

Collaboration Skills: being an effective group member



Strawberry photo credit: Bennilover, used under a BY-ND 2.0 Creative Commons license

To function effectively in small groups, students must pay attention to both the climate within their group and the process by which they accomplish their tasks. **Strong communication skills** are crucial to a healthy climate and effective process. Detailed below are the basic characteristics of effective communicators, plus tips to help you obtain a healthy group climate and process.

Communication skills:



To function successfully in groups, you must be able to communicate clearly on an intellectual and emotional level. This is what we call effective communicators. Effective communicators:





- Can explain their own ideas
- Express their feelings in an open but non-threatening way
- Listen attentively to others
- Asking questions to clarify others' ideas and emotions
- Sensing how others are feeling based on their nonverbal communication
- Initiate conversations about group climate or process when they sense tensions rising
- Reflect on their group's activities and interactions and encourage other group members to do the same

Regular open communication, in which group members share their thoughts, ideas and feelings, is a must for successful group work. Unspoken assumptions and issues can be very destructive to the productive functioning of a group. When students are willing to

communicate openly with each other, a healthy climate is created, and an effective process can be followed.

Skills for healthy group climate

To work together successfully, you must demonstrate a sense of cohesion as group members. Cohesion occurs when group members exhibit the following skills:

 <p>Openness:</p> <p>Group members are willing to get to know each other, especially those with different interests and backgrounds. They are open to new ideas, differing viewpoints and the diversity of individuals in the group. They listen to others and ask for their ideas. They know how to balance the need for group cohesion with the need for individual expression.</p>	 <p>Trust and self-disclosure:</p> <p>Group members trust each other enough to share their own ideas and feelings. A sense of mutual trust develops only when everyone is willing to expose themselves and be honest but respectful. Trust also grows as group members show personal responsibility for their assigned tasks.</p>
 <p>Support:</p> <p>Group members show support for each other in achieving their goals. They demonstrate a sense of team loyalty and encourage the group as a whole and help members who are experiencing difficulties. They see each other not as competitors but as colleagues.</p>	 <p>Respect:</p> <p>Group members communicate their opinions in a way that respects others, focusing on "What can we learn?" rather than "Who is at fault?" See constructive feedback in the process section for more details.</p>

Appendix A: The "Checklist: Are We a Team?" can be completed to reflect on what is going well in the group but especially what could be better.

Skills for an effective group process

In addition to knowing how to develop a healthy group climate, you as students also need to know how to function in order to be productive and perform tasks effectively. An effective process occurs when you employ these skills:

Individual responsibility and accountability: All group members agree on what needs to be done and by whom.



- Each student then determines what to do and takes responsibility for completing the task or tasks
- They can be held accountable for their tasks, and they hold others accountable for their tasks.

Constructive feedback: Group members can give and receive feedback on group ideas.



- Giving feedback requires focusing on ideas and behaviors, rather than individuals, being as positive as possible, and making suggestions for improvement.
- Receiving feedback requires listening carefully, asking for clarification if the comment is unclear, and being open to change and other ideas.

Problem solving:



- Group members help the group develop and use strategies that are central to group goals. As such, they can facilitate group decision-making and deal productively with conflict. In extreme cases, they know when to approach the professor for additional advice and assistance.

Management and organization: Group members know how to plan and manage a task, manage their time and run a meeting.



- For example, they ensure that meeting objectives are set, that an agenda is created and followed, and that everyone has a chance to participate.
- They stay focused on the task at hand and help others do the same.

Knowledge of roles: Group members know what roles can be played in a group.



- E.g. leader, facilitator, note taker, timekeeper, devil's advocate, evaluator and know which role(s) they and others are best suited for. (*See document maximizing group performance for roles*).
- They are also willing to switch roles to maximize their own learning and that of others.



Appendix B. Effective group process

- **Ground rules and goals:**
 - What are these in your group?
 - What changes to these rules and goals could improve the functioning of your group?
- **Sticking to the rules:**
 - How is everyone encouraged to stick to assigned tasks?
- **Feedback:**
 - To what extent do you and the others follow the feedback method outlined in class?
 - How could you and your group members improve the way you give and receive feedback?
- **Reflection:**
 - To what extent does your group reflect on the extent to which goals are being met?
 - How would more (or less) discussion of goals help or hinder your group's functioning?
- **Decisions:**
 - How are decisions made in your group?
 - Who is involved and in what ways?
 - What was effective about the processes you used?
 - How can your decision-making processes be improved?
- **Conflict:**
 - What happens when a group member is dissatisfied or uncomfortable with a group decision?
 - What conflicts arose within the group?
 - How were the conflicts resolved?
 - What role do you play in resolving these conflicts?
 - What could you (or others) do to improve your group's ability to deal with conflict productively?
- **Meetings:**
 - How do your meetings usually go?
 - What is effective about the group's performance during meetings?
 - What changes would improve meetings?
- **Roles:**
 - Who has emerged as the leader in your group?
 - What other roles do you see team members playing and what role(s) do you play yourself?
 - Which role do you prefer and why?