part of the role of an effective group communicator.

Another important component of self-concept is *culture of origin*. Different cultures foster different beliefs and attitudes about communication, status, nonverbal behavior, and all the

interpersonal dynamics discussed throughout this book. The development of selfhood takes place differently from culture to culture. Recalling our discussions in Chapters 1 and 3 of individualistic and collectivist cultures, consider that Japanese and North American social lives flow from different premises. Many North Americans prize the image of the rugged individualist; many Japanese, in contrast, view this image as suggestive of egotism and insensitivity. For some Japanese, the line where self ends and others begin is far less clearly defined than it is for many North Americans. Studies show that in both types of cultures, strong cooperative relationships within a group or team enhance constructive conflict (see Chapter 10) and lead to more innovative team outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Culture influences self-concept and thus behaviors such as the willingness to communicate in a group.<sup>8</sup> There is ample evidence that individuals from different cultures interpret situations and concepts very differently.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, understanding cultural differences is essential to understanding behavior in small groups.

The various groups with which one affiliates also help to define one's self-concept. If you attend college, you may describe yourself as a student. If you belong to a fraternity or sorority, you may think that sets you apart from others. Your religious affiliation, political party, and membership in civic and social organizations all contribute to the way you perceive yourself.

You also learn who you are by simply observing and interpreting your own behavior. Just as before leaving home you check the mirror to see how you look, so too do you try to see yourself through others' behavior toward you? Self-concept arises, in part, through the reflected appraisals of others.

## Diversity of Roles in Small Groups

As a member of a small group, your own perceptions and expectations provide a foundation for the roles you will assume. Yet your role is also worked out between you and the other group members.<sup>10</sup> As you interact with others, they form impressions of you and your abilities. As they react to your actions in the group—reflected appraisals—you learn what abilities and behaviors they will reinforce. These abilities and behaviors may, in turn, become part of your self-concept.

People assume roles because of their interests and abilities and because of the needs and expectations of the rest of the group. Some roles, especially in teams, are formally assigned. When police officers arrive on the scene of an accident, bystanders do not generally question their assumption of leadership. In a task-oriented small group, a member may be assigned the role of secretary, which includes specific duties and responsibilities. A chairperson may be elected to coordinate the meeting and delegate responsibilities. Assigning responsibilities and specific roles reduces uncertainty. A group can sometimes get on with its task more efficiently if some roles are assigned. Of course, even if a person has been elected or assigned the role of chairperson, the group may reject his or her leadership in favor of that of another member who may better meet the needs of the group. In other words, roles can be assigned *formally* or can evolve *informally*.<sup>11</sup> To be most successful, groups and teams require a balance of team roles. When a balance of roles exists within a team, the team will likely be successful.<sup>12</sup>

The kinds of roles discussed so far are **task roles**, which are aimed at accomplishing a group's goal. There are also two other role categories. **Maintenance roles** define a group's social atmosphere. A member who tries to maintain a peaceful, harmonious group climate by mediating disagreements and resolving conflicts performs a maintenance function. **Individual roles** call attention to individual contributions and tend to be counterproductive to the overall group effort. Someone who is more interested in seeking personal recognition than in promoting the general benefit of the group is adopting an individual role.

Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats have compiled a comprehensive list of possible informal roles that individual group members can assume.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps you can identify the various roles

you have assumed while participating in small-group discussions. Chapter 9 discusses the task/maintenance roles, highlighted in boldface, as leadership-role functions. These are some of the most important roles for group effectiveness.

### Group Task Roles

#### **Initiator-contributor**

Proposes new ideas or approaches to group problem solving; may suggest a different procedure or approach to organizing the problem-solving task

#### Information seeker

Asks for clarification of suggestions; also asks for facts or other information that may help the group deal with the issues at hand

#### Opinion seeker

Asks for a clarification of the values and opinions expressed by other group members

#### Information giver

Provides facts, examples, statistics, and other evidence that pertains to the problem the group is attempting to solve

#### Opinion giver

Offers beliefs or opinions about the ideas under discussion

#### **Elaborator**

Provides examples based on his or her experience or the experience of others that help to show how an idea or suggestion would work if the group accepted a particular course of action

#### **Coordinator**

Tries to clarify and note relationships among the ideas and suggestions that have been provided by others

#### **Orienter (summarizer)**

Attempts to summarize what has occurred and tries to keep the group focused on the task at hand

#### Evaluator-critic

Makes an effort to judge the evidence and conclusions that the group suggests

#### Energizer

Tries to spur the group to action and attempts to motivate and stimulate the group to greater productivity

#### Procedural technician

Helps the group achieve its goal by performing tasks such as distributing papers, rearranging the seating, or running errands for the group

#### Recorder

Writes down suggestions and ideas of others; makes a record of the group's progress

### Group-Building and Maintenance Roles

#### **Encourager**

Offers praise, understanding, and acceptance of others' ideas and suggestions

#### Harmonizer

Mediates disagreements among group members

#### Compromiser

Attempts to resolve conflicts by trying to find an acceptable solution to disagreements among group members

#### **Gatekeeper and expediter**

Encourages less talkative group members to participate and tries to limit lengthy contributions of other group members

Standard setter	Helps to set standards and goals for the group
Group observer	Keeps records of the group's process and uses the gathered information gathered to evaluate the group's procedures
Follower	Basically goes along with the suggestions and ideas of other group members; serves as an audience in group discussions and decision making

## Individual Roles

Aggressor	Destroys or deflates the status of other group members; may try to take credit for someone else's contribution
Blocker	Is generally negative, stubborn, and disagreeable without apparent reason
Recognition seeker	Seeks the spotlight by boasting and reporting on his or her personal achievements
Self-confessor	Uses the group as an audience to report personal feelings, insights, and observations
Joker	Reflects a lack of involvement in the group's process by telling stories and jokes that do not help the group; lack of interest may result in cynicism, nonchalance, or other behaviors that indicate lack of enthusiasm for the group and a focus on himself or herself
Dominator	Makes an effort to assert authority by manipulating group members or attempting to take over the entire group; may use flattery or assertive behavior to dominate the discussion
Help seeker	Tries to evoke a sympathetic response from others; often expresses insecurity or feelings of low self-worth
Special-interest pleader	Works to serve an individual need; speaks for a special group or organization that best fits his or her own biases

In looking at the preceding list of roles, you may have recognized yourself—for instance, as a harmonizer or a follower—and said, “Yes, that’s me. That’s the role I usually take.” You may also have tried to classify other members of some group into these categories. Although identifying the characteristics of roles may help you understand their nature and function in small-group communication, stereotyping individuals can lock them into roles. Ernest Bormann has extensively studied role behavior in groups and notes that, when asked to analyze group roles, group members often categorize and label other members, based on the roles they are perceived to fill.<sup>14</sup> As you identify the roles adopted by group members, be flexible in your classifications. Realize that you and other members can assume several roles during a group discussion. In fact, a group member rarely serves only as an “encourager,” “opinion seeker,” or “follower.” Roles are dynamic; they change with changing perceptions, experiences, and expectations. An individual can assume leadership responsibilities at one meeting and play a supporting role at the next.

Because a role is worked out jointly between you and the group, you will no doubt find yourself assuming different roles in different groups. Perhaps a committee you belong to needs

Both group task roles and group-building and maintenance roles are important to a group's success. What roles do you usually take in a group?



someone to serve as a procedural leader to keep the meeting in order. Because you recognize this need and no one else keeps the group organized, you may find yourself steering the group back on to the topic, making sure all members have a chance to participate. In another committee, where others serve as procedural leaders, you may be the person who generates new ideas. Whether consciously or not, you develop a role unique to your talents and the needs of the group. Your role, then, changes from group to group.

Roles in groups and teams can be either *informal*, as we've discussed, or *formal*. In the case of teams, roles are likely to be more formally defined. For example, one team member may have primary responsibility for communicating with the supervisor or with other teams and departments. Another may head up project planning. When roles within a team are formally established, it is important that these roles be clearly defined and coordinated with one another.<sup>15</sup> Lack of clarity can result in role stress and loss of team productivity.<sup>16</sup>

If you understand how group roles form and how various roles function, you will be better able to help a group achieve its purpose. Studies of asynchronous college discussion groups have found significant improvement in their performance when roles such as moderator, starter, and summarizer are assigned.<sup>17</sup> Groups need members to perform both maintenance and task functions. Task functions help the group get the job done, and maintenance functions help the group run smoothly. If no one is performing maintenance functions, you could point this out to the group, or assume some responsibility for them. If you notice individuals hindering the group's progress because they have adopted individual roles (blocker, aggressor, recognition seeker, etc.), you could bring this to the attention of the offending group member. Explain that individual roles can make the group less efficient and can lead to conflict among members. Although you cannot assume complete responsibility for distributing roles within your group, your insights can help solve some of the group's potential problems. Understanding group roles—and when to use them—is an important part of becoming a competent group communicator.

## Norms

Have you noticed that in some classes it is okay to say something without raising your hand, but in others the instructor must call on you before you speak? Raising your hand is a norm.