SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

The point of group work

Many jobs require people to work collaboratively on projects and often with people not of our choosing. Thus, group work at university is a vehicle for you to gain valuable experience for lifelong application. Group work involves professional skills such as organisation, negotiation, delegation and cooperation.

Organisation

Establish how to contact each other, how regularly to meet and where, how to share information, such as a Dropbox, Facebook, email and so on. In your group make a plan with dates and goals to complete the task and keep a record of who is doing what as has been decided in meetings, including timeline dates. Responsible group members ensure they are clear about what is expected and how to deliver on time. Hence, at your first meeting establish clear deadlines and progress milestones. Start from the submission date and work backwards. Be realistic taking into account all other responsibilities and rehearsal time.

Negotiation

Establish roles in your group to ensure clarity about what is expected to successfully achieve the task.

- Chairperson: someone to run the meetings, f2f or online, and to keep the conversation continuous, equitable and on track, not necessarily the most dominant person.
- Note taker: someone to take notes of who is doing what and the progress. Notes need to be passed on to each member of the group.
- Compiler: someone who will be responsible for putting it all together in a cohesive manner.
- Technology: someone whose strength is in technology or who would like to develop that strength.

Some group projects require marks to be distributed evenly. To minimise conflict and difficult conversations later, develop a plan and clear group outline. Successful groups establish agreement on the following:

- What is the time frame for responding to emails?
- What happens if someone cannot meet an agreed upon deadline?
- What is your decision making process?
- What happens if there is an even split of preferences?

Delegation

Analyse the task, decide on what background reading and information will be required, allocate tasks – fairly and effectively, and utilise individual strengths or develop weaknesses into strengths. Decide who is good at understanding and linking theory, analysing validity and reliability of research data, graphic design, editing and proof reading?

Cooperation

Project related information needs to be shared and understood and thus communicating effectively is important. Successful communication involves active listening. As a tip: listen when someone is talking in a way that you can make mental notes – then you can ensure you have heard the message as it was intended. Cooperation and effective communication also involves good manners, thus avoid interrupting to have your point heard, and rather ensure you have understood what has been said first. Pay attention and stay open-minded, maybe another person's idea is valid or even valuable. Ensure everyone in the group has a voice. Last, plan a completion celebration, it is a good way to reflect, debrief and move on.

Group Life Cycle

There is a developmental lifecycle related to working in groups (Tuckman, cited in Turner et al., 2008). Turner and colleagues explain that familiarising yourself with this lifecycle helps to understand the dynamics of group work. Hence, don't sweat the small stuff, a little bit of friction can polish your work, the content and the process. Their lifecycle involves:

- Forming: getting to know each other, the task and expectations.
- Storming: brainstorming of ideas where conflicts may arise, thus clear outlines assist this phase.
- Norming: the phase when conflicts are resolved and communication becomes productive
- Performing: goals are being achieved, if not, the group may return to the outline or plan to readdress.

Naylor and Martinez (2011) explain different issues and characteristic that can be present in group work.

- 'Free rider' effect

Identifying characteristics of the 'free rider' is the person who does not respond to emails or come to meetings or meet milestones that have been agreed upon by group members.

What to do: Find out if there is a reason. If so, re-plan. If not, discuss your contract 'terms and conditions.'

What if this is you: Communicate with your group and seek guidance if you needed. Also ensure that you ask for support if you are not sure what to do. Recognise if you simply need to limit distractions for a while.

- 'Sucker' effect

Identifying characteristics of this effect is the person who is a hard worker and slowly drops out of the group because they feel 'taken for granted.' They may be reluctant to continue because of a perceived lack of involvement by others.

What to do: Have a team meeting to discuss roles and milestones and potentially redistribute workloads.

What if this is you: Talk to the group about how you are feeling; persevere, it is important.

- 'Over-worker' effect

Identifying characteristics of the over worker is the person who is highly committed or aims higher than others. They might expect equal commitment from group who may not share the same aspirations.

What to do: Discuss goals and share the load or reduce some 'perceived' responsibilities.

What if this is you: Pause and reflect; why are you working this hard? How can you share the tasks? Be reflective, is your way the only way?

It is important to know yourself, your strengths and your weaknesses. Use your strengths to contribute effectively to the group. Acknowledge your weaknesses as skills or attributes to develop. Also know how you work, and if possible team up with others who work in similar ways. For instance, are you a tortoise who works slow and steady, or an early bird who starts immediately and finishes early? Perhaps you are a deadline hunter who starts when the deadline is looming or a stop starter who does the work in chunks.

The take home message is to communicate effectively at all times. Effective communication involves setting clear goals and responsibilities from the beginning as well as not being afraid to let others know when you are struggling or if you are unclear about what is expected of you and when. Group work involves team work and teams work best when they are united.

References

Naylor, S. & Martinez, K. (2011). *Faculty Fundamentals FLBCA & FAESS: Making Groupwork Work*

Turner, K., Ireland, L., Krenus, B., Pointon, L. (2006) *Essential academic skills*. Melbourne: Oxford University Press