How do I collaborate with others effectively?

Working successfully with others in a group or a team, particularly one with a shared goal, involves a high level of self-awareness, excellent people skills and effective academic skills (such as planning, organising, etc.). Universities expect group participation on a weekly basis, in discussions through lectures and seminars as part of your learning and cognitive development.

In addition, many courses set group work assignments to prepare students for the world of work. It is therefore a key employability skill. These various group activities can be a really engaging way to study because it provides the opportunity for an active and hands-on learning experience, an opportunity to learn with and from your peer group and to develop your social and emotional skills. However, under assessment conditions student teams often start to break down, struggling with conflicts between team members, differences of approach and motivation. This guide will explore some of the key characteristics and personal attributes required to work effectively within groups of people both at university and beyond, as well as targeting some specific academic skills.

So what happens when a group isn't working?

Here is an example of a group with negative dynamics. What problems can you predict from the descriptions of the people?

A team of five have been working together to write a presentation on a topic from their lecture series.

- *Jenny is an exceptionally shy student and as a result has not participated in group discussions. She has got on with making a PowerPoint to try and be helpful, but without consulting the others.*

- *Mohammed has a lot of friends, is president of the sports societies in the SU and is coach of the rugby team. He came to university for the experience and is less bothered about grades. He is always busy, misses meetings and rarely gets his share of the work done.*

- *Dominique made herself leader from the start, without being elected by the other students, and has spent most of the time bossing the other students around and criticising their work. She is a straight A student and is frustrated that not everyone in the group is working hard or committed.*

- *Rupinda likes to ensure everyone is happy and spends most of her time trying to smooth over disputes in the team. She is not a top student but gets regular B's, she is exceptionally hard working and often picks up the work others haven't completed.*

- *Samantha has difficulties at home and has no financial support at university (which she hasn't told the team), she is working 30-40 hours a week at a club, but hides this from everyone. She never gets the grades she wants because she is tired all the time and can't put the work in. She regularly misses meetings and hasn't done the work. Her excuses are wearing thin on the team but she doesn't want to tell them the truth.*

Here's what happened. What mistakes do you think they made as a group?

> The deadline is two days away and they have not yet managed to meet all together. Dominique is angry with Jenny, because she doesn't agree with the work Jenny has done on the PowerPoint; with Mohammed and Samantha, for not turning up and not working hard and Rupinda, for not sticking up for Dominique's views. Rupinda is exhausted trying to make the team work. She is also beginning to feel very used because she has done most of the work and feels that all Dominique has done is criticise her. Mohammed is angry with Dominique for her treatment of Jenny and Rupinda, has shouted at her down the phone and told her she is unreasonable. Samantha is exhausted and on the verge of tears, as well as feeling horribly guilty that her work is not as good as the others. Most of their communication has been via text. They have been unable to practice the presentation.

Amongst other things they did not:

- establish ground rules for the team
- discuss leadership strategies
- set up effective communication strategies
- discuss or implement effective delegation strategies (i.e. who should do what)
- allow themselves to be honest with each other
- acknowledge their own behaviours and the impact of these behaviours on others
- practice empathy and support each other

The key to any group working scenario is ensuring that two things are established from the start: communication strategies and group dynamics.

What 'Communication Strategies' can we use?

Active listening: To do this it is important to listen to and engage with what your colleagues are saying, and before you respond, summarise or paraphrase what they said. This allows you to check that you understand and lets them know that they have been heard. Often conflicts result from miscommunication; active listening can help avoid this.

Concise speaking: In group work, sometimes conflicts result from one or two people dominating the conversation, and speaking for long periods of time. Take a moment to plan what you want to say and make one point at a time. Then others can respond and decisions can be made one at a time.

Turn-taking: If you are a confident, chatty person, make a few contributions and then sit back and keep quiet to allow others to speak. You can also ask group members directly if you think they will be comfortable contributing.

Communicating through writing: Also remember that communication doesn't have to happen through discussions. Some people may contribute more if you have something like a Google Document which you can all add to simultaneously, or if you use chat apps, messaging or email.

How do we best plan for working together?

Discuss organisation and allocation of tasks at the beginning of the group work. In your first meeting, brainstorm a list of what needs to get done and split up the tasks. Agree together what the roles and responsibilities will be, and try to set a timetable (see below).

Set agendas for meetings, whether in person or virtual. Part of the team leader's role is to set a task (or several) to achieve at a particular time. This lets meetings stay focused, so don't be afraid to bring the team back to the point when people start talking about something irrelevant (even if you're not the team leader).

Agree what you will do if someone cannot attend one of the meetings, or cannot complete their tasks. Think about back-up plans.

What time-management strategies can we use?

Create a schedule or a timetable. Work backwards from the deadline, put the tasks in order (establish which steps depend on other steps being completed), and decide when each task needs to be completed based on how long it will take. Do this in your first meeting.

Agree dates and times for subsequent meetings, and agree what everyone will do and bring before the meeting.

Consider using planners, Gantt charts, flow charts, calendars etc. to visualise the process and goals. There are also a wide range of apps available to aid effective communication and time-management that it would be worth considering.

What are group dynamics?

Group dynamics are the interrelationships between members of a group in terms of behaviours exhibited and psychological processes. Group dynamics have a major impact on the productivity and success of a group.

Good group dynamics happen as a result of a combination of sensitivity and awareness towards the following issues:
- developing **self (and group) awareness**
- establishing ground rules for teamwork & co-operation
- practicing **empathy** and 'perspective taking'
- acting with **authenticity** and **integrity**
- effective conflict resolution and **negotiation** skills.

Specifically, for group projects this may also involve:
- establishing specific roles for team members & delegation of tasks
- considering the role of **leadership** (electing **leadership** where appropriate)

How do we establish good group dynamics?

This will happen through a process of discussing and establishing an ethos for the group in terms of the way you are going to operate together; agreed working behaviours, codes of conduct and approach. You will need to be open and honest with

each other in a non- confrontational manner. Approach each other with respect and compassion.

How can I develop my self-awareness & ensure my contribution to the group dynamics is positive?

Firstly, make an honest assessment of your own strengths and weaknesses and be prepared to talk about your own behaviours within the group - without getting defensive. In group projects this open discussion allows appropriate decisions to be made about how everyone will be involved, what, if any, leadership you want to establish and how to delegate tasks.

There are now a huge range of tools available for assessing your own characteristics, including the Myers Briggs test which will help you assess your own behaviours. You can use this to consider potential conflicts that might arise between.

To be useful in a group, take personal responsibility for your own behaviour, approach, motivation etc. This means developing your reflective and introspective skills to understand what you find frustrating, causes you to be upset or angry, or to behave unfeelingly towards others. Even more importantly, to understand why. Our emotions are not always fair nor are they necessarily based on a true reflection of events. Therefore, for a group to succeed you need to try to lay aside your own ego or pride and put the groups' needs above your own. This does not mean letting everyone else decide what to do, or deciding not to care. It is equally important to have integrity by being authentic and not 'faking' your personality.

> *Juror 8 (Henry Fonda) in the film 'Twelve Angry Men' is a fantastic example of this balance between the way an individual can influence group dynamics positively by both putting the group first and being authentic about his own position. In the film twelve jurors must come to a unanimous verdict for a murder case. Only Henry votes 'not guilty' in the opening vote before discussion. This makes the other jurors annoyed because they want to finish quickly, the room is hot and uncomfortable, the case has been long and they want to go home. Henry Fonda gently puts forward his case and has the confidence to be willing to stand alone in his vote. He works hard to create dialogue and to compromise. He agrees to set a time limit of an hour to discuss, he is reasonable and credits other group members' need to leave swiftly but remains quietly insistent that a discussion is needed. He starts from the premise that viewing from multiple perspectives will lead to best conclusion. He listens fully to others, respects each person's views and provides opportunity to share. He refrains from saying that he was right and the others were wrong but merely that he wishes to talk. This leads to a domino effect amongst the group, where others follow suit and seek areas of agreement. Clarification is sought where needed in a non-confrontational way. He is flexible and keeps an even tone of voice throughout.*

Adapted from Waller (2013).

What sorts of ground rules should we set for teamwork & co-operation?

Rules can help us to be fair to everyone involved while allowing the group to function well. Consider writing a contract that everyone signs such as:

"We agree to:
- allow each team member to speak without interrupting
- be encouraging in our comments
- criticise only when constructive and deliver this criticism gently
- commit 1 hour a week to meetings
- commit 2 hours a week to planning
- undertake all work to a high standard
- respond to feedback without letting ego get in the way"

Everyone can sign this at the outset, but it can also be adjusted or added to if required as the group develops an understanding of each other. Remember these ground rules will differ for each group you are involved with depending on what is appropriate given the context. However the basic premise for all groups is that members need to feel heard, respected and appreciated; need to be clear about how their contributions can fit into the overall picture; and there needs to be empathy between group members.

For example:

In the first example how quickly would you have judged Samantha? If you were in a group together and she never turned up, didn't seem to work hard and was always tired, what assumptions would you have jumped to?

What difference does it make when we understand the pressure she is under, or if we learn she is a young carer for a sick parent? Suddenly, our judgements seem harsh. More often than not there are deeper reasons for people's behaviour - never act out of judgements based on surface assumptions.

For more information on developing empathy look at this set of slides from Tim Curtis (Changemaker) on empathetic listening:

How do we establish appropriate roles within the group?

This leads on from the section on self-awareness. It is often useful to start a group project by assessing each individual team member's strengths and weaknesses. Based on this you can establish who might be best served performing what function within the group.

When should we elect team leadership and how should we do it?

As part of the process of assigning roles you might consider electing a leader. It may become apparent that you have someone in the group who has natural leadership skills (they are encouraging of others, a good organiser etc.). It may benefit the group to appoint this person to take charge of the overview of the project. This does not mean that they have to do everything but rather they keep track of progress and keep people organised. Having someone who 'chairs' meetings to get tasks started can

save time as often groups without a leader waste a lot of time, usually due to lack of focus.

That said, it is worth considering this role very carefully. You do not want to put someone domineering in a leadership position, as they are likely to overturn others' views and cause upset. Similarly, having a leader may cause other members to feel less important. Ensure that the whole group wish to have a leader and that they are voted in, as close to unanimously as possible. Consider having checkpoints to make sure everyone is still happy with this group dynamic throughout the process. Keep communication channels open so everyone feels valued and listened to.

What other group roles are important?

The **organiser** or recorder keeps track of decisions made, and coordinates materials.
The **timekeeper** keeps track of time in meetings and overall deadlines.
The **checker** can make sure everyone in the group understands concepts and conclusions; they can also be a fact-checker to find out key information to allow discussions to progress.

Note that, like the leader, these are roles played **in addition to** participating in the main work of the group project and contributing to discussions.

In discussions and meetings, the **devil's advocate** can point out potential problems or challenges constructively, or come up with counter arguments. The **harmoniser** tries to create a positive, harmonious atmosphere to allow the group to reach consensus and minimise hurt feelings.

What are good strategies for conflict resolution and negotiation?

Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing. It often leads through dialogue to better results because it means the team's approach has been contested and justified. It is worth noting that it is equally important to be wary of peer pressure that puts unanimous agreement above problem solving.

That said, you do need strategies that lead to positive debate and discussion rather than destructive anger and upset. With any luck if you implement all that has been already discussed you will avoid any major conflict. If not these ideas may help resolve the problems:

- Seek a **compromise** where each party involved in the conflict gets at least one thing they want. This means all parties have to sacrifice part of what they want in favour of a solution that meets halfway between the two conflicting views.
- One position backs down in order to **accommodate** the other view. Sometimes it is worth picking your battles so if it is not a fundamental issue consider backing down in favour of the group moving forward.
- Tackle the problem head on, and as a group **collaborate** in a problem solving exercise to seek creative solutions to the conflict. As a group vote on the approaches. Majority decision rules.
- Remember that in a group, decisions may not go your way. Do not seek to revisit decisions already taken unnecessarily, and try to avoid rehashing previous conflicts.

Further reading:

Borg, M., Kembro, J., Pedersen N. J., Petersson, C. & Ohlsson, L. (2011) Conflict Management in Student Groups - a Teacher's Perspective in Higher Education. *Högre utbildning.* **1**(2), pp.111-124.

Eisenberg, N. & Strayer, J. (eds.) (1987) *Empathy and it's development.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hassanien, H. (2006) Student Experience of Group Work and Group Assessment in Higher Education. J*ournal of Teaching in Travel & Tourism*, **6**(1) pp.17-39.

Waller, M. J. (2013) Beyond 12 Angry Men: Thin-Slicing Film to illustrate group dynamics. Small Group Research. **44**(4) pp.446-465.