Group Work

You may find it useful to read this factsheet in conjunction with Conflict Management.

Aim of this factsheet
To provide information on why group work is relevant and how to get the most from working in groups.

Why group work?
Some students do not enjoy working in groups, especially when the outcome is being assessed.

It is even more of a challenge if you are put into groups where you do not know any of the other members. However, advantages include:

- In the work place you will be asked to work with colleagues who you may not know and you will be expected to get on with it and successfully complete the task.
- Working in a group allows students to investigate academic subjects in-depth and produce work which is more detailed than if one person was working alone.

Working in groups on short term projects is a beneficial process which will help your academic studies and employability skills

Working in groups means that you need to take responsibility:

Effective group work involves:

- listening to others
- respecting all points of view – not everyone thinks the same
- contributing relevant points about the subject
- ensuring the environment is safe and non-judgemental
- being supportive.

You should take responsibility for:

- participating
- being prepared
- doing your share
- supporting others to contribute.

If everyone in the group agrees with these ideas at the start of the task any problems should be avoided or minimised.
Why groups go wrong

Group work can be stressful and things can quickly go wrong. The information below will help explain the dynamics of how groups work and will provide guidance on how to avoid common problems.

The dynamics of the group

Tuckman (1965) first proposed the idea that groups are predictable in their behaviour. He concluded that all groups go through the following stages:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Forming</td>
<td>• When the group members first meet they are polite and interested in each other. Group members exchange backgrounds and find out about each other.</td>
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</table>
| Storming  | • After being together for a while the typical group members then start jockeying for roles and positions in the group - Roles (e.g. Belbin roles) are negotiated and recognised.  
• During this stage group members are prone to arguing and forming cliques (this is not good for task achievement or group cohesion). It is in this stage that people fall out.  
• If the group doesn’t work hard to get past the storming stage it may fall apart and not achieve the task in hand. |
| Norming   | • After some time (the actual amount depends on various factors) the group will start to bond. Roles in the group are accepted and recognised. The group sets about completing the task. |
| Performing| • The group starts working well towards achieving its goals. The group starts taking pride in its work and sees itself as a 'special unit' (the army is very good at getting and keeping groups at this stage). Everyone knows what their role is in the group. |
| Mourning  | • The task is complete and the group is split up. Often there is a real sense of loss. If people have been working together for some time to achieve something, once the task is complete there can be a sense of emptiness. |

Recognising that it is normal to go through these stages enables you to manage them.

It is the **Performing** stage you are aiming to get to, but you sometimes have to work hard to get through the **Storming** stage.
**Understanding team roles**

Understanding why people behave in the way they do is a good starting point to getting the most from people and avoiding conflict. Belbin (1970) is probably one of the most influential thinkers in understanding how groups and teams work. He concluded that people take on specific roles within a group, and that to produce quality work each group needs a combination of the following people/roles:

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Belbin’s roles</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Implementer</strong></td>
<td>Well-organised and predictable. Takes ideas and makes them work. Sees work through to the end.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(doing)</td>
<td>Can be slow.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shaper</strong></td>
<td>Lots of energy and enthusiasm, challenges others to get the task done. Creates excitement around the task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(leader)</td>
<td>Can be insensitive. Can get bored easily. If more than one is in the group there may be a lot of ‘storming’.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Completer Finisher</strong></td>
<td>Sees things through to the end, is reliable and ensures things work well. Checks details and ensures deadlines are met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(doing)</td>
<td>Can worry too much and not trust others. Does not like delegating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Plant</strong></td>
<td>Solves difficult problems with original and creative ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thinking)</td>
<td>Can be seen to be critical, but may bring new ideas to the group. Can be a poor communicator and may ignore the details.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Monitor Evaluator</strong></td>
<td>Maintains clarity and keeps the group on task. Works towards completing the task. Thinks carefully and accurately about things. Comes up with creative and original ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thinking)</td>
<td>May lack energy or ability to inspire others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specialist</strong></td>
<td>Has expert knowledge/skills in key areas and will solve many problems here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(thinking)</td>
<td>Can be disinterested in all other areas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Coordinator</strong></td>
<td>Leader who helps everyone achieve their task, coordinating the group’s efforts and keeping the peace.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(leader)</td>
<td>Can be seen as excessively controlling.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Team worker</strong></td>
<td>Good listener and works to resolve social problems. Dislikes conflict and works to avoid it in the team. Is supportive of other group members and helps to maintain cohesion.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(socialising)</td>
<td>Can have problems making difficult decisions. Likes to be liked.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Resource/ investigator</strong></td>
<td>Explores new ideas and possibilities with energy and with others. Good networker.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(socialising)</td>
<td>Can be too optimistic and lose energy after the initial flush.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
One person may carry out several of these roles within a group, and a person’s role may change from group to group, but to be a successful team it is suggested that you need a combination of the roles. If the group contained only one ‘type’ of person it would make it very difficult to achieve a quality product.

**Remember:** Your behaviour has an impact on others. Recognise your role and how this affects other people you are working with.

**How to succeed in groups**

Here are a few ways to ensure that a group succeeds:

- Realise that all groups go through the stages above and that each member has a role to play in the group.
- Understand your role in the group and how your behaviour can affect others in the group.
- Manage groups by recognising behaviours – e.g. if someone monopolises the group suggest that others contribute. If someone is not participating recognise they need space to speak.
- Recognise that all Belbin’s roles are needed to have a well-rounded group.
- Do not get personal.
- All members to discuss their strengths and weaknesses and preferences.
- Agree some ground rules at your first meeting – for instance, no talking negatively about the project or each other
- Group Building exercises are another way to maximise the chances of success. Some suggestions are:
  1. Go out together
  2. Do something fun together
  3. Problem solve together

You can probably think of a few more of your own.

**References and further reading**


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- **Email:** academicskills@staffs.ac.uk
- **Visit:** Skills Space, Thompson Library, Stoke / Blackheath Lane, Stafford / Shrewsbury Hospital

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