1.4: Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Groups

Learning Objectives

1. Identify ways in which group communication differs from interpersonal communication
2. Identify relationship and task advantages and disadvantages of working in groups versus individually

"It used to be argued that slavery was abolished simply because it had ceased to be profitable, but all the evidence points the other way: in fact, it was abolished despite the fact that it was still profitable. What we need to understand, then, is a collective change of heart. Like all such great changes, it had small beginnings." Ferguson, N. *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British Empire and the Lessons for Global Power*, quoted in Steffen, A. (2006). *Worldchanging: A User’s Guide for the 21st Century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams.

Niall Ferguson
All human beings exist, spend time, and behave both individually and in groups. When you’re a student, you spend a
great deal of your time in groups. In the working world, whether you’re already in it or not, you spend even more. O’Hair,

Of course, many times you have no choice whether you’ll work alone or in a group. You’re just told what to do. Still,
you’re best apt to be prepared if you know what to expect of each status.

Differences between Group and Interpersonal Communication

The mere fact that groups include multiple people leads to at least four consequences. Whether these consequences
prove to be advantageous or not depends on the skill level and knowledge of a group’s members.

First, since not everyone in a group can talk at the same time (at least, not if they intend to understand and be
understood by each other), members have to seek permission to speak. They need to decide how to take turns. In this
respect, a group is inherently more formal than a single individual or a dyad.

Second, members of a group have to share time together. The larger the group, the less average time per person is available and the fewer opportunities each member will likely have to contribute to discussions.

Third, communication in groups is generally less intimate than in interpersonal settings. Because there are so many personalities and levels of relationship to consider, people in groups are less inclined to share personal details or express controversial views.

Finally, group work is more time-consuming than individual or interpersonal effort. Why? For one thing, group members usually try to let everyone share information and views. Also, the more people are involved in a discussion, the more diverse opinions may need to be considered and allowed to compete.

As we’ve noted earlier, groups apply themselves toward reaching aims and accomplishing things. In addition to this task-oriented characteristic, however, they include and depend upon relationships among their members. Although these two elements are usually intertwined rather than discrete and separate, an overview of the pluses and minuses of each can help you make the most of your experience in a group.

### Relationship Advantages

The columnist David Brooks interpreted research as indicating that human beings are “wired to cooperate and collaborate, just as much as we are to compete.” Galanes, G., & Adams, K. (2013). *Effective Group Discussion: Theory and Practice*. New York: McGraw-Hill, p. 5. What’s in it for you in terms of relationships, then, if you work in a group instead of alone? Well, you may have a number of your most important human needs satisfied. Here are some specifics:

- You may enjoy fellowship and companionship
- You may receive moral and emotional support for your views and objectives
- You may have your impulsiveness curbed or your reticence challenged
- You may cultivate ties that yield future personal or career advantages

In the next chapter, we’ll further explore the ideas William Schutz, who theorized about levels of basic human needs and how they may vary from person to person and according to people’s circumstances. We’ll also review Abraham Maslow’s model of human needs.

### Relationship Disadvantages

Despite the advantages it offers, working in groups almost invariably presents challenges and disadvantages in the realm of relationships. These are some of the chief dangers you may encounter as part of a group:

- It will probably take a lot of time to create, maintain, and repair the human relationships involved in a group
- Your group may generate conflict which hurts people’s feelings and otherwise undermines their relationships
• You may misunderstand other group members’ intentions or messages
• Some group members may attempt to deceive, manipulate, or betray the trust of other members

Task Advantages


When you're trying to get something done, working in a group promises many positive possibilities, among them being the following:

• The group will most likely have access to much more information than any member possesses.
• The group can focus multiple attentions and diverse energy on a topic.
• The group may be more thorough in dealing with a topic than any individual might be. This thoroughness may arise simply because of the number of perspectives represented in the group, but it also owes to the fact that members often “propel each other’s thinking.” Wood, J.T. (1997). *Communication in Our Lives*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, p. 270.
• The group may harness and exploit conflict to generate new and better ideas than an individual could. When tension and disagreement are resolved constructively, the chances of achieving group goals increase.
• The group may attain deeper understanding of topics. One analysis of studies, for instance, indicated that students in group-based learning environments learned more, and remembered more of what they learned, than did counterparts exposed to more traditional methods. Johnson, D.W., Johnson, R.T., & Smith, K.A. (1998, July/August). Cooperative learning returns to college. *Change*, 30(4), 31.
• Synergy—a combined effect greater than the simple sum total of individual contributions—can arise. Sometimes synergy results through enhanced creativity as group members share and build upon each other’s strengths and perspectives. You can probably think of examples of an athletic squad or business group comprising members with modest individual strengths that performed superlatively together.
• The group may spur needed social change. Margaret Mead wrote, “Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” It may be reasonable to question whether the world always works the way Mead described, but many examples do exist of small groups that initiated changes that spread to larger and large parts of society. All other things being equal, a group of committed individuals will project more credibility and engender more support than will a solitary person.

Task Disadvantages

Groups aren’t always successful at reaching their goals. You’ve probably experienced many situations in which you became frustrated or angry because a group you were part of seemed to be taking two steps backward for every step forward—or perhaps you felt it was going only backward. Here are some features of group work which distinguish it in a
potentially negative way from what you might be able to accomplish by yourself or with a single partner:

- In order to be successful, groups need broad, ongoing, time-consuming exchanges of messages. They need to invest in coordinating and monitoring what they’re doing. With people as busy as they are in the twenty-first century, “out of sight” is indeed often “out of mind.” If they don’t keep in touch frequently, group members may forget what they’ve most recently discussed or decided as a group. They also run the risk of losing track of the structures and processes they’ve put in place to help them move toward their goals.
- Some group members may engage in “social loafing.” When one or two people are assigned a task, they know they’re being watched and are apt to shoulder the burden. In a larger group, however, any given member will feel less personally responsible for what takes place in it. If too many members follow the natural tendency to observe rather than act, a group may lose its efficiency and thereby find it much more difficult to reach its aims.
- Groupthink may sap the creative potential of the members. Too much diversity in outlooks and work styles may act as a barrier to a group, but too little diversity also represents a threat to success. If they too easily adopt and hold onto one viewpoint or course of action, people may fall prey to two dangers. First, they may overlook flaws in their thinking. Second, they may fail to anticipate dangers that they might have been detected with closer scrutiny and longer reflection.

**Key Takeaway**

To accomplish tasks and relate effectively in a group, it’s important to know the advantages and disadvantages inherent in groups.

**Exercise \(\PageIndex{1}\)**

1. Identify two groups of which you’re a member. Describe the following:
   1. How each group determined how to take turns in communicating—or, if you weren’t part of determining this process, how people take turns now;
   2. The most controversial view you can recall being expressed in each group; and
   3. A task which feel each group performed better than any of its individuals might have done alone.
2. Describe an experience in which you observed people cooperating or collaborating when they might instead have competed. What do you believe motivated them to cooperate?
3. Identify two examples of your personal or vocational growth which you feel you owe to participation in a group.
4. Identify a group you’ve been part of which contributed to positive social change. How did it establish its credibility and influence with other people and groups?