CHAPTER 1

Planning Your Collaboration

At the end of a semester-long project on advanced database techniques, Eduardo, a graduate student in computer science, reflected on his team's collaboration:

> **Interviewer:** *Did anybody give you any input on the sections of the report that you wrote?*
> **Eduardo:** *No. No, nobody gave their opinion on anybody's work.*
> **Interviewer:** *Did you expect them to?*
> **Eduardo:** *Well, at the beginning, yes . . . but then everybody submitted at the last minute, so it was rushed. Umm, also we didn't have a chance 'cause we didn't meet after we submitted the draft. At that point, we were in finals, and we weren't going to do anything else.*
> **Interviewer:** *How do you think your teammates would evaluate your contribution?*
> **Eduardo:** *Well, I would hope they would say I did the most, but I don't know. I don't think some of them read [the final report].*

Thomas, a biology student in a technical writing class, also feels that his collaborative project did not live up to his expectations:

> **Thomas:** *Personally, I thought we could have used class time better.*
> **Interviewer:** *How so?*
> **Thomas:** *Because I think we could have got more of it done outside of class. . . . It took us 50 minutes to revise about half a page because of word choice or how we wanted to say it. I think that we thought we were actually more ahead than what we were . . . and then the final deadline caught up to us. It snuck up on us.*

Susan, an undergraduate majoring in math, similarly expresses frustration with a collaborative project she worked on in her technical writing class:

Interviewer: *So how did you decide who was going to do what?*
Susan: *Well, originally we all decided that we were gonna get together and do the Web site, but Rene took the disc and drafted the site herself. And then the rest of the project was just kind of, we volunteered for stuff as it came up, I guess.*
Interviewer: *And how did you feel about that?*
Susan: *It kind of destroyed our group working together. . . . We were going to do it all together because none of us knew how to do a Web site, and then Rene just went and did it all . . . and then she had to come back and explain it to us.*

These three students—and all the other students discussed in this book—were members of actual student teams observed as they worked on team projects in technical writing and engineering classes. Like the majority of the teams observed, these student groups had problems working together toward a common end. In some cases, students weren't aware of what their teammates had done, other teams failed to budget their time effectively, and still other teams ended up with hurt feelings and resentment. This textbook is intended to teach you to replace such frustrating team situations with ones where you coordinate with your teammates to produce work that is better and much more innovative than what any one of you could have created on your own.

This book focuses on the role of writing in effective teamwork. First, you will learn to produce the types of internal team documents that are *absolutely essential* to a well-run project—documents such as task schedules, meeting minutes, and team agendas as well as e-mails and memos that help head off potential problems. Second, you will learn how to write and revise large documents as a group. This focus on large documents is important because so much collaboration in fields like engineering, business, computer science, medicine, and hard sciences (to name a few) involves major written documents such as design plans, proposals, reports, manuals, and Web sites. This book teaches you specific writing strategies for managing such large documents.

Before you continue reading, take a moment to review the three preceding scenarios and reflect on why these student teams experienced breakdowns. What could these teams have done differently to prevent the problems they experienced?

◆ Why Teamwork?

These three scenarios illustrate the various problems that student teams can encounter. Given the problems with collaboration, why do teachers assign team projects in the first place? Group projects are typically assigned in school for two reasons:

1. To prepare students for the workplace by providing opportunities to learn the social and organizational skills necessary for productive teamwork. Employers in many fields want to hire graduates who already have experience working collaboratively.

2. To improve the educational experience through collaboration with fellow students. Educational research suggests that people learn the most when working with peers toward a common goal. When students discuss problems with an instructor or someone else who is considered an expert, they tend to automatically defer to the expert's viewpoint. However, when students discuss problems with peers, they are freer to debate and think through the problem and all the issues involved.

Let's take each of these reasons separately. First, collaboration has become the norm in most workplaces. On large, complex projects, no one person has all of the expertise and experience (let alone time and energy) to complete the project by himself or herself. Even smaller projects tend to take advantage of teamwork. People working together can often produce better outcomes in less time than any one person could produce independently. Team members benefit from a diversity of approaches and perspectives that lead to innovative insights.

However, teams often fail to work together effectively—and that failure threatens the entire project. For instance, Tom DeMarco and Timothy Lister (1987), experienced software specialists, write:

> The success or failure of a project is seldom due to technical issues. . . . If the project goes down the tubes it will be non-technical, human interaction problems that do it in. The team will fail to bind, or the developers will fail to gain rapport with the users, or people will fight interminably over meaningless methodological issues. (p. 88)

Because poor team skills waste so much company time, businesses are now putting pressure on educational institutions to provide authentic team experiences that will produce college graduates with strong interpersonal, management, and coauthoring skills. Instructors assign team projects to give students opportunities to develop these skills.

Second, instructors assign team projects so that students have opportunities to learn from their peers. Many students are motivated by collaborative learning. Co-writing and collaborating give students opportunities to share expertise, learn from others' mistakes as well as successes, and—most importantly—solidify what they have learned by teaching it to others.

Unfortunately, teams in school settings do not function just like teams in the workplace. Unlike school-based teams, work-based teams can develop longer histories of working together and are more likely to have clear-cut lines of authority. Thus, school-based teams have some unique

challenges that are not present in work-based teams. This textbook attempts to teach you how to navigate some of these challenges using strategies that you can also carry into the workplace.

◆ Understanding Collaboration Methods

The three scenarios that begin this chapter illustrate some of the problems that arise when teams fail to fully plan out a project and agree on a collaboration method. In all three cases, the students being interviewed disagreed with their teammates over the specific steps the team needed to follow. These conflicting views of how the team should go about collaborating hurt the quality of the final projects and led to dissatisfaction with the team.

Understanding different collaboration methods and their respective costs and benefits can help teams identify and negotiate conflicting visions of how the group should proceed. When working on documents, groups can structure their collaboration using one of three basic methods (see Figure 1.1):

1. **Face-to-face.** The entire team sits down and writes the document together. Usually one or two team members sit at the computer and type while others give input.
2. **Divided.** The group breaks the document into sections and assigns each team member a section.
3. **Layered.** Each person on the team is assigned one or more specific roles. Each person works on the document in turn, adding his or her own expertise to the product. The document slowly accumulates in layers as each team member revises and improves upon what already exists.

The type of collaboration method a group uses has significant consequences for how the work proceeds. In the interviews beginning this chapter, Eduardo describes experiences typical of groups that rely on **divided** collaboration. Team members completed their individual sections at the last minute, there was no time for discussion of the final draft, and Eduardo is not sure if his teammates even read the final report. Moreover, one of the team members produced a section that was of particularly low quality—contributing to the disappointing grade this group received.

Whereas Eduardo's group never met to discuss the draft, Thomas's group tried to complete *all* of its work in team meetings. The team members' attempt to draft their entire proposal **face-to-face** not only was inefficient but also lowered project quality because they were rushed for time at the end and ended up dropping sections. In addition, although Thomas was not aware of it at the time, one of the group members was

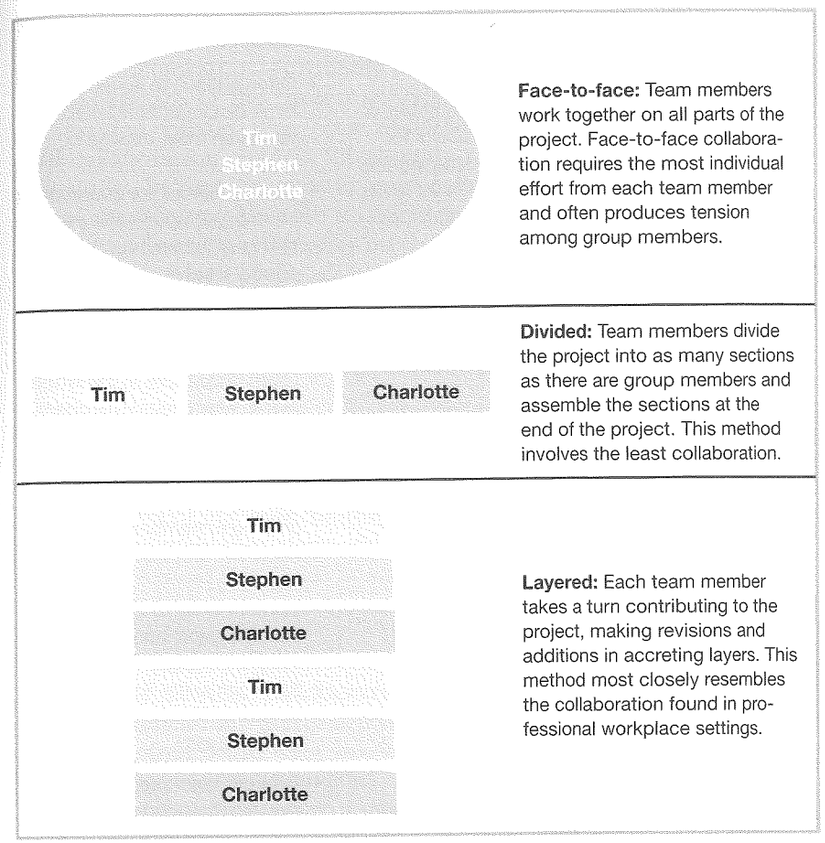


FIGURE 1.1. Three methods of collaboration

extremely upset with the group dynamics, perceiving the team as not valuing her input. When a team relies too much on face-to-face collaboration, such resentment is common because it is virtually impossible for three or more people sitting around a computer to contribute equally.

Susan's group illustrates how the failure to discuss a collaboration method as a group can produce conflict. Susan felt the group should have created the Web site face-to-face; however, Rene operated using a **layered** collaboration method in which she completed an initial draft and then tried to hand the project off to others to revise and finish. Although this layered approach seemed more appropriate to this project than Susan's face-to-face method, Rene's failure to discuss her collaboration plans resulted in a major breakdown in group dynamics.

See Table 1.1 for a summary of the advantages and drawbacks of the face-to-face, divided, and layered methods of collaboration.

Method	Advantages	Drawbacks
Face-to-face	• Allows team members to quickly share a large number of ideas—particularly useful for brainstorming and debating the pros and cons of different ideas. • Effective for drafting plans, outlines, and task schedules. • Effective for discussing graphic design, such as a company brochure or the layout of a Web page.	• Often difficult to schedule large blocks of time when the team can meet outside of class. • Can be difficult for everyone to have equal input—the person sitting at the keyboard can control what is said. • Ineffective for drafting text and content—wastes individual time and can produce conflict. • Often impossible in the workplace, where team members may be geographically distant.
Divided	• Allows the work to be completed in the least amount of time.	• Minimal collaboration. • Can be difficult to recover if one team member fails to do his or her share or does a poor job. • Content likely to contain duplications, gaps, and inconsistencies. • Style can suffer from inconsistent tone, word choice, and writing quality.
Layered	• Helps ensure a high-quality project because everyone has multiple opportunities to contribute, critique, and improve upon the project. • Maximizes the contributions of all group members. • Motivates the group because everyone feels ownership of the full document. • Particularly effective for drafting and revising. • Mirrors collaboration in the workplace.	• Different team members' roles may require unequal effort—this is common in a work setting but may create problems in a school setting, where all team members are expected to contribute equally. • Requires thoughtful planning up front—some team members may feel anxious spending time on planning rather than jumping into the details.

TABLE 1.1. Advantages and drawbacks of the three collaboration methods

Despite its substantial advantages, student teams tend to underutilize layered collaboration—probably because it requires the most planning and experience of the three methods. While face-to-face collaboration and divided collaboration seem to come naturally to student teams, layered collaboration requires forethought and some basic training to use it effectively. In part because layered collaboration is unfamiliar to students—and in part because it is the form of collaboration that most frequently leads to higher-quality products—this book stresses layered collaboration in much of the advice and many of the examples provided.

◆ Alternating Collaboration Methods

Often when students are assigned a team project, their first instinct is to schedule a series of face-to-face meetings. Not only does this put a tremendous strain on everyone's personal schedules, but face-to-face collaboration may not even be the most productive form of collaboration for the group at this stage. By figuring out which type of collaboration will be most beneficial at various stages in the project, team members can avoid many problems and ensure that they use their time together productively.

Few experienced teams rely exclusively on a single collaboration method. Most teams alternate collaboration methods throughout the project, depending on what the group is trying to accomplish at each stage. Thus, a team will often begin with face-to-face collaboration in the early stages of a project; switch to layered collaboration to complete the "heavy," detailed work of the project; and then switch back to face-to-face collaboration to discuss revisions or to work out a presentation. Or the team might initially divide up the work so that each team member drafts a section independently and then switch to layered collaboration for the revision process.

Table 1.2 illustrates a group that alternates the face-to-face and layered collaboration methods. In the early stages of the project, the group meets face-to-face to discuss the project's direction and to assign tasks to team members. About a third of the way through the project, the group switches to layered collaboration, with team members successively adding to, elaborating on, critiquing, and revising one another's work. Table 1.3 provides an overview of which types of collaboration are generally most effective at various stages of a project.

Switching collaboration methods might seem complicated at first. However, with a clearly defined **task schedule**, such as the one in Table 1.2, groups can easily stay on task. In fact, if you take away only one lesson from this book, it should be this: a well-planned task schedule is key to the success of any collaborative project. Task schedules will be discussed in more detail in the following chapters.

Deadline	Who	Task
3/02	Everyone	Initial group meeting
3/04	Everyone	Group meeting
3/04	Stephen	E-mail schedule and notes from group meeting
3/13	Tim	Complete client interviews; e-mail interview notes to the group
3/14	Everyone	Group meeting at 3:00 p.m. to discuss interviews
3/14	Stephen	E-mail notes from group meeting
3/21	Charlotte	E-mail rough draft of requirements document minus introduction and conclusion
3/23	Tim	E-mail comments on requirements document
3/29	Stephen	E-mail revised draft of requirements with introduction and conclusion added
3/31	Tim	E-mail draft of cover letter addressed to client
4/03	Charlotte	E-mail revised and polished draft of all materials to group for last-minute comments
4/04 a.m.	Stephen	E-mail editing suggestions to Charlotte
4/04 p.m.	Charlotte	Turn in final draft to professor by 3:00 p.m.

TABLE 1.2. Task schedule from a project that switches from face-to-face to layered collaboration
Tim is the researcher and client expert; Stephen is the project manager and secondary writer; Charlotte is the primary writer and editor. Note that the task schedule can be color-coded or shaded to highlight each team member's responsibilities.

Task or Project Stage	Most Appropriate Collaboration Method
Brainstorming	Face-to-face
Planning a task schedule	Face-to-face
Conducting research	Any, depending on the type of research
Drafting text	Layered or divided
Talking to third parties (instructors, clients, users)	Face-to-face or layered
Discussing a draft	Face-to-face or layered
Resolving disagreements or major changes to project	Face-to-face
Revising text	Layered
Preparing presentations or other visual materials	Layered or face-to-face
Editing text	Layered

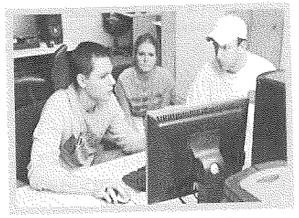
TABLE 1.3. Most appropriate collaboration method for various stages of a project

Exercises

1. Think of a time when you were involved in a group project at school or at work. Which collaboration method or methods did your group use? How did your choice of collaboration methods contribute to the group's success? How did your choice of collaboration methods lead to conflicts, inefficiencies, or poor project quality? What would you do differently if you were to start this project from scratch?

The videos in this textbook are directly based on the interactions of actual student teams. Before you complete any of the video exercises, take a moment to watch the introductory video on the Team Writing *Web site, which describes how the videos were produced and created.*

2. View Team Video 1: Mark, Natalie, and Keith on the *Team Writing* Web site. Answer the following questions about the video:



Team 1

   a. What method of collaboration does this team seem to be using?
   b. For each team member—Mark (typing at the computer), Natalie, and Keith—provide two or three words or short phrases describing their role on the team.
   c. Based on what you have observed, which team member do you think made the most important contribution, and which one made the least important contribution? Why?
   d. Review Table 1.1. Which drawbacks do you see illustrated in the way the students in this video are collaborating? What problems do you anticipate this team will have in the future if the students continue this style of collaboration?
   e. What changes would you suggest that this group make to improve their collaboration?

3. Once you have completed question 2, read Appendix C, "Responses and Outcomes for Team Video 1." Read about this project's outcome and what the team members themselves said when they viewed a copy of this video after the project was over.
   a. Now that you have more information, how would you modify your original responses to questions 2b–2e?
   b. What actions would you advise the unhappy members of this group to take? How would you have handled the situation if you were Natalie? If you were Mark?
   c. What major lessons can you learn from observing this team?

4. View Team Video 2: Shelly, Will, and Ben on the *Team Writing* Web site. Answer the following questions:

Team 2

   a. What method of collaboration does this team seem to be using?
   b. For each team member—Shelly, Will, and Ben—provide two or three words or short phrases describing their role on the team.
   c. Review Table 1.1. Which drawbacks do you see illustrated in the way the students in this video are collaborating? What problems do you anticipate this team will have in the future if the students continue this style of collaboration?
   d. What changes would you recommend that this team make to improve their collaboration?
   e. What major lessons can you learn from observing this team?

Work Cited

DeMarco, T., & Lister, T. (1987). *Peopleware: Productive products and teams.* New York: Dorset House Publishing.

CHAPTER 2

Project Management

In a team evaluation at the end of his project, Ryan commented:

> Audrey was a great project manager. She really kept us on track. There were several times when I wasn't sure what I should do next. Then I just looked at her minutes and saw what it was I needed to finish up.

On another team, Bill similarly attributed team success to good project management:

> Steve did a great job keeping everybody updated. Because of him, everybody knew what their deadlines were and how the group was going. This was the first time I've been on a group project where everybody didn't wait until the last minute to throw everything together.

Project management is one of the least understood aspects of collaboration in student teams. Before we continue discussing how to organize a collaborative project, you should understand what project management involves and why a project manager is necessary—even on small projects.

◆ Why Do You Need a Project Manager?

Students frequently confuse the role of project manager with "boss," "leader," or even "dictator" and quite understandably decide that they do not want a project manager on their team. Instead of viewing the project manager as a kind of supervisor, think of the project manager as someone who plays a specific role on the team by keeping the project on course. The project manager's primary responsibility is to track the status of the project and to ensure that all team members know what they should be doing at any moment.

The larger and more complicated the team project is, the more important the role of project manager becomes. However, even small two-person projects can benefit from someone who acts as project manager by summarizing tasks and deadlines for the group. Often the project manager

will do other work for the group; however, according to Charles Stratton, a technical writing consultant, even if he or she does nothing other than coordinate the team, the project manager "has earned his [or her] keep" (Stratton, 1989).

The project manager's specific duties include the following:

- Keeping the project on schedule by publicizing deadlines and responsibilities in the **task schedule**
- Holding people accountable by documenting action items in the **meeting minutes**
- Managing disagreements by documenting decisions in the meeting minutes
- Keeping team meetings on task by preparing **meeting agendas**

In addition, the project manager may, if needed, perform other tasks:

- Sending e-mail reminders of deadlines
- Notifying the instructor of problems, particularly missed deadlines
- Creating the initial **straw document** of the project
- Producing other documents related to the project, including **project plans**, **team charters**, and **progress reports**

On most projects, the manager will be doing work in addition to coordinating the project. Thus, a project manager might also double up as a co-writer, artist, or some other role on the team. However, on very large projects, it may be sufficient to have a project manager who does nothing other than manage the team.

The remainder of this chapter focuses on the three types of documents that are essential to good project management: task schedules, meeting minutes, and meeting agendas. This chapter also describes additional documents that the project manager should produce.

◆ Task Schedules: Publicizing Deadlines and Responsibilities

Once the team has brainstormed some initial ideas for the project and discussed how to organize the collaboration, the project manager needs to create a **written task schedule** that documents **deadlines**, **tasks**, and **responsibilities**. Such a document is absolutely essential to effective collaboration. (See Chapter 4, "Getting Started with the Task Schedule," for more details on how to develop and schedule a collaborative process.)

At a minimum, every project (even a two-person project) needs a task schedule that lists the three *W*s: *who* is responsible for doing *what* by *when*. This task schedule is continually updated as work is reassigned,

new tasks are identified, or deadlines change. Table 2.1 shows a task schedule for a group collaborating on an instruction manual.

Each entry in a task schedule contains three vital pieces of information: a name, a deadline, and a brief description of the task. A good task schedule should also build in **padding**—additional downtime between major steps that allows the group to recover in case a particular step takes longer than expected. For instance, this group has built in two days of padding between 9/12 (the date that everyone's drafts or tasks are due) and 9/14 (the date that the usability tests are scheduled). Similar padding is built into the schedule between 9/19 (the date that Amy will compile and edit a completed manual) and 9/21 (the date the manual is due). This padding allows the group to stay on schedule even if one or more of the major parts of the project are unexpectedly delayed.

To be effective, a task schedule needs to be visible. Thus, the project manager must *distribute the schedule to the entire group* (usually through e-mail) each time it is updated. In addition, it is a good idea to keep a copy of the task schedule in a centralized document server that the entire

Deadline	Who	Task	Status
9/04	Amy	Write topic proposal and bring to group meeting	Completed
9/04	Everyone	Review and discuss topic proposal at in-class meeting	Completed
9/06	Amy	Turn in revised topic proposal to instructor	Completed
9/09	Jessica	Bring template with sample layout for manual to meeting	
9/09	Everyone	Discuss and revise template at in-class meeting	
9/12	Bryan	Write instructions for installing motor and arms; e-mail	
9/12	Jessica	Write instructions for assembling base; e-mail	
9/12	Amy	Line up two users for 9/14; prepare all materials for usability tests; e-mail group with status	
9/14	Everyone	Test-drive instructions with users at 3:00 p.m. in the library	
9/14	Amy	E-mail a list of changes to group	
9/17	Bryan and Jessica	Revise instructions; e-mail Amy	
9/19	Amy	Edit manual; prepare overview and table of contents; compile and e-mail completed manual to group	
9/21	Everyone	Group meeting at 3:00 p.m. to review final draft; turn in draft	

TABLE 2.1. Task schedule for a three-person group working on an instruction manual

"That's not the way I interpreted what we agreed upon." If you don't have it documented, it's he said/she said three weeks [later]. . . . So I think documentation of those encounters [is] absolutely critical in moving forward; otherwise you take one step forward and four steps back and one step forward and four steps back, and you can only take so many steps back before you drop off the cliff.

Library Project Meeting Minutes
April 8, 2008

Attendance: Alex, Alicia, Sefu (Phil absent because of emergency dental visit)

Action items:
Alex: Double-check room availability and send out confirmation to users
Alicia: E-mail draft of usability script to group by Wednesday night
Sefu: Make changes to artwork and send to Phil by Wednesday night
Phil: Implement changes to home page and insert new artwork by class on Thursday

Discussion:

- Mapped out the details of the usability tests
  - Usability tests will be held in LL15 next Friday from 12:00 to 3:00 p.m. Alex will double-check room availability and send confirmation e-mail to users.
  - Alex will bring his video camera to record the tests.
  - Roles: Alicia will be the moderator for all three tests. Alex will record. Sefu and Phil will take observational notes.
- Discussed changes to the artwork
  - The home page logo/image is taking up too much space. It needs to be cropped or resized.
  - The photo of the computer lab on the "Student Resources" page is too dark. It looks depressing.
- Discussed changes to the home page
  - Main navigation links should be reordered: "Search Catalog" should be first, followed by "Search Journals," "Hours," "Resources," and finally "Contact Information."
  - Link to "Hours" is broken.
  - A copyright logo should be placed in the footer.
- Discussed what we want to get out of the usability tests next Friday
  - What do users think of the artwork? (Maybe have some alternative designs to show them?)
  - Does the order of navigational elements make sense?
  - Are there any broken links?
  - Can users find basic information (such as circulation hours, lab hours, phone numbers) without help?
  - Can users find all journal and book search features without help?

Next steps: Next meeting in class on Thursday, April 10. Need to go over changes to artwork, search for broken links, and take a look at the usability script.

FIGURE 2.1. Meeting minutes
These minutes contain action items, major decisions, next steps, and attendance. The minutes should be circulated to the team within 24 hours of the meeting.

Andrew Grove, the CEO of Intel, a major computer chip manufacturer, agrees:

> If a meeting was worth calling in the first place, the effort to produce and distribute the minutes is a small additional investment necessary to realize its full benefits. (Grove, 1995)

The most important information in the minutes is the list of action items detailing who will do what. Ken West, an operations research manager with more than 10 years' experience supervising teams, clarifies:

> Even if you don't produce formal minutes, at the end of the meeting, there should be a page that says you're going to do this, you're going do this, you're going do this, and you're going to do this. The person who is the project manager better make sure that that's written down. It's their responsibility to follow up that things get done.

Dangers of Operating without Meeting Minutes

As the previous quotes from managers testify, meeting minutes are essential to the forward progress of a team. Without a central set of minutes, teams will

- **Waste time.** Without minutes, teams will revisit issues that have already been decided, repeat information that has already been shared, or rehash conversations that have already been completed. Moreover, the minutes allow teams to pick up the next meeting right where they left off.
- **Proceed without consensus.** As Randall Walker stated, you can say something to five people and they will interpret it five different ways. The minutes provide a centralized interpretation of the team's decisions and ensure that everyone is "on the same page."
- **Forget important details.** The minutes serve as a reminder of important material that the team has discussed. Without minutes, teams will almost certainly forget some of this material.
- **Encourage slackers.** The minutes publicize the commitments each person has made and put pressure on everyone to perform up to the team's standards.

◆ Meeting Agenda: Keeping Discussions on Track

A meeting agenda is a *brief* list of topics to be discussed at the meeting. This list of topics does not need to be comprehensive—in other words, the team can discuss items not on the agenda; however, an agenda helps

TO: Team
FR: Jason
Subject: Agenda for meeting on 3/7, 1:00 p.m., Miller Tech

Hi Team:

We are meeting at 1:00 p.m. on Thursday, 3/7, in the Miller Tech computer lab.

Agenda:
- Confirm meeting time with instructor
- Discuss Karen's revisions (see attachment Karen e-mailed earlier today)
- Report from Susan detailing her research on costs

Let me know if there is anything else that you think should go on the agenda.

FIGURE 2.2. Meeting agenda sent via e-mail
The agenda contains a short list of items to be discussed, along with a reminder of the meeting time and location. An agenda must be distributed to the team in advance of the meeting.

ensure that nothing important gets left out of the discussion. When people who are not part of the team attend a meeting, a brief agenda is particularly important because it lets them know what to expect and allows them to prepare for questions team members might ask.

To allow people time to prepare for the meeting, an agenda should be distributed **in advance of the meeting** (see Figure 2.2).

Dangers of Operating without a Meeting Agenda

A meeting agenda is essential to make sure that the team meeting is really needed and that the team stays on track. Without a clear agenda, teams will

- **Manage their time poorly.** A written agenda allows a team to jump directly to what needs to be accomplished without wasting time figuring out what needs to be discussed. Moreover, without an agenda, the team might overlook important items, thus necessitating another meeting.
- **Show up unprepared.** The agenda gives everyone a chance to think about the items that will be discussed at the meeting, to do any necessary research, and to prepare any information or material that needs to be distributed.
- **Hold unnecessary meetings.** Sometimes, the project manager will begin to prepare a meeting agenda only to realize that there are no issues for the team to discuss. In this case, after checking with the rest of the team, the project manager may cancel the meeting.

◆ E-mail Reminders and Notifications: Stepping In When Problems Occur

The project manager is always focused on the future direction of the group. Even meeting minutes, which at first might seem just to be records of past actions, are produced in order to shape the group's future direction and ensure that everyone follows through on commitments made during the meeting.

In the unfortunate event that some teammates are negligent in performing their duties or a project goes off schedule, the project manager needs to continue this focus on the team's future. Thus, when a project manager steps in to take action on missed deadlines, missed meetings, or unacceptable work, his or her focus needs to be on finding a solution rather than spreading blame.

How forcefully the project manager steps in depends on the situation and the severity of the offense. Usually, small problems can be handled through gentle reminder e-mails. Larger problems that threaten the project's success may require contacting the instructor.

For instance, a project manager should always send a "gentle" reminder to a teammate immediately after a deadline has passed. Figure 2.3 illustrates a gentle reminder sent directly to a teammate who has missed a deadline. This reminder assumes that Susan plans on completing the work but either has encountered unexpected difficulties or has had some personal emergency that has prevented her from completing the work on time. The e-mail focuses on highlighting the effects that this lateness might have on the team's future schedule.

The next step up in severity occurs when a teammate is several days behind schedule, has missed deadlines in the past, or has otherwise shown

TO: Susan
FR: Jason
Subject: Draft due date

Dear Susan:

Just a reminder that your draft was due to the team by 5:00 p.m. yesterday. Do you think you can get it out by Wednesday morning? If there is some problem, please let me know ASAP so that I can revise the task schedule.

Thanks,
Jason

FIGURE 2.3. A gentle reminder that a deadline has passed
Such reminders should be sent (usually directly to the person involved) the first time a team member has missed a deadline.

TO: Susan
FR: Jason
Subject: Draft due date—second notice

Dear Susan:

Your draft was due more than two days ago, and we haven't heard anything from you. Karen needs your materials so that she can compile everything and make revisions by Friday. If you cannot get the materials to us today, please let us know because Karen will have to rearrange her schedule in order to get everything done. I apologize if you are experiencing some crisis. We are starting to get worried about meeting the deadline and will have to contact the instructor if we don't hear from you. Please let us know what to expect.

Thanks,
Jason

FIGURE 2.4. A more pointed reminder that a deadline has passed
Such reminders should point out the effects that a teammate's delays or poor performance will have on the rest of the team.

himself or herself deserving of a more pointed reminder. This reminder should gently point out the consequences that the teammate's actions have on the rest of the team. The project manager may want to copy the entire team in the "cc" section of the e-mail. Figure 2.4 illustrates a pointed reminder.

If a teammate does not respond appropriately to this pointed reminder, the project manager might want to send an e-mail to the instructor, if for no other reason than to document the team's problems. Figure 2.5 illustrates an e-mail notifying the instructor about a problem.

Chapter 8, "Troubleshooting Team Problems," provides additional advice on handling problematic teammates.

◆ Other Documents the Project Manager May Produce

Task schedules, meeting minutes, and meeting agendas should be produced for any project, no matter how large or small. These documents are essential to keeping the team on task. Projects that neglect these are destined for trouble and unproductive conflict. However, larger projects may require additional routine maintenance documents with which the project manager keeps the team on track. (See Table 2.2.)

TO: Professor Williams
FR: Jason Carpenter
CC: Carrie S., Matt B.
Subject: Question about a team problem

Dear Professor Williams:

My team would like to notify you and ask your advice about a problem we are having. I have attached a copy of our task schedule. As you can see, a draft of the cost-benefit analysis was due on Monday. I received a brief outline from Susan (the person responsible) on Wednesday night. Not only was this two days late, but it was not what the team needed. It is now Thursday, and the next leg of the project is about to be officially behind schedule.

Since the cost information is key to our proposal, we are unsure how to proceed. Should we give Susan another chance, or should we assign this task to someone else and basically cut her out of the project? Any advice or assistance you can provide would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you very much for your help.
Jason Carpenter

FIGURE 2.5. E-mail notifying the instructor about a problem
Although the e-mail documents the group's past problems, the overall tone and direction of the e-mail focuses on finding a future solution. Jason asks the instructor for advice rather than a solution to the group's problems. Even if the instructor does not take any action, such an e-mail provides documentation of the team's problems and can protect responsible team members if any grading disputes come up in the future.

◆ Starting the Process with a Straw Document

A "straw" document is an excellent way to start a group writing project that is taking on a complex task for which no clear format exists. A straw document is basically an extremely rough skeleton of the project that the writer expects to be blown down, like a straw house. The purpose of the straw document is to draw the team into a discussion of the pros and cons of various directions the project might take. In this way, the straw document is a tool to facilitate group brainstorming about specific details.

With a straw document, the project manager brings in a very flimsy but relatively complete draft of the entire document or document section. The straw document should contain a comprehensive list of topics or points the document needs to address, but the details do not have to be fully fleshed out. The goal is to have *something* down on paper so

4. View Team Video 3: Jamaal, Jim, Don, and Tonya on the *Team Writing* Web site. This group of students is preparing a proposal to irrigate a third-world country. To the best of your ability based on the information you have, create a brief set of meeting minutes to follow up this group's discussion. What important information has this group failed to discuss? What issues does this team need to take up at its next meeting?

Team 3

5. What collaboration method does the team in this video seem to be using? What problems do you anticipate if the team continues to collaborate using this method?

Works Cited

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