CHAPTER 8

Small-Group Communication



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When you have read and thought about this chapter, you will be able to

1. explain what characterizes small-group communication.
2. recall the two functions of small groups.
3. explain how culture develops in small groups.
4. compare and contrast task, maintenance, and self-centered roles in groups.
5. describe how effective leadership is accomplished in small groups.
6. apply a process for group problem solving and decision-making.
7. discuss two technology tools that can be used to facilitate small-group communication.
8. apply skills necessary for effective and ethical group communication in face-to-face and virtual settings.

The Importance of Learning About Small Groups

Small groups are the basic building blocks of our society. Families, work teams, support groups, religious circles, and study groups are all examples of the groups on which our society is built. In organizations, the higher up you go, the more time you will spend working in groups. Membership in small groups is both common and important. In fact, most types of jobs increasingly rely on team-based work, and an increasing number require flexible and remote teams. Working in remote teams became increasingly more apparent in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and to the present in ways that have changed the landscape of how groups do their work. A 2021 *Future Workforce Report* by Upwork indicated that 40.7 million American workers will be fully remote in the next five years.[4] In a recent study, Yang (2022) and colleagues found that a move to remote work resulted in less communication between different groups and increased communication and closeness within one's own working groups. They also found that connections between coworkers stagnated and people made fewer new connections to other colleagues. We hope that the communication skills in this chapter will help you manage these newer challenges when you are involved in groups and teamwork.[5]

Small groups are important for four reasons. First, working in groups is an aspect of nearly every human activity. William Schutz, a psychologist who studied group interaction, said that humans have needs for inclusion, affection, and control.[6] The need for **inclusion**—the state of being involved with others—suggests that we need to belong to, or be included in, groups with others. As humans, we derive much of our identity, our beliefs about who we are, from the groups to which we belong. Starting with our immediate families, because they are one of the most influential social groups in our lives,[7] and including such important groups as members of a neighborhood place of worship, interest groups such as those concerned with preventing sexual assault on campus, and social groups such as book clubs—all of these help us define who we are. The need for **affection**—the emotion of caring for others and/or being cared for—means that we humans need to love and be loved, to know that we are important to others who value us as unique human beings. Finally, we have a need for **control**—the ability to influence our environment. We are better able to exercise such control if we work together in groups. One person cannot build a school, a bridge, or a new business. We need others to meet our needs.

Second, because group work is the norm in business and industry, knowing how groups function and having the ability to operate effectively in them will be highly valued skills. This is especially true given the rise in remote work and remote teamwork. A recent article in *Forbes* indicates that empathetic listening, agility, communicating through modern means such as pictures and video, emotional intelligence, hybrid and remote teamwork, and public speaking are among skills employers expect of new hires and skills even seasoned employees need to gain through upskilling (gaining or enhancing certain skills and practices).[8]

Third, being an effective group or team member is a skill you can learn about, develop, and master. As helpful as groups can be to any organization, they often fail because group leaders have not thought through exactly what they want the groups to accomplish or because group members have not been trained in how to behave appropriately as part of a team.[9] Group members need training to understand the dynamics of small-group interaction.

Finally, groups can be an important way for Americans to participate in the democratic process and understand how and why we differ on various issues. By talking in groups, we can become more confident in articulating our own beliefs, which, in turn, may lead us to be more vocal about our beliefs in a variety of contexts.[10] For example, during the 2014 election, small groups played a key role in increasing voter turnout. At Illinois State University (ISU), a small group of communication instructors created assignments in their public-speaking classes designed to get students more involved in civic issues. As a result of this effort, students engaged in an annual "issues fair" at which small groups of students presented information about local, state, and national issues by setting up tables and booths on their campus quad. These students helped raise awareness of how political issues were relevant to other college students. Those efforts not only significantly increased student-voter turnout but also persuaded the county board of elections to expand early voting locations to the campus.

ISU then created the Social Media Analytics Command Center (SMACC) that hosted a campus watch party for the 2015 State of the Union (SOTU) address. At this event, students worked in small groups to analyze the social media chatter about the SOTU in real time. The small groups analyzed 1,688 posts that contained the #iSOTU hashtag and they found that the tweets had the following relationships:

- *Cliques*—groups of Twitter (X) handles that frequently mentioned each other or were mentioned together.
- *Degree*—the number of connections to other Twitter (X) handles by means of retweets or mentions.
- *Betweenness*—the extent to which a Twitter (X) handle serves as a connection between other handles in the network. A Twitter (X) handle with a high level of betweenness has influence over what flows and does not flow through the social network.
- *Authority*—the extent to which a Twitter (X) handle is a definitive source of information. A Twitter (X) handle with a large amount of authority is frequently retweeted or mentioned by other Twitter (X) handles or groups of Twitter (X) handles.[11]

engaging diversity

Groups Help Us Maintain Culture

If you travel 10 minutes northeast of Hermann Park in central Houston, you will find yourself in the middle of the greater Third Ward. Houston's Third Ward is distinctive for many reasons: it is the home of Texas Southern University, it is one of the original political subdivisions of Houston, and it is just adjacent to downtown Houston and the world-renowned Texas Medical Center campus. The Third Ward has also been the home for much of Houston's African American community. As an article in the *Houston Business Journal* points out, the Third Ward has been threatened with losing its historic identity because of gentrification, or the influx of higher-income development within lower-income areas. Lower-income residents who can no longer afford the increasing rent or property taxes mainly feel the effects of gentrification because they often become displaced. As a result, the historical roots of the area are ripped apart.

Small groups of residents in Houston's Third Ward are doing their part to combat the negative effects of gentrification. A group of artists created Project Row Houses (**www.projectrowhouses.org**) in 1993 as a way to build community through art. In 2018, Project Row Houses celebrated 25 years of service. It embraces the philosophy that communities created through art can revitalize inner-city neighborhoods such as the Third Ward. Recently, artist Jackie Sumell was part of a Project Row Houses exhibit called "Round 48: Beyond Social Practice," which raised awareness for incarcerated mothers, who make up 80% of the female prison population. As part of the installation, visitors planted seedlings chosen by the incarcerated mothers and shared pictures of the plants' growth with them through the Flikshop app, which allows messages and images to be printed and mailed as postcards to inmates. In this way, Project Row Houses uses art to highlight the interconnections of urban spaces, cultural issues, and cultural identity.

Sources: Bradford, N. (2007, July 22). Houston's Third Ward battles an identity crisis. *Houston Business Journal*. www.bizjournals.com/houston/stories/2007/07/23/focus1; Project Row Houses. (n.d.). About. https://projectrowhouses.org/about/about-prh; Tommaney, S. (2018, October 9). Project row houses brings night bakery, pics for prison moms and chill house. *Houston Press*. www.houstonpress.com/arts/things-to-do-check-out-round-48-beyond-social-practice-at-project-row-houses-10934179

Defining Small-Group Communication

Small-group communication is the interaction among three to nine people who are working together to achieve an interdependent goal.[12] This definition implies several things:

- Groups must be small enough that members are mutually aware that the group is a collective entity. Groups typically contain between three and nine people but may be larger if members perceive the group as an entity. Research does show that groups of three or four people are more productive than are larger groups of five or more people.[13] So, if given a choice, working with a smaller group may produce better results.
- The substance that creates and holds the group together is the interaction between members.
- Group members are interdependent—they cannot achieve their goals without the help of other group members. If you watch reality TV shows such as *The Amazing Race,* then you have seen examples of how groups of people must work as interdependent units to achieve success.

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Based on this definition, *communication* is the essential process within a small group. Communication creates a group, shapes each group in unique ways, and allows the group to function. As with other forms of human communication, small-group communication involves sending verbal and nonverbal signals that are perceived, interpreted, and responded to by other people. Group members pay attention to each other and coordinate their behavior in order to accomplish the group's assignment. In fact, group communication is like any other form of communication; however, the greater number of people makes communication even more challenging.

The Types and Functions of Small Groups

Think for a moment about the different groups to which you belong. You may regularly study with other students from your English class, you may belong to an a cappella singing group on campus or a political group, you may be assigned to participate in a student service-learning group, and you likely have a group of friends with whom you socialize. What are the key differences among these groups? In answering that question, you might think about differences that point to the type of group or the function that the group serves in your life. There are two types of groups:

- **Assigned groups** occur when individuals are appointed to be members of the group. A student union advisory board is an example of an assigned group.
- **Emergent groups** occur when a group of individuals decide to form a cohesive group out of personal need or desire, but they are not appointed to be part of the group. A group of friends who meet at college are an emergent group.

We can also classify groups according to the function they serve:

- **Task-oriented groups** are formed for the purpose of completing tasks, such as solving a problem or making a decision. A group of students studying for an exam are taking part in a task-oriented group.
- **Relationship-oriented groups** are usually long term and exist to meet our needs for inclusion and affection. Your family is an example of a relationship-oriented group.

Classifying groups according to whether they are task oriented, relationship oriented, assigned, or emergent is important because a primary tension felt in groups is balancing the task and the interaction (relational) side of group work. Because people form groups, and because groups can grow and change through communication, lines between these types and functions can easily blur. Members of relationship-oriented groups, such as families, engage in work, make decisions, and must cooperate to complete tasks. Members of task-oriented groups forge strong personal bonds and provide each other with affection and recognition. In fact, some of the best task-oriented groups are those that benefit from strong relational bonds so that members feel appreciated and valued. If positive relationships are established among group members, an assigned group can start to look and feel like an emergent group. As we interact with members of that group, a relationship-oriented social group may emerge. Just as our personal relationships can go through several turning points, our group membership is also constantly in flux.

However, certain group members' identities may affect a group's dynamics, even though they are not directly related to the group's task. It is natural for group members to engage in relationally oriented communication as they get to know each other, and it is possible that they may talk about issues that are not tied to the group task. In doing so, this reveals aspects of group members' identities that are different from those of other members. For example, you may decide to go out for pizza with the group you have been assigned to in your marketing class, and the conversation turns toward politics and the federal budget. You realize quickly that there are significant differences of opinions based on political affiliations in your group, and you wonder if this is going to influence your work together for class. Groups are not immune to current societal events. It is important to listen to and learn from others' opinions and to continue to focus on the group's task while honoring differences of opinions.



A family is an example of a relationship-oriented group.

Hill Street Studios/Crystal Cartier/Blend/Getty Images

Establishing Culture in Small Groups

When small groups are created, they immediately begin developing a unique group culture. Some group cultures are pleasant, empowering, and motivating, whereas others are aggressive, hostile, and demeaning. In this section you will learn how group culture develops as a result of group norms, role structures enacted by group members, group cohesiveness, and diversity.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP NORMS

The first time group members communicate, they begin to establish the **norms**—informal rules for interaction created and sustained through communication—that will eventually guide the members' behaviors. Norms for group behavior tell us implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, how we are to act and behave with others in the group. At first, the full range of human behavior is available to members. For example, they may greet each other formally ("Director," "Doctor," "Professor," and so on), or they may speak informally and use first names. Some group members may shake hands when they first meet, whereas others may hug or bow. The initial pattern of behavior tends to set the tone for subsequent meetings and to establish the general norms that members will follow. The norms of any group tend to mirror the norms of broader cultures in which the group exists. Such norms are also created and altered through communication between group members. As the group interacts, and as leaders exercise authority, the norms of the group can be modified to help the group function more effectively. Of course, sometimes bad norms also develop, which can negatively affect the group's outcomes.

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Most norms are not established directly. For example, if Ali comes late to a meeting and no one seems bothered, other members may get the message that coming to meetings on time is unnecessary. By saying nothing to Ali, the group, without consciously thinking about it or formally "deciding," has begun to establish a norm that members need not be on time.

Norms often develop rapidly, without members consciously realizing what is occurring. For example, repeated behaviors, such as members always sitting in the same seats, show how easily norms can emerge through communication. Groups naturally use feedback to enforce norms. If a group member continually texts during meetings, another group member or a leader might say, "We need to put our devices away and focus," to indicate that a norm has been violated.

Members should pay attention to group norms to ensure that they are appropriate to the group task. When groups are working on a task in the classroom, it is common for members to discuss other topics, such as a band playing at the local club, turning back to the task at hand only when the teacher walks by. Such norms for playfulness, although important for relationship development, may begin to distract the group from assigned tasks. In general, groups needs to balance time for fun and time for work.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ROLES FOR GROUP MEMBERS

Every group member enacts a unique **role**, which is a consistent pattern of interaction or behavior exhibited over time. In movies, characters enact roles to drive the story; in small groups, members enact roles to drive the interaction of the group. Whereas actors learn their roles from scripts, group members create their roles spontaneously during interactions with others and while drawing on their unique skills and attitudes. Just as an actor plays different roles in different films, individuals enact many diverse roles in the numerous groups to which they belong.

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The Types of Group Roles

Two major types of group roles are formal and informal. A **formal role** (sometimes called a *positional role*) is an assigned role based on an individual's position or title within a group. You may have a job in which you are assigned to send a GroupMe message reminding group members about tasks to complete before the next meeting. Your job duty could even state that your role is to keep track of finances or to record agenda items for future meetings. As a result of your formal role, other group members might expect you to behave in certain ways: they might expect you to be organized and have the ability to locate information quickly and without warning. Formal roles bring expectations, and your job is to understand and meet those expectations.

An **informal role** (sometimes called a *behavioral role*) is a role that develops naturally, or spontaneously, within a group. The role of each group member is worked out through interactions with the rest of the group and changes to meet emerging needs of the group. Informal roles strongly reflect members' personality characteristics, habits, and typical ways of interacting within a group. If you are the type of person who likes to talk in front of others, you might take on the role of a facilitator. By contrast, if you are less talkative, you might be a person who takes on behind-the-scene roles, such as conducting research or creating documents for the group. If you are the most competent social media user in your group, you might create a Facebook group for the members or coordinate WhatsApp threads to stay in touch in between meetings. Informal roles allow you to play to your strengths; of course, to develop informal roles you may need to talk to other group members about your preferences and abilities.

Behaviors That Define Roles

Roles enacted by group members create a set of behaviors that help the group achieve its objectives. An effective group is like a jigsaw puzzle; each group member performs a slightly different role, but each set of behaviors is coordinated to work with the others so that a complete picture is formed.

One way of understanding the various types of behaviors performed by group members is to classify them as task, maintenance, or self-centered behaviors. **Task functions** are behaviors that are directly relevant to the group's purpose and that affect the group's productivity; their purpose is to focus group members productively on their assignment. **Maintenance functions** are behaviors that focus on the interpersonal relationships among group members; they are aimed at supporting cooperative and harmonious relationships. Both task and maintenance functions are considered essential to effective group communication. By contrast, **self-centered functions** are behaviors that serve the needs of the individual at the expense of the group. The person performing a self-centered behavior implies, "I don't care what the group needs or wants. *I* want . . . ." These group members use self-centered functions to manipulate other members for selfish goals that compete with group goals. Examples of statements that support task, maintenance, and self-centered functions are shown in **Table 8.1**. The list is not exhaustive, however; many more functions could be added.

Table 8.1 Examples of Task, Maintenance, and Self-Centered Statements

TASK FUNCTIONS AND STATEMENTS	
Initiating and Orienting	"Let's make a list of what we still need to do."
Information Giving	"Last year, the club spent $150 on publicity."
Information Seeking	"Omar, how many donations did the Child and Family Advocacy Center report last year?"
Opinion Giving	"I don't think the cost of parking stickers is the worst parking problem students have."
Clarifying	"Martina, are you saying that you couldn't support a proposal that increased student fees?"
Extending	"Another thing that Toby's proposal would let us do is allow us to have a wider outreach."
Evaluating	"One problem I see with Amara's idea is that the budget may not cover it."
Summarizing	"So we've decided that we'll add two sections to the report, and Jim and Aisha will write them."
Coordinating	"If Xixi gets everyone's sources by Monday, then Terrell and I can prepare the references page for Tuesday's meeting."
Consensus Testing	"We seem to be agreed that we prefer the second option."
Recording	"I think we decided at our last meeting. Let me check the minutes."
MAINTENANCE (RELATIONSHIP-ORIENTED) FUNCTIONS AND STATEMENTS	
Establishing Norms	"It doesn't help to talk about other group members when they aren't here. Let's stick to the issues."
Gatekeeping	"Pat, you look like you want to say something about the proposal."
Supporting	"I think Keisha's point is well made, and we should look at it more closely."
Harmonizing	"Jin and Sally, I think there are areas where you are in agreement, and I would like to suggest a compromise that might work for you both."
Tension Relieving	"We're getting tired and cranky. Let's take a 10-minute break."
Dramatizing	"Let me tell you about this one time five years ago when we had something similar happen in this company."
Showing Solidarity	"We've really done great work here!"
SELF-CENTERED FUNCTIONS AND STATEMENTS	
Withdrawing	"Do whatever you want. I don't care."
Blocking	"I don't care if we've already voted. I want to discuss it again!"
Status and Recognition Seeking	"I have a lot more experience fundraising than any of you, and I think we should do it the way I know works."

Behaviors are the building blocks for roles. These behavioral functions combine to create a member's informal role, which is a comprehensive, general picture of how a particular member typically acts in a group. An example of how individual functions combine to create a role is shown in Figure 8.1. As you can see, information-giving and information-seeking behaviors primarily characterize the information specialist role. The storyteller role comprises several behaviors, including dramatizing, relieving tension, supporting, summarizing, and clarifying. Numerous other informal roles can be created through combinations of behaviors.

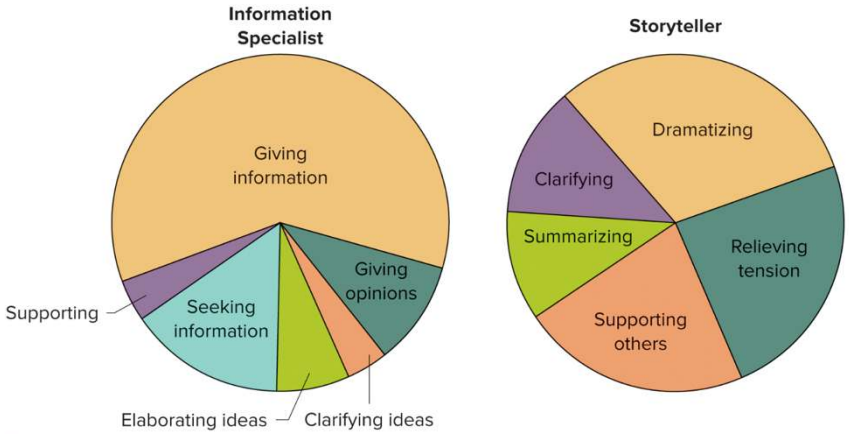


Figure 8.1 Behavioral functions combine to create roles.

Galanes, G. J., and J. K. Brilhart. *Communicating in Groups: Applications and Skills*. Brown & Benchmark, 1993. Copyright © 1993. Times Mirror Higher Education Group, Inc. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission.

Emerging Technology and Group Roles

New technology and social media are changing the ways in which groups interact, as well as the amount and frequency of their interactions. Studies show that students who participate in social media as part of a class feel more connected to their peers than do students who do not participate in social media. Using social media creates a more collaborative and engaging learning environment for people to discuss ideas.[14] Research shows that collaborating with classmates on a given topic through social media can help groups develop a stronger sense of community.[15] With increased accessibility to news and media, everyone can now be an information giver and an information seeker. As a result, we may have to rethink how group roles are derived and assigned. For example, perhaps it may be a disadvantage or no longer necessary for only one person to be tasked with being an information giver.

GROUP COHESIVENESS

Another important element that helps shape a group's culture is the **group climate**, which is the emotional tone or atmosphere that members create within the group. For example, you have probably attended a group meeting where the tension silenced everyone. That atmosphere of tension describes the group's climate. Three factors that contribute heavily to group climate are trust, cohesiveness, and supportiveness:

- *Trust* means that members believe they can rely on each other. Two types of trust relevant to group work are task trust and interpersonal trust. Task trust develops when you have confidence that others will get their jobs done in support of the group's goals. Interpersonal trust emerges when you perceive that others are working in support of the group rather than trying to achieve personal gain or to accomplish hidden agendas.
- *Supportiveness* refers to an atmosphere of openness in which members care about each other and create cohesiveness. Examples of both supportive and defensive statements are found in Table 8.2.
- *Cohesiveness* is the attachment members feel toward each other and the group. Highly cohesive groups are more open, handle disagreement more effectively, and typically perform better than less cohesive groups.[16]

Table 8.2 Examples of Defensive and Supportive Statements		
Behavior	**Description**	**Sample Statement**
DEFENSIVE BEHAVIORS AND STATEMENTS		
Evaluation	Judging another person	"That's a completely ridiculous idea."
Control	Dominating or insisting on your own way	"I've decided what we need to do."
Manipulation	Trying to verbally push compliance	"Don't you think you should try it my way?"
Neutrality	Not caring about how others feel	"It doesn't matter to me what you decide."
Superiority	Pulling rank, maximizing status differences	"As group leader, I think we should . . ."
Certainty	Being a "know-it-all"	"You guys are completely off base. I know exactly how to handle this."
SUPPORTIVE BEHAVIORS AND STATEMENTS		
Description	Describing your own feelings without making those of others wrong	"I prefer the first option because . . ."
Problem Orientation	Searching for the best solution without predetermining what that should be	"We want to produce the best results, and that may mean some extra time from all of us."
Spontaneity	Reacting honestly and openly	"Wow, that sounds like a great idea!"
Empathy	Showing you care about the other members	"Jan, originally you were skeptical. How comfortable will you be if the group favors that option?"
Equality	Minimizing status differences by treating members as equals	"I don't have all the answers. What do the rest of you think?"
Provisionalism	Expressing opinions tentatively and being open to others' suggestions	"Maybe we should try a different approach . . ."

Although cohesiveness is generally desirable for groups, dangers arise from too much cohesion. **Groupthink** occurs when the desire for cohesion and agreement takes precedence over critical analysis and discussion. According to sociologists, groupthink can destroy effective decision making. Several historical decision-making blunders have been attributed to groupthink, including the escalation of the Vietnam conflict, the space shuttle *Challenger* disaster, and potentially the *Columbia* shuttle disaster over Texas.[17] Although groupthink may be difficult to detect when you are in a group, researchers have identified the following observable signs of groupthink:

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- An illusion of invulnerability by the group
- An unquestioned belief in the morality of the group
- Collective efforts by group members to rationalize faulty decisions
- Stereotypic views of enemy leaders as evil, weak, or ineffective
- Self-censorship of alternative viewpoints
- A shared illusion that all group members think the same thing
- Direct pressure on group members expressing divergent opinions
- The emergence of "mind guards" to screen the group from information contradictory to the prevailing opinion

Research psychologist Irving Janis's original description of groupthink suggests that these characteristics lead to groupthink, and consequently result in bad decisions, recent studies suggest that Janis's groupthink characteristics actually occur after the group has already made a poor decision.[18] Once groups make decisions, group members try to create and reinforce a consensus in support of the decision, even in the face of evidence that the decision is a poor one. The desire for consensus then leads to all of the groupthink characteristics identified by Janis.

Groupthink is possible in nearly every group. To prevent groupthink from occurring, groups should

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- seek all pertinent information,
- carefully assess the credibility of information relevant to the decision at hand,
- assign members to present counterarguments, and
- maintain a commitment to finding the best possible outcome as supported by the available evidence.

In addition to groupthink, aspects of group members' identities can also influence group interactions. According to professor of psychology Thomas G. Plante, research and theory in social psychology shows that small groups are at risk of having polarizing views disrupt healthy dialogue, just as they do on social media and in other types of discussions.[19] In a *Psychology Today* article, Plante noted that several social forces, including politics, race, gender, and socioeconomic level, can create polarization in groups.[20] For example, if a small group were tasked with brainstorming ways to reduce poverty and its effects in a community, group members' socioeconomic statuses, as well as other characteristics, have the potential to create conflict surrounding the topic. Such conflict can occur among group members, which Plante calls "in-group" conflict, or between members of the group and others, which he calls "out-group" conflict. How can you challenge instances of polarization and conflict if they arise in your group? The common in-group identity model suggests that you can find what your group members have in common and then make that feature one of the most important aspects of your group, rather than focusing on all the ways you are different.[21] An "us versus them" mentality usually does not lead to good outcomes, and you would be better served by thinking and behaving in ways that promote compassion and respect. Importantly, having this mindset and acting in these ways can promote people with diverse viewpoints to get along.



• Group members must make counterviewpoints known to help the group avoid groupthink.

DIVERSITY AND GROUP CULTURE

Although we typically think of culture as belonging to very large groups of people, small groups also develop cultures. **Group culture** is the socially negotiated system of rules that guide group behavior. Group culture differs from national and ethnic cultures in that group cultures are relatively unstable and short-term phenomena. Group cultures are constantly in flux, and they disappear when the group dissolves. National and ethnic cultures change slowly and are relatively persistent. If you compare two groups from your own life, you can easily understand the concept of group culture. Your group of friends has implicit rules for behavior—inside jokes, slang, norms for touching, and shared objectives. Your group likely has a culture different from that of an assigned group of students you work with in one of your classes. Classroom groups are typically more formal, less cohesive, and more task oriented. The two groups reflect different cultures that have emerged.

The culture of a group can be influenced by many things. The norms and behaviors of group members can influence culture; so, too, can the diversity among group members.

Within-group diversity is the presence of observable and implicit differences among group members. We observe within-group diversity when group members differ based on visible characteristics. For example, we can visually distinguish between some aspects of able-bodied and non-able-bodied group members. Group diversity can be implicit when members of a group have differing values, attitudes, political beliefs, and perspectives—personal characteristics that cannot be seen. **Table 8.3** shows common examples of observable and implicit within-group diversity.

Table 8.3 Observable and Implicit Within-Group Diversity

Differences	Definition	Example
Observable	Within-group diversity based on physical characteristics that can be seen	Visible aspects of able and non-able-bodiedness, perceived gender, height, eye color
Implicit	Within-group diversity based on individuals' worldviews, perspectives, and other personality characteristics	Religious orientation, educational background, political affiliation

Differences between group members can have an impact on how they interact with one another and how effectively the group functions. To illustrate the effects of group diversity on group members' behaviors, here are several research findings on differences between how self-identified men and women may interact in groups:

- In online discussion groups and other forms of digitally mediated communication, women tend to use more exclamation points as markers of friendliness—thus emphasizing the relational aspects of group communication.[22]
- Although men are typically more influential in standard communication contexts, this difference diminishes in groups, especially when more than one woman is present. In such situations, the influence of women is roughly equal to that of men.[23]
- Research has observed no differences in perceived leadership ability regardless of whether the group is primarily task or relationship oriented; earlier research had shown that women were better leaders in relationship-oriented groups.[24]

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In addition to gender differences, cultural differences can also influence group dynamics. For instance, it is likely that work groups and even classroom groups will have at least one member who is an English language learner (ELL). You might assume that group members who speak English with different levels of proficiency can diminish the cohesiveness of the group. That assumption would be incorrect, however. Research shows that having various primary languages represented in a group does not impede group cohesiveness as long as members continue to have frequent interactions.[25]

In such situations, all group members should make sure that ELL members are fully included. Strategies for helping nonnative speakers feel included are

(1) providing written information in advance of discussions

(2) asking someone in the group to take notes that can be copied and distributed to all group members

(3) viewing difference as a group strength

(4) matching tasks to members' abilities.

Particularly with the last suggestion, finding out the strengths of all group members is important. ELL group members often do not speak as frequently as native English speakers, but this does not mean they do not have highly developed skills in other areas, such as computers, artwork, record keeping, and so on.

If you are a nonnative speaker who is part of a group with mostly native speakers, you can enhance your assertive communication in the group. You should ask questions to clarify the group's activities or points made during discussion. You should also let group members know about skills you have that could be useful to the group. Finally, try to recognize that in most situations, group discussions are as much about relationship building as task accomplishment. Taking time to get to know other members of your group will not only help all of you build confidence in each other but can also lead to meaningful friendships outside class or the workplace.

The Role of Leadership in Small Groups

For most groups to work effectively, some structure is necessary. Noted group communication scholar Gloria Galanes observed that group leaders must attend to four issues:

(1) identifying the task of the group

(2) creating cohesiveness among the group members

(3) monitoring and adapting the behaviors of the group members as needed to accomplish tasks

(4) keeping the group focused on the task at hand.[26]

DEFINING LEADERSHIP

Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson define **leadership** as a process of using communication to influence the behaviors and attitudes of others to meet group goals.[27] A leader is a person who influences the behavior and attitudes of others through communication. In small groups, there are two types of leaders: *designated* and *emergent*. A **designated leader** is someone who has been appointed or elected to a leadership position, such as a chair, team leader, coordinator, or facilitator. An **emergent leader** is someone who becomes an informal leader by exerting influence toward the achievement of a group's goal but does not hold the formal position or role of leader. Groups benefit from having a designated leader because designated leaders add stability and organization to the group's activities. An emergent leader can be any group member who helps the group meet its goals. Groups work best when all members contribute skills and leadership behaviors on behalf of the group.

How do leaders, designated or emergent, gain their ability to influence others? Group leaders use **power**, or interpersonal influence that forms the basis for group leadership, to guide actions of the group and behaviors of group members. As explained by William W. Wilmot and Joyce L. Hocker, power is tied to the types of roles that people have in a group.[28] As they note, power flows from specific roles in a group, such as when a designated leader has authority to influence group members' behaviors. Power is also a group dynamic that influences interpersonal connections between group members. They identify three ways in which power exists within a group:

- *Distributive power* occurs when the leader exerts influence over others.
- *Integrative power* highlights interdependence with another person or persons to achieve mutually agreed-upon goals.
- *Designated power* reflects the importance of relationships between people. Marriages, families, and groups often hold such power for us.

Whereas Wilmot and Hocker describe the connections between power and group roles, a classic study by John P. French and Bertram Raven describes different *tactics* through which group members enact power:

- *Reward power* is the ability to give followers what they want and need. This type of power is most likely used by leaders who can offer rewards, but it can also be enacted by emergent leaders who negotiate the possible outcomes for the group that will benefit members.
- *Punishment power* is the ability to withhold from followers what they want and need. An extreme form of punishment power is *coercion,* in which compliance is forced through hostile acts. Both designated and emergent leaders can attempt to use punishment.
- *Referent power* is power based on others' admiration and respect. Charisma is an extreme form of referent power that inspires strong loyalty and devotion from others. Referent power may be used by any group member who, because of reputation or credentials, commands respect and admiration from others.
- *Expert power* is power that arises when the other members value a person's knowledge or expertise. Group members who have specific skills or particular areas of knowledge can use expert power.
- *Legitimate power* is power given to a person because of a title, position, or role. It is most likely used by a designated leader.[29]

Understanding how to use power to influence small groups is not easy. Galanes describes the process of leadership as a balancing act, where leaders must learn to manage various tensions, identified in Table 8.4. Group leaders must understand how to use power in ways that balance several of these tensions in an effort to push the group to achieve its goals while building and maintaining a positive culture.

Table 8.4 Tensions Present for Group Leaders

Tension	Description
Leader centered vs. group centered	Does the leader maintain complete control over the group, or are aspects of group control given to members of the group?
Listening vs. talking	Does the group leader spend more time talking (to set an agenda for group action) or listening (to build trust and cohesiveness)?
Task vs. nontask emphasis	Does the group focus primarily on task-related behaviors or primarily on nontask behaviors? One focus could get the job done quicker; the other could build cohesiveness.
Process vs. outcome focus	Does the group focus only on outcomes, or does it also focus on getting tasks done "the right way"?

Source: Based on Galanes, G. (2009). Dialectical tensions of small group leadership. *Communication Studies, 60,* 409–425.

FROM THIS POINT ONWARDS (PG.12) YOU NEED TO CREATE YOUR OWN PRIVATE NOTES TO REVIEW FROM FOR THE FINAL EXAM. THIS WILL NOT BE COVERED IN CLASS SO PLEASE MAKE SURE YOU GIVE YOURSELF AT LEAST TWO WEEKS TO REVIEW THE FINAL PARTS OF CHAPTER 8 INDEPENDENTLY.

WAYS OF ENACTING LEADERSHIP

Since Aristotle's time, people have been interested in what makes a good leader. Is leadership a skill you are born with? Can you learn to be a leader? In this section you will learn about three ways of thinking about effective leadership: leadership as style, leadership as communication competence, and leadership as planning. Although they are presented as separate perspectives, effective leaders learn to embrace key elements from each simultaneously.

Leadership Styles

Style approaches to studying leadership focus on the patterns of behavior that leaders exhibit in groups. Considerable research has examined three major styles of designated leader: democratic, laissez-faire, and autocratic. **Democratic leaders** encourage members to participate in group decisions, even major ones: "What suggestions do you have for solving our problem?" **Laissez-faire leaders** take almost no initiative in structuring a group discussion; they are nonleaders whose typical response is "I don't care; whatever you want to do is fine with me." **Autocratic leaders** maintain strict control over their group, including making assignments and giving orders: "Here's how we'll solve the problem. First, you will . . . ." Autocratic leaders ask fewer questions but answer more than democratic leaders; they make more attempts to coerce and fewer attempts to get others to participate.[30]

Groups vary in the amount of structure and control their members want and need, but research findings about style have been consistent.[31] Most people in the United States prefer democratic groups and are more satisfied in democratically, rather than autocratically, led groups.

The style approaches imply that a single leadership style works for all situations in a group. However, most scholars believe that the style should match the needs of the specific situation. For example, if you are in a group working on a class project and the deadline is tomorrow, a democratic leadership style might be ineffective because it takes longer to make decisions.



• Democratic groups allow group members to take part in decision-making.

Syda Productions/Shutterstock

Communication Competencies and Leadership

Communication scholars who adopt the communicative competencies approach have tried to focus on the communicative behaviors of leaders as they exercise interpersonal influence to accomplish group goals. They ask such questions as "What do effective leaders do?" The communication competency model of group leadership, developed by J. Kevin Barge and Randy Y. Hirokawa,[32] is one of the most comprehensive models to address this question. This model assumes that leaders help a group achieve its goals through communication skills (competencies). Two competencies include the task and interpersonal, or relationship, distinctions discussed earlier. Leaders must be flexible to draw from a personal repertoire of such competencies. Some of the most important leader competencies are described briefly here:

- Effective leaders are able to clearly and appropriately communicate ideas to the group without dominating the conversation.
- Effective leaders communicate a clear grasp of the task facing the group.
- Effective leaders are skilled at facilitating discussion.

- Effective leaders encourage open dialogue and do not force their own ideas on the group.
- Effective leaders place group needs over personal concerns.
- Effective leaders display respect for others during interaction.
- Effective leaders share in the successes and failures of the group.

sizing things up

Leadership Power in Groups

When we enact leadership in small groups, we use a variety of methods to create and enact power that is used to influence others. Below are several statements to help you assess which types of power you typically use during your small-group interactions. Respond to each statement using the following scale:

0 = Never
1 = Rarely
2 = Occasionally
3 = Often
4 = Very often

During group interactions, I generally attempt to influence others' opinions by

1. showing benefits for agreeing with my viewpoint.
2. threatening to not work as hard if they do not agree with me.
3. being open and friendly with everyone in the group.
4. showing that I have a lot of knowledge or information about the topic.
5. telling them that my assigned or volunteered role should allow my opinion to carry weight.
6. offering to help them with their tasks if they follow my way of thinking.
7. using subtle threats if they do not agree with me.
8. demonstrating that I am honest and trustworthy.
9. explaining how my background and experiences give me a uniquely qualified perspective.
10. pointing out that I was told to lead the discussion, project, or task.

This exercise has no right or wrong answers. A guide for interpreting your responses appears at the end of the chapter.

Leadership and Planning

In addition to exhibiting an appropriate style and being a competent communicator, effective leaders must learn to plan. Although planning cannot prevent all problems from occurring, some upfront work can increase the likelihood of successful outcomes. Here are some tips for planning effective meetings.

1. *Know the task at hand.* Later in the chapter you will learn about the group problem-solving model. Effective leaders should understand the problem facing the group and take care to communicate that task to group members.
2. *Know the people.* As you will learn, individual group members have different skills, motivations, frames of reference, and knowledge bases. Understanding how to draw on group members' strengths and manage interpersonal dynamics is a key role of the group leader.
3. *Collect information.* The group leader should attempt to become knowledgeable on all issues facing the group. If you are knowledgeable, you will know when discussions are off track.
4. *Distribute leadership.* In certain situations, leadership should be distributed among all group members. The designated leader may need to delegate responsibility, especially when smaller tasks need to be assigned to individual group members. Distributed leadership, whereby all members share in leadership responsibilities, can result in highly productive group outcomes.[33]
5. *Organize the discussion.* Although some types of group discussions may not need much organization—a short class discussion assigned by your teacher, for instance—most discussions need more structure. The group leader should plan an agenda for the discussion. The agenda should be adapted to the task at hand; however, a general template for the agenda is provided in **Figure 8.2**. As you can see, the typical agenda requires group members to agree on minutes from the past meeting to clear up any confusion or disagreement, make announcements, hear reports, consider new business, and reconsider old business as necessary.

GROUP AGENDA
DATE

I. ***Approval of minutes from previous meeting(s).*** The group facilitator should determine if there are any changes to the minutes and have group members vote to approve the minutes.

II. ***Announcements.*** Members of the group should make announcements relevant to the group but not necessarily tied to group business. For example, a group member might read a thank-you note from a person the group helped or might provide personal announcements that may be of interest to group members. Such announcements should be brief.

III. ***Reports.*** Individuals assigned to collect information or carry out tasks should report on their progress. If a report results in an action item—that is, something the group should discuss and vote on—the report should be included under new business. Reports in this segment of the meeting should be informative, but they do not necessarily require action at this time.

IV. ***New business.*** Items in this part of the agenda can include important discussions and/ or action items. Discussions may or may not result in a vote, but action items should be voted on by the group.

V. ***Old business.*** Occasionally, action items and discussion from previous meetings may not be complete. In such cases those items should be listed under old business and approached in the same way as new business, with appropriate discussion and voting as necessary.

Figure 8.2 Standard group agenda template.

communicating with agility

Agile Leadership

Leadership requires self-reflection and adaptability. Organizational consultants Bill Joiner and Stephen Jones believe leaders must grow through the following three stages to develop and use new skills to meet objectives in any situation:

- *Expert leaders* are highly focused on task accomplishment, problem solving, and tactical completion of objectives.
- *Achiever leaders* are effective in coordinating interdependent people and strategic resources to accomplish outcomes.
- *Catalyst leaders* are highly visionary and develop a culture that focuses on positive change and adaptability to meet objectives.

Rather than progressing through each step, leaders build on their skills to become more collaborative, adaptable, and effective.

Source: Agile Leadership Journey. (2023). *What is leadership agility?* www.agileleadershipjourney.com/leadership-journey/leadership-agility

Problem Solving and Decision-Making

A primary task facing many groups is solving problems: student clubs need to raise money, church groups need to plan activities, and social groups must find fun things to do. Group members must be both creative and critical to arrive at the best solutions to these problems. Groups are usually (but not always) better problem solvers than individuals because several people can provide more information than one person. Group members can bring greater resources to bear on a problem, can collectively have a broader perspective, and can more easily spot flaws in each other's reasoning. However, trade-offs occur. Group problem solving takes longer, and sometimes personality, procedural, or social problems make working as a team difficult for members. Group problem solving is usually more effective when the process is systematic and organized because a group that does not have an overall plan for decision-making is more likely to make a poor decision.[34] In this section you will learn techniques for making group problem-solving efforts more systematic and organized, as well as other work you can accomplish in groups.

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EFFECTIVE GROUP PROBLEM SOLVING

When groups succeed, it is in part because they have followed a coordinated process for analyzing and discussing the problem and its solutions. Effective problem solving is systematic and follows a procedure. Typically, the problem-solving process includes determining the discussion question, identifying the criteria, identifying potential solutions, and evaluating potential solutions.

Determining the Discussion Question

Problem-solving groups typically handle three basic types of discussion questions. Questions of *fact* deal with whether something is true or can be verified. Questions of *value* ask whether something is good or bad, better or worse. Cultural and individual values and beliefs are central to questions of value. Questions of *policy* ask what action should be taken. The key word *should* is either stated or implied in questions of policy. Examples of each type of question are presented in Figure 8.3.

FACT

How has the divorce rate changed in the past 15 years?

How many first-generation students are currently enrolled in college?

What percentage of college students graduate in four years?

How often, on average, does a person speak each day?

What occupations earn the highest annual incomes?





VALUE

Why should people seek higher education?

How should Americans treat international students?

Does our legal system provide "justice for all"?

How should young people be educated about HIV?

What is the value of standardized tests for college admission?

POLICY

What courses should students be required to take?

Should the state's drunk-driving laws be changed?

What are the arguments for and against mandatory retirement?

Should the United States intervene in foreign disputes for humanitarian reasons?

What advantages should government provide for businesses willing to develop in high-risk areas of a city?



Figure 8.3 Examples of questions of fact, value, and policy.

(top): Brand X Pictures/Getty Images; (middle): Comstock/Getty Images; (bottom): Siede Preis/Getty Images

Regardless of the type of discussion question guiding a problem-solving group, the leader must state the question appropriately. Remember, a key task of effective leaders is to help focus the group on what is being discussed. First, the language and terminology should be concrete rather than abstract. If ambiguous terms such as *effective, good,* or *fair* are used, providing examples helps each group member have as close to the same meaning as possible. Second, a well-stated discussion question helps group members know when the solution has been achieved. For example, a task force charged with "completing a report by May 15 on why membership has dropped from 100 to 50 members" knows exactly what to do by what deadline. Finally, a group should start its problem solving with a problem question rather than a solution question. Problem questions focus on what is wrong and imply that many solutions are possible for resolving the problem. Problem questions do not bias a group toward one particular solution. Solution questions, by contrast, slant the group's discussion toward one particular option. They may inadvertently cause a group to ignore creative or unusual options because they blind members to some alternatives. Examples of problem and solution questions appear in Figure 8.4.

PROBLEM QUESTIONS

How can we reduce complaints about parking on campus?

What can we do to increase attendance at our club's activities?

How can we make Ginny Avenue safer to cross?



SOLUTION QUESTIONS

How can we increase the number of parking spaces in the campus lots?

How can we improve publicity for our club's activities?

How can we get the city council to reduce the speed limit on Ginny Avenue?

Figure 8.4 Problem questions versus solution questions.

PNC/Photodisc/Getty Images

Identifying Criteria

Criteria are the standards by which a group must judge potential solutions. For example, a solution's likely effectiveness ("Will it work?"), acceptability ("Will people vote for our proposal?"), and cost ("Does this option keep us within the budget?") are common criteria. Group members should discuss and agree on criteria before adopting a solution. Because criteria are based on the values of group members, two members, each using rational tools of decision-making, can arrive at different conclusions. The more similar group members are in age, gender, ethnicity, background, attitudes, values, and beliefs, the more easily they can agree on criteria.

Two kinds of criteria are common. Absolute criteria are those that *must* be met; the group has no leeway. Important criteria are those that *should* be met, but the group has some flexibility. Group members should give the highest priority to criteria that must be met. Ideas that do not meet absolute criteria should be rejected, and the rest should be ranked on how well they meet important criteria. Examples of absolute and important criteria are presented in Figure 8.5.

ABSOLUTE CRITERIA

(*Must* be met)

- Must not cost more than $2 million
- Must be wheelchair-accessible
- Must include flexible space that can be arranged in different ways



IMPORTANT CRITERIA

(*Should* be met)

- Should be centrally located
- Should have stage space for concerts
- Should be attractive to all campus constituencies, including traditional and nontraditional students, faculty, and staff

Figure 8.5 Absolute criteria versus important criteria for a new student union.

Wavebreak Media Ltd/123rf

Identifying Potential Solutions

One of the most important jobs a leader has is to encourage group creativity. One technique that can promote innovation and creative thought among groups is brainstorming.[35] Brainstorming is most effective when group members are free to identify multiple ideas, they are asked to defer any judgment (positive or negative) until all ideas have been identified, and the ideas are succinct. Critical evaluation kills creativity, so the main rule of brainstorming is "no evaluation," at least during the brainstorming process. Evaluation of the ideas takes place *after* the group has exhausted its options.

As a leader, you must carefully guide the brainstorming phase of group discussions. You should start with a specified time period in which brainstorming will occur. Before starting dialogue, providing group members with a few minutes to consider the question before responding can help them start individual brainstorming. As ideas are presented to the group, they should be recorded and displayed for all to see; doing so can generate additional ideas. The initial time period for brainstorming can be modified based on the discussion. If ideas start to become repetitive, you may need to stop sooner; if ideas are still unique and interesting, you may need to slightly extend the time. In research this is called "looking for saturation." When all the new ideas have been tapped out (saturated), that is a good time to stop.

Evaluating Potential Solutions

After group members have adequately brainstormed potential solutions, the final task is to evaluate the ideas. At this stage in the discussion, the criteria the group has identified are used to judge the efficacy of each idea generated through brainstorming. Before proceeding to this step, it may be useful to determine whether various ideas can be organized together in some way. Solutions failing to meet absolute criteria are eliminated quickly. Once the nonviable alternatives are eliminated, group members must evaluate each alternative based on the remaining important criteria. Eventually, the group must determine which alternative best meets the set of important criteria they identified.

OTHER WORK TO ACCOMPLISH IN GROUPS

Although this section has highlighted the role of problem solving in small groups, other important types of work are also accomplished in group settings. In fact, groups serve multiple functions, sometimes simultaneously. In addition to helping us perform task functions, such as solving problems, groups also allow us to do the following:

1. *Make decisions.* Many groups exist to make decisions that are unrelated to specific problems. For example, student groups on your campus make daily decisions, such as planning events, launching community outreach projects, and maintaining facilities. These decisions do not necessarily solve problems; rather, they sustain the day-to-day functions of the groups.
2. *Effect change.* Some groups want to influence society but do not have the power to make decisions. You might belong to a community association or the student government organization on your campus. Those groups attempt to influence change even though they may not have the power to make final decisions on that change.
3. *Negotiate conflict.* Groups are often created to resolve conflict. In Los Angeles, small groups were used to bring Latino American and Armenian American high school students together to resolve racial tensions. In fact, the National Communication Association in partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center has used this strategy across the nation to promote intercultural understanding and to help resolve racial conflict.

4. *Foster creativity.* Groups help us achieve a level of creativity not possible when working alone. The idea that "two heads are better than one" is magnified in groups. People working together to identify creative ideas will likely be more successful than one person working alone.
5. *Maintain ties between stakeholders.* A final function for small groups is to bring together stakeholders. **Stakeholders** are groups of people who have an interest in the actions of an organization. For example, most schools have parent-teacher organizations. The principal of a school might bring together selected teachers and parents to discuss issues facing the school so that open lines of communication between the stakeholders (parents, teachers, and administrators) can be maintained. Various organizations, including businesses, government agencies, and nonprofit organizations, use groups to establish and maintain communication among multiple groups of stakeholders.

As you can see, groups exist for many reasons. Although the heart of group activity may indeed be problem solving, not all groups exist solely for that purpose.

Technology and Group Communication Processes

Throughout this course you have learned how technology affects various forms of human communication, and group communication is no different. Groups of all types use technology to find and analyze information, to facilitate interaction among group members, and even to aid in the decision-making process.

Technology has advanced such that many tools have become available to help support the work of groups by allowing people to create, collaborate, and share information online. Consider how the following resources can help groups work more efficiently:

- *Facebook.* Besides helping group members stay connected as friends, Facebook allows you to create a group page for any group to which you belong. On the group page you can post information, links to other resources, agendas, and other information that may help group members stay prepared. You can also create events to alert group members to upcoming meetings.
- *Dropbox.* Dropbox is a free file-sharing service that allows you to create shared folders so that group members can all store, have access to, and edit group documents.

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- *Evernote.* This free resource can be used for **content curation**, the collection and storage of information from across the web. Your group might locate several webpages, videos, and other resources and use Evernote to maintain a research file in shared notebooks. Evernote is a powerful note-taking tool, so you can use the service to record and publish notes from meetings, as well as collaborate on notes. The Work Chat feature also allows you to instant-message with people who are working on the project.
- *Google Documents.* Google provides a free version of office programs used for word processing, spreadsheets, and presentations. Files can be created, shared, and edited by all group members.
- *Canva.* This free (for basic use) platform allows users to create professional-looking visual representations on content and data in flyer, brochure, and other formats.
- *Skype/Zoom/Teams.* These resources can be used for online videoconferencing so that group members can meet remotely to share ideas, images, screens, and folders.
- *Trello.* This free project management app provides a visual overview of a project and who is working on each task. The app uses a series of boards and cards that can be broken down by task, similar to Pinterest. In this way, each board has its own project and is filled with the cards, or tasks, that need to be completed. Group members can share boards and collaborate within the platform.
- *Asana.* This is one of many free web- and mobile-based applications that allow teams to plan and manage projects. Each group gets a workspace where members can assign tasks to users and include notes, comments, and attachments, as well as use tags to label and group similar tasks.

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- *Todoist.* This free productivity app can be used to create lists of tasks and subtasks for projects so users can easily keep track of tasks and deadlines.
- *Slack.* Slack is a free collaborative communication application that makes office communication organized and searchable using different channels for projects, departments, and stakeholders. Team members can use a chat feature and share documents, GIFs, and videos.
- *GroupMe.* This is a free group texting application that works like a private chat room for your small group.
- *Toggl.* This is a free time-tracking program that allows team members to track how much time they are spending on projects and associated tasks.
- *Texting.* Although you are probably well versed in using text messaging for social interactions, many students find it easy to use text messages for quick reminders and general announcements. For example, if a room change occurs a half hour before a meeting, one group member can text the entire group with the update.
- *Google Jamboards.* This is a free visual collaboration and communication tool through Google that allows multiple users to visually collaborate and storyboard ideas using a sticky-note format.

These resources show just some of the options available online that can be used to facilitate the work of groups. Of course, how you use the web for group work is limited only by your imagination. A variety of services and social media sites can be readily adapted to support the work of your group.

Regardless of which resources a group uses, it is important that group members create rules surrounding how they will and will not share private information created as a result of these tools. For example, if the group determines that individual group members cannot use the research summaries created for the current project for other courses, then the group members must be accountable and uphold this rule. Similarly, group members may decide that they will not share with nongroup members any private information generated during group chats.

Of course, not all group technology automatically improves group communication. As communication researcher Paul Turman points out, groups communicating entirely through technology may find that group norms and basic structures for how the group operates are more difficult to create in computer-mediated environments.[36] He cautions that computer-mediated groups must take more time to explicitly talk about how the group will function and about various norms for communication among group members.

Of course, not all group technology automatically improves group communication. As communication researcher Paul Turman points out, groups communicating entirely through technology may find that group norms and basic structures for how the group operates are more difficult to create in computer-mediated environments.[36] He cautions that computer-mediated groups must take more time to explicitly talk about how the group will function and about various norms for communication among group members.



• Computers can be used to facilitate group communication.

Ariel Skelley/Getty Images

communicating creatively

Collaborative Coworking

What images and feelings arise in you when you think about working in a cubicle? Like many people, you may think it reflects an outdated way of organizing a workspace and limits coworker interaction. Initially, organizations thought creating open workspaces was the answer, but it turns out that open workspaces promote less productivity, increase the use of sick days, and reduce morale.

Now consider the images and feelings that arise in you when you think about working in a collaborative common area that includes space for meetings and casual gatherings among coworkers or a place you could go to bounce ideas off of others in a shared workspace in your local community. These types of spaces are flourishing in contemporary industries. Many contemporary organizations are turning to a design approach that considers employee work and privacy needs. For example, designers are creating team rooms but also quiet spaces, where people can make personal calls and have one-on-one meetings, that encourage some degree of privacy. Frank Chalupa, president and cofounder of Amata Office Solutions, indicates that

> a circular or rectangular layout is one way to achieve this, as it avoids dead-end hallways that workers might not pass through if their offices are located elsewhere. It's also important to scatter amenities throughout a workplace so employees aren't walking by the same offices or workstations each day.

Villa Bonne Nouvelle ("House of Good News"), or VBN, in Paris, France, uses a *corpoworking* approach, a cousin to coworking, where half of its workforce is represented by in-house employees and the other half by freelancers. Together the teams are set up in temporary stations so that programmers and engineers learn how to work with and from people external to the main company. VBN noted that, overall, teams worked better and more efficiently and reported greater satisfaction and engagement, as well as increases in depression upon returning to the traditional office space.

Additionally, coworking spaces are popping up in many local communities to provide space for freelancers, start-ups, and small businesses. These spaces offer a relaxed, productive environment to workers who would typically work at home or in another space. For example, organizers in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, spent time conducting focus groups within the community to determine what kind of coworking space was needed. The result was *Lodgic*, a workspace that offers drop-in childcare, a market cafe, and a restaurant. The workspace offers 24-hour work zones, internet, direct-to-desk food and drink, bike storage, showers, locker rooms, a print center, technology support, meeting rooms, quiet spaces, and private drop-in offices.

When you think about the type of physical environment that you want to work in, what does it look like? What types of communication and collaboration opportunities do you want with your coworkers? You may want to begin implementing some of these workspace plans into task-oriented groups to which you belong. This will help you get a sense of how you work and communicate best in groups and teams.

Source: Chalupa, F. (2015). Coworking 2.0: Collaboration meets privacy in the workplace. *Huffpost,* Verizon Media.

building behaviors

Harnessing Technology for Your Group

Digital tools to support the work of a group are a valuable resource that can help you with any group to which you belong. Go to **Trello.com** and explore the various ways in which you can create boards and cards to support the management of a team project you are part of for one of your classes or student organizations. Create a board for each project and then create a card for each of the major tasks for each project. You can add due dates to the cards, create checklists for tasks, and upload documents and weblinks to each card, among many other features. You can add members of your group to the boards, communicate about the project in the chat feature, and even connect and sync your boards to your online calendar to complete tasks on time.

How to Communicate in Small Groups

Each member of a group must take personal responsibility to help support the functions of the group. How can you best do that? The ability to speak fluently and with polish is not essential, but the ability to speak clearly, ethically, and honestly is. Other members of the group will understand your views more easily if you follow this advice:

1. *Relate your statements to preceding remarks.* Public speakers do not always have the opportunity to respond to remarks by others, but small-group members do. Your statement should not appear irrelevant. Clarify the relevance of your remark to the topic under discussion by linking your remark to the preceding remark:
   - Briefly note the previous speaker's point that you want to address–for example, "I want to piggyback on Bill's comment by noting that we can meet our goal by . . ."
   - State your point clearly and concisely.
   - Summarize how your point adds to the comments made by others–for example, "I agree with Bill. We need to fund-raise, but we can't get so caught up in raising money that we forget about our goal of volunteering."
2. *Use conventional word arrangements.* When you speak, use clear, common language so that people can understand you. Consider this comment: "I unequivocally recognize the meaningful contribution made by my colleague." Although the language might impress some, a simple "I agree" would work just as well. Here are some ways to improve your verbal clarity while in group discussions:
   - After connecting your idea to the discussion or previous speaker, state your point and then provide one piece of supporting information or additional explanation.
   - Explain to group members how you perceive the importance of what you are saying. Not all comments are critical; some are just ideas. Letting others know how important you think something is may influence how they react and respond.
   - When done, ask if anyone needs you to clarify your point.
3. *Speak concisely.* The point here is simple: don't be long-winded. The main advantage of small groups is their ability to approach a problem interactively. If you monopolize the discussion, that advantage may be diminished or lost completely. To learn to speak concisely, try the following:
   - Write down your idea before speaking. Those who are wordy during group discussions often spend much of their time trying to figure out what they want to say.
   - Try to talk for no more than one minute at a time. Of course, this time limit is arbitrary, but one minute should be enough time to get an idea out for consideration, and you can always answer questions to clarify as needed.
4. *State one point at a time.* Sometimes this rule is violated appropriately, such as when a group member is presenting a report to the group. However, during give-and-take discussion, stating only one idea promotes efficiency and responsiveness. To ensure this practice, try the following strategies:
   - As a group, appoint a process observer to be in charge of keeping the group discussion moving along and preventing any member from bringing up more than one idea at a time. After using the process observer a few times, these behaviors become second nature.
   - If you have several ideas that vary in importance, provide some of the less important points to group members in written form for later reflection. Save discussion time for the most important ideas.

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4. *State one point at a time.* Sometimes this rule is violated appropriately, such as when a group member is presenting a report to the group. However, during give-and-take discussion, stating only one idea promotes efficiency and responsiveness. To ensure this practice, try the following strategies:

   - As a group, appoint a process observer to be in charge of keeping the group discussion moving along and preventing any member from bringing up more than one idea at a time. After using the process observer a few times, these behaviors become second nature.
   - If you have several ideas that vary in importance, provide some of the less important points to group members in written form for later reflection. Save discussion time for the most important ideas.

sizing things up

Adapted Competent Group Communication Evaluation Form

Think about a problem-solving-type group you are currently involved in. For each of the eight competencies listed below, indicate how you believe you are performing the behavior using the following scale:

1 = Unsatisfactorily

2 = Satisfactorily

3 = Excellently

Group Task Competencies (1–5)

1. *Defines and analyzes the problem*—appropriately defines and analyzes the problem that confronts the group.
2. *Identifies criteria*—appropriately participates in the establishment of the group goal and identifies criteria for assessing the quality of the group outcome.
3. *Generates solutions*—appropriately generates solutions or alternatives.
4. *Evaluates solutions*—appropriately evaluates the solutions or alternatives identified by group members.
5. *Maintains task focus*—appropriately helps the group stay on the task, issue, or agenda item the group is discussing.

Group Relationship Competencies (6–8)

6. *Manages conflict*—appropriately manages disagreements and conflict.
7. *Manages climate*—appropriately provides supportive comments to other group members.
8. *Manages interaction*—helps manage interaction and appropriately invites others to participate.

A guide for interpreting your responses appears at the end of the chapter.

Source: Beebe, S. A., Barge, J. K., & McCormick, C. (1995). *The competent group communicator: Assessing essential competencies of small group problem solving.* Presented at the annual meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Antonio, TX.

Being an Ethical Group Member

The unique nature of small groups requires attention to special ethical concerns regarding the treatment of speech, people, and information. First, as noted in the National Communication Association Credo of Ethics, the field of communication strongly supports the value of free speech. Many secondary groups are formed because several heads perform better than one, but that advantage will not be realized if group members are unwilling or afraid to speak freely in the group. An important ethical principle for small groups is that group members should be willing to share their unique perspectives. However, they should also refrain from saying or doing things that prevent others from speaking freely. Members who are trustworthy and supportive are behaving ethically.

Second, group members must be honest and truthful. In a small group they should not intentionally deceive one another or use biased information to persuade other members to adopt their point of view.

Third, group members must be thorough and unbiased when they evaluate information. Groups are used to make any number of decisions, both large and small. Such decisions will be only as good as the information on which they are based and the reasoning the members use to assess the information. Group members must consider *all* relevant information in an open-minded, verified, and unbiased way by using the best critical-thinking skills they can; otherwise, tragedies can result.

Fourth, group members must behave with integrity. That is, they must be willing to place the good of the group ahead of their own goals, interests, and desires. Some individuals cannot be team players because they are unable or unwilling to merge their personal agendas with those of the group. If you make a commitment to join a group, you should be the kind of team member who will benefit rather than harm the group. If you cannot in good conscience give a group your support, you should leave the group rather than pretend to support the group.

Finally, group members must learn to manage **group conflict**, which is an expressed struggle between two or more members of a group.[37] Although some conflict can actually help groups make better decisions because ideas are debated and tested more vigorously, too much conflict may result in decreased group cohesiveness and can cause the group to cease functioning. To manage conflict, group members must be ethical in the way they approach disagreement and be willing to listen to and compromise with others. Ethical disagreement happens when you express your disagreement openly, disagree with ideas rather than people, base your disagreement on evidence and reasoning, and react to disagreement positively rather than defensively.[38]

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be ready... for what's next

Resolving Group Conflicts

The hope is that you engage in meaningful group work like Lane, Chris, and Nick did with the Boston Strong campaign. Yet it's inevitable that you will also find yourself engaged in difficult group experiences. Difficult group experiences occur because of the task at hand or relationships among the group members.

Perhaps you are currently experiencing problems with a group project. Maybe group members are missing meetings or regularly coming late to meetings. What are you and the other members doing as a group about these problematic behaviors, if anything? What would you do if your group's final presentation occurred and one of your group members failed to show up?

One option would be to talk to your instructor about the situation. The instructor may determine that it is up to the group to decide what to do about missing the group member's grade. How does the group handle this situation? Does the group member get the same grade as the rest of the group for the project? Does the group determine that a reduction in grade is warranted for the absence?

If you experience these situations as part of class projects, they are actually important opportunities for you to build the behaviors you've read about in this chapter. For example, though it may be uncomfortable to tell a group member that the rest of the group is frustrated with the habitual lateness, it is far better to deal with it early on rather than let the behavior continue.

If you find yourself in situations like this, talk to your group members about the problem and perhaps seek the advice of your instructor. It is likely that your instructor will want you and the other members to try to work these problems out as a group. This is a good thing because it will ultimately provide you with real examples of how you've handled conflict in groups that you can talk about during future job interviews. Remember, one of the top skills employers want college graduates to have is team-building skills, and having experiences to highlight how you have managed conflict—rather than avoided it—provides evidence of your ability to work effectively in groups and teams.