

WORKING IN TEAMS

Group work is an essential part of life, both at CQUniversity and in the wider world. In fact, we all participate in group work throughout our lives, interacting with family, friends, schoolmates and colleagues. While social groups are different from work teams and study groups, they influence our approach to collaborating with others in more formal situations.

Team work can be interesting and rewarding, but can also be challenging and frustrating at times. Collaborating in groups at CQUniversity helps prepare us for the world of work and life. In addition, it can be an invaluable learning tool, as others in the group can provide ideas and support. Other benefits include making large projects more manageable, sharing skill sets and working together to solve problems. In your studies you may work in face-to-face settings or online groups. While these two modes are different in the ways in which interactions and collaborations occur, the general principles outlined below apply across both modes.

For tips on team work, see:
<http://www.tips4teamwork.com/>

WORK OUT YOUR TEAM'S AIMS, PLANS AND RULES

At the beginning of your group activity, meet up with the other team members and decide on:

- » The overall aims and specific objectives (a mission statement outlining what you want to achieve—seek help from your lecturers if you need to clarify any aspects of the team activity).
- » A plan (this will be an initial outline, developed more fully during the early stages of the group's activity).
- » The ground rules and guidelines (for example, number and frequency of meetings, what roles are required in order to achieve your goals).

As the group becomes established, you can refer back to this document to ensure that everything is on track. You can update the document, for example to identify roles and responsibilities and fill in more details of the plan.

UNDERSTAND THE STAGES IN GROUP DEVELOPMENT

The main phases of group activity are often described in sequence:

1. **Forming:** this is the beginning phase, when the team first comes together. Members have not yet worked out their place within the group and may feel anxious about the task ahead. It is important to agree on an approach to tackle any disagreements.
2. **Storming:** this phase is the end of the beginning, where members share their ideas and roles emerge (team roles may either be specified by your teacher or lecturer, or more often, identified by the team).
3. **Norming:** by this phase, the group is now established and members are more aware of each other's roles and characters. Personalities may become more evident and team roles are confirmed.
4. **Performing:** this phase is where productive work takes place, where tasks have been assigned and are carried out, issues are resolved, and members of the group feel free to engage with each other.
5. **Adjourning (or mourning):** this is the last phase of the group process, on completion of the team work. It is time to recognise the group's achievements and to reflect on the process. Members may be sad, or glad, that it is over, depending on their individual experiences. After reflection and evaluation, it is time to move on.

APPRECIATE DIFFERENT PERSONALITY TYPES, INCLUDING YOUR OWN

For more on team roles, see:
<http://www.belbin.com/rte.asp?id=8>
 or <http://www.myersbriggs.org/>

In all groups, whether social or formal, most people will conform to certain roles and sociologists and psychologists have made extensive studies of these personality types. Some examples of team roles are: leader; organiser; encourager; worker; creator; analyst. While it is important to recognise a person's individual characteristics in terms of their role in the team, be very careful not to be too judgemental. It may also be appropriate to reconsider roles in the early phases, to enable some group members to take on new roles as the group develops.

Be considerate to others in your group; this will help ease tension and avoid conflict by creating a shared understanding of what is required. Be ready to compromise. Consider swapping roles or taking on positions which you have never tried before—you are likely to learn more when you push yourself beyond your comfort zone. You may also find that you need to take on more than one role if you have a particularly small group.

For more on conflict resolution, see:
http://www.mindtools.com/pages/article/newLDR_81.htm

Consider the need for a mechanism for conflict resolution—consider incorporating ideas of fair work and open communication into your initial guidelines. It is far better to consider how best to deal with this in advance than to have to devise something in response to a disagreement within the group.

WORK EFFECTIVELY IN ONLINE GROUPS

Find out more about online communication etiquette on the net (netiquette) at:
<http://www.albion.com/netiquette/>

Forming relationships in the virtual world is quite different from the real world. When speaking with others face-to-face we use many non-verbal communication cues to help us understand and to pass on our own messages. Consequently, online, text-based communication can be more challenging than speaking face-to-face. Remember what is written and posted cannot be retracted, so always read your posts and emails carefully before you send them. For very sensitive topics, consider drafting a response and waiting until the next day to re-read and revise, if necessary.

When communicating through online text: check your wording for hidden tones and potential misunderstandings; never post in anger; always look for spelling mistakes and 'txt spk'; and try to leave your mouse pointer away from any clicks that may submit your entry or email before you are ready.

Online communication through video-conferencing or phone-conferencing has its own challenges. When using this approach for team meetings, decide on some rules of participation, for example:

- » The team leader decides who is to speak next.
- » Try to avoid interrupting or talking over each other.
- » Speak clearly and slightly more slowly than you would for a face-to-face meeting.
- » Mute your microphone when you are not speaking.
- » Try not to multi-task, for example, texting, or talking to others in the room.