

Communication Skills: Group/Team Start Up Tasks

Description

Students often find themselves working in groups or teams to complete classroom activities. Often the instructor assumes that students know intuitively or have received instruction elsewhere on the process of working with others, whereas this is not necessarily the case. The result of such an assumption can range from personal conflict between members to a poorly executed group or team product to one or a few members taking responsibility for the project, thus minimizing the “group-ness” or “team-ness.” A list of group or team start up tasks can assist students in laying the groundwork for a more productive and satisfying group or team experience.

Learners

Before working on a group or team classroom activities, it is suggested that students discuss their vision of the group or team: that is, how they would like to proceed? What they would like their responsibilities to be? What is their understanding of the nature of the assignment? What are their expectations of their group or team colleagues? A discussion about the workings of the group or team in advance of the experience is more likely to result in an experience for members that enhances individual group or team skills as well as resulting in a more desirable group or team product and learning experience.

Equipment

No equipment is needed, however typical classroom equipment such as a chalkboard or dry board are useful. Members should have a list of the issues and tasks they are to discuss.

Facilitator

The facilitator should determine the start up tasks and issues that will result in the best experience for groups or teams in carrying out the assigned project. For some classroom applications, for example, an educational goal is learning to work as a group or team; in other instances the goal is connected more closely to a specific assignment and the group or team process is of secondary importance. A list of possible start up tasks is provided under “Instructions”, however, these can be modified to fit specific classroom needs.

Facilitators should hold students accountable for completing the start up tasks and for proceeding with their group or team work in a manner consistent with the decisions they made during the discussion of start up tasks. For example, ground rules that are generated during this discussion should be enforced during the group or team project.

Student accountability can be determined in a number of ways: students can summarize the decisions they have made in brief presentations to their classmates; exams or papers

can questions that ask students to assess various aspects of their group or team process; the facilitator can hold regular or unscheduled meetings with groups or teams to attain a sense of the group or team experience for participants.

Instructions

1. Students should be organized into groups or teams. Groups or teams can be designated in a variety of ways: by a random process; by students' common interests or concerns; the instructor can assign students to specific groups or teams based on various individual characteristics. The size of the group or team is dependent on the group/team task. Groups or teams can be just about any size starting with 2-3 members. There should be enough members to complete the assignment but not so many members that individuals "get lost." For most group or team projects, 5 members work well. An odd number of members also ensure that members will not create ties in decision making.
2. Students should be given the assignment they will work on as a group or team.
3. Prior to their start of the assignment, they should be given a list of start up tasks and instructed to discuss the start up tasks. Class time can be used for the start up discussions or students can be given a deadline for completion of the start up discussion and asked to arrange a meeting outside of class.
4. Typical start up tasks that students might discuss are:
 - a. Designate one person to begin to chair the meeting and another member to act as recorder. (When you move on to the next item, rotate chair duties so everyone has a chance to practice leading the discussion; you can also rotate the recorder duty.)
 - b. Briefly introduce yourselves to each other. Describe the type of group/team member you try to be. What group/team responsibilities are your strengths? your weaknesses? Also share contact information.
 - c. Discuss the type of team culture you would like to have. Do you enjoy assigning members various responsibilities and then working individually? Would it be helpful for you to remain in contact with each other through regularly scheduled meetings? Would a few minutes at the beginning and/or end of your classes for discussing progress and problems be beneficial? Do you want to get together to socialize outside of class? Questions such as these will help you decide the type of culture you would like to establish with your group or team colleagues.
 - d. Based on what you have concluded about your group or team culture, generate a list of ground rules that will help your group or team achieve this culture. Typical areas to include in ground rules are: 1)attendance; 2) promptness; 3)participation and assuming responsibilities; 4)communication courtesies; 5)meeting deadlines; 6)taking breaks during meetings; 7)assignment and rotation of duties; 8)preparation and maintenance of agendas, minutes, and other documents; 9)use of out of class time; 10)contingencies for firing members; 11)methods to be used in decision making.

- e. Determine the roles your class assignment will require and create a schedule to identify who will assume roles and when. Some common roles that groups or teams use are: a chair or leader; a recorder or secretary; a timekeeper; a facilitator, a spokesperson.
 - f. Select a name for your group or team.
 - g. Discuss your group or team assignment and make a list of points about which you have questions.
 - h. Prepare a timeline you will follow to complete your assignment.
 - i. Help your spokesperson prepare a briefing to the class about the key decisions you made during your start up task discussion.
5. After groups or teams have completed their start up tasks, the spokesperson from each group or team will prepare a brief (3-5 minute) presentation indicating the key decisions the group or team made as a result of the start up task assignment.
6. Brief meetings with groups or teams will not only motivate the team to stay on track, but will also let the facilitator know about problems that groups or teams are having that might necessitate intervention or work with the entire class. Requiring groups or teams to develop agendas and maintain minutes of meetings that will be read by the facilitator also assist groups or teams to stay on track.

References

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- Lumsden, G. and Lumsden, D. (2004). "The 'work' in teamwork: Planning the process," in *Communicating in groups and teams: Sharing leadership* (4th ed.), pp. 59-82. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Redmond, M. & Vrchota, D. (in press). *Everyday speaking: A practical guide to planning presentations* (working title). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon. (A public speaking textbook with a chapter devoted to small group interaction.)