AFTER STUDYING THE MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER . . .

You should understand:

1. The characteristics that distinguish groups from other collections of people.
2. The types of goals that operate in groups.
3. The various types of groups.
4. The characteristics of groups described in this chapter.
5. The advantages and disadvantages of the decision-making methods introduced in this chapter.
6. The cultural influences that shape communication in groups.

You should be able to:

1. Identify the groups you presently belong to and those you are likely to join in the future.
2. List the personal and group goals in groups you observe or belong to.
3. Identify the norms, roles, and interaction patterns in groups you observe or belong to.
4. Choose the most effective decision-making methods for a group task.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Nature of Groups

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

Group communication possesses several important characteristics.

- Groups have a variety of purposes for existing, and each has its own operating style.
- A true group's interaction, interdependence, size, and length of time distinguish it from a less well-defined collection of individuals.
- The stated goals of groups and the personal goals of individual members interact in ways that can affect success.
- Different types of groups exist to fulfill a variety of goals: social, learning, personal growth, and problem solving.
- A group's rules, norms, roles, patterns of interaction, and methods of making decisions can shape the way members interact as well as their productivity and satisfaction.
- Powerful but sometimes subtle cultural factors shape the way groups operate.

Most of the decisions that affect our lives are not made by individuals, but by small groups of people in executive boardrooms, faculty meetings, town councils, quality circles, dormitory rooms, kitchens, locker rooms, and a host of other meeting places. In a democracy, the small group is the most basic way to get work done.

Arthur Jensen

How important are groups?

You can answer this question for yourself by trying a simple experiment. Start by thinking of all the groups you belong to now and have belonged to in the past: the family you grew up with, the classes you have attended, the companies you have worked for, the teams you have played on, the many social groups you have been a member of—the list is a long one. Now, one by one, imagine that you had never belonged to each of these groups. Start with the less important ones, and the results aren't too dramatic; but very soon you will begin to see that a great deal of the information you have learned, the benefits you have gained—even your very identity have all come from group membership.

On the job, groups are the setting in which most work takes place. In one survey, 75 percent of the professionals surveyed reported that they "always" or "often" worked in teams.[1] In the growing multimedia field, the ability to work effectively as a team has been identified as the top nontechnical job skill.[2] When negotiating is conducted by teams instead of individuals, the results are better for everyone involved.[3]

This doesn't mean that every group experience is a good one. Some are vaguely unrewarding, rather like eating food that has no taste and gives no nourishment. And others are downright miserable. Sometimes it is easy to see why a group succeeds or fails, but in other cases matters aren't so clear.[4]

This chapter will help you understand better the nature of group communication. It will start by explaining just what a group is—because not every collection of people qualifies. It will go on to examine the reasons why people form groups and then look at several types of groups. Finally, it will conclude by looking at some common characteristics all groups share.

WHAT IS A GROUP?

Imagine that you are taking a test on group communication. Which of the following would you identify as groups?

- A crowd of onlookers gawking at a burning building
- Several passengers at an airline ticket counter discussing their hopes to find space on a crowded flight
- An army battalion

Because all these situations seem to involve groups, your experience as a canny test taker probably tells you that a commonsense answer will get you in trouble here—and you're right. When social scientists talk about *groups,* they use the word in a special way that excludes each of the preceding examples.

What are we talking about when we use the word *group?* For our purposes a **group** consists of a *small collection of people who interact with each other, usually face to face, over time in order to reach goals.* A closer examination of this definition will show why none of the collections of people described in the preceding quiz qualifies as a group.

Interaction

CULTURAL IDIOM

gawking at: staring at

Without interaction, a collection of people isn't a group. Consider, for example, the onlookers at a fire. Though they all occupy the same area at a given time, they have virtually nothing to do with each other. Of course, if they should be-

gin interacting—working together to give first aid or to rescue victims, for example—the situation would change. This requirement of interaction highlights the difference between true groups and collections of individuals who merely coact—simultaneously engaging in a similar activity without communicating with one another. For example, students who passively listen to a lecture don't technically constitute a group until they begin to exchange messages with each other and their instructor. (This explains why some students feel isolated even though they spend so much time on a crowded campus. Despite being surrounded by others, they really don't belong to any groups.)

As you read in Chapters 3 and 5, there are two types of interaction that go on in any communication setting. The most obvious type is verbal, in which group members exchange words either orally or in writing. But people needn't talk to each other in order to communicate as a group: Nonverbal channels can do the job, too. We can see how by thinking again about a hypothetical classroom. Imagine that the course is in its tenth week and that the instructor has been lecturing nonstop for the entire time. During the first few meetings there was very little interaction of any kind: Students were too busy scribbling notes and wondering how they would survive the course with grade-point averages and sanity intact. But as they became more used to the class, the students began to share their feelings with each other. Now there's a great amount of eye rolling and groaning as the assignments are poured on, and the students exchange resigned signs as they hear the same tired jokes for the second and third time. Thus, even though there's no verbal exchange of sentiments, the class has become a group—interestingly, in this sense a group that doesn't include the professor.

The explosion of communication technologies has led to the growth of "virtual groups"—people who interact with one another without meeting face to face. For a small cost (at least compared with in-person meetings), people, whether within the same office or around the world, can swap ideas via computer networks, speak with one another via telephone conference calls, and even have visual contact thanks to teleconferencing.[5] Despite the lack of personal contact between members, virtual teams actually can be superior to face-to-face teams in at least two ways. First, getting together is fast and easy. A virtual team can meet whenever necessary, even if the members are widely separated. This ease of interaction isn't just useful in the business world. For most groups of students working on class projects, finding a convenient time to meet can be a major headache. Virtual groups don't face the same challenges.

A second advantage of virtual teams is the leveling of status differences. When people connect via computer networks, rank is much less prominent than when groups meet face to face.[6] Because fear of authority figures can squelch creative thinking, virtual teams are a good device for making sure groups find the best solutions to problems.

CULTURAL IDIOM

eye rolling: nonverbally expressing discontent

Interdependence

In groups, members don't just interact: Their members are *interdependent.*[7] The behavior of one person affects all the others in what can be called a "ripple effect."[8] Consider your own experience in family and work groups: When one member behaves poorly, his or her actions shape the way the entire group functions. The ripple effect can be positive as well as negative: Beneficial actions by some members help everyone.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR OWN VIRTUAL GROUP

Groups don't have to meet in person. Setting up a telephone conference call is easy and affordable. (Ask your phone company for details.) Also, you can create your own virtual group on the Internet.

Yahoo! Groups (http://groups.yahoo.com/) will host your own virtual team at no charge, providing a surprising array of services. You and your groupmates can

- Send and receive email messages
- Upload and download files
- Create and use your own private chat for real-time conferencing
- Add and edit photos
- Link to other Web pages using bookmarks
- Conduct votes and polls online
- Schedule events and reminders on a group calendar
- Create a roster of group members, complete with personal profiles

Sometimes there is no good substitute for face-to-face meetings. But you may be surprised how quick, easy, and effective it can be for a group to work online.

Time

A collection of people who interact for a short while doesn't qualify as a group. As you'll soon read, groups who work together for any length of time begin to take on characteristics that aren't present in temporary aggregations. For example, certain standards of acceptable behavior begin to evolve, and the way individuals feel about each other begins to affect their behavior toward the group's task and toward each other. According to this criterion, onlookers at a fire might have trouble qualifying as a group even if they briefly cooperated with one another to help out in the emergency. The element of time clearly excludes temporary gatherings such as the passengers gathered around the airline ticket counter. Situations like this simply don't follow many of the principles you'll be reading about in the next two chapters.

Size

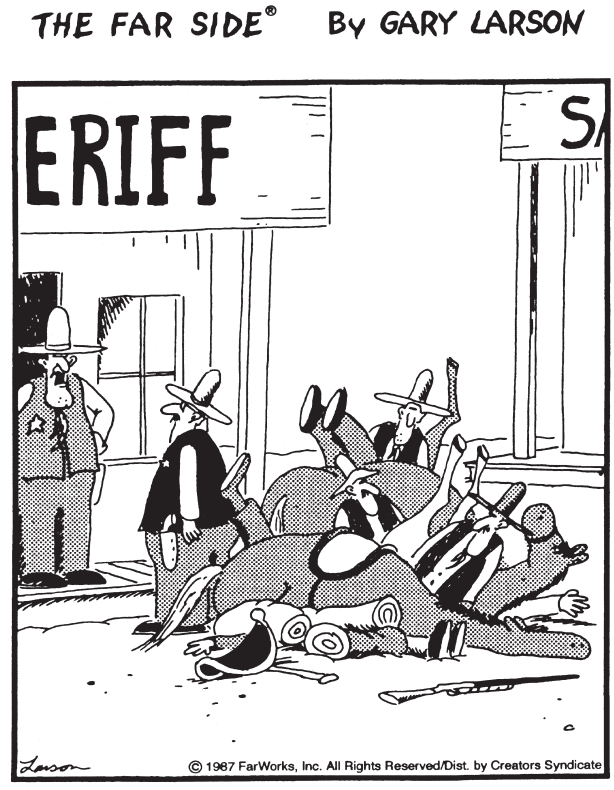
Our definition of *groups* included the word *small.* Most experts in the field set the lower limit of group size at three members. This decision isn't arbitrary, because there are some significant differences between two- and three-person communication. For example, the only ways two people can resolve a conflict are to change one another's minds, give in, or compromise; in a larger group, however, there's a possibility of members' forming alliances either to put increased pressure on dissenting members or to outvote them.

There is less agreement about when a group stops being small.[9] Though no expert would call a five hundred–member army battalion a group in our sense of the word (it would be labeled an organization), most experts are reluctant to set an arbitrary upper limit. Probably the best description of smallness is the ability for each member to be able to know and react to every other member. It's sufficient to say that our focus in these pages will be on collections of people ranging in size from three to between seven and twenty.

In task-oriented groups, bigger usually isn't better. Research suggests that the optimal size for a group is the smallest number of people capable of performing the task at hand effectively.[10] This definition makes it clear that there is no magic number or formula for choosing the best group size. The optimal number will change according to the task, as well as contextual factors such as politics, legal requirements, and institutional norms.[11] But generally speaking, as a group becomes larger, it is harder to schedule meetings, the members have less access to important information, and they have fewer chances to participate—three ingredients in a recipe for dissatisfaction.

Goals

Group membership isn't always voluntary, as some family members and most prison inmates will testify. But whether or not people choose to join groups, they usually hope to achieve one or more goals. At first the goal-related nature of group membership seems simple and obvious. In truth, however, there are several types of goals, which we will examine in the following pages.



"And so you just threw everything together? ... Matthews, a posse is something you have to *organize*."

GOALS OF GROUPS AND THEIR MEMBERS

We can talk about two types of goals when we examine groups. The first type involves **individual goals**—the motives of individual members—whereas the second involves **group goals**—the outcome the group seeks to accomplish.

Individual Goals

The most obvious reason why individuals join groups is to meet their personal needs. **Task orientation**—getting the job done—is the most obvious type of individual motive for belonging to a group. Some people join study groups, for example, in order to improve their knowledge. Sometimes a member's task-related goals will have little to do with a group's stated purpose. Many merchants, for example, join service clubs such as Kiwanis, Rotary, or Lions primarily because doing so is good for business. The fact that these groups help achieve worthy goals such as helping the blind or disabled is fine, of course, but for many people it is not the prime motive for belonging.[12]

What about groups with no specifically defined purpose? Consider, for instance, gatherings of regulars at the beach on sunny weekends or a group of friends whose members eat lunch together several times a week. Collections such as these meet the other criteria for being groups: They interact, meet over time,

and have the right number of members. But what are the members' reasons for belonging? In our examples here, the goals can't be sunbathing or eating because these activities could be carried out alone. The answer to our question introduces **social orientation.** In many cases people join together in order to seek a sense of belonging, to exercise influence over others, and to gain the liking of others. Notice that none of these factors necessarily has much to do with the task: It's possible to get social needs met without getting the job done. Likewise, a group can be efficient—at least for a short while—without meeting the social needs of its members.

We join many, if not most, groups in order to accomplish both task and social goals. School becomes a place both to learn important information and to meet desirable friends. Our work becomes a means of putting food on the table and getting recognition for being competent. The value of making a distinction between task and social goals comes from recognizing that the latter are usually important but often not stated or even recognized by group members. Thus, asking yourself whether social goals are being met can be one way of identifying and overcoming blocks to group effectiveness.

Group Goals

So far we have discussed the forces that motivate individual group members. In addition to these individual forces, there also exist group goals. For example, athletic teams exist to compete with each other, and academic classes strive to transmit knowledge.

Sometimes there is a close relationship between group and individual goals. In athletic teams the group goal is to win, whereas individual members' goals include helping the group succeed. If you think about it for a moment, however, you'll see that the individual members have other goals as well: improving their physical ability, having a good time, overcoming the personal challenges of competition,

and often gaining the social benefits that come from being an athlete. The difference between individual and group goals is even more pronounced when the two are incompatible. Consider, for instance, the case of an athletic team that has one player more interested in being a "star" (satisfying personal needs for recognition) than in helping the team win. Or recall classes you have known in which a lack of student enthusiasm made the personal goal of many students—getting by with the smallest possible amount of work—hardly consistent with the stated group goal of conveying information. Sometimes the gap between individual and group goals is public, whereas at other times an individual's goal becomes a **hidden agenda.** In either case, this discrepancy can be dangerous for the well-being of the group and needs to be dealt with. We'll have more to say about this subject in Chapter 9.

As long as the members' individual goals match those of the group, no conflicts are likely to arise. But when there is a clash between what members seek for themselves and what the group seeks, the collective goal is likely to suffer. The risk of individuals putting their own interests ahead of the group's is especially great when there is less need for interdependence. John Krakauer captures this situation clearly in his account of a team of climbers seeking to reach the peak of Mount Everest:

> There were more than fifty people camped on the Col that night, huddled in shelters pitched side by side, yet an odd feeling of isolation hung in the air. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realize. Although in a few hours we would leave camp as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I sincerely hoped Doug got to the top, for instance, yet I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on if he turned around.[13]

TYPES OF GROUPS

So far we have seen that groups fulfill a variety of goals. Another way of examining groups is to look at some of the functions they serve.

Learning Groups

When the term **learning group** comes up, most people think first about school. Although academic settings certainly qualify as learning groups, they aren't the only ones. Members of a scuba-diving class, friends who form a Bible study group, and members of a League of Women Voters chapter all belong to learning groups. Whatever the setting or subject, the purpose of learning groups is to increase the knowledge or skill of each member.

Problem-Solving Groups

Problem-solving groups work to resolve a mutual concern of members. Sometimes the problem involves the group itself, as when a family decides how to handle household chores or when coworkers meet to coordinate vacation schedules. At other times, the problem is external to the group. For instance, neighbors who organize themselves to prevent burglaries or club members who plan a fund-raising drive are focusing on external problems.

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY

WAIFS ON THE WEB: ANOREXIC TEENS JOIN DANGEROUS ONLINE SUPPORT GROUPS

For three days Abbey, 18, subsisted mostly on water. When hunger pangs began to plague her, she simply gulped a little more liquid. Although the 5′6″, 115-pound college freshman was achieving her goal—to lose weight as quickly as possible–her body was clearly suffering. On the third day, Abbey (who didn't want her full name used) lay awake in the middle of the night panting uncontrollably, her heart racing. Concerned about what was happening to her, she turned to an online support group. Maybe what she was feeling was normal. This was, after all, the first time she had ever tried starving herself.

"I can't see straight, I can't really hear well, and worst of all, I can't catch my breath," she posted on the Pro-Eating Disorder Society's Web site at around midnight. "Has anyone ever experienced these effects, and will they go away?"

The response came hours later. "Yeah, I get that sometimes when I've been fasting," wrote someone seemingly well-versed in hunger. "The best thing to do is eat an apple, drink a glass of water and go to sleep. Your body is a little exhausted, that's all." Reassured, Abbey never sought medical attention, nor did she tell anyone else about her scare. "The apple comment made me feel like someone had an answer," she says.

What Abbey didn't know is that her body was more than just "a little exhausted." In someone who is fasting, a speeding heart can be a sign of real danger. Severe fasting and dehydration can cause abnormal heart patterns and even cardiac arrest, a condition responsible for many of the anorexia-related deaths each year. Abbey's body was telling her it was in trouble, but her online cheerleaders were telling her she was doing fine—and that's who Abbey believed.

It's the dynamic that has eating-disorder experts worried about the recent popularity of secretive, girl-run "thinspirational" Web sites and e-groups. Catering to "Anas"(after America's estimated 8 million who suffer from anorexia and other eating disorders), the sites are havens where girls cybergather to hash out their problems or listen in on discussions about body obsessions and the best ways to avoid prying family members. "What I do to hide it . . . is complain about my teeth being too sore [because of my braces]," writes Sally The Veggie Stick when asked how she disguises the disease from her mother. "Hi, I'm new to the list," chimes in one participant in the e-group Never Thin Enough. "I am almost 5′10″ and I weigh 115. Of course . . . my goal is to weigh around 88."

From there, it's on to discussions of how well laxatives and over-the-counter weight-loss supplements work, sign-ups for group fasts, advice on how to curb hunger (one poster recommends looking at photos of dead, bloody animals) and tips such as eating cotton sprinkled with salt instead of food. In one posting a girl details her exercise schedule for the day—aerobics at 9 A.M., Pilates at 10 A.M., and running in the evening—and urges others to work as hard. Many sites also post something called the Anorexic Creed: " . . . I believe in calorie counters as the inspired word of God and memorize them accordingly. I believe in bathroom scales as an indicator of my daily successes and failures . . . "

"With the pro-anorexia sites, you don't feel like people are going to be judging you," says Liz, a high school senior from Oak Park, Ill. "There are people who just want to lose weight, and there are people who want to be underweight. But everyone is supported in reaching their goal."Liz admits she used to frequent anorexia-recovery sites but left because she felt pressured to, well, recover.

"[The sites] make me feel pretty helpless," admits Daniel le Grange, Ph.D., director of the University of Chicago's Eating Disorders Program, adding that their covert nature "just reinforces the secretive tendency of anorexics," leaving therapists and doctors at a loss to help patients they can't even find, let alone talk to.

Abbey in Texas knows that anorexia is taking over her life and that she's on the verge of a serious illness. Unfortunately, knowing that doesn't necessarily mean stopping the behavior. She still turns to the Anas for advice, but unlike others on the sites who chat like old friends, she makes no pretense about the kinds of relationships she is forming there. "I've met some nice girls, but they're not my friends,"Abbey says. "These people are helping me starve. I was talking to this one girl and I said something like, 'It's weird that we're basically helping each other starve.' She was like, 'Yeah, I know.' They call it fasting and they use all these PC terms, but it's really starving."

Dawn Mackeen

Problem-solving groups can take part in many activities: One type is gathering information, as when several students compile a report for a class assignment. At other times, a group makes policy—a club's deciding whether or not to admit the public to its meetings being an example. Some groups make individual decisions; an interview committee who decides which candidate to hire is fulfilling this function.

Social Groups

We have already mentioned that some groups serve strictly to satisfy the social needs of their participants. Some **social groups** are organized, whereas others are informal. In either case, the inclusion, control, and affection that such groups provide are reason enough for belonging.

Groups don't always fall neatly into just one category. For example, learning groups often have other functions. Consider the class in which you are reading this book as an example: Besides becoming more knowledgeable about communication, many of the students in your class are probably satisfying social needs by making new friends. Some are probably growing personally by applying the principles to their own lives. Groups of students—fellow employees or teammates, for instance—may even take the class together to focus on solving a collective problem. Despite the multiplicity of goals, it's usually possible to characterize a group as primarily focused on learning, growth, problem-solving, or social goals.

Growth Groups

Unlike learning groups, in which the subject matter is external to the members, **growth groups** focus on teaching the members more about themselves. Consciousness-raising groups, marriage encounter workshops, counseling, and group therapy are all types of growth groups. These are unlike most other types of groups in that there is no real collective goal: The entire purpose of the group is to help the members identify and deal with their personal concerns. As the "Understanding Communication Technology" box on page 268 shows, not all support groups operate in the best interests of their members.

ETHICAL CHALLENGE

MOTIVES FOR GROUP MEMBERSHIP

Members often join a group for reasons unrelated to the group's stated purpose for existing. For example, some people belong to growth groups to achieve social needs, and others speak out in task-oriented groups to satisfy their egos more than to help solve the stated problem. Develop a set of ethical guidelines that describes when you believe it is and is not ethical to participate in groups without stating any hidden agendas.

CHARACTERISTICS OF GROUPS

Whatever their function, all groups have certain characteristics in common. Understanding these characteristics is a first step to behaving more effectively in your own groups.

Rules and Norms

Many groups have formal **rules**—explicit, officially stated guidelines that govern what the group is supposed to do and how the members should behave. In a classroom, these rules include how absences will be treated, whether papers must be typed or may be handwritten, and so on. Alongside the official rules, an equally powerful set of standards also operates, often without ever being discussed. Sociologists call these unstated rules **norms.** Norms are shared values, beliefs, behaviors, and procedures that govern a group's operation. For instance, you probably won't find a description of what jokes are and aren't acceptable in the bylaws of any groups you belong to, yet you can almost certainly describe the unstated code if you think about it. Is sexual humor acceptable? How much, and what types? What about religious jokes? How much kidding of other members is proper? Matters such as these vary from one group to another, according to the norms of each one.[14]

TABLE 8-1 Typical Rules and Norms in Two Types of Groups

Family
Rules (Explicit)
■ If you don't do the chores, you don't get your allowance.
■ If you're going to be more than a half-hour late, phone home so the others don't worry about you.
■ If the gas gauge reads "empty," fill up the tank before bringing the car home.
■ Don't make plans for Sunday nights. That's time for the family to spend together.
■ Daniel gets to watch Sesame Street from 5 to 6 P.M.
Norms (Unstated)
■ When Dad is in a bad mood, don't bring up problems.
■ Don't talk about Sheila's divorce.
■ It's okay to tease Lupe about being short, but don't make comments about Shana's complexion.
■ As long as the kids don't get in trouble, the parents won't ask detailed questions about what they do with their friends.
■ At family gatherings, try to change the subject when Uncle Max brings up politics.
On-the-Job Meetings
Rules (Explicit)
■ Regular meetings are held every Monday morning at 9 A.M.
■ The job of keeping minutes rotates from person to person.
■ Meetings last no more than an hour.
■ Don't leave the meetings to take phone calls except in emergencies.
Norms (Unstated)
■ Use first names.
■ It's okay to question the boss's ideas, but if she doesn't concede after the first remark, don't continue to object.
■ Tell jokes at the beginning of the meeting, but avoid sexual or ethnic topics.
■ It's okay to talk about "gut feelings," but back them up with hard facts.
■ Don't act upset when your ideas aren't accepted, even if you're unhappy.

"RULES ARE THE ONLY THING WE'VE GOT"

"What are we? Humans? Or animals? Or savages? What's grownups going to think? Going off—hunting pigs—letting fires out—and now!"

A shadow fronted him tempestuously.

"You shut up, you fat slug!"

There was a moment's struggle and the glimmering conch jigged up and down. Ralph leapt to his feet.

"Jack! Jack! You haven't got the conch! Let him speak."

Jack's face swam near him.

"And you shut up! Who are you, anyway? Sitting there telling people what to do. You can't hunt, you can't sing—"

"I'm chief. I was chosen."

"Why should choosing make any difference? Just giving orders that don't make any sense—"

"Piggy's got the conch."

"That's right—favor Piggy as you always do—"

"Jack!"

Jack's voice sounded in bitter mimicry.

"Jack! Jack!"

"The rules!" shouted Ralph. "You're breaking the rules!"

"Who cares?"

Ralph summoned his wits.

"Because the rules are the only thing we've got!"

William Golding
Lord of the Flies

There are three categories of group norms: social, procedural, and task. **Social norms** govern the relationship of members to each other. How honest and direct will members be with one another? What emotions will and won't be expressed, and in what ways? Matters such as these are handled by the establishment of social norms, usually implicit ones. **Procedural norms** outline how the group should operate. Will the group make decisions by accepting the vote of the majority, or will the members keep talking until consensus is reached? Will one person run meetings, or will discussion be leaderless? **Task norms** focus on how the job itself should be handled. Will the group keep working on a problem until everyone agrees that its solution is the best one possible, or will members settle for an adequate, if imperfect, solution? The answer to this question results in a task-related norm. All groups have social norms, whereas problem-solving, learning, and growth groups also have procedural and task norms.

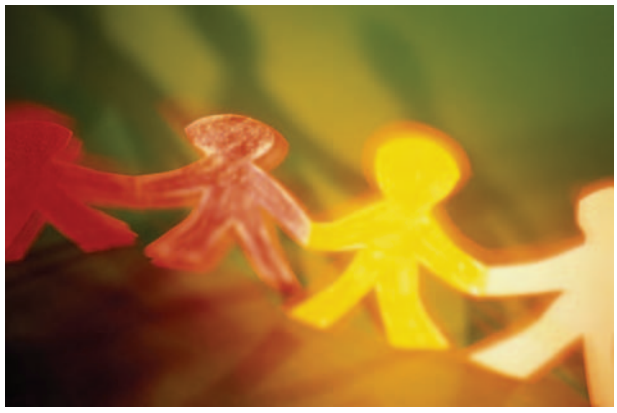
Table 8–1 lists some typical rules and norms that operate in familiar groups. It is important to realize that the actual rules and norms that govern a group don't always match the idealized ones that embody cultural standards. Consider the matter of punctuality, for example. A cultural norm in our society is that meetings should begin at the scheduled time, yet some groups soon generate the usually unstated agreement that the real business won't commence until ten or so minutes later. On a more serious level, one cultural norm is that other people should be treated politely and with respect, but in some groups failure to listen, sarcasm, and even outright hostility make the principle of civility a sham.

It is important to understand a group's norms. Following them is one way to gain acceptance into the group, and sometimes recognizing norms that cause problems can be a way to help the group operate more effectively. For instance, in some groups a norm is to discourage new ideas by criticism, sarcasm, or indifference. Pointing this out to members might be a way to change the unwritten rules and thereby improve the group's work.

If norms are rarely stated, how is it possible to identify them? There are two sets of clues that can help you pin down norms. First, look for behaviors that occur of-

CULTURAL IDIOM

pin down: identify specifically



ten.[15] For instance, notice what time meetings begin. Observe the amount of work members are willing to contribute to the group. See what kinds of humor are and aren't used. Habitual behaviors like these suggest the unspoken rules that the group lives by. Second, look for clues that members are being punished for violating norms. Most punishments are subtle, of course: pained expressions from other members when a speaker talks too much, no laughter following an inappropriate joke, and so on.

Roles

Whereas norms define acceptable group standards, **roles** define patterns of behavior expected of members. Just like norms, some roles are officially recognized. These **formal roles** are assigned by an organization or group partly to establish order. Formal roles usually come with a label, such as "assistant coach," "treasurer," or "customer service representative." Unlike these formal classifications, **informal roles** (sometimes called "functional roles") are rarely acknowledged by the group.[16] Table 8–2 lists some of the most common informal roles in task-oriented groups. As the list shows, informal roles describe the functions members can fill rather than their formal positions. You can probably think of many groups in which members occupy functional roles. For example, you can probably think of many groups in which some members were clearly leaders and others followers.

Informal roles are not formally assigned to members. In fact, they are rarely even recognized as existing. Many of the roles may be filled by more than one member, and some of them may be filled by different people at different times. The important fact is that, at crucial times, each of the informal roles must be filled by someone.

Notice that the informal roles listed in Table 8–2 fall into two categories: task and maintenance. **Task roles** help the group accomplish its goals, and **social roles** (also called "maintenance roles") help the relationships among the members run smoothly. Not all roles are constructive. Table 8–3 lists several **dysfunctional roles** that prevent a group from working effectively. Research suggests that the presence of positive social roles and the absence of dysfunctional ones are key ingredients in the effectiveness of groups.[17]

What is the optimal balance between task and social functions? According to Robert Bales, one of the earliest and most influential researchers in the area, the ideal ratio is 2 : 1, with task-related behavior dominating.[18] This ratio allows the group to get its work done while at the same time taking care of the personal needs and concerns of the members.

ROLE EMERGENCE We said earlier that most group members aren't aware of the existence of informal roles. You will rarely find members saying things like "You ask most of the questions, I'll give opinions, and she can be the summarizer." Yet it's fairly obvious that over time certain members do begin to fulfill specific roles. How does this process occur?

There are two answers to this question. One factor in role differentiation is certainly the personal characteristics of each member. But by themselves, personal

TABLE 8-2 Functional Roles of Group Members

Task Roles	Typical Behaviors	Examples
1. Initiator/Contributor	Contributes ideas and suggestions; proposes solutions and decisions; proposes new ideas or states old ones in a novel fashion.	"How about taking a different approach to this chore? Suppose we . . ."
2. Information Seeker	Asks for clarification of comments in terms of their factual adequacy; asks for information or facts relevant to the problem; suggests information is needed before making decisions.	"Do you think the others will go for this?""How much would the plan cost us?""Does anybody know if those dates are available?"
3. Information Giver	Offers facts or generalizations that may relate to the group's task.	"I bet Chris would know the answer to that.""*Newsweek* ran an article on that a couple of months ago. It said . . ."
4. Opinion Seeker	Asks for clarification of opinions made by other members of the group and asks how people in the group feel.	"Does anyone else have an idea about this?""That's an interesting idea, Ruth. How long would it take to get started?"
5. Opinion Giver	States beliefs or opinions having to do with suggestions made; indicates what the group's attitude should be.	"I think we ought to go with the second plan. It fits the conditions we face in the Concord plant best. . . ."
6. Elaborator/Clarifier	Elaborates ideas and other contributions; offers rationales for suggestions; tries to deduce how an idea or suggestion would work if adopted by the group.	"If we followed Lee's suggestion, each of us would need to make three calls.""Let's see . . . at thirty-five cents per brochure, the total cost would be $525.00."
7. Coordinator	Clarifies the relationships among information, opinions, and ideas or suggests an integration of the information, opinions, and ideas of subgroups.	"John, you seem most concerned with potential problems. Mary sounds confident that they can all be solved. Why don't you list the problems one at a time, John, and Mary can respond to each one."
8. Diagnostician	Indicates what the problems are.	"But you're missing the main thing, I think. The problem is that we can't afford . . ."
9. Orienter/Summarizer	Summarizes what has taken place; points out departures from agreed-on goals; tries to bring the group back to the central issues; raises questions about the direction in which the group is heading.	"Let's take stock of where we are. Helen and John take the position that we should act now. Bill says, 'Wait.' Rusty isn't sure. Can we set that aside for a moment and come back to it after we . . ."

Continued

TABLE 8-2 Functional Roles of Group Members—cont'd

Task Roles	Typical Behaviors	Examples
10. Energizer	Prods the group to action.	"Come on, guys. We've been wasting time. Let's get down to business."
11. Procedure Developer	Handles routine tasks such as seating arrangements, obtaining equipment, and handing out pertinent papers.	"I'll volunteer to see that the forms are printed and distributed." "I'd be happy to check on which of those dates are free."
12. Secretary	Keeps notes on the group's progress.	"Just for the record, I'll put these decisions in the memo and get copies to everyone in the group."
13. Evaluator/Critic	Constructively analyzes group's accomplishments according to some set of standards; checks to see that consensus has been reached.	"Look, we said we only had two weeks, and this proposal will take at least three. Does that mean that it's out of the running, or do we need to change our original guidelines?"
Social/Maintenance Roles		
1. Supporter/Encourager	Praises, agrees with, and accepts the contributions of others; offers warmth, solidarity, and recognition.	"I really like that idea, John." "Priscilla's suggestion sounds good to me. Could we discuss it further?"
2. Harmonizer	Reconciles disagreements; mediates differences; reduces tensions by giving group members a chance to explore their differences.	"I don't think you two are as far apart as you think. Henry, are you saying _____? Benson, you seem to be saying _____. Is that what you mean?"
3. Tension Reliever	Jokes or in some other way reduces the formality of the situation; relaxes the group members.	"Let's take a break . . . maybe have a drink." "You're a tough cookie, Bob. I'm glad you're on our side!"
4. Conciliator	Offers new options when his or her own ideas are involved in a conflict; willing to admit errors so as to maintain group cohesion.	"Looks like our solution is halfway between you and me, John. Can we look at the middle ground?"
5. Gatekeeper	Keeps communication channels open; encourages and facilitates interaction from those members who are usually silent.	"Susan, you haven't said anything about this yet. I know you've been studying the problem. What do you think about _____?"
6. Feeling Expresser	Makes explicit the feelings, moods, and relationships in the group; shares own feelings with others.	"I'm really glad we cleared things up today." "I'm just about worn out. Could we call it a day and start fresh tomorrow?"
7. Follower	Goes along with the movement of the group passively, accepting the ideas of others, sometimes serving as an audience.	"I agree. Yes, I see what you mean. If that's what the group wants to do, I'll go along."

TABLE 8-3 Dysfunctional Roles of Group Members

Dysfunctional Roles	Typical Behaviors	Examples
1. Blocker	Interferes with progress by rejecting ideas or taking a negative stand on any and all issues; refuses to cooperate.	"Wait a minute! That's not right! That idea is absurd." "You can talk all day, but my mind is made up."
2. Aggressor	Struggles for status by deflating the status of others; boasts, criticizes.	"Wow, that's really swell! You turkeys have botched things again." "Your constant bickering is responsible for this mess. Let me tell you how you ought to do it."
3. Deserter	Withdraws in some way; remains indifferent, aloof, sometimes formal; daydreams; wanders from the subject, engages in irrelevant side conversations.	"I suppose that's right . . . I really don't care."
4. Dominator	Interrupts and embarks on long monologues; is authoritative; tries to monopolize the group's time.	"Bill, you're just off base. What we should do is this. First . . ."
5. Recognition Seeker	Attempts to gain attention in an exaggerated manner; usually boasts about past accomplishments; relates irrelevant personal experiences, usually in an attempt to gain sympathy.	"That reminds me of a guy I used to know . . ." "Let me tell you how I handled old Marris . . ."
6. Joker	Displays a lack of involvement in the group through inappropriate humor, horseplay, or cynicism.	"Why try to convince these guys? Let's just get the mob to snuff them out." "Hey, Carla, wanna be my roommate at the sales conference?"
7. Cynic	Discounts chances for group's success.	"Sure, we could try that idea, but it probably won't solve the problem. Nothing we've tried so far has worked."

Source: "Functional Roles of Group Members" and "Dysfunctional Roles of Group Members" adapted from *GROUPSINCONTEXT: Leadership and Participation in Decision-Making Groups* by Gerald Wilson and Michael Hanna, pp. 144–146. © 1986. Reprinted by permission of McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

skills and traits aren't enough to earn a member acceptance as possessor of a role, especially in newly formed groups where no formal leader exists. The process of role emergence has been studied extensively by communication scholar Ernest Bormann, who has identified a predictable series of stages groups go through in role designation.[19] (Remember that this process is almost never discussed and is rarely performed consciously.)

At first, members will make bids for certain roles. A particularly analytical communicator might audition for the role of critic by pointing out flaws in a proposal,

CULTURAL IDIOM

occupying their pet position: playing their favorite

just the ticket: the right thing

for example. In order for this role to "take," the group members must endorse the bid by acknowledging and accepting it verbally and nonverbally—giving the would-be critic their attention and making positive comments about the observations. If the group does not support the first few initial bids, a sensitive member is likely to try another role.

ROLE-RELATED PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS Groups can suffer from at least three role-related problems. The first occurs when one or more important informal roles—either task or social—go unfilled. For instance, there may be no information giver to provide vital knowledge or no harmonizer to smooth things over when members disagree.

There are other cases when the problem isn't an absence of candidates to fill certain roles, but rather an overabundance of them. This situation can lead to unstated competition between members, which gets in the way of group effectiveness. You have probably seen groups in which two people both want to be the tension-relieving comedian. In such cases, the problem arises when the members become more concerned with occupying their pet position than with getting the group's job done.

Even when there's no competition over roles, a group's effectiveness can be threatened when one or more members suffer from "role fixation"—acting out a specific role whether or not the situation requires it.[20] As you learned in Chapter 1, a key ingredient of communication competence is flexibility—the ability to choose the right behavior for a given situation. Members who always take the same role—even a constructive one—lack competence, and they hinder the group. As in other areas of life, too much of a good thing can be a problem. You can overcome the potential role-related problems by following these guidelines:

- Look for unfilled roles. When a group seems to be experiencing problems, use the list in Table 8–2 as a kind of checklist to diagnose what roles might be unfilled.
- Make sure unfilled roles are filled. After you have identified unfilled roles, you may be able to help the group by filling them yourself. If key facts are missing, take the role of information seeker and try to dig them out. If nobody is keeping track of the group's work, offer to play secretary and take notes. Even if you are not suited by skill or temperament to a job, you can often encourage others to fill it.
- Avoid role fixation. Don't fall into familiar roles if they aren't needed. You may be a world-class coordinator or critic, but these talents will only annoy others if you use them when they aren't needed. In most cases your natural inclination to be a supporter might be just the ticket to help a group succeed; but if you find yourself in a group where the members don't need or want this sort of support, your encouragement might become a nuisance.
- Avoid dysfunctional roles. Some of these roles can be personally gratifying, especially when you are frustrated with a group; but they do nothing to help the group succeed, and they can damage your reputation as a team player. Nobody needs a blocker, a joker, or any other of the dysfunctional roles listed in Table 8–3. Resist the temptation to indulge yourself by taking on any of them.

CRITICAL THINKING PROBE

FUNCTIONAL AND DYSFUNCTIONAL ROLES

Identify the functional and dysfunctional roles in an established group. You might analyze a group to which you belong (e.g., an athletic team or class group), a group who can be observed (e.g., city council, faculty senate), or even a fictional group (such as those described in the books and films listed at the end of this chapter). How do the roles in the group you are analyzing contribute to the group's success (or lack of it)? How might members take on different roles to make the group more effective?

Patterns of Interaction

In Chapter 1 we said that communication involves the exchange of information between and among people. It almost goes without saying that this exchange needs to be complete and efficient for the communicators to reach their goals. In interpersonal and public speaking settings, information exchange is relatively uncomplicated, taking basically two routes: either between the two individuals in an interpersonal dyad or between the speaker and the audience in a public speaking situation. (Actually, this is a slight oversimplification. In public speaking situations, members of an audience also exchange messages with one another with their laughter, restless movements, and so on. It's still fair to say, however, that the exchange of information is basically two-way.) In groups, however, things aren't so simple. The mathematical formula that identifies the number of possible interactions between individuals is

$$\frac{N\,(N-1)}{2}$$

where N equals the number of members in a group. Thus, in even a relatively small five-member group, there are ten possible combinations of two-person conversations and seventy-five possible multiperson interactions. Besides the sheer quantity of information exchanged, the more complex structure of groups affects the flow of information in other ways, too.

A look at Figure 8–1 (usually called a **sociogram**) will suggest the number and complexity of interactions that can occur in a group. Arrows connecting members indicate remarks shared between them. Two-headed arrows represent two-way conversations, whereas one-headed arrows represent remarks that did not arouse a response. Arrows directed to the center of the circle indicate remarks made to the group as a whole. A network analysis of this sort can reveal both the amount of participation by each member and the recipients of every member's remarks. As such, it provides a graphic look at who seems to be making the most significant contributions (at least in terms of their quantity), as well as who is not contributing.

In the group pictured in Figure 8–1, person E appears to be connected to the group only through a relationship with person A; E never addressed any other members,

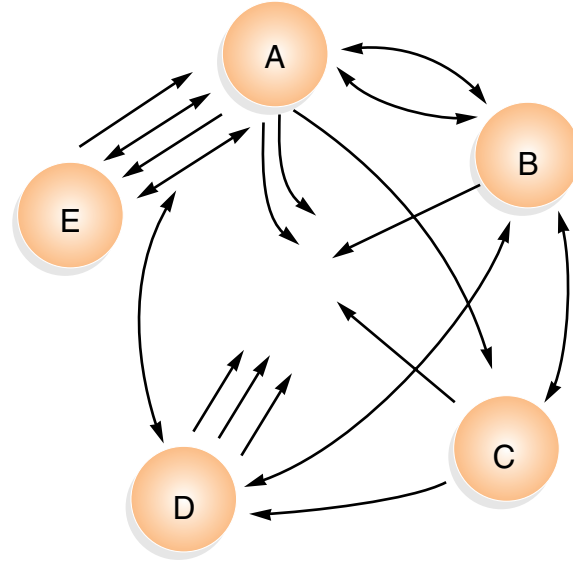


Figure 8-1 Patterns of Interaction in a Five-Person Group

nor did they address E. Also notice that person A is the most active and best-connected member. A addressed remarks to the group as a whole and to every other member and was the object of remarks from three individuals as well.

Sociograms don't tell the whole story, because they do not indicate the quality of the messages being exchanged. Nonetheless, they are a useful tool in diagnosing group communication.

Physical arrangement influences communication in groups. It's obviously easier to interact with someone you can see well. Lack of visibility isn't a serious problem in dyadic settings, but it can be troublesome in groups. For example, group members seated in a circle are more likely to talk with persons across from them than with those on either side.[21] Different things happen when members are seated in rectangular arrangements. Research with twelve-person juries showed that those sitting at either end of rectangular tables participated more in discussions and were viewed by other members as having more influence on the decision-making process.[22] Rectangular seating patterns have other consequences as well. Research conducted on six-person groups seated at rectangular tables showed that as distance between two persons increased, other members perceived them as being less friendly, less talkative, and less acquainted with each other.[23]

If group members always stayed together and shared every piece of information with one another, their interaction would resemble the pattern in Figure 8–2—what communication theorists have called an **all-channel network.** But not all groups meet face to face. The crew who waits tables and prepares the food at a restaurant and the group of nurses, aids, and technicians who staff an eight- or ten-hour hospital shift rarely sit down together to discuss their work. When group members aren't in immediate contact with one another, information can flow through a variety of other networks (see Figure 8–2). Some follow a **chain network,** moving sequentially from one member to another. Chains are an efficient way to deliver simple verbal messages or to circulate written information when members can't manage to attend a meeting at one time. You might use this approach to route an important message to members of a team at work, asking each

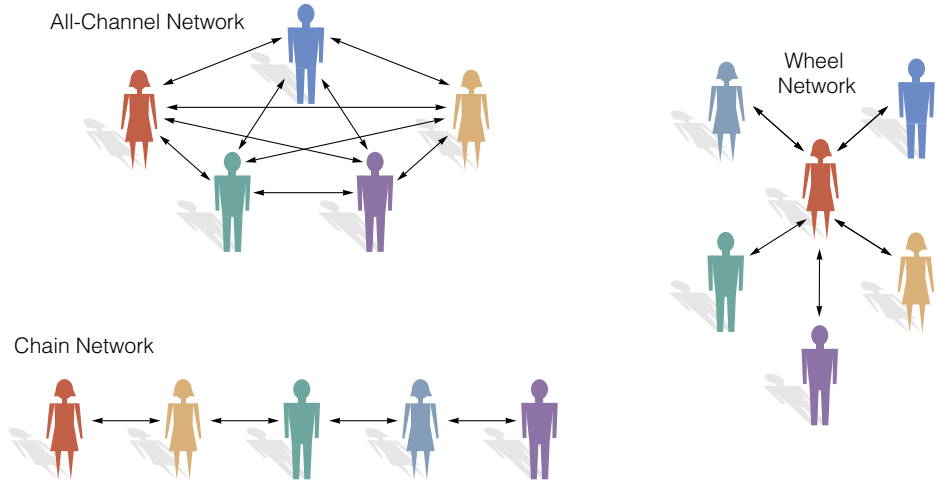


Figure 8-2 Small Group Communication Networks

person to initial a memo and pass it along to the next person on a routing slip. Chain networks are not very reliable for lengthy or complex verbal messages, because the content of the message can change as it passes from one person to another.

Another communication pattern is the **wheel network,** in which one person acts as a clearinghouse, receiving and relaying messages to all other members. Like chains, wheel networks are sometimes a practical choice, especially if one member is available to communicate with others all or most of the time. In a class group, you might use a wheel network if one of your members is usually near a telephone. This person can become the informational hub who keeps track of messages and people. Groups sometimes use wheel networks when relationships are strained between two or more members. In cases like this, the central member can serve as a mediator or facilitator who manages messages as they flow between others.

The success of a wheel network depends heavily on the skill of the **gatekeeper**—the person through whom information flows. If he or she is a skilled communicator, these mediated messages may help the group function effectively. But if the gatekeeper consciously or unconsciously distorts messages to suit personal goals or plays members off against one another, the group is likely to suffer.

CULTURAL IDIOM

hashed out: discussed thoroughly

Decision-Making Methods

Another way to classify groups is according to the approach they use to make decisions. There are several approaches a group can use to make decisions. We'll look at each of them now, examining their advantages and disadvantages.[24]

CONSENSUS **Consensus** occurs when all members of a group support a decision. The advantages of consensus are obvious: Full participation can increase the quality of the decision as well as the commitment of the members to support it. Consensus is especially important in decisions on critical or complex matters; in such cases, methods using less input can diminish the quality of or enthusiasm for a decision. Despite its advantages, consensus also has its disadvantages. It takes a great deal of time, which makes it unsuitable for emergencies. In addition, it is often very frustrating: Emotions can run high on important matters, and patience in the face of such pressures is difficult. Because of the need to deal with these emotional pressures, consensus calls for more communication skill than do other decision-making approaches. As with many things in life, consensus has high rewards, which come at a proportionately high cost.

MAJORITY CONTROL A naive belief of many people (perhaps coming from overzealous high school civics teachers) is that the democratic method of majority rule is always superior. This method does have its advantages in matters where the support of all members isn't necessary, but in more important matters it is risky. Remember that even if a 51 percent majority of the members favors a plan, 49 percent might still oppose it—hardly sweeping support for any decision that needs the support of all members in order to work.

Besides producing unhappy members, decisions made under majority rule often are of a quality inferior to that of decisions hashed out by a group until the members reach consensus.[25] Under majority rule, members who recognize

During a [second-grade] science project . . . one of the 7-year-olds wondered out loud whether the baby squirrel they had in class was a boy or a girl. After pondering the issue for a few minutes, one budding scientist offered the suggestion that they have a class discussion about it and then take a vote.

Cal Downs, Wil Linkugel, and David M. Berg

Source: DILBERT © by Scott Adams; reprinted by permission of United Feature Syndicate, Inc.

that they are outvoted often participate less, and the deliberations usually end after a majority opinion has formed—even though minority viewpoints might be worthwhile.

EXPERT OPINION Sometimes one group member will be defined as an expert and, as such, will be given the power to make decisions. This method can work well when that person's judgment is truly superior. For example, if a group of friends is backpacking in the wilderness, and one becomes injured, it would probably be foolish to argue with the advice of a doctor in the group. In most cases, however, matters aren't so simple. Who is the expert? There is often disagreement on this question. Sometimes a member might think he or she is the best qualified to make a decision, but others will disagree. In a case like this, the group probably won't support that person's advice, even if it is sound.

MINORITY CONTROL Sometimes a few members of a group will decide matters. This approach works well with noncritical questions that would waste the whole group's time. In the form of a committee, a minority of members also can study an issue in greater detail than can the entire group. When an issue is so important that it needs the support of everyone, it's best at least to have the committee report its findings for the approval of all members.

AUTHORITY RULE Authority rule is the approach most often used by autocratic leaders (see Chapter 8). Though it sounds dictatorial, there are times when such an approach has its advantages. This method is quick: There are cases when there simply isn't time for a group to decide what to do. The approach is also perfectly acceptable with routine matters that don't require discussion in order to gain approval. When overused, however, this approach causes problems. As Chapter 8 will show, much of the time group decisions are of higher quality and gain more support from members than those made by an individual. Thus,

failure to consult with members can lead to a decrease of effectiveness even when the leader's decision is a reasonable one.

When the person in authority consults members before making a decision, the results gain some of the quality and commitment that come from group interaction while also enjoying the speed that comes from avoiding extensive discussion. This approach has its disadvantages, however. In some cases other group members will be tempted to tell the leader what they think he or she wants to hear, and in other cases they will compete to impress the decision maker.

Which of these decision-making approaches is best? The answer can vary from one culture to another. In Japan, consensus is highly valued. British and Dutch businesspeople also value the "team must be aboard" approach. On the other hand, Germans, French, and Spanish communicators depend more on the decision of a strong leader and view a desire for consensus as somewhat wishy-washy.[26]

Culture notwithstanding, the most effective approach in a given situation depends on the circumstances:

- **The type of decision** Some decisions can best be made by an expert, whereas others will benefit from involving the entire group.
- **The importance of the decision** If the decision is relatively unimportant, it's probably not worth involving all members of the group. By contrast, critical decisions probably require the participation, and ideally the buy-in, of all members.
- **Time available** If time is short, it may not be possible to assemble the entire group for deliberations.[27]

When choosing a decision-making approach, weigh the pros and cons of each before you decide which one has the best chance of success in the situation your group is facing.

CULTURAL IDIOM

wishy-washy: lacking decisiveness

buy-in: support

CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON GROUP COMMUNICATION

In past generations, most groups in the United States and Canada were ethnically and culturally homogenous. People could expect to work, study, and play with others who were fundamentally similar to themselves. Social forces have changed society dramatically. Over the next two decades, former minority groups will account for more than half of the population in California, Hawaii, New Mexico, and Texas and almost 50 percent in other states, including New York, New Jersey, and Maryland.[28] Changes like these make it more and more likely that we will find ourselves in groups with people from backgrounds different than ours.

Fortunately, the growing body of research about communicating across diversity offers encouraging news about what happens when people from different backgrounds get together. While homogenous groups may be more cohesive,[29] diverse groups often develop better solutions to problems[30] and enjoy themselves more while working together.[31]

One ingedient in working effectively in diverse groups is understanding the often subtle cultural factors that shape communication. After surveying over 160,000 members of organizations in sixty countries, Geert Hofstede identified five cultural forces that shape the attitudes and behaviors of groups and individuals.[32] We will examine each of them in the following pages.

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY

BASEBALL IN JAPAN AND THE USA

The concept and practice of group harmony or *wa* is what most dramatically differentiates Japanese baseball from the American game. It is the connecting thread running through all Japanese life and sports. While "Let It All Hang Out" and "Do Your Own Thing" are mottoes of contemporary American society, the Japanese have their own credo in the well-worn proverb, "The Nail That Sticks Up Shall Be Hammered Down." It is practically a national slogan.

Holdouts, for example, are rare in Japan. A player usually takes what the club deigns to give him and that's that. Demanding more money is evidence that a player is putting his own interests before those of the team.

In the pressure-cooker world of U.S. pro sports, temper outbursts are considered acceptable, and at times even regarded as a salutary show of spirit. In Japan, however, a player's behavior is often considered as important as his batting average. Batting slumps are usually accompanied by embarrassed smiles. Temper tantrums—along with practical joking, bickering, complaining, and other norms of American clubhouse life—are viewed in Japan as unwelcome incursions into the team's collective peace of mind.

When [Tokyo] Giants top pitcher Takashi Nishimoto ignored the instructions of a coach in practice one summer day in 1985, the coach punched him between the eyes. Nishimoto was also forced to apologize and pay a one-hundred thousand yen fine for insubordination.

Moreover, untoward behavior is also seen as a sign of character weakness and a "small heart," as well as being detrimental to the team's image overall. In Japan, a "real man" is one who keeps his emotions to himself and thinks of others' feelings.

Robert Whiting
You Gotta Have Wa

Individualism versus Collectivism

Some cultures value the individual, whereas others value the group. As Table 8–4 shows, the United States is one of the world's more individualistic societies, along with Canada, Australia, and Britain. By contrast, Latin American and Asian societies are generally more collectivistic.

CULTURAL IDIOM

holdouts: those who refuse to participate until they receive a satisfactory contract offer

Members of individualistic cultures view their primary responsibility as being to themselves, whereas members of collectivistic societies feel loyalties and obligations to the groups of which they are members: the family, the community, the organization they work for, and their working teams. Members of individualistic societies gain most of their identity and self-esteem from their own accomplishments, whereas members of collectivistic societies are identified with the groups to which they belong. Individualistic cultures are also characterized by self-reliance and competition, whereas collectivistic cultures are more attentive to and concerned with the opinions of significant others.[33] Individualistic and collectivistic cultures have very different approaches to communication. For example, individualistic cultures are relatively tolerant of conflicts, using a direct, solution-oriented approach. By contrast, members of collectivistic cultures are less direct.[34]

It's easy to see how a culture's **individualistic** or **collectivistic orientation** can affect group communication. Members of collectivistic cultures are more likely to be team players, whereas members of individualistic ones are far more likely to produce and reward stars. As members of highly individualistic cultures, North Americans often need to control their desires to dominate group discussions and to "win" in problem-solving situations. Consensus may be a desirable outcome, but it doesn't always come easily to individualists. By contrast, members of collectivistic cultures need to consider when speaking out—even if it means disagreeing—is in the best interests of the group.

TABLE 8-4 Cultural Values in Selected Countries

(Countries ranked lower on each list are closer to the mean)

Individualistic	Collectivistic
U.S.A.	Venezuela
Australia	Taiwan
Great Britain	Mexico
Canada	Philippines
Low Power Distance	**High Power Distance**
Israel	Philippines
New Zealand	Mexico
Germany	India
U.S.A.	France
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	**High Uncertainty Avoidance**
Singapore	Greece
India	Japan
Philippines	Peru
U.S.A.	Mexico
High Task Orientation	**High Social Orientation**
Japan	Sweden
Austria	Norway
Italy	Chile
Mexico	Portugal
Long-Term Focus	**Short-Term Focus**
China (includes Hong Kong and Taiwan)	Pakistan
Japan	Canada
South Korea	Great Britain
Brazil	U.S.A.
India	Australia

Source: Based on research summarized in G. Hofstede, *Culture and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997).

Power Distance

Some cultures accept differences in power and status, whereas others accept them grudgingly, if at all. Most members of U.S. and Canadian cultures are firm believers in the principle of equality, which means that the notion that some people are entitled to greater power or privilege doesn't come easily. In other cultures, inequality is accepted as a fact of life.[35] **Power distance** refers to the degree to which members are willing to accept a difference in power and status between members of a group. In a culture with a high power distance, group members might willingly subordinate themselves to a leader—especially one whose title comes from socially accepted sources such as age, experience, training, or status. By contrast, members of cultures where low power distance is the norm would probably be less likely to feel that many groups

CULTURAL IDIOM

speaking out: saying boldly what one thinks

A fighter pilot soon found he wanted to associate only with other fighter pilots. Who else could understand the nature of the little proposition (right stuff/death) they were all dealing with? And what other subject could compare with it? It was riveting! To talk about it in so many words was forbidden, of course. The very words death, danger, bravery, fear were not to be uttered except in the occasional specific instance or for ironic effect. Nevertheless, the subject could be adumbrated in code or by example . . . They diced that righteous stuff up into little bits, bowed ironically to it, stumbled blindfolded around it, groped, lurched, belched, staggered, bawled, sang, roared, and feinted at it with self-deprecating humor. Nevertheless!—they never mentioned it by name.

Tom Wolfe
The Right Stuff

need a leader or that people who do occupy that role automatically deserve unquestioning obedience. Supervisors, bosses, teachers, and so on certainly have the respect of the members they lead in cultures where low power distance is the norm—but mostly because they earn it. In low power distance cultures, group members expect leaders to be more considerate of their interests and needs. "After all," they assume, "we're basically equal."

Uncertainty Avoidance

Some cultures accept—and even welcome—risk, uncertainty, and change.[36] Others, characterized by **uncertainty avoidance,** are uncomfortable with these unavoidable trends. Instead, they favor stability and tradition. Geography offers no clue to a culture's tolerance of uncertainty. Countries whose members tend to avoid surprises include Greece, Portugal, Turkey, Mexico, and Israel. Among those who are more comfortable with change are Denmark, Hong Kong, Ireland, and India.

It should come as no surprise that uncertainty avoidance affects the way members of groups communicate. They are uncomfortable with ambiguous tasks and reluctant to take risks. They worry more about the future, are more loyal to employers, and accept seniority as the basis for leadership. They view conflict as undesirable and are also less willing to compromise when disagreements arise. By contrast, members of groups who come from cultures with a higher tolerance for uncertainty are more willing to take risks, more accepting of change, and more willing to break rules for pragmatic reasons. They accept conflict as natural and are willing to compromise when disagreements occur.

Task versus Social Orientation

The categories of task and social orientation were originally labeled "masculine" and "feminine," based on traditional views that men are assertive and results oriented, whereas women are nurturing. In an era of increasingly flexible sex roles these labels are considered sexist and misleading, so we have substituted different labels. Groups in societies with a strong task orientation (Japan, Austria, Switzerland, and Mexico are examples) focus heavily on getting the job done. By contrast, groups in societies with a high degree of social orientation (including all the Scandinavian countries, Chile, Portugal, and Thailand) are more likely to be concerned about the feelings of members and their smooth functioning as a team. When compared to other countries, the United States falls slightly toward the task-oriented end of the spectrum, and Canada is almost exactly in the middle, balanced between task and social concerns.[37]

Task-oriented societies are characterized by a focus on making the team more competent through training and the use of up-to-date methods. In task-oriented societies members are highly concerned with individual success: advancing to more responsible jobs, better training, and so on. By contrast, groups in socially oriented societies focus more on collective concerns: cooperative problem solving, a friendly atmosphere, and good physical working conditions. Members may still be interested in solving the problem at hand, but they are reluctant to do so if the personal costs to members—in stress and hard feelings—may be high.

Short- versus Long-Term Orientation

Members of some cultures look for quick payoffs, whereas members of other cultures are willing to defer gratification in pursuit of long-range goals. The willingness to work hard today for a future payoff is especially common in East Asian cultures, including China, Japan, and South Korea. Western industrialized cultures are much more focused on short-term results.

As long as all group members share the same orientation toward payoffs, the chances for harmony are good. When some people push for a quick fix, while others urge patience, conflicts are likely to arise.

It's easy to see how a society's orientation toward short- or long-term goals, task or social aspects of groups, uncertainty, individuality, and power distance can make a tremendous difference in how a group operates. Whether the group is an athletic team, a military unit, a working group, or a family, the principle is the same. Cultural values shape what groups communicate about and how they interact. Cultural differences don't account for every difference in group functioning, of course, but they do provide a common set of assumptions that exerts a subtle yet powerful effect on communication.

CULTURAL IDIOM

payoffs: rewards

work in a vacuum: function as if there are no other individuals or influences

SUMMARY

Groups play an important role in many areas of our lives—families, education, employment, and friendships, to name a few. Groups possess several characteristics that distinguish them from other communication contexts. They involve interaction and interdependence over time among a small number of participants with the purpose of achieving one or more goals. Groups have their own goals, as do individual members. Member goals fall into two categories: task-related and social. Sometimes individual and group goals are compatible, and sometimes they conflict.

Groups can be put into several classifications—learning, growth, problem solving, and social. All these types of groups share certain characteristics: the existence of group norms, individual roles for members, patterns of interaction that are shaped by the group's structure, and the choice of one or more ways of reaching decisions.

Groups don't work in a vacuum. The culture in which they work influences the way members communicate with one another. The chapter examined five ways in which culture influences interaction: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, task versus social orientation, and short- versus long-term goals.

KEY TERMS

all-channel network *278*
chain network *278*
collectivistic orientation *283*
consensus *279*
dysfunctional roles *272*
formal roles *272*
gatekeeper *279*
group *262*
group goals *265*
growth groups *269*
hidden agenda *267*
individual goals *265*
individualistic orientation *283*
informal roles *272*
learning group *267*
norms *270*
power distance *283*
problem-solving groups *267*
procedural norms *271*
roles *272*
rules *270*
social groups *269*
social norms *271*
social orientation *266*
social roles *272*
sociogram *277*
task norms *271*
task orientation *265*
task roles *272*
uncertainty avoidance *284*
wheel network *279*

ACTIVITIES

1. **Your Membership in Groups** To find out what roles groups play in your life, complete the following steps:
   1. Use the criteria of size, interaction, interdependence, time, and goals to identify the small groups to which you belong.
   2. Describe the importance of each group to you, and evaluate how satisfying the communication is in each one.

   As you read the remainder of this chapter, develop a list of insights that help you understand how communication operates in your groups and how you can improve your satisfaction in them.
2. **Group and Individual Goals** Think about two groups to which you belong.
   1. What are your task-related goals in each?
   2. What are your social goals?
   3. Are your personal goals compatible or incompatible with those of other members?
   4. Are they compatible or incompatible with the group goals?
   5. What effect does the compatibility or incompatibility of goals have on the effectiveness of the group?
3. **Norms and Rules in Action** Describe the desirable norms and explicit rules you would like to see established in the following new groups, and describe the steps you could take to see that they are established.
   1. A group of classmates formed to develop and present a class research project
   2. A group of neighbors who is meeting for the first time to persuade the city to install a stop sign at a dangerous intersection
   3. A group of eight-year-olds you will be coaching in a team sport
   4. A group of fellow employees who will be sharing new office space
4. **Choosing the Best Decision-Making Approach** Describe which of the decision-making approaches listed on pages 279–281 would be most appropriate in each of the following situations. Explain why your recommended approach is the best one for this situation.
   1. Four apartment mates must decide how to handle household chores.
   2. A group of hikers and their experienced guide become lost in a snowstorm and debate whether to try to find their way to safety or to pitch camp and wait for the weather to clear.
   3. After trying unsuccessfully to reach consensus, the partners in a new business venture cannot agree on the best name for their enterprise.
   4. A twenty-five-member ski club is looking for the cheapest airfare and lodging for its winter trip.
   5. A passenger falls overboard during an afternoon sail on your friend's twenty-foot sailboat. The wind is carrying the boat away from the passenger.

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about the nature of groups, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Frey, Lawrence R., ed. *Handbook of Group Communication Theory and Research.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1999.

In this volume, leading communication scholars provide state-of-the-art reviews on a variety of group-related topics, including influence, creativity, technology, and socialization.

Keyton, Joann, and Lawrence R. Frey. "The State of Traits: Predispositions and Group Communication." In Lawrence R. Frey, ed., *New Directions in Group Communication.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

This research-based chapter details the influence of individual personality styles on a group's effectiveness.

Larson, Carl E., and Frank M. J. LaFusto. *Team Work: What Must Go Right/What Can Go Wrong.* Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989.

Larson and LaFusto interviewed members of a variety of successful teams: cardiac surgeons, members of a Mount Everest climbing expedition, a championship football team, and the developers of the IBM personal computer. Based on their findings, the authors offer a list of the principles that are essential for successful teams.

Rothwell, J. Dan. *In Mixed Company,* 5th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2004.

This is a readable, comprehensive look at the process of communication in small groups. The book does an excellent job of summarizing literally hundreds of research studies in a manner that makes their value in everyday interaction clear. This book is ideal for readers looking for more information on group communication.

Zorn, Theodore E., Jr., and George H. Tompson. "Communication in Top Management Teams." In Lawrence R. Frey, ed., *New Directions in Group Communication.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002.

For career-minded readers, this essay offers insights into the communication skills of high-level managers.

Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate group interactions, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the *Understanding Human Communication* Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

Group and Individual Goals

Remember the Titans (2000). Rated PG.

In 1971 a formerly all-white Virginia high school is integrated, and few members of the football team are happy. Herman Boone (Denzel Washington) is hired by the school board to create a cohesive team out of two basically hostile and racially isolated groups. The drama captures the tension between players' individual goals (to achieve stardom and stick with members of their own ethnic group) and the collective need to win.

Wizard of Oz (1939). Rated G.

This much-loved story illustrates how group members can achieve their personal goals by working together toward a common purpose. The Tin Man seeks a heart, the Cowardly Lion wants courage, the Scarecrow wants a brain, and Dorothy wants to go home to Kansas. All the adventurers realize that helping one another is the best way to get what each wants. The characters embody the motto of another famous band of adventurers: All for one and one for all.

Power Distribution in Groups

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975). Rated R.

R. P. McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) is a perfectly sane convict who is sent to a mental institution as a punishment for troublemaking. As he begins to rally the patients' self-confidence, cohesiveness, and assertiveness, the control-hungry Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) recognizes McMurphy is a threat to her dominion.

Conflict in Groups

Almost Famous (2000). Rated R.

Young journalist William Miller (Patrick Fugit) tours with a 1970s band named Stillwater. Through Miller's eyes, we get a picture of the forces that affect the band as it goes on tour. For example, the group's vocalist and the lead guitarist, each of whom wants maximum recognition, illustrate the clash between individual and group goals.

Group Norms

Dangerous Minds (1995). Rated R.

Louanne Johnson (Michelle Pfeiffer) takes over as English teacher for a class of tough inner-city students. At first they challenge her, but soon Johnson's toughness (she is an ex-Marine), teaching savvy, and genuine concern have the students excited about literature and learning. Although the focus is on Johnson's role in this transformation, the shift in the class's norms nicely illustrates how groups have their own standards of what counts as appropriate behavior.

The Right Stuff (1983). Rated PG.

This film (like Tom Wolfe's book, upon which it was based) chronicles the history of the original seven U.S. astronauts in the early days of America's space exploration program. More than detailing the astronauts' physical accomplishments, the film examines the attitudes that led them to risk death and their reactions to being treated as heroes. It contains many examples of the unspoken norms that these men developed to govern their approach to their jobs, one another, and the world at large.