Student Guide to Group Work

Communicating Effectively - Video Transcript

As soon as you are working in a setting with more than one person, you need to think about communication. In a group setting effective communication is important to ensure a shared understanding of tasks and responsibilities, make sure everyone is heard, and to head off conflict.

This requires more than just small talk. You need to be intentional about setting up a supportive environment, so group members feel able to be honest and open. Some key things to keep in mind to ensure good communication within your group include: being respectful at all times, listening before responding, not taking comments or criticism personally, and being open-minded and receptive to viewpoints different from your own.

First, we will cover group meetings. Many students working on group projects know it's important to meet but these meetings can end up being unorganized and unfocused without an intentional approach to communication. One way that you can manage this is by designating key roles like facilitator, note taker, and timekeeper - all connected to keeping communication productive and on track. The facilitator needs to communicate meeting agendas ahead of time, so group members can prepare for meetings and be clear on what needs to be achieved each time. During meetings the chair or facilitator needs to listen and summarize ideas or agreements to bring discussion forward. They also need to be mindful of whether certain voices are dominating and find ways to make room for other voices or opinions to be heard. The note taker needs to create a concise and accurate record of what was agreed to, and itemize action items, where follow-up is needed. All group members need to read the minutes and follow up on what was agreed to.

Group conflict - this is something that many students feel anxious about, so it's completely normal if you feel the same. Quite often disagreements that take place can actually be a good thing. As we mentioned in the Understanding the Team module, disagreement is a part of the group process. Don't be afraid of disagreement. It can sometimes lead to better ideas. It can also be a part of a process of growth, as group members build their resilience and strategies to negotiate conflict. Sometimes group members will have different points of view, or even run into conflict around accountability or deadlines. If that happens, stay calm and respectful, and address the action, and not the person. Enlist the help of your professor or TA, if the situation becomes difficult, and the group cannot work through it alone.

Finally, spend time talking about what modes of communication work best for your group, and when it is best to use each form. For example, it is better to use synchronous forms of communication, where your group can engage in real time, when you are in the earlier stages of group work, and getting to know each other, and deciding on group goals and processes. Synchronous communication is better for high stakes decisions or check-ins, so in-person meetings or video conferencing tools like zoom can work really well here. For smaller decisions, or for working collaboratively on tasks, asynchronous forms of communication can work, like WhatsApp or text, and are useful when different group members are in different time zones.