

Group Work: Dealing With Conflicts

Assisting students in working on group projects can be one of the most challenging aspects of our work as instructors. When groups work, they are a wonderful experience for both students and instructors, and have great applications to the real world. However, sometimes group work goes wrong. This handout reviews some best practices in forming groups, helping students learn to effectively organize and communicate, and handling conflicts between group members.

Forming Groups

There are three general types of student groups.

- In-class Groups
- Study Groups
- Project Groups:

These groups can be either student-formed or instructor-assigned. Students often prefer forming their own groups, while as instructors often want more control. When deciding which method to use, keep in mind that “although students-selected groups perceived they produced higher-quality work, the actual grades assigned to the group projects did not differ between group formation conditions” (Hilton and Phillips, 2010). What’s more important is that the groups, no matter what their makeup, are taught how to communicate with each other.

Project Charters

All projects should begin with a **project charter**. The project charter “is a statement of the scope, objectives and participants in a project. It provides a preliminary delineation of roles and responsibilities, outlines the project objectives, identifies the main stakeholders, and defines the authority of the project manager. It serves as a reference of authority for the future of the project” (Lehmann)

“The purpose of the project charter is to document:

- Reasons for undertaking the project
 - Objectives and constraints of the project
 - Directions concerning the solution
 - Identities of the main stakeholders”
- (Lehmann)

To help students get off to a good start, provide them with a project charter template to fill out before beginning work with their group. Having a project charter reduces the possibility of conflict. A good charter also helps set the groundwork for successful conflict resolution.

See the end of this document for a sample Project Charter.

Group Conflict

The most common problems for students using group work in the classroom are an absence of leadership and coordination, an inability to communicate effectively, difficulty defining and assigning tasks, trouble maintaining equal participation, and frustration with setting and achieving group goals. Instructors have expressed frustration with dividing students into groups, and dealing with student conflicts or disruptive group members.

The most common causes of conflict within groups are:

- **Faulty communication:** criticism is given inappropriately, and group members' feelings are hurt and they feel devalued
- **Attribution errors:** members make errors in determining the causes of the behavior of other members. This can occur, for example, when one member doesn't complete his or her work and the other members jump to the conclusion that the reason for this was nothing more than irresponsibility. Maybe there was a good reason why that one member fell behind.
- **Mistrust:** members do not trust each other due to poor communication, faulty attributions, or someone's lack of follow through on obligations
- **Grudges:** members hold grudges when they feel they have been treated unfairly, when criticism has been given inappropriately, when there have been faulty attributions, or for other reasons; people become angry with each other and they sometimes nurse their anger and remain hostile rather than working through and resolving their anger and moving on.
- **Personality clashes:** this can occur when groups are put together randomly in particular. The styles of working differ with each member and in some cases, there may be a lack of fit among the members" (Hadad & Reed, p. 267).

Conflict Resolution

"Conflict in a group doesn't have to mean that the group cannot function. In fact, if the conflict is handled well, it may actually help the group to function. People can grow and learn from conflict, especially if it can be resolved in a way that makes the group a winner, not in a way that makes one individual the loser. If the resolution involves all members of the group, regarding the conflict as a group problem, rather than as one person's problem, the group cohesiveness may even be increased. Group conflicts should be dealt with because they can become destructive and divide the group" (Hadad & Reed, p. 268).

Here are some conflict resolution methods that you can present to your students when dealing with group conflict:

1. **Deal with each conflict as it arises.** Do not try to ignore it, hoping it will go away—it will probably fester and become worse if not dealt with. Let's use the example of one person in a group working at a very slow pace that is holding up the work of other group members.

2. **Present the conflict as evidence that people are involved and excited about their work, and that they are showing a passionate commitment to what they are doing.** This may involve a little situational reconstruction to enable everyone to view what has been a negative situation as an opportunity for positive outcomes. For example, note that while the group may be frustrated with one member's slow work, the frustration reflects the enthusiasm of the group and the slowness may indicate the painstaking effort and care of the slow group member.
3. **Confront the issue as a problem to be solved.** Focus on working together to solve the problem. In the example noted above, the issue would be how to enable the slow worker to be faster, providing what the rest of the group needs without losing the care that he or she has been taking
4. **Do not engage in blaming or character assassination.** In the above example, blaming the slow worker or calling the slow worker derogatory names is strictly prohibited.
5. **Be open-minded and fair, listening to all sides of the issue.** Why does the slow worker say he or she is slow?
6. **Insist on criticism being given appropriately and constructively.** Explain the problems that slowness has been causing and how it is making the group members feel.
7. **Make sure everyone in the group understands all sides of the issue by having them repeat or write down what they believe the arguments to be.** Then check to make sure that everyone is correct in their understanding. Does the slow worker realize why the group is having problems with his or her slowness? Does the group understand why the slow worker is taking so much time?
8. **Brainstorm to find solutions or compromises.** Perhaps the slow worker's job is actually bigger than it seems and could be broken into sub-parts with another member helping. Perhaps the slow worker could filter parts of his or her work to the group as each part is ready, rather than waiting for the entire task to be done (Hadad & Reed, 2007, p. 270).

Excerpted from: *The Post-Secondary Learning Experience*, Marilyn Hadad and Maureen J. Reed, 2007.

For more on group work, see:

Using Project Management Concepts in the Facilitation of Group Work

<http://ryerson.ca/content/dam/lt/resources/handouts/ProjectManagementGroupWork.pdf>

Group Charter/Contract

What is/are the goal(s) of our group? (*Goals should be SMART: Simple, Measurable, Attainable, Results oriented, Time bound*)

RECOMMENDATION: Check to see if the goals are similar to the ones that the instructor provided for the group.

What are our pressures? (ex. Money? Time?)

RECOMMENDATION: Have they listed all possible pressures? Are the pressures realistic?

How will we deal with/compensate for our pressures?

RECOMMENDATION: What are their strategies to overcome these pressures? For example, if time is a pressure, how will they plan to resolve this problem? Possible solutions: virtual meetings, Skype, discussion board forums.

What are the strengths of our group and its members?

RECOMMENDATION: The instructor should look for a variety of skills that could contribute to the success of the group and the project. Is there enough diversity (if diversity is needed), is there any overlap?

Group member	Strength(s)

How will we capitalize on the strengths of each member? (*Hint: Think about your group goals. How might each person contribute to achieving them?*)

RECOMMENDATION: Instructors should provide the students with examples of responsibilities related to the project. This will help students in understanding the various roles. The students can then list how they can contribute to the specified goals.

What communication strategies will we use to communicate?

(*Email? Facebook? What is the maximum expected response time?*)

RECOMMENDATION: If students are using Skype, they all need to have accounts and share their Skype ID. If they are communicating by email, what is the frequency of communication and how quickly should they expect a response?

What process will we follow if someone does not live up to the responsibilities? Be specific.

RECOMMENDATION: Some possible answers to this question include

- Examine the reasons and try to find a solution among the group.
- Inform the instructor of the situation.
- Make plans for who will take over each part of the project if a student drops out the group.

Signatures

Member 1	Member 2	Member 3	Member 4

RECOMMENDATION: You might not need signatures for online students, but should request an acknowledgment that they all agree to the charter. This could be done by email to you and to the group members.