

# Effective Group Work

A well-functioning group achieves more than separate individuals. That happens when group members acquire and use cooperative skills to address issues. Working in groups for university coursework is an opportunity to develop those skills that will be invaluable throughout life.

It is unnecessary that group members be friends. Qualities that go into close friendships may differ from the qualities needed for effective group work. Certainly, respect is essential for each member of a group and for the different knowledge, skills, experience, and personality they bring. Respect means listening to others' opinions even if you disagree or think them wrong. Instead of beating a teammate down in an argument, it's better to try to win them over to your point of view.

One of the biggest obstacles to a successful group dynamic occurs when members are perceived as avoiding their rightful share of the work. This can cause others to be resentful because they shoulder the entire burden.

How can a group deal with this?

First, consider that a member may have a poor attitude because they lack knowledge. They may feel they are holding the group back by asking for explanations or assistance. Such people may try to mask their sense of inadequacy by keeping a low profile or adopting an "I-don't-care" attitude.

Encouraging questions can minimize this problem. Sometimes we can inadvertently make other people feel academically inferior by giving the impression that everything is easy for us. Remember that, when you respond to a request for help, you both benefit. The person asking the question learns how to focus on what he or she needs to know, how to effectively phrase a question and how to get needed information. The person answering is forced to focus on the topic, select relevant information and clearly articulate an answer based on their understanding of the material. Practicing these valuable skills is one purpose of group work.

Another way to facilitate teamwork is to assign roles. You may even rotate these roles during the semester. Tasks involved could be:

- Obtaining and distributing assignments and other handouts,
- collecting graded homework and returning it to members,
- monitoring deadlines for group assignments,
- writing out group homework solutions,
- assuring everyone has been consulted and signed off on group homework and exam solutions,
- sharing information-gathering tasks,
- making sure that everyone's name and group number is on each group assignment,
- and so on.