

Communication Skills: The Ways Informal Roles Influence Groups and Teams

Description

Informal roles influence the way a group or team goes about its business as a result of members' personalities or of their willingness to assume responsibilities that facilitate the tasks or social interactions of the group or team. Informal roles differ from formal roles such as leader or secretary because for those roles members have been elected, appointed, or otherwise designated. Although members' informal roles are not "official," they often exert a much greater influence on their group or team colleagues and the group or team process than do the formal roles. Formal roles refer largely to positions or titles whereas informal roles describe actions that assist the group or team process in constructive ways, or in some cases, create major interference with the group or team ability to accomplish its goal. Mudrack and Farrell (1995) designated three categories by which informal roles can be organized: task roles, maintenance roles, and disruptive roles.

Learners

When learners work on group or team assignments, they usually become aware of the influences their colleagues' informal roles exert on the group or team. A member who is unreliable creates a negative reputation for him or her self; the member who shows support or encouragement for others' ideas is appreciated. Learners are often challenged to find ways to respond to their colleagues' disruptive roles that will encourage the disruptive person to become a contributing member of the group or team. They may also be unaware of their own informal roles or of the value of cultivating helpful informal roles in themselves and each other.

Equipment

Participants need two cards or slips of paper with one informal role written on each. A sampling of the informal roles identified by Mudrack and Farrell is included in the "Instructions" section. These can be used or informal roles can be generated based on classroom experience (clown, enthusiast, questioner, encourager, devil's advocate, etc).

Participants are allowed to look at the role on one of their cards but their group or team colleagues should not be allowed to see it.

The second role should be visible to the group or team colleagues, but the individual does not see it. To facilitate the role visibility, paper clips or masking tape can be used to attach the role to the individual's clothing, or postit notes can be used. Another possibility is to create a "tent" with the name of the role visible to others.

To add complexity to the exercise, place all task roles on one color of paper, all maintenance roles on another color, and disruptive roles on a third color. Instruct participants to select papers of different colors.

Facilitator

When group or team projects are part of the classroom experience, the power of learners' informal roles in their groups or teams should not be overlooked. It is often the influence of learners' informal roles that makes the difference between a productive and a disastrous group or team experience. This exercise strives to create an awareness of informal roles and their influence on groups or teams as well as encourage discussion of ways to respond to informal roles that discourage productive group or teamwork and cultivate those informal roles that result in productive groups or teams.

Instructions

The categories into which Mudrack & Farrell organized the informal roles are task, maintenance, and disruptive roles.

Task roles are those informal roles that move groups and teams toward their goals. For example, a member observes "We've been discussing this topic for an hour and I don't hear any new ideas. Are we ready to vote?" Examples of some of the specific task roles identified by Mudrack and Farrell are:

- The "information seeker" requests clarification and seeks other ideas and input from members;
- The "opinion seeker" encourages members to express their viewpoints;
- The "information giver" provides information as a result of experience or expertise;
- The "initiator-contributor" offers many ideas and suggests the group or team consider moving in new directions.

Maintenance roles focus on social interactions of the group or team. For example, a member notices another member is frowning and asks how he or she feels about the proposed course of action being discussed. Examples of maintenance roles identified by Mudrack & Farrell are:

- The "supporter-encourager" praises others' ideas and encourages quiet members to join the discussion;
- The "harmonizer-tension reliever" encourages conflicting members to reconcile and has a ready humorous observation or joke;
- The "feeling-expressor" is sensitive to group or team climate and suggests breaks when energy begins to fade.

Disruptive roles are those roles that focus on members' individual needs, interfering with group or team needs. The member who spends time discussing a personal issue or the member who jokes or "kids around" to the detriment of the group or team process are examples of disruptive roles. Mudrack and Farrell list these disruptive roles:

- The "stagehog" prevents others from expressing their opinions;

- The “clown” engages in joking that interrupts and disrupts group or team business;
- The “cynic” focuses on negatives and fault finding;
- The “blocker” concentrates on throwing up barriers to group or team ideas and decision making.

To experience this activity, learners should be organized into groups of from three to five individuals, and given a topic to discuss. As indicated under “Equipment”, learners receive two cards or slips of paper, each indicating a specific informal role.

One of the cards or slips of paper should be handed to each learner with instructions to think about how he or she would act according to the role on the paper. Others in the group should not know what roles their colleagues will take on.

The second card, slip of paper, or postit note should be attached to each learner or, if tents are used, should be placed in front of each learner to be visible to other members, but not visible to the learner. Everyone should be given a few minutes to familiarize themselves with these roles and consider how they would treat individuals who assumed these roles.

Instruct participants to discuss their topic while role playing the informal role on the card they are allowed to see and instruct them to treat each other according to the role visible to the group or team but not visible to individuals themselves. Be prepared for learners to become more engrossed in playing their roles or in treating their colleagues according to the second roles rather than discussing the topic they are given.

When the discussion has gone on for several minutes or when members are beginning to try to guess others’ roles, allow them to see all of the roles. Debriefing following the activity could include questions such as:

1. How did your colleagues treat you? Why did they treat you that way? Were their behaviors the result of something you did or said? Did you like the way they treated you? If not, what, if anything, did you do to try to discourage their actions toward you? Were you able to change the way you were treated?
2. How did you act out the role you were assigned? Did your role assist or interfere with the group or team process? How did your colleagues respond to this role?
3. Where do the informal roles that we bring to our groups and teams originate? With ourselves or with others?
4. Which of the specific roles represented in your group contributed in a constructive manner to the group or team process? Which interfered with the group or team process? How can the members of a group or team respond to others’ disruptive roles and encourage task and maintenance behaviors?

References and Resources

The Mudrack and Farrell article is the classic work identifying informal roles and their influences on the group or team process. The article can be found at:

Mudrack, P. & Farrell, G. (1995). An examination of functional role behavior and its consequences for individuals in group settings. *Small Group Research*, 26, 542-571.

A google search using Mudrack & Farrell will result in the application of the informal behaviors in other contexts.

Additionally, there are several excellent websites, that provide information and additional resources regarding cultivating productive team behavior. Some of these are:

“Building blocks for teams: Student tips.” This website, sponsored by Penn State University offers a helpful section on “What happens if a team member isn’t doing his or her part?” The page includes a definition of unproductive behavior, compares productive with unproductive behaviors, and suggests tips for responding to the unproductive actions of members. <http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/teams/student/responsibility.html> Accessed June 2, 2005.

“Managing how members work together” suggests ways for team members to work together that encourage contributing behaviors and discourage disruptive behaviors. Also includes a resource list of varied sources, i.e., books, organizations, and other websites. http://www.cob.sjsu.edu/turner_m/working_together.htm Accessed June 2, 2005.

“Surviving the group project: A note on working in teams” offers a twelve part compilation of the majority of important topics related to smooth running teams. Part seven addresses disruptive behavior. All parts are valuable. <http://web.cba.neu.edu/~ewertheim/teams/ovrvw2.htm> Accessed June 2, 2005.

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