



# A guide to group work

## The Purpose of Group Work

The aim of group work is to produce better (more effective, more detailed, more comprehensive) presentations and reports. This is achieved through the combined talents of group members, contributing knowledge and ideas.

One difficulty with group work is that you can't work as quickly as you can by yourself. Patience, communication skills and commitment are all required to make the most of the contributions of all group members. Thus, effective group work requires each member to focus on the **process** rather than just the product.

## Starting the Process

Much of the success of the project relies on what is decided upon at the outset. This is where you get to know your group members, pre-empt problems, set goals and objectives and formulate a working strategy.

### 1. Building Group Dynamics

The quality of your relationship with the other group members is a major factor in the overall success of the group, so it is important to spend time getting to know your colleagues.

- Find out about their backgrounds and interests.
- Find common goals and expectations related to the task.
- Discuss work styles and individual strengths and weaknesses: this will assist in formulating objectives and in allocating tasks appropriately.

### 2. Agree on goals

It is important to agree on a common purpose. Share and discuss your understanding of the aims and scope of the project, and the methods of collaboration.

If you don't understand something about the task, say it now.

### 3. Organise the Group

- Clearly define the sections of the task, and determine who will complete them and by what date.
- Create a list of names and contact information for everyone.
- Decide how to collaborate throughout the project, how meetings will be organised, and who will be responsible for taking notes in meetings.
- Plan how you will collectively collate and edit your assignment. The best group assignment is a single, unified project, not a collection of separate elements.

## Maintaining Relationships

Relationships are the key to the success of the project, so be prepared to invest considerable energy in developing all your relationships in the group. Remember, too, that people have very different modes of interacting in groups, depending on their social and cultural backgrounds.

Here are a few tips for dealing with conflict in a group:

- Agree to a strategy at the outset for dealing with people who
  - (a) are too domineering
  - (b) don't do their share of the work.
- Talk to your lecturer for advice.
- In your negotiations, separate the person from the problem. Don't let your opinion of the person cloud your opinion of their ideas, and don't make a criticism of their ideas sound like a criticism of their personality!
- Try to put yourself in their shoes and see their perspective. This might give you an insight into how best to deal with the situation.
- Be prepared to renegotiate things you established at the outset: roles in the group, the aims and scope of the task, the methods of collaboration, and so on, to suit the needs and aims of the group.

## Leadership

Effective leaders **manage** the process: they help the group decide **how** to work efficiently, and monitor the group's progress in relation to the intended plan. They should not merely lead the group toward their own desired outcome. Thus, a good leader is an excellent listener and is also prepared to re-evaluate his or her own opinion on a topic.

## Where do you go for Help?

- ➔ Faculty Staff: let your tutor/lecturer know about any issues which are preventing the group from working effectively.
- ➔ Library Learning Skills Advisers: we can facilitate a group planning session for you.
- ➔ Community Services: can assist you with approaches in dealing with problems you might encounter in your group.

### Other useful references

Cottrell, S 1999, *The study skills handbook*, Palgrave, Basingstoke. (Chapter 5 *Working with others*)

Gardner, H 1983, *Frames of mind*, Basic Books, New York.

Laborde, J 1987, *Influencing with integrity: management skills for communication and negotiation*, Syntony, Palo Alto, CA.

The Learning Commons website, 2005 *Fastfacts: Collaborative group work*, University of Guelph, Canada, <http://www.learningcommons.uoguelph.ca/ByFormat/OnlineResources/Fastfacts/LearningFastfacts/Fastfacts-GroupWork.html>

Witzel, M 2000, *How to get an MBA*, Routledge, New York.