Survey of Communication Study/Chapter 10 - Group Communication

Chapter 10

Group and Team Communication

Chapter Objectives:

After reading this chapter you should be able to:

• Define what constitutes a group and team.

• Understand cultural influences on groups.

• Explain how groups and teams form.

• Identify group roles and norms.

• Understand various approaches to leadership in groups.

• Recognize styles and options for decision making in groups.

• Explain the impact of computer-mediated communication on group communication.

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ave you ever had this happen to you in a college class? At the beginning of the semester your professor hands out the syllabus and explains that a group project is part of the course requirements. You, and others in the class, groan at the idea of this project because you have experienced the difficulties and frustrations of working in a group, especially when your grade depends on the work of others. Does this sound familiar? Why do you think so many students react negatively to these types of assignments? The reality is that group work can be fraught with complications. But, the reality is, many companies are promoting groups as the model working environment.

Case In Point

Don't think knowing how to participate in groups or teams really matters outside of college? Think again. The Atlanta Business Chronicle reports that many companies are using group incentives and team-based pay to "reinforce and reward individuals who contribute to the success of the group as a whole." This kind of pay structure is meant to reward group outcome, not individual performance in a group. Next time you don't want to work in a group, remember you are practicing skills that may help you earn more money.

Chances are that a class assignment is not your first and only experience with groups. We are quite certain that you have already spent, and will continue to spend, a great deal of your time working in groups. You may be involved with school athletics in which you are part of a specialized group called a team. You may be part of a work or professional group. Many of you participate in social, religious, and/or political groups. The family in which you were raised, regardless of the configuration, is also a group. No matter what the specific focus—sports, profession, politics, or family—all groups share some common features.

While group communication is growing in popularity and emphasis, both at the academic and corporate levels, it is not a new area of study. The emergence of group communication study came about in the mid 1950s, following World War II and has been a focus of study ever since. Group communication is often closely aligned with interpersonal communication and organizational communication which is why we have placed it as a chapter in between these two areas of specialization. In your personal, civic, professional lives, you will engage in group communication. Let's take a look at what constitutes a group or team.

Defining Groups and Teams

T o understand group and team communication, we must first understand the definition of a **group**. Many people think that a group is simply a collection of people, but that is only part of it. If you walk out your front door and pull together the first ten people you see, do you have a group? No! According to Wood (2003) a group must have, *"three or more people who interact over time, depend on each other, and follow shared rules of conduct to reach a common goal"* (p. 274). Gerald Wilson defines a group as, *"a collection of three or more individuals who interact about some common problem or interdependent goal and can exert mutual influence over one another"* (2002, p. 14). He goes on to say that the three key components of a group are, "size, goal orientation, and mutual influence" (p. 14). Interpersonal communication is often thought about in terms of dyads. That is, we often communicate interpersonally in pairs. Organizational communication might be thought of as a group that is larger than 12 people. While there are exceptions, for the most part, group size is often thought of in terms of 3-12 people. So, if the ten people you gathered outside of your front door were all neighbors working together as part of "neighborhood watch" to create safety in the community, then you would indeed have a group.

For those of you who have participated on athletic teams you'll notice that these definitions also fit the idea of a team. All of the qualities of groups hold true for teams, but teams have additional qualities not necessarily present for all groups. Wood explains that a **team** *"is a special kind of group characterized by different and complimentary resources of members and by a strong sense of collective identity"* (p. 275). While all members of a team share some athletic ability and special appreciation for a particular sport, members of a football team, for example, have highly specialized skills as indicated in the various positions on the team—quarterback, receiver, and running back. Research suggests that members of an organized team feel and exhibit a strong sense of belonging and commitment to one another (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1997) as a result of combining these specialized skills to achieve particular outcomes. Besides athletic teams, work and professional teams also share these qualities. Now that you know how to define groups and teams, let's look at characteristics of groups and teams, as well as the different types of groups and teams.

Characteristics of Groups

• **Interdependence**. Groups cannot be defined as a number of people simply talking to each other or meeting together. Instead, a primary characteristic of groups is that members of a group are dependent on the others for the group to maintain its existence and achieve its goals. In essence, interdependence is the recognition by those in a group of their need for the others in the group (Cragon & Wright, 1999; Harris & Sherblom, 2008; Lewin, 1951). Imagine playing on a basketball as an individual against the five members of another team. Even if you're considered the best in the world, it's highly unlikely you could win a game against five other people. You must rely on four other teammates to make it a successful game.

• **Interaction**. It probably seems obvious to you that there must be interaction for groups to exist. However, what kind of interaction must exist? Since we all communicate every day, there must be something that distinguishes the interaction in groups from other forms of communication. Cragon and Wright (1999) state that the primary

defining characteristic of group interaction is that it is purposeful. They go on to break down purposeful interaction into four types: problem solving, role playing, team building, and trust building (p. 7). Without purposeful interaction a true group does not exist. If you're put into a group for a class assignment, your first interaction probably centers around exchanging contact information, settings times to meet, and starting to focus on the task at hand. It's purposeful interaction to achieve a goal.

- **Synergy**. One advantage of working in groups and teams is that they allow us to accomplish things we wouldn't be able to accomplish on our own. Remember back to our discussion of Systems Theory in Chapter 5. Systems Theory suggests that "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." This is the very idea of synergy (Morris, 1981; Harris & Sherblom, 2008). Think of an orchestra or band. Each person is there to perform in order to help the larger unit make music in a way that cannot be accomplished without each member working together.

- **Common Goals**. Having interaction and synergy would be relatively pointless in groups without a common goal. People who comprise groups are brought together for a reason or a purpose. While most members of a group have individual goals, a group is largely defined by the common goals of the group. Think of the example at the beginning of the chapter. Your common goal in a class group is to learn, complete an assignment, and earn a grade. While there may be differences regarding individual goals in the group (what final grade is acceptable for example), or how to achieve the common goals, the group is largely defined by the common goals it shares.

- **Shared Norms**. Because people come together for a specific purpose, they develop shared norms to help them achieve their goals. Even with a goal in place, random interaction does not define a group. Group interaction is generally guided by norms a group has established for acceptable behavior. Norms are essentially expectations of the group members, established by the group. Norms can be conscious and formal, or unconscious and informal. One example of norms that we often witness as professors is the expectation of our students' groups that all members show up at group meeting times. When members of a group violate this norm, we notice how frustrated the other group members get. We'll spend more time later in the chapter looking at group norms.

- **Cohesiveness**. One way that members understand of the idea of communicating in groups and teams is when they experience a sense of cohesiveness with other members of the group. When we feel like we are part of something larger, it creates a sense of cohesion or wholeness, a purpose that is bigger than our own individual desires and goals. It is the sense of connection and participation that characterizes the interaction in a group as different from the defined interaction among loosely connected individuals. If you've ever participated in a group that achieved its goal successfully, you are probably able to reflect back on your feelings of connections with the other members of that group.

Types of Groups

Not all groups are the same or brought together for the same reasons. Bilhart and Galanes (1998) categorize groups "on the basis of the reason they were formed and the human needs they serve" (p. 9). Let's take a look!

- **Primary Groups**. Primary groups are ones we form to help us realize our human needs like inclusion and affection. They are not generally formed to accomplish a task, but rather, to help us meet our fundamental needs as relational beings like acceptance, love, and affection. These groups are generally longer term than other groups and include family, roommates, and other relationships that meet as groups on a regular basis (Bilhart & Galanes).

- **Secondary Groups**. We form secondary groups to accomplish work, perform a task, solve problems, and make decisions (Bilhart & Galanes; Harris & Sherblom; Cragan & Wright). Larson and LaFasto (1989) state that secondary groups have "a specific performance objective or recognizable goal to be attained; and coordination of activity among the members of the team is required for attainment of the team goal or objective" (p. 19). Bilhart and Galanes divide secondary groups into four different types.

- **Activity Groups**. Activity Groups are ones we form for the purpose of participating in activities. I'm sure your campus has many clubs that are organized for the sole purpose of doing activities. One example on our campus is the campus group devoted to disc golf.

- **Personal Growth Groups**. We form Personal Growth Groups "to come together to develop personal insights, overcome personal problems, and grow as individuals from the feedback and support of others" (Bilhart & Galanes, p. 11). An example that is probably familiar to you is Alcoholics Anonymous. There are many personal growth groups available for helping us develop as people through group interaction with others.

- **Learning Groups**. Learning Groups "are concerned primarily with discovering and developing new ideas and ways of thinking" (Harris & Sherblom, p. 12). If you have ever been assigned to a group in a college class, most likely it was a learning group whose purpose was to interact in ways that that help those in the group learn new things about the course content.

- **Problem-Solving Groups**. These groups are created for the express purpose of solving a specific problem. The very nature of organizing people into this type of group is to get them to collectively figure out effective solutions to the problem they have before them. Committees are an excellent example of people who are brought together to solve problems.

After looking at the various types of groups, it's probably easy for you to recognize just how much of your daily interaction occurs within the contexts of the various types of groups. The reality is, we spend a great deal of time in groups, and understanding the types of groups you're in, as well as their purpose, goes a long way toward helping you function as a whole member.

The Importance of Studying Communication in Groups and Teams

One of the reasons communication scholars study groups and teams is because of the overwhelming amount of time we spend interacting in groups in professional contexts. More and more professional organizations are turning to groups and teams as an essential way of conducting business and getting things done. Even professions that are seemingly independent, such as being a college professor, are heavily laden with group work. Your authors spend a significant amount of time outside the classroom working on committees that make decisions about all aspects of the campus. The process of writing this book was a group effort as the authors worked with colleagues, then with a group from the publishing company to bring the book to you. Each of us had specific roles and tasks to perform to produce this textbook. Moreover, we were committed to each other and the project, making the decision to spend our weekends writing rather than hanging out with friends because we knew others were counting on us.

Another vital area of group communication concerns the study of social change or social movement organizations. Groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the National Organization of Women (NOW) are all groups bound together by a shared social and political commitment—to promote the rights of nonhuman animals, African-Americans, and women respectively. While individuals can be committed to these ideas, the social, political, and legal rights afforded to groups like these would not have been possible through individual action alone. It was when groups of like-minded people came together with shared commitments and goals, pooling their skills and resources, that change occurred.

The study of social movements reveals the importance of groups for accomplishing goals. Bowers and Ochs (1971) in The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control explain seven progressive and cumulative strategies through which movements progress as they move toward success. Three of the seven strategies focus explicitly on group communication—promulgation, solidification, and polarization. **Promulgation** refers to the *"tactics designed to win social support for the agitator's position. [For N]o movement can be successful unless it attracts a sufficient number of members …"* (p. 20). Without a sufficient group the actions of individual protestors are likely to be dismissed. The strategy of **solidification** *"occurs mainly inside the agitating group" and is "primarily used to unite followers"* (p. 23-4). The point is to unite group members and provide sufficient motivation and support. The

communication that occurs through the collective action of singing songs or chanting slogans serves to unite group members. Because the success of social movements depends in part on the ability to attract a large number of followers, most employ the strategy of **polarization**, which is designed to *persuade neutral individuals or "fence sitters" to join a group*. The essence of this strategy is captured in the quote from Eldridge Cleaver, "You are either part of the problem or part of the solution." Taken together these three strategies stress that the key to group success is the sustained effort of group members working together through communication.

Case In Point

The Power of Women's Groups

In the 1970s groups of women started gathering in private homes to discuss what they believed were shared personal frustrations. However, in the group setting they realized that their frustrations were shared by many and that the personal really had political and cultural roots; thus, the term "the personal is political" was born. Further, they came to understand that their "personal problems" were neither personal nor problems, but manifestations of living in a sexist culture. Together, they realized that collective action on the part of these "consciousness raising groups" all over the country could help transform a sexist society into a more egalitarian one. As a result, such consciousness raising groups became a hallmark of the 1970s women's movement or second wave feminism.

For more discussion on women's groups see Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future by Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards

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Not only do Communication scholars focus on work and social movements, we are also interested in the role that one's cultural identity and membership plays in our communicative choices and how we interpret the communication of others. This focus sheds interesting insights when we examine membership and communication in groups and teams. One reason for this is that different cultures emphasize the role of individuals while other cultures emphasize the importance of the group. For example, **collectivist cultures** are ones that *place high value on group work because they understand that outcomes of our communication impact all members of the community and the community as a whole, not just the individuals in the group*. Conversely, **individualistic cultures** are ones that *place high value on the individual person above the needs of the group*. Thus, whether we view group work as favorable or unfavorable may stem from our cultural background. The U.S. is considered an individualistic culture in that we value the work and accomplishments of the individual because of ideals of being able to "pull yourself up by the bootstraps" and create success for yourself. However, you've probably encountered the influence of collectivist cultures like Japan that value the collective group. For example, many of the ways we work in groups within organizations are borrowed from Japanese organizations that have long-valued group-based work environments. Given the complexity of group interaction, it's short-sighted to try to understand group communication without looking at notions of power (think back to Critical Theories and Research Methods!). **Power** influences how we interpret the messages of others and determines the extent to which we feel we have the right to speak up and voice our concerns and opinions to others. Take a moment to reflect on the different ways you think about power. What images come to mind for you when you think of power? Are there different kinds of power? Are some people inherently more powerful than others? Do you consider yourself to be a powerful person? We highlight three ways to understand power as it relates to group and team communication. The word "power" literally means *"to be able"* and has many implications.

If you associate power with control or dominance, this refers to the notion of power as **power-over**. According to Starhawk (1987), "power-over *enables one individual or group to make the decisions that affect others, and to enforce control*" (9). Control can and does take many forms in society. Starhawk explains that,

> This power is wielded from the workplace, in the schools, in the courts, in the doctor's office. It may rule with weapons that are physical or by controlling the resources we need to live: money, food, medical care; or by controlling more subtle resources: information, approval, love. We are so accustomed to power-over, so steeped in its language and its implicit threats, that we often become aware of its functioning only when we see its extreme manifestations. (9)

When we are in group situations and someone dominates the conversation, makes all of the decisions, or controls the resources of the group such as money or equipment, this is power-over.

Power-from-within refers to a more personal sense of strength or agency. Power-from-within manifests ***itself when we can stand, walk, and speak "words that convey our needs and thoughts"*** (Starhawk, p. 10). In groups, this type of power "arises from our sense of connection, our bonding with other human beings, and with the environment" (p. 10). As Heider explains in The Tao of Leadership, "Since all creation is a whole, separateness is an illusion. Like it or not, we are team players. Power comes through cooperation, independence through service, and a greater self through selflessness" (p. 77). If you think about your role in groups, how have you influenced other group members? Your strategies indicate your sense of power-from-within.

Finally, groups manifest **power-with**, which is "*the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to, to begin something and see it happen*" (Starhawk, p. 10). For this to be effective in a group or team at least two qualities must be present among members: 1) All group members must communicate respect and equality for one another, and 2) The leader must not abuse power-with and attempt to turn it into power-over. Have you ever been involved in a group where people did not treat each others as equals or with respect? How did you feel about the group? What was the outcome? Could you have done anything to change that dynamic?

Obviously, communication is the central activity of every group because it is how we organize and maintain groups. While we can all tell positive and negative stories about being in groups, how are they formed in the first place?

Forming Groups

S ometimes we join a group because we want to. Other times, we might be assigned to work in groups in a class or at work. Either way, Lumsden and Lumsden (1986) give three reasons why we form groups. First, we may join groups because we share similar **interests or attractions** with other group members. If you are a certain major in college, chances are you share some of the same interests as others in your class groups. Also, you might find yourself attracted to others in your group for romantic, friendship, political, religious or professional reasons. On our campus, our majors have formed the Communication Club to bring together students in the major. A second reason we join groups is called **drive reduction**. Essentially, we join groups so our work with others reduces the drive to fulfill our needs by spreading out involvement. As Maslow (1970) explains, we have drives for physiological needs, security, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Working with others helps us achieve these needs thereby reducing our obligation to meet these needs ourselves. For example, if you accomplished a task successfully for a group, it's likely your group members complimented your work, thus fulfilling some of your self-esteem needs. If you had done the same work only for yourself, the building up of your self-esteem may not have occurred. A third reason we join groups is for **reinforcement**. We are often motivated to do things for the rewards they bring. Participating in groups provides reinforcement from others in the pursuit of our goals and rewards. Most groups go through a series of stages as they come together. These stages are called forming, storming, norming, and performing (Tuckman, 1965, 1977; Fisher, 1970; Harris & Sherblom, 2002). Groups formed to achieve a task often go through a fifth stage called termination that occurs after a group accomplishes its goal. Let's look at each of the stages of group formation and termination.

- **Forming**. Obviously, for a group to exist and work together its members must first form the group. During the forming stage, group members begin to set the parameters of the group by establishing what characteristics identify the members of the group as a group. During this stage, the group's goals are made generally clear to members, initial questions and concerns are addressed, and initial role assignments may develop. This is the stage when group norms begin to be negotiated and established. Essentially, norms are a code of conduct which may be explicit or assumed and dictate acceptable and expected behavior of the group.

- **Storming**. The storming stage might be considered comparable to the "first fight" of a romantic couple. After the initial politeness passes in the forming stage, group members begin to feel more comfortable expressing their opinions about how the group should operate and the participation of other members in the group. Given the complexity of meeting both individual goals as well as group goals, there is constant negotiation among group members regarding participation and how a group should operate. Imagine being assigned to a group for class and you discover that all the members of the group are content with getting a C grade, but you want an A. If you confront your group members to challenge them to have higher expectations, you are in the storming stage.

- **Norming**. Back to our romantic couple example, if the couple can survive the first fight, they often emerge on the other side of the conflict feeling stronger and more cohesive. The same is true in groups. If a group is able to work through the initial conflict of the storming stage, there is the opportunity to really solidify the group's norms and get to the task at hand as a cohesive group. Norming signifies that the members of a group are willing to abide by group rules and values to achieve the group's goals.

- **Performing**. Performing is the stage we most often associate as the defining characteristic of groups. This stage is marked by a decrease in tensions, less conscious attention to norm establishment, and greater focus on the actual work at hand in order to accomplish the group's goals. While there still may be episodes of negotiating conflict and re-establishing norms, performing is about getting to the business at hand. When you are in a weekly routine of meeting at the library to work on a group project, you are in the performing stage.

- **Terminating**. Groups that are assigned a specific goal and timeline will experience the fifth stage of group formation, termination. Think about groups you have been assigned to in college. We're willing to bet that the group did not continue once you achieved the required assignment and earned your grade. This is not to say that we do not continue relationships with other group members. But, the defining characteristics of the group established during the forming stage have come to an end, and thus, so has the group.

> **Group Communication Now**
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> Technology is changing so many things about the ways we communicate. This is also true in group communication. One of the great frustrations for many people in groups is simply finding a time that everyone can meet together. However, computer technology has changed these dynamics as more and more groups "meet" in the virtual world, rather than face-to-face. But, what is the impact of technology on how groups function? For example, Flanagin, Tiyaamornwong, O'Connor, and Seibold (2002) examined how men and women communicated in computer mediated groups where each person was anonymous, and therefore, participants did not know one another's gender. We have a lot to learn about the ways communication technologies are changing our notions of working in groups and individual communication styles.

Now that you understand how groups form, let's discuss the ways in which people participate in groups. Since groups are comprised of interdependent individual people, one area of research that has emerged from studying group communication is the focus on the roles that we play in groups and teams. Having an understanding of the various roles we play in groups can help us understand how to interact with various group members.

Groups Roles

Take a moment to think about the individuals in a particular group and the role each of them played. You may recall that some people were extremely helpful, organized and made getting the job done easy. Others may have been more difficult to work with, or seemed to disrupt the group process. In each case, the participants were performing roles that manifest themselves in most groups. An early study on group communication reports 25 commonly played roles in groups (Benne & Sheats, 1948) that can be divided into three types—group task roles, group building and maintenance roles, and individual roles. In later research, Ketrow (1991) uses only two categories of group roles—task and social/emotional roles, while Jensen and Chilberg (1991) describe thirty-four roles in groups. To

simplify, we provide an overview of some of the more common roles. As you study group roles, remember that we usually play more than one role at a time, and that we do not always play the same roles from group to group.

We organize group roles into four categories—task, social-emotional, procedural, and individual. Task roles are those that help or hinder a group's ability to accomplish its goals. Social-emotional roles are those that focus on building and maintaining relationships among individuals in a group. The focus is on how people feel about being in the group. Procedural roles are concerned with how the group accomplishes its task. People occupying these roles are interested in following directions, proper procedure, and going through appropriate channels when making decisions or initiating policy. The final category, individual roles, includes any role "that detracts from group goals and emphasizes personal goals" (Jensen & Chilberg, p. 97). When people come to a group to promote their individual agenda above the group's, they do not communicate in ways that are beneficial to the group. Let's take a look at each of these categories in more detail.

- **Task Roles**. While there are many task roles a person can play in a group, we want to emphasize five common ones. The **Task Leader** is *the person that keeps the group focused on the primary goal or task by setting agendas, controlling the participation and communication of the group's members, and evaluating ideas and contributions of participants*. Your associated students president probably performs the task leader role. **Information Gatherers** are those people who *seek and/or provide the factual information necessary for evaluating ideas, problem solving, and reaching conclusions*. This is the person who serves as the liaison with your professor about what he/she expects from a group project. **Opinion Gatherers** are those that *seek out and/or provide subjective responses about ideas and suggestions*. They most often take into account the values, beliefs, and attitudes of members. If you have a quiet member of your group, the opinion gatherer may ask, "What do you think?" in order to get that person's feedback. The **Devil's Advocate** is the person that *argues a contrary or opposing point of view*. This may be done positively in an effort to ensure that all perspectives are considered, or negatively as the unwillingness of a single person to participate in the group's ideas. The **Energizer** is the person who *functions as the group's cheer-leader, providing energy, motivation, and positive encouragement*.

- **Social-Emotional Roles**. Group members play a variety of roles in order to buil**d and maintain relationships in groups. The Social-Emotional Leader** is the person who is *concerned with maintaining and balancing the social and emotional needs of the group members and tends to play many, if not all, of the roles in this category*. The **Encourager** practices good listening skills in order to *create a safe space for others to share ideas and offer suggestions*. **Followers** are group members that do what they are told, *going along with decisions and assignments from the group*. The **Tension Releaser** is the person that *uses humor, or can skillfully change the subject in an attempt to minimize tension and avoid conflict*. The **Compromiser** is the one who *mediates disagreements or conflicts among members by encouraging others to give in on small issues for the sake of meeting the goals of the group*. What role do you find yourself most likely to enact in groups? Or, do you find you switch between these roles depending on the group?

- **Procedural Roles**. Groups cannot function properly without having a system of rules or norms in place. Members are responsible for maintaining the norms of a group and play many roles to accomplish this. The **Facilitator** acts like a traffic director by *managing the flow of information to keep the group on task*. **Gatekeepers** are those group members that attempt to *maintain proper communicative balance*. These people also serve as the points of contact between times of official group meetings. The **Recorder** is the person responsible for *tracking group ideas, decisions, and progress*. Often, a written record is necessary, thus, this person has the responsibility for keeping, maintaining, and sharing group notes. If you're the person who pulls out a pen and paper in order to track what the group talks about, you're the recorder.

- **Individual Roles**. Because groups are made of individuals, group members often play various roles in order to achieve individual goals. The **Aggressor** engages in *forceful or dominating communication to put others down or initiate conflict with other members*. This communication style can cause some members to remain silent or passive. The **Blocker** is the person that fusses or *complains about small procedural matters, often blocking the*

group's progress by not letting them get to the task. They worry about small details that, overall, are not important to achieving the group's desired outcome. The **Self-Confessor** uses the group as a setting to *discuss personal or emotional matters not relevant to the group or its task*. This is the person that views the group as one that is there to perform group therapy. The **Playboy or Playgirl** *shows little interest in the group or the problem at hand* and does not contribute in a meaningful way, or at all. This is the person who does essentially no work, yet still gets credit for the group's work. The **Joker or Clown** uses *inappropriate humor or remarks that can steer the group from its mission*.

While we certainly do not have the space to cover every role you might encounter in a group, we're sure you can point to your own examples of people who have filled the roles we've discussed. Perhaps you can point to examples of when you have filled some of these roles yourself. It's important for group members to understand what kinds of roles they play in groups in order to engage in positive roles that help the group along. One dynamic that these roles contribute to in the process of group communication is leadership in groups. Let's briefly examine how leadership functions in groups.

Leadership In Groups

W

hile we've examined roles we can play in groups, the role that often gets the most attention is that of the leader. Like defining communication, many people have an idea of what a leader is, but can't really come up with a good definition for the term as there are many ways to conceptualize the role of leader. One way to do this is to think of leaders in terms of their leadership styles. Let's look at three broad leadership styles to better understand the communication choices leaders can make, as well as the outcome of such choices, in a group.

First, let's visualize leadership styles by seeing them as a continuum. The position to the left (Laissez-faire) indicates a leader who exerts little to no control over a group, while the position on the right (Authoritarian) indicates a leader who seeks complete control. The position in the middle (Democratic) is one where a leader maintains a moderate level of control or influence in a group with the group's permission.

- **Laissez-faire** is a French term that literally means "let do." This leadership style is one in which the leader *takes a laid back or hands-off approach*. For a variety of reasons a leader may choose to keep her/his input at a minimum and refrain from directing a group. What do you think some reasons may be for selecting this leadership style? Perhaps a person feels uncomfortable being a leader. Perhaps a person does not feel that she/he possesses the skills required to successfully lead the group. Or, perhaps the group is highly skilled, motivated, and efficient and does not require much formal direction from a leader. If the latter is the case then a laissez-faire approach may work well. However, if a group is in need of direction then a laissez-faire style may result in frustration and inefficiency.

- An **authoritarian leadership style** is one in which a leader attempts *to exert maximum control over a group*. This may be done by making unilateral decisions rather than consulting all members, assigning members to specific tasks or duties, and generally controlling group processes. This leadership style may be beneficial when a group is in need of direction or there are significant time pressures. Authoritarian leaders may help a group stay efficient and organized in order to accomplish its goals. However, group members may be less committed to the outcomes of the group process than if they had been a part of the decision making process. One term that you may have heard on your campus is "shared-governance." In general, faculty do not like working in groups where one person is making the decisions. Instead, most faculty prefer a system where all members of a group share in the leadership process. This can also be called the democratic style of leadership.

- The **democratic style of leadership** falls somewhere in the middle of laissez-faire and authoritarian styles. In these situations, *the decision-making power is shared among group members, not exercised by one individual*.

In order for this to be effective, group members must spend considerable time sharing and listening to various positions and weighing the effects of each. Groups organized in this fashion may be more committed to the outcomes of the group, be more creative, and be more participatory. However, as each person's ideas are taken into account, this can extend the amount of time it takes for a group to accomplish its goals.

While we've certainly oversimplified our coverage of the complex nature of group leaders, you should be able to recognize that there are pros and cons to each leadership style, and that there is not one right way to be a leader for every group. An effective leader is able to adapt his or her style to fit the needs of the group. Furthermore, as a group's needs and members change over time, leadership styles can accommodate natural changes in the group's life cycle. Take a moment to think of various group situations in which each leadership style may be the most and the least desirable. What are examples of groups where each style of leadership could be practiced effectively?

Group Norms

E very group we participate in has a set of norms like we talked about in the "norming" stage of groups. Each group's rules and norms are different, and we must learn them to be effective participants. Some groups formalize their norms and rules, while others are less formal and more fluid. Norms are the recognized rules of behavior for group members. **Norms** *influence the ways we communicate with other members, and ultimately, the outcome of group participation*. Norms are important because, as we highlighted in the "norming" stage of group formation, they are the defining characteristics of groups. Brilhart and Galanes (1998) divide norms into two categories. **General norms** *"direct the behavior of the group as a whole"* (p. 130). Meeting times, how meetings run, and the division of tasks are all examples of general norms that groups form and maintain. These norms establish the generally accepted rules of behavior for all group members. The second category of norms is role-specific norms. **Role-specific norms** *"concern individual members with particular roles, such as the designated leader"* (p. 130). Not only are there norms that apply to all members of a group, there are norms that influence the behaviors of each role. Consider our brief discussion on leadership. If a group's members are self-motivated, and do not need someone imposing structure, they will set a norm that the group leader should act as a laissez-faire or democratic leader rather than an authoritarian leader. Violation of this norm would most likely result in conflict if the leader tries to impose his/her will. A violation like this will send a group back to the "storming" stage to renegotiate the acceptable norms of the group. When norms are violated, group members most often will work to correct the violation to get the group back on task and functioning properly. Have you ever been in a group in which a particular group member did not do the task that was assigned to him/her? What happened? How did the group handle this situation as a whole? What was the response of the person who did not complete the task? In hindsight, would you have handled it differently? If so, how?

As groups progress through the various stages, and as members engage in the various roles, the group is in a continual process of decision making. Since this is true, it makes sense to ask the question, "How is it that groups make decisions?"

Decision Making In Groups

W

hen groups need to get a job done they should have a method in place for making decisions. The decision making process is a norm that may be decided by a group leader, or by the group members as a whole. Let's look at four common ways of making decisions in groups. To make it simple we will again use a continuum as a way to visualize the various options groups have for making decisions. On the left side are those methods that require maximum group involvement (consensus and voting). On the right are those methods that use the least amount of input from all members (compromise and authority rule).

The decision-making process that requires the most group input is called **consensus**. To reach consensus *group members must participate in the crafting of a decision and agree to adopt it*. While not all members may support the decision equally, all will agree to carry it out. In individualistic cultures like the U.S., where a great deal of value is placed on independence and freedom of choice, this option can be seen by group members as desirable, since no one is forced to go along with a policy or plan of action to which they are opposed. Even though this style of decision making has many advantages, it has its limitations as well—it requires a great deal of creativity, trust, communication, and time on the part of all group members. It is often difficult to reach consensus, therefore, groups may opt for the next strategy which does not require buy-in from all or most of the group.

Group Communication and You

Okay, you're a Communication major and this whole idea of working in groups really appeals to you and seems to come naturally. But perhaps you're not a Communication major and you're thinking to yourself that your future career isn't really going to require group or team work. Well, you're probably wrong about that. The College of Engineering at Michigan State University created a webpage called "top ten things engineering employers want you to do." Among them are: "Make a contribution to the company the minute you arrive," "Show us you are a leader," "Be able to clearly express your thoughts (verbally & in writing)" "Demonstrate you are a Team Player" and "Be goal oriented."

Even non-Communication majors need to develop effective group communication skills to succeed at work.

Voting by majority may be as simple as having 51% of the vote for a particular decision, or may require a larger percentage, such as two-thirds or three-fourths, before reaching a decision. Like consensus, voting is advantageous because everyone is able to have an equal say in the decision process (as long as they vote). Unlike consensus, everyone may not be satisfied with the outcome. In a simple majority, 49% of voters may be displeased and may be resistant to abide by the majority vote. In this case the decision or policy may be difficult to carry out and implement. For example, one of your authors was involved at a campus where a department was voting on whether or not they wanted to hire a particular person to be a professor. Three faculty voted yes for the person, while two faculty voted no. Needless to say, there was a fair amount of contention among the professors who voted. Ultimately, the person being considered for the job learned about the split vote and decided that he did not want to take the job because he felt that the two people that voted no would not treat him well. Toward the right of our continuum is **compromise**. This method often carries a positive connotation in the U.S. because it is perceived as fair since *each member gives up something, as well as gains something*. Nevertheless, this decision making process may not be as fair as it seems on the surface. The main reason for this has to do with what is being given up and obtained. There is nothing in a compromise that says these two factors must be equal (that may be the ideal, but it is often not the reality). For individuals or groups that feel they have gotten the unfair end of the bargain, they may be resentful and refuse to carry out the compromise. They may also foster ill will toward others in the group, or engage in self-doubt for going along with the compromise in the first place. However, if groups cannot make decisions through consensus or voting, compromise may be the next best alternative. At the far right of our continuum is decision by **authority rule**. This decision-making process *requires essentially no input from the group, although the group's participation may be necessary for implementing the decision*. The authority in question may be a member of the group who has more

power than other members, or a person of power outside the group. While this method is obviously efficient, members are often resentful when they feel they have to follow another's orders and feel the group process was a façade and waste of valuable time. During the decision making process, groups must be careful not to fall victim to groupthink. **Groupthink** happens when *a group is so focused on agreement and consensus that they do not examine all of the potential solutions available to them*. Obviously, this can lead to incredibly flawed decision making and outcomes. Groupthink occurs when a group overestimates its power and morality, becomes closed-minded, and group members are pressured to conform and not raise serious objections to decisions being proposed (Brilhard & Galanes, 1998). Many have argued that the Bush administration's decision to go to war with Iraq is an example of groupthink. In fact, the United States Senate Select Committee on Intelligence: Report on pre-Iraq War Intelligence concluded that many of the decisions used to support the war in Iraq were a result of "collective group think."

As with leadership styles, appropriate decision making processes vary from group to group depending on context, culture, and group members. There is not a "one way fits all" approach to making group decisions. When you find yourself in a task or decision-making group it is best to first take stock of the task at hand before deciding as a group the best ways to proceed.

Group Work and Time

B

y now you should recognize that working in groups and teams has many advantages. However, one issue that is of central importance to group work is time. When working in groups time can be both a source of frustration, as well as a reason to work together. One obvious problem is that it takes much longer to make decisions with two or more people as opposed to just one person. Another problem is that it can be difficult to coordinate meeting times when taking into account people's busy lives of work, school, family, and other personal commitments. On the flip side, when time is limited and there are multiple tasks to accomplish, it is often more efficient to work in a group where tasks can be delegated according to resources and skills. When each member can take on certain aspects of a project, this limits the amount of work an individual would have to do if he/she were solely responsible for the project.

For example, when one of your authors bought her first house the yard was a mess—the lawn needed to be mowed and trimmed, trees needed to be pruned, and flower beds needed to be weeded and replanted. The thought of doing this alone was daunting in terms of the required labor and time. Hiring professionals was too expensive to consider. What to do? A friend suggested a "yard warming party" as an alternative to a traditional house warming party. Instead of bringing gifts each person brought a new plant or some sort of garden tool, came over in their work clothes, and donated a Saturday afternoon to cleaning up the yard. After only four hours of collective work the trees were trimmed, the lawn was neatly mowed, and the group of friends had planted fresh new daisy bushes. The group had set out on a task, divided work according to skill, and accomplished a huge project in a fraction of the time it would have taken a single person. The best part was being able to look at the yard as a reminder of one's community and the power of people working together. On the flip side, your other author chaired a committee in which a report had to be written and presented to the campus community. The committee took several multi-hour meetings to write a report that could have been written by your author in less than two hours. However, the final report by the committee was much better and more detailed than your author could have written on his own. When deciding whether or not to work in groups, it is important to consider time. Is the time and effort of working in a group worth the outcome? Or, is it better to accomplish the task as an individual?

Groups and Technology

If you haven't done so already, it is likely that you will use technology at some point to communicate in a group. There is no doubt that technology is rapidly changing the ways we communicate in a variety of contexts, and group communication is no exception. Many organizations use technologies such as computers and cell phones as a primary way to keep groups connected given their ease of use, low cost, and asynchronous nature. In fact, when your authors set up course web pages for students, they also set up "group forums" for class groups to deal with the complexities of finding times to meet. Using these forums our students have live chats online, transfer documents back and forth, and form discussion "threads" to achieve the group's goals, all without ever having to meet in person. As you enter the workforce, you'll likely find yourself participating in virtual groups with people who have been brought together from a variety of geographical locations. While communication technologies can be beneficial for bringing people together and facilitating groups, they also have drawbacks. When we lack face-to-face encounters, and rely on asynchronous forms of communication, there is greater potential for information to be lost and messages to be ambiguous. The face-to-face nature of traditional group meetings provides immediate processing and feedback through the interaction of group members. When groups communicate through email, threads, discussion forums, text messaging, etc., they lose the ability to provide immediate feedback to other members. Also, using communication technologies takes a great deal more time for a group to achieve its goals due to the asynchronous nature of these channels. Nevertheless, technology is changing the ways we understand groups and participate in them. We have yet to work out all of the new standards for group participation introduced by technology. Used well, technology opens the door for new avenues of working in groups to achieve goals. Used poorly, technology can add to the many frustrations people often experience working in groups and teams.

Summary

We participate in groups and teams at all stages and phases of our lives, from play groups, to members of an athletic team, to performing in a band, or performing in a play. We form groups based on personal and professional interests, drive reduction, and for reinforcement. Through group and team work we can save time and resources, enhance the quality of our work, succeed professionally, or accomplish socio-political change. As you recall, a group is composed of three or more people who interact over time, depend on each other, and follow shared rules and norms. A team is a specialized group which possesses a strong sense of collective identity and compatible and complimentary resources. There are five general types of groups depending on the intended outcome. Primary groups are formed to satisfy our long-term emotive needs. Secondary groups are more performance based and concern themselves with accomplishing tasks or decision making. Personal growth groups focus on specific areas of personal problem solving while providing a supportive and emotionally positive context. Learning groups are charged with the discovery and dissemination of new ideas while problem solving groups find solutions. Once a group comes together they go through typical stages (forming, storming, norming, performing, and terminating) to develop roles, create a leadership strategy, and determine the process for decision making. While numerous specific group roles exit, the four categories of roles include: task, social-emotional, procedural, and individual roles. It is likely that members will occupy multiple roles simultaneously as they participate in groups. There are three broad leadership styles ranging from least to most control—laissez faire, democratic, and authoritarian. Also related to power and control are options for decision making. Consensus gives members the most say, voting and compromise may please some but not others, and authority rule gives all control to the leader. None of the options for leadership styles and decision making are inherently good or bad—the appropriate choice depends on the individual situation

and context. It is important for groups not to become victims of groupthink as they make decisions. New technologies are continually changing how we engage in group communication. The asynchronous nature of communication technologies can facilitate group processes. However, they also have the potential to slow groups down and make it more difficult to accomplish group goals.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast the definition of "team" vs. "group." Are there other differences you can think of?
2. In a local, state, national, or international newspaper, find a recent story of group or teamwork. (Do not use a sport or athletic team for this example.) How do you think communication was relevant for this group?
3. Given the fact that there are both advantages and disadvantages to working in a group, how would you decide if a particular situation was best served by working in a group versus working as an individual?
4. Compare and contrast the three types of power. What might be some advantages and disadvantages of each in a group setting?
5. Reflect back on a recent group or team experience. What roles did you play? How would you feel if you had to take on a new role or responsibility? How would your communication change or stay the same?
6. Watch a feature length film and pay attention to the styles of leadership. (Whale Rider works well for this.) Does one person lead? Or, is leadership shared among group members? What styles of leadership do you notice? What are the suggested implications of a given style?
7. How were/are decisions made in your family? Has the process changed over time? What kinds of communication surround the decision making?

Key Terms

- activity groups
- aggressor
- authoritarian
- authority rule
- blocker
- cohesiveness
- collectivist
- common goals
- compromise
- consensus
- democratic
- devil's advocate
- drive reduction
- encourager
- energizer
- facilitator
- followers
- forming
- gatekeepers
- general norms
- group
- individualistic
- individual roles
- information gatherers

- interaction
- interdependence
- interests/attraction
- joker/clown
- laissez-faire
- leadership
- learning groups
- norming
- norms
- opinion gatherers
- performing
- personal growth groups
- playboy/playgirl
- polarization
- power
- power-from-within
- power-over
- power-with
- primary groups
- problem solving groups
- procedural roles
- promulgation
- recorder
- reinforcement
- role-specific norms
- secondary groups
- self-confessor
- shared norms
- social-emotional roles
- social-emotional leader
- solidification
- storming
- synergy
- task leader
- task roles
- team
- tension releasers
- terminating
- voting

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