

Groupwork

Academic Tip Sheet



This academic tip sheet:

- explains what groupwork is;
- outlines what is meant by 'people skills';
- examines how to create an effective working group; and
- reviews the general processes to follow in a group project.

What is groupwork?

The aim of groupwork is to complete a collaborative task by working through various decision-making steps such as organisation, critical thinking, conflict resolution and reflection. This approach follows/models many industry situations, including task forces, formal decision-making bodies, committees and informal interactions.

The advantages of groupwork include sharing responsibilities, widening your knowledge of different viewpoints, linking with others and developing your 'people skills'.

What are 'people skills'?

People skills are highly prized in working environments. There is a wide range of people skills so it's important to find out which of the following skills are relevant to you and how you can develop them:

- Rapport with others.
- Listening.
- Public speaking.
- Communicating with different audiences.
- Giving and receiving criticism.
- Assertiveness.

- Dealing with difficult people.
- Negotiation.
- Leadership.

Skilful Listening

Good listening skills are important when working with others. Key skills include:

- actively listening – show that you are listening by using body language and facial expressions;
- being a listener more than a talker;
- remembering to refer to what someone has been saying before you change the subject;
- listening for the underlying message of what they really want you to know;
- asking questions to check for understanding;
- asking for clarification or more details if you don't understand; and
- being silent – allowing other people to enter the dialogue.

An effective working group

Group work can be rewarding but it may also be a frustrating process if certain aspects are not considered. There are a number of factors that help establish good working relationships in groups/teams. An effective group:

- has a shared vision;
- puts the welfare of the team first;
- sets goals and priorities together;
- makes decisions as a team;
- has versatile members; and
- includes all members equally.

Good group members

Being a good group member means that you:

- are considerate to all members;
- are punctual when you attend meetings;
- turn up when you say you will;
- complete your tasks in good time;
- share responsibilities for different tasks;
- respect the opinions of other team members; and
- keep others informed of developments.

The stages in a group project

There are many different types of groups/teams at university. Some industry-based teams have specific ways of working. Unless you are given different instructions, you can use the following process:

1. Establish the group

- **Develop rapport:** Get to know each other and your strengths and weaknesses in relevant study, organisation and knowledge.

- **Set ground rules:** Include meeting times (or online sessions). Each member needs to: be supportive, participate, be committed, listen to everyone's point of view, have an agenda, keep to the set task during meetings, and accept diversity in the group make-up and contributions.
- **Examine the task closely:** Clarify and agree upon directions. Check the task objectives and assessment criteria. Brainstorm ideas. Decide how to break up the task parts. Allocate tasks. Establish deadlines. Record decisions.
- **Be explicit about any concerns, problems, and confusion:** Stating these may lessen any misunderstandings later. Each team member should have a copy of the agreed ground rules.
- **Decide on specific roles:** As well as the specialist roles that may come with the task, others could include leader, scribe at meetings, and agenda setter. Work out ways to ensure that everyone contributes.
- **Be prepared to contribute:** It is extremely unfair as well as unethical to let others do the work and then take the credit for the results in the assignment.

2. Starting the work

This is the challenging part when various issues can arise. Some research materials may be unavailable. Problems can occur with the computer technology. Personal problems can arise. This is where your group will need the skills to maintain group cohesion and cooperation. For example:

- Some members of the group may arrive late for a meeting, and another may not have done any work. The leader can refer to the agreed ground rules in a diplomatic way to remind the group about the consensus decisions made.
- One member might interrupt constantly or another may dominate the group. To make sure everyone is heard, try the 'group round'. Each person has a turn to speak. It is OK to say 'pass' on a certain issue. Allocate a time limit for each person.
- Someone may feel threatened or unsure. Participants need to work hard at establishing trust and empathy in fostering a climate of support and encouragement. Active listening is crucial here.

3. Doing the 'real' work

By this stage, solutions should have been found, directions should be firmly established and task orientation and productive work should increase. During this phase, it is important for the group to maintain good lines of communication to ensure that everyone stays on task.

- Gather the resources you will need to complete the task and identify the gaps.
- Continue to communicate to ensure total group participation. Record decisions.
- Be open to ideas but do not get off track.
- Watch your time management carefully so that you meet deadlines.
- Learn from each other!

3. Finalising the task

This is the time to bring everything together. As a group, it's important to re-consider the structure of the report, project, essay or other task. Decide on final format and content. Someone should be given the responsibility of putting the material together and then sending or giving the draft product to the others to review. One person may take responsibility for doing a final edit and perhaps compiling the reference list.

4. Presenting the group outcome

Your group may be asked to present the group task verbally. Check to identify the keen speakers as well as the shy individuals. Plan the presentation focussing on a few key areas and any interesting data and findings. Do not attempt to present the whole project! The confident speaker/s could introduce the topic, the plan and the conclusion. The shy individual/s could present a small section using overhead sheets or PowerPoint slides to take some attention away from the speaker.

5. Ending the group

Think about what have you learnt from the perspectives of both the knowledge and the process. Also consider the new skills in interpersonal communication that you may have developed.

Groupwork checklist

- **Do you know who is in your group?**
- **Do you know what 'people skills' you have and what you will need to work on?**
- **Have the aims and objectives of the task been established?**
- **Have you developed clear ground rules?**
- **Is everyone contributing to the task at hand?**
- **Is the group communicating well and working cohesively?**
- **Are you meeting set deadlines?**

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