

What Makes an Effective Group?

Here are twelve common characteristics of group work:

1. Competitiveness among members.
2. Everyone sticks closely to the agenda.
3. The group avoids conflict.
4. Members rotate the leadership position.
5. Each member gives and receives feedback.
6. A detailed agenda precedes each group meeting.
7. Each group member is assertive.
8. Informal subgroups form.
9. Members freely express negative feelings.
10. The overall goals of the group are explicitly set.
11. Information is freely shared among group members.
12. Each person's ideas are taken into consideration and assessed.

Task #1: Pick three of these characteristics that you consider essential for good group performance and fill in the table below.

Table 1: Important Characteristics for Good Group Performance

Most important	
2 nd most important	
3 rd most important	

Task #2: From the remaining items on the list, pick the three that you feel most interfere with good group performance and fill in the table below.

Table 2: Characteristics that most Disrupt Group Performance

Most disruptive	
2 nd most disruptive	
3 rd most disruptive	

Task #3: Compare your choices with other class members and discuss the differences. Do the different choices reflect cultural norms? Do they reflect individual personalities?

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Strategies for Effective Group Work

Successful group work requires a willingness to participate and to focus: it also requires a willingness not to dominate and to discourage others from doing so.

1. Show good listening skills. Give physical attention to each speaker through effective body language and listening expressions. Be sure you understand a speaker's point before you react. Use expressions of clarification.
2. Support every group member's right to speak. Know your group members and understand their strengths. Encourage discussion by acknowledging all ideas. Use expressions like "Let's consider X," not "That won't work because..." Disagree with ideas, not with group members. For example, "Can you explain how X will work?" is more productive than "Joe's idea won't work." Look for places where you can agree and for places where you can ask questions.
3. Stick to the agenda. Avoid extraneous topics. Make your points quickly at the appropriate time. Unless you are giving a formal report during a meeting, you should never speak for more than a few minutes at a time.
4. Prevent dominance. Avoid interrupting, arguing, criticizing or over-defending. The group facilitator should
 - Be sure that everyone has a chance to speak
 - Use tactful reminders of the ground rules
 - Deliberately seek comments from the less assertive members

A. Establishing Group Ground Rules

As you establish your group ground rules, consider the following questions:

1. **Work norms.** How will you distribute the work? How will you establish the schedule and the guidelines? How will you handle cases when group members do not fulfill their commitments? How will the work be reviewed? What if members have different opinions about the quality of the work? How will you handle different work habits?
2. **Facilitator norms.** What responsibilities will the facilitator have? How will you choose a facilitator? Will you rotate the position?
3. **Communication norms.** Between meetings, which medium is preferred: telephone, e-mail, texting? How frequently will you check for messages? Does everyone understand the concepts of active listening and appropriate participation?
4. **Meeting norms.** What is everyone's schedule? Should one person be in charge of coordinating meetings? Where will meetings be held? How will you handle latecomers or absent members? Can people eat or smoke at meetings? What if someone dominates the discussion? How can you change norms if someone is uncomfortable with the team dynamics?

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Strategies for Effective Group Work

B. Active Listening vs. Poor Listening

Active Listeners	Poor Listeners
Look at the speaker as s/he talks	Frequently interrupt speaker or finish their thoughts.
Notice nonverbal communication (gestures, tone, eye contact)	Ask too many questions about details
Listen for a speaker's structuring cues	Change the focus of the discussion (e.g., That reminds me of X; That's nothing--let me tell you about.)
Limit their own talking	Rush speakers, making them that time is being wasted.
Use feedback cues to show they're paying attention: nodding, murmuring agreement	Show interest in something other than the conversation, discussion or presentation.
Actively check for comprehension and use clear expressions of clarification	Fail to value <i>productive</i> conversation.

C. Guidelines for Giving and Receiving Constructive Feedback

Anglo-American communication is characterized as "direct" and "to the point." However, we tend to soften our approach when discussing potentially sensitive issues in several ways:

1. We couple uncomfortable truths with positive observations. For example, "Your research sounds very exciting. More examples of how it is used in the transportation industry would have been useful."
2. We use question structure. For example, "Can you provide a few examples to help make this concrete?"
3. We use our needs to point out weaknesses. For example, "I'm sorry—I'm having a hard time hearing you."

Group Discussion Preparation

Tasks

A. In groups, spend a few minutes predicting factors for successful group discussions by

1. Anticipating the kinds of expressions that are particularly useful in group discussions. Record as many as you can think of. Refer to the Introductory section of the course packet for Essential Gambits if necessary.
2. Discussing how speakers can support their opinions with facts, statistics, and sources.
3. Anticipating what happens when two speakers speak at the same time.
4. Describing tips for effective group body language.
5. Defining the role of an effective group facilitator.

B. In groups, spend a few minutes modeling the language of a group member whose role is

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|------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Initiating | 7. Supporting |
| 2. Seeking information or opinions | 8. Mediating |
| 3. Giving information or opinions | 9. Reconciling |
| 4. Questioning | 10. Compromising |
| 5. Clarifying | 11. Being humorous |
| 6. Summarizing | |

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21G.221 Communicating in American Culture(s) Spring 2019

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