HOW TO OBTAIN THE COMMITMENT AND EFFORT NEEDED FROM ALL TEAM MEMBERS TO MAINTAIN STEADY PROGRESS

Students often complain or hear others complain about team members who don't do their share of the work, making more work for others and also reducing the quality of the final product by withholding their creativity and ideas. While this problem occurs less often in the workplace, it does arise. Here are four simple strategies that can help your teams avoid this difficulty.

sample team charters, go to your English CourseMate at *www .cengagebrain.com.*

- **Create a team charter.** A charter is a written agreement about the ways the team will work together. Typical topics include the team's goals, the roles of each member, and ground rules about such things as expectations for attendance and completion of tasks, as well as the team's plans for dealing with conflicts and failure to meet expectations.

- **End each meeting by deciding what each member needs to do *before* the next meeting.** Nothing is more discouraging than discovering at a team meeting that the team is at exactly the same point as it was at the previous meeting. The reason could be that team members didn't know what they were supposed to do in the meantime. Before adjourning any meeting, make specific, explicit decisions about the assignment each member is to complete before the next meeting.

- **Prepare and distribute meeting minutes.** Minutes provide a way to remind team members of their responsibilities before the next meeting. They also save time that might have been spent trying to remember previous decisions or in reconsidering issues that have already been settled.

- **Treat each other respectfully.** In the workplace, as at school, a great deal of team members' motivations to contribute to team efforts depends on the relationships they have with one another. By showing appreciation for each person's contributions and by following the next section's advice for engaging in respectful meetings, any team can greatly increase the productivity and pleasure of working together.

HOW TO MAKE TEAM MEETINGS EFFICIENT AND HIGHLY PRODUCTIVE

In addition to helping your teams develop effective plans for working together, you can increase their productivity by helping them conduct efficient meetings at which all team members are encouraged to fully contribute their knowledge, creativity, and energy.

Guideline 1 | Set and follow an agenda

Nothing will be more precious to your communication teams than time. Each participant has other projects and responsibilities and is taking time away from them. You can help your teams spend as little time as possible in meetings by encouraging them to employ the following strategies.

CONDUCTING EFFICIENT MEETINGS

- **Prepare an agenda.** Before the meeting, have someone list the major issues to be discussed. Open the meeting by having the team review the agenda to be sure everyone agrees on what is to be accomplished. This small amount of preparation by one person can save large amounts of meeting time for many persons.

- **Stick to the agenda.** As the meeting proceeds, keep the discussion on track by referring to the agenda.

- **Bring discussions to a close.** Communication teams sometimes keep debating a topic even after everything useful has been said. When a discussion becomes repetitive, say something like, "We seem to have explored the options pretty thoroughly. Let's make a decision."

  Some teams continue talking even after they have reached consensus. If your team does that, try formalizing the agreement by saying, "I think I hear everyone agreeing that . . ." If someone objects, the team can clear up any point that still needs to be resolved. Otherwise, the team can move on to the next item of business.

- **Sum up.** After all the topics have been covered to everyone's satisfaction, sum up the results of the meeting verbally. Such a statement consolidates what the team has accomplished and reinforces its decisions. Follow up this summation in writing.

- **Set goals for the next meeting.** Make sure everyone knows exactly what he or she is to do before the next meeting. This strategy helps assure that when you meet again, you will have new ideas and material to discuss.

TRY THIS Think of a meeting in which you recently participated. Which of these strategies for conducting efficient meetings would have most improved that meeting?

Guideline 2 | Encourage discussion, debate, and diversity of ideas

One of the chief benefits of group work is that many people bring their expertise and creativity to a project. To take full advantage of that benefit, all team members must offer their ideas freely—even if the ideas conflict with one another. In fact, debate and disagreement can be very useful if carried out in a courteous and nonthreatening way. Debate ensures that the team won't settle for the first or most obvious suggestion. It also enables your team to avoid *groupthink*, a condition in which everyone uncritically agrees at just the time when critical thinking is most needed.

Encouraging debate and diversity of ideas can be difficult. Some people are naturally shy about speaking, and many avoid disagreeing, especially if they fear that their ideas will be treated with hostility rather than openness and politeness. The following sections describe strategies your teams can use to promote productive debate and consideration of a rich diversity of ideas.

In group meetings, active listening is as important as it is in one-to-one conversation.

Active Listening

Good listening is one key to good discussions. In fact, the quality of your contributions to team discussions can depend at least as much on how well you listen as on what you say. By following the strategies for active listening described below, your teams can encourage full and open participation by all members. The strategies will also help team members fully understand one another and build on one another's ideas.

LISTENING ACTIVELY

- **Give everyone a chance to speak.** If someone is quiet, ask for—actively encourage—the person's thoughts and ideas.
- **Let each speaker finish.** Hold your thoughts until they've finished theirs. Don't interrupt.
- **Show that you are paying attention.** If you agree with the person, say such things as "That's interesting," "I hadn't thought of that," or even simply "Uh-huh."
- **Look at the speaker.** People raised in the United States and similar cultures believe that listeners who maintain lots of eye contact are friendlier than those who maintain less eye contact (Kleinke, Bustos, Meeker, & Staneski, 1973). When speakers think they are receiving more eye contact, they also think their listeners are more attentive (Kleck & Nuessle, 1967). As page 405 explains, however, eye contact is interpreted differently in some cultures.
- **Refrain from distracting gestures.** Researchers have found that speakers feel uncomfortable if their listeners engage in such nervous gestures as cleaning their fingernails, drumming their fingers, or holding their hands over their mouths (Mehrabian, 1972). Replace such gestures with note taking, or assume a relaxed but alert posture. Keep your expression pleasant or neutral. Avoid signaling disagreement or displeasure through nonverbal language.
- **Focus on ideas.** Be sure you understand what the person is saying. Ask for examples, clarifications, or elaborations. Before responding, get a full picture of the speaker's thoughts.

Fostering Productive Debate and Handling Conflict

At meetings, highly effective teams do more than share ideas. They explore, test, and refine them through discussion and debate. Some teams disagree too little. Some disagree too much. The following strategies will help you increase productive debate as well as defuse demoralizing interpersonal conflicts.

FOSTERING PRODUCTIVE DEBATE AND HANDLING CONFLICT

- **Be open to others' ideas.** Don't be so attached to your own thoughts that you can't hear theirs.
- **Respect the other person's ideas.** First show that you understand the other person's position by paraphrasing it. Identify the points on which you agree before explaining why you have a different view on other points.
- **Discuss ideas, not persons.** Refrain from implying that the person is wrong. Express your reasons for thinking that another idea is better. Avoid moral judgments (right/wrong) in favor of qualitative judgments (better/worse).

- **Watch nonverbal communication.** Another team member's facial expression or body language may suggest that they are feeling uncomfortable, hurt, or angry about an issue. Respond in a respectful and sensitive way.
- **Look for the "third way."** Sometimes, ideas that seem to be in conflict can both be accommodated.
- **Be prepared to compromise.** Stalemate is unproductive. If another team member continues to disagree with you, your best contribution to the team may be to compromise—even if you are certain you are correct. Being a productive team member can require supporting writing choices you wouldn't make on your own. Remember that the point of group work is exactly that—the result of the group's efforts. Don't allow yourself to think that your ideas must triumph.
- **Paraphrase and vote if team members become deadlocked.** If two team members are unable to find a resolution to their disagreement, suggest that the team decide. Then paraphrase each position fairly and take a vote. Once the decision has been made, encourage the team to move forward; emphasize that there are no "winners" or "losers."

Discussing Drafts

Teams can increase the usability and persuasiveness of their drafts by sharing suggestions for revision. To benefit fully from these discussions, members must help one another overcome the fear that their suggestions could offend the person who drafted the section under discussion and the tendency of some members to resist changes to parts they drafted. Chapter 17's guidelines for reviewing drafts can help teams avoid these barriers to productive reviews. Especially relevant to team writing are the following six guidelines from Chapter 17, plus two more that apply specifically to team projects.

DISCUSSING DRAFTS

STRATEGIES FROM CHAPTER 17

- Begin comments about a draft with praise for what's strong.
- Explain the reader-centered reasons for all suggestions. Remind the writer that your suggestions are intended to improve the communication for its intended audience.
- Avoid phrasing suggestions in ways that sound like criticisms of the writer's work.
- Rank suggested revisions beforehand and focus on the ones that will have the greatest impact.
- Distinguish matters of substance from matters of style.
- Accept all reasonable suggestions for improving your own draft and thank team members for their ideas.

SPECIAL GUIDELINES FOR TEAM PROJECTS

- **Treat drafts as team property, not individual property.** Encourage each other to give up personal "ownership" of drafts. Take pride in your

contributions, but view your drafts as something you've created for the team; they have become its property.

This doesn't mean that you should remain silent if someone suggests a change that would weaken your draft. Join in a reasoned conversation about the best way to write "our" communication rather than struggling to protect "my" writing. Your lack of defensiveness about your draft will encourage others to adopt the same attitude concerning theirs.

- **Swap responsibilities.** Responsibility for revising each section could be given to someone other than the person who drafted it. When all drafts are combined into a single communication, one person might be responsible for editing and polishing. With these arrangements, all drafts clearly become team drafts.

Guideline 3 | Global Guideline: Help your team work across cultural differences

Successful teamwork requires that each team member needs to be fully engaged. One hazard for multicultural teams is that members can misinterpret one another's ways of interacting, with the result that opportunities for engagement are missed.

A first step in helping your teams work across cultural differences is to recognize the many ways these differences can impact discussions of ideas.

Cultural Differences in Discussions of Ideas

Bosley (1993) has identified four important differences in the ways that people from various cultures may interact on workplace teams.

Recognizing cultural differences

- **Expressing disagreement.** In some cultures, individuals typically express disagreement directly. In others, people say "no" only indirectly in order to save face for themselves and the other person.
- **Making suggestions.** People from some cultures offer suggestions freely. To avoid embarrassment, people from some other cultures avoid saying anything that might be interpreted as disagreement.
- **Requesting clarification.** In some cultures, individuals frequently ask others to explain themselves more clearly. People from other cultures feel that it's rude to ask for clarification; doing so would imply that the speaker doesn't know what he or she is talking about or hasn't succeeded in explaining things clearly.
- **Debating ideas.** Whereas members of work teams in some cultures debate ideas vigorously as a way of exploring ideas, people from other cultures regard such behavior as disloyal and unacceptable.

Cultural Differences in Behaviors in Conversation

The ways people interact in everyday conversation show up in the ways they converse in team meetings. In Sweden, listeners signal that they are being attentive by sitting straight and folding their arms in front of them (Rabinowitz & Carr, 2001). However, if you were raised in the United States, you might interpret the Swedish posture as signaling boredom, disagreement, or even hostility. In the U.S., most people signal attentiveness by leaning forward and openness by keeping their arms spread.

Similarly, cultural differences exist concerning eye contact. People raised in the United States are likely to interpret eye contact as a signal of sincerity and interest in the other person. Eye contact is even more important in Arab cultures, where people use intense eye contact to read someone's real intentions. However, if you were raised in Korea, you might interpret constant eye contact as rudeness. In Japan, looking someone in the eye is an invasion of his or her space (Varner & Beamer, 2005).

Cultural Differences and Gender

Different cultures also have different expectations about the ways men and women will behave. For example, research shows that many men in the United States present their ideas and opinions as assertions of fact. When exploring ideas, they may argue over them in a competitive manner. In contrast, some women offer their ideas tentatively, introducing them with statements such as, "I think," or, "I'm not sure about this, but . . . ." If there is disagreement, women may support part or all of the other person's ideas and seek to reach consensus (Lay, 1989). Differences in gender expectations can lead to misinterpretations even when team members are from the same culture.

Improving Team Effectiveness Across Cultural Difference

The best tools for assuring team effectiveness across cultural difference are knowledge, self-awareness, and flexibility.

- **Knowledge.** The more members of your teams know about one another's cultural expectations and behaviors, the greater their ability will be to avoid counterproductive misinterpretations. No guidebook can beat the effectiveness of conversation for developing this knowledge. These conversations can occur during team meetings or outside of them. In fact, you'll find that one of the great pleasures of working with persons from different cultural backgrounds is learning about the cultures and the people who reside in them.
- **Self-awareness.** Also important is your own awareness of the extent to which your own cultural background influences your interpretations of your teammates' behaviors. If you grew up in a culture where people explore ideas through competitive debate, you may misinterpret the style of a team member whose culture values indirectness as signaling a lack of commitment to the team. If you are the person from a culture that values indirectness, you may misinterpret the other person's directness as rude and aggressive. Talking with other team members about your understanding of them is the best way to test your interpretations. But remember to be sensitive and cautious at first. Ask questions rather than make blunt statements.
- **Flexibility.** Through conversation, you will likely learn that you, too, are being interpreted incorrectly by others. In addition to discussing the "meaning" of these behaviors in your culture and that of one or more teammates, think of ways you can modify your behavior to reduce your chances of being misunderstood.

Ultimately, each multicultural team must develop its own ways of working as productively as possible. A team can't succeed in doing that if the members merely share generalizations about their cultures. Instead, they must develop a mutual

understanding that sees each member's ways of interacting as partly an expression of his or culture. This understanding is an important element in the working relationships that team members develop.

HOW TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

Most teams make extensive use of computer technology to support their work. You can increase your value to your teams by helping them use these resources as productively as possible.

Guideline 1 | Choose the computer technology best suited to your team's project

Many companies offer computer programs and services that support team efforts. Some are very expensive. Some are free. Each supports some team activities better than others. There's a considerable payoff from investing the time to identify the one program or group of programs that best supports your team's project.

The range of tasks that need to be supported is often more complex than might appear at first glance. One or more team members will create an initial draft or drafts, which they will distribute to the rest of the team. When reviewing these drafts, each team member will make comments, raise questions, offer suggestions, and revise by adding, deleting, or moving content. The resulting drafts will be reviewed, perhaps through many cycles. The larger the team, the more drafts to be prepared, the more difficult the work will be.

Here are three kinds of computer support, each suited to different situations.

- **Circulating drafts made with standard desktop programs.** Programs that you use every day such as Microsoft Word and PowerPoint include many features that support people working collaboratively. You and others on your team can insert comments, highlight changes you've made for others to review, and compare drafts readily. Drafts can be distributed as e-mail attachments. Note, however, that if more than one of you works simultaneously on a draft, someone will need to enter both sets of changes into the same draft—and decide which version to use when they disagree. To avoid this complication, some teams pass a single draft from person to person in an agreed-upon pattern.
- **Working on a single draft on the Internet.** Rather than circulating a draft by e-mail, you can place it at Google Drive (www.drive.google.com) or a similar site where all team members can work on it using Internet Explorer, Firefox, or another browser. Because all revisions are made to this single draft, there's no need to merge changes from separate versions. Unfortunately, these programs have limited word-processing options, so you can't add many of the page design features that increase a communication's usability and persuasiveness until you've downloaded it to your own computer. Also, these programs have trouble with tables, graphs, and similar content. However, when you are working with simple designs and straight text, they are very helpful.

- **Storing and downloading drafts on the Internet.** For documents that feature sophisticated page designs and complex content, you can also place your drafts at Google Drive, wikispaces.com, or a similar site for downloading only. If you don't open the files, the downloads will be identical to what you or your teammates uploaded.

Internet resources also enable you and your teammates to talk about drafts without being in the same room. If are using Google Drive, for instance, to share the document, you can open the document in one window and a Skype audio or video chat in another.

Guideline 2 | For virtual teams, foster personal relationships and conversational interchanges

As you learned in Chapter 1, some teams, called *virtual teams*, work entirely online. Employers have found that, along with its benefits, this arrangement sometimes reduces employee motivation and produces misunderstandings that slow progress and degrade results. Research suggests three remedies.

- **Include opportunities for social conversation.** When teams meet in person, members chat while waiting for the session to begin, during breaks, and when walking to or from the room. The personal relationships they develop motivate them to help one another by contributing to the team effort.
- **Encourage team members to be especially attuned to others' responses.** When meeting in person, you can often tell whether someone is puzzled, irritated, or reluctant to speak up by reading the persons' facial expressions, body language, and other behaviors. These same signals are not easy to detect in virtual meetings. The best solution? Ask frequently for each person's thoughts.
- **Be especially alert to cultural differences.** The Internet can magnify people's impressions of others' communication styles, increasing the chances that team members from cultures with different communication customs will make negative judgments about one another. Does one team member seem to you to be overly aggressive? Perhaps the person is from a culture accustomed to exploring ideas through competitive debate. Does a team member seem to lack the conviction of points he or she seems to be making? Maybe the person is from a culture where people usually make suggestions indirectly.

LEARNING TEAM SKILLS THROUGH FEEDBACK

As Chapter 1 explained, feedback from your instructor, fellow students, and others is a powerful resource as you seek to extend your communication abilities. Feedback from other team members can be especially helpful. They are able to see you in action in ways your instructor cannot. Figure 19.2 shows a feedback form that you and your teammates may complete for one another. You'll learn most if your ratings and explanations are candid rather than flattering. Also, try using the form to evaluate your own performance.