

# Group Work

This module covers concepts such as:

- Identifying the key characteristics of an effective group
- Recognising the typical roles and behaviours people exhibit when working in groups
- Implementing strategies to enable successful group work



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# Group Work

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You will often be required to work as a member of a group at university, sometimes in the lectures/tutorials or workshops and, quite often, outside of class time. *Try Activity 1* ✓

## Group Work has many benefits:

- It develops many of the attributes the university and employers want to see you graduate with
- peer collaboration actually helps you to learn – and to remember what you have learnt
- working as a member of a team is an important life skill anyway, and;
- it can just be – FUN!

## Group work can also be challenging:

- sometimes there is a real or perceived uneven distribution of workload among group members
- there can be conflict in the group
- there are often difficulties in coordinating meeting times to suit everyone, and;
- it can just be – HARD!



### Strategies for successful group work:

1. Know yourself
2. Know your group members
3. Know your task
4. Know the group process
5. Just do it!

## 1. Know yourself

You really need to be self-aware and examine your own learning preferences, personality dispositions and your world view. Why? Because there are particular strengths you bring to a group, but also because you need to appreciate that not everyone is like you.

You will need to exercise some time-honoured social norms in order to work effectively, such as: respect, tolerance and patience. You will also need to know how to be assertive without being aggressive – there is a difference between standing up for yourself and being a bully!

*Try Activity 2* ✓

## 2. Know your group members

One of the key complaints about group work is that some members do a lot and others do very little. Most group work assignments at university these days have some component of 'peer assessment', where you get to rate the contribution of other members.

A good way of maximising the contribution of each group member is, simply to get to know them. Yes! Strange though it may seem, people are less likely to take a 'free ride' if they have a good working relationship with other group members. Capable students are also less likely to hold back their skills and talents (which can happen if they feel like they are doing 'all the work').

Getting to know each other also helps the group to identify individual strengths and how best to direct these to the benefit of the group.

## 3. Know your task

You need to know what you are doing! There is no point running around in circles – you need a clear direction.

1. Review your assignment task carefully. Check anything you are unsure about with your lecturer/tutor.
2. Break the task down into the many smaller steps that will bring your assignment to its completion. Allocate these tasks among the group.
3. Keep a record of “who is doing what” in your group.
4. Keep a record of the dates by which these small steps must be completed – the milestone dates or the dates by which each group member is expected to have something completed.
5. Make sure everyone has a copy of this record, so you are all literally ‘on the same page’.
6. Schedule more group meetings than you think you need. It is easier to cancel meetings at the end than to try and arrange additional last-minute meetings.
7. Take minutes of every meeting and circulate them afterwards – this helps to keep everyone ‘on the same page’. Having a written record also acts as a reference point if/when disagreements arise.
8. Make sure everyone’s voice is heard/is allowed to contribute.
9. Try and have fun. You have to do the assignment anyway, so enjoy it.
10. Again, try and have fun!

#### 4. Know the Group Process

Scholars have attached various labels to the group process (including using chaos theory!), but generally there is the following:

**First phase:** Usually a polite first meeting where people are still getting to know each other and becoming familiar with the task.

**Second Phase:** When you actually get down to work – and differences arise. Differences in opinion are expressed. The stress of having to complete an assignment or set tasks by expected dates is encountered. Different ideas and personalities clash...

Embrace the difference! What? Yes! Did you know groups that encounter a little tension actually often come up with something much better in the end? Having too many peacemakers in a group can inhibit creativity. Having said this, of course, we are talking about a little *creative tension*, not explosive tantrums. Anyone behaving without respect, tolerance and patience needs to refer back to step one – know thyself!

**Final Phase:** This is the end of the group work. You present/hand-in your assignment and you heave a sigh of relief, or go have a party, or feel quite deflated because you won’t be meeting up with your group anymore. Sometimes it is hard to let go of a process, or an assignment, that has demanded so much from you.

Knowing a little about the group process will help you cope when times are tough – and to fearlessly embrace difference!

#### 5. Just do it!

Yes - this is for all you procrastinators out there - get to work!

Try Activity 3 ✓

**Start every group meeting on time and end on time. If you have an agenda – stick to it!**

This will not only please the task-oriented group members but also make your time more productive. You could always socialise before or after the official group meetings.

Try Activity 4 ✓ and Activity 5 ✓

#### Some handy hints for resolving or avoiding group conflict:

1. Having a written agenda (and a rotating chairperson?), as well as a record-keeper at each meeting could help keep the meetings running smoothly and on-task.
2. Establishing group conventions/norms can also help. You could go around the group, giving everyone a chance to speak to an issue/topic for a few minutes (you can allocate a time limit if needed); that way everyone contributes before discussion starts. You could actually write down some ‘group rules’ – like a code of behaviour – that everyone signs off on. After all, not everyone has had the experience of working in groups and it is a learnt skill.

# Your Turn

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## 1. Characteristics of an effective group

Can you think of at least 10 characteristics of an effective group? If in a group, brainstorm a list together.

*After you have had a go, have a look at page 5 – here you will find 10 characteristics that have been identified by the University of Kent Careers Advisory Service.*

*How do yours compare? Have you identified any that you think they may have missed?*

## 2. Assertive, passive or aggressive behaviour?

Can you identify these behaviours that are sometimes seen in groups?

Try classifying the following as *assertive, aggressive or passive*.

Being prepared to negotiate solutions; avoiding conflict; getting your point across at other peoples expense; having self-respect and respect for others; showing understanding of other peoples situations; listening to other peoples points of view; getting your own way no matter what; not expressing your feelings; keeping quiet for fear of upsetting other people; listening to other peoples points of view, expressing your feelings honestly and with care; appearing indecisive; being loud and noisy, apologising excessively; interrupting others; going along with things you don't agree with; being vague about your ideas and needs; putting people down; manipulating people by using silence or sarcasm; inwardly burning with anger and frustration; respecting other peoples values and ideas; being clear about your point.

This exercise and the answers can be found at the Learning Skills website at the University of Canberra (<http://www.canberra.edu.au/studyskills/learning/groups>).

## 3. Group Roles

The roles that people play in a group situation is talked about a lot in academic circles, the business community and in many personal development/coaching training institutions. One thing *most* people agree on is that roles can vary – you can change roles or play more than one role. Belbin's Team Roles (see page 5) are quite a popular way of conceptualising differences in a group. Have a look at the nine team roles and see if you can identify yourself in one/some of them. What strengths and weaknesses do you bring to a group?

## 4. Learning Styles

You may find it helpful to review the workshop or online module called [Learning Styles](#). There are some similarities between the behaviours/roles that are evident in groups and preferred learning styles. Keep in mind that just as it is a useful skill to be able to take on a range of roles in a group, it is similarly beneficial to be able to move up and down the scales of different learning styles. As a learner (and teacher!) it is important to be aware of your own as well as other peoples' preferred roles and learning styles.

**5. Reflecting on your personal strengths, concerns and preferred study styles**

Complete the following tables. You can use this activity as a way of reviewing the content of this workshop. You may also suggest this as a commencing activity for each of your group members the next time you are working in a group.

**My strengths:** What do I bring to the team? What skills would I like to develop?

Things I enjoy doing	Things I can do	Skills I would like to develop

**My concerns:** Group work is about being responsible. What might go wrong for me during the project?

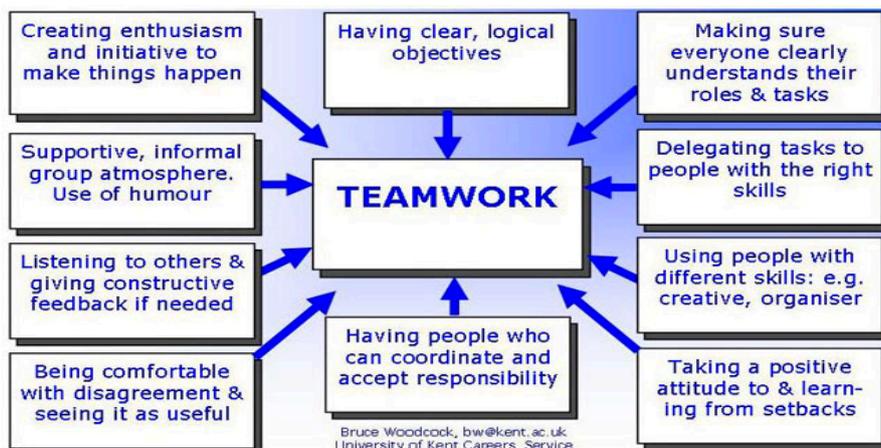
I could see myself...	The issues this might create are...	I could work around this by...

**My study style:** How and when do I work effectively? What motivates me to work?

How do I work? In advance? Last minute? Job by job?	What strengths does this give me?	What tasks does this suit?

# Your Turn - Feedback

1. Source: <http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/sk/teamwork.htm>



3. Source: [www.belbin.com](http://www.belbin.com)

## Team Role Summary Descriptions

Team Role	Contribution	Allowable Weaknesses
Plant 	Creative, imaginative, free-thinking. Generates ideas and solves difficult problems.	Ignores incidentals. Too preoccupied to communicate effectively.
Resource Investigator 	Outgoing, enthusiastic, communicative. Explores opportunities and develops contacts.	Over-optimistic. Loses interest once initial enthusiasm has passed.
Co-ordinator 	Mature, confident, identifies talent. Clarifies goals. Delegates effectively.	Can be seen as manipulative. Offloads own share of the work.
Shaper 	Challenging, dynamic, thrives on pressure. Has the drive and courage to overcome obstacles.	Prone to provocation. Offends people's feelings.
Monitor Evaluator 	Sober, strategic and discerning. Sees all options and judges accurately.	Lacks drive and ability to inspire others. Can be overly critical.
Teamworker 	Co-operative, perceptive and diplomatic. Listens and averts friction.	Indecisive in crunch situations. Avoids confrontation.
Implementer 	Practical, reliable, efficient. Turns ideas into actions and organises work that needs to be done.	Somewhat inflexible. Slow to respond to new possibilities.
Completer Finisher 	Painstaking, conscientious, anxious. Searches out errors. Polishes and perfects.	Inclined to worry unduly. Reluctant to delegate.
Specialist 	Single-minded, self-starting, dedicated. Provides knowledge and skills in rare supply.	Contributes only on a narrow front. Dwells on technicalities.