Dedicated to Sue and Nancy
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# Brief Contents

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### 1 Group Principles and Practices

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- TRANSACTIONAL, MEDIATED, ESSENTIAL COMMUNICATION  

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- TEAMS DEVELOP CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES, DUTIES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TEAM MEMBERS  
- TEAMS HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED RULES FOR AND EXPECTATIONS ABOUT TEAM OPERATION  
- TEAMS HAVE COORDINATED AND COLLABORATIVE METHODS FOR ACHIEVING THE WORK

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- A RESULTS-DRIVEN STRUCTURE  
- TEAM CHARACTERISTIC CONT’D  

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- PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS  
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- POSITIVE PERSONAL STYLE  
- POSITIVE OVERALL TEAM PERCEPTIONS  
- TEAM LEARNING AND ADAPTING  

Putting Principles into Practice  

1.3: Communicating Collaboratively

1.3.1: Advantages  
- YOUR GROUP HAS MORE INFORMATION THAN YOU DO  
- GROUPS STIMULATE CREATIVITY  
- YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU DISCUSS  
- YOU ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SATISFIED WITH A DECISION YOU HELP MAKE  
- YOU GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOURSELF  

1.3.2: Disadvantages  
- GROUP MEMBERS MAY PRESSURE OTHERS TO CONFORM TO THE MAJORITY OPINION IN ORDER TO AVOID CONFLICT  
- AN INDIVIDUAL GROUP OR TEAM MEMBER MAY DOMINATE THE DISCUSSION  
- SOME GROUP MEMBERS MAY RELAY TOO MUCH ON OTHERS TO GET THE JOB DONE  
- WORKING WITH OTHERS IN A GROUP OR TEAM TAKES LONGER THAN WORKING ALONE  

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**MISCONCEPTION 2: ALL CONFLICT OCCURS BECAUSE PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER**

**MISCONCEPTION 3: ALL CONFLICT CAN BE RESOLVED**

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**CRITICAL THINKING IS NOT ENCOURAGED OR REWARDED**

**MEMBERS BELIEVE THAT THEIR GROUP CAN DO NO WRONG**

**MEMBERS ARE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT JUSTIFYING THEIR ACTIONS**

**MEMBERS APPLY PRESSURE TO THOSE WHO DO NOT SUPPORT THE GROUP**

**MORE SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK**

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Preface

From our first edition onward, our goal in writing this book has remained the same: to write a book students find interesting and practical, and instructors find clear and comprehensive. We are pleased that the previous ten editions continue to be praised and widely used by both teachers and students.

We have written this edition of Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices to serve as the primary text for a college-level course that focuses on group communication. We continue to seek a balanced approach to presenting the latest small group principles, while also identifying practical practices that bring the principles to life.

New to the Edition

In this new edition we have thoroughly updated the research that anchors the principles and skills we present, incorporated new pedagogical features to enhance student learning, and added new applications of technology to enhance collaborate. Here’s an overview of what’s new.

Expanded Emphasis on Virtual Groups and Teams.

From the first page through the final appendix, we have included additional research-based information about the role technology plays in facilitating collaboration in contemporary society. Students who have used technological tools all of their lives are increasingly becoming more sophisticated about the use of technology. We have revised our coverage of technology and the use of new media to reflect students’ existing knowledge while also building on it.

Increased Application of Group Skills.

Students take a course in group communication not only to improve their knowledge but also to become more skilled communicators. How to develop a discussion plan, create an agenda, facilitate a meeting, manage conflict, make efficient and effective decisions, lead others, and collaboratively solve problems are just a few of the skill sets that are presented. To help students bolster their communication competence, we have expanded our application of specific group communication skills throughout the book. Our “Theory into Practice” feature has been re-titled “Putting Principles into Practice,” and we’ve added new material and applications to ensure students can increase their group communication skill.

Linking Chapter Objectives with Chapter Headings.

To help students learn, review, and master chapter content, each learning objective that appears at the beginning of a chapter corresponds to a specific major heading. Students can easily confirm their mastery of each section of the material by reviewing the chapter objectives.

Revised Ethics Feature.

To help students explore their own values and ethics when collaborating with others, we have revised several of the “Collaborating Ethically: What Would You do?” features. These mini case studies can be used for student journal entries or spark insightful class discussions.

Crisp Presentation of Chapter Content.

Sometimes less is more. To help students quickly grasp ideas and information, we have looked for ways to structure the text’s content using bullets, new subheads, and streamlined prose to assist students’ mastery of the material.

New Inclusion of Contemporary Group Communication Research.

As we have for 30 years, we’ve done our best to find the latest research about small group communication and add it to our already comprehensive digest of small group communication research applications. Each chapter includes new and updated references to the latest applications of and insights into communicating in small groups.

New Diversity Material Integrated into Every Chapter.

As we have in previous editions, we continue to integrate research and application of diversity throughout the text. Thanks to an increased use of technology as well as an increasingly diverse society, we ensure students can adapt and respond to others from different backgrounds and cultures. Rather than relegating culture and diversity topics to a boxed feature, we carefully integrate our discussion of culture and diversity into every chapter.

And Much, Much More.

Each chapter includes new examples, illustrations, and updated pedagogy to make Communicating in Small Groups: Principles and Practices the best learning tool possible. We’ve made a special effort to streamline our coverage of content to make room for new research and additional
pedagogical features so as not to add to the overall length of the book.

**REVEL™**

**Educational technology designed for the way today’s students read, think, and learn**

When students are engaged deeply, they learn more effectively and perform better in their courses. This simple fact inspired the creation of REVEL: an immersive learning experience designed for the way today’s students read, think, and learn. Built in collaboration with educators and students nationwide, REVEL is the newest, fully digital way to deliver respected Pearson content.

REVEL enlivens course content with media interactives and assessments—integrated directly within the authors’ narrative—that provide opportunities for students to read about and practice course material in tandem. This immersive educational technology boosts student engagement, which leads to better understanding of concepts and improved performance throughout the course.

**Learn more about REVEL**

**Balanced Coverage: Principles and Practices**

We provide a carefully crafted integration of both principles and practices that provide a strong theoretical scaffolding for the “how to” practical skills needed for communicating in small groups. Theory without application can leave students understanding group principles but not knowing how to enhance their performance. On the other hand, presenting lists of techniques without providing an understanding of the principles that inform their skill would result in a laundry list of do’s and don’ts without insight as to when to apply the skills. The balanced tension between theory and application, structure and interaction, as well as task and process is especially evident in all communication study, but especially in the dynamic context of a small group. We believe that emphasizing theory without helping students apply principles can result in highly informed yet under-skilled group members. And while it’s true that our students often clamor for techniques to enhance their skills, such approaches alone do not give students the underlying principles they need to inform their newfound applications.

When we summarize research conclusions, we hear our students’ voices echoing in our heads, asking, “So what?” In response to those, we ask ourselves how the research conclusions we cite can enhance the quality of collaboration. We seek to provide principles and practices of small group communication that make a difference in our students’ lives.

We both abhor boring meetings that are adrift. Consequently, we draw upon our almost 75 years of combined university administrative and teaching experience as we sift through classic and contemporary group communication research to keep our focus on application while anchoring our prescriptions in principled theory. Our goal is to provide a comprehensive yet laser-focused compendium of the latest thinking about group and team communication.

**Popular Features We’ve Retained**

A hallmark of this book, according to educators and students, is our get-to-the-point writing style coupled with our comprehensive distillation of contemporary and classic group communication research. We continue to receive praise for the clear applications of the research we describe. We’ve done our best to keep the features instructors and students like best about our book: a lively, engaging writing style, references to the most recent research, and not overwhelming readers with unnecessary rambling narratives. As we have in previous editions, we’ve revised and updated all of our pedagogical features.

**Available Instructor Resources**

The following resources are available for instructors. These can be downloaded at http://www.pearsonhighered.com/irc. Login required.

- **PowerPoint**—provides a core template of the content covered throughout the text. Can easily be added to to customize for your classroom.
- **Instructor’s Manual**—includes a description, in-class discussion questions, a research assignment for each chapter.
- **Test Bank**—includes additional questions beyond the REVEL in multiple choice and open-ended—short and essay response—formats.
- **MyTest**—an electronic format of the Test Bank to customize in-class tests or quizzes. Visit: http://www.pearsonhighered.com/mytest.

**Acknowledgments**

Three and a half decades ago we met as new college professors sharing an office at the University of Miami. Today we live only miles apart in different Texas communities and remain united by a common bond of friendship that has grown stronger over the years. Our collaboration as friends continues to make this book a labor of love. This book is a partnership not only between us as authors, but also with a support team of scholars, editors, colleagues, reviewers, students, and family members.
We are grateful to those who have reviewed this edition of our book to help make this a more useful instructional resource. Specifically we thank Jeanne Christie, Western Connecticut State University; Meikuan Huang, California State University-Stanislaus; Daryle Nagano, El Camino College; David Kahl, Jr., Penn State Erie, The Behrend College.

We continue to be thankful to the talented editorial staff at Pearson. We are especially grateful to our REVEL editor, David Ploskonka, for his guidance and support. We also appreciate Megan Hermida’s assistance in keeping us on track and managing the logistics of preparing this new edition. We are continually thankful for the ongoing support from Karon Bowers, Publisher of Communication.

Steve thanks his colleagues and students at Texas State University for their encouragement and support. Casey Chilton, Mike Cornett, and Sue Stewart are gifted teachers who offer advice, encouragement, and friendship. Kosta Tovstadi provided expert assistance in helping to gather research for this new edition; we appreciate his ongoing friendship and expertise. We also acknowledge Dennis and Laurie Romig of Side by Side Consulting for their rich knowledge and practical insight about groups and teams that they have shared with us for many years. Jim Bell, who teaches in Texas State’s McCoy College of Business Administration, is a valued friend and gifted teacher who offers many ideas about teamwork. Sue Hall, Bob Hanna, and Meredith Williams are talented administrative assistants at Texas State and are invaluable colleagues who provide ongoing structure and interaction to maintain Steve’s productivity.

John thanks his friends, colleagues, and students at Texas Lutheran University, who have taught, challenged, and inspired him.

Finally, as in our previous editions, we offer our appreciation and thanks to our families, who continue to teach us about the value of teamwork and collaboration. Our sons are taking their place in the world and our spouses continue to be equal partners in all we do. John’s sons, John III and Noah, are older than we both were when we began the first edition of this book. John III and Noah continue to make their dad smile with pride at their successes. Nancy Masterson continues, as always, as John’s greatest love, best friend, and most respected critic.

Steve’s sons, Mark and Matt, are now also older than their dad when he started this project. Matt and his wife, Brittany, teach us the power of supportive collaboration and teamwork. Mark continues to teach his dad the importance of endurance and ever-present power of renewal, even when life presents ongoing challenges. Susan Beebe has been an integral part of the author team in this and every previous edition for over 30 years. She continues to be Steve’s personal Grammar Queen, life’s love, and best friend.

Steven Beebe,
San Marcos, Texas

John Masterson,
Seguin, Texas
Chapter 1
Group Principles and Practices

Learning Objectives

1.1 Define small group communication
1.2 List four characteristics that distinguish a team from a group
1.3 Describe the advantages and disadvantages of working with others in groups and teams
1.4 Compare and contrast primary and secondary groups
1.5 Describe virtual communication methods
1.6 Name the two essential qualities of competent group members

“Working together works.”
—Rob Gilbert

Human beings are creatures who collaborate. We need to establish relationships with others. We are raised in family groups. We are educated and entertained in groups, and we work and worship in groups.

Regardless of your career choice, you will spend a considerable part of your work life collaborating with others.

One survey of Fortune 500 companies found that 81 percent use team-based approaches to organize the work that needs to be done. In addition, 77 percent use temporary teams and work groups when new projects develop. The typical manager spends a quarter of the workweek in group meetings. The higher you rise in position and leadership authority, the more time you’ll spend in meetings. Top-level leaders spend up to two-thirds of their time—an average of three days a week—in meetings or preparing for meetings.
Not all of our collaborations are face-to-face. In the twenty-first century, our collaboration has dramatically increased because of our use of technology. We are hyper-connected. Computer power that once needed a room-size space now fits in our pocket. We not only GoToMeetings online (thanks to GoToMeeting software), but because of “iCommunication” devices (iPhone, iPad, iPods), numerous apps, Skype, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, and ultra-high-speed-big-data-cloud-computing methods, we are connected to virtual groups and teams nearly all of our waking moments. Collaboration is a daily element of our work, family, and social lives.¹⁴

Yet despite our constant collaboration, we sometimes (even often) have difficulty working collectively. Collaboration is hard. Collaboration takes skill. And groups can exist for constructive as well as destructive reasons.⁵ Communication researcher Susan Sorenson coined the term grouphate to describe the dread and repulsion many people have about working in groups, teams, or attending meetings.⁶ We have good news. Grouphate diminishes when people receive training and instruction about working in groups. The purpose of this book, therefore, is to help you learn communication principles and become skilled in the practices that make working in groups productive and enjoyable.

Communication is the central focus of this book. Communication makes it possible for groups and teams to exist and function. If you use the book as a tool to help you learn to communicate in groups, you will distinguish yourself as a highly valued group member.

### 1.1: What Is Small Group Communication

#### 1.1 Define small group communication

Consider these situations:

- After the stock market plunges 1000 points in a week, the President of the United States appoints a high-level team of economists to identify the causes of the market collapse.
- In a bid by the social networking site Connect.com to merge with a rival company, Relate.com, the Chair of the Board of Connect.com calls the board together to consider the virtues and pitfalls of the possible merger.
- To prepare for the final exam in your group communication class, you and several class members meet three nights each week to study.

Each of these three examples involves a group of people meeting and communicating for a specific purpose. And as group members communicate with one another, they are communicating transactively—they are simultaneously responding to one another and expressing ideas, information, and opinions. Although the purposes of the groups in these three scenarios are quite different, the groups have something in common—something that distinguishes them from a cluster of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator, for example. Just what is that “something”? What are the characteristics that make a group a group? We define small group communication as communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another. Let’s explore this definition in more detail.

### 1.1.1: Communication

Reduced to its essence, communication is the process of acting on information.⁷ Someone does or says something, and there is a response from someone else in the form of an action, a word, or a thought. Merely presenting information to others does not mean there is communication: Information is not communication. “But I told you what I wanted!” “I put it in the memo. Why didn’t you do what I asked?” “It’s in the syllabus.” Such expressions of exasperation assume that if you send a message, someone will receive it. However, communication does not operate in a linear, input–output process. What you send is rarely what others understand.

**HUMAN COMMUNICATION: MAKING SENSE AND SHARING THAT SENSE WITH OTHERS** Human communication is the process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages.⁸ Let’s examine the key elements of this definition.

**Communication Is about Making Sense** We make sense out of what we experience when we interpret what we see, hear, touch, smell, and taste. Typically, in a small group, multiple people are sending multiple messages, often at the same time. To make sense out of the myriad of messages we experience, we look for patterns or structure; we relate what happens to us at any given moment to something we’ve experienced in the past.

**Communication Is about Sharing Sense** We share what we experience by expressing it to others and to ourselves. We use words as well as nonverbal cues (such as gestures, facial expressions, clothing, music) to convey our thoughts and feelings to others.

**Communication Is about Creating Meaning** Meaning is created in the hearts and minds of both the message source and the message receiver. We don’t send meaning, we create it based on our experiences, background, and culture.
Communication Is about Verbal and Nonverbal Messages
Words and nonverbal behaviors are symbols that we use to communicate and derive meaning that makes sense to us.

A **symbol** is something that represents a thought, concept, object, or experience. The words on this page are symbols that you are using to derive meaning that makes sense to you. Nonverbal symbols such as our use of gestures, posture, tone of voice, clothing, and jewelry primarily communicate emotions—our feelings of joy or sadness, our likes and dislikes, or whether we’re interested or uninterested in others.

**TRANSACTIONAL, MEDIATED, ESSENTIAL COMMUNICATION**

Human Communication Is Transactional Live, in-person, human communication is **transactional**, meaning that when we communicate, we send and receive messages simultaneously. As you talk to someone, you respond to that person’s verbal and nonverbal messages, even while you speak. In the context of a small group, even if you remain silent or nod off to sleep, your nonverbal behavior provides information to others about your emotions and interest, or lack of interest. The transactive nature of communication suggests that you cannot not communicate. Ultimately, people judge you by your behavior, not by your intent. And since you behave in some way (even when you’re asleep), there is the potential for someone to make sense out of your behavior.

Human Communication Can Be Mediated Through Different Channels Key elements of communication include the source, message, receiver, and channel. The **source** of the message is the originator of the ideas and feelings expressed. The **message** is the information being communicated. The **receiver** of the message is the person or persons who interpret the message. The **channel** is the means by which the message is expressed to the receiver.

Do groups need to communicate face to face to be considered a group? More and more small group meetings occur in a **mediated setting**—a setting in which the channel of communication is a phone line, fiber-optic cable, wireless signal, the Internet, or other means of sending messages to others; the interaction is not face to face. In the twenty-first century, it has become increasingly easy and efficient to collaborate using the Internet, and other technological means of communicating. So, yes: A group can be a group without meeting face to face.

In the past three decades we have learned more about how mediated communication can enhance group communication. For example, there is evidence that groups linked together only by e-mail or a computer network can generate more and better ideas than groups that meet face to face. Such communication may, however, be hindered by sluggish feedback or delayed replies, which are not problems when we collaborate in person. And although more ideas may be generated in a mediated meeting, complex problems and relationship issues are better handled in person than on the Internet or through another mediated network. In most cases, in-person communication affords the best opportunity to clarify meaning and resolve uncertainty and misunderstanding. We will discuss the use of technology in groups and teams in a section in this chapter and throughout the book in a special feature called Virtual Groups.

**Human Communication: Essential for Effective Group Outcomes** Does the quality of communication really affect what a group accomplishes? Because this is a book about group communication, you won’t be surprised that our answer is yes. Researchers have debated, however, the precise role of communication in contributing to a group’s success. Success depends on a variety of factors besides communication, such as the personality of the group members, how motivated the members are to contribute, how much information members have, and the innate talent group members have for collaboration. Nevertheless, several researchers have found that the way group members communicate with each other is crucial in determining what happens when people collaborate. Research investigating the importance of small group communication in a variety of situations continues to increase.

**1.1.2: A Small Group of People**
A group includes at least three people; two people are a **dyad**. The addition of a third person immediately adds complexity and an element of uncertainty to the transactive communication process. The probability increases that two will form a coalition against one. And although the dynamics of group roles, norms, power, status, and leadership are also present in two-person transactions, they become increasingly important in affecting the outcome of the transaction when three or more people communicate.

If at least three people are required for a **small group**, what is the maximum number of members a group may have and still be considered small? Scholars do not agree on a specific number. However, having more than 12 people (some say 13, others say 20) in a group significantly decreases individual members’ interaction. Research documents that larger groups just aren’t as effective as smaller groups. The larger the group, the less influence each individual has on the group and the more likely it is that subgroups will develop. With 20 or more people, the communication more closely resembles a public-speaking situation when one person addresses an audience, providing less opportunity for all members to participate freely. The larger the group, the more likely it is that group members will become passive rather than actively involved in the discussion.
1.3: Meeting with a Common Purpose

The president’s economic task force, the Connect.com company executives’ group, and your communication study group have one thing in common: Their members have a specific purpose for meeting. They share a concern for the objectives of the group. Although a group of people waiting for a bus or riding in an elevator may share the goal of transportation, they do not have a collective goal. Their individual destinations are different. Their primary concerns are for themselves, not for others. As soon as their individual goals are realized, they leave the bus or elevator. On the other hand, a goal keeps a committee or discussion group together until that goal is realized. Many groups fail to remain together because they never identify their common purpose. While participants in small groups may have somewhat different motives for their membership, a common purpose cements the group together.

1.4: Feeling a Sense of Belonging

Not only do group members need a mutual concern to unite them, they also need to feel they belong to the group. Commuters waiting for a bus probably do not feel part of a collective effort. Members of a small group, however, need to have a sense of identity with the group; they should be able to feel it is their group. Members of a small group are aware that a group exists and that they are members of the group.

1.5: Exerting Influence

Each member of a small group, in one way or another, potentially influences others. Even if a group member sits in stony silence while other group members actively verbalize opinions and ideas, the silence of that one member may be interpreted as agreement by another. Nonverbal messages have a powerful influence on a group’s climate.

At its essence, the process of influencing others defines leadership. To some degree, each member of a small group exerts some leadership in the group because of his or her potential to influence others. Although some groups have an elected or appointed leader, most group members have some opportunity to share in how the work gets done and how group members relate to each other. Thus, if we define the role of leader rather broadly, each group member has an opportunity to fill the role of leader by offering contributions and suggestions. Regardless of its size, a group achieves optimal success when each person accepts some responsibility for influencing and leading others.

To repeat our definition: Small group communication is defined as communication among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.

1.2: What Is Team Communication?

1.2.1 List four characteristics that distinguish a team from a group

“Go, team!” You can hear this chant at most sports events. Whether playing a touch football game or in the Super Bowl, members of sports teams are rewarded for working together. Corporate America has also learned that working in teams can enhance productivity, efficiency, worker satisfaction, and corporate profits. Regardless of whether its members play football or construct web pages, a team is a coordinated group of individuals organized to work together to achieve a specific, common goal. Teamwork is increasingly emphasized as a way to accomplish tasks and projects because teamwork works. An effectively functioning team gets results. Research clearly documents the increased use of teams in corporate America during the past two decades, especially in larger, more complex organizations.

Because we have clearly defined small group communication, you may be wondering, “What’s the difference between a group and a team?” Often people use the terms group and team interchangeably. But are they different concepts, or is there merely a semantic difference between a group and a team? Our view is that teams are often more highly structured than typical small groups. All teams are small groups, but not all groups operate as a team.

Business and nonprofit organizations tend to use the term team rather than group to identify individuals who work together to achieve a common task. Corporate training departments often spend much time and money to train their employees to be better team members. What skills do such training programs focus on? Most programs cover the communication principles and practices that we will emphasize in this book: problem solving, decision making, listening, and conflict management. In addition to using communication skills, team members set goals, evaluate the quality of their work, and establish team operating procedures. Research has found that people who have been trained to work together in a team are, in fact, better team members. So the news is good: There is evidence that learning principles and practices of group and team communication can enhance your performance.

Highly effective teams usually have at least four attributes that give the term team distinct meaning. Let’s take a closer look at how distinctions are sometimes made between teams and groups:

1. Team goals are clear and specific (win the game, win the championship).
2. Teams have well-defined team-member responsibilities, such as positions on a sports team (first base, shortstop, and so on).
3. The rules for and expectations about how the team operates are spelled out; sports team competitions usually have a referee to enforce the rules of the game.

4. Teams usually develop a clear way of coordinating their efforts; sports teams discuss and practice how to work together.

1.2.1: Teams Develop Clear, Well-Defined Goals

Team goals are clear, specific, and measurable. They are also more than could be achieved by any individuals on the team. Research has found convincing evidence that teams that develop and use clear goals perform better than groups without clear-cut goals. A sports team knows that the goal is to win the game. An advertising team’s goal is to sell the most product. Yes, all groups, too, have a goal, but the goal may be less measurable or clear. A team develops a clear goal so that the members know when they’ve achieved it.

TEAM DEVELOP CLEARLY DEFINED ROLES, DUTIES, AND RESPONSIBILITIES FOR TEAM MEMBERS People who belong to a team usually have a clear sense of their particular role or function on the team. As on a sports team, each team member has an understanding of how his or her job or responsibility helps the team achieve the goal. The roles and responsibilities of team members are explicitly discussed. If one team member is absent, other team members know what needs to be done to accomplish that person’s responsibilities. Sometimes team members may be trained to take on several roles just in case a team member is absent; this kind of training is called cross-functional team-role training. Team members’ understanding other members’ responsibilities helps the team to work more effectively. In a group, the participants may perform specific roles and duties, but on a team, greater care must be devoted to explicitly ensuring that the individual roles and responsibilities are clear and are linked to a common goal or outcome. In fact, the key challenge in team development is to teach individuals who are used to performing individual tasks how to work together.

TEAM HAVE CLEARLY DEFINED RULES FOR AND EXPECTATIONS ABOUT TEAM OPERATION A third difference between groups and teams is that teams develop specific operating systems to help them function well. A rule is a prescription for acceptable behavior. For example, a team may establish as a rule that all meetings will start and end on time. Another rule may be that if a team member is absent from a meeting, the absent member will contact the meeting leader after the meeting. Although expectations develop in groups, in a team those expectations, rules, and procedures are often overtly stated or written down. Team members know what the rules are and how those rules benefit the entire team.

TEAMS HAVE COORDINATED AND COLLABORATIVE METHODS FOR ACCOMPLISHING THE WORK A fourth difference between groups and teams involves the methods team members use to accomplish their goals. Team members discuss how to collaborate and work together. Sports teams spend many hours practicing how to anticipate the moves of other team members so that, as in an intricate dance, all team members are moving to the same beat. Team members develop interdependent relationships; what happens to one affects everyone on the team. Of course, team members may be given individual assignments, but those assignments are clearly coordinated with other team members’ duties so that all members are working together. Coordination and collaboration are the hallmark methods of a team. Research has found that teams that are trained to coordinate and adapt their communication with one another have greater success than teams not trained to coordinate their communication. Although groups work together, they may accomplish their goal with less collaboration and coordination.

Even though we’ve made distinctions between groups and teams, we are not saying they are dramatically different entities. Think of these two concepts as existing on a continuum; some gatherings will have more elements of a group, whereas others will be closer to our description of a team. Keep in mind also that all teams are small groups, which mean that throughout the book when we refer to a team we will also be referring to a small group. And the principles and practices of effective small group communication will, thus, also apply to teams.

1.2.2: Characteristics of an Effective Team

Several researchers have been interested in studying how to make teams function better. One study found that team members need work schedules compatible with those of their colleagues, adequate resources to obtain the information needed to do the work, leadership skills, and help from the organization to get the job done. Another study concluded that it’s not how smart team members are, but how well they communicate that improves teamwork. Using studies of several real-life teams (such as NASA, McDonald’s, and sports teams), Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto identified eight hallmarks of an effective team. The more of these characteristics a team has, the more likely it is that the team will be effective.

A CLEAR, ELEVATING GOAL Having a common, well-defined goal is the single most important attribute of an effective team. But having a goal is not enough; the goal should be elevating and important—it should excite team members and motivate them to make sacrifices for the good of the team. Sports teams use the elevating goal of winning the game or the championship. Corporate teams also need an exciting goal that all team members believe is important.
External Support and Recognition  Teams in any organization do not operate in isolation. They need support from outside the team to help acquire the information and materials needed to do the job. Perhaps that’s why evidence suggests that teams who have a broad social network of colleagues and friends perform better than teams who don’t have a well-developed social network.35 Team members also need to be recognized and rewarded for their efforts by others outside the team.36 Positive, reinforcing feedback enhances team performance and feelings of team importance.37 There’s evidence that less positive support from others discourages some team members from giving their full effort; negative feedback causes more group members to not give their full effort.38 Most coaches acknowledge the “home-field advantage” that flows from the enthusiastic support and accolades of team followers. Corporate teams, too, need external support and recognition to help them function at maximum effectiveness.

Principled Leadership  Teams need effective leaders. This is not to say that a team requires an authoritarian leader to dictate who should do what. On the contrary, teams usually function more effectively when they adopt shared approaches to leadership. In most effective teams, leadership responsibilities are spread throughout the team.

Review

Comparing Groups and Teams

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1.2.4: Characteristics of Effective Team Members

One top-selling management book, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, nominated five things team members should not do if the team wants to be effective:

1. Don’t trust other team members.
2. Fear conflict.
3. Don’t be committed to the team.
4. Avoid accountability.
5. Don’t focus on achieving results.39

If you’ve been in a dysfunctional team, these five characteristics may be familiar to you.

But rather than focusing only on what not to do, we take a more positive approach by emphasizing what researchers suggest team members should do to be effective. Here is what researchers have found enhances teamwork.40

**EXPERIENCE** Effective team members have practical experience in managing the problems and issues they face; they’ve “been there, done that.” Less-experienced team members tend not to see the big picture and may lack the technical background needed to accomplish the task.

**PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS** The ability to overcome obstacles to achieve goals is an essential team skill. Effective team members skillfully identify and solve problems. Being indecisive, dithering, and shying away from team problems has a negative impact on team success.

**OPENNESS** Openness is a basic ingredient for team success; having team members who are straightforward and willing to appropriately discuss delicate issues is a predictor of team success. Team members who are not open to new ideas and who participate less are perceived as less valuable to the team.

**SUPPORTIVENESS** Supportive team members listen to others, are willing to pitch in and accomplish the job, and have an optimistic outlook about team success.41 Nonsupportive members try to control team members and focus on their individual interests rather than on team interests.

**ACTION ORIENTED** Team members who focus on “strategic doing” as well as on “strategic thinking” are vital for team success. Effective team members respond when action needs to be taken. Procrastinating and being slow to take action reduce team effectiveness.42

**POSITIVE PERSONAL STYLE** Effective team members are motivated, patient, enthusiastic, friendly, and well liked.43 By contrast, being competitive, argumentative, and impatient are perceived as hindrances to team success.

**POSITIVE OVERALL TEAM PERCEPTIONS** Effective team members believe they have the skills and resources to accomplish their task.44 Team members who think they will be less effective are, in fact, less effective.45 And team members who are more effective think they will have more positive results because of the self-perceived quality of the team.46 Are team members effective because of a self-fulfilling prophecy (expecting to be effective causes them to act effectively)? Or do team members think they are effective because they really are outstanding? We’re not quite sure what the precise cause-and-effect relationship is between self-perceptions of being effective and effective performance. Perhaps team members who are optimistic about their success also work better with others and are cooperative. The bottom line is: Team member optimism appears to enhance team effectiveness.

It’s one thing to know what effective team members should do to be effective (such as being supportive, understanding the problem-solving process, and having a positive personal style), but more important than only knowing what to do is actually putting the principles into practice. The research is clear that team members who receive team training in how to perform specific skills to enhance team performance are more effective.47

**TEAM LEARNING AND ADAPTING** It’s been said that insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and then expecting different results. Effective team members learn from both their successes and their failures. Specifically, researchers have found support for the principle that team members who learn how to overcome obstacles and adapt their behavior to achieve their goals are more successful than those who don’t learn and adapt. Effective teams learn best not by merely going to classes or reading books but by actively exploring, reflecting, discussing mistakes, seeking feedback from others, and experimenting.
1.3: Communicating Collaboratively

1.3 Describe the advantages and disadvantages of working with others in groups and teams

There is no question about it: You will find yourself working in groups and teams. Collaborative projects are becoming the mainstay method of accomplishing work in all organizations. Students from kindergarten through graduate school are frequently called on to work on group projects.

How do you feel about working in groups and teams? Maybe you dread attending group meetings. Perhaps you agree with the observation that a committee is a group that keeps minutes but wastes hours. You may believe that groups bumble and stumble along until they reach some sort of compromise—a compromise with which no one is pleased. “To be effective,” said one observer, “a committee should be made up of three people. But to get anything done, one member should be sick and another absent.”

By understanding both the advantages and the potential pitfalls of working collaboratively, you will form more realistic expectations while capitalizing on the virtues of group work and minimizing the obstacles to success.50

First, we’ll identify advantages of group collaboration and then we’ll present potential disadvantages.

1.3.1: Advantages

YOUR GROUP HAS MORE INFORMATION THAN YOU DO On the TV game show Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? contestants who phone a friend get the right answer to the question 65 percent of the time. But if the contestant asks the audience for help, they get the right answer 91 percent of the time.51 There’s wisdom in groups and teams. Because of the variety of backgrounds and experiences that individuals bring to a group, the group as a whole has more information and ideas from which to seek solutions to a problem than one person would have alone. Research clearly documents that a group with diverse backgrounds, including ethnic diversity, comes up with better-quality ideas.52 With more information available, the group is more likely to discuss all sides of an issue and is also more likely to arrive at a better solution.53 The key, of course, is whether group members share what they know. When group members do share information, the group outcome is better than when they don’t share what they know with other group members.54 Although group members tend to start out by discussing what they already know, groups still have the advantage of having greater potential information to share with other group members.55

GROUPS STIMULATE CREATIVITY Research on groups generally supports the maxim that “two heads are better
than one” when it comes to solving problems. Groups usually make better decisions than individuals working alone because groups have more approaches to or methods of solving a specific problem. A group of people with various backgrounds, experiences, and resources can more creatively consider ways to solve a problem than one person can.

YOU REMEMBER WHAT YOU DISCUSS Working in groups and teams fosters improved learning and comprehension, because you are actively involved rather than passive. Imagine that your history professor announces that the final exam is going to be comprehensive. History is not your best subject. You realize you need help. What do you do? You may form a study group with other classmates. Your decision to study with a group of people is wise; education theorists claim that when you take an active role in the learning process, your comprehension of information is improved. If you studied for the exam by yourself, you would not have the benefit of asking and answering questions of other study group members. By discussing a subject with a group, you learn more and improve your comprehension of the subject.

YOU ARE MORE LIKELY TO BE SATISFIED WITH A DECISION YOU HELP MAKE Group problem solving provides an opportunity for group members to participate in making decisions and achieving the group goal. Individuals who help solve problems in a group are more committed to the solution and better satisfied with their participation in the group than if they weren’t involved in the discussion.

YOU GAIN A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF YOURSELF Working in groups helps you gain a more accurate picture of how others see you. The feedback you receive makes you aware of personal characteristics that you may be unaware of but that others perceive. By becoming sensitive to feedback, you can understand yourself better (or at least better understand how others perceive you) than you would if you worked alone. Group interaction and feedback can be useful in helping you examine your interpersonal behavior and in deciding whether you want to change your communication style.

Why do these advantages occur? One explanation is called social facilitation. Social facilitation is the tendency for people to work harder simply because there are other people present. Why does this happen? Some researchers suggest that the increased effort may occur because people need and expect positive evaluations from others; some people want to be liked and they work harder when others are around so that they gain more positive feedback. Social facilitation seems to occur with greater consistency if the group task is simple rather than complex.

1.3.2: Disadvantages

Although working in small groups and teams can produce positive results, problems sometimes occur when people congregate. Consider some of the disadvantages of working in groups. Identifying these potential problems can help you avoid them.

GROUP MEMBERS MAY PRESSURE OTHERS TO CONFORM TO THE MAJORITY OPINION IN ORDER TO AVOID CONFLICT Most people do not like conflict; they generally try to avoid it. Some people avoid conflict because they believe that in an effective group, members readily reach agreement. But this tendency to avoid controversy in relationships can affect the quality of a group decision. What is wrong with group members reaching agreement? Nothing, unless they are agreeing to conform to the majority opinion or even to the leader’s opinion just to avoid conflict. Social psychologist Irving Janis calls this phenomenon groupthink—when groups agree primarily in order to avoid conflict.

AN INDIVIDUAL GROUP OR TEAM MEMBER MAY DOMINATE THE DISCUSSION In some groups it seems as if one person must run the show. That member wants to make the decisions and insists that his or her position on the issue is the best one. “Well,” you might say, “if this person wants to do all the work, that’s fine with me. I won’t complain. It sure will be a lot easier for me.” Yes, if you permit a member or two to dominate the group, you may do less work yourself, but then you forfeit the greater fund of knowledge and more creative approaches that come with full participation. Other members may not feel satisfied because they feel alienated from the decision making.

Try to use the domineering member’s enthusiasm to the group’s advantage. If an individual tries to monopolize the discussion, other group members should channel that interest more constructively. The talkative member, for example, could be given a special research assignment. Of course, if the domineering member continues to monopolize the discussion, other group members may have to confront that person and suggest that others be given an opportunity to present their views.

SOME GROUP MEMBERS MAY RELY TOO MUCH ON OTHERS TO GET THE JOB DONE One potential problem of working in groups is that individuals may be tempted to rely too much on others rather than pitch in and help. The name for this problem is social loafing. Some group members hold back on their contributions (loaf), assuming others will do the work. They can get away with this because in a group or team, no one will be able to pin the lack of work on a single group member. There is less accountability for who does what. Working together distributes the responsibility of accomplishing a task. Spreading the responsibility among all group members should be an advantage of group work.
However, when some group members allow others to carry the workload, problems can develop. Just because you are part of a group does not mean that you can get lost in the crowd. Your input is needed. Do not abdicate your responsibility to another group member. There’s also evidence that people are more likely to hang back and let others do the work if they simply don’t like to work in groups or don’t really care what others think of them.

To avoid this problem, encourage less-talkative group members to contribute to the discussion. Also, make sure each person knows the goals and objectives of the group. Encouraging each member to attend every meeting helps, too. Poor attendance at group meetings is a sure sign that members are falling into the “Let someone else do it” syndrome. Finally, see that each person knows and fulfills his or her specific responsibilities to the group.

**WORKING WITH OTHERS IN A GROUP OR TEAM TAKES LONGER THAN WORKING ALONE** For many people, one of the major frustrations about group work is the time it takes to accomplish tasks. Not only does a group have to find a time and place where everyone can meet (sometimes a serious problem in itself), but a group simply requires more time to define, analyze, research, and solve problems than do individuals working alone. It takes time for people to talk and listen to others. And, as you’ve heard, time is money! One researcher estimates that one 2-hour meeting attended by 20 executives would cost the equivalent of a week’s salary for one of them. Still, talking and listening in a group usually result in a better solution.

**WHEN THE GROUP OR TEAM HAS LIMITED TIME** If a decision must be made quickly, it may sometimes be better to delegate the decision to an expert. In the heat of battle, commanders usually do not call for a committee meeting of all their troops to decide when to strike. True, the troops may be better satisfied with a decision that they have participated in making, but the obvious need for a quick decision overrides any advantages that may be gained from meeting as a group.

**WHEN AN EXPERT ALREADY HAS THE ANSWER** If you want to know what it’s like to be president of a university, you don’t need to form a committee to answer that question; go ask some university presidents what they do. Or, if you want to know mathematical formulas, scientific theories, or other information that an expert could readily tell you, go ask the expert rather than forming a fact-finding committee. Creating a group to gather information that an expert already knows wastes time.

**WHEN THE INFORMATION IS READILY AVAILABLE FROM RESEARCH SOURCES** In this information age, a wealth of information is available with a click of a mouse. It may not be necessary to form a committee to chase after information that already exists. It may be helpful to put together a group or team if the information needed is extensive and several people are needed to conduct an exhaustive search. But if names, facts, dates, or other pieces of information can be quickly found in an encyclopedia or on the Internet, use those methods rather than making a simple task more complex by forming a group to get the information.

**WHEN GROUP MEMBERS ARE INVOLVED IN UNMANAGEABLE CONFLICT AND CONTENTION** Although both of your authors are optimists, sometimes bringing people together for discussion and dialogue is premature. When conflict clearly may explode into something worse, it may be best to first try other communication formats before putting warring parties in a group to discuss. What may be needed instead of group discussion is more structured communication, such as mediation or negotiation with a leader or facilitator. Or, if group members have discussed an issue and just can’t reach a decision, they may decide to let someone else make the decision for them. The judicial system is used when people can’t or won’t work things out in a rational, logical discussion.

However, don’t avoid forming or participating in groups just because of conflict. Conflict is virtually always present in groups; disagreements can challenge a group to develop a better solution. But if the conflict is intractable, another method of making the decision may be best.
1.3.4: Me Versus We

To work together effectively, individuals must develop common goals and a collective focus rather than pursuing only individual goals. Why might some cultures find this easier to achieve than others?

The personal pronouns *I*, *me*, and *my* can be significant stumbling blocks to collaboration. A focus on individual concerns (*me*) can be a major challenge to collaborating with others (*we*). Most North Americans value individual achievement over collective group or team accomplishment. Researchers describe our tendency to focus on individual accomplishment as individualism. According to Geert Hofstede, individualism is the “emotional independence from groups, organizations, or other collectivities.”65 Individualistic cultures value individual recognition more than group or team recognition. They encourage *self-actualization*—the achievement of one’s potential *as an individual*. The United States, Britain, and Australia usually top the list of countries in which individual rights and accomplishment are valued over collective achievement.

By contrast, collectivistic cultures value group or team achievement more than individual achievement. People from Asian countries such as Japan, China, and Taiwan typically value collaboration and collective achievement more than do those from individualistic cultures. Venezuela, Colombia, and Pakistan are other countries in which people score high on a collective approach to work methods.66 In collectivistic cultures, *we* is more important than *me*. Collectivistic cultures usually think of a group as the primary unit in society, whereas individualistic cultures think about the individual.67

As you might guess, people from individualistic cultures tend to find it more challenging to collaborate in group projects than do people from collectivistic cultures. Table 1.1 contrasts individualistic and collectivistic assumptions about working in small groups. The advantages of communicating in groups and teams are less likely to occur if individualistic assumptions consistently trump collectivistic assumptions.

Table 1.1 Individualism and Collectivism in Small Groups68

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individualistic Assumptions</th>
<th>Collectivistic Assumptions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The most effective decisions are made by individuals.</td>
<td>The most effective decisions are made by teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning should be centralized and done by the leaders.</td>
<td>Planning is best done by all concerned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals should be rewarded.</td>
<td>Groups or teams should be rewarded.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individuals work primarily for themselves.</td>
<td>Individuals work primarily for the team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthy competition between colleagues is more important than teamwork.</td>
<td>Teamwork is more important than competition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetings are mainly for sharing information with individuals.</td>
<td>Meetings are mainly for making group or team decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To get something accomplished, you should work with individuals.</td>
<td>To get something accomplished, you should work with the whole group or team.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A key objective in group meetings is to advance your own ideas.</td>
<td>A key objective in group meetings is to reach consensus or agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Team meetings should be controlled by the leader or chair.</td>
<td>Team meetings should be a place for all team members to bring up what they want.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group or team meetings are often a waste of time.</td>
<td>Group or team meetings are the best way to achieve a goal.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1.4: Communicating in Different Types of Groups

1.4 Compare and contrast primary and secondary groups

There are two broad categories of groups—primary and secondary. Within these broad types, groups can be categorized according to their purpose and function. To give you an idea of the multiple types of groups you belong to, we’ll define these two broad types and then note specific functions within each type.

1.4.1: Primary Groups

A primary group is a group whose main purpose is to give people a way to fulfill their need to associate with others. It is primary in the sense that the group meets the primary human need to relate to others. The main function of the primary group is to perpetuate the group so that members can continue to enjoy one another’s company. Primary groups typically do not meet regularly to solve problems or make decisions, although they sometimes do both of those things.

FAMILY GROUPS Your family is the most fundamental of all primary groups. In his poem “The Death of the Hired Man,” Robert Frost mused, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there/They have to take you in.” Family communication usually does not follow a structured agenda; family conversation is informal and flows naturally from the context and content emerging from the family experiences. Although family groups do accomplish things together, at the core of a family group is the association of simply being a family.

SOCIAL GROUPS In addition to family groups you also have groups of friends who interact over an extended period of time. These groups exist to meet the primary human need for fellowship and human interaction. As in a family group, conversation in social groups, such as your various groups of friends, is informal and typically does not have a pre-planned agenda. You associate with one another for the joy of community—to fulfill the basic human need to be social. Our focus in this book is less with primary groups and more with secondary groups, which accomplish specific tasks such as problem solving, decision making, and learning.

1.4.2: Secondary Groups

Secondary groups exist to accomplish a task or achieve a goal. Most of the groups you belong to at work or school are secondary groups. You are not involved in a committee or a class group assignment just for fun or to meet your social need for belonging (even though you may enjoy the group and make friends with other group members). The main reason you join secondary groups is to get something done. There are several kinds of secondary groups to which you may belong at some point in your life.

PROBLEM-SOLVING GROUPS A problem-solving group exists to overcome some unsatisfactory situation or obstacles to achieving a goal. Many, if not most, groups in business and industry are problem-solving groups. The most common problem that any organization faces (whether it’s a for-profit business or a nonprofit group) is finding a way to make more money.

DECISION-MAKING GROUPS The task of a decision-making group is to make a choice from among several alternatives. The group must identify what the possible choices are, discuss the consequences of the choices, and then select the alternative that best meets a need or achieves the goal of the group or parent organization. A committee that screens applicants for a job has the task of making a decision. The group must select one person from among the many who apply. Decision making is usually a part of the problem-solving process. Groups that have a problem to solve usually must identify several possible solutions and decide on the one that best solves the problem. Although all group problem solving involves making decisions, not all group decision making solves a problem.

STUDY GROUPS As a student, you are no doubt familiar with study groups. The main goal of these groups is to gather information and learn new ideas. We have already noted that one advantage of participating in a group is that you learn by being involved in a discussion. A study group also has the advantage of having access to more information and a wider variety of ideas through the contribution of different individuals.
**THERAPY GROUPS** A therapy group, also called an encounter group, support group, or T-group, helps group members work on personal problems or provides encouragement and support to help manage stress. Such groups are led by professionals who are trained to help members overcome, or at least manage, individual problems in a group setting. Group therapy takes advantage of the self-understanding that members gain as they communicate with one another. Members also learn how they are perceived by others. By participating in a therapy group, people with similar problems can benefit by learning how others have learned to cope. Groups such as Weight Watchers and Alcoholics Anonymous also provide positive reinforcement when members have achieved their goals. By experiencing therapy with others, members take advantage of the greater knowledge and information available to the group.

**COMMITTEES** A committee is a group of people who are elected or appointed for a specific task. Some committees are formed to solve problems. Others are appointed to make a decision or simply to gather information so that another group, team, or committee can make a decision. A committee may be either a standing committee (one that remains active for an extended time period) or an ad hoc committee (one that disbands when its special task has been completed). Like many other people, you may react negatively to serving on a committee. Committee work is often regarded as time-consuming, tedious, and ineffective—except in increasing the sale of aspirin! Perhaps you have heard that “a committee is a way of postponing a decision,” or “a committee is a group of people who individually can do nothing and who collectively decide nothing can be done.” Although frustration with committees is commonplace, you are not doomed to have a negative experience when working with others on a committee. Throughout this book we review principles and skills of group communication that can help you enhance the quality of committee meetings.

**FOCUS GROUPS** A focus group is a small group of people who are asked to focus on a particular topic or issue so that others can better understand the group’s responses to the topic or issue presented. One person usually serves as moderator, and this person asks open-ended questions and then simply listens to the responses of the group members. Many advertising agencies show new advertising campaigns to focus groups and then listen to the response of the group members to assess the impact or effectiveness of the campaign.

1.5: Communicating in Virtual Groups and Teams

1.5 Describe virtual communication methods

With today’s technological advances, people can work together even when they are physically in different locations. Virtual small group communication (also called electronically mediated communication) consists of three or more people who collaborate from different physical locations, perform interdependent tasks, have shared responsibility for the outcome of the work, and rely on some form of technology to communicate with one another. A phone line, fiber-optic cable, wireless signal, satellite signal, or other technology connects people who are communicating in a virtual group. Although technology seems to be a pervasive and revolutionary fact of life—in both our personal and our professional lives—communication researchers predict that technology will play an even larger role in how we collaborate with one another in the future. Although there is evidence that we will spend increasing amounts of time collaborating in virtual groups, we may not always enjoy doing so. Evidence suggests that although virtual groups and teams can perform just as effectively, in most instances, as face-to-face groups and teams, we don’t enjoy the work as much as we do when we are collaborating live and in person. Research also suggests that virtual groups need special support in place to help them operate at peak effectiveness.

1.5.1: Channels of Virtual Collaboration

As a twenty-first century communicator, you have a variety of channels you can use to collaborate with others. The channel, as you recall from our discussion earlier in the chapter, is simply the means by which messages are expressed. Typical channels include voice only messages, simple text (such as e-mail or phone text messages), video, and more elaborate meeting management systems that could use text or both text and video.

**VOICE** The telephone conference call—one of the first uses of technology to support group and team meetings—
involves a group of people agreeing to “meet” at a certain time by phone. To hold a conference call, you may need a special telephone service, available from most phone companies, so that several people in different locations can be connected at the same time.

TEXT Whether texting or e-mailing someone from your computer, using a social networking site such as Facebook, or sharing documents using Google docs or other document sharing software, you will likely use written text to send and receive collaborative messages.

Communicating with group members via e-mail or text can be effective for the discussion of routine business. There is some evidence, however, that groups that make decisions by e-mail have a more difficult time reaching agreement.\textsuperscript{76} Other research, however, suggests that electronic correspondence has the advantage of minimizing status differences that may be present if people meet face to face.\textsuperscript{77} Yet another research team found that groups that use e-mail while solving problems are more likely to do a better job analyzing the problem than groups that interact face to face.\textsuperscript{78} Researchers continue to learn new applications, as well as the advantages and disadvantages, of using e-mail to collaborate.\textsuperscript{79}

VIDEO A video group or team conference occurs when three or more people are linked by the Internet (using a camera connected or built in to a computer) or satellite-linked TV. With the advent of mini-cameras and affordable or free software, it has become increasingly easy for groups to hold video conference meetings using programs such as Skype on the Internet. Several studies have found that a video meeting is more likely to be successful if group members have met one another prior to the video meeting.\textsuperscript{80} Another study found that video-conferences are better than face-to-face meetings when participants are involved in more structured discussion.\textsuperscript{81} Group members seem to prepare better for a video-conference than for a face-to-face meeting; perhaps group members perceive a video conference as more important than an ordinary meeting.

**Electronic Meeting Systems** Electronic meeting systems (EMS) consist of computer software programs (sometimes requiring special hardware) that help group members collaborate when not meeting face to face.\textsuperscript{82} Some EMS use only text, others combine text, PowerPoint, photos, and video. Also referred to as group decision support systems (GDSS) or group support systems (GSS), these technologies are all based on similar principles. GoTo Meeting is one popular software program that lets participants share what’s on their personal computer with the entire group, including PowerPoint slides, data summaries, and written reports. Webinars are seminars that are held via the Internet that could be as simple as voice messages combined with PowerPoint slides; some webinars use more sophisticated, interactive software.

EMS can be used by people who are sitting at computer keyboards in the same room at the same time, projecting what people type onto a large screen. Sometimes people talk to each other directly, just as they would in any face-to-face meeting; at other times they can make contributions via their keyboards. Using EMS, group members can brainstorm ideas, vote, outline ideas, or expand on the ideas of others. EMS can also be used when people are not in the same room at the same time.

Using Web pages or Wiki, group and team members can collaborate in the same electronic space using a common Web page that functions as an electronic bulletin board. Members can go to the Web page for information and may be permitted to change or delete information. Each member has access to what others have gathered and shared. Group members can also paste calendars and schedules onto the Web page to help organize the work.

Wikipedia is a giant Web page (technically called a Wiki) that lets people from all over the world collaborate by retrieving information from this electronic encyclopedia or adding information to it. (Because almost anyone can add information to Wikipedia, many of your instructors may discourage you from liberally quoting from a Wikipedia article because the source of the information may not be known.)

15.2: Differences Between Virtual and Non-Virtual Collaboration

How is electronically mediated group and team collaboration different from live, face-to-face meetings? There are six key differences: (1) time, (2) varying degrees of anonymity, (3) potential for deception, (4) nonverbal messages, (5) written messages, and (6) distance.\textsuperscript{83}

Time Electronic technology makes it possible for you to use virtual methods of communication under four conditions: (1) same time/same place; (2) same time/different place; (3) different time/same place; and (4) different time/different place.\textsuperscript{84}

An asynchronous message is a message that is not read, heard, or seen at the same time you send the message; there is a time delay between when you send and receive a message. Sending a text message to someone who is not monitoring Facebook or leaving a voice message for someone are examples of asynchronous messages. Synchronous messages are those that occur instantly and simultaneously—there is no time delay between when you send a message and the other person receives it. A live video-conference is an example of a synchronous message.

The more synchronous our interaction, the more similar it is to face-to-face interactions. The more a technology resembles a face-to-face conversation, the more social
presence there is. **Social presence** is the feeling we have when we act and think as if we’re involved in an unmediated, face-to-face conversation. Technically, there is always some delay in sending and receiving messages (even in face-to-face interactions, sound takes time to travel, but that “delay” is really imperceptible). The key distinction among different forms of EMS and the degree of social presence we experience is whether we feel we are in a synchronous interaction. When we send text messages back and forth or instant-message with a group of people, we create a shared sense of social or psychological presence with our collaborators.

**VARYING DEGREES OF ANONYMITY** Maybe you’ve seen the cartoon of a cocker spaniel sitting at a computer typing the words “On the Internet, no one knows you’re a dog.” Being able to contribute to a group and knowing that other group members may not know who you are can be liberating and make you feel freer to share ideas with others. Because you can be anonymous, you may say things that are bolder, more honest, or even more outrageous than if your audience knew who you were. But it may also be easier for a group or team member not to contribute to the conversation because there is no accountability for who says what; a group member may just decide to read what others have to say rather than adding to the conversation.

**POTENTIAL FOR DECEPTION** Being anonymous may tempt you and other group members to say things that aren’t true. Because with many forms of EMS you can’t see or hear others, it’s easier to lie. A survey of 191 students at one college found that 40 percent had lied on the Internet. Fifteen percent lied about their age, 8 percent about their weight, 6 percent about appearance, 6 percent about marital status, and 3 percent about what sex they were.

**NONVERBAL MESSAGES** Words and graphics become more important when collaborating virtually compared to face-to-face communication because when texting or e-mailing you must rely solely on them to carry nonverbal cues. Of course, a YouTube video does include nonverbal messages; but even on YouTube some cues may be limited, such as the surrounding context and reactions from others.

Some researchers have found that trust takes longer to develop in virtual forms of communication because team members can’t see one another. Since visual cues provide confirmation of verbal messages, without seeing other members, trust takes longer to develop.

There are some basic things text users do to add emotion to their messages, including CAPITALIZING THE MESSAGE (which is considered “yelling”), making letters bold, inserting graphics, or using emoticons such as smiley faces 😊, a frowning face with glasses 😞, and so on. In face-to-face communication we laugh, smile, or frown in direct response to what others are saying. One team of researchers found that we use emoticons to provide emotional punctuation in our written message. Also, the ability to tease or make sarcastic remarks is limited when using text messages. Because there is no tone of voice in the written message, emoticons help provide information about the intended emotional tone of what is written. You can also write out an accompanying interpretation—for example, “What a kook you are! (just kidding)”—to compensate for the limits of emotional cues.

**WRITTEN MESSAGES** Reliance on the written word also affects virtual collaborations. One online scholar suggests that a person’s typing ability and writing skills affect the quality of any relationship that is developed. The ability to encode thoughts quickly and accurately into written words is not a skill everyone has. Not only do writing skills affect your ability to express yourself online, they also affect how others perceive you. Your written messages provide insights to others about your personality, skills, sense of humor, and even your values.

**DISTANCE** Although we certainly can collaborate virtually with people who live and work in the same building (or even the same room), there is typically greater physical distance between people who are communicating virtually. When using the Internet or a cell phone, we can just as easily send a text or video message to someone on the other side of the globe as we can to someone on the other side of the room.

1.5.3: Virtual Group and Team Theory

Three theories have been developed that further explain and predict how we use electronic meeting systems. The role of nonverbal messages is an integral part of each of these theories.

**CUES-FILTERED-OUT THEORY** One early theory of communication via the Internet was the cues-filtered-out theory. This theory suggests that emotional expression is severely restricted when we communicate using only text messages; the nonverbal cues such as facial expression, gestures, and tone of voice are filtered out. The assumption was that text messages were best used for brief, task-oriented messages such as sharing information or asking questions; text messages were assumed to be less effective in helping people establish meaningful relationships or in solving more complex problems. This theory also suggests that because of the lack of nonverbal cues and other social information, we are less likely to use text-based electronic messages to manage relationships. Although using Facebook or Myspace may include photos, videos, and
ample personal information, it’s still not as rich as a face-to-face conversation.

MEDIA RICHNESS THEORY Another theory helps us predict which form of media we would use, depending on the richness required to convey messages, especially emotional and relational ones. Media richness theory suggests that the richness of a communication channel is based upon four criteria: (1) the amount of feedback that the communicators can receive, (2) the number of cues that the channel can convey and that can be interpreted by a receiver, (3) the variety of language that communicators use, and (4) the potential for expressing emotions and feelings.\(^90\) Using these four criteria, researchers have developed a continuum of communication channels, from communication-rich to communication-lean. As illustrated below, face-to-face conversation is the most media rich, and simply posting an announcement or a flyer is the most media lean.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A CONTINUUM OF MEDIA-RICH TO MEDIA-LEAN MESSAGE SOURCES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Continuum of Media-Rich to Media-Lean Message Sources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Face-to-face, one-on-one discussion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Face-to-face group meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video-conference</td>
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<tr>
<td>Telephone conversation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Computer conference (interactive e-mail)</td>
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<td>Voice mail</td>
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<td>Noninteractive e-mail</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fax</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal letter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Impersonal memo</td>
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<tr>
<td>Posted flyer or announcement</td>
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There is some evidence that those wishing to communicate a negative message, such as ending a relationship, may select a less-rich communication message—they may be more likely to send a letter or an e-mail rather than share the bad news face to face.\(^91\) Similarly, people usually want to share good news in person, where they can enjoy the positive reaction. Both the cues-filtered-out theory and media richness theory suggest that the restriction of nonverbal cues, which provide information about the nature of the relationship, hamper the quality of relationships that can be established using EMS. But a newer perspective suggests that eventually we may be able to discern relational information using EMS.

1.5.4: Social Information-Processing Theory

Social information-processing theory suggests that we can communicate relational and emotional messages via the Internet, but it just may take longer to express messages that are typically communicated using facial expressions and tone of voice. A key difference between face-to-face and computer-mediated communication is the rate at which information reaches you. During a live, in-person conversation, you process a lot of information quickly; you process the words you hear as well as the many nonverbal cues you see (facial expression, gestures, and body posture) and hear (tone of voice and the use of pauses). During text-only interactions, there is less information to process (no audio cues or visual nonverbal expressions), so it takes a bit longer for the relationship to develop—but it does develop as you learn more about your e-mail partner’s likes, dislikes, and feelings.

Social information-processing theory also suggests that if you expect to communicate with your electronic communication partner again, you will likely pay more attention to the relationship cues—expressions of emotions that are communicated directly (such as someone’s writing “I’m feeling bored in this meeting today”) or indirectly (such as when you write a long e-mail message and your e-mail collaborator writes back only a sentence, suggesting he or she may not want to spend much time “talking” today).

A study by Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther extended the application of social information-processing theory. They investigated how computer-mediated communication affects how much information people reveal about themselves, how quickly they reveal it, and the overall impressions people get of one another. In comparing computer-mediated exchanges with face-to-face conversations, Tidwell and Walther found that people in computer-mediated “conversations” asked more direct questions, which resulted in people revealing more, not less, information about themselves when online.\(^92\)

Also, if you expect to communicate with your electronic partner again, there is evidence that you will pay more attention to the relationship cues that develop. In one study, Joseph Walther and Judee Burgoon found that the development of relationships between people who meet face to face differed little from those between people who had computer-mediated interactions.\(^93\) In fact, they found that many computer-mediated groups actually developed more satisfying relationships than the face-to-face groups.
1.6: How Can You Become a Competent Small Group Communicator?

1.6 Name the two essential qualities of competent group members

In the chapters ahead, we discuss principles and skills designed to enhance your competence as a member of a small group. You may be wondering “precisely what does a competent communicator do?” A competent group communicator is a person who is able to interact appropriately and effectively with others in small groups and teams. Communication researcher Michael Mayer found that the two most important behaviors of group members were (1) fully participating in the discussion, especially when analyzing a problem, and (2) offering encouraging, supportive comments to others. Stated succinctly: Participate and be nice.

As a prelude to this book’s discussion of the ideas and strategies that enhance communication in small groups, we will first introduce a more specific definition of competence and then present nine core small group communication competencies.

Virtual Groups

It’s one thing to understand how virtual group collaboration is different from collaborating face to face, and to understand different theoretical approaches to virtual collaboration, but what you may want to know is, what are the do’s and don’ts of collaborating virtually?

1.6.1: The Essence of Communication Competence

Researchers who have studied how to enhance communication competence suggest that three elements are involved in becoming a truly competent communicator: (1) you must be motivated, (2) you must have appropriate knowledge, and (3) you must have the skill to act appropriately.

**MOTIVATION** Motivation is an internal drive to achieve a goal. To be motivated means you have a strong desire to do your best, even during inevitable periods of fatigue and frustration. If you are motivated to become a competent small group communicator, you probably have an understanding of the benefits or advantages of working with others in groups.

**KNOWLEDGE** Knowledge is the information you need to do competently what needs to be done. One key purpose of this book is to give you knowledge that can help you become a more competent communicator in groups, on teams, and during the many meetings you will undoubtedly attend in the future.

**SKILL** A skill is an effective behavior that can be repeated when appropriate. Just having the desire to be effective (motivation) or being able to rattle off lists of principles and theories (knowledge) doesn’t ensure that you will be competent; you have to have the skill to put the principles into practice. The subtitle of this book—Principles and Practices—emphasizes the importance of being able to translate into action what you know and think.
Research supports the commonsense conclusion that practicing group communication skills, especially when you practice the skills in a group or team setting, enhances your group performance.98

1.6.2: The Nine Core Small Group Communication Competencies

Although we’ve described the personal qualities of competent group or team members, you may still be wondering, “What specifically do effective group members do?” Following is an overview of some of the competencies that are essential for members of problem-solving groups. It’s important to emphasize that this overview targets problem-solving discussions. To solve a problem or to achieve a goal you must seek to overcome an obstacle. There is more communication research about how to solve problems and make effective decisions in small groups and teams than on any other topic. The overview presented here sketches some of the core competencies that can result in more effective group outcomes. We will expand on this overview in the chapters ahead.

The nine competencies are grouped into four categories.

### Problem-Oriented Competencies

1. **Define the problem.** Effective group members clearly and appropriately define or describe the problem to be solved and the obstacles to be overcome. Ineffective group members either define the problem inaccurately or make little or no attempt to clarify the problem or issues confronting the group.

2. **Analyze the problem.** Effective group members offer statements that clearly and appropriately examine the causes, history, symptoms, and significance of the problem to be solved. Ineffective members either don’t analyze the problem or they do so inaccurately or inappropriately.

### Solution-Oriented Competencies

1. **Identify criteria.** Effective group members offer clear and appropriate comments that identify the goal the group is attempting to achieve or identify specific criteria (or standards) for an acceptable solution or outcome for the problem facing the group. Ineffective group members don’t clarify the goal or establish criteria for solving the problem. Ineffective groups aren’t sure what they are looking for in a solution or outcome.

2. **Generate solutions.** Effective group members offer several possible solutions or strategies to overcome obstacles or decision options regarding the issues confronting the group. Ineffective group members offer fewer solutions, or they rush to make a decision without considering other options or before defining and analyzing the problem.

3. **Evaluate solutions.** Effective group members systematically evaluate the pros and cons of the solutions that are proposed. Ineffective group members examine neither the positive and negative consequences nor the benefits and potential costs of a solution or decision.

### Discussion-Management Competencies

1. **Maintain task focus.** Effective group members stay on track and keep their focus on the task at hand. Although almost every group wanders off track from time to time, the most effective groups are mindful of their goal and sensitive to completing the work before them. Effective group members also summarize what the group is discussing to keep the group oriented. Ineffective group members have difficulty staying on track and frequently digress from the issues at hand. They also seldom summarize what the group has done, which means that group members aren’t quite sure what they are accomplishing.

2. **Manage interaction.** Effective group members don’t monopolize the conversation; rather, they actively look for ways to draw quieter members into the discussion. Neither are they too quiet; they contribute their fair share of information and look for ways to keep the discussion from becoming a series of monologues; they encourage on-task, supportive dialogue. Ineffective group members either rarely contribute to the discussion or monopolize the discussion by talking too much. They also make little effort to draw others into the conversation and are not sensitive to the need for balanced interaction among group members.

### Relational Competencies

1. **Manage conflict.** Conflict occurs in the best of groups. Effective group members are sensitive to differences of opinion and personal conflict, and they actively seek to manage the conflict by focusing on issues, information, and evidence rather than on personalities. Ineffective group members deal with conflict by making it personal; they are insensitive to the feelings of others and generally focus on personalities at the expense of issues.
2. **Maintain climate.** Effective group members look for opportunities to support and encourage other group members.\(^{100}\) Although they may not agree with all comments made, they actively seek ways to improve the climate and maintain positive relationships with other group members through both verbal and nonverbal expressions of support. Ineffective group members do just the opposite: They are critical of others, and their frowning faces and strident voices nonverbally cast a gloomy pall over the group. Ineffective members rarely use appropriate humor to lessen any tension between members.

**COMPETENCIES ARE ONLY BEGINNINGS** Communicating effectively in small groups and teams involves a variety of competencies. Even as we present these nine competencies, we are not suggesting that they are the only things you need to learn; instead, we present them as a practical beginning to learning the essentials of communicating in small group problem solving and decision making.

**COMPETENT COMMUNICATORS** A competent communicator has not only knowledge and skill but also the motivation to work well with others. In his book *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*, Robert Fulghum suggested that while he was in kindergarten he mastered the basics of getting along with others and accomplishing tasks effectively. This book is designed to add to what you learned in kindergarten and later, so you can become a valued member of the groups to which you belong.

**Case Study**

**The Battle Over Working as a Virtual Group**

It seemed simple enough. Their history professor had divided the class into groups of five or six people to present an oral report to the class about the Civil War. Each group had an assigned topic. Although there was some class time devoted to the project, the professor assumed that the groups would also spend some out-of-class time to collaborate on the report. The problem, however, was that the members of the group assigned to cover the Battle of Appomattox all had part-time jobs, two members had busy lives as parents, and another member commuted to campus an hour away. After comparing their schedules it was obvious they were going to have difficulty finding a time when they could all get together.

They decided that rather than meeting face to face, they would connect outside class via the Internet. Although the professor wanted them to meet in person, the group just didn’t see how that was possible. So they exchanged e-mail addresses and agreed to share information online. They found, however, that it was tricky to make much progress. A couple of group members weren’t clear about the goal of the assignment and just waited for others to start sharing information to see what the group project was all about. Because of a heavy workload, another member just didn’t have time to devote to the project and didn’t seem very committed to the group. There were two members who started sharing their research findings with the entire group; yet when they realized they were the only two doing the work, they stopped volunteering to share their information with the group and only shared their work with each other. One of the top-performing group members started criticizing the group members who weren't doing their fair share of the work. The criticism didn’t do much for the group’s climate. Soon members were spending more time complaining about their colleagues than they were working on the project.

At the midway point the group wasn’t making much progress. Something needed to be done to get the group back on track or they were going to present an oral report that would not only be embarrassingly bad but would also significantly lower their course grade. The professor scheduled one more in-class meeting and announced that the rest of the time the groups would have to meet on their own. The Battle of Appomattox group sensed disaster looming. Mistrust and inaction on the project were increasing.

Each of the nine group communication competencies is founded on the assumption that to be a competent communicator, you must be an ethical communicator. **Ethics** are the beliefs, values, and moral principles by which we determine what is right and what is wrong. Ethical principles are the basis for many of the decisions we make in our personal and professional lives. Throughout the book we will be spotlighting the importance of being an ethical group communicator in a feature, called Shared Writing: What Would You Do? Each one poses an ethical question or dilemma and then invites you to consider the most ethical course of action to take.
How you interact with others is based on your underlying ethical assumptions and beliefs about appropriate and inappropriate ways to treat others. Imagine the following situation.

Your instructor breaks the class into small groups to work on a project. A member of your group has a friend who took the course already. He suggests that your group select the same discussion topic that his friend had so that all of you can benefit from the research already gathered by his friend’s group. Is it ethical to use the previous group’s work? Are there any conditions that would make it more ethical to use the other group’s work? Even if the group you’re in gathers additional research, is it appropriate to “borrow” heavily from the work already completed by others, especially if the goal is to learn how to conduct original research?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specific examples in your discussion.
Chapter 2

Understanding Small Group Communication Theory

Learning Objectives

2.1 Discuss the nature and functions of theory and theory construction
2.2 Review how theory helps people make intelligent decisions
2.3a Explain the relevance of theory to the study of small group communication
2.3b Describe the sense-making role of communication in small groups
2.4 Describe five general theories that apply to small group communication
2.5 Explain the model of small group communication presented in this chapter

“To despise theory is to have the excessively vain pretension to do without knowing what one does, and to speak without knowing what one says.”
—Bernard le Bovier de Fontenelle

We encounter theories every day. Evolution, climate change, the “Big Bang”—all of these may be discussed and evaluated in classrooms, in our daily conversations, in newscasts, and in political debates. When we view crime dramas, fictitious detectives develop theories of crimes as we follow along and try to predict outcomes. But few of us take the time to think about what theories actually do for us. Where do they come from? How are they built? What are they good for?
Today’s students are interested in relevant, practical knowledge, and sometimes—sadly—they assume that theory is neither relevant nor practical. But theory is very practical. Theorizing helps to explain or predict the events in people’s lives. In fact, theorizing is a very basic form of human activity. People theorize on a rudimentary level when they reflect on the past and make decisions based on these reflections. Theory is a set of interrelated facts, observations, and ideas that explains or predicts something. Theory, then, has two basic functions: to explain and to predict. We discuss these functions more fully later in the chapter.

This chapter examines some of the central issues of group communication theory. First, we discuss the nature of theory and the theory-building process. Second, we turn our attention to the relevance and practicality of theory in the study of small group communication. Third, we discuss five theoretical perspectives for the study of small groups. Finally, we present a theoretical model of small group communication.

2.1: The Nature of Theory and the Theory-Building Process

2.1 Discuss the nature and functions of theory and theory construction

Theories are useful in our everyday lives. Suppose, for example, that you do your weekly grocery shopping every Thursday after your late afternoon class. When you arrive at the store, you are pleased to see that several checkout lanes are open, with no one waiting at any of them. “Ah,” you say, “I’ll be out of here in short order.” You proceed up one aisle and down the next. To your dismay, you notice that each time you pass the checkout lanes, the lines have grown. By the time you fill your cart, at least six people are waiting in each lane. You now have a 20-minute wait at the checkout.

If the situation just described were to occur once, you would probably curse your luck or chalk it up to fate. If you find, however, that the same events occur each time you visit the market, you begin to see a consistency in your observations that goes beyond luck or fate. In noticing this consistency, you take the first step in building a theory. You have observed a phenomenon. You have witnessed a repeated pattern of events for which you feel there must be some explanation. So you ponder the situation. In your mind you organize all the facts available to you: the time of your arrival, the condition of the checkout lanes when you enter the store each time, and the length of the lines when you complete your shopping. Lo and behold, you discover that you arrive at the store at approximately 4:45 each afternoon and reach the checkout lanes about 25 minutes later. You conclude that between the time you arrive and the time you depart, thousands of workers head for home, some of them stopping off at the store on the way. Voilà—you have a theory. You have organized your information to explain the phenomenon.

Assuming that your theory is accurate, it is now very useful for you. Having explained the phenomenon, you may now reasonably predict that under the same set of circumstances, the phenomenon will recur. In other words, if you continue to do your weekly shopping after your late afternoon class on Thursday, you will repeatedly be faced with long checkout lines. Given this knowledge, you can adapt your behavior accordingly, perhaps by doing your shopping earlier or later in the day.

On a more personal level, your theory about yourself—your self-concept— influences the choices you make throughout the day. You tend to do things that you see as being consistent (predictable) with your self-concept. In essence, this self-concept, or “self-theory,” serves to explain you to yourself, thereby allowing you to predict your behavior and to successfully select realistic goals. This is theory at its most personal and pervasive.

Theory building is a common, natural process of human communication. You notice consistencies in your experience and examine relationships among the consistencies. You then build an explanation of the phenomenon that allows you to predict future events and, in some cases, to exercise some control over situations. Some theories, of course, are very elaborate and formal, but even in these the fundamental features of explanation and prediction can be seen. George Kelly’s definition of theory refers to these features:

A theory may be considered as a way of binding together a multitude of facts so that one may comprehend them all at once. When the theory enables us to make reasonably precise predictions, one may call it scientific.

Theory is crucial to the study of group communication. The explanatory power of good theory helps make sense of the processes involved when people interact with others in a group. The predictive precision of theory allows people to anticipate probable outcomes of various types of communicative behavior in the group. Armed with this type of knowledge, people can adjust their own communicative behavior to help make group work more effective and rewarding.

WRITING PROMPT

Make a list of informal theories you have about an ordinary day (Professor X is boring, I’m afraid of speaking in class, etc.). On what basis did you formulate these theories? How do they affect your behavior? What might cause you to alter them? Write a brief response addressing these questions. Your response will be read by your instructor. Be sure to include specifics.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit
Understanding Small Group Communication Theory

2.2: Theory: A Practical Approach to Group Communication

2.2 Review how theory helps people make intelligent decisions

Theory, both formal and informal, helps people make intelligent decisions about how to conduct themselves. Working in small groups is no exception. Everyone brings a set of theories to small group meetings—theories about oneself (self-concept), about other group members, and about groups in general. Once in the group, people regulate their behavior according to these theories. They behave in ways consistent with their self-concepts. They deal with others in the group according to their previous impressions (theories) of them. If they believe (theorize) that groups are essentially ineffectual, that “a camel is a horse designed by committee” or that “if you really want something done, do it yourself,” then they probably will act accordingly and reinforce their belief. If, by contrast, they come to the group having learned from this book that groups are capable of working effectively, they will behave very differently and contribute much more to the group’s effectiveness.

2.2.1: Explanatory Function

To be practical, theories of small group communication must suggest ways in which participants can make group discussion more efficient and rewarding. The explanatory function of theory is important in this regard. If people understand why some groups are effective while others are not, or why certain styles of leadership are appropriate in some situations but not in others, they are better prepared to diagnose the needs of their own groups.

2.2.2: Predictive Function

In medicine, a diagnosis is not helpful unless it suggests a course of treatment. Nevertheless, diagnosis—explanation—is a necessary first step. Understanding the process leads toward ways of improving the process, and herein lies the usefulness of the predictive function of theory. By understanding a specific group and group communication in general, and by being aware of possible alternative behaviors, you can use theory to select behaviors that will help you achieve the goal of your group. In other words, if you can reasonably predict that certain outcomes will follow certain types of communication, you can regulate your behavior to achieve the most desirable results. For example, consider this bit of theoretical knowledge about prediction and group communication: Predictions about time—such as how much time a task will take—that are made through group discussion tend to be more optimistic than predictions made by individuals in the group, probably because of the assumption that “many hands make light work.” This tendency may lead to unrealistic time estimates and failure to meet deadlines. If you are a leader or member of a group or team facing such a situation, knowledge of this tendency can help you to moderate its effect by alerting the group and suggesting a little more time for the project at hand.

Some theories presented in this book explain group and team phenomena. These theories are referred to as process theories. Other theories, called method theories, take a prescriptive approach to small group communication. These how-to theories are particularly useful in establishing formats for solving problems and resolving conflicts in a group. Both types of theories add to the knowledge and skills that can make you a more effective communicator. Central to your effectiveness as a communicator is the ability to use words, which are the subject of the next section.

2.3: The Purpose of Communication in Small Groups: Making Sense

2.3a Explain the relevance of theory to the study of small group communication

Communication is the vehicle that allows a group to move toward its goals, and words—spoken or written—are the primary tools of communication. A verbal description of a planned new product at a company’s board meeting creates a vision of that product for board members. Presented effectively, the description may result in new or changed attitudes and behaviors; the idea may be adopted. Words have the power to create new realities and
to change attitudes; they are immensely powerful tools. Although this may seem obvious, it is a truth that often goes unnoticed. We spend so much of each day speaking, listening, reading, and writing that language seems commonplace to us. It is not. Through language, we unravel the immense complexity that is our world. With language, we build the theories that explain the world to ourselves and others.

Human communication is a transactive process by which we make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. Communication organizes and makes sense out of all the sights, sounds, odors, tastes, and sensations in the environment. As communication scholar Dean Barnlund states, “Communication occurs any time meaning is assigned to an internal or external stimulus.” Thus, when people arrive at a meeting room and begin to shiver, the sensation brings to their minds the word cold. Within themselves, or on an interpersonal level, they have reduced uncertainty about the nature of an experience. The room is too cold. Giving verbal expression to an experience organizes and clarifies that experience.

At the interpersonal level of communication, the sense-making process is even more clearly evident. As you get to know someone, you progressively discover what makes that person unique. By developing an explanation of the person’s behavior, you can predict how he or she is likely to respond to future communication and events. You base your predictions on what you know about the person’s beliefs, attitudes, values, and personality. In essence, you build a theory that allows you to explain another person’s behavior, to predict that person’s future responses, and to control your own communicative behavior accordingly. Theories help people make sense of others.

2.3.1: Complexity

Getting to know someone is a process of progressively reducing uncertainty—and a lot of uncertainty exists, especially at the outset of working with others in groups and teams. Think back to your first day at college or to your first day in group communication class. You were probably surrounded by many unfamiliar faces. At times such as these, you may feel tentative or uncertain and think “What am I doing here?” and “Who are all of these other people?” In the cafeteria line, you encounter a person you find attractive. You say, “Hi! Are you new? What do you think of school so far?” This takes some courage because you don’t know what kind of response you will get. So you hesitate. You make small talk and look for signs in the other person’s behavior that might indicate whether that person desires further communication. You communicate, observe the response, and base further communication on your interpretation of that response. This is a complex process, particularly because both you and the other person must communicate, observe, respond, and interpret simultaneously!

The complexity of the process creates uncertainty—a sense of not being able to predict what will happen in the future. The presence of other people always creates uncertainty because you don’t know for sure what they will do or say. Many communication theorists have noted that whenever an individual communicates with another person at least six people are involved: (1) who you think you are, (2) who you think the other person is, (3) who you think the other person thinks you are, (4) who the other person thinks he or she is, (5) who the other person thinks you are, and (6) who the other person thinks you think he or she is. All six of these people influence and are influenced by the communication—a very complex matter indeed.

**WRITING PROMPT**

Think of a recent, memorable conversation you had with another person. In a brief response that will be read by your teacher, describe the conversation and explain who these “six people” were in the conversation.

Submit

2.3.2: Small Groups: More Complexity

Complexity increases dramatically with group size, even when one relationship involves two, not six, people. When eight people interact, literally thousands of factors influence communication and are influenced by it—factors such as “who I think Ted thinks Rosa thinks Amit is” or “who I think Lourdes thinks Tom thinks I am.”

Adding to the complexity are group members’ thoughts and beliefs about the group itself. For example, considerable research has shown that athletic teams’ beliefs about their own ability to perform have a clear effect on actual team outcomes. When feedback about the team’s performance has been artificially manipulated by researchers who inaccurately report exceedingly high or low baseline performance, such feedback affects subsequent team performance. Beliefs about the group itself—even when inaccurate—serve to explain, predict, and thus affect behaviors. Furthermore, when facing a problem or decision, humans have the unique ability to envision scenarios and eventualities in a variety of ways. Decisions are complex tasks and are not always welcomed by group members who may view the uncertainty of decision making with apprehension and anticipation of regret. All of these dynamics add to the complexity of small group communication.
2.4: Theoretical Perspectives for the Study of Group Communication

2.4 Describe five general theories that apply to small group communication

Thus far, we have discussed the nature of theory and its relationship to effective small group communication. Uncertainty and complexity are pervasive characteristics of small groups, and communication is the driving force that moves groups toward their goals.

Small group communication theory attempts to explain and predict group and team phenomena. Given the complexity of the process and the number of variables that affect small group communication, no single theory can account for all the variables involved, nor can one theory systematically relate the variables to one another. Therefore, a number of approaches to group communication theory have emerged in recent years. Each seeks to explain and predict group behavior while focusing on different facets of the group process. Many of these theories will be introduced throughout this book as we discuss different facets of small group communication. For this chapter, we will briefly describe five broad theoretical perspectives that provide fairly holistic approaches: (1) systems theory, (2) social exchange theory, (3) symbolic convergence theory, (4) structuration theory, and (5) functional theory.

2.4.1: Systems Theory

Perhaps the most prevalent approach to small group communication is systems theory because it is flexible enough to encompass the vast array of variables that influence group and team interaction.

One way to approach the concept of a system is to think of your own body. The various organs make up systems (digestive, nervous, circulatory) that, in turn, make up the larger system: your body. Each organ depends on the proper functioning of other organs: A change in one part of the system causes changes in the rest of the system. Furthermore, the physiological system cannot be isolated from the environment that surrounds it; to maintain the proper functioning of your physiological systems, you must adjust to changes outside your body. A decrease in oxygen at a higher elevation will cause you to breathe more rapidly, a rise in temperature will make you perspire, and so forth. In other words, your body is an open system composed of interdependent elements. It receives input from the environment (food, air, water), processes that input (digestion and oxygenation) and yields an output (writing poetry, designing a webpage, cooking a fabulous dinner).

- OPEN SYSTEMS Like the human body, a small group is an open system, composed of interdependent variables, that receives input, processes the input, and yields an output. The system also exhibits the properties of synergy, entropy, and equifinality, which we will now discuss.

- OPENNESS TO ENVIRONMENT Groups do not operate in isolation; they are affected continually by interactions with the environment. New members may join and former members leave; demands from other organizations may alter a group’s goals. Even the climate can affect the group’s ability to work: for instance, a snowstorm may force cancellation of a meeting or a beautiful day outside can cause minds in a meeting room to drift.

- INTERDEPENDENCE The components of group process are interrelated in such a way that a change in one component can alter the relationships among all other components. A shift in cohesiveness or composition can change the group’s productivity level. The loss of a group member or the addition of a new member causes a change felt throughout the system. Interdependence in the small group makes the study of small group communication both fascinating and difficult: None of the variables involved may be understood properly in isolation.

- INPUT VARIABLES By viewing them as parts of subsystems, we can categorize the variables of small group communication according to the systems-theory concept of input, process, and output. Input variables in the small group system include such things as group members and group resources, among them funds, tools, knowledge, purposes, relationships to other groups or organizations, and the physical environment.

- PROCESS VARIABLES Process variables relate to the procedures that the group follows to reach its goals. Many of these variables are represented in Figure 2.1, discussed later in this chapter.

- OUTPUT VARIABLES Output variables—the outcomes of the group process—range from solutions and decisions to personal growth and satisfaction.

- SYNERGY Just as you are more than a composite of your various parts (you are you, after all), groups must be seen as more than the sum of their elements. Synergy is present when the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. When individuals
form groups, they create something—the group—that didn’t exist before; the group is more than the individuals who compose it. The performance of the group is often superior to the performance of the individuals within it.10

2.4.2: Social Exchange Theory

Social exchange theory is a simple but powerful attempt to explain human behavior in terms that sound like a blend of behavioral psychology and economic theory. According to this theory, relationships can be described in terms of their rewards and costs, profits and losses. Rewards are pleasurable outcomes associated with particular behaviors; costs include such things as mental effort, anxiety, or even embarrassment.11 Profit equals rewards minus costs; as long as rewards exceed costs, a relationship remains attractive.

Rewards and costs can take many forms in a group. Fellowship, job satisfaction, achievement, status, and meeting personal needs and goals are all rewards that groups provide. However, group work takes time and effort and may be frustrating—all forms of cost. In one community theater group, participants identified meeting people and the opportunity to perform as the primary rewards, while they saw disorganization, lack of coordination, and time issues as costs.12 Social exchange theory predicts that as long as rewards exceed costs—that is, as long as group membership is profitable—group membership will continue to be attractive. Small group variables such as cohesiveness and productivity are directly related to how rewarding the group experience is to its members. As with all theories discussed in this book, social exchange theory has its limitations. For example, it does not account for the effects of gender and power relationships in groups.13 These are factors that will be addressed elsewhere throughout the book.

The basics of social exchange theory are useful in their descriptiveness. Keep them in mind as you read the remaining chapters and as you observe working groups.

2.4.3: Symbolic Convergence Theory

Symbolic convergence theory describes how groups’ identities develop through shared fantasies. If you consider your closest interpersonal relationships, you can probably remember a point at which each relationship took on a life of its own. For example, when you and an acquaintance become friends, the relationship takes on an identity based on your experiences together and your shared stories and visions of those experiences. Perhaps you develop “inside,” or private, jokes that have meaning only for the two of you.

Communication scholar Ernest Bormann notes that groups take on this kind of shared personality as well. The symbolic convergence theory of communication explains how certain types of communication shape a group’s identity and culture, which in turn influences other dynamics such as norms, roles, and decision making. Over time groups develop a collective consciousness with shared emotions, motives, and meanings.14
FANTASY This group consciousness, Bormann says, evolves as group members share group fantasies or stories. Within this theory, fantasy does not mean what it usually does—something not grounded in reality. Rather, it has a technical meaning: Fantasy is the creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group’s need to make sense of its experience and to anticipate its future. A fantasy is usually introduced as a story that captures the imagination of the group and momentarily takes the group away from the specific issue under discussion. A group fantasy usually deals with real-life people and situations.

In groups, as in almost all forms of human endeavor, we can discern two levels of reality: (1) what actually happens and (2) our interpretations and beliefs about what happens. What remains in our memories and what guides our subsequent behavior is the latter. Suppose, for example, you are in a group discussing how to reduce cheating and other forms of academic dishonesty, and a group member says, “Hey, did anyone see the Tonight Show last night? They had a guy who won the national lying championship. He was so funny. He talked his way into getting photographed with the president of the United States.” Another group member chimes in and says, “Yeah, I saw that. I had an uncle who used to tell whoppers. He once convinced my aunt that he had won a million dollars in the lottery.” Yet another group member says, “My brother always plays practical jokes on my mom.” Before you know it, the pace of conversation quickens and other group members tell stories about people who love to play practical jokes. A fantasy theme consists of the common or related content of the stories the group tells. In addition, the fantasy of one group member leads to a fantasy chain—a string of connected stories that revolve around a common theme. These fantasy chains help the group develop a shared sense of identity, just as the unique theme. These fantasy chains help the group develop a shared sense of connected stories that revolve around a common fantasy. In addition, the fantasy (such as who the villains are in the stories or who wins or loses in the story) can also give you insight about a group’s values and culture. And fantasies may be a way for groups to deal with sensitive issues in an indirect way.

By describing how people in groups come to share a common social reality, symbolic convergence theory explains how groups make decisions and make sense of the decision-making process. It points out that groups, like individuals, have unique “personalities,” cultures, or identities built on shared symbolic representations related to the group; and that these cultures evolve through the adoption of fantasy themes or group stories. Just as we try to understand someone’s behavior by taking into account “what sort of person he or she is,” we must do the same for groups. Reflecting on the stories a group tells, which may seem off the topic, can give you insight into a group’s personality, culture, values, and identity.

Case Study

How Do You Keep a Group on Task?

You have been appointed to a task force whose purpose is to recommend ways to better integrate students who take mostly online courses with students who commute to the campus as well as resident students. The dean of students is concerned with the drop-out rate and is hopeful that your group will offer positive suggestions that will enhance the college experience for all students.

The committee is composed mostly of juniors and seniors. The dean thinks they have been around long enough to “know the ropes.” A majority of group members are traditional undergraduates who live in residence halls. One is a single mother who takes her classes online. As president-elect of next year’s sophomore class, you are the youngest of the six committee members. You are also one of the few commuter students on the committee. The chairperson is a graduating senior and an assistant in the residence halls.

You arrive at the first meeting ready to work. You are excited about being a part of a decision-making process that will have a real effect. To your dismay, the other members of the group seem to disregard their assignment and spend the meeting discussing the prospects for the basketball team, hardly mentioning the task at hand. You leave the meeting confused but hopeful that the next meeting will be more fruitful. You resolve to take a more active role and to try to steer the meeting more toward the committee’s task.

At the second meeting, you suggest that the committee discuss the assigned problem. Members concur at first,
but then make jokes about the futility of retention programs and how the administration is always looking for ways to collect more tuition from students. When the chairperson makes no effort to keep the group on track, you feel overwhelmed and bewildered. You know that the dean expects a report within a month.

2.4.4: Structural Theory

Anthony Giddens offers another contemporary theoretical approach to help us understand how people behave in small groups. The approach is further advanced by communication researcher Marshall Scott Poole and his colleagues. Structuration theory provides a general framework that explains how people structure their groups by making active use of rules and resources. The theory focuses on individuals' behaviors in groups rather than on dynamics of groups per se. It is a process theory that is especially useful for explaining change within groups and organizational systems.

At first glance this concept may seem complicated because of abstract terms; however, we have already talked about two concepts that are important in structuration theory: rules and systems. A system, as you recall, is composed of many interdependent elements. Rules are explicit or implied prescriptions that affect how people behave in a group (system). "Don’t talk while others are talking" and "Don’t leave the meeting until the boss says everyone is dismissed" are examples of rules. These rules determine how the group structures itself and performs tasks, and how group members talk to one another.

Structuration theory suggests that when we join a new group we use rules we learned in other groups to structure our behavior. For example, when you walked into your first college class, you probably drew on your experiences as a high school student to know how to act. But groups also create their own rules and resources to determine what is appropriate and inappropriate. You learned that a college class is similar to but not exactly like a high school class. You also know that different classes have different rules or structure; some classes have informal rules; others have more formal ones. One teacher may deduct points for being absent; another teacher may not take roll at all. How communication rules are organized is based on factors both internal and external to the group. Structuration theory helps explain why and how groups develop the rules and behavior patterns they adopt. It can be especially useful for understanding group communication within broader organizational cultures, such as how a group of jurors in a trial draws on rules each juror has observed from other juries and from dramatic depictions of jury deliberations.

2.4.5: Functional Theory

Much of this book aims to help you identify and enact behaviors that will help your groups reach intended goals. The term function refers to the effect or consequence of a given behavior within a group system. For example, communication can help a group make decisions or manage conflict. Communication has an effect on the group; it has a function. Theories that concern themselves with group functions, then, are those that seek to identify and explain behaviors that help or allow a group to achieve its goals. Functional relationships exist within a group when an outcome occurs as a consequence of a specific behavior, which in turn was intended to produce the consequence.

THREE PROPOSITIONS The functional theory developed by Dennis Gouran and Randy Hirokawa advances three propositions. These researchers suggest that effective group problem solving and decision making are most likely to occur when:

1. group members attempt to satisfy task requirements (including understanding the issue to be resolved, the characteristics of acceptable solutions, and what constitute realistic alternatives; examining the alternatives; and selecting the alternative most likely to satisfy the requirements of the problem);
2. group members use communication to overcome constraints such as stress from deadlines, interpersonal conflict, or self-serving interaction; and
3. group members take the time to review the process through which they arrived at choices and, if necessary, reconsider their choice.
Competent group communicators participate actively and are supportive toward other group members. We also identified nine core competencies of effective group members, all of which were either group task competencies or group relationship competencies. Later we will introduce a functional approach to group problem solving and leadership. All these discussions are grounded in functional theories about how communication in groups promotes appropriate consequences—sound reasoning, critical thinking, the prevention of errors, and the building of productive relationships among group members.25

Rules and resources in interaction provide the structures that define your group’s system. These systems can and do change over time—and sometimes suddenly—through the choices individual group members make. This book and the course you’re taking are designed to arm you with an ever-greater understanding of the rules and resources available to you in group interaction.

2.5: A Model of Small Group Communication

2.5 Explain the model of small group communication presented in this chapter

A model that takes into account all the possible sender, receiver, and message variables in a small group would be hopelessly complicated. A complete systems model of group and team communication would necessarily include psychological forces as well as communication variables.27 No model is ever complete. Consequently, we offer below a less-than-comprehensive model but one that suggests the main features and relationships critical to an understanding of small group communication.
2.5.1: Parts of the Model

Figure 2.1 represents such a descriptive model. This framework depicts small group communication as a constellation of variables, each related to every other. Communication establishes and maintains the relationships among these essential variables. This model thus reflects a systems approach to group and team communication. Below we’ll consider each variable briefly.

**COMMUNICATION** Human communication is how you make sense out of the world and share that sense with others. Communication is what people say, how they say it, and to whom they say it. This process is the primary focus of study in small group communication research.

**LEADERSHIP** Leadership is behavior that exerts influence on the group.

**GOALS** All groups have goals. A goal may be to provide therapy for members, to complete some designated task, or simply to have a good time. Individual group members also have goals. Often individual goals complement the group goal; sometimes, though, they do not. Effective teamwork requires shared, clear, specific goals.

**NORMS** Norms are standards that establish which behaviors are normally permitted or encouraged within the group and which are forbidden or discouraged. Every group, from your family to the president’s cabinet, develops and maintains norms. Some norms are formal, such as a rule about when a group must use parliamentary procedure. Formal, explicitly stated norms are rules that prescribe how group members should behave. Other norms are informal, such as the fact that your study group always meets 15 minutes late. Not only do norms guide and direct behavior in groups, they can also be viewed as characteristics of a group that differentiate it from all other groups.

**ROLES** Roles are sets of expectations people hold for themselves and for others in a given context. People play different roles in different groups. Researchers have identified several roles that need to be filled in order for a small group to reach maximum satisfaction and productivity.

**COHESIVENESS** Cohesiveness is the degree of attraction group members feel toward one another and toward the group. Feelings of loyalty help unite the group.

**SITUATION** The context in which group communication occurs is of paramount importance. The task is significant, but there are many other important situational variables, such as group size, the physical arrangement of group members, the location or setting, the group’s purpose, even the amount of stress placed on the group by time constraints or other internal or external pressures. We will examine each of these situational variables later in the book.

The combined effect of these variables results in group outcomes. A group or team accomplishes something. Group and team outcomes include solving problems, making decisions, feeling satisfied, reaching agreement, or even making money. Small group communication theory seeks to explain the relationships among these and other variables and to make predictions about group outcomes. Thus, the theories presented in this book help explain most of the complexity and uncertainty that surface at every level of group and team interaction. A good theoretical understanding of small groups, coupled with an expanded repertoire of communicative behavior, is the recipe for developing group communication competence—the objective of this book.

**Virtual Groups**

**Modes of Communication**

Face-to-face communication is “media rich” because it involves numerous modes of communication. A mode is the particular way or means through which communication is expressed. In face-to-face communication, the modes correspond to our senses. Thus, the message “I’m so glad to see you” is reinforced when accompanied with a smile and a hug. Modal contradiction occurs when modes conflict, as when a person smirks and continues staring into her cell phone while saying without enthusiasm, “I’m so glad to see you.”

Generally speaking, modal reinforcement is desirable; the addition of modalities strengthens the message. But modal contradiction can also be used to subtly affect the intended message. It is, after all, the mother of sarcasm.

In virtual communication, the nonverbal cues that come so naturally through our senses are absent. But the principles of modal reinforcement and contradiction still apply. Researcher Ashley Walvoord and her colleagues argue that the goal of communication technology should
be to maximize media richness for a particular task by using redundant or complementary modalities. Today’s technology offers visual and auditory possibilities for communication that were not present even a few years ago. Walvoord et al. note that the goal in virtual communication is to approximate face-to-face interaction as closely as possible.

The skill to develop is how to match which text-based or audiovisual modality to communication in virtual teams. The best way to begin is to be conversant with the communication modalities available to you, and then to consider your intended message from the point of view of your target receivers. What combinations of modalities will best strengthen your message without providing so much media richness as to be distracting?

### 2.5.2: Tips for Using This Information

The theories presented in this chapter will be useful to you to the degree that you learn and internalize them. Therefore, the first step in turning theory into practice is to really learn the theories: Study the theories to the point that you can teach them to another person without using notes. Once you have internalized this information, the theories become a part of you, a resource to draw on throughout your life.

Here are some tips for using each:

- **Systems theory** gives you broad perspective. Learn to think about your groups holistically. Every group comprises interdependent parts that affect one another while responding to and shaping the environment.
- **Social exchange theory** focuses on the costs and rewards associated with group membership. Do a simple cost-benefit analysis of your group and then work to minimize costs and maximize rewards for greater group satisfaction and productivity.
- **Symbolic convergence theory** alerts us to the importance of group “personality.” Be mindful of the “fantasies” or stories that circulate within the group to give you insight into the group’s values and ways of dealing with sensitive issues.
- **Structuration theory** focuses on group rules and resources. Identifying and understanding these will strengthen your influence within your groups.
- **Functional theories** focus on behaviors that help the group move toward its goals. Effective group communication involves specific competencies that help groups achieve their goals. Learn these competencies well and work to improve your group communication skills.

- Our general model of small group interaction includes seven variables: communication, leadership, goals, norms, roles, cohesiveness, and situation. Use these categories to help structure your thinking about groups.

As you read the rest of the book, continue to seek ways to apply what you’re learning. The practicality of theories is measured only by how we can use them to be more effective group leaders, members, and scholars.

### SHARED WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Ethical principles help people decide what’s right or wrong. They are theoretical constructs that help people explain situations in which they find themselves, predict possible outcomes from a set of potential actions, and control their behavior to achieve desired effects. Sometimes people are unaware of their own ethical principles until confronted with specific situations that require ethical judgments.

What would you do in the following situation? You and your three roommates see an advertisement for a $1,500 high-definition, big-screen LCD television. You currently have a small, low-resolution TV in your apartment, and on your limited budgets, you can’t really afford a new one. The ad says you may try out the TV in your home for six months with no obligation to buy. If not completely satisfied, you can return the set with no questions asked. If you decide to keep the set, you begin making monthly payments at that time. Will you try out the TV, knowing that there is no way you can keep it longer than six months? Or will you pass on the offer?

You may think there is clearly a right answer, but others may hold the opposite view and see it just as clearly. Our theories of ourselves (self-concepts) include ethical beliefs and principles.

In this situation, what would you do and why? Can you identify the ethical principle that explains your decision in this case? In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

**A minimum number of characters is required to post and earn points. After posting, your response can be viewed by your class and instructor, and you can participate in the class discussion.**

**Post**

0 characters | 140 minimum

**Chapter Quiz: Understanding Small Group Communication Theory**
Chapter 3
Facilitating Group Development

Learning Objectives

3.1 Express broadly why people join groups
3.2a Describe two classification systems of interpersonal needs
3.2b Explain how the classification systems relate to group formation
3.3 Describe individual and group goals and the potential conflict between the two
3.4 Identify ways of establishing mutuality of concern in a work group
3.5 Identify and explain four factors that are elements of interpersonal attraction
3.6 Identify and describe three factors in group attraction
3.7 Describe cultural differences in communication and their effect on group formation and development
3.8a Describe group formation over time
3.8b Discuss a group’s movement through the initial stages of its formation
Like individual humans, groups and teams are born, grow, change, move through fairly predictable stages of life, and die. They, too, require nurturing and sometimes get sick. When this happens, they need diagnosis and treatment. Their health relies on keeping various systems and subsystems in balance.

This chapter is about the process of group formation and development. Formation is more than a one-time event. While there is often an identifiable moment in which groups come into being, they are continually engaged in a process of reinvention as they develop over time. This chapter focuses on what brings people together in groups. It also introduces processes that will be addressed in greater depth throughout the remainder of the book.

Group formation—and development over time—is a complex interplay of needs, goals, attraction, and communication. The competent group communicator recognizes these dynamics and works to keep them in balance.

### 3.1: Why People Join Groups

#### 3.1 Express broadly why people join groups

To all human beings, the formation of groups—from families to teams to corporate boards—is part of a biological imperative that is simply part of the human species; we are, all of us, social animals by nature. We are born into family groups and assigned or elected to other groups and committees. Some common dynamics affect all groups. But we also actively choose many of our affiliations. Individuals differ in their motivation for joining a group as well as in their commitment and contribution to it. The reasons why people join groups can be placed into five broad categories: (1) **interpersonal needs**, (2) individual goals, (3) group and team goals, (4) interpersonal attraction, and (5) group attraction.

#### 3.2: Interpersonal Needs

##### 3.2a Describe two classification systems of interpersonal needs

##### 3.2b Explain how the classification systems relate to group formation

#### 3.2.1: Maslow’s Theory

Abraham Maslow asserted that all humans have basic needs that can be arranged in a hierarchy; that is, people do not concern themselves with higher-level needs until lower-level needs are satisfied. Figure 3.1 illustrates how interpersonal needs form a hierarchy.

**Figure 3.1 Hierarchy of Interpersonal Needs**


**Physiological Needs** Maslow termed the first level of needs, at the bottom of the hierarchy, *physiological needs*. People have physiological needs for air, water, and food.

**Safety Needs** Safety needs are for one’s security and protection. Maslow called the first two levels of the hierarchy *survival needs*; satisfaction of these needs is necessary for basic human existence. During childhood years, the family satisfies these needs.

Once survival needs are fulfilled, the higher-level needs that Maslow called *psychological needs*—the need to belong, the need for esteem, and the need for self-actualization—become more important. These needs may affect people’s group memberships throughout their lives.

**Belongingness Need** People need to feel that they are a part of some group. Here, again, the family provides a sense of belonging for children, but as they get older they begin to look outside the family to satisfy this need. Peer groups gain special importance during adolescence. At that time, people’s need for affiliation is at its strongest.
Esteem Need Once people have developed a sense of belonging, Maslow says, they need respect or esteem. They need to feel not only that they are accepted but also that they are considered worthwhile and valued by others. When we are promoted, recognized, congratulated, thanked, and given awards, our esteem needs are addressed.

Self-Actualization Need The need for self-actualization differs from the other four needs. Maslow termed the other four needs deficiency needs because individuals subconsciously perceive these needs as inner voids, which they fill by drawing on the resources of other people. Maslow called the need for self-actualization a being need. This need motivates people to try to fulfill their potential and live life to its fullest. They are ready to function as autonomous beings, operating independently in quest of their own full potential. They no longer need groups to take care of their deficiencies; instead, they need groups in which to find and express their wholeness. Participation in service-oriented groups such as Habitat for Humanity may fulfill self-actualization needs in many. Although this need level is perhaps the most difficult to grasp conceptually, Maslow’s hierarchy is consistent: People need groups to satisfy interpersonal needs. They also differ from one another in their motivations for joining groups. These differing motivations may be reflected in their communicative behavior in a group. Those who simply want to belong may interact differently from those who need the group’s esteem or respect. The higher we move up Maslow’s hierarchy, the more important communication becomes in need satisfaction.3

3.2.2: Schutz’s Theory

In an elaborate theory of interpersonal behavior, William Schutz suggested that three basic human needs influence individuals as they form and interact in groups: the need for inclusion, the need for control, and the need for affection.4 Individuals’ needs vary, but groups often provide settings in which such needs can be satisfied.

Inclusion Need Just as Maslow postulated a belongingness need, Schutz said people join groups to fulfill their need for inclusion. They need to be recognized as unique individuals and to feel understood. When people try to understand someone, the implication is that the individual is worthy of their time and effort. In this respect, Schutz’s inclusion need is also related to Maslow’s esteem need.

Control Need People need control to gain status and power. They need to have some control over themselves and others, and sometimes they need to give others some control over them, such as when they seek guidance and direction. There is wide variation in peoples’ control needs. Such needs are often observed as bossiness or, conversely, submissiveness.

Affection Need The need for affection drives people to give and receive emotional warmth and closeness. Some people are natural care givers and exercise their need to nurture others in groups. Others (and sometimes the same people) need to feel the acceptance, warmth, and love that groups can provide.

In a broad sense, groups are more than collections of people with common goals; they are arenas in which individual needs are satisfied or frustrated. Schutz asserted that people’s needs for inclusion, control, and affection influence group development throughout the life of the group. He observed that in the initial stages of group formation, communication aims primarily toward fulfilling members’ inclusion needs. Group members are friendly but cautious as they try to evaluate one another and be accepted by other members. As the group develops, control needs become more evident; members contest issues and vie for leadership. Schutz observed that as conflicts resolve, people turn toward affection needs. Members characteristically express positive feelings in this phase. The progression, Schutz says, is cyclical.

REPEATING CYCLES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

From Schutz’s perspective, the process of group formation is not limited to the initial coming together of the group members. Rather, formation patterns repeat themselves as the group develops over time. Group decision making involves a series of smaller decisions on the way toward achieving the group’s primary goal. For example, a group of engineers planning to construct a bridge must make decisions about the location and frequency of their meetings as well as the design and materials for the bridge. A group progresses through developmental phases throughout its life, and this cyclical pattern of formation and re-formation occurs whenever the group approaches a new meeting and a new decision. If this process could be visualized, it might look something like a large jellyfish moving through the water. The jellyfish floats in the water in a relatively aimless way until it needs to move forward. Then it organizes itself, contracts, and propels itself through the water, after which its movements again become less organized. A group progresses through a similar series of contractions until it reaches its ultimate goal.

A group is defined, in part, by a common purpose. That purpose contains several smaller goals. As a group reaches each of these goals, it momentarily loses a bit of its definition until a new goal replaces the old one. As people accomplish each new goal, they begin a new cycle of inclusion, control, and affection behaviors. Listen as the following example illustrates this point:

Harv: Well, it’s been hard, but we’ve finally found a date for the banquet that we can all agree on.
3.3: Individual and Group Goals

3.3 Describe individual and group goals and the potential conflict between the two

Theories of psychological and interpersonal needs explain some of the bases for group development. So, too, do individual goals. Goals have a more tangible and obvious effect on your selection of group memberships. What do you want out of life? Happiness? Status? Power? Fame? Recreation? Education? Personal growth? In other words, what goals do you have that exist apart from any particular group membership?

Individual goals are instrumental in determining which groups people join. Obviously, if people enjoy arranging flowers and wish to improve their skills, they’ll join garden clubs. If artistic expression is an aim, people will join arts groups. If they desire status and power, they’ll seek membership in elite social or professional groups. Sometimes the prestige associated with a particular group is enough to make membership attractive. Whatever their individual goals may be, people bring those goals with them when they join groups.

Sometimes individual goals are group-centric; that is, an individual goal may be significant for the group’s or team’s success. Consider, for example, a basketball player with the goal of helping her team be successful in any way possible. Her behavior on the court will be different—and more helpful—than that of the player whose individual goal is to score as many points as possible, which may negatively affect her defensive play or her tendency to pass the ball to a teammate. When individual and group goals coincide, greater productivity often follows.

Sometimes people choose a group because its goals coincide with their own. For example, Habitat for Humanity—which builds homes for the working poor—attracts members and volunteers for whom this goal is consistent with their own values. But not all groups are self-selected.

Group and team goals are identifiable future achievements that transcend the group members’ individual goals. This is the paradox of group membership: we often join groups to meet personal goals, which must then be made secondary, in part, for the group to succeed. But there’s a payoff: in the workplace, group or team goal achievement is related to greater group attraction, individual satisfaction, and employee job satisfaction.

When personal goals conflict with group goals, the results can be counter-productive. Especially when high levels of commitment are required, groups should question their participants’ mutuality of concern—the degree to which members share the same level of commitment to the group or team—during the early stages of group formation.
people join groups, they often assume that other group members share their commitment to the group’s task. If a problem is to be solved, they take for granted that others view the problem the same way they do. However, each person brings a different perspective to a group. Some group members are invariably more conscientious than others. Studies have shown that the more dissimilar team members are in this respect, the less satisfied they are likely to be with their team. Conversely, strong conscientiousness within a group is strongly related to group performance.

People also bring different levels of commitment or concern to groups. Suppose you have been appointed to a student-government group whose task is to recommend whether your college should institute a plus/minus grading system or continue with a traditional A, B, C, D grading policy. If you are a first- or second-year student, this policy change could have a direct effect on your grade-point average over your four years in college. If you are a graduating senior, this policy change would have little or no effect on you. Hence, the level of concern over the problem can vary from member to member. Once again, individual goals interact with a group goal. Those affected directly by the problem will probably become more active in the group than those who are not.

The degree to which members are concerned with the group’s task need to be clarified at the outset. All group members should clearly state their own needs and goals regarding the task. They should also acknowledge constraints on their time or interest. Establishing realistic expectations among group members will help minimize misunderstandings and conflict.

Although individual needs and goals may bring a group together in the first place, they can also break a group apart. The success or failure of a group depends, in part, on the degree to which its goal is adopted by individuals as their own. Unsatisfied or unclarified individual needs and goals can become hidden agendas—private goals toward which individuals work while seeming to work toward the group goal. Such hidden agendas can be extremely disruptive to the group. Establishing mutuality of concern can help reduce this negative influence.

Putting Principles into Practice

Mutuality of Concern

People who join groups often assume that other group members share their commitment to the group’s tasks. Individual needs and goals can bring a group together at the outset, but they can also break a group apart. For groups to succeed, the collective goal should transcend the goals of the individual group members.

The degrees to which members are concerned with the group’s task need to be clarified at the outset. All group members should clearly state their own needs and goals regarding the task. They should also acknowledge constraints on their time or interest. Establishing realistic expectations among group members will help minimize misunderstandings and conflict.

Real-Life Applications

Communication scholar Michael Kramer studied a community theater group to see how its members managed multiple group roles. A community theater is a good example of a group that sometimes requires extraordinary commitments of time and effort over a limited period of time. Kramer found that members had to make their membership in the theater group a priority over their membership in other groups until the production ended, after which they could again devote time and effort to their other commitments.
Members of the theater group managed conflicts among their several group memberships in three ways. First, they auditioned for productions only if they thought conflicts would be minimal. Second, they negotiated conflicts (such as being required to attend regular meetings of other groups) in advance, so the theater group could allow for such time conflicts in its planning. Third, they informed members of their other groups of their temporary conflicts. While these strategies were noted in a particular context, they translate well to many types of groups and contexts.

Consider the following strategies to manage conflicts

- Try to avoid putting yourself in group situations if you don’t have the time, energy, or interest to commit and do a good job.
- When you know you have conflicts and other interests that will compete for your time and attention, be “up front” with your group: Explain your situation and work to find acceptable solutions.
- When you accept new positions or assignments, explain the new demands on your time to those in groups you’re already a part of; in other words, renegotiate your level of commitment to the groups of which you’re a member.

Consider the following practical questions when joining new groups and teams

- How does participating in the group relate to your overall goals and objectives? Will it, for example, help you with your work or school goals, give your life more meaning or balance, or assist you in developing quality relationships with others?
- What will you have to give up if you participate in this group?
- How will your new group affect your existing obligations to your employer, colleagues, friends, or family members?

3.5: Interpersonal Attraction

3.5 Identify and explain four factors that are elements of interpersonal attraction

Often people are attracted not to groups but to the people in the groups. Of the many factors that influence interpersonal attraction, four are especially significant: similarity, complementarity, proximity/contact/interaction, and physical attractiveness.

3.5.1: Similarity

One of the strongest influences in interpersonal attraction is similarity. Remember your first day on campus? That feeling of being new and alone? You needed a friend, and with luck you found one. In looking for a friend, did you seek out someone you perceived to be very different from you? Most likely not. As the principle of similarity in interpersonal attraction suggests, you probably looked for someone who appeared to be in the same situation—another lonely newcomer, or perhaps someone dressed as you were.

Who are your closest friends? Do you share many of the same attitudes, beliefs, and values? Do you enjoy the same activities? People are often attracted to those they consider to be like them. A probable explanation for such attraction is that similar backgrounds, beliefs, attitudes, and values make it easier to understand one another—and all people like to fostering cognitive engagement. In any given situation the interaction of individual and group needs will cause one of four possible outcomes:

1. Individual and group needs may be so diverse that they interfere with each other, with no positive effects accruing either to individuals within the group or to the group as a whole.
2. Group interaction may result in the realization of group goals, while individual needs are not met.
3. One or more group members may have their needs met, to the detriment or destruction of the group.
4. Individual and group needs may blend so completely that the needs realized by the group as a whole are the same needs individuals wish to realize.

In the ideal, fully integrated group, this fourth alternative is realized. Mutuality of concern can merge individual and group needs and goals.

Aside from the relationships among interpersonal needs, personal goals, and group goals, two other factors influence people’s selection of groups: interpersonal attraction and group attraction.
feel that others understand them. The converse of the similarity factor may also be true: People may be repelled by those whose attitudes differ from theirs.\textsuperscript{14}

One danger of the similarity factor in group formation is that our tendency to be attracted to people like ourselves may result in a group that is too homogeneous to approach a complex task effectively. Indeed, research on classroom groups found that by a two-to-one margin, students reported their worst experiences occurred in groups they had formed themselves. Their best experiences most likely occurred in groups to which professors had assigned them.\textsuperscript{15}

### 3.5.2: Complementarity

In reading the previous section on similarity, some of you probably shook your heads and said, “No, that’s not the way it is at all. My best friend and I are about as similar as an orchid and a fire hydrant!” No generalization is entirely true, and so it is with the principle of similarity. While birds of a feather may flock together, it is also true that opposites attract. John Thibaut and Harold Kelley suggest that some interpersonal relationships are based primarily on similarity, whereas others are based on complementarity.\textsuperscript{16} At times people may be attracted to others who exhibit qualities that they do not have but that they admire. For at least a partial explanation of attraction through complementarity, consider Schutz’s theory of interpersonal needs, discussed earlier. According to this theory, a person who has a high need to control, for example, would be most compatible with a person who has a high need to be controlled. The same would be true of needs to express and to receive affection and the needs to feel included and to include others. These are complementary needs rather than similar needs.

### 3.5.3: Proximity, Contact, and Interaction

You tend to be attracted to people who are physically close to you, who live or work with you, and whom you see or communicate with often. If you know that you have to live or work close to another person, you may ignore that person’s less desirable traits in order to minimize potential conflict. Furthermore, proximity, contact, and interaction breed familiarity, and familiarity has a positive influence on interpersonal attraction.\textsuperscript{17} Interaction with another person helps you get to know that person, and through this process the two of you may uncover similarities and discover ways in which you can satisfy each other’s interpersonal needs. The actual physical distance between people, then, does not influence attraction, but the interpersonal possibilities illuminated by proximity, contact, and interaction do.

### 3.5.4: Physical Attractiveness

At least in the initial stages of interpersonal attraction, physical attractiveness influences people. If a person is physically beautiful, others tend to want to affiliate with him or her.\textsuperscript{18} However, evidence indicates that this factor diminishes in importance over time, and that—at least in North American cultures—physical beauty is more important to males than to females.\textsuperscript{19}

In sum, people seem to be attracted to others who are similar to them and, thus, likely to understand them, who can fulfill their needs and complement their personalities, who are familiar to them because of repeated contact, and who are physically appealing. Those qualities in group members constitute a powerful influence on people’s selection of groups.

### 3.6: Group Attraction

#### 3.6 Identify and describe three factors in group attraction

Although individuals may be attracted to a group because of the members who compose it, they may also be attracted to the group itself. Such attraction usually focuses on the group’s activities or goals, or simply on the desirability of group membership.

#### 3.6.1: Group Activities

Although research is not extensive in this area, it seems fairly clear that people who are interested in the same activities tend to form groups.\textsuperscript{20} People who enjoy intellectual pursuits may join literary discussion groups. Those who enjoy playing soccer join soccer teams. Beyond these obvious examples, people may be attracted to the activities of a group in a more general sense. Some may join groups simply because they enjoy going to regular meetings and joining in group discussions, regardless of the group’s specific aims or goals. The structure and human contact provided by groups are potentially rewarding in and of themselves.

#### 3.6.2: Group Goals

A group’s goal is another factor that may attract people to the group. If, for example, people believe that the spread of coal-burning plants must be curtailed, they may join a group dedicated to changing national energy policy. If they believe in preserving and protecting the natural environment, they may join The Nature Conservancy, the Sierra Club, the Audubon Society, or any organization that professes a similar goal.
Virtual Groups

When forming a group, remember that people from different cultures often have differing views and preferences when it comes to using virtual technologies. You may encounter some of the following attitudes about technology based on five cultural factors identified by researcher Geert Hofstede.²¹

Despite cultural differences, several commonalities also exist. If you are the leader of a virtual group, four tactics will enhance team members’ identification with the team: catering for the individual (asserting each team member’s individuality and their rights to different opinions), giving positive feedback, pointing out common goals, and talking up team activities and face-to-face interactions.²²

3.6.3: Group Membership

Sometimes it is not a group’s members, activities, or goals that attract people but membership itself. Potential members may perceive that membership in an exclusive club or honor society will bring them prestige, acceptance, or professional benefits outside the group. For example, company officials may expect a young executive to belong to some civic group because such memberships provide good public relations for the firm.

The need for affiliation—Maslow’s belongingness need and Schutz’s inclusion need—is basic to human nature and can make group membership attractive. In addition to affiliation, group membership also fulfills people’s needs for achievement and identity.²³ Indeed, a substantial body of research indicates that the satisfaction provided by group membership is important to people’s happiness.²⁴
Collectivists are more likely to conform to group norms and to value group decisions highly. We caution you, though, against overgeneralization. Although different cultures clearly foster different orientations, there is also ample evidence that there are vast differences among people within any culture. Thus, it is nearly impossible to predict with certainty an individualist or a collectivist orientation based on culture alone.

Although differences in individualism always exist in groups, these differences can be extreme if group members are culturally diverse, and extreme differences can result in low group satisfaction and difficulty establishing mutuality of concern.

### 3.7.2: High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

In some cultures the surrounding context of an interaction or the unspoken, nonverbal message plays a greater role than in others. A high-context culture is one in which more emphasis is placed on nonverbal communication. In high-context cultures, the physical environment is important in helping communicators interpret the message. The environment, the situation, and the communicator’s mood are especially significant in decoding messages. A low-context culture places more emphasis on verbal expression. Figure 3.2 shows cultures arranged along a continuum from high to low context.

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### Figure 3.2 Where Different Cultures Fall on the Context Scale

People from high-context cultures may be more skilled in interpreting nonverbal information than people from low-context cultures. Individuals from high-context cultures may also use fewer words to express themselves. Because individuals from low-context cultures place greater emphasis on speech, they may talk more than those belonging to high-context cultures. People from a low-context culture typically are less sensitive to the nonverbal cues in the environment and the situation in interpreting the messages of others.\(^{29}\)

In a small group, high- or low-context orientation can play a role in the amount of time a person talks and his or her sensitivity in responding to unspoken dynamics of a group’s climate. Sometimes people from a high-context culture will find those from a low-context culture less credible or trustworthy. Someone from a low-context culture may be more likely to make explicit requests for information by saying, “Tell it like it is.” In contrast, a person from a high-context culture expects communication to be more indirect and to rely on more implicit cues.

**3.7.3: High-Contact and Low-Contact Cultures**

In some cultures, people are more comfortable being touched or being physically close to others; these are said to be **high-contact cultures**. Individuals from **low-contact cultures** tend to prefer more personal space, typically make less eye contact with others, and are much more uncomfortable with being touched or approached by others.\(^{30}\)

**AFFECTS OF HIGH OR LOW CONTACT CULTURES**

Whether group members are from high- or low-contact cultures can affect preferred seating arrangements and other aspects of small-group ecology. For example, people from some cultural groups, such as the Chinese, prefer sitting side by side rather than directly across from one another.\(^{31}\) Fathi Yousef and Nancy Briggs found that in Middle Eastern countries it is appropriate to stand close enough to someone to smell their breath.\(^{32}\) North Americans usually prefer more space around them than do Latin Americans, Arabs, and Greeks.\(^{33}\) Cultural differences can also be found among ethnic groups within the same country.

When we come to a group, our cultures—whatever they may be—come with us. These differing cultures, as well as individual differences, can contribute to a kind of tension in the group that communication scholars Kevin Barge and Lawrence Frey describe as “the product of two ideas being equally valid when considered alone, but contradictory when paired.”\(^{34}\) They give the following pairs of statements as examples:

I need to behave consistently in a group.
I need to adapt my behavior to changes in the group situation.

It is important to fit in with and be like other group members, even when doing so goes against my personal beliefs.
It is important to maintain my individuality when I am in a group.
Good group members defer their own needs to the larger needs of the group.
Good group members act independently within the group and pursue their personal agendas.\(^{35}\)

While it may be tempting to make stereotypical inferences about all people within a given culture based on some of the research conclusions, Robert Shuter cautions against making broad, sweeping generalizations about a specific culture.\(^{36}\) His research found significant variations in nonverbal behavior within cultures. Our discussion has been intended simply to document the existence of cultural differences and to warn that such differences may hamper effective communication in small groups.

No list of simple suggestions or techniques will help you manage the cultural differences that you will encounter in groups. However, a basic principle can help: *When interacting with people from a culture other than your own, note differences you think may be culture-based and adapt accordingly. Become other-oriented.* We are not suggesting that you abandon your cultural norms, traditions, and expectations—only that you become more flexible, thereby minimizing the communication distortion that cultural differences may cause. Carley Dodd suggests that if you think you have offended someone or acted inappropriately, you can ask the other person if you have, and if so, find out what exactly you did wrong.\(^{37}\) Being aware of and responding to cultural differences in small groups can enhance your ability to interact with others.

**3.7.4: Homogeneity and Diversity**

Earlier in the chapter we noted the dynamic tension created when individual goals and group goals conflict. Each of us seeks to be independent and autonomous, while depending on the groups to which we belong. We need to influence and control, as well as being influenced and controlled by others. Even in the most homogeneous groups, varying levels of these needs coupled with differing views of the group and its goals can make for an interesting time and a fascinating field for study.

As we join or are assigned to groups, we are likely to find that those groups include increasing diversity. Research showing that women represent 47 percent and minorities 32 percent of the workforce in the United States is but one indication of this trend.\(^{38}\)

What if we have a choice? Are groups that are more homogeneous in terms of race, gender, culture, and general ability more effective or less effective than more diverse groups? Which should we choose? Perhaps, not
surprisingly, there are advantages and disadvantages to each. There is some evidence that over time diverse groups can be more effective because they include more potential in terms of skills and approaches to problems. For example, in groups where high levels of difficult cognition are required, diversity in educational specialization and age contribute positively to team identification and team performance. However, there is also evidence that differences in age and nationality often contribute to personality clashes, especially in newly formed teams. Such groups tend to fare better if they acknowledge their diversity at the outset and create a supportive climate tolerant of diverse opinions and personalities. It is also helpful for highly diverse groups to focus most sharply on the group’s task in the early stages of the group’s development. When comparing homogeneous work groups with diverse work groups, researchers find that diverse work groups often have more trouble initially, but over time they become more productive than homogeneous groups. This makes sense. We are more comfortable with people whom we think are similar to us. This makes for easier interaction in the initial stages of group formation. With a little effort, though, diverse groups can find the common ground to make interaction work; their diversity often produces more flexibility, more options, and more ways of looking at a problem. Diversity in groups is clearly associated with positive outcomes for groups, particularly with task-oriented or productivity outcomes.

3.8: Group Formation over Time

3.8a Describe group formation over time

3.8b Discuss a group’s movement through the initial stages of its formation

The process of group development is a progressive movement along a continuum ranging from a loose aggregate of people to a high-functioning team. This transformation from nongroup to group includes identification with the group, interrelationship, coordination among group members, and orientation to group goals. The previous sections on group diversity and intercultural differences highlight the importance or recognizing, understanding, and adapting to differences from the outset of group formation.

Once a group forms, it continues to grow and develop over time. Many researchers observe that group development follows fairly predictable stages. Perhaps the best-known scheme for these stages was advanced by Bruce Tuckman. The initial stage is forming, a period characterized by anxiety and uncertainty about belonging to the group and a resulting cautiousness in behavior. In the second stage, storming, competition, individuality, and conflict emerge as group members try to satisfy their individual needs. The third stage, norming, is characterized by attempts to resolve earlier conflicts, often by negotiating clear guidelines for the group. Performing is the fourth stage. Cooperation and productive work are the hallmarks of this stage. Although not all groups neatly cycle through these stages, you will probably be able to detect forming, storming, norming, and performing behaviors in many of the groups and teams in which you participate.

Remember these stages as you read this book. Developmental changes in the life of a group relate to many important group dynamics, including conflict management and leadership.

Writing Prompt

How can you best facilitate a group’s movement through the initial stages of its formation? Write a brief response that will be read by your instructor.

Groups change over time, and sometimes group members leave and are replaced by new members. Socializing these new members to their new group is important. Over time groups develop a “personality” of their own. Group or team members become oriented to one another, they set patterns of behavior and group norms, and they develop a shared collective experience—their own fantasy chains, rules, and systems. But what happens when a newcomer joins the team? Changes in membership alter the group’s dynamics, sometimes profoundly. Continuing success depends on how well the new member adapts to particular group dynamics (is socialized) and how well the group adapts to the characteristics, abilities, and skills of the new member.

Case Study

How Do You Manage Conflicting Needs and Goals?

The First Church of Roseville has a Building and Grounds committee. This committee, charged with overseeing the regular maintenance and upkeep of the church building and surrounding property, makes sure that the lawns are
mowed, the hedges trimmed, the furnace maintained, the roof patched, and so forth.

The group convenes for its first monthly meeting. The church custodian has just resigned, and just before leaving, he reported that the roof of the church leaks. The group’s goal is to maintain the building and grounds. All of the members are, to some degree, committed to the goal. However, this commitment means different things to different members.

The committee consists of the following members:

ROBERTO BOMBBLAST. Roberto has been an accountant for a local firm for 23 years. He has never felt that his firm has given him a chance to show his true leadership ability. He sees the church committee, of which he is chair, as his big chance to prove himself and show the world what a truly fine administrator he is. He has another ulterior motive: He wants very much to be the new part-time business manager for the church when “Old George,” the present manager, dies or retires. This committee, then, is Roberto’s stepping-stone to greatness.

MARMALADE. No one is sure of Marmalade’s real name. He was found 10 years ago wandering around the sanctuary, staring at the stained glass, and saying, “Wow . . . wow . . . wowowowow . . .” The church members took him under their wing, and he has been sweeping floors and doing other odd jobs around the church since then. The pastor thought it would “do Marmalade some good” to get involved with a responsible committee, so he assigned him to this one.

LATASHA GREENE. Latasha is a young attorney who joined the church last year because she enjoys its outstanding music program. She has been dismayed, though, to find church governance still dominated by white males. “What decade are we in?” she wonders. “Don’t they know the millennium has come and gone?” She is annoyed because Roberto BOMBBLAST and Thurman JESTER act as if they are in charge of everything.

MERRY PLCID. In all of her 47 years, Merry has not been outside her home state. She loves her country, her state, her community, her home, and her family. She especially loves her church because of the sense of warmth and community she feels there. She has served on every committee in the church. Merry has a high need for inclusion. She is pleased to be on this committee.

THURMAN JESTER. Ever since his vacation trip to Dallas, Thurman wears a white belt and off-white shoes to work every day (and strongly urges his employees at the insurance office to do the same). He is committed to keeping up with the trendsetters, and Dallas, he feels, is where trends are set. Thurman was also impressed by a 40-foot neon cross he spotted outside a church in Dallas. He is highly motivated by control needs.

As group membership changes, groups contain members experiencing different membership phases. One key issue that arises in such groups is trust. Mutual trust takes time to build among newer and more established group members, as new members may not yet be fully accepted by the already established members. When new members join a group, the group re-forms and will likely repeat the “forming” and “storming” phases of development to some degree.

Successful socialization of a new group or team member depends largely on expectations: the newcomer’s expectations of his or her own performance as well as the group’s expectations of the newcomer. The degree to which these expectations are compatible is the primary determinant of a successful transition. Just as a group should spend time establishing mutuality of concern at the beginning of its life, similarly it should revisit these considerations when group membership changes.

In many respects, the group is new each time its membership changes. This re-formation presents its own stages of development. The socialization of a newcomer actually begins with a period of anticipation prior to the first meeting at which the newcomer is present, in which the group formulates initial expectations. These expectations are modified or reinforced very quickly during the initial face-to-face encounter among team members. In the final phase of socialization, adjustment, newcomer and team members adjust to one another and team performance stabilizes.

It is important to note here that positive team expectations for a new member enhance the probability of a successful outcome. Likewise, viewing changing team membership as beneficial will enhance the probability of a
good outcome. Successful integration of new members is especially important in teams in which members have specialized roles and are highly interdependent.48

The dynamic interrelatedness of all the variables that affect small-group processes makes the study of small-group communication challenging and exciting. As you continue through the rest of this book, it is important that you retain what you have previously learned. Only when you have fit all the puzzle pieces together can you see a clear picture of small-group communication.

This chapter has highlighted one part of the puzzle: those needs and goals that motivate people to join groups and that influence their behavior within those groups. In the initial stages of group development, uncertainty—about the group, about its goals, and about each member’s place in it—is at its peak. How you communicate at this sensitive stage of group development provides the basis for future interaction.

**SHARED WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

We often join groups to satisfy personal needs or to accomplish personal goals. But is it ethical to join groups to promote personal objectives? Is it selfish?

Imagine that you are part of an important team preparing to launch a new project. All of you know that the project will involve hard, time-consuming work, but if it succeeds, it will bring great benefits to your organization. A position opens up on your team because one of the members moves away. On several occasions one of your best friends has indicated that if a position on the team ever became available, she would like to be considered. You know that your friend is intelligent and capable and could make a contribution to the team’s efforts if she can truly commit to it. The problem is, you know that she has already spread herself too thin. She is ambitious and has already accepted leadership positions in several organizations, as she builds her résumé while applying to prestigious graduate schools. She says that appointment to your team would mean a lot to her and could make the difference in her graduate school acceptance.

Would you recommend your friend for an appointment to the team? In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

**Chapter Quiz: Facilitating Group Development**
Learning Objectives

4.1 Develop a plan in preparation for a group discussion

4.2 Formulate a question of fact, prediction, value, or policy for a group discussion

4.3 Use appropriate logic and reasoning to develop sound conclusions

4.4 Identify appropriate ways to use facts, examples, opinions, and statistics in group discussions

4.5 Avoid reasoning fallacies by critically analyzing the reasoning and evidence presented in group discussions

“To solve a problem it is necessary to think. It is necessary to think even to decide what facts to collect.”

—Robert Maynard Hutchins

The primary message of this chapter can be summarized by the Boy Scout motto “Be prepared!” Have you ever spent an hour or two at a group or team meeting only to find out no one was ready to make a meaningful, informed contribution? Many wasted meetings boil down to the fact that group members just haven’t done their homework. GIGO is the acronym that computer programmers use for the expression “Garbage in, garbage out.” If you put poor information (garbage) into a computer program, you get poor results as output. It works the same way in group
4.1: How to Develop a Discussion Plan

4.1 Develop a plan in preparation for a group discussion

Imagine the instructor in your group communication class has assigned you to a group or committee, perhaps, so that you can make a recommendation, solve a problem, or make a decision. What should you do first? How would you develop a plan to get your work accomplished? What should you not do? It’s tempting for members to jump in with both feet and start deciding what to do without adequate research or preparation. The most effective groups develop a plan for accomplishing their goal. Groups are more likely to deliberate wisely and effectively if group members clarify their goals, have good discussion skills, and are motivated to do a good job. Suggesting solutions or making final recommendations at your first meeting is not a good idea. Effective groups prepare for discussion. We’ll outline the general parts of a discussion plan and then spend the rest of the chapter describing these strategies in detail.

4.1.1: Get Acquainted with Your Group Members

“Let’s get down to business,” “What are we supposed to do,” and “Get to the point” are typical statements heard at most first team or group meetings. It’s important, however, to take a few minutes to get better acquainted with group members before focusing on the task. A consistent conclusion from teamwork research is that it is vital to ensure that group members know one another in order to develop appropriate roles and responsibilities. In fact, often the most serious problems group and team members encounter are not caused by task issues, but rather because people have difficulty relating to each other. Taking time to establish good working relationships and trust can help a group or team be more productive in the long run.

Do more than just announce your name to the group. Research has documented that if you and other group members take the time to identify who has special expertise or information, the group can work more effectively. Perhaps you can provide information about how much experience you have with the topic, or, if no specific task has been articulated, you can talk about your experience in working on group and team projects. You may want to exchange phone numbers and e-mail addresses so that you can contact one another. You need not artificially prolong this initial orientation period, but it will be useful for group or team members to spend some time getting to know their fellow members. Some groups appoint someone to help facilitate their discussion, but most groups figure out the best way to get started on their own. One research team found that self-managing groups can be quite effective, especially with routine tasks.

SHARING PERSONAL INFORMATION Sharing personal information can establish a climate of cooperation. Research suggests that it’s important to encourage all members to participate early in the group’s history. Communication researcher Joseph Bonito found that groups that had higher rates of participation within the first minute of their discussion had higher-quality discussion during the entire meeting; the group members made more task-relevant contributions (that is, they made comments that helped the group make a decision or solve a problem). So make sure all group members are contributing early in the group’s history.

In addition to taking time to get acquainted with group members, avoid the temptation to make quick decisions. Groups sometimes feel pressure to get something accomplished. One team of researchers found that some groups encounter a “speed trap” when group members focus too much on speed and not enough on quality. In essence, the researchers found that an overemphasis on making fast decisions results in a group’s getting caught in a spiral of emphasizing speed and efficiency over quality of decision making. Since norms are established early in the group’s history, make sure the speed of decision making doesn’t become the group’s goal.

4.1.2: Clarify the Goals of the Group

Once you’ve completed introductions, make sure you know what the group’s purpose, goal, and assignment are. A key question to ask as the group begins focusing on the
goal is, “When do you know you’re finished with your task?” When developing the group’s goal, visualize what the completed project will look like. Is the goal to produce a written report or to deliver an oral presentation in which you will make recommendations? You should be able to summarize the group’s goal in your own words.

Most work-group goals boil down to one of three tasks: (1) generating ideas, information, or options; (2) making a choice, often about how to solve a larger problem; and (3) putting an idea into action. Your team may be involved in only one of these tasks, or all three. Whatever the group goal, it should be expressed in the form of a question that the group will discuss. Later in this chapter, we suggest that you formulate a discussion question as either a fact (something did or did not happen), a prediction (something will happen), a value (something is better or worse than something else), or a policy (something should be done). Consider writing your question or group goal on a chalkboard or flipchart for all team members to see.

When the group starts to wobble or get offtrack, point group members back to the central reason for the discussion—to achieve the goal of the group. Having a clear, elevating goal is one of the essential requirements for an effective team. Leadership expert Stephen Covey suggests that to be successful you should “begin with the end in mind.”

If you find that your group is not achieving its goals or that you’re just not making the progress you expect, the reasons may be one of the following:

- Your team has an unclear vision of what it wants to accomplish.
- Team members don’t know what is expected of them; they need help clarifying their roles.
- Team members aren’t clear about the process of how work gets done. They have such questions as “Do we work individually or together? Do we report our findings at each group meeting?”
- Team members aren’t getting along. They need to focus on developing greater trust and managing tensions before getting down to business.

Establishing clear goals can help group members have a clearer vision, understand their individual roles, develop a work plan, and address the uncertainty that is present when the group first get together.

### 4.1.3: Develop a Plan for Gathering Information and Analyzing Issues

Once you develop your discussion question and clarify your goal, you need to collect information and research conclusions to help answer your question. Research consistently finds that developing a collaborative plan to accomplish the work results in higher-quality results. Research has also found that groups tend to be too optimistic in judging their efficiency. It typically takes more, rather than less, time to accomplish group tasks than group members realize. So be realistic in estimating how long it will take the group to complete its work. Developing a step-by-step plan that involves all group members will help your group work effectively and create a realistic timetable for accomplishing its goal. However, although planning is important, research also suggests that it is beneficial to adjust your plans as your group continues its work. Group communication researchers Leslie DeChurch and Craig Haas found that groups that appropriately adapted to situations and problems that were encountered along the way had a higher-quality solution than groups that didn’t deviate from their plan. Their conclusion: Have a plan but give yourself permission to react and respond to what you discover as you seek to make a decision or solve a problem.

Before you start surfing the Internet for information, find out what you and your group members already know about the topic and issues. As we have noted, researchers have found that one of the most important things you can do early in a group’s history is to identify who in your group has special skills or is an expert on the topic you’re discussing. Once you identify information experts, make sure that they contribute to the group’s conversation.

After assessing your group’s knowledge, figure out what kind of information you need. Identify who is most interested in specific aspects of your topic. Groups that figure out how to learn together do a better job of managing conflict are overall more effective in achieving their goal. Begin to “divide and conquer.” Assign members—or ask for volunteers—to begin researching the topic. Coordinate your group’s research efforts rather than having group members scatter and then plunge into the research process. Without coordination, you may needlessly duplicate your research efforts. In developing a coordinated plan to do the work, educator Lisa Snyder suggests that you will be more effective and efficient if you do these things:

- Focus on the purpose of the project.
- Encourage all members to participate by positively reinforcing the contributions of others.
- Establish a timeline of the due dates.
- Keep the project on track by periodically reviewing whether you are adhering to the timeline.
recommendations. Research suggests that groups that have more time to solve a problem tend to do a better job of sharing information among group members; this finding is especially true of virtual groups sharing information via the Internet. The more time allotted to solve a problem, the greater the chance that group members will share what they know. So, in addition to making assignments, indicate when the information should be shared with the group. Develop a concrete plan for structuring the workload.

Especially if you have limited time, divvying up the research tasks is a good idea. However, some research suggests that with a longer time period and low levels of information, it may be best to work collaboratively rather than independently to gather information. What’s important is to make sure that group members share among themselves the information they gather. According to a research team led by communication researcher Charles Pavitt, once a group member shares information or a proposal with the group, all group members will join in the discussion and talk about the ideas presented. However, evidence also suggests that some people may dominate the discussion, as indicated in a classic study by Robert Bales. He found that some group members can dominate at least 40 percent of the talk time. To maximize the benefits of information sharing and group deliberation, avoid letting one person run the show. Seek balanced participation and sharing of ideas and information.

4.1.4: Follow a Structured Agenda to Accomplish the Task

Here’s a powerful principle for effective group discussion: Groups and teams need an agenda to help them organize their discussion. An agenda is a thoughtfully prepared list of the issues, topics, and questions that the group will discuss. There is an art to preparing an agenda—it is not just a list of topics that come to mind. A group needs not only an agenda for each meeting but also an overarching plan of how to accomplish the group’s goal. If your group is solving a problem, then a straightforward problem-solving agenda should provide the necessary structure. There are several techniques and methods for organizing a problem-solving discussion. The most basic problem-solving structure includes these steps:

1. Identify and define the problem.
2. Analyze the problem.
3. Generate several possible solutions.
4. Select the best solution or combination of solutions.
5. Test and implement the solution.

Organizing your overall work plan around these steps can help keep your group on track.

4.1.5: Share Information with Others

Groups typically make better decisions than individuals because there is typically more information among a group of people than in one person. Researchers have consistently found that groups that have more information are more likely to arrive at a better solution or outcome. But there’s a problem: Group members sometimes don’t share what they know. Research has documented that we often talk about and think about ourselves rather than consider making the group goals our concern.

What factors make group members more willing to share their knowledge?

According to one study, you are more likely to share information if:

- everyone in the group already knows the information—that is, there is a common core of information that group members talk about;
- at least one person knows the same information you know;
- you are perceived to be an expert on the topic at hand; or
- you want to enhance your position or influence in the group.

Group members may share even those information that everyone already knows to confirm that they are “in the know” and part of the group’s core of well-respected members. In addition, we tend to share information with people we like and withhold information from people we don’t like.

There are several reasons why it’s important to share information with the entire group. In addition to groups’ having more information on which to base their deliberations,
shared information can help allay group conflict and tensions and sort through disagreements.34 Researchers have also found that not only sharing information with one another but also talking about how information should be shared helps a group perform better.35 It helps to develop a plan to share information with other group members.36 Besides resulting in better-quality outcomes, another advantage to group members’ sharing what they know is more overall satisfaction with their participation in the group.37 Also, when groups don’t share all of the information that they have with one another, they forge ahead and make a decision or solve a problem based on incomplete information.38

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR SHARING INFORMATION. So what can group members do to ensure that they share information with one another? Consider these practical tips:

- **Work to develop a positive, conforming, and, cohesive group climate.**39 Celebrate when your group achieves a short-term goal; find ways to catch group members doing things well and then offer a positive, reinforcing comment such as “Good job of finding that key piece of information.”

- **Help the entire group as well as each member feel valued.** Group members who feel positive about the group’s goal, as well as believe they are making important contributions, are more likely to share information with other group members.40

- **Assess the range of knowledge, education, and information among group members.** Research suggests that group members who have different levels of information and education are likely to share information among team members only up to a certain point.41 An educationally diverse group will tend to share less information among team members. Don’t let differences in education, knowledge, or culture keep group members from sharing what each of them knows.

- **Assess the group’s cultural diversity.** Sometimes people who are in the cultural minority are less likely to share what they know, so encourage them to share information with the entire group.

- **Encourage quiet members to participate.** Some group members are shy, while others are just apprehensive about speaking up in any situation.

- **Use the write-and-then-speak technique.** Ask group members to first jot down some of their information on a piece of paper and then take turns sharing what they have written. Having a written “script” may encourage quieter members to speak up.

- **Use online, e-mail, text, or instant messages to contribute information.** Consider asking group members to first provide a written report via e-mail or other electronic means to every group member. Using the structure provided by having information in written form may gently prod each group member to share what he or she knows.42

- **Explicitly talk about the problem of unshared information.** Also talk about the importance of being open to new information and new ideas.43 Make it a group concern. Some groups have found that group members who receive training in the importance of sharing information do, in fact, share more information.44

- **Work together to find research and information; don’t worry whether group members are finding similar information.** One study found that if several group members found the same information, it was more likely to be shared with the entire group. So duplicating each other’s research can increase the likelihood that the information will be shared with the entire group.45

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**Putting Principles into Practice**

**What Should You Do with Group Members Who Don’t Pull Their Weight?**

A common disadvantage of working in groups and teams is that sometimes a team member may not follow through on assignments, actively contribute, or, even worse, may not attend team meetings. This behavior, known as social loafing, creates much discord and anguish, especially for group members who are following through on assignments and tasks. One of the biggest triggers of conflict is someone who thinks he or she is unfairly doing more work than others. Rather than ignore the problem (especially if a loafing group member is significantly hindering the work of the entire group), group members should confront the issue. But how can the problem be addressed without adding to the stress?

**Understanding the Problem**

First, it helps to understand why someone may be loafing. Why do some people not contribute to the group? Consider these possibilities:

- **APATHY:** The loafing group member may simply not care whether the group succeeds or not.
- **WORK “CHALLENGED”:** The slacking group member may just not like to work very hard. Perhaps he or she has gotten by with doing minimal or no work on other projects and this is just another opportunity to let others do the work.
- **TOO BUSY:** The loafer may have too much to do and has made working in the group a low priority, hoping that others will pick up the slack.
- **NO GROUP ACCOUNTABILITY:** There may be no way tracking who does what: the loafer can skate through the process because there are no consequences of not doing the work.
4.1.6: Determine How to Present Your Information

Once you have developed your conclusions, you’ll need to decide how best to present your information to others. There are three common formats for doing this: (1) a panel discussion, (2) a symposium presentation, and (3) a forum presentation. In addition to presenting your conclusions orally, you may need to prepare a written report.

Consider organizing your written report around the problem-solving steps noted earlier (definition of the problem, analysis of the problem, possible solutions, best solution or solutions). Most written reports are prepared for a specific individual or group. Keep your reader in mind as you develop the written report. Follow any specific guidelines or structure prescribed for you.

Review
How to Develop a Discussion Plan

- Get acquainted with your group members
  - Introduce yourself
  - Share your contact information
  - Discuss the experience you’ve had with the topic

- Clarify the goals of the group
  - Explicitly write down the purposes and goals of the group
  - Identify whether your key purpose is to
    1. gather information,
    2. make a choice or solve a problem,
    3. put an idea into action, or
    4. achieve two or more of these purposes
  - Describe what it will look like when your group is finished with its task. Answer the question: How will you know when you are done?

- Develop a plan for gathering information and analyzing issues
  - Identify and assess the information you already know
  - Develop a written plan that indicates what you already know and what you need to know
  - Give members assignments or ask for volunteers for gathering or analyzing information with a date for reporting back to the group

- Follow a structured agenda to accomplish the task
  - Identify the topics and issues you need to discuss at each meeting
  - Consider using the traditional problem-solving agenda to develop the overarching plan: Identify and define the

Although we’ve offered several suggestions, realize this: You ultimately can’t change another person’s behavior. Despite what group members do (or don’t do), there are no surefire strategies to spur a loafing member to action. The rest of the group may simply have to pick up the slack.
Preparing to Collaborate

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more clearly articulated will be the group’s goal, and the greater will be the chances for a productive and orderly discussion.

For some group discussions and conferences, the questions are predetermined. Government committees and juries exemplify such groups. But usually groups are faced with a problem or need and are responsible for formulating a specific question to guide their deliberations. There are basically four types of discussion questions: (1) questions of fact, (2) questions of prediction, (3) questions of value, and (4) questions of policy. To help you determine which type is most appropriate for your various group discussions, we discuss each in the following sections.49

4.2.1: Questions of Fact

Some questions of fact are phrased such that the answer to the question is either yes or no. Something either did or did not occur. (Although, of course, a yes or no response can be qualified in terms of the probability of its accuracy.) The question “Did the New York Yankees win the World Series in 2009?” is a question of fact—either they did, or they did not. Questions of fact like that can simply be looked up online or in library sources and probably don’t require group deliberations. On the other hand, a group may be asked to investigate a question such as “Did John Smith violate our company ethics policy last year?”

Virtual Groups

Sharing Information

When working on a group or team project, it may be useful to share your initial research findings electronically via e-mail, a group Facebook page, or other electronic means. A study by Carol Saunders and Shaila Miranda concluded that virtual groups that collaborate only via e-mail or text typically have more information.50 According to the research, although face-to-face group meetings result in more information-sharing initially, over the long term, exchanging information via e-mail may ensure that more information is shared and that all members of the group receive the information.

4.2: How to Formulate Discussion Questions

4.2 Formulate a question of fact, prediction, value, or policy for a group discussion

Before most scientists begin an experiment or conduct research, they have some idea of what they are looking for. Some researchers start with a hypothesis, a guess based on previous theory and research about what they will find in their search for new knowledge. Other investigators formulate a research question that provides a direction for their research. Like scientific research, problem solving seeks answers to questions. It makes sense, then, for group members to formulate a question before searching for answers. By identifying a specific question they must answer, members can reduce some of the initial uncertainty accompanying their discussion.

A discussion question should be phrased with considerable care. This is an important part of initiating and organizing any group discussion, particularly problem-solving discussions, because the quality and specificity of a question usually determine the quality of the answer. The better a group prepares a discussion question, the
Group researcher Dennis Gouran suggests that, when investigating questions of prediction, an appropriate agenda for groups to follow would include these four steps:52

1. **Develop if-then statements**: Identify one or more if-then statements to focus and clarify the issues. Here’s an example of an if-then statement: If tuition is increased, then the university will have a balanced budget. Here’s another if-then statement: If tuition is increased, then the university can continue its expansion program.

2. **Analyze the problem**: Spend time analyzing the likelihood that what is suspected (a balanced budget) will actually occur. What are the causes, effects, and symptoms of the problem? What impact have previous tuition increases had on the budget in the past?

3. **Use evidence**: Present evidence that documents the likelihood that X will lead to Y. In this example, X = a tuition increase and Y = a balanced budget.

4. **Evaluate the quality of the evidence**: Determine whether the evidence that attempts to document the likelihood that X will lead to Y is high-quality evidence (e.g., Is the evidence recent? Is the evidence from a credible source?).

Using this four-step agenda, groups can efficiently focus on determining whether the suspected outcome will likely occur.

**4.2.3: Questions of Value**

A **question of value** generally produces a lively discussion because it concerns attitudes, beliefs, and values about what is good or bad or right or wrong. Answering a question of value is more complicated than simply determining whether an event did or did not occur. “Which political party in the United States produced the best presidents?” is an example of a question of value. Group members’ responses to this question depend on their attitudes toward Democrats, Republicans, or other political parties.

An **attitude** is a learned predisposition to respond to a person, an object, or an idea in a favorable, neutral, or unfavorable way. In essence, the attitudes you hold about the world determine whether you like or dislike what you experience and observe. A favorable attitude toward Democrats will affect your response to the value question “Which political party in the United States produced the best presidents?”

A **belief** is what you hold to be true and false. Put another way, it is the way you structure reality. If you believe in God, you have structured your reality to assume that God exists. If you do not believe in God, you have structured your perception of what is true and false so that God is not part of your reality.

A **value** is often defined as an enduring conception of what is good and bad. Your values affect your perceptions of right and wrong. A value, such as the importance of being honest, is more resistant to change than an attitude or a belief.
What are your values? Which of your values have the most influence on your behavior? Because values are so central to how you respond in the world, you may have trouble coming up with a tidy list of your most important values. You may be able to list things you like and do not like (attitudes) or things that you classify as true and not true (beliefs), but your values—the guiding forces affecting your behavior—are sometimes difficult to identify.

In looking at relationships between attitudes (likes and dislikes), beliefs (what is perceived as true or false), and values (what is perceived as good or bad), it is important to note that values change infrequently and attitudes are most susceptible to change. Figure 4.1 shows values in the center of the diagram because they are central to how you make sense out of what you experience; if you valued honesty yesterday you will probably still value honesty today and in the future. Beliefs, the next ring, may change depending on your experiences and your perception of what is true and false. Attitudes are shown in the outer ring because they are likely to change more often; our attitudes may change daily. For example, one day you may like your small-group communication class, and the next day you don’t. Yet the underlying value of obtaining a good education probably will not vary.

Understanding the differences among attitudes, beliefs, and values helps you better understand what happens when a group discusses a value question. You base your response to a value question on your own attitudes, beliefs, and values, as do other group members. If you can identify the underlying attitudes, beliefs, and values that influence the responses to a value question, you can examine and discuss them.

4.2.4: Questions of Policy

Most problem-solving discussions revolve around questions of policy—questions that help groups determine what course of action or policy change would enable them to solve a problem or reach a decision. “What should be done to improve the quality of education in U.S. colleges and universities?” and “What can Congress do to reduce America’s national debt?” are examples of policy questions. These questions can be identified easily because answers to them require changes of policy or procedure. Discussion questions including phrases such as “What should be done about . . . ?” or “What could be done to improve . . . ?” are policy questions. Most legislation in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives is proposed in response to specific policy questions. A well-written policy question should adhere to three criteria: It should imply that a problem exists, it should be limited in scope, and it should be controversial enough to spark discussion.

1. **A policy question should imply that a specific problem exists and must be solved.** The question “What should be done about UFOs?” is not an appropriate policy question because it does not provide enough direction to a specific problem. Do not confuse a discussion topic with a discussion question. If your group is going to discuss UFOs, it has a topic, but it is not trying to solve a problem. The group could rephrase the discussion question to make it more policy-oriented: “What could be done to improve the way the government investigates UFO sightings in the United States?” The rephrased question more clearly implies that there is a problem in the way the government investigates sightings of UFOs. The latter question provides clearer direction for research and analysis.

2. **A policy question should be limited in scope.** Do not try to tackle a complex problem unless your group has the time and resources to solve it. For example, a group of students was assigned the task of formulating a policy question, discussing it, and then reporting the results of the discussion to the class. The students had three weeks to analyze and suggest possible solutions to the problem they had chosen to investigate, which was “What should be done to deal with health care?” Although the question clearly implies a specific problem, its lack of focus frustrated the group. A more limited discussion question, such as “What should be done to improve access to affordable prescription drugs for the elderly in our community?” would have been more manageable. You would do better to consider a simple, clearly worded question that can be analyzed in the time period allotted to your group than a question that would keep the U.S. Congress busy for several months or even years. On the other hand, a group should not phrase a policy-discussion question so that it requires only a yes or no answer or limits the group’s options for solutions. Given this criterion, “Should it be illegal to send text messages while driving in a school zone?” is a less-satisfactory policy discussion topic than “What can be done to ensure greater safety for children in a school zone?” The second question gives the group more options to consider to achieve the goal of children’s safety in a school zone.

3. **A policy question should be controversial.** A policy question should be about an important issue. An issue is a question about which individuals disagree. If group members disagree about how to solve a problem, they should not necessarily select another issue.
Conflict, controversy, and disagreement should not always be viewed negatively. If group members agreed on how to solve a problem at the beginning of a discussion, they would have nothing to discuss. The purpose of a group discussion is to consider all alternatives and to agree on the best one. Therefore, do not reject a discussion question because other group members may hold contrasting points of view.

**Case Study**

**Questioning the Cost of Textbooks**

Imagine that your instructor has just announced a semester-long group project for your small-group communication course. You are assigned to work with a group of five people to develop a solution to a problem and, in so doing, to answer a specific policy question. Your group has been assigned the following issue: What should be done to make college textbooks at our school bookstore more affordable for students at our school? You know that textbooks take quite a bite out of your budget, but you and other group members really don’t understand how textbook prices are set or why used textbooks still have a high price tag. You also don’t understand why popular books on best-seller lists at large bookstores cost under $30 while most of your textbooks cost over $60, with many over $100.

At the first group meeting, group members aren’t quite sure how to begin addressing the question. You need to know more about how your local bookstore decides to set prices for both new and used books. Many students are buying their textbooks on the Internet and skipping the bookstore altogether. This sometimes results in the students getting the wrong book or the wrong edition of the book. You’ve also heard that your school’s bookstore generates a profit that is used to support other activities at your school, but you’re not sure of the specific relationship between the bookstore and your school’s budget.

**Questions for Analysis**

1. Although the policy question is clear, what are related questions of fact, prediction, and policy that your group may need to investigate before answering the larger policy question?

2. What should the group do to develop a plan for gathering information and analyzing the issues that contribute to the problem under discussion?

3. What information do you think is available through electronic sources to help your group analyze the issues being investigated? What information is probably not going to be available on the Internet and will call for other research strategies? How would you go about dividing up the work to gather the information you need?

**WRITING PROMPT**

Think about the last time you were in a group and needed to formulate a question of fact, prediction, value, or policy for a group discussion. Which question type did you chose and why? Write a brief response that will be read by your instructor.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

**4.2.5: Policy Questions Give Groups Direction**

The four types of discussion questions (of fact, of prediction, of value, and of policy) may not appear to overlap, but as one researcher observed, groups must concern themselves with questions of fact, prediction, and value when considering questions of policy. They must judge evidence as true or false (questions of fact). They must ponder whether the proposed solution will be effective in the future (questions of prediction). Their attitudes, beliefs, and values (questions of value) will influence the decisions they make on policy changes (questions of policy).

A discussion question serves a valuable function in providing direction to group deliberations. Discussion questions can be modified. Decide whether your group is considering a question of fact, of prediction, of value, or of policy. Identifying the type of question helps you understand the dynamics of the issue under discussion. If you realize that the question “Should we legalize casino gambling in our community?” involves value judgments, you will be less likely to condemn group members who disagree with you. Even in the face of disagreement, frustration and defensiveness can yield to understanding and compromise. Remember, too, that even though a discussion question may be clearly identified as one of fact, prediction, value, or policy, your discussion probably will include other types of questions. Once your group has a well-defined problem to discuss, members should begin researching and analyzing it.
Preparing to Collaborate

For over two thousand years, students have studied the principles of critical analysis that we now present. Although you may have been introduced to a discussion of logic, reasoning, and evidence in another course (such as public speaking, argumentation, or philosophy), we think it’s important to apply these important principles to group and team deliberations. First we will provide an overview of reasoning strategies and then describe how to use evidence effectively.

There are three major ways of structuring an argument to reach a logical conclusion: (1) inductive reasoning, (2) deductive reasoning, and (3) causal reasoning.

### 4.3.1: Inductive Reasoning

**Inductive reasoning** is a method of arriving at a general, or “bottom-line,” conclusion through the use of specific examples, facts, statistics, and opinions. For example, suppose you recently bought a used personal computer that didn’t work the way it was supposed to when you got it home. You learn that one of your classmates also bought a used computer that didn’t work well. Your uncle also bought a used computer from someone who ran an ad in the paper; his computer didn’t work properly either. Based on those three examples, you reach a conclusion that buying used computers will give you trouble. You’ve reached a general conclusion based on the specific examples you know about.

To help answer your group-discussion question, you need to make sure you reach a valid or logical conclusion. When you reason inductively (from specific examples to a general conclusion), keep the following questions in mind:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question of fact</td>
<td>A question that asks whether something is true or false</td>
<td>Did university officials violate the freshman-admission policy last year?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question of prediction</td>
<td>A question that asks whether something is likely to occur</td>
<td>Will the building renovations be completed by Christmas?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question of value</td>
<td>A question that considers something’s worth or desirability</td>
<td>What are the virtues of a democratic form of government?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question of policy</td>
<td>A question that considers whether a change in procedure should be made</td>
<td>What should be done to curtail gang violence in our community?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## 4.3: How to Use Logic and Reasoning Effectively

### 4.3 Use appropriate logic and reasoning to develop sound conclusions

In the search for truth, you will need to develop logical arguments and reach reasoned conclusions. Researchers have found that at the heart of group deliberation is argument. During group discussion the essence of what you do when you interact with others is advance arguments and listen and respond to the conclusions that others have reached. **Reasoning** is the process of drawing a conclusion from evidence. Your evidence will consist of the facts, examples, statistics, and opinions you use to support the point you wish to make. For over
4.3.3: Casual Reasoning

The third way to reach a logical conclusion is through causal reasoning—the process of relating two or more events and concluding that one event caused the other. For example, you might reason that in 2012, climate change was the cause of Hurricane Sandy.

You can structure a causal argument in two ways. First, you can reason from cause to effect, moving from a known fact (cause) to predict a result (effect). You know that the number of drug arrests in your community has increased; you know this is a fact because you have researched the police records. You reason that crime will decrease in your community if the drug offenders are locked up. Weather forecasters use the same method of reasoning when they predict the weather. They base a conclusion about what will happen tomorrow on what they know about today’s weather.

The second way to structure a causal argument is to reason backward, from a known effect to an unknown cause. You know, for example, that interest rates have decreased in the past six months. You hypothesize that the decrease has occurred because of a healthy economy. You can’t be absolutely sure of your analysis, but you do know that interest rates have decreased (the effect). As with other forms of reasoning, you develop strong causal arguments by using evidence to link something known with something unknown. If you understand how to use evidence effectively, you can enhance your use of inductive, deductive, and causal reasoning.

4.4: How to Evaluate Evidence in Group Discussions

4.4 Identify appropriate ways to use facts, examples, opinions, and statistics in group discussions

After you formulate your discussion question, you need to define key terms and gather information on the issues implied by the question. Group members should also know something about the four kinds of evidence available: (1) facts, (2) examples, (3) opinions, and (4) statistics. Group members who use evidence effectively make better decisions. A research study found that the key element in swaying a jury is the quality and quantity of the evidence presented.55

Research also suggests that when reaching a final conclusion about the validity of an argument, most people find that an argument that is supported by multiple types of evidence is more persuasive than one backed up by only one source or one type of evidence.56 Let’s examine each of the four types of evidence in more detail.
4.4.1: Facts

A fact is any statement proven to be true. A fact cannot be a prediction about the future because such a statement cannot be verified; it must be a report of something that has already happened or that is happening. “It will rain tomorrow” cannot be a fact because the statement cannot be verified. “The weather forecaster predicts rain” may be a fact if the weather forecaster has made such a prediction; the accuracy of the forecast has nothing to do with whether the statement is a fact. Ask yourself these questions to determine whether a statement is a fact:

1. Is it true?
2. Is the source reliable?
3. Are there any contrary facts?

4.4.2: Examples

An example is an illustration of a particular case or incident and is most valuable when used to emphasize a fact. An example may be real or hypothetical. A real example can also be called a fact; it actually exists or has happened. A hypothetical example is of little use in proving a point but can add color and interest to illustrate an otherwise dry or boring factual presentation. Apply the following tests to examples:

1. Is it typical?
2. Is it significant?
3. Are there any contrary examples?

4.4.3: Opinions

An opinion is a quoted comment. The fact-based opinions of unbiased authorities are most valuable as evidence. Like examples, opinions can dramatize a point and make it more interesting. Opinions are most effective when used in conjunction with facts or statistics. The following questions can help you determine the usefulness of opinions:

1. Is the source reliable?
2. Is the source an expert in the field?
3. Is the source free from bias?
4. Is the opinion consistent with other statements made by the same source?
5. Is the opinion characteristic of opinions held by other experts in the field?

4.4.4: Statistics

Because they cannot present dozens of facts or examples in a given time limit, people often rely on statistics. A statistic is simply a number: 10,000 people, 132 reported cases of child abuse, 57 Western nations. Statistics provide firm support for important points. Pay special attention, though, to the tests of statistics listed next because statistics are probably the most frequently misgathered and misinterpreted type of evidence.

1. Is the source reliable?
2. Is the source unbiased?
3. Are the figures recent? Do they apply to the time period in question?
4. How were the statistics drawn? If from a sample, is the sample representative of the total population? Is the sample big enough to be reliable?
5. Does the statistic actually measure what it is supposed to measure?
6. Are there contrary statistics?

Once you have located and collected your evidence, keep in mind a couple of guidelines for applying it effectively. First, never take evidence out of context. Even if you find a statement that seems to be exactly the evidence you need, do not use it if the sentence following it says something like, “However, this idea has recently been proved false.” Second, try to gather and use as many types of evidence from as many sources as possible to support a point.

4.4.5: Gathering and Evaluating Evidence: A Special Emphasis on Web Resources

Although traditional library sources are still excellent for gathering evidence used in group discussion, more and more research is conducted via the Internet. Newspapers, research journals, and a multitude of other resources are available online; it’s likely that you and your group members will find a significant amount of information on the Web.

The challenge in electronic research is deciding which data are relevant to your question. Although you can access hundreds of libraries and end up with a ream of documents, the volume of information is not nearly as important as your ability to use the information you gather. In the medical profession, triage is the process of making decisions about which patients need the most attention or medical care in an emergency room. Information triage is the process of sorting through information you have gathered from your search to determine what is most useful or needs the most critical attention. You will also need to cite the sources that you find on the Internet. A style manual will tell you how to prepare a bibliographical entry to document an Internet citation.

As with any type of evidence, just because you find it on the Web does not mean the evidence or information is accurate or reliable. Anyone with a computer and software can construct a Web site. Information on the Web may not
have gone through an editorial process to be checked for accuracy. For example, information that you glean from the Web site of the Wall Street Journal is more credible than that from someone’s personal Web site or the Web site of an organization with a particular political or profit-based agenda. When evaluating information you retrieve from the Web, consider the following criteria.57

4.5: How to Develop Critical-Analysis Skills

4.5 Avoid reasoning fallacies by critically analyzing the reasoning and evidence presented in group discussions

It’s not enough just to have evidence or to be able to label the kind of reasoning that you’re using to reach conclusions. If you want to critically analyze information and ideas, you must evaluate both the logic and the evidence used to reach a conclusion. Critical thinkers who are members of groups and teams need to develop key technical skills:

In addition to identifying and analyzing information, groups need to avoid committing fallacies—false reasoning that occurs when someone attempts to arrive at a conclusion without adequate evidence or with arguments that are irrelevant or inappropriate. Avoiding reasoning fallacies in your own arguments will enhance your critical-thinking skills. Being able to spot reasoning fallacies that others are using will make you a more discriminating and effective listener. Here are some of the most common fallacies.

4.5.1: Causal Fallacy

Causal fallacy is the inappropriate assumption that one event is the cause of another when there is little evidence to connect the two events. The Latin phrase used to summarize this fallacy is *post hoc, ergo propter hoc,* which translates as “after this, therefore because of this.” Superstitions are prime examples of causal fallacies. Your assumption that your “lucky” rabbit’s foot helps you perform better on math tests probably can’t be demonstrated with facts and evidence. It’s your ability to study and learn math that determines your test results, not whether you have a rabbit’s foot in your pocket. Be on the lookout for group members who inappropriately try to connect one event to another without adequate cause and effective evidence.

4.5.2: Either/Or Fallacy

The either/or fallacy occurs when someone argues that there are only two approaches or solutions to a problem; it oversimplifies the options by suggesting we must do either X or Y. “It’s either vote for new school taxes or we will have to send our kids to the next county to be educated,” claims a parent at a school-board meeting. Usually there are a range of options to consider in any discussion. In fact, one hallmark of successful groups is the ability to identify several options to solving a problem.

4.5.3: Bandwagon Fallacy

“All the people are in favor of expanding the city park, so you should favor it too” is an example of the bandwagon
fallacy. Someone using this fallacy tries to convince you that an idea is good simply because “everybody” else thinks it’s good; hence, you should jump on the bandwagon and support the idea. Judge an idea on its merits, not just because of a popular opinion poll. One disadvantage of group discussion is that the group may give in to pressure from others.

4.5.4: Hasty Generalization

A person reaching a conclusion on the basis of too little evidence or evidence that doesn’t exist is making a hasty generalization. As we noted while discussing tests of evidence or tests of inductive reasoning, one or two examples do not prove your point. For example, because a friend of yours got ripped off by a service station when vacationing in Texas doesn’t mean that you should avoid all service stations in Texas. Here’s another example: “We don’t need to spend more money on music education in our schools; my son listens to classical music at home, and so can other students.”

4.5.5: Attacking the Person

This fallacy—also known as ad hominem, Latin for “to the man”—involves attacking irrelevant personal characteristics about someone rather than examining the idea or proposal he or she advances. “We all know that Sue’s idea won’t work because she’s been in local politics for years and we just can’t trust her” does not really deal with the soundness of the idea, which may be a great one.

4.5.6: Red Herring

The red herring fallacy, which occurs when someone undermines an idea by using irrelevant facts or arguments as distractions, gets its name from the old trick of dragging a red herring across the trail to divert the sniffing dogs who may be following. Someone uses a red herring fallacy to divert attention or distract listeners from the real issues. For example, someone who claims “The real problem is not sexual harassment in the military, but the fact that we need to pay our military personnel more money” is trying to divert attention from the issue of sexual harassment and change the subject to the salary of military personnel. A group member who listens critically will recognize this distraction and return the discussion back to the issue at hand.

If in the course of your discussion you detect that someone reaches a conclusion using a reasoning fallacy, how do you bring it to his or her attention? We don’t suggest that you use an accusatory voice and pounce on someone for the lousy logic. Making someone defensive doesn’t do much for maintaining a quality group climate. Your first effort to draw attention to a reasoning fallacy should be to calmly and tactfully describe how the evidence offered does not support the point. Consider using an “I” statement: “I’m not sure I follow that argument. . . .” Describing how you don’t see the logic of their point is a better way to challenge fellow group members than immediately labeling their logic as a “fallacious argument” and trying to belittle them. “You” statements (“You’re wrong! Your evidence is terrible!”) tend to raise the hackles of your listener and create a defensive, disconfirming climate.

**WRITING PROMPT**

Consider the last time you accidentally used a red herring fallacy, or one of the fallacies discussed here. Which fallacy did you use and why? If someone corrected you, how did they go about doing it? Write a brief response that will be read by your instructor.

**SHARE WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

When preparing for a group discussion or a team meeting, consider the following ethical obligations.

**USE SOUND EVIDENCE AND REASONING.** As we have discussed in this chapter, using appropriate evidence and reasoning will help ensure that your group reaches a quality decision. It is unethical to claim you have found “the truth” without adequately researching the issues you discuss. Furthermore, a discussion peppered with reasoning fallacies can lead to inaccurate conclusions and an insensitivity to the ideas and positions of others. Asserting your conclusions without evidence and overrelying on emotional appeals at the expense of rational, logical reasoning are also unethical.

**GIVE CREDIT TO YOUR SOURCES.** Avoid plagiarism—presenting the words and ideas of others as your own without giving proper credit to the source. Don’t use quotes or paraphrase the ideas of others without acknowledging them. Give proper credit to ideas and information that are not your own, when both speaking and writing. In group discussions you can provide an oral footnote: Simply tell
your listeners where you got the idea or information you are using. In your written work, use footnotes or references to document the original source of the ideas.

FOLLOW THROUGH ON COMMITMENTS. When you don’t follow through on work you have promised to perform, you are not being an ethical group communicator. Don’t promise to do more than you can accomplish but accomplish all that you promise to do.

Now consider the following situation. While watching television you see an interesting program that includes a wealth of statistics documenting the problem of climate change. Not long afterward, you are assigned to work on a group project that focuses on this policy question: Should the government take more aggressive steps to manage the worldwide problem of climate change? You remember several of the statistics that were presented in the TV program, but you don’t remember the precise program that included those statistics. Is it acceptable to share your information with your group and “make up” a source for the statistics? You’re fairly certain that your information is accurate and reliable: You just don’t remember the exact source. No one will ever know that your figures aren’t from the source you cite. Do you share the statistics with your group even though you can’t remember the correct source of the information?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

A minimum number of characters is required to post and earn points. After posting, your response can be viewed by your class and instructor, and you can participate in the class discussion.

Chapter Quiz: Preparing to Collaborate
Chapter 5
Relating to Others in Groups

Learning Objectives

5.1 Identify the task, maintenance, and individual roles that group members assume

5.2 Identify several group norms that often develop in small-group discussions

5.3 Describe several effects of status differences on small-group communication

5.4 Describe how five power bases affect relationships in small groups

5.5 Identify factors that foster trusting relationships with others

5.6 Describe how relationships develop over time among group members

“In organizations, real power and energy is generated through relationships. The patterns of relationships and the capacities to form them are more important than the tasks, functions, roles and positions.”

—Margaret Wheatley

Do you tend to be a leader or a follower in a small group? Do you talk a lot or little? Perhaps your answers would depend on the quality of your relationships with other group members.
Communication scholar Joann Keyton notes that relational communication in groups refers to the verbal and nonverbal messages that create the social fabric of a group by promoting relationships between and among group members. It is the affective or expressive dimension of group communication as opposed to the instrumental, or task-oriented, dimension.1

Relational communication theorists assert that every message people communicate to one another has both a content dimension and a relationship dimension. The content dimension of a message includes the specific information conveyed to someone. The relationship dimension involves message cues that provide hints about whether you like or dislike the person with whom you are communicating. Whether you give a public speech, talk with your spouse, or communicate with another member of a small group, you provide information about the feelings you have toward your listener in addition to the ideas you’re conveying.

This chapter emphasizes the relational elements that affect the quality of the relationships you establish with other group members. Specifically, it concentrates on variables that have an important effect on the relationships you establish with others in small groups: (1) the roles you assume, (2) the norms or standards the group develops, (3) the status differences that affect the group’s productivity, (4) the power some members wield, (5) the trust that improves group performance, and (6) some additional effects of cultural differences.

5.1: Roles

5.1 Identify the task, maintenance, and individual roles that group members assume

WRITING PROMPT

“Who are you?” Now, write down ten different responses to the question beginning with ‘I am____’.

These responses are part of your theory of yourself—your self-concept. Your self-concept—who you think you are—shapes your communication and relationships with others. Your self-concept also affects how others relate to you.

5.1.1: Who are You?

In trying to reduce the uncertainty that occurs when communicating in groups, people quickly assess the behaviors of others. They assign roles—sets of expectations—to others. In a small group, roles result from (1) people’s expectations about their own behavior—their self-concepts, (2) the perceptions others have about individuals’ positions in the group, and (3) people’s actual behavior as they interact with others. Because self-concepts largely determine the roles people assume in small groups, it is important to understand how self-concepts develop.

5.1.2: Self-Concept Development: Gender and Sexual Orientation

How do you know who you are? Why did you respond as you did when you were asked to consider the question “Who are you?” Many factors influence your self-concept. First, other people influence who you think you are. Your parents gave you your name. Perhaps a teacher once told you that you were good in art, and consequently you think of yourself as artistic. Maybe somebody once told you that you cannot sing very well. Because you believed that person, you may now view yourself as not being very musical. Thus, you listen to others, especially those whose opinions you respect, to help shape your self-concept.

GENDER AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION One important part of everyone’s self-concept is gender.2 Whether you experience life as male or female affects your communication with others. While it is natural to assume that people’s communication differs depending on their biological sex, research suggests that the psychological aspects of gender—how “feminine” or “masculine” a person is—may be at least as important a variable.3 Some research supports small differences that “characterize women as using communication to connect with, support, and achieve closeness with others, and men as using communication to accomplish some task and to assert their individuality.”4

More recent studies reinforce the notion that gender still makes a difference. Researchers Priya Raghubir and Ana Valenzuela, for example, showed through a study of the television show The Weakest Link how men and women both use sex in a strategic way to achieve a competitive advantage.5 The same researchers also observed that, in this competitive setting, female players perform better when women constitute a majority on a team.6

Sexual orientation also affects a person’s sense of self-concept, as well as how he or she relates to others. Whether you approve or disapprove of another person’s sexual orientation should not reduce your effectiveness when communicating in groups and teams. You already know that it is inappropriate to use racially charged terms that demean a person’s race or ethnicity; it is equally important not to use derogatory terms or make jokes about a person’s sexual orientation. Being sensitive to
attitudes about sexual orientation is part of the role of an effective group communicator.

CULTURE AND ROLE Another important component of self-concept is culture of origin. Different cultures foster different beliefs and attitudes about communication, status, nonverbal behavior, and all the interpersonal dynamics discussed throughout this book. The development of selfhood takes place differently from culture to culture. Consider that Japanese and North American social lives flow from different premises. Many North Americans prize the image of the rugged individualist; many Japanese, in contrast, view this image as suggestive of egotism and insensitivity. For some Japanese, the line where self ends and others begin is far less clearly defined than it is for many North Americans. Studies show that in both types of cultures, strong cooperative relationships within a group or team enhance constructive conflict and lead to more innovative team outcomes.

Culture influences self-concept and thus behaviors such as the willingness to communicate in a group. There is ample evidence that individuals from different cultures interpret situations and concepts very differently. Therefore, understanding cultural differences is essential to understanding behavior in small groups.

The various groups with which one affiliates also help to define one's self-concept. If you attend college, you may describe yourself as a student. If you belong to a fraternity or sorority, you may think that sets you apart from others. Your religious affiliation, political party, and membership in civic and social organizations all contribute to the way you perceive yourself.

You also learn who you are by simply observing and interpreting your own behavior. Just as before leaving home you check the mirror to see how you look, so too do you try to see yourself through others' behavior toward you? Self-concept arises, in part, through the reflected appraisals of others.

5.1.3: Diversity of Roles in Small Groups

As a member of a small group, your own perceptions and expectations provide a foundation for the roles you will assume. Yet your role is also worked out between you and the other group members. As you interact with others, they form impressions of you and your abilities. As they react to your actions in the group—reflected appraisals—you learn what abilities and behaviors they will reinforce. These abilities and behaviors may, in turn, become part of your self-concept.

People assume roles because of their interests and abilities and because of the needs and expectations of the rest of the group. Some roles, especially in teams, are formally assigned. When police officers arrive on the scene of an accident, bystanders do not generally question their assumption of leadership. In a task-oriented small group, a member may be assigned the role of secretary, which includes specific duties and responsibilities. A chairperson may be elected to coordinate the meeting and delegate responsibilities. Assigning responsibilities and specific roles reduces uncertainty. A group can sometimes get on with its task more efficiently if some roles are assigned. Of course, even if a person has been elected or assigned the role of chairperson, the group may reject his or her leadership in favor of that of another member who may better meet the needs of the group. In other words, roles can be assigned formally or can evolve informally. To be most successful, groups and teams require a balance of team roles. When a balance of roles exists within a team, the team will likely be successful.

The kinds of roles discussed so far are task roles, which are aimed at accomplishing a group's goal. There are also two other role categories. Maintenance roles define a group's social atmosphere. A member who tries to maintain a peaceful, harmonious group climate by mediating disagreements and resolving conflicts performs a maintenance function. Individual roles call attention to individual contributions and tend to be counterproductive to the overall group effort. Someone who is more interested in seeking personal recognition than in promoting the general benefit of the group is adopting an individual role.

Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats have compiled a comprehensive list of possible informal roles that individual group members can assume. Perhaps you can identify the various roles you have assumed while participating in small-group discussions. Task/maintenance roles are some of the most important roles for group effectiveness.

5.1.4: Group Task Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Task</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Initiator-contributor</td>
<td>Proposes new ideas or approaches to group problem solving; may suggest a different procedure or approach to organizing the problem-solving task</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information seeker</td>
<td>Asks for clarification of suggestions; also asks for facts or other information that may help the group deal with the issues at hand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opinion seeker</td>
<td>Asks for a clarification of the values and opinions expressed by other group members</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
5.1.5: Group-Building and Maintenance Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles</th>
<th>Definitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Encourager</td>
<td>Offers praise, understanding, and acceptance of others' ideas and suggestions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5.1.6: Individual Roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Role</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aggressor</td>
<td>Destroys or defeats the status of other group members; may try to take credit for someone else's contribution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blocker</td>
<td>Is generally negative, stubborn, and disagreeable without apparent reason</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition seeker</td>
<td>Seeks the spotlight by boasting and reporting on his or her personal achievements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confessor</td>
<td>Uses the group as an audience to report personal feelings, insights, and observations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joker</td>
<td>Reflects a lack of involvement in the group's process by falling stories and jokes that do not help the group; lack of interest</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
DISCUSSING INDIVIDUAL ROLES  In looking at the preceding list of roles, you may have recognized yourself—for instance, as a harmonizer or a follower—and said, “Yes, that’s me. That’s the role I usually take.” You may also have tried to classify other members of some group into these categories. Although identifying the characteristics of roles may help you understand their nature and function in small-group communication, stereotyping individuals can lock them into roles. Ernest Bormann has extensively studied role behavior in groups and notes that, when asked to analyze group roles, group members often categorize and label other members, based on the roles they are perceived to fill.14 As you identify the roles adopted by group members, be flexible in your classifications. Realize that you and other members can assume several roles during a group discussion. In fact, a group member rarely serves only as an “encourager,” “opinion seeker,” or “follower.” Roles are dynamic; they change with changing perceptions, experiences, and expectations. An individual can assume leadership responsibilities at one meeting and play a supporting role at the next.

Because a role is worked out jointly between you and the group, you will no doubt find yourself assuming different roles in different groups. Perhaps a committee you belong to needs someone to serve as a procedural leader to keep the meeting in order. Because you recognize this need and no one else keeps the group organized, you may find yourself steering the group back on to the topic, making sure all members have a chance to participate. In another committee, where others serve as procedural leaders, you may be the person who generates new ideas. Whether consciously or not, you develop a role unique to your talents and the needs of the group. Your role, then, changes from group to group.

Roles in groups and teams can be either informal, as we’ve discussed, or formal. In the case of teams, roles are likely to be more formally defined. For example, one team member may have primary responsibility for communicating with the supervisor or with other teams and departments. Another may head up project planning. When roles within a team are formally established, it is important that these roles be clearly defined and coordinated with one another.15 Lack of clarity can result in role stress and loss of team productivity.16

If you understand how group roles form and how various roles function, you will be better able to help a group achieve its purpose. Studies of asynchronous college discussion groups have found significant improvement in their performance when roles such as moderator, starter, and summarizer are assigned.17 Groups need members to perform both maintenance and task functions. Task functions help the group get the job done, and maintenance functions help the group run smoothly. If no one is performing maintenance functions, you could point this out to the group, or assume some responsibility for them. If you notice individuals hindering the group’s progress because they have adopted individual roles (blocker, aggressor, recognition seeker, etc.), you could bring this to the attention of the offending group member. Explain that individual roles can make the group less efficient and can lead to conflict among members. Although you cannot assume complete responsibility for distributing roles within your group, your insights can help solve some of the group’s potential problems. Understanding group roles—and when to use them—is an important part of becoming a competent group communicator.
5.2: Norms

5.2 Identify several group norms that often develop in small-group discussions

Have you noticed that in some classes it is okay to say something without raising your hand, but in others the instructor must call on you before you speak? Raising your hand is a norm.

Norms are rules or standards that determine appropriate and inappropriate behavior in a group. How did different norms develop in two similar situations? There are at least two key reasons: (1) People develop norms in new groups based on those of previous groups they have belonged to, and (2) norms develop based on what happens early in a group’s existence.

5.2.1: How Do Norms Develop?

Marshall Scott Poole suggests that a group organizes itself based, in part, on norms that members encountered in previous groups. Giddens and Poole call this process structuration. Groups do things (become structured) based on the ways those things were done in other groups. If many of your classmates previously had classes in which they had to raise their hands before speaking, then they will probably introduce that behavior into other groups. If enough people accept it, a norm is born—or, more accurately, a norm is reborn.

In the long run, having a clear mutual understanding of a group’s norms frees group members to focus their attention on the actual work of the group. Your own reflections on your experience with group norms and your leadership in helping the groups you are part of adopt norms that facilitate their work can be important resources that you provide your groups.

Norms also develop from the kinds of behavior that occur early in a group’s development. Because of member uncertainty about how to behave when a group first meets, members are eager to learn acceptable behavior. If, for example, on the first day of class, a student raises his or her hand to respond to the instructor, and another student does the same, that norm is likely to stick. However, if several students respond without raising a hand, chances are that raising hands will not become a norm in the class.

5.2.2: Identifying Group Norms

Norms reduce some of the uncertainty that occurs when people congregate. People’s speech; the clothes they wear, or do not wear; and how and where they sit are all influenced group norms. Group norms also affect relationships among group members and the quality of group decisions.

Norms are neither good nor bad. It is even possible for the same norm to be beneficial to one group but harmful to another. For example, a norm of permitting side conversations between two people within a group can be helpful in problem solving in groups where faction forming and debate are desirable. But the same behavior can impede a group’s negotiation tasks where group unity is more desirable.

If you have recently joined a group, how do you recognize the group’s norms? One way to do this is to observe repeated behavior patterns. Note, for example, any consistencies in the way people talk or dress. In identifying normative behavior in a group, consider the following questions:

- How do group members dress?
- What are group members’ attitudes toward time? (Do group meetings begin and end on time? Are members often late to meetings?)
- What type of language is used by most group members? (Is swearing acceptable? Is the language formal?)
- Do group members use humor to relieve tension?
- Do group members address the group leader formally?
- Is it proper to address group members by their first names?

Answering these questions will help you identify a group’s norms. Some groups even develop norms for developing norms. For example, members may discuss the type of clothing that should be worn to meetings or talk about how tardiness or absenteeism should be handled.

Noting when someone breaks a rule can also reveal group norms. If a member arrives late and other members scowl at that person, they probably do not approve of the violation of the norm. If, after a member uses obscene words, another member says, “I wish you wouldn’t use words like that,” you can be certain that for at least one person a norm has been broken. Thus, punishment indicates violated norms. Often the severity of the punishment corresponds to the significance of the norm. Punishment can range from subtle nonverbal expressions of disapproval (which may not even be noticed by the person expressing them) to exclusion from the group.

Putting Principles into Practice

Establishing Group Norms

Norms are the rules or standards that tell us what is acceptable and unacceptable behavior in a group. Structuration theory tells us that groups are structured by members’ use of the rules and resources they bring with them into the group. A group’s norms, then, are established,
in part, by members’ previous experiences. Group members interact with one another to establish new group norms.

**Real-Life Applications**

You can leave the development of group norms to chance and relatively random group interaction, or you can approach the establishment of group norms intentionally. Often, spending some time to establish norms when a group is first formed can save time and conflict later on. Just as establishing mutuality of concern among group members is important, so too is consciously setting some ground rules.

**WRITING PROMPT**

You might suggest discussing the ground rules for the group along with the usual discussions about how frequently and where you’ll meet. What is acceptable and unacceptable behavior? Is it OK to show up late to a meeting or to miss one altogether? What will happen if you do? If you have to miss a meeting, how will you let the others know? What provisions will the group establish for bringing a member who has missed a meeting up to date? Write a brief response in which you lay out a set of rules that address the questions above.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

Submit

5.2.3: Conforming to Group Norms

What influences how quickly and rigidly people conform to the rules and standards of a group? According to Harold Reitan and Marvin Shaw, at least five factors affect conformity to group norms.²²

*The individual characteristics of the group members*

In summarizing the research on conformity, Shaw makes the following observation:

More intelligent persons are less likely to conform than less intelligent persons; women usually conform more than men, at least on traditional tasks; there is a curvilinear relationship between age and conformity; persons who generally blame themselves for what happens to them conform more than those low on self-blame; and authoritarians conform more than nonauthoritarians.

Thus, group members’ past experiences and unique personality characteristics influence how they conform to established norms.²³


Conforming to group norms requires participants to be aware of both *general norms* and more specific *operationalized norms*. Groups often adopt general norms very quickly.
For example “We all need to communicate with one another frequently” would be a common general group norm. But while there may be clear consensus around this general norm, it may mean different things to different people. For one person, frequently might mean “weekly,” whereas another team member may think it to mean “daily.” Thus, norms tend to evolve from the general to the operational (what the norms mean in terms of actual behaviors) over time as the specifics are negotiated. As always, communication about norms is key.25

**NORMS AND CULTURE** Culturally diverse groups often have difficulty establishing satisfactory roles and norms because of differences in cultural expectations. Such groups require extra effort in group building and maintenance.

When group members do not share a common native language, some additional tactics may be necessary:26

- **Slow down** communication.
- **Repeat** or paraphrase when nonverbal expressions suggest that listeners do not understand.
- **Verify** common understanding by having others restate the argument or idea.
- If necessary (and possible), encourage **repetition** in the listener’s native language.

Remember that cultures vary widely in conversational style as well as the appropriateness assigned to topics of conversation. Do not make the mistake of attributing such differences to impoliteness or insensitivity.

Although violating a group norm usually results in group disapproval and perhaps chastisement, such a violation can occasionally benefit a group. Just because members conform unanimously to a rule does not mean that the rule is beneficial. For example, in some situations the opinion of group members may matter more to decision making than the facts they exchange.27 When most group members, especially those of higher status, are in agreement, it is tempting for other group members to disregard contradictory evidence or facts and go along with the majority. Such disregard for facts and evidence can lead to unfortunate consequences when we consider groupthink.

5.2.4: Establishing Ground Rules

Norms often develop in a group without anyone’s explicitly identifying what is or is not acceptable behavior. A group or team may decide to develop more precise rules to help accomplish its task. According to communication researcher Susan Shimanoff, a rule is “a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts.”28 Group or team **ground rules** are explicit, agreed-on prescriptions for acceptable and appropriate behavior. Undoubtedly your school has rules about what constitutes appropriate behavior: Don’t cheat on a test, plagiarize a paper, carry a gun to campus, or consume alcohol in class—these are typical college and university rules. Rules help keep order so that meaningful work can be accomplished. Rules also state what the group or organization values. Honesty, fairness, freedom of speech, and personal safety are typical values embedded in rules.

Because teams are usually more structured and coordinated than a typical group discussion, most training sessions that teach people how to become an effective team stress that a high-performing team needs clear ground rules.29

How does a team develop ground rules? The team leader may facilitate a discussion to establish the ground rules. If a group has no designated leader, any team member can say, “To help us stay organized and get our work done, let’s establish some ground rules.” Groups and teams operate better if members develop their own ground rules rather than having them imposed from “on high” or from the leader.

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions to Consider</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To help your group or team develop ground rules, consider the following questions:</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How long should our meetings last?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Should we have a standard meeting place and time?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What should a member do if he or she can’t attend a meeting?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How will we follow up to ensure that each member is doing his or her assigned work?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Who is going to organize the agenda for our meetings?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How will we manage conflict?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- How will we make our decisions—by majority vote or consensus?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What kind of climate do we want in our meetings?</td>
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<tr>
<td>- What other kinds of guidelines do we need to develop?</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Typical Team Ground Rules</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Everyone will attend all meetings.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Meetings will start on time.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Each team member will follow through on individual assignments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Each team member will be prepared for every meeting.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- We will make decisions by consensus rather than majority vote.</td>
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<tr>
<td>- We will work together to manage conflict when it arises.</td>
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Often teams are given their marching orders by someone from outside the group. Even when the team is given its goal, sometimes called a charge—the purpose of the team, group, or committee—the team should take some time to discuss its ground rules so that each person clearly understands and agrees to them.

5.3: Status

5.3 Describe several effects of status differences on small-group communication

“My dad can run faster than your dad.”
“Oh, yeah? Well, my dad is smarter than your dad.”
“No, he’s not!”
“Oh, yes he is!”
“Says who?”
“Says me. Wanna make something of it?”

Awareness of status differences begins when we are children—who is better, brighter, and more beautiful. Status is an individual’s relative importance. People with higher social status generally have more prestige and command more respect than do people of lower status. People want to talk to and talk about, see and be seen with those of high status.

5.3.1: Privileges Accorded to High-Status Group Members

Most people like to be perceived as enjoying some status within a group. Because occupying a position of status fulfills a need for attention, it also builds self-respect and self-esteem. Bormann explains why high-status positions are pleasant:

The group makes a high-status person feel important and influential. They show him deference, listen to him, ask his advice, and often reward him with a greater share of the group’s goods. He gets a bigger office, more secretaries, better furniture, more salary, a bigger car, and so forth. Even in communication-class discussion groups, the high-status members receive considerable gratification of their social and esteem needs. One of the most powerful forces drawing people into groups is the attraction of high status.

Perhaps you have participated in small groups in which the status of an individual afforded him or her certain privileges that were not available to the rest of the group. The chairperson of the board may have a private dining room or an executive washroom, while other members must eat in the company cafeteria and use public washrooms.

5.3.2: Effects of Status Differences

In groups and teams, members’ status exerts a significant effect on interpersonal relationships. Status affects who talks to whom and how often a member speaks. The status or reputation an individual has before joining a group certainly affects the role he or she assumes. In addition, norms that help groups determine how they will deal with status differences and what privileges they should allow those with greater prestige develop quickly. Several researchers have observed how status differences affect the relationships among members of a small group. Consider the following research conclusions:

• High-status group members talk more than low-status members.
• High-status group members communicate more with other high-status members than they do with those of lower status.
• Low-status group members tend to direct their conversation to high-status group members rather than to those of lower or equal status.
• Low-status group members communicate more positive messages to high-status members than they do to those of equal or lower status.
• High perceived status and expertise increase a group member’s tendencies to participate actively and to generate positive self-evaluations of his or her own input into the group’s task.
• High-status group members usually abide by the norms of the group more than do low-status group members. (The exception to this research finding occurs when high-status members realize that they can violate group norms and receive less punishment than low-status group members would receive; thus, depending on the situation, they may violate certain group norms.)
• Group members are more likely to ignore the comments and suggestions made by low-status members than those made by high-status members.
• Low-status group members communicate more irrelevant information than do high-status members.
• High-status members are less likely than low-status members to complain about their jobs or their responsibilities.\(^{39}\)

• Communication with high-status group members can replace the need for the upward movement of low-status members in the group’s status hierarchy.\(^{40}\)

• High-status group members tend to talk to the entire group more than members of lower status do.\(^{41}\)

• The leader of a small group is usually the member with the highest status. (The exception to this conclusion occurs when the leader emerges because of capability and competence and not necessarily because of popularity. That kind of leader holds a lower status than does a more popular and well-liked group member.)\(^{42}\)

• What’s your status level? Research shows that your perception of your own status in a group closely approximates others’ views of you.\(^{43}\)

5.3.3: Status Differences in Online Groups

Research by Amanda Dino and others found that lower status members of online groups were more conforming and agreeable in their messages. They also used more first-person singular voice (I, we) as well as more exclamation points. High-status members tended to be more instructive. Their messages contained more complex words and second-person (You) references.\(^{44}\)

5.3.4: Observing Status Difference to Predict Group Dynamics

Knowing how status affects the relationships among group members helps you predict who will talk with whom. If you can perceive status differences, you can also predict the type of messages communicated in a small-group discussion. These research conclusions suggest that the social hierarchy of a group affects group cohesiveness, group satisfaction, and even the quality of a group’s solution. One of the benefits of increased status within a group is the relative increase in the group member’s influence or power.

5.4: Power

5.4 Describe how five power bases affect relationships in small groups

Sociologist Robert Bierstedt once observed that in the “entire lexicon of sociological concepts, none is more troublesome than the concept of power. We may say about it in general only what St. Augustine said about time, that we all know perfectly well what it is—until someone asks us.”\(^{45}\) Although scholars debate definitions of power as well as its relationship to other variables such as status and authority, they generally agree that power, at its core, involves the ability of one person to control or influence some other person or decision.\(^{46}\) Power in a small group, then, is reflected in an individual’s ability to get other members to conform to his or her wishes. Power is about influence.

Certain group members may have more power in the group than others. Sometimes the sources of their power are clear to members, such as in groups with large status differences, but in other cases, the sources of power are not so clear. In order to map out the territory of social power in small groups, you need to look at power bases and the effects of power on group processes.
5.4.1: Power Bases
Your power base in a group is the sum of the resources that you can use to control or influence others. Because no two group members have exactly the same resources, each member operates from a different power base. What are some of these power bases? John French and Bertram Raven identified five power bases in their study of small groups:

1. Legitimate power
2. Referent power
3. Expert power
4. Reward power
5. Coercive power

Legitimate power stems from a group member’s ability to influence others because of being elected, appointed, or selected to exert control over a group. Legitimate power comes from occupying a position of responsibility. The principal of a school has the legitimate power to control school policy; the senators from your state have the legitimate power to represent their constituents. Many of the privileges enjoyed by high-status group members reflect this kind of power base. A small group member who has been elected chairperson is given legitimate power to influence the group’s procedures.

Referent power is the power of interpersonal attraction. People are attracted to others whom they admire and want to emulate. Put simply, people we like have more power over us than people we do not like.

Expert power stems from a group member’s ability to influence others based on the knowledge and information the member possesses. As the saying goes, knowledge is power. Suppose you are a member of a group studying ways to improve the environment of the river in your community. If one of your group members has a PhD in aquatic plant life, that person’s knowledge and access to information give him or her expert power. More than likely, that person can influence the group. However, just because a group member has knowledge does not mean that he or she will exert more influence in the group. The group must find the knowledge credible and useful.

Reward power is based on a person’s ability to reward behaviors. If you are in a position to help another member gain money, status, power, acceptance, or other rewards, you will have power over that person. Of course, group members are motivated by different needs and goals. What is rewarding to one may not be rewarding to others. Reward power is effective only if a person finds the reward satisfying or valuable. Others must also believe that a person actually has the power and resources to bestow the reward.

Coercive power, the negative side of reward power, is based on the perception that you can be punished for acting or not acting in a certain way. The ability to demote others, reduce their salaries or benefits, force them to work overtime hours, or fire them are examples of resources that can make up this power base. Even though coercive power may achieve a desired effect, group members usually resent threats of punishment intended to make them conform to group norms. Punished group members often try to dominate in other interactions or escape from heavy-handed efforts to accomplish a group goal.

Virtual Groups
Technology development is not neutral but reflects the values of the cultures in which it develops. A team of researchers at the University of California at Santa Barbara analyzed the structure of the Internet to determine the social impact of that technology. They found that the primary use (70 percent) of the Internet was information dissemination and gathering. Its decentralized structure makes government regulation of the medium extremely difficult and encourages open communication. According to the authors, these democratic values implicit in the technology reflect a North American cultural influence that will most certainly drive the future development of the Internet.

These democratic values may also reflect the fact that communication on a computer screen minimizes status differences that are far more influential in face-to-face situations. Students and faculty members who use online chat rooms or threaded discussions in their classes report an interesting finding that supports this notion. Students who participate most actively in online discussions are often not the ones who participate most actively in face-to-face classroom discussions. Some students are simply more comfortable in an environment where they can choose their words more carefully and less publicly; it suits their personalities better. As you add virtual group communication to your group communication repertoire, keep in mind these tips:

- Online discussions may seem more democratic because of the factors noted above. However, status differences don’t disappear when we no longer can see the other person. Remember to adapt your messages to your audience—friend, peer, colleague, professor, supervisor, CEO—as appropriate.
- The disembodied messages of virtual communication can be easily misinterpreted without attending nonverbal signals. Be sure you understand the sender’s meaning before you react.
- Resist the tendency to communicate solely online in lieu of face to face. Convenience and effectiveness are often competing values.

Educators know that active engagement in the learning process and time on task are the best predictors of student academic success. It follows, then, that given the different
personalities of group members and the democratic value of participation, a combination of face-to-face interaction and virtual communication may reduce the effects of status differences, maximize the contributions of each group member, and consequently maximize the effectiveness of your group.


### 5.4.2: Effects of Power on Group Process

Members who have power influence the group process. Whether their influence will be positive or negative depends on how wisely the members use their influence.

A person’s power base in a group is the sum of the resources that the person can use to control or influence others. What types of power do you think New Jersey Governor Chris Christie uses when trying to persuade others?

The following principles summarize the impact of power on group deliberations:

- A struggle for power among group members can result in poor group decisions and less group cohesion.
- Members who overtly seek dominance and control over a group often focus attention on themselves rather than on achieving group goals. They typically serve as aggressors, blockers, recognition seekers, dominators, or special-interest pleaders (roles discussed earlier in this chapter).
- Group members with little power often talk less frequently in a group.
- Charles Berger observed that “persons who talk most frequently and for the longest periods of time are assumed to be the most dominant group members. In addition, persons receiving the most communication are assumed to be most powerful.”48 While not all powerful members dominate group conversations, there is a relationship between verbal contributions to the group and influence. The exceptions to this principle are members who talk so frequently that they are ignored by the group. Cultural variations can influence this dynamic as well.
- Group members can lose power if other members think they use power for personal gain or to keep a group from achieving its goals.
- Group members usually expect individuals with greater power to have high-status privileges. However, if members believe that powerful members are having a detrimental effect on the group, their credibility and influence are likely to diminish. Too many perks and privileges given to some members sap a group’s ability to do its job and can result in challenges to the influential group members.
- Too much power in one individual can lead to less group decision making and more autocratic decision making. Autocratic decision making occurs when one person with several power bases (for example, one who can reward and punish, has needed information, is well liked, and has been appointed to lead) makes a decision alone rather than with the group as a whole. Group members may not speak their minds for fear of reprisals.
- Increasing your level of activity in a group can increase your power and influence. Research shows that individuals with high levels of dominance in their personalities attain high levels of influence in groups, not because of competence, but because their high level of activity makes them appear competent.49
- Groups with equal power distribution show higher-quality group communication than do groups with unequal power distribution.50
- In corporate work teams, individual power is related to the fact that group members must depend on one another.51

**Participation** If you participate in a group and sense that your influence is diminishing, try to participate more and to take an active role in helping the group achieve its goal. Volunteering to help with tasks and increasing your knowledge about group problems, issues, or decisions can also enhance your influence. If you see other group members losing influence, you can give them (or suggest that
they take responsibility for) specific tasks that will bring them back into the group’s mainstream (assuming that they are willing to accept the responsibility).

5.4.3: Power and Gender

Stereotypes portray women as being more easily influenced than men and as having less power over others than their male counterparts. However, although results are mixed, research tends to dispel these illusions. In one study, when women were placed in positions of power, they were just as likely as men to use strategies associated with power. Because men typically occupy roles of higher power in society, the opportunity for them to use power strategies is greater than for women. This observation led the researcher to conclude that the unequal distribution of power results in the illusion of gender differences, which are really the result of women’s and men’s relative social status. Thus, apparent gender differences must be understood within a context of status and power.

Clearly there are inequities in the workplace. But social and organizational expectations for men and women have changed and will continue to do so. Indeed, there is evidence that more and more firms value diversity in the ranks of management and believe that such diversity provides a competitive advantage. Indeed, there is evidence that having women at the top of management teams in initial public offering firms is associated with gains in both short-term and long-term financial performance.

5.4.4: Status and Power:
A Cultural Footnote

It is important to remember that status is primarily in the eye of the beholder. Frequently status becomes meaningless when someone crosses a cultural boundary; a PhD will not be revered in a country-and-western bar. Communication scholar Marshall Singer offers this observation:

The Ph.D. holder and the famous athlete have acquired high status and the ability to influence their respective “constituents.” Because high status—whether ascribed or acquired—depends so much on its being perceived as such, it may be the least transferable, across cultural barriers, of all the components of power we are discussing.

Cultural differences in perceptions of status are revealed pointedly in the following letter. On June 17, 1744, commissioners from Maryland and Virginia negotiated a treaty with the Native American members of the Six Nations at Lancaster, Pennsylvania. The Native Americans were invited to send young men to William and Mary College. The next day they declined the offer, as the letter explains.

We know that you highly esteem the kind of learning taught in those Colleges, and that the Maintenance of our young Men, while with you, would be very expensive to you. We are convinced, that you mean to do us Good by your Proposal; and we thank you heartily. But you, who are wise must know that different Nations have different Conceptions of things and you will therefore not take it amiss if our ideas of this kind of Education happen not to be the same as yours. We have had some Experience of it. Several of our young People were formerly brought up at the Colleges of the Northern Provinces: They were instructed in all your Sciences; but, when they came back to us, they were bad Runners, ignorant of every means of living in the woods . . . neither fit for Hunters, Warriors, nor Counsellors, they were totally good for nothing.

We are, however, not the less oblig’d by your kind Offer, tho’ we decline accepting it; and, to show our grateful Sense of it, if the Gentlemen of Virginia will send us a Dozen of their Sons, we will take Care of their Education, instruct them in all we know, and make Men of them.

5.5: Trust

5.5 Identify factors that foster trusting relationships with others

What do used-car salespeople and politicians have in common? They are often stereotyped as people whose credibility is suspect. The untrustworthy images of such people are not always justified, but when they want
something from you, whether it is money or a vote, you are often suspicious of the promises they make. When you trust people, you have faith that they will not try to take advantage of you and that they will be mindful of your best interests. In small groups, the degree of trust you have in others affects your developing interpersonal relationships with them. The following sections consider how trust in relationships affects group members and suggests how you can elicit more trust as you interact with others.

5.5.1: Developing Trusting Relationships

Why do you trust some people more than others? What is it about your closest friend that enables you to confide your most private feelings? How can group members develop trusting relationships? First, developing trusting relationships in a group takes time. Just as assuming a role in a group discussion requires time, so does developing confidence in others. Second, you base trust on the previous experiences you have had with others. You probably would not give a stranger your bank account number. You would, however, more than likely trust this number to your spouse or to a friend you have known for many years. As you communicate with other people, you gradually learn whether you can trust them. First you observe how they complete various tasks and responsibilities. Then you decide whether you can rely on them to get things done.

Trust in groups has been defined as “the extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another.” As you participate in a group, you trust those who, because of their actions in the past, have given you reason to believe that they will behave predictably in the future. Group members establish trusting relationships as they develop mutual respect and as the group becomes more cohesive. One interesting piece of research shows that in computer-mediated teams, levels of trust among group members start lower than in face-to-face groups. But over time, trust increases to a level comparable to that in face-to-face teams.

However, even time and experience cannot guarantee trust. A certain amount of risk is always involved whenever you trust another person. As Richard Reichert suggests, “Trust is always a risk, a kind of leap in the dark. It is not based on any solid proof that the other person will not hurt you . . . trust is always a gamble.” Sometimes the gamble does not pay off. And if you have worked in a small group with several people who proved untrustworthy, you may be reluctant to trust others in future groups. Thus, your good and bad experiences in past groups affect the way in which you relate to people in future groups.

5.5.2: Trust in Face-to-Face and Virtual Teams

Groups and teams that have limited or no face-to-face interaction develop trust differently from those where face-to-face contact is frequent. Face-to-face teams develop trust mostly through social and emotional bonds that grow as they get to know one another. In virtual teams, trust is more likely to develop through task-oriented responses such as timely information sharing and appropriate, sound responses to electronic communications. Trust will develop more rapidly in computer-mediated relationships when the participants first have an opportunity for face-to-face interaction. This is especially true when the context is competitive.

5.6: The Development of Group Relationships over Time

Describe how relationships develop over time among group members

Group formation takes place over time. It takes time for trusting relationships to develop. You experience some tension and anxiety the first time you participate in a small group. You may be uncertain of your role, and the group may not have met long enough for norms to develop. Status differences among group members can also create tension. Bormann has defined this initial uneasiness as primary tension, or

the social unease and stiffness that accompanies getting acquainted. Students placed in a discussion group with strangers will experience these tensions most strongly during the opening minutes of their first meetings. The earmarks of primary tensions are extreme politeness, apparent boredom or tiredness, and considerable sighing or yawning. When members
show primary tension, they speak softly and tentatively. Frequently they can think of nothing to say, and many long pauses result.62

Expect to find some primary tension during initial meetings. It is a normal part of group development. A group leader can minimize this tension, however, by helping members get to know one another, perhaps through get-acquainted exercises or brief statements of introduction. While members of groups that meet only once might deem getting to know one another impractical, using a few minutes to break the ice and reduce some of the primary tension can help create more satisfying relationships among group members.

After a group resolves primary tension and its members become more comfortable with one another, another type of tension, known as secondary tension, develops. Secondary tension, according to Bormann, occurs as conflicts arise and differences of opinion emerge. Whether recognized as a personality conflict or simply as a disagreement, secondary tension surfaces when members try to solve the problem or accomplish the task facing the group. Secondary tension also results from power struggles, and it usually establishes group norms. Joking or laughing often helps manage secondary tension. But no matter how cohesive a group may be, some conflict over procedure will normally develop as relationships among members form.

Case Study
Adjusting to Variable Status and Power

Your university has a Strategic Planning Committee composed of the following people:

- The Dean of the College
- The Vice President for Finance
- The Vice President for Development (fundraising)
- A representative from the Board of Trustees
- The Director of Admissions
- The Director of Planning and Institutional Research
- Three elected faculty members
- Two students selected by the Student Government Association
- An alumni representative

Some committee members (administrators) are appointed to the committee permanently. Others (faculty members and students) are appointed to one-year terms. The committee’s charge is to make recommendations to the president about new goals and objectives for the Strategic Plan. To do this, the committee has been asked first to review the University’s Mission Statement, as well as the Institutional Goals for Graduates and how they relate to the Mission. Then the committee is asked to evaluate progress made toward these goals since establishment of the previous Strategic Plan. The committee then must facilitate and coordinate the annual update of the Plan before finally making their recommendations.

Questions for Analysis

1. Consider the membership of this group. What source(s) of power can you identify for each member based on the member’s title or affiliation?
2. Can you predict which group members are most likely to enact certain group roles? Which members and which roles? Why do you think this?
3. Rank committee members by their status. What is the basis for your rankings?
4. This is a committee that has relatively permanent members (dean, vice presidents, and directors), as well as members who are more short-term (representatives from trustees, alumni, students, faculty). How will this affect the establishment of group norms from year to year?

5.6.1: Gender and Communication

Deborah Tannen’s best-selling book *You Just Don’t Understand* struck a responsive chord by identifying gender differences in verbal communication. Her work popularized a research conclusion that most of us already knew: Both within a given culture and from one culture to another, men and women have different communication patterns. Evidence indicates that men and women sometimes use language differently and that they also interpret nonverbal behavior differently. Clara Mayo and Nancy Henley63 as well as Diana Ivy and Phil Backlund64 are among the scholars who provide excellent comparisons of how males and females use and respond to nonverbal cues. Note the following conclusions about gender differences in sending and receiving nonverbal messages:

- People of both sexes tend to move closer to women than to men.65
- Women tend to move closer to others than men do.66
- Men tend to maintain less eye contact with others than women do.67
- Women seem to use more expressive facial expressions than men do.68
- Men tend to use more gestures than women do.69
- Men initiate touch more often than women do.70
- Women speak with less volume than men do.71
Besides differing from men in their use of nonverbal behaviors, there is evidence that women tend to receive and interpret nonverbal messages more accurately. Why are there differences in the way males and females use and respond to nonverbal messages? Some theorize that the answer lies in physiological differences between men and women. But the leading explanation focuses on how men and women are socialized into society. Women typically are socialized to value interpersonal relationships and to respond to others’ emotions, which are largely expressed nonverbally. Also, men typically have higher status in North American culture and in many other cultures throughout the world. And as we noted earlier, those of higher status are typically talked to more; receiving verbal information from others may lessen men’s need to interpret nonverbal messages.

The research conclusions reviewed here can help explain some of the differences in the way that men and women communicate in groups and teams. We emphasize, however, that these are research generalizations; do not expect all men and all women to exhibit these differences. In your group deliberations, be cautious about always expecting to see these differences. But knowing that there can be gender differences in both verbal and nonverbal behavior may help you become both more flexible and tolerant when communicating with others in groups.

Conversational norms vary by culture. If not understood, these differences can cause misunderstanding, anxiety, and group conflict.

The white middle-class North American norm that leads one group member to quietly await a turn to speak may cause him or her to wait a very long time when those from other cultures do not share that norm. People from some cultures love a good argument, whereas others revere harmony and the ability to assimilate differences to build consensus. Some cultures are put off by North Americans’ frankness and relative lack of inhibition about sharing negative information. In Western cultures, control is exerted through speaking; in Eastern cultures, control is expressed through silence and in the outward show of reticence.

The topics we address and our willingness to talk about personal matters vary by culture. Whereas Mexicans may talk about a person’s soul or spirit, such talk may make North Americans uncomfortable. Persons from Hispanic cultures often begin conversations with inquiries about one’s family, even with casual acquaintances or in a business meeting. Many North Americans view family matters as too personal to be discussed casually.
5.6.4: Time

Thomas Fitzgerald recounts an anecdote that illustrates cultural differences in the temporal dimension. While interviewing a group of Brazilian students, Fitzgerald asked them how they felt about a person who was consistently late. He was surprised to find that the students viewed such a person as probably more successful than those who were on time. A person of status, they reasoned, is expected to be late.77

Some people are monochronic. They are most comfortable doing only one thing at a time, like to concentrate on the job at hand, are more serious and sensitive to deadlines and schedules, like to plan how to use their time, and stress the importance of starting and ending meetings on time.78 Other people are polychronic. Such individuals can do many things at once, are less influenced by deadlines and schedules, feel that relationships are more important than producing volumes of work, frequently change plans, and are less concerned about punctuality than are monochronic individuals.

Communication researchers Dawna Ballard and David Seibold confirmed what scholars have suspected: Groups have different approaches to how they use time. Ballard and Seibold found that groups they investigated had three general approaches to time: (1) flexible, (2) separation, and (3) concurrency.79 Groups with a flexible approach to time set fewer deadlines and provided group members more autonomy. Groups with a separation approach to time preferred literally to separate themselves from others when working on a group task; they were more likely to keep the door closed and get away from others. Concurrency groups were more likely to attempt to do several things at once (multitask); they would look for ways to combine projects and activities. Being aware of how groups and teams in which you participate use time can help you better understand why your group behaves as it does. If you’re in a flexible group, you may need to monitor deadlines more closely. Separation groups may need to ensure they don’t separate themselves so far from the organization that they lose sight of the overall organizational goal. Because concurrency groups have a tendency to do several things at once, such groups may need added structure and a system to keep track of the various projects undertaken.

The use of time and expectations about time can cause conflict and frustration if group members have widely differing perspectives. Time use and expectations vary from culture to culture.80 People from the United States and Northern Europe tend to be more monochronic; attention to deadlines and punctuality are important. Latin Americans, Southern Europeans, and Middle Easterners are more often polychronic; they give less attention to deadlines and schedules. Western cultures tend to approach problems in a linear, step-by-step fashion. How events are structured and sequenced is important. Eastern cultures (Chinese and Japanese) approach time with a less-structured perspective. The observations of several researchers have been summarized in Table 5.1.81

Even if your group does not have members from widely different cultures, you may notice that people have different approaches to time. Groups develop their own norms about time. It may be useful to explicitly discuss and clarify norms, such as the importance of deadlines, expectations for group productivity, and general attitudes about punctuality, in order to manage any uncertainty about time that may exist.

Whether a group is struggling with cultural differences or differences in role expectations, norms, status, perceived power, or trust, it’s important to remember that through effective and appropriate communication, we can bridge differences and develop productive relationships with others. In the next chapter we examine those communication variables that can contribute to a positive group climate.

**Table 5.1 Cultural Differences in the Use of Time**

**Source:** From Donald W. Klopf and James McCroskey, *International Encounters: An Introduction to Intercultural Communication* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 2006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>In Western Cultures</th>
<th>In Eastern Cultures</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time is something to be manipulated.</td>
<td>Time simply exists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The present is a way-station between the past and the future.</td>
<td>The present is more important than the past or the future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is a resource that can be saved, spent, or wasted.</td>
<td>Time is a limitless pool.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is an aspect of history rather than part of an immediate experience.</td>
<td>Events occur in time; they cause ripples, and the ripples subside.</td>
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**Shared Writing: What Would You Do?**

Relational communication is the process of building relationships between and among group members. But what happens when you see another group member behaving unethically?

Suppose that in the final semester of your senior year, you and a classmate are student interns for a not-for-profit organization that raises funds and develops programs to help children who have
suffered abuse. Each of you receives a small stipend for your work on the organization’s programming team, as well as three college credits (assuming successful completion of the internship and a favorable review by your supervisors).

It has come to your attention that your friend has been taking office supplies for personal use. At first it was small packages of sticky notes, but now your friend has gone home with 500 sheets of printer paper, an ink cartridge, several rolls of cellophane tape, a tape dispenser, and a stapler.

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

Chapter Quiz: Relating to Others in Groups
Chapter 6
Improving Group Climate

Learning Objectives

6.1 Identify behaviors that contribute to a defensive or supportive group climate
6.2 Identify examples of confirming and disconfirming interpersonal responses
6.3 Describe at least four factors in group cohesiveness
6.4 Explain communication networks and their effects on group climate and individual satisfaction
6.5 Discuss group size and its relationship to group climate
6.6 Describe the relationship between group climate and productivity

“All for one, one for all.”
—Alexandre Dumas

What does the word *climate* call to mind? If you’ve taken a course in physical geography or meteorology, you may think of temperature gradients, barometric pressure, and how bodies of water, latitude, ocean currents, and mountains affect the weather of a particular region. Look out your window. Does today’s weather make you want to curl up indoors with a book? Go to the beach? Go skiing? How do you feel about spending a cold, snowy night in front of a roaring fire in a cozy room? Would you say that climate affects your desire to engage in certain activities?
Group climate is roughly analogous to geographic climate. A variety of factors interact to create a group feeling or atmosphere. How group members communicate, with whom they communicate, and how often they communicate influence their satisfaction as well as their productivity. This chapter examines how people communicate in ways that help a group establish a positive climate.

### 6.1: Defensive and Supportive Climates

#### 6.1 Identify behaviors that contribute to a defensive or supportive group climate

Think about two or three groups or teams you’ve participated in recently. How did you feel during meetings? Energized? Tense? Did you look forward to meetings or did you hope they’d be canceled? In other words, what was the group’s climate?

How team members communicate with one another is a primary determinant of group climate. In some groups we feel supported; in others, we may feel defensive. For several years social psychologist Jack Gibb observed the communicative behavior of people in groups and identified the categories of behaviors that contribute to defensive and supportive climates. He suggests that a defensive climate is counterproductive in any group. People who are made to feel defensive try to protect themselves—worrying how they are perceived, how they can “win,” how they can generally defend themselves. While doing so, they are not spending much of their energy building relationships and working toward the group’s goal. When group members feel supported, they can focus on the group and its task, rather than on self-protection.¹

More recent research reinforces the relationship of a supportive climate to productivity.² Indeed, supportive communication in the workplace has been found to reduce stress and burnout for many employees. Supportive communication provides links among employees or group members characterized by self-disclosure and a shared definition of the relationship. Often, the key to building a supportive climate lies not only in what we communicate but also in how we communicate it.³ A message can be delivered in ways that evoke support or defense. Consider some examples based on Gibb’s categories.

#### 6.1.1: Evaluation versus Description

Problem solving in small groups involves generating and evaluating ideas. Unfortunately, not all ideas are perfect, and the group needs to discover this in order to reach the most effective decision. When someone puts forth a less-than-perfect idea, you can respond by saying, “You idiot, that’s the most ridiculous idea I’ve heard in a decade,” or you can say, “As I think through that idea and apply it to our problem, I run up against some other problems. Am I missing something?” Imagine yourself on the receiving end of the first comment. How do you feel? You have just been put down and are likely to be defensive. This is an example of evaluation (albeit an extreme one). The second response, an example of description, is much more effective and supportive. Your idea may, in fact, be terrible, but at least the second response allows you to save face. It also keeps the door open for further discussion of your idea. Quite possibly, further investigation into your bad idea may lead to a better idea.

In a nutshell, evaluation is “you” language: It directs itself to the worth of the other person or of that person’s ideas. As a result, it can provoke defensiveness. Description, in contrast, is “I” language: It describes the speaker’s thoughts about the person or idea. This type of response leads to more trust and cohesiveness in groups.

#### 6.1.2: Control versus Problem Orientation

Communicative behavior that aims at controlling others can produce defensiveness in group members. This pattern characterizes many aggressive salespeople who, quite intentionally, manipulate others into answering trivial questions that lead up to the final question of whether or not they want to buy a product. Various persuasive tactics aim at controlling behavior (as any student of television commercials can observe). Implicit in attempts to control lies the assumption of the controller—the “I know what’s good for you” assumption. When people become aware of this attitude, they frequently become defensive.

In a group, maintaining a problem orientation is a more effective approach. If others perceive you as a person who genuinely strives for a solution that will benefit all concerned (rather than just yourself), this perception will contribute to a supportive climate, greater cohesiveness, and increased productivity.

#### 6.1.3: Strategy versus Spontaneity

Like controlling behavior, strategy suggests manipulation because it implies preplanned communication. Such strategies range from “pitching a fit” and acting upset to withholding information, acting mysterious, or pouting. This sort of behavior places the self before the group and does not lead to the most effective solutions to group problems.

If others perceive you as a person who acts spontaneously (that is, not from hidden motivations or agendas) and as a person who immediately and honestly responds to the present situation, you are likely to create a more supportive climate.

#### 6.1.4: Neutrality versus Empathy

If you behave in a detached, uncaring fashion, as if the people in your group and the outcome of the group’s process do not concern you in the least, your behavior will
probably arouse defensiveness. Involvement and concern for the group task and for other group members are perceived as supportive.

6.1.5: Superiority versus Equality

If you feel superior to other group members, a small-group meeting is not the place to show it. You probably know students who approach you in class after tests have been returned and ask, “What’d ya get?” Frequently these students use this question merely as a preface to showing you their superior grade. Most people think such behavior is obnoxious. It makes them feel defensive. In groups, some people preface their remarks with words such as “obviously” or point out their greater knowledge, experience, or some other attribute that makes them superior to other members. Most likely, their behavior will meet with some resistance. People create more supportive climates when they indicate a willingness to enter into participative planning with mutual trust and respect.

Communication that is spontaneous is perceived as more supportive than communication that appears planned. Why might these office workers appreciate spontaneous communication?

6.1.6: Certainty versus Provisionalism

Do you know people who always have all the answers, whose ideas are truths to be defended, who are intolerant toward people with wrong (that is, different) attitudes? These highly dogmatic people are easily recognizable because of the defensiveness they produce in others. The usual response to such people is to want to prove them wrong. This behavior is counterproductive in groups. Individuals are likely to be more effective if their attitudes appear to be held provisionally, that is, if they appear flexible and genuinely committed to solving problems rather than to simply taking sides on issues. If people keep themselves open to new information and can admit that, from time to time, they may be wrong about something, they will be more effective group members and will help build more supportive group climates.

As a communicator, you control your own actions. Your knowledge of defensive and supportive behaviors will help you make your group work more effectively. Another area of research and application in group climate is interpersonal confirmation and disconfirmation. This research deals not with communicative behaviors that you initiate, but with the ways in which you respond to other group members.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Defensive Climate</th>
<th>Supportive Climate</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation:</strong> Use of “you” language calls into question the worth of another person.</td>
<td><strong>Description:</strong> “I” language describes your own feelings and ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control:</strong> Efforts to get others to do what you want them to do.</td>
<td><strong>Problem orientation:</strong> Communication aimed at solving problems. “Let’s find a solution that works for both of us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strategy:</strong> Planned communication—for example, saying something nice before criticizing someone.</td>
<td><strong>Spontaneity:</strong> Here-and-now orientation; being honest rather than planning how to manipulate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neutrality:</strong> Emotional indifference—the unspoken attitude that “you’ll get over it.”</td>
<td><strong>Empathy:</strong> Emotional involvement; nonverbal behavior is important.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Superiority:</strong> Attitude that you’re better than the other person.</td>
<td><strong>Equality:</strong> Communication based on mutual respect; “I’m okay, you’re okay.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Certainty:</strong> Taking dogmatic, rigid positions; “Don’t bother me with facts, my mind is made up.” Those who behave this way are usually more interested in winning an argument than in solving a problem.</td>
<td>** Provisionalism:** Openness to receiving new information; showing some flexibility in the positions you take.</td>
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</table>
6.2: Interpersonal Confirmation and Disconfirmation

6.2.1: Disconfirming Responses

- **IMPERVIOUS RESPONSE**: One speaker fails to acknowledge, even minimally, another speaker’s communicative attempt.
- **INTERRUPTING RESPONSE**: One speaker cuts another speaker short or begins while the other is still speaking.
- **IRRELEVANT RESPONSE**: A speaker responds in a way that seems unrelated to what the other has been saying, or introduces a new topic without warning or returns to his or her earlier topic, apparently disregarding the intervening conversation.
- **TANGENTIAL RESPONSE**: A speaker acknowledges another person’s communication but immediately takes the conversation in another direction. Occasionally individuals exhibit what may appear to be direct responses to the other, such as “Yes, but . . .” or “Well, you may be right, but . . .,” and then continue by discussing something very different from what preceded. Tangential responses are considered the most disconfirming responses because they first acknowledge the other’s statement (“Yes, I heard you”) but then changes the subject (“but I’m going to talk about me now”).
- **IMPERSONAL RESPONSE**: One speaker conducts a monologue, or exhibits speech behavior that appears intellectualized and impersonal, contains few first-person statements and many generalized “you” or “one” statements, or is heavily loaded with euphemisms or clichés.
- **INCOHERENT RESPONSE**: A speaker responds with incomplete sentences; with rambling, difficult-to-follow statements; with sentences containing much retracing or rephrasing; or with interjections such as “you know” or “I mean.”
- **INCONGRUOUS RESPONSE**: A speaker engages in nonverbal behavior that contradicts the vocal content, which results in a response that may be called incongruous. For example, “Who’s angry? I’m not angry!” (said in angrily), or “I already said that I love you!!!” (shouting and menacing).

6.2.2: Confirming Responses

- **DIRECT ACKNOWLEDGMENT**: A speaker acknowledges another person’s communication and reacts to it directly and verbally.
- **AGREEMENT ABOUT CONTENT**: A speaker reinforces information expressed by another.
- **SUPPORTIVE RESPONSE**: A speaker expresses understanding of another person or tries to reassure or make the other feel better.
6.3: Group Cohesiveness

Describe at least four factors in group cohesiveness.

Historically, cohesiveness has been considered one of the most important small-group variables. Group cohesiveness is the degree of attraction members feel toward one another and toward the group. It is a feeling of deep loyalty, of “groupness” (often called by the French term esprit de corps), and the degree to which each individual has made the group’s goal his or her own. It is a sense of belonging and a feeling of high morale. Cohesiveness results from the interaction of a number of variables, including group composition, individual benefits derived from the group, task effectiveness, context, and, first and foremost, communication. The productivity of groups and teams is strongly related to their cohesiveness. However, there are exceptions. In one study of a junior hockey team, high social cohesion was seen to be detrimental to team performance. The authors of the study hypothesized that in this case, high group cohesion and pressure to conform had led to a reduction in the need to evaluate one another’s performance and, consequently, to deteriorating performance.

6.3.1: Composition and Cohesiveness: Building a Team

People often join groups because they feel an attraction toward the people in that group. Factors discussed earlier, such as the similarity of group members or the degree to which group members’ needs complement one another, are influential in the development of group cohesiveness. To borrow a metaphor from the sports world, the best team has the right players at the right positions—and good coaching. Based on their size, speed, aggressiveness, reaction time, and so forth, different players are suited for different positions. So it is with all groups and teams. For maximum effectiveness, they need participants with different talents that complement one another.

Cohesiveness develops around both task and the relationship dimensions. Building a group solely on the basis of similarity in interpersonal attraction is likely to lead to strong cohesiveness based on relationships but mediocrity as a task group. This is why self-selected groups are often less cohesive—and less productive—than groups in which...
membership has been assigned carefully, with the group's task in mind. The characteristics we find most attractive in a friend may not be those best suited to help us do a job. Evidence from college classroom groups suggests strongly that self-selection is not the best policy. In one study, by a nearly two-to-one margin, students who formed their own groups reported that group as one of their worst group experiences. However, extreme diversity within a group brings stimulating perspectives to problem solving but may strain the relational aspects of group process. Likewise, negative emotions such as envy can have a detrimental effect on cohesiveness and productivity. Research shows that people like to affiliate with those who they perceive as superior in some way. However, a truly and vastly superior teammate can also result not only in envy but also in defensiveness and physiological feelings of threat.

Most work groups today are culturally and racially diverse in addition to reflecting a range of talents and expertise. Such diversity can be a source of strength because of the multiple perspectives it brings to problem solving as long as the group can work together to minimize misunderstandings that can derive from that diversity. Contradictory findings have been called the "double-edged sword of diversity"—that group diversity can be either positive or negative or both. But the costs and benefits of diversity depend very much on context—the type of diversity, the nature of the task, the group's history, and its leadership.

6.3.2: Individual Benefits and Cohesiveness

Cohesiveness is a combination of forces that holds people in groups. Depending on the nature of the group, its members can derive benefits of affiliation, power, affection, and prestige. People like to be with groups in which these needs are satisfied. For example, group members who experience relational satisfaction also tend to perceive their groups as more cohesive and as reaching consensus. An important determinant of group cohesiveness, then, is the degree to which a particular group is capable of meeting members' needs in comparison to the ability of any other group to meet those same needs. If people perceive that they derive benefits from a group that no other group could provide, their attraction toward that group will strengthen considerably. This factor partially accounts for the intense attraction most people feel toward their families or closest friends.

6.3.3: Task Effectiveness and Cohesiveness

The relation of personal and interpersonal variables to group cohesiveness has already been discussed. The performance of the group as a whole has considerable influence as well; success fosters cohesiveness. The mutuality of concern for the group's task, which provides the focal point for working toward that task, becomes socially rewarding when the task is completed successfully. Here is another example of the interrelatedness of the task and social dimensions: Reaching a particular goal provides a common, rewarding experience for all group members. This commonality, or shared experience, further sets a group apart from other groups.

6.3.4: Communication and Cohesiveness

Communication plays a role in creating symbolic convergence through which a cohesive group identity evolves. According to symbolic convergence theory, the group develops a unique identity through the sharing of fantasies or stories. A feeling of cohesiveness is likely to increase as group members share stories and other group members respond to those stories. A fantasy chain occurs when one story leads to another, thus creating a bond among group members and the revelation of common fantasies.

The earlier discussion of defensive and supportive communication suggests some ways in which people can adjust their communicative behavior to improve group cohesiveness. Research shows that an "agreeable" style is positively related to team members' willingness to share their knowledge with their groups, which relate to job performance and to satisfaction with the group. In addition to the quality of communication, the amount of communication in the group also affects cohesiveness. George Homans states that if "the frequency of interaction between two or more persons increases, the degree of their liking for one another will increase, and vice versa." Free and open communication characterizes highly cohesive groups. The more people interact, the more they reveal themselves to each other. Through communication, people negotiate group roles, establish goals, reveal similarities and differences, resolve conflict, and express affection. It makes sense, then, that as the frequency of communication within a group increases, so does the group's cohesiveness. Communication is also the foundation for interpersonal trust within the group.

6.3.5: Cohesiveness in Virtual Teams

When compared to face-to-face teams, virtual teams often show lower levels of initial trust, cohesiveness, and
Other patterns may emerge. These include circular patterns, in which people talk primarily to those sitting next to them, or linear patterns, in which people communicate in a kind of chain reaction. These patterns may be built into the group from the outset, or they may emerge spontaneously. Either way, networks tend to stabilize over time. Once people establish channels of communication, they continue to use the same channels. This network of channels influences group climate as well as group productivity.

A review of research suggests that, in general, “groups in which free communication is maximized are generally more accurate in their judgments, although they may take longer to reach a decision.”27 People also tend to feel more satisfied in groups in which they participate actively.28 When interaction is stifled or discouraged, people have less opportunity to satisfy their needs through communication. Groups with centralized communication networks (see Figure 6.2) are certainly more efficient. That efficiency enhances group cohesiveness, but considerable evidence suggests that free and open communication networks that include everyone in the group (see Figure 6.1) are more likely to lead to more accurate group judgments as well as to better goal attainment and task performance.29

6.4: Communication Networks

6.4 Explain communication networks and their effects on group climate and individual satisfaction

Another influence on group climate is the communication network—the pattern of interaction within a group, or who talks to whom. If you think about the group meetings in which you participate, it may seem that although some people talk more than others, most of their communication is addressed to the group as a whole. Next time you are in a group, note who is talking to whom. You will find that people address relatively few comments to the group as a whole and that they direct most of what they say in groups toward specific persons. In some groups, communication tends to be distributed equally among group members. Figure 6.1 represents such a distribution.

Figure 6.1 Equal Distribution of Communication

In other groups, members address most comments to one central person, perhaps the designated leader or chairperson. Figure 6.2 represents this type of communicative pattern.

Figure 6.2 Communication Addressed to Leader

Other patterns may emerge. These include circular patterns, in which people talk primarily to those sitting next to them, or linear patterns, in which people communicate in a kind of chain reaction. These patterns may be built into the group from the outset, or they may emerge spontaneously. Either way, networks tend to stabilize over time. Once people establish channels of communication, they continue to use the same channels. This network of channels influences group climate as well as group productivity.

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Putting Principles into Practice

Cohesiveness and Productivity at Harley-Davidson30

Group cohesiveness and productivity are often strongly related. Cohesive groups possess the kind of bonds that foster trust, openness, and the ability to manage conflicting views productively.

In the 1980s, the Harley-Davidson Motor Company experienced a widely celebrated turnaround that was achieved largely by replacing a “command-and-control” culture with a new culture that involved assembly employees’ making important decisions in their work teams. Former Harley-Davidson CEO Rich Teerlink purposely delegated his authority to “lead” the company. The Public
6.5: Group Size

Discuss group size and its relationship to group climate

Within a group, there is a positive relationship between the level of people’s participation and the degree of their individual satisfaction. Obviously, as the size of a group increases, the opportunity to interact with other members decreases. No one knows the precise number of people that will maximize the effectiveness of your group, but some observations may provide guidance. As a group’s size increases, complexity increases and the principle of diminishing returns sets in. Moreover, individual group members’ efforts tend to decrease. One study found that cohesiveness is positively related to the opportunity for interaction afforded by group size: As group size increases, the opportunity for interaction decreases. What, then, is the optimum size?

Groups should be large enough to include people with the skills necessary to get the job done, but small enough to encourage maximum participation. Groups move through fairly orderly developmental stages. Researcher Susan Whelan observed that smaller groups tend to move through these phases more quickly and thus become more productive sooner than larger groups. In her research, groups containing three to six members were more productive and developmentally advanced than groups with seven to ten members. For face-to-face contact, a smaller group is often better in terms of cohesiveness and productivity. In virtual groups and teams, size appears to be less of a factor in this regard. Some research has found less clear effects of group size. One study of production work teams found group size to be unrelated to employees’ perceptions of their work teams or their workplace commitment. But the same study showed positive perceptions of their work teams to be related strongly to their commitment to their workplace and their productivity.

6.6: Group Climate and Productivity

Describe the relationship between group climate and productivity

Thus far this chapter has discussed many variables that affect group climate—defensive behavior, confirming and disconfirming responses, group cohesiveness, group size—and has made some suggestions about how to improve the climate of groups. When communication is free and open and when everyone participates, people tend to feel more attraction toward the group and
consequently receive more personal satisfaction. Another reason for developing and maintaining a positive group climate is that climate affects productivity. There is substantial evidence that factors such as strong work norms and cohesiveness interact in groups and teams to increase productivity.36

In computer-mediated groups, group members’ familiarity with one another has a positive effect on the group’s efficiency. As familiarity in these groups increases, the time it takes to reach a decision decreases. However, group members report lower satisfaction with computer-mediated groups than with face-to-face groups. Furthermore, there is evidence that decision accuracy for computer-mediated groups is lower than for face-to-face groups.37

Virtual Groups
When compared to face-to-face teams, virtual teams often show lower levels of initial trust, cohesiveness, and satisfaction. Trust is important to a healthy group climate, open exchange of information, and effective decision making.

When team members are in different locations, they can’t rely on the usual face-to-face nonverbal cues to gauge sincerity or effort. This “behavioral invisibility” adds risk to virtual groups and teams.

As virtual teams become more commonplace and even the norm in some organizations, it is important to understand how trust develops in virtual environments. Researchers Jeanne Wilson, Susan Straus, and Bill McEvily found that virtual teams can and do reach levels of trust comparable to face-to-face groups. Their findings were consistent with other research showing lower initial levels of trust in virtual groups. But over time, virtual groups and teams often meet or exceed trust levels in their face-to-face counterparts.

Time is the key to understanding this process. Groups pass through predictable stages in development as they move from tentative “orientation” behaviors toward higher levels of performance. Wilson, Straus, and McEvily noted that virtual groups take up to four times as long to exchange the same number of messages as face-to-face groups. That, coupled with the absence of visual cues, results in a much slower movement through developmental stages.

Another key finding was that at the outset members of computer-mediated teams are more likely to use offensive or inflammatory language and to tease or antagonize one another. These behaviors are, predictably, associated with lower levels of initial trust in such groups and teams. Eventually, virtual groups are able to achieve high levels of trust if given sufficient time.

**Answer**

The implications of this research for working in computer-mediated teams are clear:

- Remember that the long-term productivity of the group requires movement through developmental stages.
- Virtual teams can reach levels of trust and productivity comparable to their face-to-face counterparts. It just takes longer.
- Plan extra time for relationship and trust-building in virtual teams.
- Recognize the absence of contextual cues and avoid communication that could be interpreted as inflammatory.


6.6.1: A Trusting Atmosphere
When a group has a trusting, open atmosphere and a high level of cohesiveness, members “do not fear the effects that disagreement and conflict in the task dimension can have on their social fabric. **Cohesive groups have strong enough social bonds to tolerate conflict.**”39 Through constructive conflict, groups deal with the difficult issues confronting them. When there is no conflict, it is usually because people do not trust one another enough to assert their individuality. However, avoiding the issues does not lead to clarity about those issues. An absence of clarity prevents the group from reaching the most effective solutions.

It is a mistake to think that positive group climate and group cohesiveness mean everyone is nice all the time. Quite the contrary. In a highly cohesive group, members know that they will not be rejected for their views and are therefore more willing to express them—even though expressing them may provoke disagreement. Ernest Bormann notes,

At a point where someone in a cohesive group would say “You’re wrong!” or “I disagree!” an individual in a less cohesive group will say “I don’t understand” or “I’m
confused.” Members of groups with little cohesion have yet to create much of a common social reality.40

This “common social reality,” which includes group roles and group norms, gives people the freedom to assert their individuality within a predictable context.

Another aspect of a common social reality is the degree to which group members make the group’s goal their own. Members of a highly cohesive group personally commit themselves to the group’s well-being and to accomplishing the group’s task. In part, this personal commitment can be attributed to the feeling that this particular group meets people’s needs better than any other group. When this is the case, as it often is in a cohesive group, people have a degree of dependence on the group. This dependence increases the power the group has over individuals. To put this in a less intimidating way: “There can be little doubt that members of a more cohesive group more readily exert influence on one another and are more readily influenced by one another.”41 These factors—personal commitment to the group, personal dependence on the group, group power over individuals within the group—come together in a positive group climate. The result is that cohesive groups work harder than groups with little cohesiveness, regardless of outside supervision.42

With few exceptions, building a group climate in which cohesiveness can grow leads not only to greater individual satisfaction but to greater group productivity as well.43

Case Study

Avoiding Defensiveness

Not long ago I received a mysterious telephone call from a good friend. He said that he and his wife had a business proposition for me and my wife, which they would like to discuss as soon as they could. No, he didn’t want to discuss any details over the phone. When could we meet? Tuesday evening? At our place? They’d see us then.

Our curiosity piqued; we eagerly awaited the Tuesday evening rendezvous. What could our friends possibly have up their sleeves? The appointed hour arrived. Right on time, the doorbell rang. (Unusual, we thought, “they’re usually a half-hour late.”) Our next surprise was that our friend George was dressed in a three-piece suit, his wife Margaret in a tailored dress. My wife and I looked at each other in our jeans, bare feet, and T-shirts, then returned our gaze to George and Margaret and asked whether they had just returned from a funeral. They laughed nervously, marched past us, and began to set up a small demonstration board on our dining room table. Turning down our offer of wine, they asked if we could begin the meeting. This was becoming stranger by the moment. My wife, Nancy, and I began to feel as if we had invited insurance agents into our home—even though we had gone camping, hiking, canoeing, and spent many an evening with George and Margaret. Something did not fit, but our curiosity was aroused, so we decided to play along.

It wasn’t long before the experience began to be frustrating. George and Margaret asked us what we wanted out of life. We suggested that they probably ought to have some idea of that by now—that most of our goals were inward, state-of-being kinds of goals, like having a greater awareness of ourselves and others, peace of mind, and so forth. This answer agitated our guests, who responded by suggesting that it might be nice if we never again had to worry about money. We agreed that it would, indeed, be pleasant. At this, they seemed to breathe a little more easily and proceeded to haul out charts, graphs, and illustrations that, they claimed, proved that we could double our present income in a little over a year—in our spare time, of course.

After an hour, George and Margaret still refused to tell us what it was we would have to sell (we’d figured out that much) or to whom we’d have to sell it. (“Please bear with us until the end,” they said.) Something was definitely wrong. Here I was sitting in my own dining room with my wife, my friends, and a glass of wine, yet I felt as if I were back in middle school being asked to please hold all my questions until the end. I’ve had the similar experiences with life insurance agents and other aggressive salespeople. George and Margaret were treating us not as people, but as faceless members of the great mass of consumers.

Finally they revealed the name of the company and its line of products and set about the task of showing how rapidly the company had grown as a result of its unique marketing concepts, fine products that sell themselves (of course), and so forth. It didn’t matter, as I had already decided not to do it. I felt dehumanized and abused by my friends. Why hadn’t they simply told us that they were involved with the company (which we had heard of long before) and that they’d like to explore the possibilities of our becoming involved as well? With friends, it would be a much more effective approach—certainly a more honest one.

The formal part of the presentation ended. They asked for our comments and questions. I was ready. As a communication professor, I am well versed in the art of critiquing oral presentations and visual aids. I proceeded to evaluate their entire presentation, emphasizing their failure to adequately analyze their audience and to adapt their communication style accordingly. George and Margaret were shocked and hurt. They had not, they said, come into our home to be criticized. They had come in good faith with an honest proposal from which we all stood to benefit. If they had offended us, they were sorry. No, they still did not care for a glass of wine. We’d get together again sometime soon.
Questions for Analysis

1. What previously existing group norms can you infer from this story? How were the norms violated? What were the consequences?

2. Which of Gibb’s “defensive communication” behaviors can you identify? Do you see any evidence that anyone tried to use supportive communication?

3. What evidence of group cohesiveness can you identify?

4. What kinds of confirming and disconfirming responses can you identify?

5. This case study came from the actual experience of one of your authors. His relationship with “George” and “Margaret” suffered following this episode. What recommendations would you give George and Margaret for avoiding such trouble in the future? What advice do you have for your author and his wife?

Maria and Janell work together on a committee that frequently meets face to face in order to share vital information and to plan upcoming phases in the group’s project. Meetings have been lively, efficient, and effective. Every member relies on every other person in the group. The group has developed great working relationships, high cohesiveness, and productive group norms.

Maria has just learned from someone outside the group that her boyfriend, Tariq, and Janell have been openly flirting. Janell has even been heard suggesting to Tariq that Maria may not be entirely faithful to him.

You are also a member of this group. The group is meeting tonight, and important deadlines are approaching. Maria has just told you of her newfound source of conflict with Janell. There’s no time for Maria and Janell to “sort things out” before the meeting. Janell does not know that Maria is aware of the situation.

How would you advise Maria to behave toward Janell in tonight’s meeting? Why would you advise this? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.
Chapter 7
Enhancing Communication Skills in Groups

Learning Objectives

7.1 Explain why verbal dynamics are the most obvious component of small-group communication
7.2 Identify four listening styles and describe at least two major obstacles to effective listening
7.3 Explain why nonverbal communication is important to the study of groups
7.4 Apply research findings about nonverbal communication to groups and teams
7.5 Discuss the functions of nonverbal cues in groups
7.6 Describe how nonverbal cues should be interpreted in light of gender, cultural, and other differences

“As I grow older, I pay less attention to what people say; I just watch what they do.”
—Andrew Carnegie

Good theory informs good practice. This book addresses a wide range of theories and principles and, based on them, makes recommendations about practices that can
lead to more effective group and team communication. This chapter is about the core event in group communication: communication itself. We’ll focus on three essential skills: using words accurately, listening, and communicating nonverbally.

### 7.1: Verbal Dynamics in Small Groups

#### 7.1 Explain why verbal dynamics are the most obvious component of small-group communication

The most obvious yet elusive component of small-group communication is the spoken word. Words are at the heart of who and what people are. Their ability to represent the world symbolically gives humans the capacity to foresee events, to reflect on past experiences, to plan, to make decisions, and to consciously control their own behavior.

#### 7.1.1: Words as Barriers to Communication

Words are the tools with which people make sense of the world and share that sense with others. Paradoxically, words can both facilitate and impede communication. Spoken language gives individuals access to the ideas and inner worlds of other group members, but it can also—intentionally or unintentionally—set up barriers to effective communication.

If you grew up in the United States, you can probably remember chanting defensively, “Sticks and stones can break my bones, but names can never hurt me.” Even as you uttered this line, you knew it wasn’t true. People often unwittingly communicate in ways that threaten others and make them feel defensive. When group members feel a need to protect themselves, they shift their attention from the group’s goal to their personal goal of self-protection, thus creating a barrier to effective group process. Some subtle but pervasive word barriers are (1) bypassing, (2) allness, and (3) fact-inference confusion.

**Bypassing** The meanings of your words seem so obvious to you that you assume they elicit the same meanings from others. Nothing could be further from the truth. **Bypassing** takes place when two people assign different meanings to the same word. Most words are open to almost limitless interpretations—consider, for example, the words *love*, *respect*, and *communication*. Similarly, you may know precisely what you mean if you say that the department’s account is “seriously overdrawn,” but how are others to interpret that? How serious is “seriously”?

According to some estimates, the 500 most frequently used words in the English language have over 14,000 dictionary definitions. Considering that a dictionary definition reflects only a tiny percentage of all possible meanings for a word and that people from different cultures and with different experiences interpret words differently, it is amazing that people can understand one another at all.

The number of people involved in groups compounds the problem; the possibility for multiple misunderstandings always exists. Therefore, good feedback among group members is essential. **Feedback** is any response by listeners that lets speakers know whether they have been understood accurately. To overcome word barriers, people must understand that words are subjective. They need to check that what they understand from others is really what those others intend.

Throughout our discussion of the power of verbal messages, we invite you to keep this important idea in mind: You can influence, but cannot control, the meaning others derive from your messages. Meaning is created in others. Words do not have meaning in and of themselves.

**ALLNESS** Allness statements are simple but untrue generalizations. You have probably heard such allness statements as “Women are smarter than men,” “Men can run faster than women,” and “Football players aren’t good students.” These statements are convenient, but they simply are not accurate. The danger of allness statements is that you may begin to believe them and to prejudge other people unfairly based on them. Therefore, be careful not to overgeneralize; remember that each individual is unique.

**FACT-INFEERENCE CONFUSION** Statements of fact can be made only after direct observation. Inferences can be made at any time; no observation is necessary to make an inference. **Fact-inference confusion** occurs when people respond to something as if they have actually observed it, when in reality they have merely drawn a conclusion. The key distinction between a fact and an inference is that in statements of inference people can speculate about and interpret what they think occurred. Suppose, for example, that you hear someone comment, “Men are better than women at math.” If this statement were true, it would mean that all men and women were tested and that the results indicated that men are better in math than women. The statement is an inference. If the speaker is summarizing research that has investigated the issue, he or she should say, “Some studies have found that . . .” rather than “It’s a fact that . . . .” The first statement more accurately describes reality than does the second. Like bypassing and allness statements, fact-inference confusion can lead to inaccuracy and misunderstanding.
7.2: Listening

7.2 Identify four listening styles and describe at least two major obstacles to effective listening

Good listening skills are an important component of being an effective group member or leader. However, poor listening habits are one of the most common sources of defensiveness and discord. It is easier to be a poor listener in groups than it is in interpersonal situations because often in a group you do not have to respond to the speaker. After all, the other group members can always pick up the conversation. However, groups cannot reach their maximum effectiveness unless all members listen actively to one another.

Listening is a skill that can be improved with practice. It is an active process through which people select, attend, understand, and remember. To listen effectively, people must actively select and attend to the messages they receive. This involves filtering out the other stimuli that compete for their attention: the hunger pangs they’re starting to feel, mental lists of the groceries they need to pick up on the way home, or curiosity about the attractive person nearby.

Improving any skill takes knowledge and practice. This section will provide some knowledge. The practice is up to you. Are you listening?

7.2.1: Listening Styles

Do your ears perk up when you hear someone telling an interesting story, or would you be more interested in listening to data, facts, and details? There is evidence that different people have different listening styles. Your listening style is your preferred way of making sense out of the spoken messages you hear. Listening researchers have identified four overarching listening styles: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented.

What difference does it make to know your preferred listening style? In a small group, with multiple verbal messages coming at you from several people, you may find yourself focused more on one person’s message than another’s. We’ll discuss each of the four listening styles so that you can identify your preferred style and develop strategies for listening that may not come naturally to you.

THE FOUR LISTENING STYLES

People-oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are most comfortable listening to other people’s feelings and emotions. They empathize with others and search for common areas of interest; they are other-oriented. In a small group, people-oriented listeners will focus on the stories others tell and be good at developing relationships and fulfilling group maintenance roles. People-oriented, interpersonally sensitive group leaders tend to have more satisfied subordinates.

Action-oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners prefer information that is well-organized, brief, and error free. While a people-oriented listener likes to hear longer stories about others, action-oriented listeners want others to get to the point so that they can figure out what to do with the information. Action-oriented listeners tend to be a bit more skeptical of what they hear; they are likely to focus on the underlying reasoning and evidence that supports the conclusions presented. Action-oriented listeners help a group stay focused on the task and assess the quality of information presented. They are more likely to assume task-oriented roles to achieve the group’s goal.

Content-oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners like information-rich content; they are more comfortable listening to complex, detailed information than are people with other listening styles. A content-oriented
listener is likely to perk up when someone says, “Here are five things we should consider.” If a message does not include enough supporting evidence and specific details, the content-oriented listener will be more likely to reject the message. A content-oriented listener would be a good person to take notes at group meetings and to help the group analyze the issues.

Time-oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners prefer brief messages. They are busy and do not have time to listen to long, rambling talks. Time-oriented listeners remain constantly aware of the amount of time they have to listen. That is why it’s good to have time-oriented listeners in a group—they will help the group keep on schedule and stay focused on the agenda.

There is no single best listening style for communicating in groups and teams. Listening and other human communication processes are changing to accommodate the cyber world of the twenty-first century. Each style has its advantages and disadvantages. If you were focused only on distilling from the speaker’s words a brief and concise message (that is, if you were a time-oriented listener), you would not be as attuned to the relationships and feelings of others (people-oriented listeners). And although it’s good to focus on details (as would a content-oriented listener) or on what the action steps are (as would an action-oriented listener), spending too much time on the task without being aware of relationships can also be detrimental to a group.

Just as it’s a good thing for groups to have people play a variety of roles, it’s also useful for groups to have people with differing listening styles. If, for example, most of your group members are people-oriented listeners, then the group will have to be more mindful of focusing on facts, data, and evidence. On the other hand, a team composed entirely of content- or action-oriented listeners may need to ensure that they are managing the relational aspects of the group. Once you know your own preferred listening style, you can work to develop other styles, so you will be able to adapt your style to different situations.

7.2.2: Obstacles to Effective Listening

Regardless of your listening style, you need to overcome the common obstacles to effective listening. There are many such obstacles—outside distractions, an uncomfortable chair, a headache—but the focus here will be on two prevalent and serious barriers: prejudging and rehearsing.

PREJUDGING THE COMMUNICATOR OR THE COMMUNICATION Sometimes you simply dislike certain people or always disagree with them. You anticipate that what these people will say will be offensive, and you begin to tune them out. An example of this is many people’s tendency to “tune out” the speeches of politicians who hold political beliefs different from their own. In a group, you must overcome the temptation to ignore those you think are boring, pedantic, offensive, or wrong. Good ideas can come from anyone, even from people with whom you disagree. Likewise, you should not prejudge certain topics as being too complex, boring, or controversial. This can be difficult, especially when a cherished belief is criticized or when others say things about you that you might not want to hear. These are precisely the times when communication needs to be clear, open, honest, and confirming. To communicate effectively, you need to listen.

It is especially important not to prejudge others on the basis of culture, ethnicity, or race. Despite continuing social progress, such prejudices linger. In one study, college students indicated that racial stereotypes are alive and well. African Americans said that Whites were “demanding” and “manipulative.” Whites reported that Blacks are “loud” and “ostentatious.” Such prejudices inhibit our ability to listen effectively and also foster defensiveness in groups.


REHEARSING A RESPONSE Communication scholar John Shotter observed that “in our talk with others, we listen for opportunities to express our own point of view, to add it to or contrast it with theirs.” While looking for such opportunities and planning what we will say, we are actually sacrificing an opportunity to fully understand and be understood. Rehearsing is perhaps the most difficult listening obstacle to overcome. It is the tendency people have to rehearse in their minds what they will say when the other person stops speaking. One of the reasons for this is the difference between speech rate and thought rate. Most people speak at a rate of about 100–125 words per minute, but they have the capacity to think or listen at
a rate of 400 or more words per minute! This gives them the time to wander off mentally while keeping one ear on the speaker. The thought–speech differential is better used, though, to attend fully to what the speaker is saying—and not saying. When people learn to do this, their responses can be more spontaneous, accurate, appropriate, confirming, and supportive.9

7.2.3: A Guide to Active Listening

Supportive, confirming communication focuses not only on verbal messages but on the emotional content of the messages and on nonverbal behaviors as well. Learning to quiet one’s own thoughts and to avoid prejudging others is a first step. Fully understanding others, though, involves considerable effort. Active listening is an attempt to clarify and understand another’s thoughts and feelings. To listen actively involves several steps. These steps may seem like common sense, but they are far from common practice.

STEPS FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

① 1. Stop

Before you can effectively tune in to what someone else may be feeling, you need to stop what you are doing, eliminate as many distractions as possible, and focus fully on the other person.10 Two listening researchers conducted a study to identify the specific behaviors of good listeners.11 What they discovered supports our admonition that the first thing you have to do to be a better listener is to stop focusing on your own mental messages and instead be other-oriented. Specifically, here are five actions you should take during what the researchers called the “pre-interaction phase” of listening:

- Put your own thoughts aside.
- Be there mentally, not only physically.
- Make a conscious, mindful effort to listen.
- Take adequate time to listen—don’t rush the speaker; be patient.
- Be open-minded.


② 2. Look

Now look for clues that will help you identify how the other person is feeling. Most communication of emotion comes through nonverbal cues. The face provides important information about how a person is feeling, as do voice quality, pitch, rate, volume, and use of silence. Body movement and posture clearly indicate the intensity of a person’s feelings. We will discuss the role of nonverbal messages in more detail later in the chapter.

③ 3. Listen

Listen for what another person is telling you. Even though that person may not say exactly how he or she feels, look for cues. Match verbal with nonverbal cues to decipher both the content and the emotion of the person’s message. In addition, ask yourself, “How would I feel if I were in that person’s position?” Try to interpret the message according to the sender’s code system rather than your own.

④ 4. Ask Appropriate Questions

As you try to understand another person, you may need to ask some questions. Most of them will serve one of four purposes:

1. to obtain additional information (“How soon will you be ready to give your part of our presentation?”)
2. to find out how someone feels (“Are you feeling overwhelmed by this assignment?”);
3. to ask for clarification of a word or phrase (“What do you mean when you say you didn’t realize what you were getting into?”); and
4. to verify your conclusion about your partner’s meaning or feeling (“Are you saying that you can’t complete the project without some additional staff assistance?”).

⑤ 5. Paraphrase Content

Restate in your own words what you think another person is saying. Paraphrasing is different from parroting back everything that person has said. After all, you can repeat something perfectly without understanding what it means. Rather, from time to time, summarize the message another person has given you so far. Paraphrasing can help both listener and speaker understand. Paraphrasing is also associated with increased liking for the listener.12

Emily: I think this job is too much for me. I’m not qualified to do it.

Howard: You think you lack the necessary skills.

Note that at this point Howard is dealing only with the content of Emily’s message. The goal of active listening, though, is to understand both the feelings and the content of another person’s message.

Enhancing Communication Skills in Groups

7.3.1: More Time Is Spent Communicating Nonverbally Than Verbally

In a group or team discussion, usually only one person speaks at a time. The rest of the members can, however, emit a host of nonverbal cues that influence the deliberations. (Some cues are controlled consciously, others are emitted less intentionally.) Eye contact, facial expression, body posture, and movement occur even when only one person is speaking. Because group members are usually within just a few feet of one another, they can easily observe most nonverbal cues. In other words, it is safe to say that "you cannot not communicate."

7.3.2: Emotions and Feelings Are Typically Expressed Nonverbally Rather Than Verbally

In the past several chapters we identified factors that influence the climate of a group, what it feels like to be a group member. If a group member is frustrated with the group or disenchanted with the discussion, more than likely you will detect those feelings by observing that person’s nonverbal behavior—even before he or she verbalizes any frustration. If a member seems genuinely interested in the discussion and pleased with the group's progress, this, too, can be observed through nonverbal behavior. Albert Mehrabian and some of his colleagues devised a formula that suggests how much of the total emotional meaning of a message is based on verbal components and how much on nonverbal components.14 According to this research, only 7 percent of the emotional meaning of a message is communicated through its verbal content. About 38 percent of the emotional content is derived from the voice (its pitch, quality, and volume and the rate of speech). The largest source of emotional meaning, 55 percent, is a speaker’s facial expression. Thus, approximately 93 percent of the emotional portion of a message is communicated nonverbally. Although these percentages cannot be applied to all situations, Mehrabian’s research suggests that when inconsistencies exist between people’s verbalized emotional states and their true emotions, expressed nonverbally, nonverbal cues carry more clout in determining how receivers interpret speakers’ emotions.

Vincent Brown and his colleagues suggest that the expression of feelings and emotions during group discussion can have a negative effect on group members’

6. Paraphrase Feelings

In the example just given, Howard could follow his paraphrase of the content of the message with a question such as, "You're probably feeling pretty frustrated right now, aren't you?" Such a paraphrase would allow Emily either to agree with Howard's assessment or to clarify how she's feeling. For instance, she might respond, "No, I'm not frustrated. I'm just disappointed that the job's not working out."

A summary of active listening skills would be to act like an active listener and to suspend judgment. Effective listening skills can contribute a great deal to building a supportive, cohesive group.13 Effective listening is also the cornerstone of critical thinking—the skill required to make decisions and solve problems effectively, as you'll learn in later chapters. For now, we turn our attention to the second step of active listening: looking for nonverbal communication.

7.3: The Importance of Nonverbal Communication in Groups

7.3 Explain why nonverbal communication is important to the study of groups

Nonverbal communication is communication behavior that does not rely on written or spoken words. This definition includes body posture and movement, eye contact, facial expression, seating arrangement, spatial relationships, personal appearance, use of time, and even tone of voice. Although the words someone utters are not classified as nonverbal communication, the pitch, quality, and intonation of the voice, the rate of speaking, and the use of silence can speak volumes; thus, vocal tone is considered part of nonverbal communication.

Every message contains both content and information about relationships. Nonverbal messages, particularly facial expression and vocal cues, are often the prime source of information about interpersonal relationships. Thus, they play important functions in metacommunication—which means communication about communication. The nonverbal aspects of a message communicate information about its verbal aspects.

You have undoubtedly participated in group and team meetings that were dull and boring. Although not all unexciting group discussion results from poor or inappropriate nonverbal communication, group members’ posture, facial expression, tone of voice, and unspoken enthusiasm (or lack of enthusiasm) dramatically affect a group’s climate and members’ attitudes toward the group. We’ll examine three reasons why nonverbal communication variables are important to group discussion.
people interact in small groups. As you become a more skillful observer of nonverbal behavior, you will understand more thoroughly the way communicative feelings leak out.

7.3.3: Nonverbal Messages Are Usually More Believable Than Verbal Messages

Nonverbal communication affects how others interpret our messages. Nonverbal cues are so important to communication that when a verbal message (either spoken or written) contradicts a nonverbal message, people are more inclined to believe the nonverbal message. The group member who sighs and, with a sarcastic edge, says, “Oh, what a great group this is going to be,” communicates just the opposite meaning of that verbal message. One researcher suggests that as much as 65 percent of the way we convey meaning in our messages is through nonverbal channels. An understanding of nonverbal communication, then, is vital to even a superficial understanding of communication in general and of group communication in particular. As you become a more skillful observer of nonverbal behavior, you will understand more thoroughly the way people interact in small groups.

7.4: Applications of Nonverbal Communication Research to Groups

7.4 Apply research findings about nonverbal communication to groups and teams

Relatively few research studies have investigated nonverbal behavior in groups. Despite the undoubted importance of nonverbal group dynamics to group discussion, researchers have found this aspect of communication difficult to observe and investigate. When group members simultaneously emit a myriad of nonverbal behaviors, it is difficult to systematically observe and interpret them. In addition, nonverbal messages are considerably more ambiguous than verbal messages. No dictionary has definitive meanings for nonverbal behaviors. We suggest that you exercise caution, then, in attempting to interpret the nonverbal behavior of other group members.

The following sections describe some research that should help you become more sensitive to your own nonverbal behavior and to the role nonverbal communication plays in group discussions. Specifically, the sections discuss research on the following aspects of nonverbal communication in small groups: (1) physical posture, movement, and gestures; (2) eye contact; (3) facial expressions; (4) vocal cues; (5) personal space; (6) territoriality; (7) seating arrangement; (8) personal appearance; and (9) the communication environment.

7.4.1: Posture, Movement, and Gestures

To observe and analyze posture, movement, and gestures, Paul Ekman and Wallace Friesen have identified five major types of nonverbal behavior: (1) emblems, (2) illustrators, (3) affect displays, (4) regulators, and (5) adaptors.

Emblems are nonverbal cues that have specific verbal counterparts and are shared by all group members. Emblems often take the place of spoken words, letters, or numbers. Group leaders who place index fingers vertically in front of their lips use a nonverbal emblem to take the place of the words “Shhh, let’s be quiet now.” A hitchhiker’s raised thumb and a soldier’s salute are other examples of emblems. Group members who point to their watches to indicate that the group should get on with it because time is running out, or who use their index fingers and thumbs to signify all is okay, also depend on nonverbal emblems to communicate their messages.

Illustrators are nonverbal behaviors that add meaning to accompanying verbal messages. For example, a group member who emphasizes a spoken message while jabbing a raised index finger in the air with each word illustrates conviction and determination. Several researchers have observed that people synchronize many of their body movements to their speech. A blink of the eyes, a nod of the head, or a shift in body posture can accent spoken messages.

An affect display is a nonverbal cue that communicates emotion. As mentioned before, the face is the primary source of emotional display, but research suggests that the body indicates the intensity of the emotion, or affect, that is being expressed. For example, the faces of group members may indicate that they are bored. If they are also slouched in their chairs, they are probably more than just moderately apathetic about the discussion.

Regulators are nonverbal behaviors that help a group control the flow of communication. They are very important to small-group discussions because people rely on them to know when they should talk and when they should listen. Regulators also provide cues to indicate when other group members want to contribute to the discussion. Eye contact, posture, gestures, facial expression, and body position all help regulate communication in a group discussion. Generally, large groups operate with a rather formal set of regulators; for example, participants raise their hands so that the chairperson will recognize them before they speak. In a less formal
discussion, group members rely on direct eye contact (to indicate that a communication channel is open), facial expression (raised eyebrows often signify a desire to talk), and gestures (such as a raised index finger) as cues to regulate the flow of communication. When nonverbal regulators are absent, such as during electronic collaboration when team members are not in the same physical location, team members have a more difficult time coordinating their conversation.

Adaptors are nonverbal acts that satisfy personal needs and help people adapt to their immediate environment. Adaptors are also important for learning to get along with others and for responding to certain situations. Generally, people are not aware of most of their adaptive nonverbal behavior. Self-adaptors, for example, are things people do to their own bodies, such as scratching, biting their nails, or twirling their hair. Researchers have noted that when people become nervous, anxious, or upset, they frequently display more self-adaptive behaviors. 

7.4.2: Eye Contact

Have you ever felt uncomfortable because the person you were talking to seemed reluctant to establish eye contact? Maybe you’ve wondered, “Why doesn’t she look at me when she’s talking to me?” Perhaps you’ve had just the opposite experience—the person you were talking to would not stop staring at you. You become uneasy in these situations because they violate norms of eye contact. Although you may think that you do a pretty good job of establishing eye contact with others, researchers estimate that most people look at others only between 30 and 60 percent of the time. Eye contact usually lasts less than 10 seconds.

Researchers have identified several factors that determine when you look at another person. You are listening rather than talking; you like the other person; you want to persuade or influence someone; you have a high need for approval or affiliation; you seek a response from someone.

Other circumstances will dictate when you are less likely to have eye contact with someone: You are from a culture in which people tend not to look directly at others; you are embarrassed; you do not want to talk.
or participate in the discussion; you don’t like someone; you are shy or introverted; you have a low need for approval.

When eye contact does occur in a small-group setting, it may serve one or more important functions: (1) cognitive, (2) monitoring, (3) regulatory, and (4) expressive.24

COGNITIVE FUNCTION The cognitive function of eye contact (or lack of it) is to indicate thought processes. For example, some people look away when they are thinking of just the right word to say. Others look away before they speak so they won’t be distracted by the person to whom they are talking.

MONITORING FUNCTION Monitoring is the way you seek feedback from others when communicating with them. You make eye contact in order to monitor how your message is being received. For example, if you say something that other members disagree with, you may observe a change in facial expressions, body posture, or restless movement. Because you’ve monitored their nonverbal expression, you may then decide that you need to spend more time explaining your point.

REGULATORY FUNCTION Eye contact plays a vital role in regulating the back-and-forth flow of communication; it signals when the communication channel is open or closed. You can invite interaction simply by looking at others. If the chair of a committee asks for volunteers and you don’t want to participate, you are unlikely to establish eye contact. Nonverbally this says, “I don’t want to talk; I don’t want to participate.”

EXPRESSIVE FUNCTION Although eyes generally do not provide clues about specific emotions, the areas of the face immediately around the eyes provide quite a bit of information about feelings, emotions, and attitudes.

Eye contact or lack of it thus reveals information about thought processes, provides feedback, regulates communication channels, and expresses emotions. Eye contact also provides clues about status and leadership roles in small groups. One researcher has documented that group members who talk more receive more eye contact. In addition, research suggests that eye contact is the predominant cue that regulates when you want to speak and when you want to stop speaking during group discussion.25 In the next small-group meeting you attend, determine who receives the most eye contact in the group. Where do group members look for information and guidance? They probably look at the group leader. If, as in many groups, several members share leadership, participants may look toward any of those leaders, depending on the specific problem or level of uncertainty facing the group.

Review

Functions of Eye Contact

7.4.3: Facial Expressions

As discussed before, the face is the most important revealer of emotions. Sometimes you can mask your emotional expressions, but the face is usually the first place you look to determine someone else’s emotional state. Facial expressions are particularly significant in interpersonal and small-group communication because of the close proximity of communicators to one another. You can readily detect emotions displayed on a person’s face. Even though some researchers estimate that the face can produce thousands of different expressions, Ekman and Friesen have identified six primary emotions displayed on it: happiness, anger, surprise, sadness, disgust, and fear.26

Ekman and his colleagues have also developed a method of identifying which areas of the face play the most important roles in communicating emotion.27 According to this research, people communicate happiness with the area around their eyes and with smiles and raised cheeks. They reveal disgust with raised upper lips, wrinkled noses, lowered eyelids, and lowered brows. They communicate fear with the area around their eyes, but their mouths are also usually open when they are fearful. When they are angry, people are likely to lower their eyebrows and stare intensely. They communicate surprise with raised eyebrows, wide-open eyes, and often open mouths. They communicate sadness in the area around the eyes and mouth.
7.4.4: Vocal Cues

“John,” remarked a group discussion member, obviously upset, “it’s not that I object to what you said; it’s just the way you said it.” The pitch, rate, volume, and quality of your voice (also called paralanguage) are important in determining the meanings of messages. From a speaker’s paralanguage cues you can make inferences about how that person feels toward you. You may also base inferences about a person’s competence and personality on vocal cues. A speaker who mispronounces words and uses “uhhs” and “ums” will probably be perceived as less credible than a speaker who is more articulate. In addition to determining how speech affects a speaker’s credibility, researchers have studied the communication of emotion via vocal cues.\(^{28}\)

At times you can distinguish emotional states from vocal cues, but as a group member you should beware of drawing improper inferences and labeling someone negatively just because of vocal cues.\(^{29}\) As this chapter has emphasized, nonverbal cues do not operate in isolation. They should be evaluated in the context of other communicative behaviors.

7.4.5: Personal Space

The next time you are sitting in class, note the seat you select. Even though no one instructed you to do so, chances are that you tend to sit in about the same general area, if not in the same seat, during each class. Perhaps in your family each person sits at a certain place at the dinner table. If someone sits in your chair, you feel your territory has been invaded and you may try to reclaim your seat. Human behavior with respect to personal space and territoriality reflects competition between the need for affiliation with others and the need for privacy.\(^{30}\)

Research pioneer Edward T. Hall investigated the silent language of how we use the personal space around us. His investigation of proxemics, the study of how close or far away we choose to be to other people and objects, helps us better understand how our use of personal space gives us clues about the relationships we have with others.\(^{31}\) Hall identified four spatial zones that people in Western cultures typically use, depending on the activity and nature of the relationship they have with those around them. Figure 7.1 illustrates each of these zones.

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**Figure 7.1** Edward T. Hall’s Four Zones of Space

- **Intimate Space:** 0 to 1½ feet
- **Personal Space:** 1½ to 4 feet
- **Social Space:** 4 to 12 feet
- **Public Space:** 12 feet and beyond
Of course, not every person you’ll meet will interact with you using these zones; these are just estimates of typical interactions with others.

7.4.6: Territoriality

Territoriality is a term used in the study of animal behavior to refer to how animals stake out and defend given areas. Humans, too, exhibit this behavior. Understanding territoriality may help you understand certain group behaviors. For example, the readiness of group members to defend personal territory may provide insights about their attitudes toward the group and toward individual members. At the next meeting you attend, observe how members attempt to stake out territories. If the group is seated around a table, do members place objects in front of and around themselves to signify that they are claiming territory? Higher-status individuals generally attempt to claim more territory. Notice how group members manipulate their posture and gestures if their space is invaded. Lower-status individuals generally permit greater territorial invasion. Note, too, how individuals claim their territory by leaving markers—such as books, papers, or a pencil—when they have to leave the group but expect to return shortly.

7.4.7: Seating Arrangement

The area of study known as small-group ecology examines the consistent way in which people arrange themselves in small groups. Understanding the effects of seating arrangement can give you insights as to who is likely to talk to whom, who may emerge as a leader, and what will be the overall effects of seating arrangement on the communication climate in the group.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT AND INTERACTION PATTERNS  Where you sit in a group can have an effect on who you are likely to talk to. Bernard Steinzor found that when group members are seated in a circle, they are more likely to talk with those across from them than to those on either side. Another research team observed groups of three people in snack bars, restaurants, and lounges and found that individuals who are more centrally located and most visible in a group usually receive more eye contact from others. They also tend to initiate more communication than those who are less centrally located in the group. Furthermore, when other group members speak, they tend to direct their comments more to these centrally located members in the group. Yet another research team came to a similar conclusion: Group members who were in the center of the group spoke most often. Because of where people sit, their eye contact with others is an important factor in determining who speaks, who listens, and who has the greatest opportunity to dominate a conversation. Figure 7.2 illustrates some typical interaction patterns determined by seating arrangement.

Figure 7.2  Group Interaction Patterns Are Influenced by Seating Arrangement
SEATING ARRANGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP EMERGENCE There is evidence that where you sit in a group or team can influence your chances of emerging as a leader. If you like to lead others, you may typically select a seat from which you can see other people in the group and maximize your eye contact with them. In their study, Lloyd Howells and Selwyn Becker had groups of five people seat themselves around a table: Three people sat on one side of the table, and the other two sat opposite them. The researchers discovered that participants had a greater probability of becoming leaders if they sat on the side of the table facing the three discussion members. The ability to make direct eye contact with more group members, which can subsequently result in greater control of verbal communication, may explain why the two individuals who faced the other three emerged as leaders.

There is also evidence that a person who likes to assume a leadership role will select a seat to maximize his or her interaction with others. One researcher found clear evidence that the dominant group member tends to select a seat at the head of a rectangular table or one that maximizes the opportunity to communicate with others. In contrast, people who sit at the corners of tables generally contribute the least to a discussion and are less likely to emerge as leaders. Again, eye contact coupled with seating arrangement seems to be a major predictor of leadership emergence. In addition, people who have higher status in a group tend to have more space around them.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT AND STRESS Some people prefer greater personal space when they are under stress. If, as a group or team leader, you know that an upcoming discussion will probably produce anxiety, hold the meeting in a room that permits members to have more freedom of movement. This will allow them to find their preferred personal distance from other group members. Or, if you know that an upcoming meeting may produce conflict, arrange the chairs so that there is more space around each participant. Crowding people together can amplify whatever emotions group members may feel.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT AND GENDER There is evidence that in North America, women tend to sit closer to others than men do (whether those others are men or women). Men generally prefer greater personal space when sitting next to other men. We’re not suggesting that you use this research conclusion to measure the distance between seats in an upcoming meeting; simply realize that there may be differences in how much space men and women prefer to have around them. Where possible, let group members adjust their own seating distance from other members.

SEATING ARRANGEMENT AND PERSONALITY People who are extroverts, that is, those who are outgoing and like to talk with others, are more likely to sit across from other people than are introverts, that is, those who are less willing to initiate conversation with others. Introverts generally prefer more distance between themselves and others. Of course, you may not know who is an introvert and who is an extrovert before a meeting. Again, it’s best to let group members determine their comfort zones for interacting with others.

Collectively, the research conclusions just highlighted suggest that people do arrange themselves with some consistency in small-group discussions. A discussion leader who understands seating arrangements with some consistency in small-group discussions. A discussion leader who understands seating preferences will be able to provide a comfortable climate for a small-group discussion.

Review
Small-Group Ecology

Interaction Patterns
- Whom you have eye contact with during group discussions usually affects whom you talk with.
- People who are more centrally located in a group often receive more oral messages from other group members than do people who are less central.
- You are more likely to talk with people seated directly across from you than with those next to you.

Leadership
- We often expect the person seated at the head of a rectangular table to be the leader.
- More outspoken, dominant individuals often choose to sit at the head of the table.
- People who sit at the corner of a rectangular table often contribute less to the discussion and consequently may have less influence in the group.
- People who are perceived to have high status are given more personal space around them.

Stress
- During times of stress or conflict, people prefer more space around them.

Gender
- Women generally sit a bit closer to others than men do.
- Men tend to prefer greater personal space when sitting next to other men.

Personality
- Extroverts (people who are outgoing) tend to sit across from others.
- Introverts (people who are less outgoing) prefer more distance between themselves and others.
7.4.8: Personal Appearance

How long does it take to determine whether you like someone? Some researchers claim that within seconds after meeting another person you make an initial judgment about whether to continue to communicate with him or her or try to excuse yourself from the conversation. You base many of your initial impressions of others primarily on personal appearance. The way people dress, their hairstyles, weight, and height affect your communication with them.

Research suggests that women who are thought attractive are more effective in changing attitudes than are women thought less attractive. In addition, more attractive individuals are often thought by others to be more credible than less attractive people. They are also perceived to be happier, more popular, more sociable, and more successful than are those rated as being less attractive.

It is important to note we are not advocating making stereotypical judgments of others based on personal appearance. We are suggesting, however, that your personal appearance may affect how others perceive you. And yes, you may be influenced by others’ personal appearance. Therefore, you should try to monitor not only how your appearance may be affecting others’ perceptions but also how you may inappropriately dismiss others because their appearance distracted you.

7.4.9: Communication Environment

Five students have been assigned to work together on a project for their group communication class. Their task is to formulate a policy question and solutions to it. Their first problem is finding a place to meet. Apparently, the only available place is a small, vacant office in Smythe Hall, the oldest building on campus. Although the students are relieved to have found a place to meet, no one seems happy about holding meetings in the old office. When they arrive for their first meeting, they find a dirty, musty room with peeling paint, only three hard wooden chairs, and a gray metal desk. The ventilation is poor, and half of the light bulbs are burned out. Such a dismal environment will undoubtedly affect the group’s ability to work.

People can generally comprehend information and solve problems better in a more attractive environment. Research does not suggest, however, that one environment is best for all group communication situations. The optimal environment for any group depends on its specific task, as well as the needs and expectations of its members.

Some students need absolute quiet to read or study, while others can be productive while listening to music. Group members or leaders should attempt to find the best environments for their group based on the group’s needs and the types of tasks confronting it. Group leaders could ask members which type of environment they prefer. If a group must solve problems that require considerable thought, energy, and creativity, it might work best in a quiet, comfortable room.

Putting Principles into Practice

Improving Nonverbal Communication Skills

![Body Posture, Movement, and Gestures](image)

- You may be more effective in persuading others when you use eye contact, maintain a direct body orientation, and remain physically close to others.
- You can often identify high-status group members (or at least those who perceive themselves as having high status) by such nonverbal cues as relaxed postures, loud voices, territorial dominance, expansive movements, and, sometimes, their keeping themselves at a distance from others.
- Someone who is lying may speak with a higher-pitched voice, use less eye contact, show less enthusiasm, shrug more often, nod less, speak more slowly and with more errors, and adopt a less immediate posture.
- Group leaders may gesture more than followers.
- Observing the similarity of group members’ postures and gestures can reveal insights about group climate, leadership, and cohesiveness.

![Eye Contact](image)

- People sometimes interrupt eye contact with others because they are trying to think of the right words to say, not because they are uninterested.
- When talking with others in a small group, be sure to look at all members so that you can respond to the feedback they provide.
- You sometimes can draw a person into the conversation just by establishing direct eye contact.
- Because eye contact signals whether a communication channel is open or closed, you may be able to quiet an extremely talkative member by avoiding eye contact.
• By noting who looks at whom in a small group, you can get a good idea of who the leader is. Group members usually look at their leader more than they look at any other member (assuming that they respect their leader’s ideas and opinions).

**Facial Expression**

Look at group members’ facial expressions to find out the emotional climate in the group.

**Vocal Cues**

You may find that you dislike a group member not because of what he or she says but because of that person’s vocal quality, pitch, or rate of speech. People’s vocal cues affect your perceptions of them.

**Personal Space and Territoriality**

• Members typically stake out their territory or personal space early on in group gatherings.

• When group members’ territories are invaded, they often respond nonverbally (via posture or territorial markers) to defend their territories.

• Because people prefer greater personal space when they are under stress, make sure that group members have plenty of territory when you know that a meeting is going to be stressful.

**Seating Arrangement**

• If you want to increase your interaction with a group member, sit directly across from him or her.

• If you know that a group member generally monopolizes the conversation, try to get that person to select a corner seat rather than one at the head of a conference table.

• You are more likely to emerge as a group leader if you sit so that you can establish eye contact and a direct body orientation with shoulders squared toward most of the group members.

**Personal Appearance**

Your personal appearance will affect the way other group members perceive you. It can also influence your ability to persuade others.

**Communication Environment**

Make sure that the physical environment for a group meeting is as comfortable and attractive as possible to enhance satisfaction and productivity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonverbal Cues</th>
<th>Function</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posture, movement, and gestures</td>
<td>Provides information regarding status, intensity of attitude, warmth, approval seeking, group climate, immediacy, deception</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eye contact</td>
<td>Serves cognitive, monitoring, regulatory, and expressive functions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facial expression</td>
<td>Communicates emotion, especially happiness, anger, surprise, sadness, disgust, and fear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocal cues</td>
<td>The pitch, rate, volume, and quality of the voice communicate emotion, credibility, and personality perceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal space, territoriality, and seating arrangement</td>
<td>People in Western cultures use four zones of personal space, depending on their interpersonal relationships. They arrange themselves in consistent ways in groups and stake out space to reflect status, roles, stress levels, leadership, and personality traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal appearance</td>
<td>Clothing, body shape, and general attractiveness influence others' perceptions and reactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication environment</td>
<td>The general attractiveness or unattractiveness of a physical space contributes to the group's productivity and overall group climate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
7.5: Functions of Nonverbal Cues in Groups

7.5 Discuss the functions of nonverbal cues in groups

Now that we’ve seen how specific cues contribute to understanding messages in group discussion, you may still be wondering about some of the more general effects or functions of nonverbal messages. Unspoken messages play a significant role in how leaders are perceived, group members are persuaded, body posture and movement are synchronized, and lying is detected.

7.5.1: Nonverbal Messages Influence Perceived Leadership

To lead is to influence. Nonverbal cues have a major effect on how leaders are perceived in groups and teams. Communication researcher John O’Connor discovered that one person’s frequent gesturing was highly correlated with other members’ perception that the person was a leader in the group.42 In a follow-up study, John Baird found that group members whom other members thought of as leaders used shoulder and arm gestures more often.43 Although leaders may gesture more frequently than do followers, this does not mean that frequent gesturing causes a person to emerge as a leader. The evidence does not suggest a cause-and-effect relationship. It simply suggests that people in leadership roles may use more nonverbal gestures, perhaps to coordinate or regulate message flow.

7.5.2: Nonverbal Messages Influence Persuasion Skills

Do individuals in small groups use certain nonverbal cues during their attempts to persuade others? One study found that when a person “mirrors,” or imitates, the nonverbal behavior of other group members, they are more likely to see that person as more confident and persuasive.44 Albert Mehrabian and Martin Williams found that persuasive communicators exhibit more animated facial expressions, use more gestures to emphasize their points, and nod their heads more than do those who are less persuasive.45 Another team of researchers found that people trying to project warm, friendly images will be more likely to smile, less likely to fidget with their hands, and more likely to shift their postures toward others.46

One team of researchers found that we rely extensively on nonverbal cues to signal when we want to speak or change topics. Typically, a group member signals topic change by leaning forward, smiling, making a head nod, shifting posture, having a foot make contact with the floor, or breaking eye contact to signal a change in the direction of thought.47

7.5.3: Nonverbal Messages Help Synchronize Interaction

An excellent book by Judee Burgoon and her colleagues reports that nonverbal cues play a central role in adapting and relating to others.48 We tend to mirror the posture and behavior of others; it seems to get us “in sync” with those with whom we interact. At your next group meeting, note how one member tends to unconsciously mirror the posture of another. This is especially true of members seated across from each other or within each other’s line of vision. You may find, for example, that a person sitting across from someone with folded arms may assume a similar posture. Like partners in an intricate dance, people constantly reflect each other’s movements, eye contact, gestures, and other nonverbal cues as they respond and adapt.

We respond not only to physical posture and movement but also to the rhythm and sound of human speech. William Condon and others, using slow-motion films, documented a distinct relationship between facial expressions and head movements and speech.49 Adam Kendon observed that people may shift their body positions in response to verbal messages.50 Davida Navarre and Catherine Emihovich report similar evidence that group members may respond in synchrony to the movements and postures of others.51 These authors suggest that during group interactions, people may adopt poses similar to those of others they like or agree with. Thus, coalitions of group members may be identified not only by their verbal agreement but also by their synchronized nonverbal behavior. It is probably more than just coincidence that group members consistently fold their arms and cross their legs in the same way. Just as religious services use singing and group litanies to establish unity and a commonality of purpose, small groups may unwittingly use common nonverbal behaviors to foster cohesiveness. Counselors report that they can help clients self-disclose by adopting body postures similar to those of their clients. By synchronizing body position, counselors believe they can better empathize and establish rapport with their clients. In your small-group discussions, observe the similarity and dissimilarity of members’ postures, positions, and gestures. Such cues may provoke interesting insights about group climate, leadership, and cohesiveness.

In one of the few studies that examined nonverbal behavior in groups, Edward Mabry sought to discover whether group members’ nonverbal behavior changes from one meeting to the next. After observing a group that met five times, he found that during the second and third meetings, group members were more likely to show the palms of their hands. Group members also tended to lean back more in the first and fifth sessions of their deliberations. Participants also made more direct eye contact with one another after they had met together once. What do these differences mean? Mabry’s study suggests that group
members’ nonverbal behavior changes from one group meeting to the next. Groups do not develop a static way of behaving nonverbally; nonverbal communication may depend on the topic and how group members feel toward one another as they become more comfortable after meeting together over several sessions.52

7.5.4: Nonverbal Messages Provide Information about Perceived Honesty of Dishonesty

In addition to categorizing movement, posture, and gestures, researchers have studied whether nonverbal behavior provides clues to whether someone is lying. Sigmund Freud said, “He that has eyes to see and ears to hear may convince himself that no mortal can keep a secret. If his lips are silent, he chatters with his fingertips; betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.” Ekman and Friesen found that feet and legs often reveal people’s true feelings.53 They theorized that while people consciously manipulate their facial expressions to hide deception, they are not so likely to monitor their feet. One team of researchers suggested that the following nonverbal behaviors, listed in order from most to least important, can provide clues as to whether someone is lying.54

- Greater time lag in response to a question
- Reduced eye contact
- Increased shifts in posture
- More hand/shrug emblems
- More adaptors
- Unfilled pauses
- Less smiling
- Slower speech
- Higher pitch in voice
- More deliberate pronunciation and articulation

Of course, simply because a group member exhibits one or more of these nonverbal behaviors does not mean that he or she is lying. Although a person trying to lie or hide something may exhibit some of the cues listed above, not everyone who displays such behavior is deceptive. The ambiguity of nonverbal cues prevents you from drawing such definitive conclusions about the motives of other people based on nonverbal cues alone.

7.6: Interpreting Nonverbal Communication

7.6 Describe how nonverbal cues should be interpreted in light of gender, cultural, and other differences

Nonverbal cues do not create meaning independently of other communication cues (such as message content, language style, and message organization). Also, there is much we still do not know about nonverbal communication. After reading the research conclusions reported here, you may be tempted to interpret someone else’s body language, but you should remember several principles when ascribing meaning to the posture and movement of others.

Virtual Groups

Nonverbal Virtual Communication

If you have been reading the Virtual Communication feature in each chapter thus far, you should be aware that technology can facilitate communication by eliminating the constraints of time and space, but it brings with it liabilities as well. The difficulty of communicating emotion is one of those liabilities because people rely so much on tone of voice and visual cues to ascertain others’ feelings and reactions.

Researcher Gary Baker studied the performance of 64 virtual teams using four modes of technological collaboration: text-only, audio-only, text and video, and audio and video. The study found no significant difference in the quality of strategic decisions made by teams using text-only communication versus those using audio-only communication. But when video was added to audio communication, there was significant improvement in team decisions.55

Read more

Baker’s study leads to some recommendations about nonverbal communication in virtual groups. Consider the following:

- Whenever possible, groups and teams should meet face to face. There is no substitute for the “full picture” we get when in the presence of another human being.
- Especially in the formative stages of group interaction, meeting face to face is critical to getting to know one another and building predictability and trust. When face-to-face communication is not possible, video conferencing can improve the quality of a group’s work.
- When face-to-face or video communication is not possible and you are limited to text or audio interaction, pay extra attention to emotional cues. Hearing a sigh, a yawn, or a nervous giggle, or seeing the word sigh or an emotion :-) in the text on your screen will help you interpret verbal messages.
crossed legs and folded arms does not necessarily mean that the person does not want to communicate with others. Other variables in the communication system may be affecting the person’s posture and position.

**LOOK FOR CLUSTERS OF CUES** Look for a pattern of cues to help you interpret what a specific behavior means rather than considering only one gesture, expression, or use of personal space. Seek corroborating cues that can help you reach a more accurate conclusion about what a specific behavior means. Besides noting whether someone makes eye contact, also note whether vocal cues, posture, and gestures confirm your conclusion.

Facial expressions are important sources of information about a group’s emotional climate, particularly if several members express similar emotions. Their faces may suggest that they are bored with the discussion or that they are interested and pleased. Remember that group members may attempt to mask their facial expressions in an effort to conceal their true feelings.

**RECOGNIZE THAT PEOPLE RESPOND DIFFERENTLY TO DIFFERENT STIMULI** Not all people express emotions in the same manner. It may take considerable time before you can understand the unique, idiosyncratic meaning underlying another person’s specific nonverbal behaviors. For example, one study found that group members’ responses to a group leader’s displays of anger or happiness depended, to a large extent, on each group member’s epistemic motivation, defined as “the extent to which team members desire to develop and maintain a rich and accurate understanding of situations.” Such predispositions are not readily apparent; they take time to learn.

**CONSIDER CULTURAL AND GENDER DIFFERENCES** Keep the person’s cultural background or gender in mind when you draw an inference from his or her nonverbal behavior. No nonverbal behavior has a generally accepted universal meaning. Even though some evidence indicates that facial expressions can be interpreted across several cultures with up to 92 percent accuracy, there are subtle as well as dramatic differences in the way nonverbal behaviors may be interpreted. In small-group interactions, it is especially interesting to observe cultural differences in how people use space and territory.

**CONSIDER YOUR PAST EXPERIENCE WITH SOMEONE WHEN INTERPRETING NONVERBAL CUES** As you spend time working with group members, chances are you will learn how to interpret their nonverbal cues. For example, when you first met Lee you weren’t sure why he seemed so distant and aloof. His lack of eye contact suggested that he was not interested in being a productive member of the group. After you had spent several meetings getting to know him better, you realized that Lee is simply shy. He has good ideas but needs to be drawn out.

Working with him convinces you that you should not make snap judgments of other group members. First impressions are not always accurate.

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**Case Study**

**Interpreting Indirect Communication**

**Scene One**

**Meg:** Nice outfit…Did you make it yourself?

**Steve:** No, my grandmother made it for me.

**Meg:** I was just wondering; it has such a “homespun” look.

**Scene Two**

**She:** Do these jeans make me look fat?

**He:** Uhhhhhh….

**Scene Three**

**She:** Dear, it’s been a long time since we went out dancing on a Saturday night.

**He:** Sure has.

**Scene Four**

**Boss:** Thanks for coming in, Jean. I know it’s short notice and you’re pretty overloaded, but we have to get this contract done and back to the client first thing Monday morning. I’m looking for someone who can work over the weekend. Do you have any suggestions?

**Jean:** Let me check my calendar, Mr. Jefferson. Maybe I can do it.

**Scene Five**

**She:** Honey, I’m working on a guest list for our party. Did the Ronnings invite us to their open house last fall?

**He:** Beats me….

**Questions for Analysis**

1. The brief scenes above provide examples of indirect communication—the words convey a surface meaning that, with further analysis, may reveal deeper, unspoken meanings. Rewrite each scene using dialogue that is more direct.

2. If you were the recipient of the indirect communication in each case, what additional information would you need to verify whether your interpretation of the comment was correct? What nonverbal cues would you look for to help you interpret the comment in each case?

3. What emotions (if any) do you associate with these dialogues? Why? What nonverbal cues would you look for to identify these emotions?

4. What perception-checking responses might you use in similar situations?
LOOK FOR CUES THAT COMMUNICATE LIKING, POWER, AND RESPONSIVENESS Albert Mehrabian has developed a three-dimensional model that identifies how people respond to nonverbal messages. Even though this framework was not designed exclusively for small groups, his research can be useful in helping to interpret the meaning of messages. His conclusions cannot be applied universally, but they do reflect the way many North Americans interpret nonverbal messages. His research suggests that people derive meaning from nonverbal behavior based on (1) immediacy or liking, (2) power, and (3) responsiveness.

1. **Immediacy: Behaviors that communicate liking and disliking.** As defined by Mehrabian, immediacy refers to whether people like or dislike others. The immediacy principle states that“people are drawn toward persons and things they like, evaluate highly, and prefer; and they avoid or move away from things they dislike, evaluate negatively, or do not prefer.” According to Mehrabian, such nonverbal behaviors as touching, leaning forward, reducing distance and personal space, and maintaining direct eye contact can communicate liking or positive feelings. Based on the immediacy principle, group members who consistently sit closer to you, establish more eye contact with you, and, in general, are drawn to you probably like you more than group members who generally do not look at you and who regularly select seats away from you.

2. **Power: Behaviors that communicate influence and status.** People of higher status generally determine the degree of closeness permitted in their interactions. A person of higher status and influence, for example, usually is surrounded by more space. A boss who sits at the head of the table is more likely to have empty chairs around him or her; subordinates are more likely to give the boss more space. A person of higher status generally has a more relaxed body posture when interacting with a person of lower status. High-status members also tend to have less eye contact with others, to use a louder voice, to make more expansive movements and postures, and may reflect their status in the way they dress.

3. **Responsiveness: Behaviors that communicate interest and attention.** Body movements, facial expressions, and variation of vocal cues (such as pitch, rate, volume, and tone) all contribute to our perceptions of others as responsive or unresponsive. A group member who communicates energy and enthusiasm would be rated highly responsive.

### Review

#### Dimensions of Nonverbal Meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Nonverbal Cues</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Immediacy</td>
<td>Behaviors that signal liking, attraction, and interest</td>
<td>Touching, forward leaning, close personal space, eye contact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power</td>
<td>Behaviors that communicate power, status, and influence</td>
<td>Protected space, increased distance, relaxed posture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsiveness</td>
<td>Behaviors that communicate active interactions and attention</td>
<td>Eye contact, varied vocal cues, animated facial expression</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 7.6.2: Develop the Skill of Perception Checking

People judge you by your behavior, not by your intent. You judge others the same way—by what you see, not by what they are thinking. Unless you are a mind reader, the only way to check your perception of others’ nonverbal behavior is to ask them. **Perception checking** is the skill of asking someone whether your interpretation of his or her unspoken message is accurate. There are three steps to using this skill. First, observe the nonverbal cues we have discussed. Next, mentally draw a conclusion about what the nonverbal behavior may mean. Finally, ask the other person if your inference was accurate.

Suppose you offer a solution to a problem your group has been discussing. After you announce your proposal, the group is silent, your colleagues break eye contact, and you see one person frown. To find out whether their nonverbal response means that your proposal has been rejected, you could ask, “Does your silence mean you don’t like my idea?” You could also add, “From the look on your
An understanding of nonverbal communication and small-group ecology can be used strategically to influence group interaction and group outcomes. For example, one of our friends has been seated twice on trial juries. In each case, when the jury moved to the jury room to deliberate, our friend walked confidently to the head of the table, put his hands on the table while intently surveying the faces of his fellow jurors, and said, “Well, the first thing we need to do is to elect a foreman.” He was elected unanimously in both cases.

Imagine that you have been assigned to a task group with no designated leader. For a variety of reasons, you believe that you should be elected the leader. The information you’ve learned in this chapter has given you insight into how you can manage the group’s impression of you and of your competence through strategic use of nonverbal behaviors and group ecology principles. Is it ethical for you to use what you know to get elected? Or does doing so amount to unfairly manipulating the group?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

**Review**

**Perception Checking**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Factors to Consider</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Observe someone’s nonverbal behavior.</td>
<td>What is his or her facial expression? Does he or she make eye contact? What is his or her posture? What is his or her tone of voice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Think about what the behavior may mean.</td>
<td>Does he or she appear to be angry, sad, depressed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Check your perception by asking whether your interpretation is accurate.</td>
<td>“The expression on your face suggests you may be upset. Are you?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Chapter Quiz: Enhancing Communication Skills in Groups**

An understanding of nonverbal communication and small-group ecology can be used strategically to influence group interaction and group outcomes. For example, one of our friends has been seated twice on trial juries. In each case, when the jury moved to the jury room to deliberate, our friend walked confidently to the head of the table, put his hands on the table while intently surveying the faces of his fellow jurors, and said, “Well, the first thing we need to do is to elect a foreman.” He was elected unanimously in both cases.

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In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.
Chapter 8
Managing Conflict

“When we all think alike, then no one is thinking.”
—Walter Lippman

Owens was coming to Germany to compete in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The two brothers had a small cobbler shop and thought they would try making sports shoes for the famed runner. They approached Owens and asked if he would wear their shoes during the Olympic competition.

Adolph and his brother, Rudolph, lived in a small German town and had heard that the American sprinter Jesse Owens was coming to Germany to compete in the 1936 Berlin Olympics. The two brothers had a small cobbler shop and thought they would try making sports shoes for the famed runner. They approached Owens and asked if he would wear their shoes during the Olympic competition.

Learning Objectives

8.1a Define conflict
8.1b Explain why conflict occurs
8.1c Describe three misconceptions about conflict
8.2 Identify and describe three types of conflict
8.3 Describe the relationship between conflict and group member diversity
8.4 Describe five conflict-management styles
8.5 Apply group and team conflict management skills
8.6 Apply strategies that facilitate collaboration in groups
8.7a Define groupthink
8.7b Identify the symptoms of groupthink
8.8 Describe the nature of consensus and apply strategies for reaching consensus
Owens quickly accepted the offer of free shoes and then won four gold medals. The two brothers parlayed that good fortune into making their small cobbler shop into a major producer of running shoes. There was just one problem: The two brothers didn’t get along. In fact, they fought a lot. Eventually, because of the constant conflict, they decided to go their separate ways. Adolph, whose nickname was “Adi,” took half of the shoemaking machines and started his own company on one side of the river in their town. You know it today as Adidas. Rudolph stayed on the other side of the river and called his new shoe company Puma. Their family conflict had thus created two giant running-shoe corporations.1

Conflict is a fact of life. Throughout history, people have been involved in conflicts ranging from family feuds that spawned rival shoe companies to nations that waged war against each other. Communication researchers and social psychologists conclude that when people interact with one another, they inevitably disagree.2 This chapter gives you some ideas about the causes of conflict in groups and teams and presents some strategies for managing it. We’re not going to tell you how to eliminate group conflict but rather how to understand it and its importance in your group deliberations.

Despite the prevalence of conflict in group and team deliberations, communication researchers Steven Farmer and Jonelle Rothe note that much of what we know about group conflict has been generalized from research that has investigated interpersonal conflict.3 The prime objective of this chapter is to help you understand how conflict in groups and teams can be both useful and detrimental to collaborative decision making.

8.1: What Is Conflict?

8.1a Define conflict

8.1b Explain why conflict occurs

8.1c Describe three misconceptions about conflict

Conflict happens when there is disagreement. Communication experts William Wilmot and Joyce Hocker define conflict as: (1) an expressed struggle (2) between at least two interdependent people (3) who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others (4) to achieve specific goals.4

- **EXPRESSED STRUGGLE**: A conflict becomes a concern to a group when the disagreement is expressed verbally or, more often, nonverbally. Early signs of conflict include furrowed brows, grimacing facial expressions, and flashes of frustration evident in the voice. If the conflict persists, words are usually exchanged and unmanaged tempers may flare.

- **BETWEEN AT LEAST TWO INTERDEPENDENT PEOPLE**: From a systems theory perspective, people in a group are interdependent; what happens to one person impacts others in the group. A conflict between even just two people in a group of five will undoubtedly have an impact on the dynamics of the entire group.

- **INCOMPATIBLE GOALS, SCARCE RESOURCES, AND INTERFERENCE**: Conflict often occurs because two or more people want the same thing, yet both can’t have it. If resources are scarce or if something or someone is blocking what others want, conflict is likely.

- **ACHIEVING A GOAL**: People involved in a conflict want something. Understanding that is an important step toward finding a way to manage the conflict.

If a group experienced no conflict, it would have little to discuss. One value of conflict is that it makes a group test and challenge ideas. Conflict can, however, be detrimental to group interaction and group decision making. Conflict has a negative impact on a group when it (1) keeps the group from completing its task, (2) interferes with the quality of the group’s decision or productivity, or (3) threatens the existence of the group.5

8.1.1: Causes of Conflict

What causes conflict in groups and teams? Conflict results from differences between group members—differences in perception, personality, knowledge, culture, power, and procedural expectations.

**Perception**

People literally see the world differently from one another; this difference in perspective results in differing attitudes, beliefs, and values that inevitably surface and cause conflict. No matter how much they try to empathize with others, people still have individual perspectives on the world.

**Personality**

You don’t need a textbook to tell you that each person has a unique personality. Our personality differences that result in different group members’ tolerance for taking risks also contribute to group conflict; some people, just by their nature, are comfortable taking risk, others aren’t.6


**Knowledge**

People also differ in the amount of knowledge they have on various topics. Group members soon realize that some of them are more experienced or more widely read than others. This difference in information contributes to different attitudes.
Managing Conflict

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Conflict does not just happen. You can often discern phases or stages of conflict development. Communication scholar B. Aubrey Fisher found that group deliberations can be organized around four phases: orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement. Several researchers have discovered that the conflict phase in groups often emerges in predictable stages.

Conflicts in groups can be directed toward people (relational conflict), or ideas (task conflict), or both. One research team found that conflict often occurs because of perceived inequity; if we think someone has more resources or is getting more than his or her fair share, conflict often results. When the conflict is directed toward people, we may first try to manage it by avoiding the individual or the topic of conflict. If the conflict is more task-centered, we usually first try more integrative approaches by seeking solutions that are agreeable to all parties. One of the prime effects of conflict and discord that occurs in groups is that the seeming lack of progress toward the group’s goals results in a lack of motivation to keep working at a solution to resolve the conflict. Conflict can also result in a lack of group cohesion. Two of the biggest triggers of conflict occur when people believe they haven’t been treated fairly or that they are entitled to something that they didn’t receive.

8.1.2: Misconceptions about Conflict

People often have misconceptions about the role of conflict in groups because they think that conflict is bad and should be avoided. With higher rates of divorce, crime, and international political tensions, it is understandable that people view conflict negatively. The following discussion of myths will examine some of the feelings you may have about conflict and point out how a different attitude might improve the quality of your group discussions.

MISCONCEPTION 1: CONFLICT SHOULD BE AVOIDED AT ALL COSTS Conflict is a natural byproduct of communication; unless participants in your group share the same attitudes, beliefs, and values (an unlikely situation), there will be some conflict. Several researchers have discovered that conflict is an important, indeed useful, part of group communication. Members who believe that conflict is unhealthy become frustrated when conflict erupts in a group. They should realize that conflict probably will occur and that it is a natural and healthy part of group communication.

Research suggests that when conflict occurs, group members are often challenged to research issues in greater
detail and learn more about the issues under discussion. In the end, conflict can enhance learning and encourage more in-depth analysis.

Group conflict can also spur group members to share more information with one another than they would if everyone simply agreed on the issues discussed. Research has found that dissent in a group can uncover hidden agendas. So the quality of group discussion increases when people express different ideas, opinions, and perspectives.\(^\text{17}\)

**MISCONCEPTION 2: ALL CONFLICT OCCURS BECAUSE PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND ONE ANOTHER**

Have you ever been in a heated disagreement with someone and found yourself blurting out “You just don’t understand me!”? You easily assume that conflict occurs because another person does not understand your position. Not all conflicts occur because of misunderstandings, however. You may believe that if others really understood you, they would agree with you. Sometimes, however, conflict occurs because you have communicated your position clearly; it’s just that others disagree with that position.\(^\text{18}\) Yes, of course, conflict can result from not understanding what someone says, but some conflicts intensify when a person clarifies his or her point.

**MISCONCEPTION 3: ALL CONFLICT CAN BE RESOLVED**

Perhaps you consider yourself an optimist. You like to think that problems can be solved. You may also feel that if a conflict arises, a compromise will resolve it. However, you should realize that not all conflicts can be resolved. Many disagreements are not simple. For example, fundamental differences between those who oppose abortion and those who support it can obviously not be resolved easily, if at all. Some ideologies are so far apart that resolving conflicts between them is unlikely. This does not mean that whenever a conflict arises in your group, you should despair and say, “Oh, well, no use trying to solve this disagreement.” That position also oversimplifies the conflict-management process. Because some conflicts cannot be resolved, group members may have to focus on differences on which they can most likely reach agreement.

**8.2: Types of Conflict**

**8.2 Identify and describe three types of conflict**

Communication scholars Gerald Miller and Mark Steinberg identify three classic types of interpersonal conflict: (1) pseudo-conflict, (2) simple conflict, and (3) ego conflict.\(^\text{19}\) They suggest that by identifying the type of conflict in a group, you will be better able to manage it. The following sections look at these three types of conflict in the context of a small group.

8.2.1: Pseudo-Conflict: When People Misunderstand One Another

Some conflict occurs because of misunderstandings. **Pseudo-conflict** occurs when individuals agree, but because of poor communication, they believe that they disagree. *Pseudo* means fake or false. Thus, pseudo-conflict is conflict between people who really agree on issues, but who do not understand that their differences are caused by misunderstandings or misinterpretations. “Oh, I see,” said Mark after several minutes of heatedly defending a position he had suggested to the group. “I just misunderstood you. I guess we really agree.”

To manage pseudo-conflict, consider these strategies:

- Ask others what they mean by terms or phrases they use.
- Establish a supportive rather than a defensive climate if misunderstandings occur.
- Become an active listener by using these skills:
  
  **QUESTION**: Ask appropriate questions about information or ideas that are unclear to you.
  
  **PARAPHRASE CONTENT**: To test your understanding, summarize your conception of what your partner says.
  
  **PARAPHRASE FEELINGS**: When appropriate, check your perception of your partner’s feelings.

Research clearly supports the importance of good listening skills in small groups and teams.\(^\text{20}\)
Managing Conflict

Disagreement about group procedure. For example, one person wants the group to do an extensive Internet search to determine which organization should be hired to raise funds for a new hospital. Another group member disagrees with that approach; she suggests that group members simply interview previous clients of various fundraising firms to assess the organization’s effectiveness. There is not a disagreement about the overall goal or task of the group—to raise money for a new hospital; rather, the disagreement is about the process or procedures to achieve that task. Task conflict is a disagreement about what should be done; process conflict is a disagreement about how the task should be accomplished.

Conveying Disagreement
When you understand what someone says but simply disagree with his or her point, consider using these skills:

- Clarify your perception and your partner’s perception of the message.
- Keep the discussion focused on issues, not personalities.
- Use facts that support your point rather than opinions or emotional arguments.
- Use a structured problem-solving approach to organize the discussion: Define, analyze, identify several solutions, evaluate the solutions, select the best one.
- When appropriate, look for ways to compromise.
- Make the conflict a group concern rather than a conflict between just two people; ask others for information and data.
- If there are several issues, decide which issues are the most important and then tackle them one at a time.
- Find areas of agreement.
- If possible, postpone decisions until additional research can be conducted. Such a delay may also lessen tensions.

Simple conflict occurs when two people’s goals or ideas are mutually exclusive or incompatible. “Simple conflict involves one person saying, ‘I want to do X,’ and another saying, ‘I want to do Y,’ when X and Y are incompatible forms of behavior.” Although the conflict may seem far from simple, it’s called “simple conflict” because the issues are clear and each party understands the problem. For example, in a corporation with only a limited amount of money to invest, one board member may want to invest in real estate and another may want to make capital improvements. The issue is clear; the individuals simply believe the company should take different courses of action.

Simple conflict tends to center on two general categories. The conflict could be at a task the group is discussing or about the process or procedures that group the using. Task conflict is conflict that occurs because of substantive differences about how to accomplish what the group is trying to achieve; that is, one or more individuals in the group don’t agree about a specific idea, concept, or conclusion that the group has reached. In contrast, process conflict occurs when one or more group members disagree about how the task could or should be accomplished; there is a disagreement about group procedure. For example, one person wants the group to do an extensive Internet search to determine which organization should be hired to raise funds for a new hospital. Another group member disagrees with that approach; she suggests that group members simply interview previous clients of various fundraising firms to assess the organization’s effectiveness. There is not a disagreement about the overall goal or task of the group—to raise money for a new hospital; rather, the disagreement is about the process or procedures to achieve that task. Task conflict is a disagreement about what should be done; process conflict is a disagreement about how the task should be accomplished.

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- Find areas of agreement.
- If possible, postpone decisions until additional research can be conducted. Such a delay may also lessen tensions.

Ego conflict occurs when individuals become defensive about their positions because they think they are being personally attacked. Ego conflict results in deteriorating relationships. Relation conflict occurs when one or more group members do not like, respect, or value another person. Of the types of conflict under discussion, this one is the most difficult to manage. Research has found that when either task or process conflict is present in the group there is a chance that it could result in a third type of conflict—relationship conflict.

Ego conflicts are charged with emotion, and defensiveness in one individual often causes defensiveness in others. Underlying many ego conflicts are power struggles. Just
because you’re the chair of the group doesn’t give you the right to railroad decision making,” snaps Frank. “Well, you’re just jealous. You think you should have been elected chairperson,” retorts Ed. Based on his study of small group communication, Dennis Devine suggests that a disagreement about issues (simple conflict) can quickly evolve into a more emotionally charged discussion that becomes personal (ego conflict) unless group members consciously monitor how they interact with one another.25

If you are trying to mediate an ego conflict, find issues the disagreeing parties can agree on. Identify and emphasize the common ground between them, and encourage them to describe the sequence of events that created the conflict. A key immediate concern when ego conflict flares up in a group is to permit the disagreement to be verbalized without heightening the emotional tension. Just venting anger and irritation won’t lessen tensions, nor will simply ignoring the conflict make the tension go away. Research clearly documents that the emotional climate in a group shapes how effectively the conflict will be managed.

**ADDITIONAL STRATEGIES** Here are additional strategies that may help manage the clash of egos.26

- Encourage active listening.
- Return the discussion to the key issues under discussion.
- Try to turn the discussion into a problem to be solved rather than a conflict someone has to win.

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**Review**

**Summary of Three Conflict Types**

**Sources of Conflict**

- **Simple Conflict**—Disagreement over a course of action, idea, policy, or procedure.

**Answer**

1. Listen and clarify perceptions.
2. Make sure issues are clear to all group members.
3. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.
4. Keep discussion focused on the issues.
5. Use facts rather than opinions as evidence.
6. Look for alternatives or compromise positions.
7. Make the conflict a group concern rather than an individual concern.
8. Determine which conflicts are the most important to resolve.
9. If appropriate, postpone the decision while additional research is conducted. This delay also helps relieve tensions.

- **Ego Conflict**—Defense of ego: Individual believes he or she is being attacked personally.

**Suggestions for Managing Ego Conflict**

1. Let members express their concerns, but do not permit personal attacks.
2. Employ active listening.
3. Call for a cooling-off period.
4. Try to keep discussion focused on issues (simple conflict).
5. Encourage parties to be descriptive rather than evaluative and judgmental.
6. Use a problem-solving approach to manage differences of opinion.
7. Speak slowly and calmly.
8. Agree to disagree.

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**8.3: Conflict and Diversity in Small Groups**

**8.3** Describe the relationship between conflict and group member diversity

As we noted, the root of most conflicts are differences in understanding, perception, attitudes, or preferred action.
Yet one of the key advantages of working in groups and teams is the opportunity to capitalize on the different perspectives that group and team members have. As the saying goes, if both of us agree, then one of us is irrelevant. The challenge is to use group diversity without becoming locked in intractable conflict. Although we’ve emphasized that not all conflict is bad and not all of it should be avoided, entrenched conflict decreases a group’s effectiveness. The key to understanding how differences lead to conflict is understanding how group members communicate with one another when conflict occurs. Effective communication helps manage the conflict. Two frameworks for describing cultural differences shed light on how some conflicts develop and fester.

8.3.1: Conflict in Individualistic and Collectivistic Cultures

Some cultures expect and nurture a team or collective approach to working with others; more individualistic cultures, such as that of the United States, place greater value on individual achievement. This culturally learned difference can explain why individuals who place different values on the role of the individual or the team manage conflict as they do. Stella Ting-Toomey suggests that people in individualistic cultures are more likely to use direct, confrontational methods of managing disagreements than people who value a collective or team approach to group work. She also suggests that people from collectivistic cultures, especially cultures that place considerable stock in nonverbal messages, prefer nonconfrontational and indirect methods of resolving differences. Ting-Toomey finds that people from collectivistic cultures are more likely to use facts or principles as a basis for managing group conflict, negotiation, or persuasion situations. People from collectivistic cultures adopt more relationship-based messages to manage differences. It is important for people from collectivistic cultures to save face by not being perceived as having lost a confrontation.

8.3.2: Conflict in High-Context and Low-Context Cultures

A high-context culture is one in which considerable weight is given to the context of unspoken messages. In a low-context culture, such as that of the United States, more emphasis is placed on words and their explicit meaning than on implicit, nonverbal cues. Researchers have found that people in low-context cultures give greater importance to task or instrumental issues than do people in high-context cultures. In high-context cultures, the expressive or emotional aspects of managing conflict take on special importance. In expressive conflict, the goal is often to express feelings and release tension. Keeping the relationship in balance, maintaining the friendship, and managing the emotional climate often take a higher priority in a high-context culture than achieving a particular outcome. Here again, saving face and avoiding embarrassment for all parties are more important in high-context cultures than in low-context cultures.

In your group deliberations, knowing that culture and gender differences exist can help you decide which strategies will be more effective than others. We caution you, however, to avoid stereotyping others by cultural, national, ethnic, or gender differences alone. For example, it would be most inappropriate to draw a stereotyped conclusion that all Asians will emphasize expressive rather than instrumental objectives in conflict. Similarly, taking an egocentric view (that is, assuming your perspective is correct) or an ethnocentric view (assuming your cultural methods of managing conflict are superior to those used by others) can be detrimental to effective communication.

Putting Principles into Practice

Strategies for Managing Conflict in Diverse Groups: Surface and Deep Diversity

One of the most interesting questions that group communication researchers have explored is how diversity in group membership affects group performance. Although one of the benefits of working in groups is learning from diverse perspectives, do differences in race, ethnicity, culture, age, or gender enhance group quality? Is it only diversity that a person can physically see that influences the communication in groups and teams? And how does the diversity of group members, whether surface-level or deep-level, affect the conflict-management process?

Researchers have made distinctions between surface-level diversity and deep-level diversity.

Surface-Level Diversity

Surface-level diversity is defined as the social differences that are easily visible to us—such as differences in ethnicity, race, age, sex, and other social and observable categories. One research team found that ethnicity had an effect on group member satisfaction. Group members who were African American, Hispanic, Native American, or Asian American experienced overall more satisfaction with being in a group than did Whites. The researchers found that regardless of ethnicity, all group members valued having ethnically diverse members in the group. Researchers found that individuals from East Asia tended to speak less in a group and White Americans tended to have more comments and suggestions to offer.
Chapter 8

8.3.3: Approaches to Conflict When There Are Gender Differences

Gender is another factor that sometimes makes a difference in how people express and manage conflict in groups and teams. Research suggests that people with a feminine style of managing conflict (either men or women could have a feminine style) are more likely to be interested in issues of equity, empathy, caring, and closeness; to encourage mutuality; and generally to focus on relationship issues. A masculine style of conflict management emphasizes achieving specific goals and protecting self-interests, and it is concerned with equality of rights, fairness, and generally focusing on the task. Research further finds sex differences (here the research notes differences between men and women—not just gender differences) in conflict-management styles: women tend to emphasize more expressive goals in conflict, whereas men emphasize instrumental or task objectives.

Although we’ve noted these generalizations about sex and gender differences, we emphasize that not all men use...
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8.4.1: Avoidance

Some people just don’t like to deal with conflict, so they avoid it. The avoidance conflict-management style is one in which a person attempts to ignore disagreements. Why do people sometimes avoid conflict? People who sidestep conflict may not like the hassle of dealing with a difficult, uncomfortable situation; or they may be unassertive and afraid of standing up for their rights. At other times people avoid conflict because they don’t want to hurt someone’s feelings.

If you want to be the cause of conflict in a virtual group, research has found the best way to achieve that goal is to be a slacker or a deadbeat. Or just don’t do the work. Virtual group deadbeats tended to avoid conflict and withdraw from the group rather than to actively try to manage conflict. Not surprisingly, in addition to being a source of conflict, deadbeats or those missing in action tended to create less trust in the group as well as less cohesion and satisfaction. When confronting a deadbeat, more active group members tend to use a more integrative approach to encouraging the deadbeats to participate.

There are disadvantages to ignoring conflict. If people avoid directly addressing the conflict, the cause of the conflict may remain and emotions may escalate, making the conflict worse. Avoiding conflict may also signal to others that you simply don’t care about the needs and interests of others in your group.

When may it be advantageous to avoid conflict? Taking a break from addressing a difficult, conflict-producing issue may be just what a group needs in some circumstances. Avoiding conflict could give the group time to cool off or to think about the issues that are the source of the conflict. If the conflict is about something trivial or unimportant, it may not be worth the time and effort to manage the conflict.

8.4.2: Accommodation

Some people simply give in to avoid a major blow-up or controversy. The accommodation style is another approach used to try to make conflict go away by giving in to the wishes of others. This style is sometimes called a “lose-win” approach. People may accommodate for several reasons. Perhaps they have a high need for approval, and they want others to like them. Or they may want to reduce threats to their sense of self-worth, so they decide to give in rather than defend their own views on the issue. Some people who accommodate appear to maintain their cool, doing what others want them to do but in reality they are using accommodation to serve their own needs—to get other people to like them.

There may be times when it’s disadvantageous to accommodate others during conflict. Giving in too quickly to what others want may cause the group to make a bad decision because the issues underlying the conflict have not been thoroughly examined. Remember, conflict is not inherently bad; it is normal and to be expected. If several
people quickly accommodate, then the group has lost a key advantage of using different points of view to hash out the best solution or decision.

But there are also advantages in being accommodating to the views of others. To agree with others can indicate that you are reasonable and that you want to help. If the issue is a trivial matter, it may be best to let it slide. If you realize that your position is wrong, then by all means go ahead and agree with others. If you admit your errors, then others may be more likely to admit their mistakes as well, which can help create a climate of trust. Stubbornly clinging to your position, even when you realize it’s wrong, creates a defensive climate. Research suggests that one way to break an upward spiral of conflict is to find something about which members can agree. Accommodating can help the group develop a supportive climate; just don’t make a habit of always accommodating quickly to squelch all disagreement.

8.4.3: Competition

People who have power or want more power often seek to compete with others so that others will accept their point of view as the best position. The competition conflict-management style occurs when people stress winning a conflict at the expense of one or more other people. Think of the competition style of conflict management as an arm-wrestling match: One person tries to win so that the other person will lose. Winning is often about power, and power is about exerting control over others. Group members who seek power and position are often the ones who talk the most. Research has found that if you’re in a group with a competitive, even contentious and cutthroat atmosphere, it’s hard to break that cycle and evolve into a more collaborative environment. It takes both an awareness of the contentious climate and then talking about how to break out of the competitive environment to develop a more collaborative approach to managing conflict.

There are several disadvantages to creating a group climate built on competition. The competitive style may result in greater defensiveness, messages that blame others, and efforts to control other group members. We’ve stressed that it’s important for group and team members to have a common goal and to work toward the common good. If some group members seek to promote their own interests over the group interests, then the undue competition diminishes the overall power of the group.

We don’t want to leave the impression that it’s always wrong to compete: If you are certain that you have accurate information and that your insights and experiences can help the group achieve its goal, then stick to your position and seek to persuade others. Likewise, if some group members advocate a course of action that is immoral or illegal or that violates your personal instincts of what is right and wrong, it’s appropriate to advocate a different course of action.

But competing with others can be a problem if you try to control without being sensitive to their needs or rights. To compete can also be detrimental if your method of competition is simply to outlast or out-shout others, threaten them, or use unethical means of persuasion, such as knowingly using false information to win. When assertiveness crosses the line into aggression (trying to force others to support your point), most group members find that the competition style becomes tiresome over the course of several group meetings.

8.4.4: Compromise

The compromise style of conflict management attempts to find a middle ground—a solution that somewhat meets the needs of all concerned. The word somewhat is important. Although on the surface a compromise can look like a “win-win” approach, it can also create a lose-lose result if nobody gets what he or she actually wants or needs. Often when people give up some of what they hope to achieve, no one gets precisely what they want. When trying to reach a compromise, you’re really expected to lose something and win something simultaneously; you also expect others to lose and win.

As shown in Figure 8.1, when you compromise, you have some concern for others, as well as some concern for yourself.

Although compromise sounds good in principle, it may not be best in practice. If, for example, no one feels that the compromise solution is a good one, then it probably isn’t the best solution. If group members quickly try to reach a compromise without hashing out why they disagree, the group may not make the best solution or decision. Compromise can be tempting because it seemingly gives in to each position. An old joke says that a camel is a horse designed by a committee. When groups compromise, the final product may not quite be what anyone had in mind, and it may not really solve the problem.

Although we’ve cautioned against too quickly reaching a compromise to manage conflict, there are obvious advantages to crafting a compromise solution. If a decision is needed quickly and a compromise can be achieved to meet the time demands of the situation, then compromise may be best. Compromise may help everyone save face, especially after a long, contentious conflict. Compromise may also maintain the balance of power in a group. A compromise on one issue can create a climate of cooperation that will serve the group well when it faces other challenges and disagreements.

8.4.5: Collaboration

To collaborate is to have a high concern for both yourself and others. Group members who use a collaboration style of conflict management view conflict as a problem to be solved rather than as a game in which some people win and others lose. In the long run, groups that take the time to collaborate have better results. When group members work side-by-side, rather than just jostling for power and supremacy,
the result may be a win-win outcome. Several research studies have found that when there are cultural differences among group members, a collaborative approach to conflict management works best. Essential elements of a collaborative style include leaving personal grievances out of the discussion and describing problems without being judgmental or evaluative of other people. To compromise is to realize that each person loses something as well as wins something; to collaborate is to take the time to find a solution in which all parties are comfortable with the outcome rather than harboring a sense of loss and sacrifice.

The main disadvantage of a collaboration style is the time, effort, and skill it takes to collaborate. Collaboration requires patience. If your group needs a quick decision, group members may find that taking time to reach a truly “win-win” outcome is more trouble than the issue at hand is worth. Additionally, some people may use the appearance of collaboration as a pretense to compete: A person who is skilled in negotiation and who uses words well can manipulate a collaborative effort and ultimately “win.”

The obvious advantage to investing time and energy in collaboration is the prospect of both a better solution to issues facing the group and more satisfied group members. Collaboration is also advantageous when the group needs fresh, new ideas because the old approaches of trying to hammer out a solution simply haven’t worked. Working to develop a true consensus on a solution that all individuals support is a good goal for most groups to consider.

It may sound like the collaborative approach is always the best conflict-management style to use. And we do think it’s worth pursuing in many, if not most, cases. But the best conflict-management style depends on a variety of factors. Research suggests that most people find three things about conflict uncomfortable: (1) the participants fail to reach a clear solution, (2) the conflict is managed poorly, and (3) the participants avoid discussing the key issues and true sources of the conflict. There is no specific conflict-management style that “works” in all situations. However, we will discuss research conclusions that identify specific strategies and practices for collaboration that increase the likelihood that all individuals involved in a conflict will be satisfied.

8.5: Collaborative Conflict Management: Principles and Skills

8.5 Apply group and team conflict management skills

What principles and strategies can help a group manage conflict collaboratively? No simple checklist of techniques will miraculously resolve or manage group differences. Research supports the principle that focusing on shared interests and developing a collaborative conflict-management style are usually preferred over more combative conflict-management styles. However, based on several studies of what works and what does not work when managing conflict, Roger Fisher and William Ury identified the four conflict-management principles discussed in the following sections.

8.5.1: Separate the People from the Problem

When conflict becomes personal and egos become involved, it is very difficult to develop a positive climate in which differences can be managed. If people feel they are being evaluated and strategically manipulated, they will respond with defensiveness. Separating the person from the problem means valuing the other individual as a person, treating her or him as an equal, and empathizing with her or his feelings. A key to valuing others is to use good listening skills. It is also useful to acknowledge the other person’s feelings. Emotion is the fuel of conflict. Several scholars agree that efforts to manage our feelings facilitate the conflict-management process.

One strategy for constructively expressing how you feel toward others in conflict is to use the approach John Gottman and his colleagues call the X-Y-Z formula. According to this method, you say “When you do X, in situation Y, I feel Z.” Here’s an example: “When you are 15 minutes late to our staff meetings, I feel like you don’t care about us or our meetings.”

When you are the recipient of someone’s wrath, you could use the X-Y-Z formula to explain how being yelled at makes it difficult for you to listen effectively. Trying to understand and manage your own and others’ feelings helps separate personal issues from issues of substance. Joyce Hocker and William Wilmot suggest that when you are the receiver of someone’s emotional outburst, you could consider the following actions.

1. Acknowledge the person’s feelings.
2. Determine what specific behavior is causing the intense feelings.
3. Assess the intensity and importance of the issue.
4. Invite the other person to join you in working toward solutions.
5. Make a positive relational statement.

Research also supports the value of using well-crafted arguments rather than emotion-laden opinions to help those in conflict sort through periods of contention. No technique or simple formula exists to help you manage the challenging task of separating personal from substantive issues. Using good listening skills, acknowledging how others feel, and expressing your own feelings (without
8.5.2: Focus on Shared Interests

The words to one old song begin with the advice “Accentuate the positive. Eliminate the negative.” A collaborative style focuses on areas of agreement and what all parties have in common. If, for example, you are in a group debating whether public schools should distribute condoms, group members are more likely to have a productive discussion if they verbalize the goals and values they hold in common. A comment such as “We all agree that we want to reduce violence in our schools” might be a good place to start such a discussion.

Conflict is goal-driven. The individuals embroiled in the conflict want something. Unless goals are clear to everyone, it will be difficult to manage the conflict well. If you are involved in conflict, determine what your goals are. Then identify your partner’s goals. Finally, identify where goals overlap and where there are differences.

Do not confuse a goal with the strategy for achieving what you and a feuding group member want. For example, you may ask the group to make fewer copies on the copy machine. Your goal is to save money because you are in charge of managing the office. Asking that your colleagues make fewer copies is a strategy that you have suggested for achieving your goal. Clarifying the underlying goal rather than only debating the merits of one strategy for achieving it should help unravel clashes over issues or personalities.

8.5.3: Generate Many Options to Solve Problems

During negotiation, group members who adamantly hold to only one solution create a competitive climate. Collaborative conflict managers are more likely to use brainstorming or the nominal-group technique or other strategies for identifying a variety of options to manage the disagreement; they seek several solutions to overcome obstacles. Research by Shaila Miranda suggests that using e-mail or other electronic support systems to generate and evaluate ideas can also be a productive way of increasing the number of options a group or team might consider. Sometimes feuding group members become fixated on only one approach to their goal. When conflict management degenerates into a verbal arm-wrestling match, where combatants perceive only one way to win, the conflict is less likely to be managed successfully.

8.5.4: Base Decisions on Objective Criteria

Criteria are the standards for an acceptable solution to a problem. Typical criteria are such things as a limit to how much the solution can cost or a deadline by which a solution must be implemented. If, for example, group members agree that a solution must decrease the spread of AIDS but also not cost more than $1 million to implement, the group is using criteria to help identify an acceptable solution.

8.6: When People Are Not Cooperative: Dealing with Difficult Group Members

8.6 Apply strategies that facilitate collaboration in groups

Evidence suggests that managers spend up to 25 percent of their time dealing with conflict. One author boldly claims that 98 percent of the problems we face are “people problems.” Scholars call them “group deviants”; you may call them a pain in the neck. Even though we hope that you will not have to deal with difficult or cantankerous group members, we are not naive. Not all group members will separate people from the problem, focus on shared interests, be eager to search for more alternatives, or base decisions on objective criteria. Our individualistic cultural traditions often make it challenging to develop collaborative groups and teams. Research suggests that if you think you are a typical group member who abides by the norms and rules of the group, you are more likely to be upset by someone who obstructs the group process. You’re more likely to label someone a deviant if you think you are not deviant in your own team behavior. It sometimes takes special “people skills” to deal with some group members.

8.6.1: Manage Your Emotions

When we are emotionally charged, we may find it difficult to practice rational, logical methods of managing conflict. One researcher offers this description of what happens to our bodies when we become upset:

Our adrenaline flows faster and our strength increases by about 20 percent . . . . The veins become enlarged and the
cortical centers where thinking takes place do not perform nearly as well. . . . the blood supply to the problem-solving part of the brain is severely decreased because, under stress, a greater portion of blood is diverted to the body’s extremities.64

It’s normal to feel angry when someone seems constantly to say or do things that make you feel judged or evaluated. In that situation, you may say or do something you later regret. Although some people advocate expressing anger to “clear the air,” expressing uncensored emotions can make matters worse. On the other hand, communication researchers Barbara Gayle and Raymond Preiss confirmed what most of us know intuitively: Unresolved conflict is a breeding ground for emotional upheaval in groups and organizations.65 Although it’s been said that time heals all wounds, there are instances when ignoring hurt feelings can make the conflict escalate. Leaders and team members need to recognize when to be active in addressing emotional volatility.66 Research has confirmed that teams comprised of people with a well-developed sense of emotional intelligence (that is, they have empathy for others and are better able to manage their emotions) have less contentious and more productive meetings.67

Case Study
Practice in Applying Principles

You would think that board members of the Buckner Valley food bank would be, for the most part, pleasant, selfless people who were trying to give something back to the community by volunteering their time to help provide food for those who needed a little help. Yet the board members often found themselves embroiled in conflict, due in part to some of their personalities.

Jeff meant well, but he seemed to have a need to dominate the board. He talked too much; and although he was not the current board chair, he wanted to insist that his ideas were the ones to be implemented. Jeff’s dominance made other board members reactively reject his ideas, even when the ideas were good ones, such as purchasing a new van to make food deliveries. Tired of Jeff’s overly bombastic style of trying to get his way, they usually disagreed with him regardless of the merit of his suggestions.

Aiden also meant well, but he missed about half of the twice-monthly meetings. He often didn’t follow through on assignments. Yet he liked being on the board because it looked good on his resume; he was planning on running for city council next year and wanted to demonstrate his concern for the community by being on the board. Even when Aiden was present he seemed mentally absent; he didn’t say much, even though as manager of the local grocery store he had much to offer.

Jessica was a hard worker—maybe too hard. She always followed through on her assignments and had little patience for people who didn’t do what they were supposed to do. She did more than just raise her voice when expressing her concerns; she yelled and often screamed obscenities at members who made the smallest errors or mistakes. Because of her hard work, the board needed her; but members were frankly a bit afraid of her wrath and just kept quiet when she hollered at them. They didn’t want to upset her further because they knew she would holler even louder.

Hudson always thought the food bank was running out of money (even when it wasn’t). He longed for the good old days when just he and C. J. ran the food bank. So Hudson was typically against any new idea, especially anything that cost money. When strategies were suggested to raise more funds, Hudson was against it; he didn’t agree with the philosophy “It takes money to raise money,” so he blocked most new ideas.

C. J., current board chair, was the glue that held the board together. She was mild-mannered yet hard-working and talented at keeping the other board members moving forward (most of the time). Yet she was getting weary of the constant bickering, power struggles, and inactivity on the part of some.

It was time for the board to organize the annual holiday gift basket program for Buckner Valley, yet the board just wasn’t making progress. The need was greater this year than ever because of the downturn in the economy. Many people had lost their jobs and would have no holiday if it weren’t for the food bank. Jeff had a good idea for streamlining the operation so that more families could be fed, but other members rejected his idea because they didn’t want Jeff to get credit for the idea. Since Aiden ran the grocery store he could make a major difference in the community, but he didn’t have time to attend many meetings. He just didn’t seem to have time or interest. Hudson didn’t want to spend a dime more than what was spent last year and was against any new plan that might cost more money. Jessica was at her prickly best, and, although she could do the work, she had nothing but critical comments for her fellow board members. C. J. knew the Buckner Valley community was depending on the board, so she was intent on doing whatever she could to feed even more people this year—families were depending on it.

Questions for Analysis

1. Based on your knowledge of pseudo, simple and ego conflict, what type or types of conflict do you see evident on the board?

2. What different styles of conflict management do you see among the board members? How do those different styles affect the level of conflict among board members?

3. Which collaborative conflict-management principles and skills would be helpful for board members to implement to address the recurring conflicts they were experiencing?

4. What suggestions would you make to help manage the array of personalities present on the board?
FIVE STRATEGIES  Consider the following five strategies for managing your emotions during conflict.

1. **BE AWARE OF YOUR ANGER LEVEL.** Candidates for anger management programs don’t monitor their emotions well; before they know it, their emotions boil over. Uncensored emotional outbursts rarely enhance the quality of communication. An emotional purge may make you feel empowered momentarily, but it usually only escalates conflict and tension.68

2. **BREATHE.** It may sound too simple, but it works. As you become aware of your increased emotional arousal, take a slow, deep breath. A deep breath can help calm you and manage the physiological changes that adrenaline creates. A slow, deep breath can help soothe your spirit and give you another focus besides lashing out at others.

3. **USE SELF-TALK.** Your thoughts are linked to your feelings. You can affect your emotional state by first being aware that you are becoming upset and then telling yourself to calm down and stay focused on the issues at hand. Eleanor Roosevelt’s observation that “no one can make you feel inferior without your consent” is an acknowledgment of the power of self-talk to affect your emotional response to what others say and do.

4. **MONITOR YOUR NONVERBAL MESSAGES.** Emotions are usually communicated nonverbally rather than verbally. Monitoring your emotional signals (such as noting whether your voice gets louder, your facial expression less friendly, and your gestures more dramatic or emphatic) can help de-escalate an emotionally charged situation before it erupts. Speaking more slowly and calmly, maintaining direct eye contact, and adopting a neutral facial expression can help ensure a climate of civility and decorum. We’re not suggesting that you manipulate your nonverbal behavior so that you feel inauthentic or that you speak in a patronizing tone. However, being aware of how your nonverbal messages contribute to the emotional climate can help bring the emotional temperature down a degree or two.

5. **AVOID PERSONAL ATTACKS.** When conflict gets personal (ego conflict) it becomes more difficult to manage. Calling people names and hurling negative personal messages at others usually adds to a deteriorating emotional group climate.

Don’t **gunny-sack.** Gunny-sacking is dredging up old problems and issues from the past, like pulling them out of an old bag, or gunny sack, to use against your partner. Bringing up old problems that can’t be changed now only serves to make matters worse, especially when emotions are raw. Focus on the present and what can be discussed now and changed in the future, rather than reliving past problems.

8.6.2: Describe What Is Upsetting You

Try to avoid lashing back at the offending person. Use a descriptive “I” message to explain to the other person how you are feeling; for example, “I find it difficult to listen to you when you raise your voice at me,” or “I notice that is the fourth time you have interrupted me when I was trying to explain my point.” Keep in mind that the goal is not to increase the conflict. “You shouldn’t yell at me” or “You shouldn’t interrupt me” are examples of “you” statements. Such statements are evaluative and are likely to increase resentment and anger. Although we recommend that you manage your emotions during the heat of conflict, we’re not suggesting that you can’t express your feelings. In fact, one study found that team members who constructively express how they feel can enhance the decision-making process.69 Individuals who are aware of their own feelings and positively manage what one team of researchers called affective influence tend to develop better solutions and make better decisions.

8.6.3: Disclose Your Feelings

After describing the behavior that offends or irritates you, tell how you feel when the behavior occurs: “When I’m interrupted, I feel that my opinion isn’t valued,” or “I become increasingly frustrated when I try to contribute to our meeting but I don’t feel you are listening.” When disclosing your feelings, try to avoid such emotional overstatement as “I’ve never been so upset in all my life.” Such hyperboles raise the emotional stakes and can trigger a new volley of retorts.

Two researchers have found that simply prefacing a statement with the word “I,” as we suggested you do when using “I” language, may sometimes be too subtle to help defuse a conflict.70 You may need to add a longer justification when you provide negative emotional information to another group member. We call this using extended “I” language, which is a brief preface to a feedback statement. You might begin by saying something like “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way. I really do care about you and I need to share something with you,” or “I don’t think this is completely your fault. Yet I find myself becoming more frustrated when I hear that you’ve talked to others about me.” These extended comments may have a better chance of taking the sting out of a negative message than simply beginning a sentence with the word I instead of the word you. There are no magic words that will de-escalate conflict. Being sensitive and thoughtful about how others may respond to your messages can help you express your ideas in ways that are more likely to be heard rather than immediately rejected.
8.6.4: Return to the Issue of Contention

The only way to return to a collaborative style is to get back to the issue that is fueling the disagreement. Avoiding the issue will not resolve the issue.21 Sometimes one of those in conflict has a hidden agenda that makes it difficult to confront the key issues. A wise person once said, “Often what we fight about is not what we fight about.” Although an argument may seem on the surface to be about a substantive issue—such as which solution to adopt or whose research to use—the underlying issue may be about power and control. Only if the underlying issue is exposed and addressed will the conflict be managed.

These general suggestions provide basic principles for dealing with difficult group members, but you may need more specific strategies for managing such people. Table 8.1 offers several specific ways to deal with group members who perform such self-focused roles as dominator and blocker or who are irresponsible or unethically aggressive. Remember: No one can change the behavior of another person. But competent communicators have the knowledge, skill, and motivation to respond appropriately and effectively to others’ behavior, even when that behavior is difficult, self-serving, or unethical.

8.7: Groupthink: Conflict Avoidance

8.7a Define groupthink

8.7b Identify the symptoms of groupthink

Groupthink is the illusion of agreement—a type of thinking that occurs when a group strives to minimize conflict, maximize cohesiveness, and reach a consensus without critically testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas. Columnist William Safire notes that the term groupthink first appeared in a 1952 Fortune magazine article by William H. Whyte, Jr.23 When a group reaches decisions too quickly, it does not properly consider the implications of its decisions. Groupthink results in an ineffective consensus; too little conflict often lowers the quality of group decisions. When a group does not take time to examine the positive and negative consequences of alternative decisions, the quality of its decision is likely to suffer.24

Sociologist Irving Janis believes that many poor decisions and policies are the result of groupthink.25

Groupthink: Resultant Tragedies

Here are just a few well-known tragedies that, in hindsight, illustrate the corrosive power of groupthink to result in poor decision making even among experts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.1 How to Deal with Difficult Group Members</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>What the Group Member Does</strong></td>
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| Dominates: Tries to tell people what to do without seeking permission from the group; tells rather than asks; monopolizes the conversation | 1. Use gatekeeping skills to invite other group members to participate; explicitly state that you’d like to hear what others have to say.  
2. Channel the dominator’s energy by giving him or her a specific task to accomplish, such as recording the minutes of the meeting or periodically summarizing the group’s progress.  
3. In private, ask the dominating group member to be less domineering and to give others an opportunity to participate.  
4. The group or team may collectively decide to confront the domineering member; clearly describe the behavior that the group perceives as inappropriate. |
| Blocks Progress: Has a negative attitude. Is often stubborn and disagreeable without a clear reason. When the group is making progress, the blocker seems to keep the group from achieving its goal. | 1. Use humor to help defuse the tension that the blocker creates.  
2. Assign the blocker the role of devil’s advocate before the group makes a decision; giving the blocker permission to be negative at certain times can help the group avoid groupthink.  
3. Ask for specific evidence as to why the blocker does not support the group’s position.  
4. Calmly confront the blocker and explain how consistently being negative creates a negative group climate. |
| Is Irresponsible: Does not carry through with assignments; is often absent from or late to meetings | 1. Assign a mentor. Call the person or send an e-mail to remind him or her to attend the meeting. Ask for a progress report on the status of assigned work. Work one-on-one trying to help the irresponsible member see how his or her behavior hurts the group. Provide more structure.  
2. Clarify who will get the credit. To minimize social loafing, tell the offending member that when the final product is complete, the group will clearly indicate her or his lack of participation.  
3. Speak to the offending group member privately and convince him or her to pull his or her own weight. Explain how his or her irresponsibility is hurting other group members and the overall success of the group.  
4. If confronting the offending group member first privately and then collectively does not get results, ask for help from a supervisor or instructor. |
| Is Unethically Aggressive: Is verbally abusive toward other group members or purposefully disconfirms others. Tries to take credit for the work of others | 1. Become an advocate for other group members; support those who are attacked or singled out.  
2. Do not accept unethical behavior in silence. Immediately describe the offensive behavior to the aggressor, and indicate its negative effect on individuals or the entire group.  
3. Several group members may confront the offending group member collectively. The group as a whole should not tolerate mean-spirited actions toward others.  
4. Seek help from an instructor or supervisor or from someone in authority outside the group to stop the unethical, offending behavior. Sometimes a bully only responds to a person of greater power. |
September 11 are dramatic examples of how groupthink has contributed to faulty decision making. The groups and teams in which you participate are equally susceptible to this illusion of agreement.

Groups with highly esteemed leaders are most prone to groupthink. Because these leaders’ ideas are often viewed as sacrosanct, few members disagree with them. A group may also suffer from groupthink if its members consider themselves highly cohesive and take pride in getting along well with one another and providing support and encouragement for members’ ideas.

One research study found that groupthink is most likely to occur when (1) the group is apathetic about the task, (2) group members have low expectations about their ability to be successful, (3) there is at least one highly qualified, credible group member, (4) one group member is exceptionally persuasive, and (5) there is a norm that group members should conform rather than express negative opinions.80 Research further suggests that you are more likely to think groupthink is a problem in your group after your group has struggled and gotten off the track.81 Teams are better able to diagnose groupthink as the culprit in making groups wobble after the wobbling is over rather than during a group’s struggle. So it’s important that you recognize the symptoms of groupthink while your group is demonstrating those symptoms rather than after the damage has been done.

Although some small group communication scholars question the theoretical soundness of the theory of groupthink, it continues to serve as a useful and practical way of helping groups understand why they make poor decisions.82

8.7.1: Symptoms of Groupthink

Can you identify groupthink when it occurs in groups to which you belong? Here are some of the common symptoms of groupthink.83

CRITICAL THINKING IS NOT ENCOURAGED OR REWARDED If you are working in a group that considers disagreement or controversy counterproductive, chances are that groupthink is alive and well in that group. One advantage of working in groups is having an opportunity to evaluate ideas so that you can select the best possible solution. If group members seem proud that peace and harmony prevail at their meetings, they may suffer from groupthink.

MEMBERS BELIEVE THAT THEIR GROUP CAN DO NO WRONG During the 1972 presidential election, members of the committee to reelect President Nixon did not consider that they might fail to obtain information from Democratic headquarters. They thought their group was invulnerable. But the burglary of the Watergate office and the subsequent coverup ultimately led to the resignation of President Nixon. This sense of invulnerability is a classic symptom of groupthink. Another symptom is that members dismiss potential
threats to the group as minor problems. Although it is a good thing for groups to have high confidence in their abilities—they tend to set more challenging goals and keep moving forward even in the face of significant obstacles—it can have a negative effect if group members gloss over conflict, especially procedural conflict. Research has found that groups that think highly of their abilities tend to minimize about procedures. So if you are in a group that has a highly positive opinion of its abilities, make sure that the group actively addresses procedural differences. Groupthink is more likely to occur when the group thinks it has high power and is highly effective. In fact, there is evidence that groups that think it has low power actually do a better job of sorting through options and making decisions. If your group is consistently overconfident in dealing with problems that may interfere with its goals, it may suffer from groupthink.

**MEMBERS ARE TOO CONCERNED ABOUT JUSTIFYING THEIR ACTIONS**  Members of highly cohesive groups like to feel that they are acting in their group’s best interests. Therefore, groups that experience groupthink like to rationalize their positions on issues. A group susceptible to groupthink is too concerned about convincing itself that it has made proper decisions in the past and will make good decisions in the future.

**MEMBERS APPLY PRESSURE TO THOSE WHO DO NOT SUPPORT THE GROUP**  Have you ever voiced an opinion contrary to the majority opinion and quickly realized that other members were trying to pressure you into going along with the rest of the group? Groups prone to groupthink have a low tolerance for members who do not “go along.” They see controversy and conflict injected by a dissenting member as a threat to *esprit de corps*. Therefore, a person voicing an idea different from the group’s position is often punished.

Sometimes pressure is subtle, taking the form of frowns or grimaces. Group members may not socialize with the dissenting member, or they may not listen attentively to the dissident. Usually their first response is to try to convince this member to reconsider his or her position. But if the member still does not agree with the others, he or she may be expelled from the group. Of course, if a group member is just being stubborn, the others should try to reason with the dissenter. Do not, however, be too quick to label someone as a troublemaker simply because he or she has an opinion different from that of other group members.

**MORE SYMPTOMS OF GROUPTHINK**

**Members Often Believe That They Have Reached a True Consensus.** A significant problem in groups that suffer from groupthink is that members are not aware of the phenomenon. They think they have reached genuine consensus. For example, suppose you and your friends are trying to decide which movie to rent on Friday night. Someone suggests *The Hobbit*. Even though you’ve already seen the movie, you don’t want to be contentious, so you agree with the suggestion. Other group members also agree.

After your group has seen the movie, you overhear another one of your friends say, “I enjoyed the movie better when I saw it the first time.” After a quick poll of the group, you discover that most of your friends had already seen the movie! They agreed to see it only because they did not want to hurt anyone’s feelings. They thought everyone else was in agreement. Although the group appeared to reach consensus, only a few people actually agreed with the decision. Therefore, even if you think that the rest of the group agrees and that you are the only dissenter, your group could still be experiencing groupthink. Just because your group seems to have reached a consensus does not necessarily mean that all the members truly agree.

Members Are Too Concerned about Reinforcing the Leader’s Beliefs.  Leaders of small groups often emerge because they suggest some of the best ideas, motivate group members, or devote themselves to group goals more than others do. If group members place too much emphasis on the credibility or infallibility of their leader, groupthink may occur. Leaders who like to be surrounded by yes people (those who always agree with their ideas) lose the advantage of having their ideas tested. Most people do not like criticism and do not like to be told that their ideas are inept or inappropriate. Therefore, group leaders are understandably attracted to those who agree with them. Leaders sensitive to the problem of groupthink will solicit and tolerate all viewpoints because testing the quality of solutions requires different opinions.

One researcher has found empirical support for the symptoms of groupthink. Rebecca Cline found that groups exhibiting groupthink do express more agreement without clarification and also use simpler and fewer substantiated agreements than groups that avoid groupthink. She also found that groups that experience groupthink spend about 10 percent more of their discussion time making statements of agreement or disagreement than other groups. Groups that experience groupthink perpetuate the illusion of agreement by sprinkling in frequent comments such as “Yeah, I see what you’re saying,” “That’s right,” or “Sure.”
• Members apply pressure to those who do not support the group.
• Members often believe that they have reached a true consensus.
• Members are too concerned about reinforcing the leader’s beliefs.

8.7.2: Suggestions for Reducing Groupthink

How can you reduce the chances of groupthink’s occurring in your group? Consider the following specific suggestions, based on Janis’s initial observations as well as on the theories and the research of several small group communication researchers.

ENCOURAGE CRITICAL, INDEPENDENT THINKING
The leader should make clear that he or she does not want the group to reach agreement until each member has critically evaluated the issues. Most group leaders want to command the respect of their groups, but a leader’s insistence that the group always agree with him or her does not encourage respect; instead, it may demonstrate a fear of disagreement. Thus, if you find yourself a leader in a small group, you should encourage disagreement—not just for the sake of argument, but to eliminate groupthink. Even if you are not a leader, you can encourage a healthy discussion by voicing any objections you have to the ideas being discussed. Do not permit instant, uncritical agreement in your group.

BE SENSITIVE TO STATUS DIFFERENCES THAT MAY AFFECT DECISION MAKING Group members should not yield to status differences when evaluating ideas, issues, and solutions to problems. Instead, they should consider the merits of suggestions, weigh evidence, and make decisions about the validity of ideas without being too concerned about the status of those making suggestions. Of course, this is easier said than done.

Numerous studies suggest that a person with more status is going to be more persuasive. Cereal companies know this when they hire famous athletes to sell breakfast food. The implied message is “Don’t worry about the quality of the product. If this Olympic gold-medal winner eats this stuff, you’ll like it too.” The athlete’s fame and status do not necessarily make the cereal good; however, you still might buy the cereal, making a decision based on emotion rather than fact. Group members sometimes make decisions this way, too. Avoid agreeing with a decision just because of the status or credibility of the person making it. Evaluate the quality of the solution on its own merits.

INVITE SOMEONE FROM OUTSIDE THE GROUP TO EVALUATE THE GROUP’S DECISION-MAKING PROCESS Sometimes an objective point of view from outside the group can identify unproductive group norms more readily than group members can and thereby help prevent groupthink. Many large companies hire consultants to evaluate organizational decision making, but you do not have to be part of a multinational corporation to ask someone to analyze your group’s decision-making process. Ask someone from outside your group to sit in on one of your meetings. At the end of the meeting, ask the observer to summarize his or her observations and evaluations of the group. An outside observer may make some members uncomfortable, but if you explain why the visitor is there, the group will probably accept the visitor and eagerly await objective observations.

ASSIGN A GROUP MEMBER THE ROLE OF DEVIL’S ADVOCATE If no disagreement develops in a group, members may enjoy getting along and never realize that their group suffers from groupthink. If you find yourself in a group with no or minimal conflict, play devil’s advocate by trying to raise objections and potential problems. Assign someone to consider the negative aspects of a suggestion before it is implemented. It could save the group from groupthink and enhance the quality of the decision.

The space shuttle Challenger exploded shortly after liftoff on January 28, 1986, killing all seven crew members on board. The technical cause was O-ring failure. Some blame the disaster in part on groupthink at NASA.
Research by Ernest Borman suggests that some groups include a person who assumes the *central negative*. It’s called a central negative role because the person seems to be a central figure in routinely having negative things to say about the leader’s ideas or other group members’ suggestions. The central negative person may offer negative comments to challenge the leader’s power and position in the group. Although having someone play a strong central negative role in the group can be annoying, it can also be useful. Rather than routinely trying to shut down the central negative role person, acknowledge the value than can come from having someone periodically challenge the ideas and opinions of the leader, other members, or the entire group. It’s important, however, that the central negative person not make his or her critiques personal. If the criticism is focused on issues and not personalities, the central negative person can fulfill a useful purpose in helping the group avoid groupthink.

So don’t shy away from voicing your opinion if it deviates from the general consensus of the group. In fact, research has found that groups ultimately appreciate someone who thoughtfully and tactfully brings up alternative points of view. The key is to be respectful of others who may disagree with you.

**Virtual Groups**

Whether you’re interacting in person or using e-mail or other mediated messages, the same factors that contribute to conflict can arise. The limited amount of nonverbal cues in mediated settings appears to have an effect on how mediated teams manage conflict.

**Managing Conflict Online**

*More likely to avoid conflict*

One research group found that when groups negotiate differences in computer-mediated settings, as conflict escalates group members tend to decrease the intensity of forcefully insisting how the conflict should be resolved. In addition, the researchers found that as conflict increases, negotiators generally tend to avoid conflict rather than addressing it head-on. When communicating face to face during conflict, team members are more likely to try to control the behavior of others, and there is a more reciprocal, tit-for-tat escalation of conflict than in mediated settings.


*More challenging to address conflict*

Another study found that when attempting to brainstorm and generate ideas, members of computer-mediated groups experience more negative conflict-management behaviors than those in face-to-face groups; the computer-mediated groups are less effective in managing conflict. The results suggest that it may be more difficult to manage conflict in a productive way in computer-mediated groups than in face-to-face groups.


*More difficult to manage relational conflict*

Research has also found that if a group has relational conflict, especially if the conflict is intensely personal, it may be best to sort the conflict out in person rather than using e-mail or other mediated methods. If the issue is a difference of opinion about a technical issue, then e-mail can be a useful way of clarifying and sharing information. But if it’s a pesky relational conflict, it’s best to meet in person.


*Don’t avoid conflict*

Another research study explored the effects on conflict-management styles of participating in virtual teams—whether team members are avoidant, competitive, or collaborative. They found that it’s not a good idea to suppress ideas and suggestions that are in conflict with those of other virtual team members. Avoiding conflict had a negative effect on team performance. Confronting conflict directly typically resulted in a more positive team outcome. Researchers also found that without the accompanying nonverbal cues, team members’ attempts to negatively evaluate others had less of a sting.

CONSIDER USING TECHNOLOGY TO HELP YOUR GROUP GATHER AND EVALUATE IDEAS One study found that having group members share and test ideas and evidence through the use of a computerized group decision support system (GDSS) rather than always meeting face to face may facilitate more extensive testing of ideas and opinions.98 Some of the groups you participate in may not have access to such systems. Considerable research, however, suggests that the quality of group decisions can be enhanced if group members contribute ideas by using e-mail or other software programs to help gather and evaluate ideas.99 Research also suggests, though, that being separated from other group members geographically can increase the likelihood of conflict.100 One advantage to using GDSS methods in reducing groupthink is that ideas can be presented anonymously. Certain software programs let group members share ideas without revealing whether a member is the boss or the new intern. GDSS technology also helps separate the process of generating ideas from evaluating ideas.

Identifying and correcting groupthink should help improve the quality of your group’s decisions by capitalizing on opposing viewpoints. A textbook summary of suggestions for dealing with groupthink may lead you to think that this problem can be corrected easily. It cannot. Because many people think that conflict should be avoided, they need specific guidelines for identifying and avoiding groupthink. In essence, be critical of ideas, not people. Remember that some controversy is useful. A decision-making group uses conflict to seek the best decision everyone can agree on—it seeks consensus. The last section of this chapter discusses managing conflict in the search for consensus.

ASK GROUP MEMBERS TO SUBDIVIDE INTO SMALL GROUPS TO CONSIDER POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH THE SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS In large groups, not all members will be able to voice their objections and reservations. The U.S. Congress does most of its work in committees. Members of Congress realize that in order to hear and thoroughly evaluate bills and resolutions, small groups of representatives must work together in committees. If you are working in a group too large for everyone to discuss the issues, suggest breaking into groups of two or three, with each group composing a list of objections to the proposals. The lists could be forwarded to the group secretary, who then could weed out duplicate objections and identify common points of contention. Even in a group of seven or eight, two subcommittees could evaluate the recommendations of the group. Group members should be able to participate frequently and evaluate the issues carefully. Individuals could also write down their objections to the proposed recommendations and then present them to the group.

One technique that may reduce groupthink is to have groups divide into two teams to debate an issue. The principle is simple: Develop a group structure that encourages critical thinking. Vigilant thinking fosters quality decisions.

PUTTING RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE

What are the best ways to manage conflict when it occurs in mediated or online groups?

- Select the most appropriate conflict-management style. Cooperation and collaboration appears to be the best first approach to use when conflict occurs in mediated settings.
- Don’t sweep disagreements under the rug. Address differences of opinion, but do so thoughtfully and politely. Without contemptuous nonverbal cues, you may be able to express your differences of opinion with less of a bite because the receivers won’t also hear your sarcastic nonverbal tone.
- When relational conflict erupts online, it may be time to meet face to face rather than try to manage the conflict online.

REVIEW

Suggestions for Reducing Groupthink

- Encourage critical, independent thinking.
- Be sensitive to status differences that may affect decision making.
- Invite someone from outside the group to evaluate the group’s decision-making process.
- Assign a group member the role of devil’s advocate.
- Ask group members to subdivide into small groups (or to work individually) to consider potential problems with suggested solutions.
- Use e-mail and other electronic technology to permit people to make anonymous contributions; this will reduce the effects of group member status differences.
8.8: Consensus: Reaching Agreement Through Communication

8.8  Describe the nature of consensus and apply strategies for reaching consensus

Some conflict is inevitable in groups, but this does not mean that all group discussions are doomed to end in disagreement. Conflict can be managed. Consensus occurs when all group members support and are committed to a decision. The tendency to seek agreement and work together for a collaborative goal is not unique to humans. Research has found that ants, honeybees, and other species strive to achieve a common goal.101 Even if a group does not reach consensus on key issues, it is not necessarily a failure. Good decisions can certainly emerge from groups whose members do not all completely agree on decisions. The U.S. Congress, for example, rarely achieves consensus; that does not mean, however, that its legislative process is ineffective.

Although conflict and controversy can improve the quality of group decision making, it is worthwhile to aim for consensus.102 The following sections suggest some specific ways to help your group reach agreement.

8.8.1: The Nature of Consensus

Consensus should not come too quickly. If it does, your group is probably a victim of groupthink. Nor does consensus usually come easily. Sometimes group agreement is built on agreements on minor points raised during the discussion. Quick consensus is also a sign that the group may not be carefully considering all of the information it has.103 To achieve consensus, group members should try to emphasize these areas of agreement. This can be a time-consuming process, and some members may lose patience before they reach agreement. Regardless of how long a group takes to reach consensus, consensus generally results from careful and thoughtful communication between members of the group.

To achieve consensus, some personal preferences must be surrendered for the overall well-being of the group. Group members must decide, both individually and collectively, whether they can achieve consensus. If two or three members refuse to change their minds on their positions, the rest of the group may decide that reaching consensus is not worth the extra time. Some group communication theorists suggest that groups might do better to postpone a decision if consensus cannot be reached, particularly if the group making the decision will also implement it. If several group members oppose the solution, they will be less eager to put it into practice. Ultimately, if consensus cannot be reached, a group should generally abide by the decision of the majority.

8.8.2: Suggestions for Reaching Consensus

Communication researchers agree that group members usually go through considerable effort before reaching consensus. Using specific communication strategies may help members more readily foster consensus in group and team meetings.106 We suggest you keep three key pieces of advice in mind when striving for group consensus.

1. Because groups have a tendency to get off track, help keep the group oriented toward its goal. Groups and teams often fail to reach agreement because they engage in discussion that is not relevant to the issue at hand—groups digress.

2. Be other-oriented and sensitive to the ideas and feelings of others. Listen without interrupting. Make an honest effort to set aside your own ideas and seek to understand the ideas of others.

3. Promote honest interaction and dialogue. Genuine consensus is more likely to occur if group and team members honestly express their thoughts and feelings; withholding ideas and suggestions may lead to groupthink.

HOW TO ORIENT THE GROUP TOWARD ITS GOAL

The following strategies can help your group reach consensus by staying focused and on task.

- Use metadiscussional phrases: Metadiscussion is discussion about discussion. In other words, a metadiscussional statement focuses on the discussion process rather than on the topic under consideration.107 Metadiscussional statements include “Aren’t we getting a little off the subject?” or “John, we haven’t heard from you yet. What do you think?” or “Let’s summarize our areas of agreement.” These statements contain information and advice about the problem-solving process rather than about the issue at hand. Several studies show that groups whose members help orient the group toward its goal by (1) relying on facts rather
than opinions, (2) making useful, constructive suggestions, and (3) trying to resolve conflict are more likely to reach agreement than groups whose members do not try to keep the group focused on its goal.108

One of the essential task competencies is to maintain a focus on the group’s task. Metadiscussional phrases help to keep the group or team focused on the task or meeting agenda. This is an exceptionally powerful and useful skill to learn because you can offer metadiscussional statements, even if you are not the designated leader of the group. Research clearly supports the importance of metadiscussion; simply having someone periodically reflect on where the group is on the agenda and review what has been accomplished can pay big dividends in helping the group stay on track and reach consensus.109

- **Keep the focus on the group’s goal rather than on specific strategies to achieve the goal:** Focusing on shared interests and reminding the group what the goals are can help the group move on from debating only one or two strategies to achieving the goal. Group members sometimes fall in love with an idea or strategy and won’t let go of it. In order to move forward, explicitly and frequently remind the group of the overarching goal you are trying to achieve.

- **Display known facts for all group members to see:** Consider using a chalkboard, PowerPoint, or flipchart to display what is really known about the issues confronting the group. When group members cannot agree, they often retreat to restating opinions rather than advocating an idea based on hard evidence.110 If all group members can be reminded of what is known, consensus may be more easily obtained.

   One way to display facts is to use the is/is not technique. Draw a line down the middle of the chalkboard or flip chart. On one side of the line, note what is known about the present issue. On the other side, identify what is unknown or is mere speculation. Separating facts from speculation can help group members focus on data rather than on unproven inferences.111

- **Do not wait until the very end of the deliberations to suggest solutions:** Research suggests that groups that delay identifying specific solutions until the very end of the discussion are less likely to reach consensus than those groups that think about solutions earlier in the deliberations.112 Of course, before jumping to solutions, groups need to analyze and assess the present situation.

### HOW TO BE OTHER-ORIENTED: LISTEN TO THE IDEAS OF OTHERS

What follows are tips and suggestions to help manage the relational tension that usually occurs when groups can’t reach consensus.

- **Give your idea to the group:** People often defend a solution or suggestion just because it is theirs. Here is a suggestion that may help you develop a more objective point of view: If you find yourself becoming defensive over an idea you suggest, assume that your idea has become the property of the group; it no longer belongs to you.113 Present your position as clearly as possible, then listen to other members’ reactions and consider them carefully before you push for your point. Just because people disagree with your idea does not necessarily mean they respect you less.

- **Do not assume that someone must win and someone must lose:** When discussion becomes deadlocked, try not to view the discussion in terms of “us” versus “them” or “me” versus “the group.” Try not to view communication as a game that someone wins and others lose. Be willing to compromise and modify your original position. Of course, if compromising means finding a solution that is marginally acceptable to everyone but does not really solve a problem, then seek a better solution.

- **Use group-oriented rather than self-oriented pronouns:** Harry likes to talk about the problem as **he** sees it. He often begins sentences with phrases such as “I think this is a good idea” or “My suggestion is to . . . .” Studies suggest that groups that reach consensus generally use more pronouns like **we, us,** and **our,** while groups that do not reach consensus use more pronouns like **I, me, my,** and **mine.**114 Using group-oriented words can foster cohesiveness.

- **Avoid opinionated statements that indicate a closed mind:** Communication scholars consistently find that opinionated statements and low tolerance for dissenting points of view inhibit agreement. This is especially apparent when the opinionated person is the discussion leader. A group with a less opinionated leader is more likely to reach agreement. Remember that using facts and relying on information obtained by direct observation are probably the best ways to avoid making opinionated statements.

- **Clarify misunderstandings:** Although not all disagreements arise because conflicting parties fail to understand one another, misunderstanding another’s meaning sometimes creates conflict and adversely affects group consensus. Dealing with misunderstanding is simple. Ask a group member to explain a particular word or statement that you do not understand. Constantly solicit feedback from your listeners. During periods of disagreement, consider repeating the previous speaker’s point and ask if you’ve got it right before you state your position on an issue. This procedure can become time-consuming and stilted if overused, but it can help when misunderstandings about meanings arise. It may also be helpful for you to remember that meanings are conveyed through people, not words. Stated another way, the meaning of a word comes from a person’s unique perspective, perception, and experience.
• **Emphasize areas of agreement:** When the group gets bogged down in conflict and disagreement, it may prove useful to stop and identify the issues and information on which group members do agree. One study found that groups whose members were able to keep refocusing the group on areas of agreement, particularly following episodes of disagreement, were more likely to reach consensus than groups that continued to accentuate the negative.115 Another study found that one of the most important ways of helping a group reach consensus is to be genuinely supportive of others.116

**HOW TO PROMOTE HONEST INTERACTION AND DIALOGUE** To help groups and teams avoid a false consensus (groupthink) and to share ideas in a climate of openness and honesty, consider these suggestions.

• **Do not change your mind too quickly just to avoid conflict:** Although you may have to compromise to reach agreement, beware of changing your mind too quickly just to reach consensus. Groupthink occurs when group members do not test and challenge the ideas of others. When agreement seems to come too fast and too easily, be suspicious. Make certain that you have explored other alternatives and that everyone accepts the solution for basically the same reasons. Of course, you should not create conflict just for the sake of conflict, but do not be upset if disagreements arise. Reaching consensus takes time and often requires compromise. Be patient.

• **Avoid easy techniques that reduce conflict:** You may be tempted to flip a coin or to take a simple majority vote when you cannot resolve a disagreement. Resist that temptation, especially early in your deliberation. If possible, avoid making a decision until the entire group can agree. Of course, at times, a majority vote is the only way to resolve a conflict. Just be certain that the group explores other alternatives before it makes a hasty decision to avoid conflict. When time permits, gaining consensus through communication is best.

• **Seek out differences of opinion:** Remember that disagreements may improve the quality of a group’s decision. With a variety of opinions and information, a group has a better chance of finding a good solution. Also remember that complex problems seldom have just one solution. Perhaps more than one of the suggestions offered will work. Actively recruit opposing viewpoints if everyone seems to be agreeing without much discussion.117 Or, appoint someone to play the role of devil’s advocate. Of course, do not belabor the point if you think that group members genuinely agree after considerable discussion.

• **Involve everyone in the discussion:** Again, the more varied the suggestions, solutions, and information, the greater the chance that a group will reach quality solutions and achieve consensus. Encourage less-talkative members to contribute to the group. Several studies suggest that members will be more satisfied with a solution if they have had an opportunity to express their opinions and to offer suggestions.115 Remember not to dominate the discussion. Good listening is important, too, and you may need to encourage others to speak out and assert themselves.

• **Use a variety of methods to reach agreement:** One researcher has found that groups are more likely to reach agreement if members try several approaches to resolve a deadlocked situation rather than using just one method of achieving consensus.119 Consider (1) combining two or more ideas into one solution; (2) building, changing, or extending existing ideas; (3) using effective persuasion skills to convince others to agree; and (4) developing new ideas to move the discussion forward rather than just rehashing old ideas.

Are there differences between the ways face-to-face groups reach consensus and the ways virtual groups that interact online do? As we noted earlier in the chapter, one research study found that virtual groups use more negative conflict management behaviors.121 Negative behaviors include taking a quick vote rather than discussing issues, suppressing differences of opinions, and assuming an “I-must-win-you-must-lose” approach to managing differences. Both online and in person, it’s best to encourage honest conversation and dialogue and avoid squelching opposing viewpoints.

In summary, research suggests that groups that search for areas of agreement while critically testing ideas and reducing ambiguity are more likely to reach consensus than groups that don’t do these things. Also, one research team found that groups that strive for unanimous agreement ultimately are more likely to at least reach consensus than groups that are seeking only minimal consensus.122 As you strive for consensus, rather than just saying, “No, you’re wrong,” identify specific issues that need to be clarified. Groups that focus on disagreement about procedures rather than on substantive issues are less likely to reach consensus. Building consensus takes time and skill and is not necessarily the goal of the group, but if it can be achieved, consensus may result in a better quality decision.
Chapter 8

Review

Suggestions for Reaching Consensus

Orient the Group Toward Its Goal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Group Members</th>
<th>Ineffective Group Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Talk about the discussion process using metadiscussional phrases.</td>
<td>Do little to help clarify group discussion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help keep the group focused on the goal.</td>
<td>Go off on tangents and do not stay focused on the agenda.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Display known facts for all members in the group to see.</td>
<td>Fail to provide summaries of issues or facts about which members agree or rely only on oral summaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggest possible solutions throughout the group’s deliberation.</td>
<td>Wait until time is about to run out before suggesting solutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Promote Honest Interaction and Dialogue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Group Members</th>
<th>Ineffective Group Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Avoid opinionated statements that are not based on facts or evidence.</td>
<td>Are closed-minded and inflexible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clarify misunderstandings.</td>
<td>Do not clarify misunderstandings or check to see whether their message is understood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasize areas of agreement.</td>
<td>Ignore areas of agreement.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Be Other-Oriented: Listen to the Ideas of Others

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Group Members</th>
<th>Ineffective Group Members</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Give their ideas to the group.</td>
<td>Argue for an idea because it is their own.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approach conflict as a problem to be solved rather than a win/lose situation.</td>
<td>Assume that someone will win and someone will lose an argument.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use group-oriented pronouns to talk about the group.</td>
<td>Talk about individual accomplishments rather than group accomplishments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use a variety of methods to reach agreement.</td>
<td>Use only one or two approaches to reach agreement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expand the number of ideas and alternatives using various techniques.</td>
<td>Seek a limited number of options or solutions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SHAREDD WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Imagine that you are a member of your community’s Planning and Zoning Board. A new apartment complex has been proposed to be built on land near the beautiful and pristine San Stephen River that runs through your city. The investors who want to build the new apartment complex have agreed to donate several acres of river-front property to the city if their zoning request to build the apartment is approved. Most of the members of the Planning and Zoning Board think it is a good proposal; no one on the Board has raised any objections. You also think the proposal has merit. But to ensure that the Board avoids groupthink, you wonder if you should raise several possible concerns or objections that other community members may have.

Even if you approve of what a group or committee is doing, is it ethical to raise concerns and objections that you don’t really believe might slow the group down just to avoid groupthink? Is it ethical to play the “devil’s advocate” role, which could stir up conflict and disagreement when the group seems to be reaching a quick consensus?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

Chapter Quiz: Managing Conflict
Chapter 9
Leading Groups

Learning Objectives

9.1 Define leadership
9.2 Discuss the trait perspective on leadership
9.3 Describe the functional perspective and its advantages over the trait perspective

“The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality. The last is to say thank you. In between, the leader is a servant.”
—Max De Pree

Before beginning this chapter, consider the following statements about leadership:

Leaders are born, not made.
An effective leader is always in control of the group process.

9.4 Explain the relationship between situational variables and the effectiveness of different leadership styles
9.5 Discuss transformational leadership
9.6 Explain how leaders are most likely to emerge in a leaderless group

A leader is a person who gets others to do the work.
Leadership is a set of functions distributed throughout the group.
The leader should know more than other group members about the topic of discussion.
An authoritarian leader is better than one who allows the group to function without control.
It is best for a group to have only one leader.
A person who has been appointed leader is the leader. Leaders are servants.

What do you think about these statements? Which ones do you agree with? Disagree with? If it has not happened already, be assured that one day you will find yourself in a leadership position—on a committee, in an organization, or perhaps in the military. In fact, whenever you participate in a decision-making group, your attitudes about leadership will affect your behavior, the behavior of others, and the effectiveness of the group.

This chapter provides information about the nature of leadership in groups, which should help you become a more effective group participant, and offers some specific suggestions to help you become an effective leader.

9.1: What Is Leadership?

9.1 Define leadership

When you think about “leadership,” what comes to mind? A fearless commanding officer leading troops into battle? The president of the United States addressing the country on national television? Perhaps you think of the chairperson of a committee you are on. For our purposes, we define leadership as behavior or communication that influences, guides, directs, or controls a group. Communication scholar Dennis Gouran argues that leadership can be seen as a counteractive influence when groups get off-track. He says leadership constitutes the behavior required when groups experience difficulty establishing the conditions necessary for making the best possible choices.¹

Traditionally, the study of leadership has centered on people who are successful in leadership positions. Researchers argued that by looking at successful leaders, they could identify attributes or individual traits that best predict good leadership ability. Identifying such traits would be tremendously valuable to those in business, government, or the military who are responsible for promoting others to positions of leadership.

9.2: Trait Perspective: Characteristics of Effective Leaders

9.2 Discuss the trait perspective on leadership

Over the past several decades, researchers have conducted scores of trait studies indicating that leaders often have attributes such as intelligence, enthusiasm, dominance, self-confidence, social participation, and egalitarianism.² More recent studies have found leading change to be related to creativity and social-emotional competency in leaders.³ Other researchers found physical traits to be related to leadership ability. Leaders seemed to be larger, more active and energetic, and better looking than other group members.⁴ Still other researchers found that leaders possess tact, cheerfulness, a sense of justice, discipline, versatility, and self-control.

The trait perspective—a view of leadership as the personal attributes or qualities that leaders possess—seemed like a reasonable one when it was first proposed, but it actually yielded very little useful information. Traits useful in one situation, such as leading troops into battle, are not necessarily the traits required for other leadership positions, such as conducting a business meeting. For example, the trait of high dominance often found in leaders can actually be counterproductive in certain contexts. When there is instability in an organization’s leadership hierarchy, such leaders may use their power to advance their self-interest rather than the group’s goals.⁵

A further problem with the trait approach is that it does not identify which traits are important to becoming a leader and which are important to maintaining the position. These studies also fail to distinguish adequately between leaders and followers who possess the same traits, and they are not useful to group participants wishing to improve their leadership skills. Therefore, although the trait approach is of interest from a historical perspective, we will move on to consider other, more useful, approaches.

9.3: Functional Perspective: Group Needs and Roles

9.3 Describe the functional perspective and its advantages over the trait perspective

Rather than focusing on the characteristics of individual leaders, the functional perspective examines leadership as behaviors that may be performed by any group member to maximize group effectiveness. Dean Barnlund and Franklyn Haiman identify leadership behaviors as those that guide, influence, direct, or control others in a group.⁶ Identifying such behaviors is a fruitful approach for those interested in improving their leadership abilities. Although the trait approach might help identify the sort of person who should be appointed to a leadership position, the functional approach describes the specific communicative behaviors that help a group function more effectively. By understanding these behaviors, people can participate more productively in group discussions.

According to advocates of the functional approach, the major leadership behaviors fall into two categories: (1) task leadership and (2) process leadership (also called group building or maintenance). Task-oriented behaviors aim...
specifically at accomplishing a group goal. Process-oriented behaviors help maintain a satisfactory interpersonal climate within a group. Both types of leadership are essential.

9.3.1: Task Leadership

When groups convene to solve problems, make decisions, plan activities, or determine policy, they are frequently hampered by group members’ tendency to get off-track. Even when they get down to business, group process may stray. Sometimes one person monopolizes the conversation while others remain silent. Sometimes groups just cannot seem to get started.

The following list summarizes a few task-leadership behaviors and the ways in which they help a group move toward its goal:

- **Initiating**
  Task-oriented group discussions need to generate ideas. Sometimes ideas are related to procedural matters; at other times a group needs to generate ideas to solve problems. If, for example, you can see that your group has not adequately defined its problem before suggesting solutions, you might say, “Listen. I think we’re all proposing solutions before we’ve really agreed on the nature of the problem. Let’s take a few minutes and talk some more about the problem so that we know we’re all discussing the same thing.”

- **By proposing a change**
  In the group’s deliberations, you initiate a procedural change—in this case, one that will probably benefit the group. To “initiate” means to “begin.” If you say, “Let’s get this meeting under way,” you have begun a change (assuming the group follows your suggestion). If, later in the meeting, you say, “Let’s consider an alternative plan” or “Let’s generate some more ideas before evaluating what we have here,” you will again probably alter the course of the group’s action. Without someone who initiates discussion, a group has no direction. The ability to initiate is an important group behavior, one that anyone can contribute.

- **Coordinating**
  Different people bring different expectations, beliefs, attitudes, values, and experiences to a group. The contributions of each member are unique, yet all should be directed toward a common group goal. Given the diversity in small groups, coordinating is often an important leadership function. Communicative behavior that helps a group explore the contributions of all members is valuable. If, for example, you see a connection between the ideas that two members bring to the group, you should point it out to help focus the group. Coordinating members’ efforts can help them see the “groupness” of their activities and reduce their uncertainty about the group, its problem, and its solutions.

- **Summarizing**
  Groups can become long-winded. Often, people who are in the middle of a discussion cannot tell just where the discussion began and where it is going. It does not take many tangential remarks to get the group off-track. Even when the group is on track, it is sometimes useful to stop and assess its progress. Summarizing reduces group uncertainty by showing how far the discussion has progressed and what it still needs to accomplish. By understanding when a group needs a summary—and then providing it—you can help move the group toward
Leading Groups

Leadership research consistently indicates that groups have both task and process needs. The process dimension is often called “group building and maintenance.” Process leadership behaviors maintain interpersonal relations in a group and facilitate a climate satisfying to members and conducive to accomplishing the group’s task. Group process leaders are really communication facilitators.

ENHANCING CLIMATE The following list presents some specific process-leadership behaviors that enhance climate:

- **Releasing tension:** Think of times you have studied for exams. You cram more and more information into your head until you reach a point where it all seems futile. Everything runs together; ideas blur. You know it’s time for a break. After a cup of coffee or an energy drink and some relaxing conversation, you return to your books with renewed energy.

- **Gatekeeping:** An advantage of working in small groups is that several heads are better than one. The very diversity that makes group communication so complex also gives it strength. A group possesses more experience and intelligence than does any individual, but experience and individual insight are useful to a group only if they are shared.

9.3.2: Process Leadership

For a group to function effectively, it needs to concern itself with itself. Groups are composed of people, and people have needs. (In fact, the family is a small group specifically adapted to meeting individual needs.) People do not leave their needs at home when they come to a meeting; they bring them along. Effective group communication must be addressed to both the external task of the group and the needs of its members. Failing to maintain a satisfying group climate can lead to a breakdown in a group’s performance. In this respect, small groups resemble automobiles. Cars are great for getting you where you want to go, but they require regular tuning and maintenance in order to run reliably and efficiently. In fact, if an owner does not maintain a car, eventually it will break down. So it is with groups: They, too, need tuning and maintenance.
or even of limiting the contributions of more verbal group members (“Can we perhaps limit our comments to two or three minutes so that we can get everyone’s ideas before we have to adjourn?”). Gatekeeping is an important leadership function because it ensures more input along the task dimension and higher member satisfaction along the process dimension.

- **Encouraging:** People like praise. They feel good when someone recognizes them for their contributions. Offering encouragement is a leadership behavior aimed at increasing the self-esteem of group members and raising their hopes, confidence, and aspirations. Improving the morale of a group can increase cohesiveness, member satisfaction, and productivity.

- **Mediating:** Conflict is a normal, healthy part of group interaction. However, mismanaged conflict can lead to hurt feelings, physical or mental withdrawal from a group, reduced cohesiveness, and general disruption. Mediating is aimed at resolving conflict between group members and releasing any tension associated with the conflict. Whenever conflict becomes person-oriented rather than issue-oriented, it is a particularly appropriate time for mediation.

  **Wanda:** I think that the plan I’m proposing has considerable merit and meets our needs.

  **Harold:** That’s ridiculous. It’ll never work.

  **Wanda:** Get off my case! I don’t see you proposing any better solutions.

This potentially volatile situation could easily disrupt the group. You often have to work in groups with people you do not especially like. Obviously, Harold and Wanda do not get along well, but groups can function effectively in spite of personality clashes. They need to focus discussion on issues rather than on personalities. At times, interpersonal difficulties become so severe that they cannot be resolved by simply focusing on a group’s task. Such difficulties can be a serious encumbrance to a group and need to be dealt with either within or outside the group; ignoring problems will not make them go away.

The preceding list of behaviors that contribute to a group’s process or maintenance needs is not complete. The behaviors just described are some of those that are more essential to task and process leadership. They are included here to emphasize their importance and to help you identify your own leadership behavior in groups.

Both task and process leadership are essential to the success of a small group. If a group does not make progress on its task, members will probably feel frustrated and unsatisfied. In addition, if a group does not maintain a comfortable environment, members will tend to focus their attention and energy on their own dissatisfaction with the group rather than on their assigned task.

9.4: Situational Perspective: Adapting Style to Context

9.4 Explain the relationship between situational variables and the effectiveness of different leadership styles

Thus far we have discussed the trait and functional approaches to leadership study and explored some task and process leadership roles. The situational perspective to group leadership accommodates all these factors—leadership behaviors, task needs, and process needs—but also takes into account leadership style and situation.

9.4.1: Leadership Style

Your beliefs and attitudes about leadership will affect your behavior in small groups. **Leadership style** is a relatively consistent pattern of behavior reflecting a leader’s beliefs and attitudes. Although no two people act as leaders in precisely the same way, people do lead with three basic styles: (1) authoritarian (or autocratic), (2) democratic, and (3) laissez-faire.

  Authoritarian leaders assume positions of intellectual and behavioral superiority in groups. They make the decisions, give the orders, and generally control all activities. Democratic leaders have more faith in the group than authoritarian leaders do and consequently try to involve members in making decisions. Laissez-faire leaders see themselves as no better or no worse than other group members. They assume the group will direct itself. Laissez-faire leaders avoid dominating groups. In one of the earliest studies of the effects of leadership style, researchers compared groups of school children led by graduate students who had been specifically trained in one of the three leadership styles. The researchers defined the styles...
The situational approach views leadership as an interaction between style and various situational factors. David Korten proposes that under certain conditions groups are pressured to have centralized, authoritarian leadership but that as these conditions change, groups often develop a more democratic, participative form of leadership.

Korten says that groups with highly structured goals and high stress move toward authoritarian leadership. Think of times when you were in a group with clear goals but with members uncertain of how to achieve them. Remember when a group felt stress because of an impending deadline or a group grade. At such times, group members will gladly follow any leader who can give direction and show them the means to their goal. When the situation changes—that is, when the group feels less uncertain, has less stress, and has less structured goals—it has less of a need for authoritarian leadership and instead needs more participative, democratic leadership. Contemporary studies continue to support this relationship: under conditions of relative certainty, groups show a pro-democratic attitude. As stress and goal structure increase, the tendency of a group to accept authoritarian leadership increases. As stress and goal structure decrease, groups need more democratic— or even laissez-faire—leadership. When the room is on fire, we want someone who will take charge and lead us to safety. But when the task is to discuss the book of the month, such take-charge leadership seems inappropriate.

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Korten’s model is applicable even on an international scale. Consider the differences between leadership and goal structure in the developing world and in the United States. Citizens of developing countries seek new ways of life that they as yet have not attained; their goals are structured, concrete, and operational. By contrast, Americans focus more on maintaining processes than on changing them. The relationship of these goals to leadership styles in the two regions is obvious.

As shown in Table 9.1, groups with democratic leaders generally were better satisfied and functioned in a more orderly and positive way. Groups with authoritarian leaders were more aggressive or more apathetic (depending on the group). Members of democratic groups were better satisfied than members of laissez-faire groups; a majority of group members preferred democratic to authoritarian leadership, although some members were better satisfied in authoritarian groups. Authoritarian groups spent more time engaged in productive work, but only when the leader was present.

It is tempting to conclude that humanistic, participatory, democratic leadership will invariably lead to greater satisfaction and higher productivity. Unfortunately, the evidence does not warrant such a generalization. Several studies have shown that no single leadership style is effective in all situations. What works at General Motors may not work in a family business. An effective student body president may be a poor camp counselor. The expectations of one group differ from those of other groups.

Recent research on the effectiveness of different leadership styles has suggested that effective leadership is contingent on a variety of interrelated factors such as culture, time constraints, group compatibility, and the nature of a group’s task. Although the functional approach reveals the importance of fulfilling various leadership roles in a group, it does not explain which roles are most appropriate in which situation. It is clear that you need to consider the setting in which leadership behavior occurs.

Table 9.1 Leader Behavior in Three “Social Climates”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Democratic</th>
<th>Laissez-Faire</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Leader makes all determination of policy.</td>
<td>Leader encourages and directs, but all policies are a matter of group discussion and decision.</td>
<td>Leader participates at a minimum level; complete freedom for group or individual decisions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leader dictates techniques and activity steps one at a time, so group members are always largely uncertain of future steps.</td>
<td>Leader discusses activity steps with group before group begins work; general steps to group goal are sketched, and when technical advice is needed, leader suggests alternative procedures.</td>
<td>Leader supplies various materials, making it clear he or she will supply information when asked, but taking no other part in discussion.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| AUTHORITARIAN LEADERSHIP | The situational approach views leadership as an interaction between style and various situational factors. David Korten proposes that under certain conditions groups are pressured to have centralized, authoritarian leadership but that as these conditions change, groups often develop a more democratic, participative form of leadership. Korten says that groups with highly structured goals and high stress move toward authoritarian leadership. Think of times when you were in a group with clear goals but with members uncertain of how to achieve them. Remember when a group felt stress because of an impending deadline or a group grade. At such times, group members will gladly follow any leader who can give direction and show them the means to their goal. When the situation changes—that is, when the group feels less uncertain, has less stress, and has less structured goals—it has less of a need for authoritarian leadership and instead needs more participative, democratic leadership. Contemporary studies continue to support this relationship: under conditions of relative certainty, groups show a pro-democratic attitude. As stress and goal structure increase, the tendency of a group to accept authoritarian leadership increases. As stress and goal structure decrease, groups need more democratic—or even laissez-faire—leadership. When the room is on fire, we want someone who will take charge and lead us to safety. But when the task is to discuss the book of the month, such take-charge leadership seems inappropriate. Korten’s model is applicable even on an international scale. Consider the differences between leadership and goal structure in the developing world and in the United States. Citizens of developing countries seek new ways of life that they as yet have not attained; their goals are structured, concrete, and operational. By contrast, Americans focus more on maintaining processes than on changing them. The relationship of these goals to leadership styles in the two regions is obvious. |
9.4.2: Hersey’s Situational Leadership Model

Like other situational leadership theories, Paul Hersey’s model uses various combinations of task- and relationship-oriented leadership behavior to describe leadership style as it relates to different situations. In this case, the readiness of the group is the situational variable.

The two axes of Hersey’s model represent the now-familiar task and relationship (process) dimensions of leadership behavior. Leaders who strongly emphasize performance of the group task and pay little attention to relationship issues—that is, his or her orientation is high task and low relationship—are described as having a telling style. Those whose style reflects a high task and high relationship approach are identified as having a selling leadership style. Thus, while both telling and selling styles are directive, leaders following a selling style are concerned that the group accept and internalize the orders given. Leaders who focus less on task performance, meanwhile, may be divided into those who follow a participating style (low task performance emphasis; high relationship emphasis) and a delegating style (low task performance emphasis; low relationship emphasis). In other words, leaders with a participating style are driven primarily by concern for relationships and a need for all group members to share in decision making. A leader with a delegating style takes a hands-off attitude and allows the group to direct itself.

According to Hersey, these four leadership styles are more or less appropriate depending on a group’s readiness: the amount of willingness and ability the follower or group demonstrates while performing a specific task. When you view readiness in combination with the four leadership styles identified by the model, it becomes clear that a “telling” style is most appropriate with groups that are just starting out, perhaps in their orientation stage of development. As groups mature, effective leadership allows for more autonomy and participating and delegating styles are more effective. “Just as parents should relinquish control as a function of the increasing maturity of their children, so too should leaders share more decision-making power as their subordinates acquire greater experience with and commitment to their tasks.”

Communication scholar Sarah Trenholm offers the following example of how Hersey’s model might apply to a classroom:

Consider teaching style as a form of leadership. Hersey would suggest that at the beginning of a course of study, with inexperienced students, a highly directive telling style is best. The teacher who tells a freshman class, “You decide what and how you want to learn. It’s entirely up to you,” is using a delegating style, which will fail because at this point students are not yet ready to take full responsibility for their own learning. As the course progresses, however, and as the students feel more comfortable with the course and each other, the teacher might use selling and participating styles and perhaps end up with a delegating approach. More mature students may be ready for autonomy and may even resent being told what to do.

Hersey’s model is widely used in training managers and executives, probably because it shows how managers can change styles according to their subordinates’ readiness level. A delegating style can be used with one employee or group, and a telling style with another.

9.4.3: Some Observations on the Situational Approach to Leadership

At first glance, the situational approach seems to cover all bases. It looks at the style of leadership, the group’s task needs and process needs, and situational variables that influence groups. Unfortunately, most research using this approach has focused on the behavior of leaders rather than on leadership as a process of realizing group goals. Thus, while the situational approach is useful, it is, perhaps, not as helpful to the student of small-group communication as is the functional approach. Achieving a group goal involves everyone in the group, not just the leader.

9.4.4: Shared Leadership in Teams

A relatively new area of study is shared leadership. Research has shown that when group or team members share leadership, their groups experience less conflict, greater consensus, and higher trust and cohesion than in groups without shared leadership. Leadership in teams can be focused or distributed. Focused leadership resides in a single individual, identified as the leader. Distributed leadership occurs when two or more individuals within a team share leadership responsibilities. Focused and distributed leadership can be considered endpoints on a continuum.

Researchers Jay Carson, Paul Tesluk, and Jennifer Marrone define shared leadership as “an emergent team property that results from the distribution of leadership influence across multiple team members.” They note that shared leadership originates when multiple group members exert influence over the team and other group members, resulting in a leadership network that shapes team and individual activities and outcomes. Their research supports the hypothesis that the degree of shared leadership in a team is positively related to team performance. Other research has identified traits of leaders and team members as situational variables to take into account. The charisma of a leader and the self-efficacy (degree to which it can function on its own) are related to leadership style. A coaching (democratic) style of leadership was more effective than the directive (autocratic)
approach when the team leader was highly charismatic. The directive approach was more effective when team members lacked self-efficacy.17

**Review**

**Perspectives on Leadership**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Trait approach:</td>
<td>Attempts to identify characteristics common to successful leaders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functional approach:</td>
<td>Views leadership as a set of behaviors that may be enacted by any group member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Situational approach:</td>
<td>Relates effective leadership to interaction between leadership style and the group situation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**9.5: Transformational Leadership**

**9.5 Discuss transformational leadership**

A relatively new theory of leadership, which describes leadership in organizations, is **transformational leadership**. Transformational leaders “strive to change, elevate, and unify the goals of followers as well as inspire them to pursue challenging and shared objectives.”18 As described in management and public administration literature, transformational leadership has four defining characteristics, called the Four I’s: (1) idealized leadership, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, and (4) individual consideration.

Idealized leadership seeks to create within followers an inspiring vision of how things can be. Inspirational motivation is the communicative ability of the leader to stir followers to action. Intellectual stimulation is the leader’s ability to engage followers in challenging the status quo and assumptions about processes. Individual consideration is the leader’s ability to be supportive and to nurture each individual’s positive attributes, qualities, and strengths in support of the greater good.

Contrasted with transactional leaders, who clarify expectations and reward followers or employees for meeting them, transformational leaders motivate others to move beyond self-interest and work for the greater collective good.19 Transformational leaders have a sense of vision and purpose. Management consultant and author Peter Senge proposes three critical skills of transformational leadership: (1) building shared vision, (2) surfacing and challenging mental models, and (3) engaging in systems thinking.20 Building shared vision is similar to establishing mutuality of concern. It involves encouraging individuals to express their visions of group or organizational goals while encouraging the development of a common, positive view. Surfacing and challenging mental models is a process of identifying and challenging assumptions without creating defensiveness—a daunting task requiring supportive communication skills. Systems thinking is a process we have argued for throughout this book. Understanding groups and organizations and the great complexity that characterizes them requires that leaders look beyond day-to-day operations to find underlying themes, forces of change, and interrelationships.21

**Virtual Groups**

Electronic media are increasingly becoming a part of the situational context in which group and team communication takes place. As a group or team leader, you may have considerable influence over how much group interaction takes place face to face (FTF) or through electronic media. But which modes or combination of modes will be most effective? (How does leadership style interact with different types of communication media?)

Scholars Laura Hambley, Thomas O’Neill, and Theresa Kline tested different leadership styles against different media and outcomes. They compared transactional and transformational leadership styles in three communication media: face to face, videoconference, and text-based chat teams. Transactional leadership was defined as a process of exchange in which leaders tended to gain follower compliance through offering rewards or threatening punishment. Transformational leadership was defined, much as it is in this chapter, as leadership aimed at broadening follower interests, motivating, and gaining commitment to goals and mission. Their research found the following:

- Mean constructive (supportive) interaction scores were higher in FTF than in videoconference and chat teams.
- Teams working in richer (e.g., FTF) communication media did not achieve higher task performance than those working in less-rich media.
- Cohesiveness scores were higher in FTF and videoconference than in chat teams.
While many studies have found that teams led by transformational leaders outperform those led by transactional leaders, there is also evidence that the reward aspects of transactional leadership can be highly effective. Both transactional and transformational leadership are related to performance in face-to-face teams, with the overall edge going to transformational leadership. Research on leadership styles in virtual teams is relatively scarce, even though leadership style and technology are likely to interact in many ways. For the time being, the best advice on leadership style in virtual teams is to adopt a style that best fits your personality and skill set and the needs of the group.

This research did provide additional evidence that communication media have important effects on team interaction and cohesiveness. The best advice, again, is that media with more richness (FTF, videoconferencing) are generally more effective than less-rich media (such as text-based chat teams).

BELIEF IN TRANSFORMATIVE LEADERSHIP Leadership that empowers and motivates others stimulates knowledge sharing, team efficacy, and greater performance. In the classic film _The Empire Strikes Back_, Luke Skywalker watches as Yoda levitates his spaceship out of the swamp.

Luke: I don’t believe it!
Yoda: That is why you fail.

Often, the secret to reaching a goal (or vision) lies in the belief that it can be reached. Belief in the vision becomes more powerful than the followers’ sense of lack, limitation, and doubt. This belief-system shift empowers followers to reach a higher level of commitment and achievement. Its effect may even be so powerful as to convert followers into leaders and leaders into moral agents.

Case Study
Adjusting Leadership Style to Situation

Having been offered some very attractive extra retirement benefits by top management, Arthur agreed to take early retirement at age 62. Once an ambitious young junior executive for the company, Arthur had, in recent years, taken a rather relaxed, anything-goes attitude as director of his division. As a result, his team showed the lowest productivity record in the company, and the employees under his supervision did not receive attractive salary increments and other rewards from top management. Morale was very low, and the employees were discontented.

Hoping to rejuvenate the group, management replaced Arthur with an extremely bright, dynamic, and aggressive young manager named Marilyn. Marilyn’s instructions were: “Get your team’s productivity up by 20 percent over the next 12 months, or we’ll fire the whole group and start from scratch, with a new manager and new employees.”

Marilyn began by studying the records of employees in her group to determine the strengths and weaknesses of each. She then created goals and objectives for each employee and made assignments accordingly. She set a rigid timetable for each employee and made all employees directly accountable to her.

Employee response was overwhelmingly positive. Out of chaos came order. Each person knew what was expected and had tangible goals to achieve. Employees felt united behind their new leader as they all strove to achieve their objective of a one-year, 20 percent increase in productivity.

At the end of the year, productivity was up not 20 percent but 35 percent! Management was thrilled and awarded Marilyn a large raise and the company’s certificate of achievement. All of her team members received a handsome bonus.

Feeling that she had a viable formula for success, Marilyn moved into the second year as she had into the first—setting goals for each employee, holding them accountable, and so forth. However, things went less smoothly the second year. Employees who had been quick to respond the first year were less responsive. Although the work Marilyn assigned was usually completed on time, its quality declined. Employees had a morale problem: Those who had once looked up to Marilyn as “Boss” were now sarcastically calling her “Queen Bee” and reminiscing about “the good old days” when Arthur was their manager.

Marilyn’s behavior as a manager had not changed, yet her leadership was no longer effective. Something needed to be done, but what?

Questions for Analysis

1. What are the important elements to consider when diagnosing Marilyn’s leadership problem? How would you describe her leadership style?

2. What situational variables changed from the first to the second year of Marilyn’s leadership?

3. Why was Marilyn’s leadership successful in the first year but not in the second?

4. How did team goals change from the first to the second year? How about stress levels? Were they the same, or did they change?

5. What would you recommend to Marilyn to help her be more successful? First, use David Korten’s model and language to make your recommendations. Then, make recommendations based on the Hersey and Blanchard model.
Transformational leadership is not so much a set of behaviors that one can observe or emulate as it is a philosophy of leadership and change. Small groups and teams everywhere operate within the cultures of larger organizations and influenced by those cultures. In innovative transformational organizational cultures, we are likely to see assumptions that people can be trusted, that everyone has a contribution to make, and that complex problems should be handled at the lowest possible level. In a transformational culture, norms are flexible enough to adapt to changing external environments. Superiors serve as mentors, coaches, role models, and leaders. Transformatinal leadership has the greatest capacity to motivate group members to debate ideas constructively. There is some evidence that the most effective leaders in virtual teams are those who increase their transformational leadership. One study found that transformational leadership has a stronger effect in teams that use only computer-mediated communication.

9.6: Emergent Leadership in Small Groups

9.6 Explain how leaders are most likely to emerge in a leaderless group

9.6.1: The Minnesota Studies

A fascinating series of leadership studies begun at the University of Minnesota (called the Minnesota Studies) sought the answer to the question “Who is most likely to emerge as the perceived leader of a leaderless discussion group?” Led by Professor Ernest Bormann, the Minnesota Studies formed and observed “test-tube groups” that engaged in leaderless group discussions.

Most people think of a leader as someone who takes charge and organizes a discussion. Predictably, group members often perceive those who actively participate in the group and who direct communication toward procedural matters as leaders. Although studies show a clear correlation between perceived leadership and talkativeness, especially task-oriented talkativeness, those who talk most are not the only ones who become leaders in leaderless groups. In fact, most groups do not select leaders at all. The Minnesota Studies show that leaders emerge through a “method of residues,” whereby group members are rejected for the role of leader until only one remains. The first members to be eliminated from consideration are the quiet ones who do not actively participate in the early stages of a group’s discussion. The next to go are the talkative but overaggressive or dogmatic group members who are perceived to be too inflexible for leadership positions.

After this initial phase of elimination, a group enters a second phase, in which roughly half the group members remain in contention for the leadership role. This phase moves much more slowly than the first phase, and it is a good deal more painful and frustrating. One by one, the group rejects contenders for the leadership role until only one or two remain. Often, members reject would-be leaders because their style is perceived as disturbing. In the Minnesota Studies’ classroom discussion groups, members often rejected an authoritarian style on the grounds that the person was “too bossy” or “dictatorial.” (Of course, as the situational perspective would suggest, the authoritarian style might be inappropriate in a classroom discussion group but highly appropriate in other situations, especially those that involve extreme stress.) In another study, Deborah Baker found that specific communication behaviors increase the likelihood of rejection as leader. Group members who seem unable to contribute to either the group’s tasks or the organization because they are quiet, vague, tentative, self-effacing, or always asking others for direction are usually rejected. In this second phase of role emergence, the Minnesota Studies also found that, to some extent, groups with two or more men rejected female contenders for the leadership role. Groups containing only one man often selected a female leader and isolated the man—a pattern that may be changing.

Task-motivated group members often rejected a contender who was perceived as too process oriented—that is, too concerned about everyone’s feelings and moods to be decisive. Likewise, process-oriented members tended to reject those they saw as too concerned with the task. According to Bormann,

In the final analysis, groups accepted the contender who provided the optimum blend of task efficiency and personal consideration. The leader who emerged was the one that others thought would be of most value to the entire group and whose orders and directions they trusted and could follow.

The Minnesota Studies give fascinating insight into the process through which group leaders emerge. Although this information does not tell you how to behave in order to rise to leadership positions, it does alert you to the process through which leadership emerges. These studies also highlight the complexity of small groups and explain, to an extent, why a person who assumes a leadership role in one group may not do so in another and why a person who is perceived to be a leader in two groups may not assume the same role in each.

Research is adding to our knowledge of emergent leadership in groups. Emergent leaders typically display more effective listening skills and may be more extroverted. Individual task ability contributes to emergent leadership, as does commitment to the group’s assigned
goals. Group goals are often strongly influenced by the emergent leader’s personal goals for the group. Under conditions of high uncertainty, a group will turn to emergent leaders who are seen as prototypical—those who embody the group’s social identity. Verbal aggressiveness is not associated with leadership emergence. An individual’s self-view as a leader affects the number of leadership nominations an individual receives and the number of leadership nominations an individual receives affects an individual’s self-view as leader over time.

9.6.2: Leadership and Gender
A review of research literature on the subject of gender and leadership reveals that the times, indeed, are changing. Research in the 1960s and 1970s found that women were reluctant to assume leadership roles. Group members perceived males as more independent, rational, confident, and influential than females and viewed males as leaders more often than females. In 1979, however, one team of researchers noted that females were more receptive to ideas and to fostering interpersonal relations, showing concern, and being attentive to others than males. Males in the same study in actual organizational settings were more dominant than females and quicker to challenge others and to control the course of conversation. The researchers noted that female leadership styles were more compatible with human-resource theories of how managers should behave.

Putting Principles into Practice
Servant Leadership
One of the most popular models of leadership today with significant relations to transformational leadership is servant leadership, a concept developed by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970. The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions. For such it will be a later choice to serve—after leadership is established. The leader-first and the servant-first are two extreme types. Between them there are shadings and blends that are part of the infinite variety of human nature. The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant-first to make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.

Servant-leaders are thought to be effective because their group members or followers are so well cared for by the leader that they can reach their full potential as team members and thus perform at their best. It is the opposite of authoritarian, domineering leadership. This view asks leaders to think hard about how best to nurture, respect, value, and motivate their followers, employees, or team members.

Skills and Capacities of the Servant Leader
In his book about Greenleaf’s work, Don M. Frick notes several characteristics of servant leaders. Note that each of these characteristics has been discussed earlier in this book (as components of effective group communication).

Listening, he says, is the most important skill; servant leaders begin by being other-oriented, always responding to problems by listening first. Servant leaders use their power ethically; persuasion is always preferred over manipulation or coercion. Servant leaders seek consensus, when all group members support and are committed to a decision. While servant leaders may not always agree with others, they always approach others with acceptance and empathy. And, finally, servant leaders nurture community; understanding our interconnectedness with the broader communities in which we live.

One trait of the servant leader is selflessness, the willingness to do what is right even at the risk of one’s personal well-being or status. At its highest level, this is real leadership, like that of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who risked—and indeed gave—his life in order to stand up for what he believed in.

In 1981, research reported that the influence of gender on the emergence of leadership was most evident early in the process and dissipated over time. By the late 1980s, some studies were reporting no difference in the way males and females are perceived in leadership roles. Also in the 1980s, there was a substantial body of research distinguishing psychological gender from biological gender. This research supported the argument that the most effective leader was that androgynous individual who could draw from a repertoire of both traditionally male and traditionally female behaviors. Research in the 1990s continued to support this view.

Contemporary Research Contemporary researchers Susan Shimanoff and Mercilee Jenkins have conducted extensive reviews of the research literature on gender and group leadership and have drawn several conclusions.

• In problem-solving groups, both male and female leaders concentrate on task behaviors, but female leaders are slightly more responsive to the group’s social-emotional needs.

• Males tend to talk more, which can increase their power, but women are equally effective in using evidence and making procedural suggestions, which are two critical leadership behaviors.
• Generally, men and women lead equally well. However, there is some evidence that because of sex role biases, female leaders may need to perform better than their male counterparts to be considered as good as men.50

Men and women appear to be equally suited to positions of leadership, yet men are still more likely to rise to positions of power. Shimanoff and Jenkins have offered the following suggestions for group members who wish to lower gender barriers and maximize effective leadership:

• Acknowledge and challenge sex-role biases; affirm egalitarian attitudes and remind group members of their importance.
• Celebrate the “traditional” strengths of women but don’t assume that women alone have these strengths.
• Increase the visibility and support of female role models.
• Designate leaders only after interacting, if at all.
• Listen attentively; support all members and treat them with respect.
• Learn from diverse groups and individuals.51

Even as women increasingly take their natural and proportional positions of leadership, there still is evidence of gender bias. One study found that subordinates’ evaluations of group leaders were significantly less positive for female leaders with male subordinates than for female leaders with female subordinates. Male and female subordinates of male leaders rated their performance equally.52

We conclude this chapter as it began, with a quotation, this time from Lao Tsu, who wrote these words 2,500 years ago. They remain as true today as ever:

The wicked leader is he whom the people despise,
The good leader is he whom the people revere.
The great leader is he of whom the people say, “We did it ourselves.”
Chapter 10
Making Decisions and Solving Problems

Learning Objectives

10.1 Discuss decision making as an important group task
10.2 Explain why group decisions are usually of higher quality than individual decisions
10.3 Compare and contrast descriptive, functional, and prescriptive approaches to problem solving in small groups
10.4 Explain how cultural assumptions influence group problem solving and decision making

“There’s nothing in the middle of the road but yellow stripes and dead armadillos.”
—Jim Hightower

John Smith Pemberton made his first batch in a brass kettle over an open fire. To mask the bitter taste of a wide array of ingredients, Pemberton decided to add sugar to his concoction to make it taste better. He sold a portion of the rights to Asa Candler, who worked with a team of people to make and distribute the tonic. Candler needed to solve the problem of how to sell the drink. After developing a system for making syrup and shipping it to local bottlers, Candler eventually sold the business to Ernest Woodruff, who helped make the company a household name by making good marketing decisions. You know the company as Coca-Cola. What started as a simple homemade tonic has become a multibillion dollar business due to a little luck and a lot of good individual and
Making Decisions and Solving Problems

collaborative problem solving and decision making. The decisions you make and the problems you solve today can have significant consequences for the future.

This chapter focuses on the communication strategies that help groups make quality decisions. More research has been conducted about group problem solving and decision-making communication than about any other group objective. Groups discuss issues to search for truth, groups make decisions, and groups solve problems. Whether you work for a Fortune 500 company like Coca-Cola or are serving on your local school board, the quality of decisions and the approach to problem solving can have a major influence on others. To help you understand the nature of decision making and problem solving, we first describe the elements, methods, and obstacles to quality decision making. Then we describe the nature of group problem solving, including three approaches to examining how groups solve problems: descriptive, functional, and prescriptive. We end the chapter by identifying cultural assumptions about group problem solving and decision making.

10.1: Group Decision Making: Choosing Among Alternatives

10.1 Discuss decision making as an important group task

One critical task of groups is decision making—the process of choosing from among several alternatives. For example, in deciding which college or university to attend, you probably considered several choices. Perhaps you started by gathering information about as many as fifteen or twenty schools and then narrowed the alternatives as you considered the advantages and disadvantages of each institution. Eventually you narrowed your choice to two and made a final decision. Groups make decisions in essentially the same way. In this section we consider the elements, methods, and characteristics of group decision making and also examine some of the obstacles that keep groups from making high-quality decisions. Later we contrast the decision-making (choice-making) process with the process of solving problems, a more comprehensive process that involves making choices to overcome an obstacle or barrier to achieve a goal.

10.1.1: Elements of Effective and Ineffective Group Decision Making

According to Randy Hirokawa, Dennis Gouran, and several other group communication scholars, group decision making usually follows a predictable pattern. Groups tend to make better decisions if the pattern is explicitly identified so that the group can structure its discussion. Research has identified both what makes group decision making effective as well as factors that make it ineffective. Group decision making includes the following steps.

[Image of step-by-step process]
Ineffective: Too few people are involved in the discussion. If several members dominate the conversation, decision quality suffers. Group members who believe they did not have an opportunity to voice their opinions and share information with others will not perceive the decision to have been reached fairly.\footnote{9 J. G. Oetzel, “Explaining Individual Communication Processes in Homogeneous and Heterogeneous Groups Through Individual—Collectivism and Self—Control,” Human Communication Research 25 (1999): 202—24.}


Sometimes rather than making a decision, group members suggest no decision be made. But as the saying goes, not to decide is to decide.

Ineffective: The group makes a poor decision, overly risky decision or no decision. Groups make bad choices for a number of reasons. Perhaps group members did not have adequate data or they misanalyzed the information they had. Or members did not share the insights or information they had. One of the biggest reasons groups makes bad choices is that they fail to consider the negative consequences of the option selected.

Groups sometimes have a tendency to make overly risky decisions, especially if they are making a decision that affects others and not themselves. Research suggests that very young and elderly group members tend to make less risky decisions for others.\footnote{11 R. Y. Hirokawa and D. R. Scheinhorn, “Communication in Faulty Group Decision—Making,” in R. Y. Hirokawa and M. S. Poole, Communication and Group Decision Making (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986): 67.} To avoid making decisions that may place others at risk, imagine how you would feel about the decision you are making for others if someone were imposing a policy or procedure on you.

Sometimes rather than making a decision, group members suggest no decision be made. But as the saying goes, not to decide is to decide.

Review

Comparing Effective and Ineffective Group Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effective Decision Making Results When the Group . . .</th>
<th>Ineffective Decision Making Results When the Group . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accurately assesses the present situation</td>
<td>Improperly analyzes the present situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishes clear and appropriate group goals</td>
<td>Does not establish clear and appropriate group goals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Rationally evaluate the positive and negative consequences of alternatives

Effective: Review the pros and cons of the options identified. A group must do more than identify alternatives; it should also assess the positive and negative implications of each alternative before making a decision. The pros and cons of each option should be based on the information the group has identified.

Ineffective: The group fails to identify both positive and negative effects of possible decisions. A group that is so eager to make a decision that it does not take time to consider the pros and cons of its actions is setting itself up to make a bad decision. A critical error by ineffective groups is failing to consider the consequences of their decision before they make it.\footnote{11 R. Y. Hirokawa and D. R. Scheinhorn, “Communication in Faulty Group Decision—Making,” in R. Y. Hirokawa and M. S. Poole, Communication and Group Decision Making (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1986): 67.}
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However, it is not the best way to make a final decision because it does not take full advantage of the give-and-take of group discussion.

RANDOM CHOICE Sometimes groups become so frustrated that they make no decisions. They resort to coin tosses or other random approaches. These methods are not recommended for groups that take their decision making seriously.

MAJORITY RULE This is the method of group decision making most often used. Majority rule can be swift and efficient but can also leave an unsatisfied minority. Unless it allots time for discussing an issue, a group that makes a decision on the basis of majority rule may sacrifice decision quality and group cohesiveness for efficiency.

DECISION BY MINORITY Sometimes a minority of group members makes a decision. The minority may yell the loudest or threaten to create problems for the group unless it gets its way. Members may ask, “Does anyone have any objections?” and, if no one answers immediately, consider the decision made. Minority members whose decision is adopted may temporarily rejoice, but over time the group will have difficulty implementing a decision that is not widely accepted. On the other hand, research suggests that when a majority of members support an idea and then the majority evaporates because several group members change their minds, the group is in a vulnerable position; a view that was previously held by a minority can swiftly become the majority view. So, in cases when you side with the minority, keep in mind that things change. Don’t side with the majority simply because it’s the majority. Groups work best when there is honest dialogue in the search for truth.

DECISION BY CONSENSUS Consensus occurs when all group members can support a course of action. This decision-making method is time-consuming and difficult, but members are usually satisfied with the decision. If group members must also implement the solution, this method works well. To reach a decision by consensus, group members must listen and respond to individual viewpoints and manage conflicts that arise. Consensus is facilitated when group members are able to remain focused on the goal, emphasize areas of agreement, and combine or eliminate alternatives identified by the group. Although desirable, consensus sometimes is not possible. A fallback approach is to seek a supermajority decision. A supermajority is two-thirds of the group or team.

Research suggests that our conclusions about group decision making apply to groups that interact online and in virtual group settings, as well as those that meet face to face. Yet there is some evidence that online groups may

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Accurately identifies positive and negative consequences of decision alternatives</th>
<th>Fails to identify enough positive and negative consequences of decision alternatives</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Has accurate information</td>
<td>Works from too little information or faulty information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draws reasonable conclusions from available information</td>
<td>Fails to think critically or logically about the available information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encourages participation by many people</td>
<td>Allows (or settles for) participation by too few people</td>
</tr>
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10.1.2: Methods of Group Decision Making

After the alternatives have been narrowed and weighed, what methods can groups use to make a decision? Knowing these methods can give you and your group options to consider when a decision needs to be made.

DECISION BY EXPERT IN GROUP One person in a group may seem to be the best informed about the issue, and members can turn to this person to make the choice. This expert may or may not be a group’s designated leader. Deferring to an expert from within a group may be an efficient way to make a decision, but if there is not adequate discussion, the group may not be satisfied with the outcome.

DECISION BY EXPERT OUTSIDE GROUP A group may decide that none of its members has the credibility, knowledge, or wisdom to make a particular decision, and it may feel unable or unwilling to do so. Members can turn to someone outside the group who has authority to make a decision. Although an outside expert may make a fine decision, a group that gives up its decision-making power to one person loses the advantages of the greater input and variety of approaches that come from being a group in the first place.

AVERAGING INDIVIDUAL RANKINGS OR RATINGS Group members can be asked to rank or rate possible alternatives. After the group averages the rankings or ratings, it selects the alternative with the highest average. This method of making decisions can be a useful way to start discussions and to see where the group stands on an issue.
reach less effective decisions than groups that meet in person. Additionally, virtual group members report less satisfaction with their computer-mediated group experience. Virtual group members say that it typically takes more time, rather than less time, to work with people online compared with face-to-face interaction.

### Review

#### Methods of Group Decision Making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision by Expert</th>
<th>Advantages</th>
<th>Disadvantages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group defers to the member who has the most expertise or experience or to someone outside the group with authority to make decisions</td>
<td>- Decision is made quickly&lt;br&gt;- Uses the expertise of a knowledgeable source of information</td>
<td>- Group members may not be satisfied with the decision&lt;br&gt;- The expert could be wrong</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Averaging Individual Rankings or Ratings:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group members rank or rate possible outcomes, and the alternative with the highest ranking or best rating is selected</td>
<td>- Uses a democratic process that taps all group members’ thinking&lt;br&gt;- Useful when the group needs to assess where it stands on an issue</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Random Choice:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group members flip a coin or use a similar technique so they can move forward</td>
<td>- Easy&lt;br&gt;- Fast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Majority Rule:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision is made by the majority of group members</td>
<td>- Often perceived as a fair way of making decisions&lt;br&gt;- Can be an efficient way of making a decision</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decision by Minority:</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group decides to support a position advocated by a vocal minority of group members</td>
<td>- Decision is made by those who feel most passionate about the outcome&lt;br&gt;- Helps to avoid groupthink by acknowledging opposing points of view</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Decision by Consensus:

| Through discussion, group members reach a decision that all members can support | - Group members are more likely to be satisfied with the outcome<br>- Group members are more likely to participate in implementing a decision that all members support | - Takes time<br>- Takes skill |

### MAKING EFFECTIVE AND EFFICIENT DECISIONS

What can group members do to make effective and efficient decisions? Research by Michael Roberto suggests that groups that make the most efficient decisions (that use their time wisely) and reach high-quality decisions do the following three things:

1. They use clear criteria; they know what “good” looks like, and they make a decision based on clear standards for a good decision. They start the decision-making process with a vision of what the final outcome will look like.

2. They focus on finding high-quality, useful information directly related to the issue at hand, rather than gathering a large amount of information just for the sake of gathering it.

3. They break up big issues into smaller, more manageable issues to discuss.

Making decisions takes time, energy, and effort. Because President Obama has to make many important decisions every day, it’s reported that he has others make some of the routine decisions for him (such as what he’ll have for dinner, what he will wear, or other routine decisions). He’s found that it’s helpful to keep his decision-making energy focused on the major decisions rather than spending unnecessary effort on inconsequential issues. When working in a group or team it can be helpful to make sure that you are spending your decision-making energy on important tasks rather than wasting time on insignificant issues.

### 10.2: Group Problem Solving: Overcoming Obstacles to Achieve a Goal

#### 10.2 Explain why group decisions are usually of higher quality than individual decisions

The board of directors of a multinational corporation, a band-boostr fund-raising committee, and a group of students doing a project for a group communication class...
all have something in common—they have problems to solve. Have you ever been involved in group problem solving and thought to yourself, “If I weren’t working in this silly group, I could be more productive”? Despite such frustrations, a small group of people has the potential of arriving at a better solution than do individuals working alone. Groups have more information and more creative approaches to surmounting obstacles than individuals do, and these advantages contribute to a higher-quality decision.

10.2.2: Barriers to Group and Team Problem Solving

What keeps groups and teams from working at their full capacity? Knowing what these barriers are can help you spot and eliminate them from your group or team. Thus, before we spend the bulk of this chapter and the next one suggesting principles and strategies to help groups work better, we lay out problems you and your group may face. One study found that lack of sleep was a major factor that explained poor problem solving. You will not be communicating well if you are tired. One acronym to keep in mind is HALT, which stands for hungry, angry, lonely, or tired. When you or other group members experience these issues, you will not be functioning at your best, so it would be advantageous to take a break and recharge and refresh before continuing.¹⁹

Benjamin Broome and Luann Fulbright spent over six years asking people who participated in group discussions what barriers kept their group from operating at full capacity. What is significant about the following list is that these are problems that group members reported; they are not just problems that an observer noted. Here’s their list of the top ten barriers.²⁰

10.2.1: Problem Solving Defined

**Problem solving** is the process of overcoming obstacles to achieve a goal. Whereas decision making involves making a choice from among alternatives, problem solving usually requires a group to make many decisions or choices as it identifies a problem and determines how to solve it.

A problem consists of three elements: (1) an undesirable existing situation, (2) a goal a group wishes to achieve, and (3) obstacles that keep a group from achieving its goal.¹⁷ Problem solving allows a group to eliminate or manage the obstacles that keep it from achieving its objective.

Like decision making, problem solving begins with assessing the present situation. What’s wrong with what is happening now? *Almost every problem can be phrased in terms of something you want more or less of.*¹⁸ Problems often can be boiled down to such things as lack of time, money, information, or agreement. For example, a school board that decides a district needs a new high school yet realizes it lacks the money for a new school has a problem: The district has too many students for existing facilities. The board needs fewer students or more space. The goal the board wants to achieve is quality education for all students. The board cannot achieve this goal with the existing undesirable situation. The obstacles that keep the board from reaching its goal include lack of classroom space and lack of money to build more space. Every problem can be identified by noting its three elements just mentioned: the undesirable present, the group goal, and the obstacles to achieving it.

**Review**

**Three Elements of a Problem**

1. Undesirable existing situation: Something is wrong with the way things are
2. Goal: What the group wants to achieve
3. Obstacle: Something that keeps a group from achieving its goal

1. **LACK OF STRUCTURE**: Group members wanted specific methods to help their group function more efficiently.
2. **LACK OF CULTURAL SENSITIVITY**: Some group members were put off by biases, prejudice, sexist comments, and the failure of some to take cultural differences into account when interacting with others.
3. **LACK OF PLANNING**: Group members often weren’t prepared or were unsure what the focus of the group was supposed to be.
4. **LACK OF RESOURCES**: Sometimes groups had to meet in an inadequate physical space or just didn’t have all the information and technical support to get the job done.
5. **WRONG PEOPLE PRESENT**: The key people with the authority or information weren’t involved in the discussion.

6. **TIME PRESSURE**: Groups felt pressured to achieve immediate results and to tell those in authority what they wanted to hear.

7. **POOR COMMUNICATION**: Misunderstandings, inattentiveness, and dominance by one group member or a faction of members within the group were cited as reasons for ineffective communication.

8. **UN SUPPORTIVE SOCIAL CLIMATE**: Group members sometimes did not feel they were cohesively working together, and they could not support or trust one another.

9. **NEGATIVE ATTITUDES**: Some group members weren’t flexible, were unwilling to compromise about procedures, or had unrealistic expectations about the group.

10. **LACK OF PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILL**: Group members tended to focus on the solution before defining the problem, or there was a lack of balanced participation.

**WRITING PROMPT**

All decision making involves assessing a situation, identifying alternative solutions, and selecting the best alternatives. What group decision methods have worked well in your group? Write a brief response that will be read by your instructor. Be sure to explain why you believe the methods have worked well.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.

**10.3: Three Approaches to Group Problem Solving**

10.3 **Compare and contrast descriptive, functional, and prescriptive approaches to problem solving in small groups**

Thus far we have defined group decision making and problem solving, noted the obstacles to and the characteristics of effective group decisions, and noted barriers that keep groups from working well. We now examine three different approaches to understanding group problem solving:

1. **THE DESCRIPTIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING**: This approach identifies the typical patterns of communication that occur when people interact to solve problems.

2. **THE FUNCTIONAL APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING**: This approach identifies key task requirements and stresses the importance of effective communication as major factors that contribute to effective problem solving.

3. **THE PRESCRIPTIVE APPROACH TO PROBLEM SOLVING**: This approach identifies specific agendas and techniques to improve group problem-solving performance.

In this chapter we discuss the descriptive and functional approaches to group problem solving; we will briefly introduce the prescriptive approach here.

10.3.1: **Descriptive Approach**

When you describe something, you use words to categorize, classify, and clarify your subject. A descriptive approach to group problem solving identifies how groups do solve problems, not how they should solve problems.21

A descriptive approach does not offer specific guidelines and techniques for solving problems in groups; rather, it outlines how most groups go about solving problems. B. Aubrey Fisher makes two assumptions about the descriptive approach: (1) There is a “natural,” or normal, process of group problem solving, and (2) a group will follow a normal problem-solving approach unless some external authority interferes with its freedom to solve its problem (for example, a supervisor gives the group an agenda or a strong-willed group leader dictates how the group should approach its task).22 One of the most fruitful areas of research from a descriptive perspective seeks to identify the normal phases, or cycles, that groups experience when solving problems.

DESCRIBING GROUP PHASES “Don’t worry, Mom, I’m just going through a phase.” Does this sound like something you may have said at one time? Maybe you were trying to alleviate your mother’s concern by assuring her that your behavior was not at all uncommon and that it surely would pass in time. Implicit here is an assumption that individuals pass through several identifiable developmental stages, each of which leads to the next. Problemsolving groups, like individuals, go through several stages. If you understand these stages, you can learn to communicate in ways that expedite a group’s passage from one stage to the next.

Does every group neatly cycle through the same phases of group discussion? The answer is no. As we will discuss later in the chapter, not all groups take the same path to solve a problem. Group discussion is often messy. Many groups do, however, go through phases. Knowing what these phases are can help you spot them if they occur in your group; it’s like having a map that lets you know where you are in your group deliberations.
Several researchers have attempted to identify the phases of a problem-solving group. They have observed and recorded who speaks to whom and have categorized the comments group members exchange. Over the past fifty years researchers have used various labels to describe these phases, and despite differing terminology, they have reached similar conclusions. Although some researchers describe five phases, most scholars identify four.

PHASES Of the research on developmental phases of groups, Fisher’s is the most significant for small group communication. He focused primarily on what was said throughout the development of his test groups. We use his terminology in the following sections.

PHASE 1: ORIENTATION In the first phase of small group interaction, “group members break the ice and begin to establish a common basis for functioning.” Communication during this phase tends to be oriented toward getting to know one another, sharing backgrounds, and tentatively approaching the group’s task. You are not likely to say anything that might prompt the rest of the group to reject you. Fisher noted that “more ambiguous comments . . . are contained in Phase 1 than in any other phase except the third, which is also characterized by ambiguity.”

Research on the orientation phase suggests that group members’ communication is directed at orienting themselves toward others as well as to the group’s task, which can also be said about the other phases. What sets this phase apart from the others is the degree to which the social dimension is emphasized and the tentative, careful way in which the task dimension is approached.

Yet another characteristic of the orientation phase is primary tension. Primary tension occurs when group members are uncertain how to behave and feel somewhat awkward about what to do or say. Clear group role expectations have not emerged; clear social norms are not yet developed. Some group members may be quiet, others may be exceptionally polite, yet others may laugh nervously and smile—all of which are manifestations of the primary tension that occurs when groups first congregate.

Even the most efficient, task-motivated group will spend some time socializing and getting acquainted. Do not underestimate the importance of this type of interaction. Interpersonal trust—an essential ingredient for an effective working environment—does not happen all at once. You begin slowly, with small talk, to determine whether it is safe to move on to deeper levels of interaction. The orientation phase, then, develops trust and group cohesiveness, which are important for the group’s survival in the second phase—conflict.

PHASE 2: CONFLICT During the orientation phase, group members begin to form opinions about their own positions in the group and about the group’s task. By the second phase they start asserting these opinions. They have tested the water in the first phase and now are ready to jump in. On the process, or social, level, this is a period in which individuals compete for status in the group. Two or more potential leaders may emerge, with the support for each dividing the group into camps. This jockeying for leadership, power, and position in a group has been called secondary tension. This secondary tension occurs after the initial, or primary, tension has diminished and the group settles down to focus on both the task at hand and who will be influential in helping the group reach a conclusion. Secondary tension can occur abruptly. The group may be making progress, but conflict suddenly erupts over an issue and the group gets off its agenda.

Communication during the conflict phase is characterized by persuasive attempts at changing others’ opinions and reinforcing one’s own position. Some participants relish the idea of a good argument, whereas others see conflict as something to avoid at all cost. Avoiding conflict, however, means avoiding issues relevant and even crucial to the group’s success. Just as individuals need to assert their own points of view, so do groups need to investigate all relevant alternatives in order to select the best solutions.

The conflict phase is necessary to both the task and the process dimensions of small group communication. Through conflict, you begin to identify the task issues that confront the group and clarify your own and others’ roles. This clarification leads toward greater predictability, less uncertainty, and the establishment of group norms. There is evidence that groups that spend a considerable amount of time together may have a less prolonged period of conflict, but they nonetheless do experience conflict.

PHASE 3: EMERGENCE In Phase 3, new patterns of communications indicate a group’s emergence from the conflict phase. If a group is going to function as a cohesive unit, it must resolve the conflict of Phase 2. Although conflict remains in Phase 3, what sets the emergence phase apart from the preceding conflict phase is the way in which members deal with conflict. This shift is most apparent in the reappearance of ambiguity in task-related statements.

Task and process dimensions are interwoven at this stage. Although the group is divided, there is also clarity. Leadership patterns and roles have been established, the issues and problems confronting the group have been identified, and the need to settle differences and reach consensus has become apparent. One of the factors that helps decisions and solutions emerge is to listen to group members who are perceived as experts. As more people perceive someone has having high credibility and an expert point of view, groups will tend to agree with the expert as a way to manage conflict. Ambiguity appears to be the means by which individual group members can comfortably shift their positions toward group consensus.
The group settles on norms and moves toward consensus via ambiguous statements that gradually modify dissenting positions. Such ambiguous statements might take the form of qualifiers or reservations to the previous position: “I still would like to see our company merge with the Elector Electronics Corporation, but maybe we could consider a merger later in the year. A merger may be more appropriate next fall.” Such a statement allows a person to save face and still allows the group to reach consensus.

**PHASE 4: REINFORCEMENT** A spirit of unity characterizes the final phase of group interaction. In the preceding three phases, group members struggle through getting acquainted, building cohesiveness, expressing individuality, competing for status, and arguing over issues. The group eventually emerges from those struggles with a sense of direction, consensus, and a feeling of group identity. Not surprisingly, then, the fourth phase is characterized by positive feelings toward the group and its decisions. Finally, members feel a genuine sense of accomplishment.

Reinforcement predominates in communication:

Jim: I may have been against it at first, but I’ve finally seen the light. We’re going in the right direction now.

Marilyn: Yes, but don’t shortchange your contribution, Jim. If you hadn’t opposed it so vehemently, we never would have developed the idea so fully.

Fisher noted that ambiguous and unfavorable comments all but disappear in the fourth phase, being replaced by uniformly favorable comments and reinforcement. At this time, all the hassle of group decision making and problem solving seems worthwhile. The group is at its most cohesive, individual satisfaction and sense of achievement are high, and uncertainty is at a low level.

10.3.2: Other Descriptive Models of Group Problem Solving

Although it may appear from our discussion that a group goes through four distinct phases of development in a predictable, easy-to-identify way, group deliberations are seldom that orderly. Communication does not typically operate in such a linear, step-by-step manner. DIALECTICAL THEORY One theory that helps to explain the messiness of group interaction is dialectical theory. Dialectical theory suggests that during communication there are often competing tensions pulling the conversation into multiple directions. For example, groups like a sense of stability; they want to predict what will happen because many group members like familiar patterns. Yet, because communication is dynamic, there is also an interest in developing new ideas and procedures—groups expect change. Another dialectical tension is being separate from others while also being connected. The team versus the individual and structure versus interaction are other dialectical tensions that occur when groups communicate.

Because of these tensions and because communication is not usually (or even often) orderly and neat, the descriptive phases that we’ve described have been observed in some but not all groups. Group communication researchers have identified several other models that describe the patterns of communication within groups: the spiraling model, the punctuated equilibrium model, and the multisequence model.

**SPIRALING MODEL** Group-communication scholars Tom Scheidel and Laura Crowell’s research suggests that groups may not march through four phases but rather cycle, or spiral, through them throughout the group or team’s development. For example, the first issue confronting the group may be “What’s the purpose of this group?” A group will probably spend some time getting oriented to this task, conflict may follow as members learn each person’s objectives, and after discussion, a consensus may emerge about the group’s purpose. Finally, members may assure one another that their purpose has been developed clearly. Perhaps the next issue to come before the group is “How will we organize our work—should we have a subcommittee?” Again, the members may go through orientation, conflict, emergence, and reinforcement about a specific issue. Because group discussions tend to hop from topic to topic, a group may get bogged down in conflict, abandon the issue, and move to another issue. Thus, groups may spiral through phases for each issue, or group members may get sidetracked and abandon discussions about a particular topic.

**Virtual Groups**

**Problem Solving**

Research continues to describe the impact of technology on group problem solving. Although use of virtual team communication continues to grow, we apparently still like to connect face to face if we’re scattered in many locations trying to solve complex problems. One study found that the more different locations virtual team members are in, the more likely it is that they will want to periodically connect face to face rather than use only virtual communication channels. Another study found that when working in virtual groups, some group members connect with other virtual group members outside of the group using instant messaging. These instant messages, or it could be text messages or other messages that aren’t directed at all group members, but just another member or two, can help a group manage conflict. The researchers suggested that these private instant messages are like “backstage” whispering. In face-to-face groups some group members have side comments. Apparently the same thing happens in virtual groups and
these behind-the-scene comments can help groups move forward. The use of technology does not inherently result in making better team solutions and decisions; it’s still people who make the decisions and solve the problems. Technology doesn’t do the work; it’s just another way of connecting to others.

The following brief summary describes the advantages and disadvantages of using e-mail, texting, skype, or other ways of collaborating virtually:

**Advantages:**
- Virtual communication methods seem to work best for more structured, linear tasks.
- In computer-mediated meetings, the ideas of everyone can more easily and accurately be captured and recorded.
- Virtual groups often generate more ideas when brainstorming than face-to-face groups.

**Disadvantages:**
- The increased speed of information transfer allows less time for reflection and evaluation of ideas. Thus, technology may sometimes help us make mistakes faster.
- Some group members do a less thorough job of evaluating the pros and cons of assessing alternatives when using computer-mediated technology rather than when interacting in face-to-face settings.

Research by Charles Pavitt and Kelly Johnson found that groups do seem to exhibit spiraling tendencies, but not all groups behave in quite the same way, thus confirming the challenge of formulating tidy descriptions of how groups do their work. Pavitt and Johnson’s research also suggests that the order in which groups discuss topics and issues may not be as important as whether the topics are discussed or not. Therefore, the content of what you say may be more important than the precise sequence in which the content is discussed.

J. E. McGrath is another prominent small group researcher who suspects that groups and teams cycle through their work rather than following specific phases. His theory includes the dimensions of time (T), interaction (I), and performance (P), which he calls TIP theory. McGrath hypothesizes that groups do what they need to do at a given moment based on their needs at that moment and on what function the group needs to perform. A group will become oriented or focused on a task when there is uncertainty, not just when it is first formed.

**PUNCTUATED EQUILIBRIUM MODEL** Connies Gersick describes what she calls a pattern of “punctuated equilibrium.” During the first half of a group’s existence, group members may experience uncertainty and indecision about what to do or how to proceed, resulting in inertia; nothing seems to be happening. And then, about midway through the group’s deliberation, a revolutionary transition, or breakpoint, punctuates the seeming equilibrium, and “nothing happening” changes to “something happening.” The equilibrium of inertia is punctuated by a burst of activity. Then there will be a second inertia phase—a phase when the group seems to stop and again ponder which direction to go next before moving on to accomplishing the task. Gersick thinks this punctuated equilibrium model may only occur in groups that are working within a specific time limit; it may be less likely to occur in a group with an unstructured or open-ended time frame.

Additional research suggests that punctuated equilibrium can occur within the phases of group discussion that we described earlier. During the conflict phase, for example, there will be bursts of progress in resolving the conflict, as well as periods of time when it appears nothing much is happening.

**MULTISEQUENCE MODEL** Yet another descriptive, non-phase model of how groups and teams typically function is proposed by M. Scott Poole. As the term multisequence implies, groups and teams may be doing several things at once rather than cycling though predictable phases. Poole builds on Fisher’s phase research by suggesting that groups engage in three types of activity tracks that do not necessarily follow logical step-by-step patterns. Poole believes that three types of activities best describe group interaction.

① 1. **Task-process activities**

**Task-process activities** help the group accomplish its work, such as analyzing a problem, becoming oriented to the components of a problem, establishing criteria, and evaluating proposed solutions. Answering such questions as “What’s the problem here?” “How can we better understand the problem?” and “How effective will our solution be?” are examples of task-process activities. Furthermore, Poole indicates that there are three types of task-process activities:

1. activities that focus on the problem.
2. activities that serve executive functions (such as keeping the discussion oriented and on task), and
3. solution activities.


② 2. **Relational activities**

Relational activities manage relationships and help maintain the group climate. For example, verbal or nonverbal communication that indicates who likes and dislikes whom can be categorized as relational activity. Communication has both a task dimension and a relationship dimension. Relational activities are also communication behaviors that sustain or damage interpersonal relationships among group members. Criticism, conflict, praise, and encouragement help group members understand their relationships with one another.
Poole’s three activity tracks do not all develop at the same rate or according to the same pattern. Some groups spend a considerable portion of their time developing relationships before discussing their tasks in great detail. In contrast, task-oriented groups often devote considerable energy to completing their tasks, letting relationships play minor roles in group deliberations. Groups switch activity tracks at various breakpoints, which occur as groups switch topics, adjourn, or schedule planning periods. Another type of breakpoint, called a delay, occurs because of group conflict or inability to reach consensus. Whereas groups may expect and schedule some breakpoints, they usually do not schedule delays. Poole notes, “depending on the nature of the delay and the mood of the group, [a] breakpoint can signal the start of a difficulty or a highly creative period.” A disruption, the third type of breakpoint, results from a major conflict or a realization that a group may not be able to complete its task. To manage disruption, a group must be flexible.

Poole’s analysis of group phases and group activity emphasizes the process nature of group communication and problem solving, rather than assuming that groups proceed through a linear, step-by-step approach. Although several researchers have documented chronological phases in a group’s efforts, a group’s communication can also be described by the three activity tracks Poole identifies. A descriptive approach to group communication can help you better understand and explain why certain types of statements are made in groups and how a group develops over time. With an understanding of the process, you should be in a better position to evaluate and improve your participation in group meetings.

**Review**

**A Comparison of Descriptive Models of Group Process**

### Phase Models

Groups go through predictable phases (such as orientation, conflict, emergence, reinforcement) when working on a task or solving a problem.

### Spiral Models

Groups may go through several phases and then repeat the cycle again and again throughout the history of the group.

### Punctuated Equilibrium Models

Groups go through a period of uncertainty and indecision punctuated by a breakthrough, followed by more uncertainty, until a pattern emerges.

### Multisequence Models

Groups switch from one activity track to another as they engage in task-process activities, relational activities, or topical focus activities.

**WRITING PROMPT**

Attend a meeting of your school board or city council or another public meeting in which problems are discussed and solutions are recommended. Prepare a written analysis of the meeting in which you attempt to identify phases in the group’s discussions. Also, try to identify examples of the three activity tracks discussed in this chapter (task process, relational, and topical focus). Write a brief response that will be read by your instructor.

The response entered here will appear in the performance dashboard and can be viewed by your instructor.
10.3.3: Functional Approach

The descriptive approach to group problem solving does exactly what it implies: It describes what happens when groups communicate, whether the interaction involves going through phases, spirals, or sequences. The functional approach emphasizes that members of effective groups perform certain task requirements (functions) when they communicate with one another. The functional approach has elements of description because the researchers who propose this approach have observed groups and described the task requirements of effective groups. There’s also a hint of prescription in this approach, in that the task requirements are presumed to be useful strategies that will help groups make better-quality decisions and arrive at good solutions. Thus, the functional approach includes elements of the conceptual frameworks of both descriptive and prescriptive approaches.

The functional approach assumes that groups are goal-oriented and that to accomplish the group goal, certain activities or communication functions need to be performed. Groups and teams become effective, argue the functional theorists, not just by applying communication techniques (the prescriptive approach) but also by communicating in ways that affect the fundamental processes of how the group achieves its goal. It is through communication that group members perform key functions that enhance group problem solving and decision making.

The primary way researchers have identified the functions of effective problem solving is by examining the behaviors of both effective and ineffective groups. Certain types of communication and critical thinking distinguish effective groups from ineffective ones.

What are the key functions of effective problem solving? According to Randy Hirokawa, groups must perform five key functions in order to develop a high-quality solution.

**Five key functions**

1. **DEVELOP AN ACCURATE UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM.** Specify precisely what the problem is. Identify the causes, symptoms, and history of the problem. Use data and information to help the group understand the problem.

2. **DEVELOP REQUIREMENTS FOR AN ACCEPTABLE CHOICE.** Establish criteria—explicit standards for an acceptable solution. Identify what a good solution will look like so members will know one when they see it.

3. **DEVELOP MANY ALTERNATIVES TO SOLVE THE PROBLEM.** The more high-quality alternatives generated, the greater the chance that the group will find a high-quality solution. Just one or two ideas suggested early in the discussion will usually result in a less-effective solution.

4. **ASSESS THE POSITIVE FEATURES OF THE ALTERNATIVES OR OPTIONS FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM.** Systematically identify the merits or benefits that will occur if the suggested solution or solutions are implemented.

5. **ASSESS THE NEGATIVE FEATURES OF THE ALTERNATIVES OR OPTIONS FOR SOLVING THE PROBLEM.** Balance the positive benefits that have been identified with negative features or disadvantages of the suggested solution or solutions.

Group communicators who incorporate these functions into their interactions with others are what Hirokawa and other researchers call vigilant thinkers. Vigilant thinkers are critical thinkers. They pay attention to the process of problem solving. There is evidence that groups that believe they will be effective in using vigilant thinking skills will, in fact, do a better job of thinking critically and effectively.

**PRIORITIZING THE FIVE FUNCTIONS** Of these five functions, is one more important than the others? Recent research points to the importance of all the functions, but the best predictors of quality group performance are functions 1, 2, and 5. So, for best results, (1) analyze the problem; be sure to use data and information rather than just sharing opinions when analyzing the current situation; (2) establish criteria—know what a good solution looks like; and (3) evaluate the potential negative consequences of possible solutions. Discuss certain standards or expectations before hunting for a solution.

Communication researcher Elizabeth Graham and her colleagues found that effective groups established and used clear criteria and made positive comments about the alternative solutions that group members suggested; in essence, such groups had clear goals and said nice things about solutions. The researchers suspected that the positive comments helped to establish a supportive group climate. In contrast, Kevin Barge suggests that the following functions are essential for an effective problem-solving group. Group members should (1) network with others within and outside the group to gather effective information; (2) acquire the skill of data splitting—that is, analyzing information effectively; (3) generate and evaluate solutions; and (4) manage their relationships effectively by means of listening, feedback, and negotiation skill.

The vigilant-thinking functions suggested by Hirokawa and his colleagues, as well as the functions identified by Barge, are similar to those suggested by Irving Janis: Gather accurate information, analyze the information, draw reasonable conclusions from the data, generate solutions, evaluate the costs and risks of the solutions, and select the best one.

Although research does support the functional theory, not all research confirms that performing the functional task requirements always results in enhanced group decision mak-
ing and problem solving. In computer-mediated situations, for example, research has not found uniform support for functional theory. Although the research conclusions supporting functional theory have not been unanimous, the functional perspective of group problem solving nonetheless continues to enjoy support and application among group communication researchers and educators.

10.3.4: Communication Functions of Effective Group Problem Solvers

The functional perspective assumes that a group will make a higher-quality decision if group members analyze information appropriately, generate an ample number of ideas, and select the best one. This perspective suggests that a group makes a higher-quality decision if group members analyze information appropriately, generate an ample number of ideas, and select the best one. However, the research supporting functional theory has not been unanimous, and the functional perspective of group problem solving continues to enjoy support and application among group communication researchers and educators.

Putting Principles into Practice

Real Groups, Real Challenges: The Bona Fide Group Perspective

The phrase *bona fides* simply means real, authentic, or genuine. The *bona fide perspective on groups* suggests that the context for and boundaries of the groups in which we participate move and change. Thus, a bona fide perspective on groups is concerned with how real groups function in organizations. A bona fide perspective encourages us to look not at how groups are described in a textbook, but at how they operate in the real world with the tensions, pressures, and reality of being part of many groups simultaneously.

According to Linda Putnam, who has done extensive research and writing about bona fide groups, we need to be more sensitive to how groups really operate in natural settings. Most groups and teams do not exist in isolation from other groups and from the larger organization of which they are a part. Therefore, Putnam suggests focusing on two elements when considering bona fide groups:

1. How the group is connected to other groups and the larger organization
2. How the group operates in relationship to its external context.

What Happens in Real Groups in Real Organizations?

You are likely to be a member of many groups at the same time. Most people do not belong to just one team and focus all of their energy and talent on one primary task. Right now you are probably a member of many different kinds of groups.

There are multiple influences on what happens in your group. Groups and teams are connected to and genuinely influenced by what else is happening in an organization. If, for example, the organization is losing money and on a tight budget, then the lack of money affects how a group operates within the organization. A group does not do its work in isolation.

Another aspect of a bona fide perspective involves the other people who work in the group.

You are likely to have group members who communicate virtually. You may be assigned to work with others who are not in the same physical location as you; they may work in another city, state, or country. And even if your group does meet together face to face, it’s likely that you will exchange information via text, e-mail, Facebook, or other mediated means.

Real-Life Applications

What real-world applications does a bona fide perspective on groups have for the groups and teams to which we belong?

Read more

- If you’re a leader or manager in an organization, a bona fide perspective suggests that you need to be aware that the people who work under your supervision have multiple roles and multiple jobs. Just as your instructor needs to be aware that you’re likely taking more than one class, so should a manager realize that her or his employees are working on multiple projects at the same time.

- Remember that the groups and teams you work with today may not be the same groups and teams you work with tomorrow. Group membership changes. The changing composition of the group may result in the group’s having to go through numerous periods of reorientation as group members come and go.

- Group members may participate in the group via e-mail or phone and not face to face. Special effort must be made to integrate the long-distance group members into the fabric of the group.

- Remember that when people work on a group or team task, they are constrained by the environment of the larger organization in which they work. Groups do not work in isolation—group members are connected to others even though all they may be aware of is the interaction in the group or team in which they work.
Making Decisions and Solving Problems

ideas, evaluate information and solutions, and remain sensitive to others. Based on the work of several group communication researchers, the following specific communication functions are considered essential to effective problem solving.59

1. Analysis Function

Group members who effectively analyze information and ideas do several things:

- THEY ESTABLISH CLEAR CRITERIA. Groups and teams have their goal clearly in mind as they analyze the issues.
- THEY SEE THE PROBLEM FROM A VARIETY OF VIEWPOINTS. Individuals often look at a problem as it affects themselves. A skilled problem solver considers how the problem affects others, too, and is able to think about an issue from other people’s vantage points.60
- THEY GATHER DATA AND RESEARCH ISSUES. Good problem solvers do not rely on their own opinions. They spend time in the library or develop surveys to gather information and others’ opinions about an issue.
- THEY USE EVIDENCE EFFECTIVELY TO REACH A VALID CONCLUSION. Beyond just collecting evidence, a good problem solver needs to know how to use evidence to reach a conclusion.
- THEY ASK APPROPRIATE QUESTIONS. One big problem groups have is keeping the discussion focused on the issues. Members often bounce from one idea or topic to the next. Good problem solvers know this and use questions to help the group moving toward its goal. Questions such as “Where are we now?” or “What’s the next step in solving our problem?” or “Aren’t we getting off the track here?” can help the group get back to the task.


2. Idea-Generation Function

An essential aspect of a well-functioning problem-solving group is group members who are creative and inventive, who find ways to keep ideas flowing.

- THEY SEARCH FOR MANY ALTERNATIVES OR SOLUTIONS TO A PROBLEM. Effective groups are not content to have just one or two approaches to a problem. They identify many solutions that may help overcome the obstacles keeping the group from reaching its goal.

3. Evaluation Function

Being able to separate good ideas from bad ideas is a critical function of group members who are good problem solvers.

- THEY MAKE HIGH-QUALITY STATEMENTS TO THE GROUP. According to several researchers, high-quality statements are precise rather than rambling and abstract. They are also consistent with previous evidence and relevant to the topic under discussion, and they positively reinforce the comments of other group members.61
- THEY TAKE A VACATION FROM A PROBLEM TO REVITALIZE THE GROUP. If the group gets bogged down and cannot reach agreement, postpone further discussion if possible. Sometimes you get a burst of creativity when you are not even thinking about a problem.62 Have you ever had an idea come to you while you were jogging, driving somewhere, or taking a shower? Give your mind a chance to work on the problem by giving yourself a break from agonizing over a solution.


4. Personal-Sensitivity Function

As we have emphasized throughout the book, groups have both a task and a relationship dimension. Members of successfully
functioning teams or groups are other-oriented, empathic, sensitive to the needs of others, and thoughtful listeners.64

THEY ARE CONCERNED FOR BOTH THE GROUP TASK AND THE FEELINGS OF OTHERS. Being too task-oriented is not good for the overall group climate. Sensitivity to the feelings of others can enhance the group climate and foster a supportive, rather than a defensive, approach to achieving a group goal. One study found that group members who engage in storytelling, especially stories relevant to the task at hand, help the group balance the deliberative task talk with a more relationally focused story; the use of stories helps the group achieve a more effective outcome.65

THEY LISTEN TO MINORITY ARGUMENTS AND OPINIONS. It is always tempting to disregard the voice of a lone dissenter. That individual may, however, have a brilliant idea or a legitimate complaint about the majority point of view. Assume that all ideas have merit; do not discount ideas because they come from members who are not supporting the majority at the moment.


According to the functional perspective, effective group members take breaks when they are having trouble solving a problem, instead of agonizing over a solution. What activities help you generate ideas?

### Review

A Summary of Group Communication Functions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Functions</th>
<th>Characteristics of an Effective Group Problem Solver</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analysis function</td>
<td>Sees the problem from a variety of viewpoints</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idea-generation function</td>
<td>Searches for many solutions to a problem</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation function</td>
<td>Evaluates the pros and cons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal sensitivity function</td>
<td>Shows concern for both the group task and the feelings of others</td>
</tr>
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10.3.5: Prescriptive Approach

When the doctor gives you a prescription, he or she is telling you to do something very specific: Take a measured dose of a particular medicine to treat your medical problem. A prescriptive approach to group problem solving is based on the assumption that groups need more than a general understanding of how groups solve problems or what the key functions of group communication are. The prescriptive approach offers specific do’s and don’ts for structuring a group’s problem-solving agenda. Prescriptive approaches invite group members to perform certain behaviors in a specific order to achieve a group goal. Fisher describes the prescriptive approach as providing “guidelines, a road map, to assist the group in achieving consensus. A prescriptive approach is based on an assumed ‘ideal’ process.” According to Fisher, two assumptions underlie the prescriptive approach to problem solving: (1) Group members are consistently rational, and (2) the prescribed agenda or set of techniques will result in a better solution.

The descriptive approach to group problem solving and decision making helps a group understand how groups usually solve problems. The functional approach identifies tasks that should be performed to enhance the group’s effectiveness. The prescriptive approach offers specific recommendations for sequencing certain types of communication in a group. Which approach is best? Some scholars advocate the descriptive approach, pointing out that it does not constrain a group from its normal or natural process. These scholars reject the prescriptive approach as being too rigid. Others suggest that groups should consciously perform key functions to maximize effectiveness. Yet others contend that the prescriptive approach gives a group a needed structure for solving problems because working in groups often results in uncertainty and ambiguity. Arthur VanGundy categorizes problems as either structured or unstructured. An unstructured problem is one about which we have little information and thus high uncertainty. The more unstructured the problem, the greater the need for a prescriptive technique of gathering and analyzing information to solve the problem. One study suggests that leaders who give a group a structure by setting goals, monitoring time, and providing suggestions about procedure enhance the group’s perceived effectiveness. VanGundy has identified over 70 techniques that help provide structure to the problem-solving process.

Clearly each approach has its unique advantages. Draw on all three approaches as you work at becoming an effective problem-solving group participant. If the task is very simple, a group may not need a cumbersome, predetermined set of prescriptions. Research suggests, however, that if the task is complex (as many group tasks are) specific guidelines and procedures will help the group work more effectively.

In this chapter we have emphasized descriptive and functional perspectives. Elsewhere we describe in more detail prescriptive approaches, formats, and techniques to give you some options in structuring group problem solving.

Case Study

How to keep tuition low practice in applying principles

The Association of Student Governance (ASG), the campus student governing board of The State University (TSU), had heard rumors that a major tuition increase might take place next year. TSU was trying to be nationally recognized as a top-ranked university, and to do that the university president had decided to hire more faculty to have a favorable student-faculty ratio. Hiring faculty was expensive. Students were concerned, however, that hiring more faculty (a good thing) would increase the tuition so that many students wouldn’t be able to afford to attend TSU. So the ASG president appointed a student task force to study the issue and make a recommendation as to whether the ASG group would support a tuition increase or not.

Five students were appointed to the task force: Celeste, Bart, Sarah, Alex, and Tisha. Celeste was appointed chair of the task force; she was a communication studies major who had recently completed a course in group communication and had an open mind about the tuition increase. Bart, a pre-med major, really didn’t care how much tuition would cost; he thought he’d get a high-paying job after attending medical school and he could easily pay back any loans. Sarah, who recently transferred from a community college, planned on being a teacher and wanted the tuition to remain as low as possible. Sarah’s friends were hoping that she would also recommend no tuition increase. Alex, a music major, was planning on transferring to a music conservatory next year, so he didn’t really care what TSU’s new tuition would be. Tisha’s grandparents paid for her tuition so she had no real concern about tuition increasing. But she also wanted TSU to be nationally recognized so she agreed, prior to the task force’s discussion, that tuition should increase—a quality education is expensive.

When Celeste called the first meeting together she quickly determined that task force members already had their minds made up based upon their personal circumstances. Bart and Alex made it known they didn’t care whether tuition was increased or not. Sarah said if there was an increase she’d have to drop out. Tisha was predisposed to no increase but didn’t really care since her tuition was paid for. Celeste knew from her
Christopher Power found that females tend to ask more probing questions during group deliberations than do males. You need not travel abroad to experience different cultural perspectives. In the United States you are likely to encounter individuals with a wide range of cultural and ethnic traditions. Even within one region of the United States, group members may differ in their approaches to and assumptions about problem solving, collaboration, and teamwork.

What strategies can bridge these cultural differences? Consider these suggestions.

**DEVELOP MINDFULNESS.** To be mindful is to be consciously aware of cultural differences and to note that there are differences between your assumptions and the assumptions of others. Consciously say to yourself, “These group members may have a different assumption about how to accomplish this task. Before I impose my strategies on them, I’ll listen and make sure I understand what they are saying.”

**BE FLEXIBLE.** Realize that you may have to adapt and change according to the perceptions and assumptions others hold.

**TOLERATE UNCERTAINTY AND AMBIGUITY.** Working with others from a culture or cultures different from your own is bound to create a certain amount of uncertainty and confusion. Being patient and tolerant will help you manage cultural differences when collaborating with others.

**RESIST STEREOTYPING AND MAKING NEGATIVE JUDGMENTS ABOUT OTHERS.** Ethnocentrism is the assumption that your cultural heritage is superior. Assuming superiority when evaluating others typically produces defensiveness.

**ASK QUESTIONS.** An essential element of any effective team is common ground rules; these can best be established simply by asking others how they work and solve problems and about their preferences for establishing norms and ground rules.

**BE OTHER-ORIENTED.** Empathy and sensitivity to others are keys to bridging cultural differences. Although simply considering an issue from someone else’s point of view will not eliminate the difference, it will help enhance understanding.

One of the seven habits of highly effective people identified by Stephen Covey nicely summarizes this principle: Seek to understand before being understood.

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**Questions for Analysis**

1. Based on your knowledge about problem solving and decision making, is this group’s primary task to make a decision or solve a problem?

2. What barriers to group and team problem solving do you find evident in this group? What should be done to overcome the barriers?

3. Based upon how groups sometimes proceed when solving problems, what should Celeste expect to happen at group meetings?

4. How would you recommend Celeste organize the agenda of the meetings to ensure that the key functions of problem solving and decision making are achieved?

5. What could the group do to make sure that they properly analyzed the issues before making a recommendation? What information would be helpful in analyzing the issues?

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**10.4: Cultural Assumptions About Group Problem Solving and Decision Making**

10.4 **Explain how cultural assumptions influence group problem solving and decision making**

As we conclude this chapter, we remind you that assumptions about the descriptions, functions, and prescriptions of group and team problem solving and decision making will be filtered through the cultural perspective group members hold. Some cultures (notably those of the United States, Britain, and northern Europe) assume an individualistic approach to accomplishing work, whereas other cultures (such as Asian cultures) assume a collaborative or collectivistic mind-set.

In addition to culture, gender also contributes to group differences that researchers suggest influence how group members interact. For example, Katherine Hawkins and group communication course that the best decisions were made after thoroughly evaluating the information. She was determined to get the task force to make an informed decision rather than rely on preconceived personal opinions. Because TSU is a state-supported institution, all of the budget information for the university was available online, allowing access to a lot of information.
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the time for such wasteful meetings, yet you don’t want to quit the

Because you’ve taken a course in small-group communica-

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short

What would you do? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics

Imagine that you’re the vice president of the COMM Club, a group

Imagine that you’re the vice president of the COMM Club, a group

Chapter Quiz: Making Decisions And Solving Problems
Chapter 11
Using Problem-Solving Techniques

Learning Objectives

11.1 Identify five key strategies of prescriptive problem solving
11.2 Define and differentiate between group structure and group interaction
11.3 Use the steps and tools of reflective thinking to solve a problem in a small-group discussion
11.4 Apply the ideal-solution and single-question problem-solving methods to a group discussion
11.5 Determine which, if any, single problem-solving approach is the most suitable for a given group discussion

“All life is problem solving.”
—Karl Popper

Whenever we present corporate communication training seminars for executives or business leaders on the topic of group or team problem solving, we begin our session by asking a simple question: What do you want to learn about group problem solving? The responses of the trainees are predictable. They want to know precisely what to do to make working in groups and teams more effective. They ask questions like “How do I develop an agenda when the group has a problem to solve?” “What are the best techniques to help a group arrive at the best solution?” “What should I do to ensure that my team operates at peak efficiency?” They want precise prescriptions for success.
In the last chapter we introduced three approaches to understanding problem solving: descriptive, functional, and prescriptive. If you’re leading a group or are a member of a group, you could adopt a descriptive approach to problem solving and clue group members in to some of the processes and phases that groups experience when trying to solve problems. You could, in essence, give them a road map to help them understand how groups operate. Or you could hand out a list of the group functions—task requirements for groups: assess the problem, establish criteria, develop alternatives, and evaluate the pros and cons of the options identified, giving special attention to reviewing negative consequences of options you may consider.

There’s a third approach—the prescriptive approach to problem solving. To prescribe is to offer specific and sometimes detailed do’s or don’ts to help a group perform well. However, as there is no single best way to solve problems in groups, no list of prescriptive problem-solving techniques always works. Each group is unique, as is each group member. Yet evidence indicates that guiding a group through a structured agenda can enhance its effectiveness.¹

This chapter gives you several suggestions for solving problems in groups. We focus on the problem-solving task in this chapter and review prescriptions for enhancing creativity in the next chapter.

11.1: An Overview of Prescriptive Problem-Solving Strategies

11.1 Identify five key strategies of prescriptive problem solving

There are a vast number of specific strategies and techniques that can help you facilitate group problem solving.² Most include references to five key elements: (1) identify and define the problem, (2) analyze the problem, (3) identify possible solutions, (4) select the best solution, and (5) implement the solution. These steps outline the primary way most scientists in any discipline go about finding answers to puzzling questions. We will examine the origin of these steps as well as why they continue to be used to structure group problem-solving discussion.

11.1.1: The Origin of Prescriptive Problem Solving Strategies

In 1910, philosopher and educator John Dewey, in his book How We Think, identified the steps most people follow to solve problems. According to Dewey, a reflective thinker considers these key questions.³

1. What is the “felt difficulty” or concern?
2. Where is it located, and how is it defined?
3. What are possible solutions to the felt difficulty?
4. What are logical reasons that support the solution?
5. What additional testing and observation need to be done to confirm the validity of the solution?

These five steps should look familiar. They are very close to the five steps we just mentioned. Even though Dewey did not focus specifically on small groups, the steps he outlined, called reflective thinking—a series of logical, rational steps based on the scientific method of defining, analyzing, and solving a problem—have been used by many groups as a way to structure the problem-solving process. As new courses in group discussion were being designed in the 1920s and 1930s, teachers and authors adapted Dewey’s framework as a standard agenda that could be used to tackle any problem-solving group discussion. One of the first texts to adapt these steps explicitly was Alfred Dwight Sheffield’s brief book Creative Discussion: A Statement of Method for Leaders and Members of Discussion Groups and Conferences, first published in 1926.⁴ Soon other scholars began making similar references to this sequence, and, as you will see in the discussion that follows, it has become a standard agenda for structuring group problem solving.⁵

11.2: Finding a Balance Between Group Structure and Interaction

11.2 Define and differentiate between group structure and group interaction

Communicating with others in small groups to solve a problem is often a messy and disorganized process.⁶ Even though some researchers have identified distinct phases in the course of a group’s deliberation (orientation, conflict, emergence, reinforcement), others find that group discussion often bounces from person to person and can be an inefficient, time-consuming process.⁷ And groups also develop fantasy themes that can trigger a chain of stories—some that are related to the group’s task and some that are not. Although these stories and group fantasies are important to a group’s identity, extended off-task “storytelling” can have a negative effect on the group’s productivity.

To help group members manage the messiness of group discussion, a group needs a certain amount of structure to keep the discussion focused. Group structure consists of the agenda and other techniques and procedures to help a group stay focused on the task at hand.

A group also needs the energy that comes from interaction. Interaction is simply the give-and-take conversation
that occurs when people collaborate. We suggest that a group needs a balance of structure and interaction to be both efficient and effective.

11.2.1: Groups Need Structure

To counteract the messiness of group interaction, researchers investigating groups have suggested that an agenda be used to structure the discussion. The purpose of a group agenda is to help keep the discussion on track, not to stifle group interaction or consciousness raising. Robert Bales found that most task-oriented groups spend a little over 60 percent of their time talking about the task and almost 40 percent of their time talking about social, relational, or maintenance matters. An agenda ensures that the time spent talking about the task helps the group accomplish its goal.

Researchers have found that groups and teams that have no planned structure or agenda have many more procedural problems. Here’s a summary of what researchers have found by observing “naturally occurring” or unhindered discussion, where there is little or no structure.

1. The group takes more time to deliberate; interaction is inefficient and often off task.

2. Group members prematurely focus on solutions rather than analyzing issues.

3. The group often jumps at the first solution mentioned.

4. Group members hop from one idea or proposal to the next without seeing the larger issues.

5. The group is more likely to be dominated by an outspoken group member.

6. Conflict is likely to go unmanaged.

The conclusion to be drawn from this research: Groups and teams need help to keep them on track.

Of all the various ways to organize or structure discussion, which method seems to be the best? Many sequences of techniques have not been tested empirically. Among those sequences that have been compared in controlled studies, no single method seems to work best all of the time. One powerful conclusion, however, emerges from the research: Any method of structuring group problem solving is better than no method at all.

Groups need structure because members have relatively short attention spans and because uncertainty results both from the relationships among group members and from the group’s definition of the task. In separate studies, researchers found that groups shift topics about once a minute. As noted in the last chapter, Poole argues that group members consider task process, relational concerns, and topical shifts with varying degrees of attention. Thus, groups benefit from an agenda that keeps the discussion focused on their task. And one research study found that some members need more structure than others. Group members who have a preference for using more rigid procedures arrived at higher-quality decisions than those using a less-structured approach to organizing their discussion. Another benefit of structuring conversation in a group is that group members are more likely to remember information during a more structured, focused discussion than a less focused, free-wheeling conversation.

Having members first write information down and then share their information with the group increases the likelihood that they will remember what they share.

Think of the various steps and tools in this chapter as a way to impose a common structure on a group’s deliberation. Without that structure, a group is more likely to wobble, waste time, and be less productive.

11.2.2: Groups Need Interaction

In addition to a structured agenda and procedures to help the group stay on task, groups need interaction—give-and-take conversation, talk, dialogue, and reaction to the messages of others. A group that has too much structure and not enough interaction is a group out of balance; participating in such a group would be like listening to someone give a speech rather than engaging in an interactive discussion. In trying to find the right balance between structure and interaction, researchers have found support for the following principles:

- High quality contributions early in the group’s deliberation improve group performance.
- The more individuals share their information with others early in the group’s discussion, the more group performance improves.
- If group members not only share but also understand the value and importance of individual contributions, then group performance improves.

In order to achieve these principles, groups need facilitation to help balance structure and interaction so that all members participate.

In this chapter we identify techniques that not only help your group stay on track (structure) but also facilitate group conversation about the topic at hand (interaction). Ideally, a group should have balanced participation to which all members contribute. A group member who talks too much can throw the group off balance. As Figure 11.1 suggests, the goal is to find the right balance between structure and interaction. Based on his effective decision-making theory, John Oetzel has found that groups that have more equal participation enjoy better-quality results; this research supports the assumption that groups need balanced interaction to achieve their goals. Interaction and collaborative group discussion has the advantage of facilitating cooperation in the group. One research team found that group members who first had a collaborative discussion about a decision, before making an individual decision about the issue, were more likely to make a decision that benefited the
entire group. The very act of group interaction facilitates group cooperation. Some research studies suggest that groups that used networked computers to share information (a highly structured situation) generated lots of ideas but had difficulty reaching a decision. A less-structured, interactive, face-to-face situation was better for discussing alternatives and reaching a final decision. Many of the prescriptive agendas we discuss in this chapter incorporate the key communication functions of effective groups discussed in the last chapter.

Figure 11.1 The Balance Between Structure and Interaction

### 11.3: Reflective Thinking: The Traditional Approach to Group Problem Solving

#### 11.3 Use the steps and tools of reflective thinking to solve a problem in a small-group discussion

Some researchers and numerous group communication textbooks recommend reflective thinking (or one of its many variations) as the standard agenda for organizing or structuring group problem solving. However, many group communication theorists today believe that reflective thinking is more useful as a description of the way some people solve problems than as an ideal pattern for all groups to solve problems. We describe the procedures and tools that can assist you and your groups in organizing the sometimes uncertain and fractious process of problem solving. The steps we present here are not intended to be a one-size-fits-all approach. They do, however, provide a logical, rational way of structuring group interaction.

#### 11.3.1: Step 1: Identify and Define the Problem

Perhaps you have heard the saying “A problem well stated is a problem half solved.” A group first has to recognize that a problem exists. This may be the group’s biggest obstacle. The problem should be limited so that members know its scope and size. After members identify and limit the problem, they should define key terms in light of the problem under consideration so that they have a common understanding of the problem. For example, one student group recently decided to solve the problem of student apathy on campus. The students phrased their problem as a question: “What can be done to alleviate student apathy on campus?” They had identified a problem, but they soon discovered that they needed to decide what they meant by the word *apathy*. Does it mean poor attendance at football games? Does it mean a sparse showing at the recent fund-raising activity, “Hit Your Professor with a Pie”? After additional efforts to define the key word, they decided to limit their problem to low attendance at events sponsored by the student activities committee. With a clearer focus on their problem, they were ready to continue with the problem-solving process.

Researchers have consistently found that groups develop better solutions to their problems if they take the time to analyze the issues before jumping in and listing possible solutions; groups and teams have a tendency, however, to leap to a solution before looking at and analyzing the issues.

Consider the following questions when attempting to identify and define a problem for group deliberations:

1. What is the specific problem the group is concerned about?
2. What obstacles are keeping the group from its goal?
3. Is the question the group is trying to answer clear?
4. What terms, concepts, or ideas need to be defined?
5. Who is harmed by the problem?
6. When do the harmful effects of the problem occur?

When trying to pin down precisely what the problem is, groups should remember the principles of systems theory. It’s often not a single factor that is the cause of a problem; systems theory suggests that there are often multiple sources of a problem. As team researchers Peter Scholtes, Brian Joiner, and Barbara Streible put it, “Once people recognize that systems create the majority of problems, they stop blaming individual employees. They instead ask which system needs improvement, and are more likely to seek out and find the true source of improvement.”

#### Tools for Defining the Problem

In addition to using the questions listed above to identify and define the problem, three techniques that provide even more structure—the *is/is not* analysis, the journalist’s six questions, Pareto charts, and SWOT—may be useful when your group needs “super” structure to clarify and define the problem.

**IS/IS NOT ANALYSIS** The *is/is not* analysis technique is a way to ensure that a group is, in fact, investigating a problem and not just a symptom of the problem. Early in a group’s deliberation, group members consider such questions as “What is the area or object with the problem?” “What is not the area or object with the problem?” “Where does the problem occur?” “Where does the problem not occur?” The chart below includes other questions that can
help give the group the structure it needs to clearly identify and define a problem. Group members can use the chart to focus on the specific problem under consideration. Members could first write down their answers and then share their responses one at a time. Having group members write before speaking is a way to help further structure their comments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Is</th>
<th>Is Not</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What</td>
<td>What is not the area or object with the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symptoms</td>
<td>What are the symptoms of the problem?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>When is the problem observed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where</td>
<td>Where does the problem occur?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who</td>
<td>Who is affected by the problem?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For example, one group was attempting to investigate the declining standardized test scores in one elementary school in their community. They thought the problem they were trying to solve was inadequate teaching that resulted in lowered scores. But when the group used the is/is not technique to identify when and where the problem was and was not observed, they discovered that the low test scores occurred in only three classrooms, which were in the same wing of the building and all cooled by the same air-conditioning system. On further investigation, they realized that the air-conditioning units were not functioning, which meant that classrooms in that wing were uncomfortably hot—which in turn affected student performance on the examinations. The problem changed from trying to eliminate bad teaching to repairing the air-conditioning system. The is/is not technique is a way to identify and define the problem rather than the symptoms of the problem.

**JOURNALIST’S SIX QUESTIONS** Most news reporters are taught to quickly identify the key facts when writing a news story or broadcasting a news event. The key elements of almost any newsworthy story can be captured by addressing a journalist’s six questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? Using these questions can help a group quickly structure how a problem is defined. Group members could be given a worksheet such as the one downloadable here and asked to answer these six questions before the group’s next meeting. The group could then pool the results and be well on the way to analyzing the problem. Or, the group could brainstorm answers to these questions while the group leader records the responses on a flip chart or chalkboard.

**PARETO CHARTS** A Pareto chart is a bar graph that shows data that describe the cause, source, or frequency of a problem. The chart is arranged with the tallest bars on the left and the shortest bars on the right. A Pareto chart makes it easy to look at data and identify the source of the problem. The chart gets its name from the Pareto Principle. Perhaps you’ve heard it: *The source of 80 percent of the problem comes from 20 percent of the incidents.* Here are some examples: Eighty percent of the dirt on your carpet is on 20 percent of the carpet’s surface; 80 percent of the food you order comes from 20 percent of the menu; 80 percent of the conflict in a group is created by 20 percent of the group members. Most groups find that the primary source of the problem comes from only a few examples. When a group or team is struggling to figure out exactly what the problem is, a Pareto chart can help the group spot the issue easily.

Consider an example: One group was interested in why there were so many errors on financial aid statements at their university; students weren’t receiving their financial aid on time. They gathered data and found that 61 percent of the problem was caused by improperly completed financial-aid forms, 23 percent was related to errors in entering data into the computer, 4 percent of the mistakes were caused by the fact that students provided no phone number, and 3 percent arose because students did not provide their e-mail addresses. When the group displayed these data on a Pareto chart, as shown in Figure 11.2, they could easily see the main source of the problem—the forms weren’t being completed properly.

![Figure 11.2 Pareto Chart: Causes of Errors on Financial Aid Statements](image-url)
SWOT ANALYSIS  SWOT is an acronym for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. SWOT analysis is the technique used to help groups and teams identify and analyze big issues that influence the group or organization and can be helpful in both identifying and analyzing problems.

How do you conduct a SWOT analysis? Working individually or collectively as a group, you brainstorm a list of each of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats of the group or organization, or use a template like the one in Figure 11.3. As illustrated in Figure 11.3, note that both strengths and weakness are internal factors of the group or organization—these are factors that exist within the group or organization. Opportunities and threats are those forces external to the group or organization that serve as either an outside positive factor (opportunity) or something that may jeopardize (threaten) a current positive action.

With the SWOT identified, the next step is to rank order the information in each box: What is the greatest strength? What is our greatest weakness? What is our biggest opportunity? What is the most significant threat?

Figure 11.3  Analyzing Organizational Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats: SWOT

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<tr>
<th>Internal</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
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After identifying and ranking each of the four categories, the next step in the analysis is to consider the following questions:

1. How can we build on or maximize our strengths?
2. How can we overcome or reduce our weaknesses?
3. How can we take advantage of the opportunities?
4. How can we address the threats and potential threats?

A SWOT analysis can be used to identify problems by noting weaknesses, or could be a useful technique to analyze a problem.

11.3.2: Step 2: Analyze the Problem

Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald’s, was fond of saying that nothing is particularly hard if you divide it into small jobs. To analyze a problem is to break a problem into causes, effects, symptoms, and subproblems. During the analysis phase of group problem solving, members need to research and investigate the problem. In analyzing the problem, a group may wish to consider the following questions:

1. What is the history of the problem? How long has it existed?
2. How serious is the problem?
3. What are the causes of the problem?
4. What are the effects of the problem?
5. What are the symptoms of the problem?
6. What methods does the group already have for dealing with the problem?
7. What are the limitations of those methods?
8. How much freedom does the group have in gathering information and attempting to solve the problem?
9. What obstacles keep the group from achieving the goal?
10. Can the problem be divided into subproblems for definition and analysis?

How a group analyzes information it gathers can make all the difference in how a group frames issues and, ultimately, solves problems. There’s the story about a shoe factory manager who sends two marketing executives to Africa to scout out the possibility of selling shoes there. The first executive sends a telegram back to the home office saying: Situation hopeless. No one wears shoes. The other marketing executive writes excitedly: Glorious business opportunity. They have no shoes. Both executives had the same information; they simply analyzed the situation differently.

TOOLS FOR ANALYZING A PROBLEM  Groups may need help in breaking a problem down into its subcomponents. Two techniques can help a group sort out factors contributing to the problem: (1) force-field analysis and (2) cause-and-effect (fishbone) diagram. Each technique can help a group focus on data and facts rather than on vague impressions of what may be causing the problem.

FORCE-FIELD ANALYSIS  This technique is based on the assumptions of Kurt Lewin, often called the father of group dynamics. To use force-field analysis, a group needs to have a clear statement of its goal, which can be stated in terms of what the group wants more of or less of (for example, “We need more money, more time, or less interference from others”). The group analyzes the goal by noting what driving forces make it likely to be achieved and what restraining forces make it unlikely to be achieved.
Follow these steps to complete a force-field-analysis chart such as the one in Figure 11.4.28

**Step 1.** Identify the goal, objective, or target the group is trying to achieve (such as more money, fewer errors).

**Step 2.** On the right side of the chart, list all the restraining forces—those that currently keep the group from achieving its goal.

**Step 3.** On the left side of the chart, list all the driving forces—those that currently help the group achieve its goal.

**Step 4.** The group can now decide whether to do one of three things: (a) increase the driving forces; (b) decrease the restraining forces; (c) increase selected driving forces and decrease those restraining forces over which the group has control.

**Figure 11.4  Force-Field Analysis Chart**

**SOURCE:** Based on Julius E. Eitington, *The Winning Trainer* (Houston, TX: Gulf Publishing, 1989). Used with permission. All rights reserved.

After the group has sorted through the facts and identified the driving and restraining forces, it will more likely be able to focus on the essential causes of a problem rather than on the problem’s symptoms.

Say, for example, you are working in a group whose goal is to increase teamwork and collaboration among faculty and students. Driving forces—forces that favor teamwork—include such factors as faculty members who are motivated to work with students, students who also want to work with faculty, an existing training program that teaches teamwork and collaboration skills to both students and faculty. These and other driving forces could be included on the left-hand side of the force-field chart. Restraining forces—forces that work against increased collaboration—include current lack of knowledge of teamwork principles, the negative attitudes of a small but vocal group of faculty members who want to use more individual approaches to education, and the lack of a tradition of collaboration. These obstacles would be listed on the right side of the chart. Ideally, the group should work together on the force-field analysis diagram by using a flip chart or projecting the chart using an overhead projector. After generating additional driving and restraining forces, the group then turns its attention to the question “What can be done to increase the driving forces and decrease the restraining forces?” The group’s force-field analysis of the problem can provide new insights for overcoming the obstacles and achieving the goal.

**PROMOD Technique** Erich Witte developed and tested a way of structuring interaction in a group to ensure that the problem is effectively analyzed and that information gleaned from the analysis is shared with the entire group.31 PROMOD is designed to make sure group members have an opportunity to first individually analyze the problem or issue under consideration and then systematically share that analysis with other group members. Results from his research studies have concluded that by first individually structuring the analysis of the problem and development of solutions, and then sharing the information with the entire group, groups develop a better, high quality solution than if the group had not used the PROMOD Technique.

Witte suggests that group members first individually read a summary of the problem that also includes a digest of all the information and data known about the issue. Having the problem summarized in writing ensures that all group members are aware of the problem and have a common information base on which to base their analysis. The facilitation of the discussion is organized around four key steps that alternate between individual analysis and group sharing: (1) problem analysis (individual analysis), (2) information exchange (share analysis with the group), (3) problem resolution (individually identify a solution), and (4) group integration to reach consensus (work collaboratively to pool ideas and analysis to develop the best solution). Here’s a brief step-by-step summary of the PROMOD Technique.

**Step 1: Individual problem analysis**

- Group members individually read the information and underline, mark, or highlight important information found in the written summary of the problem.
- Group members individually identify possible strategies that would influence the problem, as well as analyze problems and risks for the alternative strategies.
- Group members individually identify possible decisions/solutions to manage the issue or problem.
- Group members individually rank the decisions/solutions from best to worse.
Step 2: Group information exchange

- Group members share written information and analysis among all group members.
- Group members then review their analysis with other group members.
- Collaboratively, group members compare the rankings of how the issue could be managed.

Step 3: Individual problem resolution

- Individually, group members revise their individual analysis and ranking of decisions.
- Group members privately make a final decision.
- Group members individually re-rank their list of solutions.

Step 4: Collaborative group integration

- Group members collaboratively share their revised decisions.
- Group members discuss the results and seek a consensus on the outcome.
- Group members make a decision either by consensus, majority vote, or group ranking to reach a final decision.

The essence of PROMOD Technique is to alternate individual analysis of the problem or issue with group sharing of the information. Writing down the analysis of the problem and then sharing that analysis assures that all group members’ ideas are considered. After a comprehensive analysis of the problem or issue, group members make an individual recommendation, and then the group collectively seeks to reach consensus.

CAUSE-AND-EFFECT (FISHBONE) DIAGRAM

Another problem analysis tool often used in groups and teams is the cause-and-effect diagram, also often called a fishbone diagram because the completed diagram looks like the skeleton of a fish. Developed by Kaoru Ishikawa, a Japanese specialist in quality management, this diagram helps groups and teams visually examine the relationship between causes and their probable effects.

To develop a cause-and-effect diagram, first think of the possible effect you want to analyze. For example, imagine your group is trying to identify possible causes in the drop in students’ standardized test scores in your community high school. The drop in test scores is the effect, but you aren’t sure what’s causing the drop. To prepare a cause-and-effect diagram, draw a long horizontal line on a piece of paper, chalkboard, or flipchart. Then, angling out from the long line, draw lines to represent possible causes of the drop in scores. Here you must use your analytical skills. For example, as illustrated in Figure 11.5, the major causes could be that the test-administration instructions are unclear; that parents are not involved; that teachers may not have time to prepare students for the test; or that students may have too many competing activities. Then, on each of the four angled lines, list possible contributing factors for each of the four main problem causes. For example, on the line suggesting that students have competing activities, you could draw lines to specify those competing activities. If you’re stumped for a way to get started analyzing the problem, Ishikawa suggested that almost all problems boil down to issues related to the “four M’s”: Manpower (people), Machines, Materials, and Methods. You could begin your analysis by drawing a line angling off the horizontal line to represent each of these four categories.

The advantage of the cause-and-effect diagram is that all group members can work together to show relationships between causes and effects. For groups and teams to collaborate, they need a common format that helps them collaborate. A cause-and-effect diagram creates that shared space in which to work. You don’t need to make your diagram complicated; you don’t always need four lines angling off the center line. Often, simpler is better. The key is to write down the potential causes so all group or team members can see the relationships among possible causes and the known effect. As suggested by management consultant Peter Scholtes, “One of the biggest challenges in creating a cause-and-effect diagram is to have the bones show cause-and-effect relationships.” He cautions that cause-and-effect diagrams only depict potential causes. Once you have a list of potential causes, your group will need to verify the relationship between the cause and the effect with data and evidence.

Figure 11.5 Cause-and-Effect (Fishbone) Diagram
HOW TO ESTABLISH CRITERIA  

Another task often part of the analysis step of the reflective-thinking process is to formulate criteria—standards or goals for an acceptable solution. Articulating criteria helps the group know when it has developed a good solution because the criteria spell out what the final outcome should look like. Here are some questions that can help your group develop criteria.

1. What outcome are we trying to accomplish?
2. How will we know when we have completed our task?
3. Which criteria or standards are most important?
4. Which criteria are less important?

For example, criteria for a solution might include the following:

1. The solution should be inexpensive.
2. The solution should be implemented by a certain date and time.
3. The solution should address the causes of the problem, not just the symptoms.
4. All group members should agree to the solution.

11.3.3: Step 3: Generate Several Possible Solutions

After analyzing a problem and identifying criteria for a solution, the group should turn its attention to listing possible solutions in tentative, hypothetical terms. It’s important that the group not be tempted to start listing solutions too early in the discussion; better solutions are more likely to emerge as the group exhausts the possibilities. Here are some tips for generating possible solutions:

- Conduct a force-field analysis via e-mail. After clarifying the group goal, assign some group members to identify the driving forces that would increase the likelihood of the goal’s being achieved. Others could submit a list of restraining forces. The information could be summarized and then discussed at the next meeting.

- Invite the group to do an analysis of the pros and cons of a particular solution via e-mail. But provide clear structure and directions as to precisely how group members should generate a list of pros and cons. Consider e-mailing each member a worksheet that includes specific directions for summarizing the advantages and disadvantages of a specific proposal.

Although we describe the setting of criteria as integral to analyzing the problem, the research literature is mixed as to when a group should explicitly identify criteria. One study found that the precise point during the problem-solving process when criteria were discussed did not seem to make a difference in the group’s final outcome.33 In fact, group members thought it made more sense to them to discuss criteria after they had identified several possible solutions. Consider this principle: The more uncertain group members are about the goal of the discussion, the more important it is to explicitly talk about criteria. If the goal is fairly obvious (for example, if a group is given the task of cutting 10 percent of a budget), then it’s probably not necessary to ask, “OK, what are we looking for in a solution?” Everyone already knows what the standard for the solution is. But if the goal is less clear-cut, it may be helpful to make sure that the group knows what the outcome of its discussion should be. One of the most important behaviors of an effective team is to develop a clear, elevating goal.34 Developing clear criteria is another way of ensuring that all group members know what the goal of the group is so that group members know when they’ve identified a good solution.

Virtual Groups

One of the ways a group can create structure is to do some of its work via e-mail. Rather than having people generate ideas face to face, assign group members some homework, to be submitted online. Or consider inviting group members to share their ideas for defining and analyzing problems via e-mail before meeting face to face.

Examples

- If a group is attempting to define a problem, take time during a face-to-face meeting to teach the group how to conduct is/is not analysis. Then each group member should complete an is/is not analysis and submit the information to one individual via e-mail. The person to whom the information is sent can then cull out duplicated information and prepare a summary of the information that the group can discuss at its next meeting.

- According to research, virtual group members do a poorer job of sharing information than face-to-face groups. So where possible, save the virtual group interaction to help analyze and evaluate information rather than sharing information.32

- At a face-to-face meeting, the group could begin a general discussion about the nature of the problem it is attempting to solve. Then group members can submit e-mail responses to the journalist’s six questions. One person can then collate and summarize the responses for the group to discuss.

occur when groups take time to thoroughly define and analyze the issues.

Creativity is needed at each step of the problem-solving process, but it is especially important when the group attempts to develop solutions. Creativity is such an important part of group deliberations that we devote the next chapter to discussing the principles and practices of group creativity.

11.3.4: Step 4: Evaluate Options and Select the Best Solution or Combination of Solutions

After a group has compiled a list of possible solutions to a problem, it should be ready to evaluate the various possible solutions and then select the best one. How do you narrow down a long list of proposed solutions? One way is to refer to the criteria proposed during the analysis stage of the discussion (or to take time now to develop criteria) and consider each tentative solution in light of these criteria. The group should decide which proposed solution or combination of solutions best meets its criteria. Narrowing a list of possible solutions down to one or two options is usually much harder for groups than generating options in the first place. The following questions may be helpful in analyzing the proposed solutions:

1. What are the advantages of each solution?
2. Are there any disadvantages to a solution? Do the disadvantages outweigh the advantages?
3. What would be the long-term and short-term effects of this solution if it were adopted?
4. Would the solution really solve the problem?
5. Does the solution conform to the criteria formulated by the group?
6. Should the group modify the criteria?

   If group members agree, the criteria for a best solution may need to be changed or modified.35

**TOOLS FOR EVALUATING THE SOLUTIONS** In addition to asking questions to guide discussion of the solutions or alternatives that the group has identified, the following are additional ways of focusing or structuring discussion.36

**ANALYZE THE PROS AND CONS** One of the most consistent findings of functional communication researchers is that when groups weigh the positive and negative outcomes of solutions, they make better decisions.37 One method of facilitating such a discussion is to make a **T-charts** (named for its shape), like the one here, to evaluate solution pros and cons. If the group is large and you want to make sure everyone participates, you can have members first write their own lists of pros and cons (or risks and benefits) and then share their responses with the group. For example, if a group is trying to decide whether to purchase a new piece of property, one side of the center line might list positive aspects of the purchase (good investment, property values increasing, good location, and so on). On the other side would be negative implications of the purchase (reduced cash flow, increased property taxes, expensive lawyer fees, and so on). A thorough look at pros and cons can help a group consider alternatives before it makes a final decision. Evidence suggests that groups often find more positive benefits than negative implications when evaluating the pros and cons.38 So make sure the group identifies both positive and negative outcomes when reviewing various options.

**AVERAGE RANKINGS AND RATINGS** It is usually easier for a group to identify possible solutions than it is to narrow the list of alternatives and select the best solution. If a group has many solutions to evaluate, one way to narrow the list is to ask group members to either rank or rate the solutions and then average the rankings or ratings to see which solutions emerge as the most and least popular. Ranking or rating should be done after a group has discussed the pros and cons of the solutions. Ranking solutions works best if you have no more than five to seven solutions; group members often have a difficult time ranking more than seven items. If you have a very long list of solutions—a dozen or more—you may ask the group members to rank their top five choices, assigning a rank of 1 to their top choice, 2 to their next choice, and so on. One researcher has found that asking the group to rank-order a list of possible alternatives is a better procedure than asking the group to pick the best solution. By ranking each option, group members are forced to critically evaluate each alternative.39

Besides ranking solutions, group members could also assign a rating score to each solution. Each solution could be rated on a five-point scale, with a rating of 1 being a very positive evaluation and 5 being a negative evaluation. Even a long list of 20 or more potential solutions could be rated. Group members’ ratings for each solution could be averaged, and the most highly rated solutions could be discussed again by the entire group.

11.3.5: Step 5: Test and Implement the Solution

Group members should be confident that the proposed solution is valid—that it will solve the problem. A classic way to make sure the solution works is to develop
a prototype of the solution. A prototype is a smaller version of the solution your team has developed, so you can test it before implementing the solution on a wide scale. For example, if your group has decided to design a new Web site for your organization to help promote events and communicate new policies, before making the Web site available to everyone, you should develop a sample or prototype Web page to see how it looks. You could then test it with a small group of people to see if the site is clear and does what you want it to do. When Thomas Edison and his team of researchers were developing the light bulb, they famously developed a prototype light bulb to test it before deciding “This is it!” and announcing their discovery to the world.40

If your group is developing a new procedure or process, you could plan a pilot program to test your process before implementing it. A pilot program allows testing the solution on a limited basis, or testing on a small sample of people, before making a final decision. Software designers often first release what they call a beta version (test version) of the software before fully releasing it for widespread distribution.

After a group selects the best solution, it must determine how the solution can be put into effect. You may wish to consider the following questions:

1. How can the group get approval and support for its proposed solution?
2. What specific steps are necessary to implement the solution?
3. How can the group evaluate the success of its problem-solving efforts?

In many groups, those who choose a solution are not the same people who will implement it. If this is the case, members who select the solution should clearly explain why they selected it to members who will put the solution into practice. If they can demonstrate that the group went through an orderly process to solve the problem, they usually can convince others that their solution is valid.

### TOOLS FOR IMPLEMENTING A SOLUTION

There are two key tools for implementing a solution: (1) an action chart and (2) a flowchart. An action chart is a grid that lists the tasks that need to be done and identifies who will be responsible for each task. Such a chart is based on more elaborate diagrams and procedures, such as a PERT diagram. PERT (the initials stand for Program Evaluation and Review Technique) was originally developed by the U.S. Navy in the late 1950s to assist with the Polaris missile program.41 The action chart here was developed by using the following steps:

1. Identify the project goal.
2. Identify the activities needed to complete the project.
3. Identify the sequence of activities (what should be done first, second, third, and so on).
4. Estimate the amount of time it should take to complete each task.
5. Determine which group members should be responsible for each task.
6. Develop a chart that shows the relationships among the tasks, times, people, and sequence of events that are needed to accomplish the project.

One reason solutions are not implemented is that people are uncertain about who should do what. An action chart provides needed structure to reduce this uncertainty. An action chart also helps ensure that everybody is aware of what needs to be done and reduces the risk that nobody will do anything.

A flowchart is a step-by-step diagram of a multistep process. Consider an example: One group was charged with choosing and carrying out a fund-raising activity. The chart in Figure 11.6 shows how the group described the essential steps involved holding a fund-raiser.

Flowcharts can help a group see whether the various procedures they have identified to solve a problem are practical and fit together. A flowchart can also help your group work through logistics and identify practical

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<th>Daryl</th>
<th>Steve</th>
<th>Janice</th>
<th>Carl</th>
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<th>Write behavioral objectives</th>
<th>Develop training content outline</th>
<th>Write training facilitator guide</th>
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Names

Ken

Daryl

Steve

Janice

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Assignment

Conduct needs assessment

Write behavioral objectives

Develop training content outline

Write training facilitator guide

Develop audio-visual resources

Conduct training pilot test

Conduct training for client

Analyze evaluation data

Week

Week 1

Week 2

Week 3

Week 4

Day

Monday

Friday

Monday

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Monday

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Friday
problems of moving from an idea’s conception to its implementation. Like an action plan, a flowchart is a way to give structure to group thought. Flowcharts can be simple, like our example, or very complex, like those used by computer programmers when writing sophisticated programs.

How detailed does a flowchart need to be? The level of detail depends on the needs of the group. We caution you, however, not to make the flowchart so detailed that your goal becomes developing a flowchart rather than describing and implementing a process. Use a flowchart as a tool to make sure all group members have a clear understanding of the critical parts of a more complex process.

11.3.6: How to Use Reflective Thinking in Your Group or Team

Reflective thinking assumes that groups work best when their discussions are organized rather than disorganized or random. Remember that you should use reflective thinking as a guide, not as an exact formula for solving every problem. As noted earlier, several group communication researchers have discovered that groups do not necessarily solve problems in a linear, step-by-step process. The process by which groups solve problems goes through several phases of growth and development as members interact. Reflective thinking is most useful in helping groups understand the phases of problem solving. As Ernest Bormann has noted, “Difficulties arise when [group] participants demand rationality from a group throughout its deliberations.”

In trying to apply reflective thinking to group problem solving, consider the following suggestions.

1. **TAKE TIME TO REFLECT ON THE PROCEDURES THE GROUP IS USING AND HOW GROUP MEMBERS ARE INTERACTING.** To reflect is to consciously consider precisely how the group and individual group members are talking with one another. Is the group following a structured plan? Are group members first analyzing the problem before generating solutions? Is the group aware of how it’s communicating? Research supports the process of having at least one group member reflect and verbalize how the group is doing in following procedures and communicating effectively. Groups that don’t have someone helping them reflect perform less effectively. Reflecting helps both face-to-face and electronically mediated groups.

2. **CLEARLY IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM YOU ARE TRYING TO SOLVE.** Make sure that you are not just discussing a topic. For example, one group decides to discuss the quality of the U.S. judicial system. The group selects a topic area, but it does not identify a problem. It should focus clearly on a specific problem, such as “How can we improve the quality of the judicial system in the United States?” or “What should be done to improve the education and training of lawyers in the United States?”

3. **PHRASE THE PROBLEM AS A QUESTION TO HELP GUIDE GROUP DISCUSSION.** Stating your group’s problem as a question adds focus and direction to your deliberations.

4. **DO NOT SUGGEST SOLUTIONS UNTIL YOU HAVE ANALYZED THE PROBLEM.** Many group communication researchers agree that until your group has researched the problem, you may not have enough information and specific facts to reach the best solution.

5. **IN THE DEFINITION AND ANALYSIS STEPS OF REFLECTIVE THINKING, DO NOT CONFUSE THE CAUSES OF THE PROBLEM WITH ITS SYMPTOMS.** A fever and headache are symptoms, not necessarily causes, of a patient’s ill health. The cause may be a cold or flu virus or a number of other things. A doctor tries to identify the cause of symptoms by running tests and
analyzing a patient’s medical history. In other words, a doctor needs to define, analyze, and solve a problem. You should try to clarify the differences between the causes and the symptoms (effects) of a problem. Perhaps your only goal is to alleviate the symptoms. However, you can better understand your group’s goal if you can distinguish causes and symptoms.

6. **CONSTANTLY EVALUATE YOUR GROUP’S PROBLEM-SOLVING METHOD.** For many years the only problem-solving method suggested to group-discussion classes was reflective thinking. Some communication theorists suggest, however, that for certain types of problems, alternative problem-solving methods work just as well, if not better, than reflective thinking. The final part of this chapter discusses some of these other problem-solving strategies.

7. **APPOINT ONE OR MORE GROUP MEMBERS TO REMIND THE GROUP TO USE A STRUCTURED METHOD OF SOLVING PROBLEMS.** One study found that groups in which one member is trained to help the group be mindful of the procedures it uses will make high-quality decisions. Raters were trained to remind the group to use effective problem-solving and decision-making skills by asking the following questions at appropriate times:

   Do we have enough evidence to support our choice of solution?
   
   Have we looked at a sufficient number of alternatives?
   
   Have we reexamined alternatives we rejected previously?
   
   Have we avoided stereotypical thinking or premature judgments?

Because you’re taking a course in small group communication, you now know the importance of helping a group stay on track and be vigilant thinkers, so you can periodically ask these questions. Even if you’re not the appointed leader of a group, you can have a positive impact on the quality of the group’s discussion by helping the group examine its process.

11.4: **Question-Oriented Approaches to Problem Solving**

11.4 Apply the ideal-solution and single-question problem-solving methods to a group discussion

Another approach to problem solving requires groups to consider a series of questions to keep them oriented toward their goal. Two such approaches are discussed in the following sections: (1) the ideal-solution format and (2) the single-question format. Both formats help groups identify the critical issues they need to resolve and organize their thinking about the best possible solutions.

**11.4.1: Ideal Solution Format**

Obviously, problem-solving groups want to identify the best solutions to problems. In the **ideal-solution format**, groups answer questions designed to help them identify ideal solutions. Alvin Goldberg and Carl Larson have devised the following agenda of questions:

1. Do all members agree on the nature of the problem?
2. What would be the ideal solution from the point of view of all parties involved in the problem?
3. What conditions within the problem could be changed so that the ideal solution might be achieved?
4. Of the solutions available, which one best approximates the ideal solution? These questions help groups recognize the barriers that the problems under consideration have created. The questions also encourage groups to analyze a problem’s cause and to evaluate proposed solutions. The advantage of the ideal-solution format over other problem-solving approaches is its simplicity. Group members simply consider each of the above questions one at a time. One expert recommends the ideal-solution format for discussions among people with varied interests; this format works best when acceptance of a solution is important. The format enables group members to see the problem from several viewpoints in their search for the best solution.

   Although the ideal-solution format is similar to reflective thinking, its chief value is that it uses questions to help a group systematically identify and analyze a problem, pinpoint the best possible solution, and formulate specific methods for achieving a solution. Like the other problem-solving formats presented in this chapter, it helps a group—particularly one whose members have varying viewpoints and experiences—to focus on a problem and devise ways to solve it in a rational, structured way.

11.4.2: **Single-Question Format**

Like the ideal-solution format, the **single-question format** poses a series of questions designed to guide the group toward a best solution. Goldberg and Larson suggest that the answers to the following five questions can help a group achieve its goal:

1. What question does the group need to answer in order to accomplish its purpose?
2. What subquestions must be answered before the group can answer the single question it has formulated?
3. Does the group have sufficient information to answer the subquestions confidently?
4. What are the most reasonable answers to the subquestions?

5. Assuming that the answers to the subquestions are correct, what is the best solution to the problem?\(^{51}\)

Unlike the ideal-solution format, the single-question format requires a group to formulate a question to help obtain the information needed to solve a problem. The single-question format also helps a group identify and resolve issues that must be confronted before it can reach a solution. As Goldberg and Larson note, “An assumption of the single-question form seems to be that issues must be resolved, however tentatively.”\(^{52}\) Thus, the single-question format probably works best for a group that is capable of reaching agreement on what the issues are and how they can be resolved. A group characterized by conflict and contention would probably not find the single-question approach productive.

The success of the single-question format depends on a group’s agreeing on the subissues before trying to agree on the major issues. If you are working with a group that has difficulty reaching agreement, the single-question format may not be the best approach. The group may become bogged down arguing about trivial matters while the major issues remain unexamined. Decide whether your group will be able to reach agreement on the minor issues before you decide to use the single-question format. If your group cannot reach agreement, either the ideal-solution format or the reflective-thinking format may be a better method of organizing your group’s deliberations.

11.4.3: How to Use Question-Oriented Approaches in Your Group or Team

You may have noticed some similarities among the single-question, the ideal-solution, and the reflective-thinking formats. By guiding groups toward their goals with questions, the ideal-solution and single-question formats help groups agree on minor issues before they try to agree on solutions to problems. Carl Larson tried to find out whether an ideal-solution, single-question, or reflective-thinking format, or no format at all, would produce better solutions.\(^{53}\) His study indicates that ideal-solution and single-question formats generated better solutions than did the reflective-thinking approach. All three approaches fared better than no approach at all.

Of course, a single study does not prove that the single-question and ideal-solution formats are superior to the reflective-thinking format, but it does suggest that under certain conditions, goal-oriented approaches may have certain advantages. In Larson’s study, when groups were given alternatives and told to choose the best solution to a problem, their discussions lasted only about twenty minutes. That is, by considering specific questions, members were able to solve problems efficiently. Norman Maier also concluded that a problem-solving approach that has a group consider minor issues before major issues can improve group decisions.\(^{54}\)

LEADING A GROUP DISCUSSION If you are going to lead a group discussion, the following suggestions may help you apply the ideal-solution and single-question approaches to problem solving:

1. **WHEN USING THE IDEAL-SOLUTION OR SINGLE-QUESTION APPROACH, PROVIDE GROUP MEMBERS WITH COPIES OF THE QUESTIONS THAT WILL GUIDE THEIR DISCUSSION.** You can reduce some of the uncertainty that occurs normally in groups by making sure that each person knows the procedure. Tell the group to use the questions as a guide.

2. **EXPLAIN WHY YOU ARE USING THE FORMAT YOU HAVE SELECTED.** Most groups are willing to go along with a particular discussion agenda, especially if you give them reasons for having selected it. Tell the group that considering specific questions in a developmental format can keep the discussion on track. If your group has a specified time period in which to meet, you can explain that using questions to guide the discussion can help make the discussion more efficient.

3. **KEEP THE DISCUSSION FOCUSED ON THE SPECIFIC QUESTION UNDER CONSIDERATION.** Whether the group is using the ideal-solution or single-question format, some group members may be tempted to skip a question or may want to discuss an unrelated issue. You may have to help the group...
focus on one question at a time. Several studies suggest that groups with members who try to keep participants aware of the pertinent issues by summarizing the discussion and requesting clarification have a good chance of agreeing on a solution and of being satisfied with their discussion.55

4. AGREE TO USE A COLLABORATIVE APPROACH TO SOLVING THE PROBLEM. Frank LaFasto and Carl Larson suggest that the single-question format can be enhanced if group members explicitly consider the question “What principles should we agree on in order to maintain a reasonable and collaborative approach through the [problem-solving] process?”56 Consider this question early in the problem-solving process. Making collaboration a problem-solving value can enhance teamwork and cooperation.

Putting Principles into Practice

When Should You Make a Decision Based on Careful Analysis and When Should You Trust Your “Gut Instincts”?

In this chapter we’ve presented several structured group problem-solving methods that provide step-by-step techniques for developing criteria and analyzing information when making decisions? But are there times when you should rely more on your intuition rather than on detailed analysis of data?

Research by Erik Dane, Kevin Rockmann, and Michael Pratt suggests that in some instances, you can have better results if you rely on your “gut instincts” rather than your head to make decisions and solve problems.57 These researchers had people evaluate how effectively a basketball player played basketball. In one condition the subjects were told to just rely on their intuition and first impression; in another condition subjects developed and used an elaborate method of establishing criteria and then analyzing each basketball shot. They were told not to rely on their intuition. The researchers also wanted to know if the subjects’ ability and experience in playing basketball was a factor in determining whether intuition or detailed analysis made a difference in how well they could evaluate the basketball players.

What they found out was that subjects that had a lot of basketball experience and skill more accurately assessed the quality of the basketball play when relying on intuition rather than when using a detailed system of developing criteria and then carefully analyzing data.

Real-Life Applications

What are the implications of these findings as well as other research about intuition when making decisions and solving problems in small groups?58

- Relying on your intuition can be more effective if the task is to make an overall judgment or impression of quality.
- Carefully establishing criteria and using a detailed method of analysis is more effective if your group is solving a complex, highly structured problem.
- Don’t ignore your “gut instincts” and intuition, especially if you are an expert or have considerable experience.
- If you and other group members have limited experience or expertise, then it’s best to use a more structured technique that emphasizes a careful analysis of data and information.


11.5: Beyond Technique

11.5 Determine which, if any, single problem-solving approach is the most suitable for a given group discussion

Throughout this book we’ve offered skills, strategies, tips, and techniques for improving group process. We conclude this chapter with a caution: Participating in groups and teams is more than simply applying “how to’s.” As we’ve repeatedly noted, communicating in groups and teams is often a zipping, buzzing, humming, halting, and cacophonous process. Systems theory teaches that group communication is an interrelated, fragile process in which each person or element affects the entire group. Group and team research has not advanced to a state where we can certify that using the various techniques we’ve discussed will always result in high-quality solutions and decisions. Working in a group is more complicated than that.59

How do you know when to adopt a specific technique to help improve a group’s process? The key, we believe, is to listen to your group, watch, observe, and identify what the group needs at a given time. In a word: adapt. Adapt to the needs of the group rather than assuming that a predetermined strategy or technique will somehow miraculously help the group or team achieve a breakthrough. If the group seems confused, disoriented, or stuck when defining or analyzing the task in front of it, then a more structured technique such as the cause-and-effect diagram or
force-field analysis may be what the group needs. But if the group is making progress, we don’t recommend that you haul out a group technique such as is/is not analysis, a fishbone diagram, a T-chart, or some other structured technique. The power of a group does not reside in technique. In fact, group researchers have had some difficulty documenting precisely what makes a group successful—and we don’t believe groups will always be successful. There is no one approach or technique that always works.

Use your knowledge of group problem-solving techniques in combination with your understanding of group process to assess whether your group needs the structure of a specific technique or tool. Effective groups and group members use techniques and strategies thoughtfully to help them make progress toward their goal depending on what is (or is not) happening in the group. Use techniques wisely.

Case Study

Who Loses Their Job

You are one of the managers of a department store in your community. You have just been informed by your supervisor that one of your employees will have to be laid off because of company cutbacks. You meet with your managerial colleagues to decide which employee will be chosen. All employees are full-time, and all work the same number of hours. There is one formal rule you have to follow: The reason for laying a person off must be job-related. Which of the following employees would you and your colleagues choose? Make the best decision you can with the limited information you are given. Be prepared to discuss the reasoning behind your group’s decision.60

Masha. Aged 33, married, with two children, Masha has worked for the company for five years. She loves her job and requires little or no supervision. You have considered giving her a promotion when the opportunity arises. Other people go to Masha when they have questions because she is good at training others. She has been going to school part time to get a management degree and will graduate in another year.

Bob. Aged 49, divorced, with one child, Bob has worked with the company for 22 years. He keeps to himself but always gets work done. You never have to give Bob instructions because he knows his job so well. Others in the department call him “Pop” because he seems like a father figure to everyone and is well liked. He really adds a great deal of stability to your department. You put Bob in charge in your absence.

Trent. Aged 19, single, a Native American, Trent just began working for your company 11 months ago. He went to an accelerated school as a child and started college when he was 15 years old. He has since graduated with a business degree and shows promise of going far in your company. He is already the best salesperson in your department. Most people get along with him well. Because he is new, Trent needs a lot of training, but his sales are worth your extra time.

Madeline. Madeline is 25, married, and three months pregnant. She transferred to your store only last month but has over three years total experience in the company. You have not been very satisfied with her attendance because she is calling in sick a lot. However, she is the only person that you feel you can give your most difficult tasks to because she is very thorough. She also has had more customer compliments than any other person in your department.

Catrina. Catrina is 40, single, has three children, and is a recovering alcoholic. She fulfills a very necessary function in your department by doing maintenance work, which no one else really has time for. Catrina is efficient and is never late; however, she does not really associate with the others. She has worked with the company for over 10 years but she cannot read or write; it is likely that this is one of the few places she could find work.

Antonio. Aged 27, single, with no children, Antonio has worked for two years in your department, and in that time he has won three awards for creating outstanding merchandise displays (the heart and soul of retail). He is your most conscientious worker and keeps your department looking great. You have wondered, though, whether he comes to work under the influence of drugs. Several customers have complained about poor grooming habits and language he uses. In the last month, however, he has made significant improvements.

Questions for Analysis

1. What is the problem facing your group?

2. What criteria did your group use to help develop a solution?

3. How would you assess the balance between structure and interaction in your group?

4. Before making a decision, how did your group assess the advantages and disadvantages of each option?

5. Did your group use any specific problem-solving or decision-making technique to help structure the discussion? If not, which structured technique could you have used to create a balance between structure and interaction and produce a good solution?

SHARED WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

You have been assigned to work with four other students on a semester-long project that counts for 30 percent of your course grade. All members of your group will share the same grade. One member of your group, Enrique, has two small children to support
and, in addition to attending your university, holds down a full-time job at a convenience store. You like and admire Enrique. He’s a friendly person who is working hard to take care of his family. But he just isn’t following through on his share of the work for your group. Enrique has missed almost half of the meetings, yet he e-mails everyone now and then with information and statistics to try to do his part, but he has clearly contributed less to the group than the other group members. Toward the end of the semester his two-year-old becomes ill and Enrique has to spend even more time away from the group.

Although your instructor in the course hasn’t asked for information about how well other group members followed through on their work assignments, you’re concerned that your entire group may get a lower grade due to Enrique’s failure to do his fair share of the work. Other group members say, “Oh, cut him some slack. He’s gotta do what he’s gotta do.” You’re the only group member who is upset about the imbalance of work. Would you tell your instructor about the lopsided workload, or just keep quiet?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.
Chapter 12
Enhancing Creativity in Groups and Teams

“If you act like an idea person, you will become one.”
—Michael Michalko

Kutol, the company that made the product “Magic Wallpaper Cleaner” since the early 1900s, was in trouble. Because fewer people were heating their homes with coal, there was less of a need for the flour-based paste used to clean wallpaper. Sales were plummeting. By the mid-1950s the company was barely making it. But that’s when Joe McVicker, son of the founder of the company, heard his sister-in-law
complain that she couldn’t find modeling clay for her young elementary school students. Joe wondered, “Could our Magic Wallpaper Cleaner be used as modeling clay?” He sent his sister-in-law some of his product and history was made. The dough was perfect for the children to play with. You now know it as Play-Doh. Joe McVicker became a millionaire by the time he was 27. Although it sometimes happens by chance, you never know where that great idea for the next creative breakthrough will come from.

Groups and teams are tremendous incubators of creative ideas. It’s been said that the best predictor of longevity in individuals or groups is the well-known principle of “survival of the fittest.” However, rather than fitness or brute strength, it may be that the “survival of the most creative” is what predicts long-term success.

One of the key prescriptive steps in solving problems that we introduced in the last chapter is the ability to generate options and discover new approaches to problem solving. In this chapter, we turn our attention to the principles and practices of enhancing creativity in groups and teams. Specifically, we define creativity and discuss why it’s so important for group and team members. We review commonly held myths about creativity and note barriers that inhibit creativity in groups, as well as identify characteristics that nurture the creative split. In the last part of the chapter, we offer specific methods and prescriptive strategies for structuring creative interaction in groups and teams.

12.1: What is Creativity?

12.1 Define creativity

Many people have defined creativity—one research duo counted over 100 different definitions of creativity. The definition we like best has been distilled from several approaches to creativity. Creativity is the generation, application, combination, and extension of new ideas. Essentially, to be creative is to invent something new that wasn’t in existence before you invented it. In the context of groups and teams, we’re not necessarily talking about inventing a tangible object (although a group could very well create something real), but inventing or creating a new idea, strategy, principle, or approach to solving a problem. Some researchers make a distinction between creativity (thinking of new ideas) and innovation—putting new ideas into action. Communication scholar Phil Clampitt describes innovation as including four steps: (1) idea generation, (2) feasibility analysis, (3) reality testing, and (4) implementation. Innovation extends the notion of creativity by transforming a creative idea into something that is put into practice. Usually group members want not only to develop creative ideas but also to implement them. Another research team found that people who draw upon their intuition to make creative decisions ultimately make better decisions. These same researchers suggest that when we use our intuition to make decisions we may not be completely conscious of what we’re doing—intuition is a holistic, sometimes unconscious process of making a judgment. Creativity researcher Jill Nemiro suggests that creativity and innovation are really intertwined. Both involve the generation of something, whether an idea or product, that didn’t exist before. So, whether you call that being creative or being innovative, it’s essentially the same process—creating something new that wasn’t there before and then using what you create.

Just as problem solving has phases, researchers have identified predictable phases in group creativity. Interestingly, Nemiro found parallel phases in face-to-face and virtual teams that are involved with developing creative ideas.

1. Idea generation phase: Group members actively identify a range of new ideas, possibilities, and approaches to the issue at hand.
2. Development phase: Ideas are extended and additional information is gathered to support the initial nuggets of ideas.
3. Finalization and closure phase: The group agrees on the best ideas.
4. Evaluation phase: The team assesses the value and worth of the ideas selected.

Because this book is about small group communication, we’re more interested in creative messages than in the mental and psychological processes of creativity. Although some books provide detailed commentary about how the brain functions in creative contexts, communication researchers are more interested in such questions as “What should people say or do to enhance creativity?” and “How does a group or team organize the agenda of a meeting to produce a creative solution or outcome?” Of course, the psychological or mental aspects of creativity are clearly linked to how we talk and what we do. But interaction and dialogue are what communication researchers focus on most, and those are our focus in this chapter.

12.2: Why Study Creativity?

12.2 Identify reasons for studying creativity

Long ago the ancient Romans identified invention as one of the classical canons, or key elements, of the communication process. Invention is the process of developing new ideas as we communicate with others and attempt
to persuade them to adopt our ideas and suggestions. Being inventive or creative is just as important today. Especially in groups and teams, it’s vital to be able to generate and articulate ideas and suggestions. Research suggests that in addition to using our logical and analytical powers, our intuition can help us make high-quality decisions. 9

But you may be wondering whether systematically studying creativity is useful. Can people be trained to be more creative? The answer to the “Why study creativity?” question is unequivocal: Yes, people who are trained to be more creative are, in fact, more creative. 10 As we’ve suggested many times throughout this book, there are no surefire techniques that always enhance a person’s skill. But several research studies suggest a clear link between being trained in creative skills and the resulting “creative competence” of the individuals taught. Whether it focuses on elementary school children or adults, research clearly suggests that creativity can be learned. 11

Roger Firestien was particularly interested in the effects of creative problem solving training on communication behaviors in small groups. 12 Group members in the trained group were taught a six-stage model of creative problem solving:

Step 1. Mess finding: Isolating a concern or problem on which to work.
Step 2. Data finding: Generating and selecting the most important data regarding the mess.
Step 3. Problem finding: Generating and selecting a statement that captures the “essence” of the situation.
Step 4. Idea finding: Generating and selecting the best available alternative(s) for solving the problem.
Step 5. Solution finding: Using criteria to screen, select, and support ideas selected in idea finding.
Step 6. Acceptance finding: Generating ways to implement the solution and developing a plan for action. 13

Firestien’s research found clear evidence that trained group members used humor to enhance the creative process and were more supportive and less critical of the ideas suggested by others (a very important element of being creative). Ultimately, groups that received training in creative problem-solving techniques produced many more ideas than did groups that had not.

So, why learn about creativity? Because being creative is an essential skill, and there is ample evidence that people who learn creativity do’s and don’ts are more creative.

WRITING PROMPT
Imagine that the president of your university has appointed you to a task force to identify strategies to keep your campus community safe. Apply the six-stage model of problem solving to identify solutions and ways the solution could be accepted by faculty, students, and members of the community. Write a brief response that will be read by your teacher.

12.3: Myths About Creativity

12.3 Describe three myths about group and team creativity

Although you may be convinced of the value of learning creativity skills, you may still find the process clouded in mystery. Many people harbor misconceptions about who can be creative and how creativity works. Let’s consider three common misunderstandings or myths about the creative process. 14 Discrediting these myths can give you insight into how you can enhance your own creative powers.

12.3.1: Creativity Myth 1: Creativity is a Mysterious Process That Can’t Be Learned

Research clearly documents that people can learn to be more creative. 15 And as for its being a mysterious process—yes, we’re still learning more about how the brain works, both from a biological and from a psychological perspective, but as you will learn in this chapter, there are some well-documented principles and strategies that have been demonstrated to enhance creativity. It’s a mistake to think that you can’t enhance your creative skill. Labeling yourself as “uncreative” can become a self-fulfilling prophecy: If you think you can’t learn to be creative, you won’t. So, don’t buy in to the myth that you can’t improve your creative skills. There is clear evidence that you can.

12.3.2: Creativity Myth 2: Only a Few Gifted People Are Creative

Most of us have been around someone who has a special creative talent. Maybe someone in your family is gifted in art, music, or drama and you think that only certain people can be creative. While it’s true that some people have special talents in the creative arts, or just seem to have a knack for coming up with new, creative ideas, most people can be taught to enhance their creative skill. And if you’re one of the talented people who have creative ability, there is evidence that you can further enhance your creative skills with both knowledge and practice.
12.4: Barriers to Group and Team Creativity

12.4 Identify barriers to group and team creativity

Having had your misconceptions about creativity dispelled, you might expect your own creativity to start flowing unchecked. But research has identified several conditions and behaviors that inhibit creativity. We’ll identify them so you can spot them and eliminate them from your group and team collaborations.

12.4.1: Premature Evaluation of Ideas

Creativity is often inhibited by inappropriate evaluation of ideas as they are shared with the group. If group members feel that their ideas will be negatively evaluated, they will be less likely to share them with the group. Several of the techniques that we discuss later in the chapter specify that ideas not be evaluated in any way when they are first offered to the group. Eventually, ideas and suggestions need to be sorted through, and the best ideas should be chosen from those offered. But when members first offer ideas, avoid pouncing on them—you not only eliminate the idea you criticize but also potentially eliminate other ideas that might have been forthcoming from your group or team members.

12.4.2: Poor Physical Surroundings

Our creative abilities are affected by our physical space. It’s hard to be creative if your group meets in a dingy, poorly lit, drafty, or too warm location. If too many people are crowded around a cramped table or in a room that wasn’t designed for that size of group, creative juices will be less likely to flow. Distractions such as outside noise can also inhibit creativity.

12.4.3: Too Many People

In a large group—say, more than 12 to 15 people—it’s difficult to have equal participation when the group shares ideas orally. Research clearly documents that communication apprehension is very real. Many people are fearful, not just of giving a speech but also of speaking up in a group. Yet people who are anxious about speaking up may have just the creative idea your group needs. Asking people to be creative in a large group or conference setting may achieve some results, but many people will not generate as many creative ideas as they might in a smaller group.

12.4.4: Poor Timing

It sometimes takes time for groups to be creative. Not giving group members enough time to let ideas bubble up can reduce the group’s creativity. On the other hand, some groups may be galvanized into action if given a tight deadline. One study found that when a group was given a tight deadline it went into high gear and was highly productive—but that productivity wasn’t very creative. Yet later on, when the same group was given another tight deadline, creativity increased. They may have learned to deal with tight deadlines and thus
improved their creativity. Another study found that when given longer periods in which to do their work, groups were more creative. The key to interpreting these studies may lie in looking at what the group does with the time it has. A group is either on task or off task. If a short time period can spur a group to focus on its task, then a short time period may be best. Depending on the nature of the creative task, group members may need more time to accomplish high-quality results. Group leaders and participants should monitor how time affects the level of creativity of the group.

12.4.5: Stinking Thinking

Zig Ziglar often challenged his audience to get rid of what he called “stinking thinking.” Stinking thinking consists of thoughts that limit the possibilities of an individual, group, or organization. Creativity is reduced when group or team members utter “sound bites” that discourage rather than encourage the group to think of new possibilities. Here are some examples:

- “We simply can’t do this.”
- “We’ve never done it this way before.”
- “We tried that a few years ago and it didn’t work.”
- “They won’t let us do this.”
- “You can’t be serious.”

You can probably identify other comments that bring creative conversation to an abrupt halt. For example, one study found that when we complain about “red tape” and overly restrictive policies, than we are less creative and often give up trying to find a way through the bureaucracy rather than searching for a creative solution. We don’t recommend that you instantly silence the person who offers such a comment. Rather, gently and tactfully invite the group to continue considering possibilities. Use an “I” message (“I think there are options that we have yet to consider”) rather than a “you” message (“You always offer negative comments!”) when attempting to change the tenor of thought in your group.

A technique for overcoming negative thinking, pioneered by Prescott Lecky, is called tick-tock. It’s quite simple. You make an effort to flip a negative idea into a positive comment. Here’s how to do it. Make two headings on a sheet of paper: one called “tick” and the other called “tock.” Whenever there is a negative thought or idea, write it in the “tick” column. Now think of a substitute positive idea to counter the negative idea: The positive idea goes in the “tock” column. For example, you hear a group member say, “What a stupid idea. Everyone will laugh at us.” That negative idea goes under the “tick” heading. Stop and think of a more positive response, such as “New ideas may not have popular appeal at first. Who cares if people laugh if the idea works?” That positive response goes under the “tock” heading. Here’s another example: “We did a terrible job with that last project”—tick. The “tock” response: “We’ve learned from our mistakes. We can do better now.” You can use this simple “tick-tock” technique to combat stinking thinking, whether it’s just your own overly negative self-critique or a collaborative pity party. We’re not suggesting that you or your group avoid honest evaluation of ideas and self-criticism. But we are recommending that if you or your group seems stuck in negative thinking, looking for a positive spin on the critique can be empowering and spur the group to consider more options.

12.5: Principles of Group and Team Creativity

12.5 Identify principles that enhance group and team creativity

Understanding how creativity works and knowing underlying principles that enhance the creative process can help you and your group and team members become more innovative. Creativity researcher Simon Taggar suggests that groups will be more creative if they are motivated; if they use creativity-fostering processes such as having everyone participate in the discussion; and if they communicate effectively by involving everyone, providing useful feedback, and addressing conflict when it arises. Broadly speaking, group creativity research suggests that groups are more likely to be creative if they appropriately analyze and define the problem, intentionally foster a climate of freedom to be creative, listen to minority points of view, encourage members to assume new perspectives or roles, and find ways to structure the process.

Research suggests that sometimes an individual may hold the key to coming up with a creative solution. A team that is too conforming or collectivistic may inadvertently put a damper on creativity. Groups and teams need to permit individuals to share their individual ideas rather than just going along with majority opinion. In their book *Virtuoso Teams*, Andy Boynton and Bill Fischer advocate that teams that enable individuals to assert their creativity can enhance the team’s overall skill in developing quality, creative solutions.

12.5.1: Appropriately Analyze and Define the Problem

It’s difficult to come up with a creative solution to a problem if the problem has not been clearly defined and analyzed. As we pointed out in previous chapters, groups that jump to solutions before thoroughly analyzing what is known and not known are less likely to have high-quality
solutions. Before attempting to come up with creative solutions to a problem, make sure the group knows what the problem is and has some information, data, or evidence to serve as a springboard for possible solutions.

Arthur VanGundy suggests that the group may need to reframe the problem or reanalyze the issues to come up with a creative slant on what confronts the group. For example, a group trying to develop a Web site where it could post answers to frequently asked questions decided that it already had a wealth of information; the group did not need to develop additional answers to questions, but rather to identify and highlight what information already existed. By reframing the problem, the group made a subtle yet useful distinction that saved the group much time and energy.

12.5.2: Create a Climate of Freedom
For maximum creativity, group members need to have the freedom to express ideas, even partial ideas, without fear of being ridiculed. Research has found that group members who are motivated to be creative are more innovative. So explicitly expressing an interest in creating a creative, freewheeling climate can enhance creativity. Consultants at one firm claim they can unlock creativity by encouraging group members to be playful and even somewhat silly. As part of the creativity training, group members are given toys such as modeling clay, rubber-band powered airplanes, Nerf balls, and wooden blocks and are invited to play. Being playful encourages freedom of expression—a key ingredient of creativity. If, for example, your group is stymied by a problem, take time off to “play”; taking a walk, going for a snack, or doing something else the group members consider fun may be just what the group needs to boost its creativity. Another study found that when team members had an attitude of being open to new experiences they were more creative.

One study found that groups in which members retain their individualism rather than going along with a collectivistic group identity generate more creative ideas. This finding suggests that it’s a good thing that group members bring their individual points of view to a group. Just make sure that each group member feels free to share his or her ideas with others. Two researchers suggest that teams can best tap their creative resources if they approach problem solving as a collaborative fusion of ideas. Using the metaphor of “fusion cooking,” in which culturally diverse cuisines are melded together to create a new flavor, groups, and teams, especially those that are culturally diverse, can see things differently if team members give up their own cultural approach to defining and analyzing a problem and truly fuse or join their ideas to create something brand new. Clinging to your own cultural comfort zone thinking patterns can decrease creativity. Make sure you are not merely approaching problems and solutions the way you’ve always done in the past. Observe and listen for new ways of solving problems by being aware of the diverse cultural perspectives that are in your group or team.

12.5.3: Listen to Minority Points of View
Creativity research suggests that groups with a diversity of opinions and ideas are more creative. Specifically, some researchers have concluded that groups that have more ethnic and racial diversity develop more creative solutions to problems. Minority points of view challenge traditional thinking and ideas, and, if listened to, they can help group members see things in a new light. Groups in which one or two people dominate the discussion, either because of extreme status differences or because of their lack of sensitivity to the need for balanced discussion, are less likely to develop creative ideas. Just as groupthink (the false consensus that occurs when groups quickly agree with an idea so as to minimize conflict) can quash ideas and limit logical decision making, so too can it smother creative minority points of view. Encourage quiet group members to contribute to the group. And when they do, listen thoughtfully to what they have to say. In general, having more information available and listening to that information enhances group creativity. However, when group members get too bogged down in details and don’t keep the big picture in mind, creativity suffers.

12.5.4: Encourage People to See Things and Themselves Differently
It’s become a cliché to say, “let’s think outside the box.” Yet often, phrases become clichés because they express ideas succinctly. “Thinking outside the box” expresses the power of seeing facts, issues, and problems from a new vantage point. Instead of analyzing a problem from your own point of view, consider taking on a new role to gain a different point of view. For example, rather than thinking about a problem from the point of view of a student trying to identify solutions to the dramatically rising cost of tuition or attempting to solve the vexing parking problem on your campus, imagine that you’re the president of your university. How would she or he view the problem? Try to consider an alternative entry point into the problem.

Another specific way to help group members see familiar problems and issues in a fresh light is to bring new members into the group. Changing the membership in a group can spur group creativity because new people bring in new ideas. In addition, having group members in the group who have had direct experience with the problem you are trying to solve also enhances creativity.
12.6: Selectively Increase Group and Team Structure

12.6 Discuss the importance of space to increase creativity

Creative ideas come not only during periods of high stimulation but also during quiet periods, when the ideas silently creep into our consciousness. Invite group and team members to write and think individually before sharing ideas orally. Increasing group structure by alternating periods of personal reflection and writing with oral sharing of ideas may help prime the group’s creative pump. Group and team members sometimes need the necessary space for ideas to emerge—not only physical space (although, as discussed above, groups need a good environment in which to work) but also psychological space so that ideas can percolate.

Research suggests that people who can live with some uncertainty and who don’t need immediate closure are more likely to generate creative ideas than are people who need to find the right answer in a short period of time. So, people who are patient and don’t try to force an immediate answer to a question or a speedy solution to a problem are likely to be more creative.

Problem-solving procedures such as reflective thinking or techniques such as journalist’s six questions, force-field analysis, and fishbone analysis, discussed in the last chapter, are techniques designed to give the problem-solving process additional structure. Structure helps channel a group’s attention and energies to stay focused on the task at hand. Several prescriptive techniques are designed to facilitate the generation of creative ideas. In the next section of this chapter we describe several methods.

Review

How to Enhance Creativity in Your Group

<table>
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<th>How to Do It</th>
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<td>Appropriately analyze and define the problem to be solved.</td>
<td>• Write the specific problem someplace where all can see it.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Have each group member write a statement of precisely what the group wants to achieve.</td>
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<td>• Separate the symptoms of the problem from the causes of the problem by using is/is not analysis.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Create a climate of individual freedom.</td>
<td>• Use structured methods of capturing ideas—for example, have group members first write ideas on paper or share ideas via e-mail or a Web site.</td>
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<td>• Encourage other group members by expressing positive reinforcement for ideas shared.</td>
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<td>• Encourage the group to play together; do something fun.</td>
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<td>• Take a break; take a walk; take time away from the problem.</td>
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12.7: Techniques for Enhancing Group and Team Creativity

12.7 Describe brainstorming, the nominal-group technique, the Delphi technique, electronic brainstorming, and the affinity technique for enhancing creativity

Group and team members often want to know “What techniques will enhance our creativity?” Beyond understanding general principles of creativity and promoting conditions to enhance creativity, what are specific methods, approaches, or techniques that can boost creativity? As noted above, sometimes groups and teams need the structure of a technique to have a creative breakthrough. Such techniques include brainstorming, the nominal-group technique, the Delphi technique, electronic brainstorming, and the affinity technique—each a prescriptive technique for structuring the process of generating creative ideas. Research suggests that having standard procedures and some structure can enhance group member creativity. We conclude the chapter by suggesting specific tips for incorporating these techniques into your group and team deliberations.

12.7.1: Brainstorming

Imagine that your employer assigns you to a task force whose goal is to increase the productivity of your small manufacturing company. Phrased as a policy question, the
problem is “What can be done to increase efficiency and productivity for our company?” To help solve the problem. Assume that your boss has clearly identified the problem for the group and has provided you with several documents analyzing the problem in some detail. Your group may decide that reflective thinking, which focuses on identifying and analyzing problems, is not the best process to follow. Your group needs innovative ideas and creative, original solutions. Perhaps your group could benefit from brainstorming.

**Brainstorming** is a creative technique designed to help a group generate several solutions to a problem. It was first developed by Alex Osborn, an advertising executive who felt the need for a creative technique that did not emphasize evaluating and criticizing ideas but instead would focus on developing imaginative and innovative solutions. Brainstorming has been used by businesses, committees, and government agencies to improve the quality of group decision making. Although it can be used in several phases of many group discussions, it may be most useful if a group needs original ideas or has trouble coming up with any ideas at all. Research suggests that a trained facilitator can improve the execution of group brainstorming.

The general assumption underlying brainstorming is that the more ideas are generated, the more likely it is that a creative solution will be found. In 1888, when a fellow named Henry thought he could make a ton of money by investing in a 600-acre cucumber farm, he found out after his first year that cucumbers were not the road to riches. He went bankrupt. But instead of giving up, he used his failure to spur him on to develop more than one product—he came up with 57 different products. More options resulted in dramatic success. Henry’s last name was Heinz. Today the Heinz company is a multimillion dollar international corporation largely because Henry Heinz developed multiple options. Brainstorming is a classic way of generating multiple options.

Research largely supports the brainstorming procedure, although some studies suggest that generating a few quality ideas is more useful to groups than merely identifying lots of bad ideas. There’s also research that suggests the groups who use brainstorming earlier in their deliberations perceive it to be more valuable in helping them generate quality ideas. And brainstorming is helpful when the group must use evidence to help them find a specific, correct solution to a problem. Research also suggests that the most effective brainstorming groups keep at it—the more persistent group members are in generating ideas, even when idea generation slows, the better the result. And there is evidence that women are more persistent than men in continuing to generate ideas during brainstorming. Another factor that seems to enhance creativity when brainstorming is for group members to value group member diversity. Groups that had a higher appreciation for welcoming and even celebrating diverse approaches to solving problems had more creative approaches to finding a quality solution.

**TRADITIONAL BRAINSTORMING STEPS** Traditional brainstorming is a process that follows certain specific guidelines.

1. **Select a specific problem that needs solving.** Be sure that all group members can identify and clearly define the problem.
2. **Set a clear time limit.**
3. **Ask group members to temporarily put aside all judgments and evaluations.** The key to brainstorming is ruling out all criticism and evaluation. Osborn makes these suggestions:
   - Acquire a “try anything” attitude.
   - Avoid criticism, which can stifle creativity.
   - Remember that all ideas are thought-starters.
   - Today’s criticism may kill tomorrow’s ideas.
4. **Ask group or team members to think of as many possible solutions to the problem as they can and to share the ideas with the group.** Consider the following suggestions:
   - The wilder the ideas, the better.
   - It is easier to tame ideas down than to think ideas up.
   - Think out loud and mention unusual ideas.
   - Someone’s wild idea may trigger a good solution from another person in the group.
5. **Make sure the group understands that “piggybacking” off someone else’s idea is useful.** Combine ideas; add to previous ideas. Adopt the philosophy that once an idea is presented to the group, no one owns it. It belongs to the group, and anyone can modify it. Based upon original suggestions from Alex Osborn, group facilitator Bob Eberle developed
a list of ways to build on the ideas of others using the acronym SCAMPER. Here are his suggestions:

- Substitute something.
- Combine it with something else.
- Adapt something to it.
- Modify or magnify it.
- Put it to some other use.
- Eliminate something.
- Reverse or rearrange it.

As you hear ideas and suggestions from others, use the SCAMPER list to transform the ideas of others into even more creative options.

6. **Have someone record all the ideas mentioned.** Ideas could be recorded on a flipchart, chalkboard, whiteboard, or an overhead projector so that each group member can see them. You could also tape-record your discussions.

7. **Evaluate ideas when the time allotted for brainstorming has elapsed.** Consider these suggestions:
   - Approach each idea positively, and give it a fair trial.
   - Try to make ideas workable.
   - Encourage feedback about the success of a session. If even a few of the ideas generated by a group are useful, the session has been successful.

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**Case Study**

**Clipping Negative Thinking**

Business was terrible. The Paper Clip Company, the primary supplier of paper clips to big box discount stores, was having a sales slump. Because more people were using e-documents and e-files, fewer people were buying paper clips to fasten paper together. For the past three years sales had dropped by 15 percent each year. The company had already been forced to reduce the size of its manufacturing plant and lay off several employees.

The vice president of marketing decided to increase sales by identifying new, creative uses for paper clips other than holding sheets of paper together. She had assembled her brightest, most creative managers to develop possible new ways paper clips could be used. The vice president decided to use the brainstorming method. She announced the rules of brainstorming and set a 15-minute time frame. She turned on a digital audio recorder to capture the verbal comments and the ideas suggested; her administrative assistant would type the list later and share them with the group.

It didn’t go well. Several team members couldn’t resist critiquing the ideas of others. The senior managers did more talking than the junior managers. One of the junior managers tried to share some ideas but received a glowering frown from a senior manager, and all the junior managers realized that they would risk being criticized if they shared their ideas. After about eight minutes of brainstorming, the senior managers had offered a few ideas, the junior managers had not spoken, and the vice president was becoming increasingly frustrated. She finally blurted out, “Oh, this isn’t working!”

**Questions for Analysis**

1. What are the key problems with the brainstorming done by The Paper Clip Company’s managers? Why did those problems occur? What should the vice president have done differently to set up the brainstorming session? What were the managers doing wrong?

2. Other than oral brainstorming, what are some alternative techniques that could be used to generate ideas?

3. Based on the principles of group and team creativity presented on pages Module 12.5, what could be done, regardless of the specific technique used, to develop a creative group climate?

4. In a group of five to seven people, select one of the creative idea-generation techniques discussed in this chapter. Take on the roles of managers at The Paper Clip Company, and see how many ideas you can generate. Alternative suggestion: Each group uses a different idea-generation technique (e.g., nominal-group technique, Delphi method, affinity technique); all groups have the same amount of time. At the end of the idea-generation process, see which groups have developed the most ideas. Discuss how the specific idea-generation technique you were required to use influenced your group’s creativity.

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**12.7.2: The Nominal Group Technique**

In her book *Quiet: The Power of Introverts in a World That Can’t Stop Talking*, author Susan Cain suggests that some people just don’t perform well in an environment with lots of talk and interaction—the environment of oral brainstorming. If you gain energy by retreating to a quiet place of solitude rather than being around other people, you are likely more introvert than extrovert. An introvert is someone who is not necessarily shy but simply prefers thinking and listening rather than speaking and interacting with others. The *nominal-group technique* is a procedure that uses some of the principles and methods of active brainstorming but has members write their ideas while being quiet and thinking before sharing them with the group. Introverts will prefer using the nominal-group technique because it gives
them time to think and reflect. Specifically, research has found that having group members alternate between individual, silent brainstorming with group conversation can enhance the quality of ideas generated. The nominal-group technique gets its name from the principle that the group is nominal (it is a group in name only), in the sense that members work on problems individually rather than during sustained group interaction. This technique uses silent brainstorming to overcome some of the disadvantages researchers have discovered in exclusively oral brainstorming.

Why does silent brainstorming often produce better results than oral brainstorming? During traditional brainstorming, group and team members blurt out their ideas. But if someone laughs at an idea or says, “That’s cool” or “That won’t work,” then the idea has been evaluated. The key to making brainstorming work is that the generation of ideas is separated from the evaluation of ideas. In oral brainstorming it’s hard not to evaluate ideas. During traditional brainstorming, despite their best intentions, group members often evaluate ideas as soon as they are verbalized, so group members may be less likely to share ideas. As we discussed earlier in the chapter, criticism and evaluation diminish creativity. Even if group members do not verbalize their evaluation, their nonverbal expressions often convey positive or negative evaluation of ideas. Some people are apprehensive or nervous about speaking up in a group, and traditional oral brainstorming makes it less likely that the communication-apprehensive members will participate. Silent brainstorming overcomes that problem by encouraging even apprehensive group and team members to participate by first writing their ideas. Once they have a written “script,” they are more comfortable sharing their ideas. Researchers also found that people work more diligently if they have an individual assignment than if they have a group assignment. In addition, researchers have found that sometimes with traditional brainstorming, the creative talents of some members seem to be restricted just by the very presence of others. Group and team members may generate more ideas if members first work alone and then regroup. After they reconvene, group members can modify, elaborate on, and evaluate ideas. The generation of ideas (writing them down) has been separated from the evaluation of ideas. Silent brainstorming can be done even before a group meets for the first time; you could describe a problem and ask group members to brainstorm individually before assembling. E-mail makes this easier; communication researcher Henri Barki found that electronic brainstorming worked just as well as face-to-face brainstorming. In the pages ahead, we talk about electronic brainstorming as a separate technique for developing creative ideas.

The nominal-group technique adds structure to the brainstorming process.

Using the nominal-group technique

The following steps summarize how to use the nominal-group technique:

1. All group members should be able to define and analyze the problem under consideration.

2. Working individually, group members write down possible solutions to the problem.

3. Group members report the solutions they have identified to the entire group one at a time. Each idea should be noted on a chart, chalkboard, whiteboard, or overhead projector for all group members to see.

4. Group members discuss the ideas gathered, not to advocate for one idea over another but rather to make sure that all the ideas are clear.

5. After discussing all proposed solutions, each group member ranks the solutions. If the list of solutions is long, the group members can rank the five solutions they like best. The results are tabulated.

6. The entire group discusses the results of the rankings. If the first round of ranking is inconclusive or if the group is not comfortable with the results, the options can be ranked again after additional discussion. Research suggests that using this organized method of gathering and evaluating information results in better solutions than if the group attacks a problem in a disorganized fashion. One researcher has found that the nominal-group technique works better than other prescriptive approaches such as reflective thinking.

This individual method of idea generation and evaluation has the advantage of involving all group members in deliberations. It can be useful if some group members are uncomfortable making contributions because of status differences in the group. Also, alternating group discussion with individual deliberation can be useful in groups plagued by conflict and tension. Research has also found that participants using the nominal-group technique also are more likely to remember more of what they discuss, perhaps because they are not only talking about their ideas in the group but also writing their ideas before they share the information with others.

To achieve the advantages that occur when using the nominal-group technique, consider investing a short period of time making sure each group member understands the technique. Research has found that group and team members who receive training in the nominal-group technique are more effective than those who don’t receive training. So groups and teams can improve their skill level if they have an opportunity to learn structured ways of developing and organizing their contributions.
Both traditional brainstorming and the nominal-group technique can be used at any phase of the problem-solving process. For example, you could combine the nominal-group technique with force-field analysis by asking group members to silently brainstorm about the forces driving and restraining attainment of a group goal. Or, you could ask members to brainstorm possible causes or symptoms of the problem during problem analysis. Or, you could use brainstorming or the nominal-group technique to generate possible strategies for implementing a solution the group has settled on.

Putting Principles into Practice

Using Your Whole Mind

Daniel Pink, in his book *A Whole New Mind: Why Right- Brainers Will Rule the Future*, argues that as we become awash in data, numbers, and statistics, it is increasingly important that we use what he calls “The Whole Mind” to make sense out of the bits of information that bombard us.66 Using the whole mind draws upon what has been dubbed both left-brain logical thinking and right-brain creativity. Applying this whole-mind thinking to groups can help groups develop more creative solutions to problems. Pink draws upon contemporary brain research to identify what he calls the “six senses for a conceptual age.” Applying Pink’s six senses to group deliberations can help groups and teams make more creative decisions.

**Focus on design not just function**

Rather than focus on the function of something, focus on its design. To be functional is to describe what something does—to identify its purpose. To focus on design is to understand how something was created. To use the whole mind, group members should be designers, which means they should have the freedom to create new solutions, not just think in old patterns about what something does (function) but how something new can be created—to design something that hasn’t existed yet.

**Find the big story**

Rather than looking only at the logical argument underlying why a process or procedure exists, try to find the story. Stories are narratives that give meaning to the pieces of information that we see. When trying to solve a problem, look for the underlying story by considering these questions: Who are the characters in the story? Are there good characters, bad characters, both good and bad? Are there obstacles that keep the people in the story from achieving what they want? What are the sources of conflict in the story? Seeing the underlying story in a situation can help a team think in new ways.

**Listen to the entire symphony not just to one note or one instrument**

Using an analogy from music, rather than focusing on only one note, passage of music, or instrument, focus on the entire symphony. Daniel Pink thinks that the skill of synthesis—seeing how things work together in harmony, rather than picking out one melody—can help develop new insights. Analysis of individual elements in a problem is useful, but supplement detailed analysis with holistic thinking that looks at how all of the parts of the process fit together. Symphony thinking draws upon systems theory.

**Be empathic**

Rather than being only rational and logical like Dr. Spock from *Star Trek*, make sure to empathize with others—feel what others are feeling. Empathy is the ability to connect to the emotions of others, to sense what others are emotionally experiencing. Empathy doesn’t replace logic; it connects to logic so that we can better understand the thoughts of others. When solving problems, consider what others may feel when you are identifying a problem (how they feel about the problem), analyzing the problem (consider emotions of others), or when suggesting a solution to the problem (how others might feel if the solution were implemented).

**Make time to play**

There’s a time to be serious, but there’s also a time to play. As the saying goes, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, or Jill a dull girl. Groups and teams should be encouraged to play with ideas, experiment, have fun, and be given permission to creatively explore ideas and options. Children play by pretending to be someone else for a while; they eagerly try new things, or simply enjoy the spontaneity of creating a new game or adventure. Sometimes a fantasy theme may be just what the group needs to energize it. Groups need to periodically bring a sense of play to the process of creating new options. Balancing the serious with play and fantasy can help a group get unstuck.

**Find the meaning**

It’s not just about accumulating more “stuff,” says Pink; it’s about finding the meaning in what we already have, or what we think we want that we don’t yet have. Our quest to get more (money, power, fame) than others should be replaced by reflecting on what truly gives us meaning in our life. Simply having more should not be the goal; rather, having a greater sense of individual and collective purpose should underlie our striving. Connecting the dots between what we think we want and how that accumulation brings true satisfaction should be something that groups talk about from time to time. Groups and teams should ask such questions as “How will achieving this goal be meaningful to the group, to other individuals, or to the community?”
Design, story, symphony, empathy, play, and meaning are ways of balancing our logical talents with creative skills. These six senses provide an underlying perspective of how groups can be creative, as well as give specific behaviors that can stimulate creativity.

**Real-Life Applications**

When you are in a group that is stuck, bogged down, and isn’t making progress, consider asking one or more of the following questions to help the group get unstuck and develop a broader, more creative perspective:

- How can we redesign the procedure or process we are focusing on?
- What’s the underlying story we are discussing?
- How are all of the pieces fitting together to work together as a “symphonic” whole?
- What would others feel about what we’re recommending? What would be their emotional response?
- How can we bring a sense of play and experimentation to the discussion?
- What is the meaning behind what we really want to achieve?

### 12.7.3: The Delphi Technique

Whereas the nominal-group technique invites participants to contribute ideas by first writing them down and then sharing them with the group, the Delphi technique takes this idea one step further. This method, named after the ancient oracle at Delphi, has been called “absentee brainstorming” because individuals share ideas in writing or via e-mail, without meeting face-to-face. One person coordinates the information and shares it with the rest of the group. This approach is especially useful when conflict within the group inhibits effective group interaction, or when time and distance constraints make it difficult for group members to meet. Here is a step-by-step description of the Delphi technique.68

#### STEP BY STEP

1. The group leader selects a problem, issue, policy, or decision that needs to be reviewed.
2. The leader corresponds with group members in writing, informing them of the task and inviting their suggestions and input. A specific questionnaire may be developed, or the group members may be asked to individually brainstorm suggestions or reactions to the issue confronting the group.
3. The respondents complete the questionnaire or generate a list of their brainstormed responses and send it to the leader.
4. The leader then summarizes all the responses from the group and shares the summary with all group members, asking for additional ideas, suggestions, and reactions. Team members are asked to rate or rank the ideas and return their comments to the leader.
5. The leader continues the process of summarizing the group feedback and asking for more input until general consensus emerges and decisions are made. It may take several rounds of soliciting ideas and evaluating ideas before consensus is achieved.

This method often produces many good ideas. All participants are treated equally because no one is aware of who submitted which idea. It is, however, a time-consuming process. And because there is no face-to-face interaction, some ideas that are worthy of elaboration and exploration may get lost in the shuffle. Using the Delphi technique in combination with face-to-face meetings can help eliminate some disadvantages of the procedure.

### Virtual Groups

Using electronic brainstorming has several advantages. It allows groups to generate ideas quickly and from remote locations. It may also be less expensive to invite team members to turn on their home or office computers to brainstorm ideas than to have all members travel to the same geographic location to hold a meeting. Nonetheless, there are several challenges and barriers to consider when using electronic brainstorming. In their book Virtual Teaming, Deborah York, Lauren Davis, and Susan Wise note some of the following challenges in collaborating virtually:67

- Fear of working with technology (technophobia)
- Lack of needed technical skills
- Incompatibility of hardware and software
- Uneven writing skills due to differences in cultural background, language use, and education
- Technical difficulties (the power goes out, the computers are down)
- E-mail overload—people have too much e-mail to process

To overcome these obstacles, make sure group members understand how to use the hardware and software programs. In case there are technical glitches, have a backup plan—such as a phone number to call or an alternative e-mail address to use. Have someone who is knowledgeable about technology available to help group members or, at the very least, give each group member a number to call or a Web site to use if there are technical problems.

### 12.7.4: Electronic Brainstorming

Electronic brainstorming is a technique that makes it possible for a group to generate solutions or strategies by typing ideas at a computer keyboard and having them displayed to the entire group. This high-tech method resembles the nominal-group technique in that group
members write ideas before sharing them with the group. Because they can see ideas in written form, group members can piggyback off the ideas of others. Electronic brainstorming can be performed with all group members in the same room or computer lab or with members at their own home or office computers.

Research suggests that groups using electronic brainstorming generate more ideas than traditional face-to-face brainstorming groups. One research team found that when some members of a group meet face to face and are supported with ideas from group members not physically present but using electronic means to share information, more ideas are generated and these are of higher quality than if all members meet face to face. Some researchers theorize that this happens because the ideas are generated anonymously. Members feel less fear or anxiety about being criticized for unconventional ideas because no one knows who suggested them. Thus, when group members move to the phase of evaluating ideas, they are not sure whether they are evaluating an idea coming from a boss or a group leader or a new intern. All ideas are considered on their merit and quality. Another reason more ideas may be generated is because of the “piggyback effect.” Group members may be stimulated to build on the ideas of other group members.

One obvious disadvantage of electronic brainstorming is the need to have access to a computer network and appropriate software. But recent evidence strongly supports the value of this variation of the brainstorming method, in which computers add structure to the process. Another disadvantage to anonymous, electronic brainstorming occurs when, because the idea sharing is supposed to be anonymous, it is difficult to publicly recognize outstanding contributions. Research has found that when someone is praised for contributing good ideas, that creativity is enhanced—both for the individual praised and for the entire group. Yet when group members privately and anonymously brainstorm ideas, it might seem like a breach of anonymity to publicly praise a good idea.

12.7.5: The Affinity Technique

Have you ever sat down at a desk cluttered with papers from a variety of projects and realized that you needed to sort the papers into piles to help you organize your desk? The affinity technique is a method for sorting through and organizing ideas that a group may generate. The affinity technique is similar to the nominal-group technique, but instead of listing ideas on paper, group members write ideas on Post-it® notes. Like the other variations of brainstorming that we’ve discussed, the group is assigned an issue or problem about which to generate ideas. The entire group (or a smaller subcommittee) then organizes the ideas that have an “affinity,” or are similar to each other, into categories.

The affinity technique is a way to make brainstorming sessions more fun and let people move around during a meeting. You can ask group members to post their notes on a wall or other smooth surface such as a chalkboard or white board and then to move around the room, review the ideas, and group them into categories. If your group sticks the notes on a chalkboard or white board, you could draw a circle around the notes and label the category using a word or terms that capture the theme of the suggestions. This technique will allow your group to quickly identify how many people have generated the same idea. The group will be able to see that one affinity category may have six or seven ideas, whereas another category may have only one or two. After creating the categories, the group may decide to combine them. Someone should be assigned to record the ideas that have been developed. The affinity technique may take a bit longer than the nominal-group technique, but for certain groups it may be the best way to develop a sense of collaboration in generating ideas.

Review

Comparing Creative Techniques

Brainstorming

Advantages
- Easy to use
- No special materials needed
- Group members can piggyback on each other’s ideas

Disadvantages
- High potential for group members to evaluate ideas as they are being generated
- Takes more time than highly structured methods
- Quiet members less likely to participate

Nominal-Group Technique

Advantages
- Can build on ideas of others
- Provides a written record of ideas suggested
- Controls more talkative, dominating group members

Disadvantages
- Requires good leader to organize the process
- Less time for free flow of ideas
- Difficult to implement with a large group
12.7.6: How to Use Brainstorming in Your Group or Team

Although you should now understand how brainstorming, in its various forms, works, you may still have some questions about how you can apply this method of creative problem solving to your group discussions. Consider the following suggestions:

• **Set aside a definite amount of time for brainstorming.** Decide as a group how much time you want to devote to brainstorming. You may want to set a goal for a certain number of ideas that should be recorded: “We’ll stop brainstorming when we get sixty ideas.”

• **Do not make the time limit for brainstorming too short.** Research suggests that groups given only a short time (four minutes) to brainstorm can be very productive, but not as creative as groups that have a longer time. If you brainstorm orally, do not worry about a little silence while people think. If you use silent brainstorming (the nominal-group technique), it is okay if people don’t write furiously during the entire brainstorming period. Don’t cut off the brainstorming period early simply because people are silent or not writing.

• **Be certain that each group or team member understands the specific problem to be solved.** A problem must be clearly defined and understood and must also be limited in size and scope. A broad, vaguely worded problem must be clarified before a group attempts to identify possible solutions.

• **Make sure that each group member follows the brainstorming rules.** Brainstorming will be most effective if group members stop criticizing and evaluating ideas. Don’t forget that group members can criticize nonverbally through tone of voice, facial expression, or posture. Everyone in the group must feel completely free to communicate ideas that may solve the problem. What should you do if a few members just cannot stop evaluating the ideas that are suggested? You may have to remind them courteously to follow the rules, ask them to be quiet, ask them to record the ideas of others, or ask them to leave the group. You may also consider using another technique (the nominal-group or the affinity technique or electronic brainstorming) as an alternative to oral brainstorming.

• **If you serve as the group’s leader, try to draw less-talkative group members into the discussion.** Call people by name: “Curt, you look like you’ve got some good ideas. What do you suggest?” You can also compliment the entire group when members do a good job of generating ideas: “Good job, group! We’ve got thirty ideas so far. Let’s see if we can come up with thirty more.”

• **Consider reverse brainstorming.** With this method, group members brainstorm ideas or solutions that would make the problem worse. After generating such a list, the group can consider the implications of doing the opposite of what was identified.

• **Consider rolestorming.** Rolestorming is one way of “thinking outside the box.” With this method, group members assume the roles of someone else to help unlock ideas and increase group creativity. If you focus on a problem in your community, ask group members to assume the role of the mayor, the school principal, a parent, a student, a teacher, or any other role you may think of to spark creativity.
superintendent, or the city manager. If it is a government problem, have them imagine that they are the governor, a member of the legislature, or even the president of the United States.

- **Tell the group what will happen with the ideas and suggestions generated.** Do not finish the brainstorming session with a long list of ideas that may be shelved. Perhaps a subcommittee can be formed to combine ideas and eliminate obvious overlapping suggestions. The subgroup might also be asked to evaluate the ideas or determine which ideas need further exploration or more information.

- **Try the random-word technique.** One strategy to enhance the power of brainstorming that seems to work for some groups is the **random-word technique**. As described by Edward de Bono, while a group is brainstorming or pondering a problem, one person is assigned the task of saying a random word so others can hear it. The word is selected from a list of random words.\(^8^0\) The spoken word is supposed to act as a trigger for new or creative ideas. This technique is another way to stimulate “thinking outside the box.”

- **Establish a brainstorming bulletin board.** Write the specific problem to be solved on a bulletin board or white board. Encourage group members to brainstorm ideas by periodically writing creative solutions that could solve the problem. Consider posting the problem and inviting creative responses for a week or more, and encourage people to build on the ideas of others.\(^8^1\)

- **Try brainsketching.** This is a technique that asks people to come up with creative ideas by drawing something rather than using words to describe a proposal. Some ideas may flow better if people are encouraged to use images rather than text to develop creative ideas.\(^8^2\)

**Review**

An Overview of Problem-Solving Steps and Techniques

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Steps</th>
<th>Techniques</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Identify and define the problem | * Is/is not analysis  
|                        | * Journalist’s six questions  
|                        | * Gather data  
|                        | * Pareto charts  
|                        | * SWOT                                                 |
| Analyze the problem    | * Is/is not analysis  
|                        | * Cause-and-effect (fishbone) diagram  
|                        | * Journalist’s six questions                          |

**SHARED WRITING: WHAT WOULD YOU DO?**

Dave has great ideas and likes to take the lead during group discussions. During traditional brainstorming sessions, he often suggests more than anyone else. But he also just can’t seem to avoid evaluating and criticizing other people’s ideas. Dave’s presence in a group sometimes intimidates others, so they don’t contribute. Group members have asked Dave to resist evaluating other people’s suggestions, but he just can’t seem to stop doing it. Should the group ask Dave to leave? He makes a considerable contribution to the group but also limits the contributions of others. Do group members have an ethical responsibility to balance concern for an individual member of the group against the needs of the entire group?

In this situation, what would you do and why? Write a short response that your classmates will read. Be sure to include specifics in your discussion.

A minimum number of characters is required to post and earn points. After posting, your response can be viewed by your class and instructor, and you can participate in the class discussion.
Glossary

Accommodation  Conflict-management style that involves giving in to the demands of others.

Action chart  A grid that lists tasks that need to be done and identifies who will be responsible for each task.


Adaptor  A nonverbal behavior that helps people respond to their immediate environment.

Ad hoc committee  A committee that disbands when it completes its task.

Affect display  A nonverbal behavior that communicates emotion.

Affect  Human warmth and closeness.

Affinity technique  A method of generating and organizing ideas by using Post-it notes; group members write each idea on a note and then sort the ideas into common categories.

Agenda  A list of topics or tasks to be discussed or completed in a meeting.

Allness statement  A simple but untrue generalization.

Asynchronous message  Interaction in which e-mail messages are responded to after a time delay; the communication thus does not occur in real time.

Attitude  A learned predisposition to respond to a person, object, or idea in a favorable, neutral, or unfavorable way.

Avoidance  Conflict-management style that involves ignoring disagreements in order to sidestep conflict.

Belief  What someone considers to be true or false.

Bona fide perspective on groups  The view that the context and boundaries of groups change.

Brainstorming  A problem-solving technique that helps a group generate creative options.

Breakpoint  A point in a group discussion when members shift to a different activity.

Bypassing  A barrier to communication that occurs when two people interpret the same word differently.

Causal reasoning  Relating two or more events in such a way as to conclude that one event caused the other.

Cause-and-effect diagram  An analysis tool (also called a fishbone diagram) that charts the causes and effects of a problem or outcome.

Central negative role  An individual role that is characterized by consistently challenging the leader’s power and position and often offering negative comments about the group’s progress.

Channel  The means or pathway by which a communication message is sent to a receiver.

Charge  The purpose of a team, group, or committee.

Coercive power  Power derived from the ability to punish people for acting or not acting in a certain way.

Cohesiveness  The degree of attraction group members feel toward one another and toward the group.

Collaborate  To use positive communication strategies in conflict management in order to achieve a positive solution for all involved.

Committee  A small group given a specific task by an individual or a larger group.

Communication  The process of acting on information; the process that allows a group to move toward its goals.

Communication network  A pattern of interaction within a group; who talks to whom.

Competent group communicator  A person who is able to interact appropriately and effectively with others in small groups.

Competition  Conflict-management style that stresses winning at the expense of others involved.

Complementarity  The tendency of individuals to be attracted to others who have knowledge, skills, or other attributes that they themselves do not have but that they admire.

Compromise  Conflict-management style that attempts to find the middle ground in the conflict.

Conclusion  The logical outcome of an argument that stems from the major premise and the minor premise.

Confirming response  A communication response that causes a person to value himself or herself more.

Conflict  An expressed struggle between at least two interdependent people who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources, and interference from others in an attempt to achieve a specific goal.

Conflict phase  Fisher’s second phase of group interaction, in which disagreement and individual differences arise.

Consensus  Support for and commitment to a decision on the part of all group members.

Control  The use of status and power to achieve a goal.

Creativity  The generation, application, combination, and extension of new ideas.

Criteria  Standards for an acceptable solution to a problem.

Cross-functional team-role training  Training that prepares members of a team to perform several roles or duties of other team members.

Cues-filtered-out theory  A theory that suggests that there are minimal relational messages expressed when communicating via e-mail or text-only messages because of fewer nonverbal cues.

Culture  A learned system of knowledge, behavior, attitudes, beliefs, values, and norms that is shared by a group of people.

Decision making  Making a choice from among several alternatives.

Decision-making group  A group whose purpose is to make a choice from among several alternatives.

Deductive reasoning  The process of reasoning from a general statement or principle to a specific conclusion.

Deep-level diversity  Human differences that are less readily visible such as attitudes, opinions, values, information, and other factors, and that take time to detect.

Delphi technique  A technique whereby people share ideas in writing, without meeting face to face; also known as absentee brainstorming.

Descriptive approach  An approach to problem solving that helps people understand how a group solves a problem.
Dialectical theory  Descriptive model of group problem solving that suggests that during communication competing tensions can pull the conversation in multiple directions; group members may feel simultaneously separate from the group and connected to the group.

Disconfirming response  A response that causes another person to value himself or herself less.

Discussion-management competencies  The communication skills that help a group maintain a focus on the task and manage interaction.

Dyad  Two people.

Ego conflict  Conflict that occurs when individuals become defensive because they feel they are being attacked.

Electronic brainstorming  A method of generating creative ideas using computers; group members write out their own ideas, which are then displayed to all other members.

Emblem  A nonverbal cue with a specific verbal counterpart, such as a word, letter, or number.

Emergence phase  Fisher’s third phase of group interaction, in which a group begins to manage disagreement and conflict.

Entropy  The measure of the randomness and chaos in a system.

Equifinality  A systems-theory principle that a final state may be reached by multiple paths and from different initial states.

Ethics  Beliefs, values, and moral principles by which people determine what is right and wrong.

Expert power  The influence someone has over others because of greater knowledge and information.

Explanatory function  The power of a theory to explain things.

Fact-inference confusion  Reaching a conclusion as if something had been actually observed (as if it was a fact), when in reality the conclusion was reached based on an inference (something not directly observed).

Fallacy  False reasoning that occurs when someone attempts to persuade without adequate evidence or with arguments that are irrelevant or inappropriate.

Fantasy  In symbolic convergence theory, a group’s creative and imaginative shared interpretation of events that fulfills a group psychological or rhetorical need.

Fantasy chain  A string of connected stories that revolve around a common theme and that is created when a group is sharing a group fantasy.

Fantasy theme  The common or related content of the stories that a group is sharing during a group fantasy.

Feedback  Any response by listeners that lets speakers know whether they have been understood accurately.

Fishbone diagram  An analysis tool (also called a cause-and-effect diagram) that charts the causes and effects of a problem or outcome; so named because a completed chart resembles the skeleton of a fish.


Focus group  A small group selected to discuss a particular topic so that others can better understand the group’s responses to that topic.

Force-field analysis  A method of structuring the analysis of a problem to assess the driving and restraining forces that may affect the attainment of a goal.

Forum presentation  A discussion that directly follows a panel discussion or symposium and allows audience members to respond to ideas.

Function  The effect or consequence of a given behavior within a group system.

Functional approach  An approach to problem solving that emphasizes the performance of certain activities and effective communication to accomplish a group goal.

Functional perspective  A view of leadership that assumes all group members can initiate leadership behaviors.

Goal  An end that a group is working to achieve.

Ground rules  Explicit, agreed-on prescriptions for acceptable and appropriate behavior in a group or team.

Group climate  The emotional environment of a group that affects and is affected by interaction among members.

Group cohesiveness  The degree of attraction members feel toward one another and their group.

Groupthink  The illusion of agreement exhibited by group members who try to minimize conflict and reach consensus without critically testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas.

Gunny-sack  A poor communication technique of dredging up old problems and issues from the past to use against your communication partner, like pulling them out of an old gunny-sack.

Hidden agenda  A private goal toward which an individual works while appearing to work toward the group’s goal.

High-contact culture  A culture in which people tend to touch others and to require less personal space.

High-context culture  A culture that emphasizes nonverbal communication.

Human communication  The process of making sense out of the world and sharing that sense with others by creating meaning through the use of verbal and nonverbal messages.

Ideal-solution format  A problem-solving method that helps a group define a problem, speculate about an ideal solution, and identify the obstacles that keep it from achieving its goal.

Illustrator  A nonverbal behavior that accompanies and embellishes verbal communication.

Inclusion  The human need for affiliation with others.

Individual roles  Roles characterized by behavior that calls attention to individual contributions of group members.

Inductive reasoning  The method of arriving at a general conclusion through the use of specific instances or examples.

Information triage  The process of sorting through information to assess its importance, value, or relevance.

Innovation  A creative process of putting new ideas into action; innovation includes idea generation, feasibility analysis, reality testing, and implementation of the idea.

Interaction  The give-and-take conversation, talk, dialogue, and reaction to the messages of others that occur during a group discussion.

Interaction diagram  A means of identifying and recording the frequency and direction of communication networks in groups.

Interdependence  A relationship among components in a system such that a change in one component affects all other components.

Interpersonal need  A human need that can be fulfilled by others.

Intimate zone  Zone of personal space between 0 and 1½ feet from an individual.

Invention  The process of developing new ideas.

Is/is not analysis  A method of separating the causes from the symptoms of a problem by considering such questions as: What is or is not the problem? What are or are not symptoms of the problem? When and where does the problem occur or not occur?

Knowledge  Cognitive understanding or accurate information about a subject—one of the elements essential to being a competent communicator.

Leadership  Behavior or communication that influences, guides, directs, or controls a group.

Leadership style  A relatively consistent behavior pattern that reflects a leader’s beliefs and attitudes; classified as authoritarian, laissez-faire, or democratic.

Legitimate power  Power derived from being elected or appointed to control a group.

Listening  The active process of selecting, attending, understanding, and remembering.

Listening style  An individual’s preferred way of making sense out of spoken messages.

Low-context culture  A culture that emphasizes verbal expression.

Maintenance roles  Roles that influence a group’s social atmosphere.

Major premise  A general statement that is the first element of a syllogism.

Media richness theory  The theory that a communication medium is rich if it has (1) potential for instant feedback, (2) verbal and nonverbal cues that can be processed by senders and receivers, (3) natural language, and (4) a focus on individuals.

Mediated setting  A context for communication that is not face to face but instead occurs through a phone line, fiber-optic cable, TV signal, or other means.

Message  Written, spoken, and unspoken elements of communication to which people assign meaning.

Metadiscussion  A statement about the process of discussion itself rather than about the discussion’s topic; discussion about discussion.

Method theories  Theories that offer prescriptions for behavior.

Minor premise  A specific statement about an example that is linked to the major premise; it is the second element of a syllogism.

Mode  The way or means through which communication is expressed.

Monochronic  A typically Western view of time as linear and segmented; also, a person who is more comfortable doing one thing at a time.

Motivation  An internal drive to achieve a goal.

Mutuality of concern  The degree to which members share the same level of commitment to a group or team.

Nominal-group technique  A problem-solving brainstorming method in which members work individually on ideas, rank suggested solutions, and then report their findings for group discussion.

Nonverbal communication  Communication behavior that does not rely on written or spoken words.

Norm  A standard that determines appropriate and inappropriate behavior.

Orientation phase  Fisher’s first phase of small group interaction, in which members try to understand one another and the task before their group.

Panel discussion  A group discussion intended to inform an audience about a problem or encourage the audience to evaluate the pros and cons of an issue.

Paralanguage  Vocal cues such as pitch, volume, speaking rate, and voice quality that provide information about the meaning of a message.

Pareto principle  The principle that the source of 80 percent of a problem comes from 20 percent of the incidents.

Parliamentary procedure  A comprehensive set of rules that prescribe how to take action on specific issues that come before a group and how to organize all aspects of group governance. For a complete guide to parliamentary procedure, see Robert’s Rules of Order.

Perception checking  The skill of asking someone whether your interpretation of his or her message is accurate; the skill requires observing behavior, thinking about what the behavior may mean, and asking whether your interpretation is accurate.

Personal zone  Zone of personal space between 1½ and 4 feet from an individual.

Plagiarism  Presenting someone else’s words and ideas as one’s own.

Polychronic  A view of time that places less emphasis on punctuality; also, a person who is able to do many things simultaneously.

Power  The ability to influence or exert control over others.

Predictive function  The ability of a theory to predict events.

Prescriptive approach  An approach to solving problems that identifies specific agendas and techniques to improve problem solving.

Primary group  A group (such as a family) that fulfills people’s needs to associate with others.

Primary tension  Anxiety and tension that occur when a group first meets and members feel awkward and uncertain how to behave.

Problem-oriented competencies  The communication skills of defining and analyzing a problem.

Problem solving  A process that attempts to overcome or manage an obstacle in order to reach a goal.

Problem-solving group  A group that exists to resolve an issue or overcome an obstacle.

Process conflict  Conflict that occurs when one or more group members disagree about how task could or should be accomplished; there is a difference of opinion about group procedures to accomplish the task.

Process leadership  Communication directed toward maintaining interpersonal relations and a positive group climate; also called group building or maintenance.

Process theories  Theories that explain human behaviors in a variety of contexts, including group and team phenomena.

Prototype  A model or smaller version of a solution to a problem that is developed to test the solution, product, or process before implementing the solution on a larger scale.

Proxemics  The study of how close to or far away from other people and objects we choose to be.

Pseudo-conflict  Conflict that occurs when individuals disagree because of poor communication.

Public communication format  A format for presenting an organized group discussion to an audience.

Public zone  Zone of personal space beyond 12 feet from an individual.

Question of fact  A question that asks whether something is true or false or did or did not occur.

Question of policy  A question that asks about a course of action or a change in a procedure or behavior.

Question of prediction  A question that asks whether something is likely to occur under certain circumstances.
**Question of value**  A question that asks whether something is good or bad or right or wrong.

**Quorum**  The minimum number of people who must be present to conduct business.

**Random-word technique**  A method used to enhance creative brainstorming in which one person says a random word to stimulate the development of new ideas.

**Reasoning**  The process of drawing conclusions from information.

**Receiver**  The person who interprets a communication message.

**Referent power**  The power of interpersonal attraction.

**Reflect**  Having one or more group members consciously observing and verbalizing how the group and individual group members are following procedures and rules and interacting with one another.

**Reflective thinking**  John Dewey’s problem-solving method, which includes defining a problem, analyzing it, suggesting possible solutions for it, selecting the best solution for it, and testing and implementing that solution.

**Regulator**  A nonverbal behavior that helps a group control the flow of communication.

**Reinforcement**  A fourth and final phase of group development in which group members express positive regard for the group and its members and offer comments that build cohesiveness.

**Relational activity**  An activity that sustains relationships among group members and manages the group climate.

**Relational competencies**  Small group communication competencies that help a group manage conflict and maintain a positive group climate.

**Reward power**  Power based on the ability to reward desired behavior.

**Roles**  Sets of expectations people hold for themselves and for others in a given context.

**Rule**  A prescription for acceptable behavior. Rules identify the appropriate or expected behavior of team or group members.

**Secondary group**  A group that exists to accomplish a task or achieve a goal.

**Secondary tension**  Conflict and stress that occur in a group as members vie for positions of leadership and influence or when group members begin to openly express disagreement about the task at hand.

**Self-concept**  The characteristics and attributes an individual believes himself or herself to have; one’s theory about oneself.

**Self-disclosure**  The deliberate communication of information about oneself to others.

**Silent brainstorming**  A period of individual brainstorming that occurs before group members share their ideas with the group; integral to the nominal-group technique; also may be used as part of traditional brainstorming.

**Similarity**  The tendency of individuals with like experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and values to be attracted to one another.

**Simple conflict**  Conflict that occurs when two people’s goals or ideas are mutually exclusive or incompatible.

**Single-question format**  A problem-solving agenda that helps a group identify key issues and subissues of a problem.

**Situation**  The context in which group communication occurs.

**Situational perspective**  A perspective that views leadership as the interaction among group needs and goals, leadership style, and the situation.

**Skill**  An effective behavior that can be repeated when appropriate.

**Small group**  At least three people interacting with one another.

**Small group communication**  Interaction among a small group of people who share a common purpose, who feel a sense of belonging to the group, and who exert influence on one another.

**Small-group ecology**  The consistent way in which people in small groups arrange themselves physically.

**Social exchange theory**  A description of human relationships in terms of costs and rewards or profits and losses.

**Social facilitation**  The tendency for the presence of others to affect human behavior, specifically, to cause people to work harder.

**Social information-processing theory**  A theory that suggests that relationships do develop via mediated channels but that expressing and interpreting relational cues takes longer than during face-to-face interaction.

**Social loafing**  The tendency for people to hold back from contributing (to loaf) in a group because they assume someone else will do the work.

**Social presence**  The feeling of acting or thinking as if a person is involved in face-to-face communication via electronically mediated communication.

**Social zone**  Zone of personal space between 4 and 12 feet from an individual.

**Solution-oriented competencies**  The communication skills of identifying solution criteria and generating and evaluating solutions.

**Source**  Originator of a thought or emotion, who puts it into a code that can be understood by a receiver.

**Standard agenda**  A prescriptive agenda for solving a group or team problem that includes (1) identifying and defining the problem, (2) analyzing the problem, (3) identifying possible solutions, (4) selecting the best solution, and (5) implementing the solution.

**Standing committee**  A committee that remains active for an extended period of time.

**Status**  An individual’s importance.

**Stinking thinking**  Thoughts that limit a person’s, group’s, or organization’s possibilities.

**Structure**  Methods used to keep a group discussion focused and on task, which includes using an agenda, rules, procedures, and problem-solving steps.

**Structuration theory**  A general framework that explains how people use rules and resources to interact in a social system.

**Study group**  A group whose primary purpose is to gather information and learn new ideas.

**Supermajority decision**  A decision based on agreement on a solution, action, or decision by at least two-thirds of a group.

**Surface-level diversity**  Social differences that are more readily visible, such as differences in ethnicity, skin color, age, sex, and other observable categories.

**SWOT analysis**  SWOTs is an acronym for identifying multiple strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats that a group or an organization has.

**Syllogism**  A way of structuring an argument in three parts: (1) a major premise, (2) a minor premise, and (3) a conclusion.

**Symbol**  Word, sound, or visual image that represents something else, such as a thought, concept, or object.

**Symbolic convergence theory**  The theory that a group develops a shared consciousness and identity through the sharing of fantasies or stories, which are often chained together and have a common theme.

**Symposium presentation**  A series of short speeches unified by a central issue or theme.

**Synchronous message**  E-mail interaction that takes place in real time.
Synergy  A condition in which the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

System  An organic whole composed of interdependent elements.

Systems theory  A theory that describes group behavior in terms of input, processes, and output.

Task conflict  Conflict that occurs because of substantive differences about how to accomplish what the group is trying to achieve.

Task leadership  Communication directed toward accomplishing a group’s task or goal.

Task-process activity  An activity that helps a group manage its task or accomplish its work.

Task role  A role a member assumes to help accomplish the group’s mission.

T-chart  A diagram (in the shape of a large T) on which the pros and cons of a particular proposition are listed on either side of the middle line.

Team  A group of individuals organized to work together to achieve a common goal.

Territoriality  Use of space to claim or defend a given area.

Theory  A set of interrelated facts, observations, and ideas that explains or predicts something.

Therapy group  A group led by a trained professional whose purpose is to help individuals with personal problems.

Topical focus activity  An activity that deals with the issues under discussion by a group at a given time.

Trait perspective  A view of leadership as the personal attributes or qualities that leaders possess.

Transactional  Involving both sending and receiving simultaneously.

Transformational leadership  Leadership that aims at changing an organization by realigning its culture around a new vision.

Trust  The extent to which a person is confident in, and willing to act on the basis of, the words, actions, and decisions of another.

Value  A person’s perception of what is right or wrong, good or bad.

Vigilant thinkers  People who use logic, reasoning, evidence, and data to analyze issues and problems; they also establish clear decision criteria and evaluate the positive and negative consequences of a decision.

Virtual small group communication  Communication among group members who are not together in the same physical location.

Webinars  Seminars held via the Internet that use voice messages or could be combined with Communicating in Virtual Groups and Teams.

X-Y-Z formula  A way to describe feelings by saying, “When you do X, in situation Y, I feel Z.”
Notes

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