

## COMM 326: Small Group Discussion Methods



# COMM 326: Small Group Discussion Methods

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NEW PRAIRIE PRESS  
MANHATTAN, KANSAS



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# Introduction

Maybe you've spent considerable time thinking about communication. This could be through other academic courses or experiences in co-curricular settings such as a debate or speech team. You might also be showing up without thinking much about communication other than it is something that we all do just fine, thank you very much. In fact, your desire to complete a course in communication studies for broader reasons (i.e., graduation) could be the main (only?) driver for your participation in this exploration of small group communication. It could also be based on a desire to truly understand how people communicate in order to improve how they engage with others around them. It would probably be easy to put everyone on a spectrum to better understand *why* you're here and *how* you see such a course focusing on small group communication improving things for you and the ways you interact with others.

In a simple way, such a process of putting everyone on a spectrum demonstrates that we are a group. This is because we have come together for a specific purpose and, in this case, for a specific time. This semester is an opportunity to not only read about and learn more regarding small group communication, but it is also an opportunity to experience group communication in real-time. We will oscillate between principles and practice, finding where concepts hold up in the multiples settings we have experienced or observed and where they need further refining and exploration.

But why is it important to think about and learn about small group communication? Why is this important beyond rudimentary skills learning about public speaking and the art of persuasion, for example? As John Gastil (2010, p. 3) notes, many people have a distaste for groups, but they also recognize the importance of groups:

“Small groups can create more problems than they solve, and they can wreak havoc in the service of dubious or even evil purposes. But as our own experiences already attest, groups can prove indispensable and help us achieve great ends. After all, if groups truly had nothing to offer, how could they be so prevalent? When employers look to hire, the ability to work effectively in teams ranks among the most desired qualities. Over 90% of the Fortune 500 companies use groups daily, with managers spending 30–80% of their days in meetings.”

In short, we might be frustrated with the idea of group work, but it plays an essential role in our lives, personal and professional. This ubiquity highlights why it is so important for us to better understand groups and the central role that communication plays within them. So, this leads to the first, and most basic, question about small group communication. What makes a group *small*?

Throughout this book, the term *group* serves as a short-hand term for *small group*, but the smallness of groups is always implied. It is relatively easy to see that the minimum size of a group is three people. With only two people present, we have a *dyad*, a pair of people who can communicate back and forth and make decisions together. Adding just one more person to the mix makes possible majority-minority splits, introduces potential competition for attention, and otherwise changes the fundamental nature of the social unit.

Some scholars would argue there is a sharp upper boundary by noting that a small group can be no more than fifteen members in size. Such a restrictive definition would exclude from our analysis social entities that are *more like a small group than anything else, even with larger numbers*. A gathering of a community, to conduct business or governance, for instance, looks and behaves more like a small group than, say, a large organization or diffuse community. It is for reason that we want to be careful about how to think of “small groups”—in both theory and/or practice.

A better way of limiting the size of a small group is to require

that every group member have a sense of every other member's existence and role within that group. When people exist as members of a small group, they are *together* in this minimal sense, each aware of every other individual in the group. They may not (yet) know each other or more details about their lives, but they are all part of each other's present reality and experience. In the case of a virtual group, they may not all be aware of who is or is not present online—let alone paying attention—at a given time, but they do know what set of people make up the group. This relational dynamic that is something tangible also offers a way of making a distinction between small groups and larger organizational structures.

## The Plan Ahead

This book is best thought of as a map that introduces some of the essential element of small group communication. It begins with some foundational information necessary for understanding what makes groups *groups*. Briefly, it will provide conceptual and practice elements that help inform how we are to think about actually defining groups and teams. It moves from there to explore the idea of group formation, helping us better understand why people join groups and how they participate within that setting. The following chapters explore issues such as cooperation, power, group thinking, listening, and making decisions together. These constituent elements of small group communication help us think about the themes that them come in the next chapters—how we address issues that cause conflict and the role of leaders within these settings. In the last chapter, the impact of culture and diversity are explored, reminding us of the ever present reality that virtually any group is comprised of people with different experiences, worldviews, ideologies, perspectives, and approaches. Sometimes those differences are obvious; other times, it is only through deeper

exploration of issues together that one discovers the rich differences that color our world.

Regardless of one's level of interest in the topic of "small group discussion," there is no contesting that the ability to communicate constructively in such settings is an instrumental part of people's lives.

# I. Defining Teams and Groups

## Characteristics of Small Groups

Different groups have different characteristics, serve different purposes, and can lead to positive, neutral, or negative experiences. While our interpersonal relationships primarily focus on relationship building, small groups usually focus on some sort of task completion or goal accomplishment. A college learning community focused on math and science, a campaign team for a state senator, and a group of local organic farmers are examples of small groups that would all have a different size, structure, identity, and interaction pattern.

## Size of Small Groups

There is no set number of members for the ideal small group. A small group requires a minimum of three people (because two people would be a pair or dyad), but the upper range of group size is contingent on the purpose of the group. When groups grow beyond fifteen to twenty members, it becomes difficult to consider them a small group based on the previous definition. An analysis of the number of unique connections between members of small groups shows that they are deceptively complex. For example, within a six-person group, there are fifteen separate potential dyadic connections, and a twelve-person group would have sixty-six potential dyadic connections (Hargie, 2011). As you can see, when we double the number of group members, we more than double

the number of connections, which shows that network connection points in small groups grow exponentially as membership increases. So, while there is no set upper limit on the number of group members, it makes sense that the number of group members should be limited to those necessary to accomplish the goal or serve the purpose of the group. Small groups that add too many members increase the potential for group members to feel overwhelmed or disconnected.

## Structure of Small Groups

Internal and external influences affect a group's structure. In terms of internal influences, member characteristics play a role in initial group formation. For instance, a person who is well informed about the group's task and/or highly motivated as a group member may emerge as a leader and set into motion internal decision-making processes, such as recruiting new members or assigning group roles, that affect the structure of a group (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). Different members will also gravitate toward different roles within the group and will advocate for certain procedures and courses of action over others. External factors such as group size, task, and resources also affect group structure. Some groups will have more control over these external factors through decision making than others. For example, a commission that is put together by a legislative body to look into ethical violations in athletic organizations will likely have less control over its external factors than a self-created weekly book club.

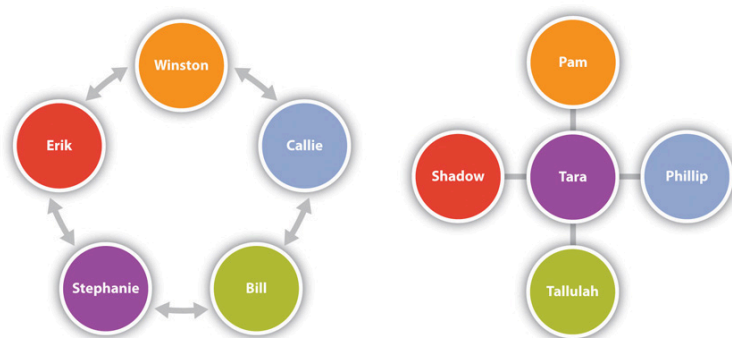


A self-formed study group is likely to be less structured than other groups.  
(Credit: Alexis Brown/[Students learning together](#)/Unsplash)

Group structure is also formed through formal and informal network connections. In terms of formal networks, groups may have clearly defined roles and responsibilities or a hierarchy that shows how members are connected. The group itself may also be a part of an organizational hierarchy that networks the group into a larger organizational structure. This type of formal network is especially important in groups that have to report to external stakeholders. These external stakeholders may influence the group's formal network, leaving the group little or no control over its structure. Conversely, groups have more control over their informal networks, which are connections among individuals within the group and among group members and people outside of the group that aren't official. For example, a group member's friend or relative may be able to secure a space to hold a fundraiser at a discounted rate, which helps the group achieve its task. Both types of networks are important because they may help facilitate information exchange

within a group and extend a group's reach in order to access other resources.

Size and structure also affect communication within a group (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). In terms of size, the more people in a group, the more issues with scheduling and coordination of communication. Remember that time is an important resource in most group interactions and a resource that is usually strained. Structure can increase or decrease the flow of communication. Reachability refers to the way in which one member is or isn't connected to other group members. For example, the "Circle" group structure in **Figure 1** shows that each group member is connected to two other members. This can make coordination easy when only one or two people need to be brought in for a decision. In this case, Erik and Callie are very reachable by Winston, who could easily coordinate with them. However, if Winston needed to coordinate with Bill or Stephanie, he would have to wait on Erik or Callie to reach that person, which could create delays. The circle can be a good structure for groups who are passing along a task and in which each member is expected to progressively build on the others' work. A group of scholars coauthoring a research paper may work in such a manner, with each person adding to the paper and then passing it on to the next person in the circle. In this case, they can ask the previous person questions and write with the next person's area of expertise in mind. The "Wheel" group structure in Figure 1 shows an alternative organization pattern. In this structure, Tara is very reachable by all members of the group. This can be a useful structure when Tara is the person with the most expertise in the task or the leader who needs to review and approve work at each step before it is passed along to other group members. But Phillip and Shadow, for example, wouldn't likely work together without Tara being involved.



**Figure 1:** Small Group Structures (Credit: University of Minnesota Press/[Small Group Structures](#)/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

Looking at the group structures, we can make some assumptions about the communication that takes place in them. The wheel is an example of a centralized structure, while the circle is decentralized. Research has shown that centralized groups are better than decentralized groups in terms of speed and efficiency (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). But decentralized groups are more effective at solving complex problems. In centralized groups like the wheel, the person with the most connections, person C, is also more likely to be the leader of the group or at least have more status among group members, largely because that person has a broad perspective of what's going on in the group. The most central person can also act as a gatekeeper. Since this person has access to the most information, which is usually a sign of leadership or status, he or she could consciously decide to limit the flow of information. But in complex tasks, that person could become overwhelmed by the burden of processing and sharing information with all the other group members. The circle structure is more likely to emerge in groups where collaboration is the goal and a specific task and course of action isn't required under time constraints. While the person who initiated the group or has the most expertise in regards to the task may emerge as a leader in a decentralized group, the

equal access to information lessens the hierarchy and potential for gatekeeping that is present in the more centralized groups.

## Interdependance

Small groups exhibit interdependence, meaning they share a common purpose and a common fate. If the actions of one or two group members lead to a group deviating from or not achieving their purpose, then all members of the group are affected. Conversely, if the actions of only a few of the group members lead to success, then all members of the group benefit. This is a major contributor to many college students' dislike of group assignments, because they feel a loss of control and independence that they have when they complete an assignment alone. This concern is valid in that their grades might suffer because of the negative actions of someone else or their hard work may go to benefit the group member who just skated by. Group meeting attendance is a clear example of the interdependent nature of group interaction. Many of us have arrived at a group meeting only to find half of the members present. In some cases, the group members who show up have to leave and reschedule because they can't accomplish their task without the other members present. Group members who attend meetings but withdraw or don't participate can also derail group progress. Although it can be frustrating to have your job, grade, or reputation partially dependent on the actions of others, the interdependent nature of groups can also lead to higher-quality performance and output, especially when group members are accountable for their actions.

## Shared Identity

The shared identity of a group manifests in several ways. Groups may have official charters or mission and vision statements that lay out the identity of a group. For example, the Girl Scout mission states that “Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place” (Girl Scouts, 2012). The mission for this large organization influences the identities of the thousands of small groups called troops. Group identity is often formed around a shared goal and/or previous accomplishments, which adds dynamism to the group as it looks toward the future and back on the past to inform its present. Shared identity can also be exhibited through group names, slogans, songs, handshakes, clothing, or other symbols. At a family reunion, for example, matching t-shirts specially made for the occasion, dishes made from recipes passed down from generation to generation, and shared stories of family members that have passed away help establish a shared identity and social reality.

A key element of the formation of a shared identity within a group is the establishment of the in-group as opposed to the out-group. The degree to which members share in the in-group identity varies from person to person and group to group. Even within a family, some members may not attend a reunion or get as excited about the matching t-shirts as others. Shared identity also emerges as groups become cohesive, meaning they identify with and like the group’s task and other group members. The presence of cohesion and a shared identity leads to a building of trust, which can also positively influence productivity and members’ satisfaction.

## What is a group?

Our tendency to form groups is a pervasive aspect of

organizational life. In addition to formal groups, committees, and teams, there are informal groups, cliques, and factions.

**Formal groups** are used to organize and distribute work, pool information, devise plans, coordinate activities, increase commitment, negotiate, resolve conflicts and conduct inquests. Group work allows the pooling of people's individual skills and knowledge, and helps compensate for individual deficiencies. Estimates suggest most managers spend 50 percent of their working day in one sort of group or another, and for top management of large organizations this can rise to 80 percent. Thus, formal groups are clearly an integral part of the functioning of an organization.

No less important are informal groups. These are usually structured more around the social needs of people than around the performance of tasks. **Informal groups** usually serve to satisfy needs of affiliation, and act as a forum for exploring self-concept as a means of gaining support, and so on. However, these informal groups may also have an important effect on formal work tasks, for example by exerting subtle pressures on group members to conform to a particular work rate, or as 'places' where news, gossip, etc., is exchanged.

What is a team?

### **Activity 1**

*Write your own definition of a 'team' (in 20 words or less).*

*Provide an example of a team working toward an achievable goals*

You probably described a team as a group of some kind. However, a team is more than just a group. When you think of all the groups that you belong to, you will probably find that very few of them are really teams. Some of them will be family or friendship groups that are formed to meet a wide range of needs such as affection, security, support, esteem, belonging, or identity. Some may be committees whose members represent different interest groups and who meet to discuss their differing perspectives on issues of interest.

In this reading the term 'work group' (or 'group') is often used interchangeably with the word 'team,' although a **team** may be

thought of as a particularly cohesive and purposeful type of work group. We can distinguish work groups or teams from more casual groupings of people by using the following set of criteria (Adair, 1983). A collection of people can be defined as a work group or team if it shows most, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- **A definable membership:** a collection of three or more people identifiable by name or type;
- **A group consciousness or identity:** the members think of themselves as a group;
- **A sense of shared purpose:** the members share some common task or goals or interests;
- **Interdependence:** the members need the help of one another to accomplish the purpose for which they joined the group;
- **Interaction:** the members communicate with one another, influence one another, react to one another;
- **Sustainability:** the team members periodically review the team's effectiveness;
- **An ability to act together.**

Usually, the tasks and goals set by teams cannot be achieved by individuals working alone because of constraints on time and resources, and because few individuals possess all the relevant competences and expertise. Sports teams or orchestras clearly fit these criteria.

### **Activity 2**

List some examples of **teams** of which you are a member – both inside and outside work – in your learning file.

Now list some **groups**. What strikes you as the main differences?

Your team examples probably highlight specific jobs or projects in your workplace, or personal interests and hobbies outside work. Teamwork is usually connected with project work and this is a feature of much work. Teamwork is particularly useful when you

have to address risky, uncertain, or unfamiliar problems where there is a lot of choice and discretion surrounding the decision to be made. In the area of voluntary and unpaid work, where pay is not an incentive, teamwork can help to motivate support and commitment because it can offer the opportunities to interact socially and learn from others. Furthermore, *people are more willing to support and defend work they helped create* (Stanton, 1992).

By contrast, many groups are much less explicitly focused on an external task. In some instances, the growth and development of the group itself is its primary purpose; process is more important than outcome. Many groups are reasonably fluid and less formally structured than teams. In the case of work groups, an agreed and defined outcome is often regarded as a sufficient basis for effective cooperation and the development of adequate relationships.

Importantly, groups and teams are not distinct entities. Both can be pertinent in personal development as well as organizational development and managing change. In such circumstances, when is it appropriate to embark on teambuilding rather than relying on ordinary group or solo working?

**In general, the greater the task uncertainty the more important teamwork is,** especially if it is necessary to represent the differing perspectives of concerned parties. In such situations, the facts themselves do not always point to an obvious policy or strategy for innovation, support, and development: decisions are partially based on the opinions and the personal visions of those involved.

There are risks associated with working in teams as well. Under some conditions, teams may produce more conventional, rather than more innovative, responses to problems. The reason for this is that team decisions may regress towards the average, with group pressures to conform cancelling out more innovative decision options (Makin, Cooper, & Cox, 1989). It depends on how innovative the team is, in terms of its membership, its norms, and its values.

Teamwork may also be inappropriate when you want a fast decision. Team decision making is usually slower than individual decision making because of the need for communication and

consensus about the decision taken. Despite the business successes of Japanese companies, it is now recognized that promoting a collective organizational identity and responsibility for decisions can sometimes slow down operations significantly, in ways that are not always compensated for by better decision making.

## Is a team or group really needed?

There may be times when group working – or simply working alone – is more appropriate and more effective. For example, decision-making in groups and teams is usually slower than individual decision-making because of the need for communication and consensus. In addition, groups and teams may produce conventional rather than innovative responses to problems, because decisions may regress towards the average, with the more innovative decision options being rejected (Makin *et al.*, 1989).

In general, the greater the ‘task uncertainty’, that is to say the less obvious and more complex the task to be addressed, the more important it will be to work in a group or team rather than individually. This is because there will be a greater need for different skills and perspectives, especially if it is necessary to represent the different perspectives of the different stakeholders involved.

Table 2 lists some occasions when it will be appropriate to work in teams, in groups or alone.

### **Table 2 When to work alone, in groups or in teams**

<b>When to work alone or in groups</b>	<b>When to build teams</b>
For simple tasks or problems	For highly-complex tasks or problems
When cooperation is sufficient	When decisions by consensus are essential
When minimum discretion is required	When there is a high level of choice and uncertainty
When fast decisions are needed	When high commitment is needed
When few competences are required	When a broad range of competences and different skills are required
When members' interests are different or in conflict	When members' objectives can be brought together towards a common purpose
When an organization credits individuals for operational outputs	When an organization rewards team results for strategy and vision building
When innovative responses are sought	When balanced views are sought

## Types of teams

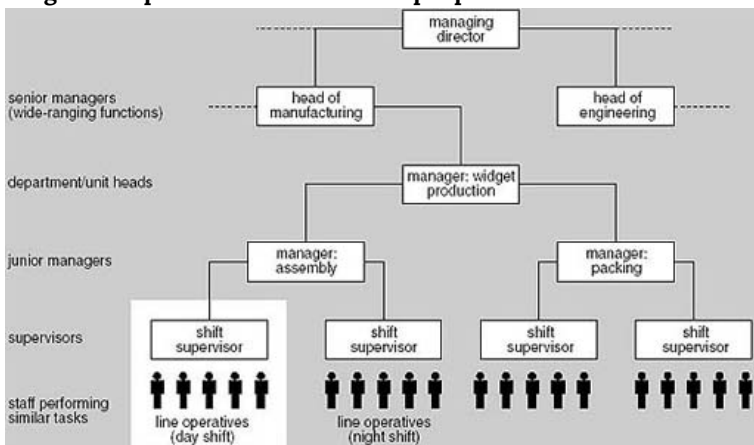
Different organizations or organizational settings lead to different types of team. The type of team affects how that team is managed, what the communication needs of the team are and, where appropriate, what aspects of the project the project manager needs to emphasize. A work group or team may be permanent, forming part of the organization's structure, such as a top management team, or temporary, such as a task force assembled to see through a particular project. Members may work as a group continuously or meet only intermittently. The more direct contact and communication team members have with each other, the more likely they are to function well as a team. Thus, getting a group to function well is a valuable management aim.

The following section defines common types of team. Many teams

may not fall clearly into one type, but may combine elements of different types. Many organizations have traditionally been managed through a hierarchical structure. This general structure is illustrated in **Figure 2**, and consists of:

- **staff performing similar tasks** – grouped together reporting to a single supervisor;
- **junior managers** – responsible for a number of supervisors and their groups;
- **groups of junior managers** – reporting to departmental heads;
- **departmental heads** – reporting to senior managers, who are responsible for wide-ranging functions such as manufacturing, finance, human resources and marketing;
- **senior managers** – reporting to the managing director, who may then report to the Board.

The number of levels clearly depends upon the size and to some extent on the type of the organization. Typically, the ‘span of control’ (the number of people each manager or supervisor is directly responsible for) averages about five people, but this can vary widely. **As a general rule it is bad practice for any single manager to supervise more than 7-10 people.**



**Figure 2:** The traditional hierarchical structure. Note: The

*highlighted area shows one supervisor's span of control: the people who work for that supervisor*

While the hierarchy is designed to provide a stable 'backbone' to the organization, *projects* are primarily concerned with change, and so tend to be organized quite differently. Their structure needs to be more fluid than that of conventional management structures. There are four commonly used types of project team: the functional team, the project (single) team, the matrix team and the contract team.

### **Activity 3**

*Why is it problematic for a manager to supervise too many people? How does this relate to groups, is there an ideal group size or configuration?*

## **The Functional Team**

The hierarchical structure described above divides groups of people along largely functional lines: people working together carry out the same or similar functions. A **functional team** is a team in which work is carried out within such a functionally organized group. This can be project work. In organizations in which the functional divisions are relatively rigid, project work can be handed from one functional team to another in order to complete the work. For example, work on a new product can pass from marketing, which has the idea, to research and development, which sees whether it is technically feasible, thence to design and finally manufacturing. This is sometimes known as 'baton passing' – or, less flatteringly, as 'throwing it over the wall'!

## The project (single) team

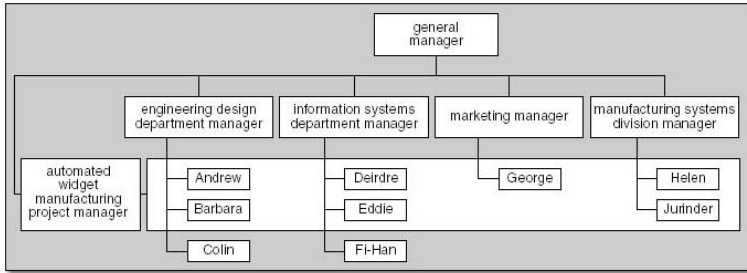
The project, or single, team consists of a group of people who come together as a distinct organizational unit in order to work on a project or projects. The team is often led by a project manager, though self-managing and self-organizing arrangements are also found. Quite often, a team that has been successful on one project will stay together to work on subsequent projects. This is particularly common where an organization engages repeatedly in projects of a broadly similar nature – for example developing software, or in construction. Perhaps the most important issue in this instance is to develop the collective capability of the team, since this is the currency for continued success. People issues are often crucial in achieving this.

The closeness of the dedicated project team normally reduces communication problems within the team. However, care should be taken to ensure that communications with other stakeholders (senior management, line managers and other members of staff in the departments affected, and so on) are not neglected, as it is easy for 'us and them' distinctions to develop.

## The matrix team

In a matrix team, staff report to different managers for different aspects of their work. Matrix structures are often, but not exclusively, found in projects. Matrix structures are more common in large and multi-national organizations. In this structure, staff are responsible to the project manager for their work on the project while their functional line manager may be responsible for other aspects of their work such as appraisal, training, and career development, and 'routine' tasks. This matrix project structure is

represented in Figure 3. Notice how the traditional hierarchy is cross-cut by the ‘automated widget manufacturing configuration.’



**Figure 3:** A matrix project structure

In this form of organization, staff from various functional areas (such as design, software development, manufacturing or marketing) are loaned or seconded to work on a particular project. Such staff may work full or part time on the project. The project manager thus has a recognizable team and is responsible for controlling and monitoring its work on the project.

However, many of the project staff will still have other duties to perform in their normal functional departments. The functional line managers they report to will retain responsibility for this work and for the professional standards of their work on the project, as well as for their training and career development. It is important to overcome the problems staff might have with the dual reporting lines (the ‘two-boss’ problem). This requires building good interpersonal relationships with the team members and regular, effective communication.

## The contract team

The contract team is brought in from outside in order to do the project work. Here, the responsibility to deliver the project rests very firmly with the project manager. The client will find such a team harder to control directly. On the other hand, it is the client

who will judge the success of the project, so the project manager has to keep an eye constantly on the physical outcomes of the project. A variant of this is the so-called 'outsourced supply team', which simply means that the team is physically situated remotely from the project manager, who then encounters the additional problem of 'managing at a distance'.

## Mixed Structures

Teams often have mixed structures:

- Some members may be employed to work full time on the project and be fully responsible to the project manager. Project managers themselves are usually employed full time.
- Others may work part time, and be responsible to the project manager only during their time on the project. For example, internal staff may well work on several projects at the same time. Alternatively, an external consultant working on a given project may also be involved in a wider portfolio of activities.
- Some may be part of a matrix arrangement, whereby their work on the project is overseen by the project manager and they report to their line manager for other matters. Project administrators often function in this way, serving the project for its duration, but having a career path within a wider administrative service.
- Still others may be part of a functional hierarchy, undertaking work on the project under their line manager's supervision by negotiation with their project manager. For instance, someone who works in an organization's legal department may provide the project team with access to legal advice when needed.

In relatively small projects the last two arrangements are a very

common way of accessing specialist services that will only be needed from time to time.

#### **Activity 4**

*What are some of the relative benefits and drawbacks to some of these team configurations?*

*Which one is best for a large and complex problem? Which is normal for a straightforward task?*

## **Modern teams**

In addition to the traditional types of teams or groups outlined above, recent years have seen the growth of interest in three other important types of team: 'self-managed teams', 'self-organizing teams', and 'dispersed virtual teams.'

A typical self-managed team may be permanent or temporary. It operates in an informal and non-hierarchical manner, and has considerable responsibility for the way it carries out its tasks. It is often found in organizations that are developing total quality management and quality assurance approaches. The *Industrial Society Survey* observed that: "Better customer service, more motivated staff, and better quality of output are the three top motives for moving to [self-managed teams], managers report."

In contrast, organizations that deliberately encourage the formation of self-organizing teams are comparatively rare. Teams of this type can be found in highly flexible, innovative organizations that thrive on creativity and informality. These are modern organizations that recognize the importance of learning and adaptability in ensuring their success and continued survival. However, self-organizing teams exist, unrecognized, in many organizations. For instance, in traditional, bureaucratic organizations, people who need to circumvent the red tape may get together in order to make something happen and, in so doing, spontaneously create a self-organizing team. The team will work

together, operating outside the formal structures, until its task is done and then it will disband.

**Table 2** shows some typical features of self-managed and self-organizing teams.

**Table 2: Comparing Self-managed and Self-Organizing Teams**

Self-managed team	Self-organizing team
Usually part of the formal reporting structure	Usually outside the formal reporting structure
Members usually selected by management	Members usually self-selected volunteers
Informal style of working	Informal style of working
Indirectly controlled by senior management	Senior management influences only the team's boundaries
Usually a permanent leader, but may change	Leadership variable – perhaps one, perhaps changing, perhaps shared
Empowered by senior management	Empowered by the team members and a supportive culture and environment

Many organizations set up self-managed or empowered teams as an important way of improving performance and they are often used as a way of introducing a continuous improvement approach. These teams tend to meet regularly to discuss and put forward ideas for improved methods of working or customer service in their areas. Some manufacturers have used multi-skilled self-managed teams to improve manufacturing processes, to enhance worker participation and improve morale. Self-managed teams give employees an opportunity to take a more active role in their working lives and to develop new skills and abilities. This may result in reduced staff turnover and less absenteeism.

Self-organizing teams are usually formed spontaneously in response to an issue, idea or challenge. This may be the challenge of creating a radically new product, or solving a tough production problem. In Japan, the encouragement of self-organizing teams has been used as a way of stimulating discussion and debate about

strategic issues so that radical and innovative new strategies emerge. By using a self-organizing team approach companies were able to tap into the collective wisdom and energy of interested and motivated employees.

Increasingly, virtual team are also common. **A virtual team** is one whose primary means of communicating is electronic, with only occasional phone and face-to-face communication, if at all. However, there is no single point at which a team ‘becomes’ a virtual team (Zigurs, 2003). Table 3 contains a summary of benefits virtual groups provide to organizations and individuals, as well as the potential challenges and disadvantages virtual groups present.

**Table 3.** *Teams have organizational and individual benefits, as well as possible challenges and disadvantages*

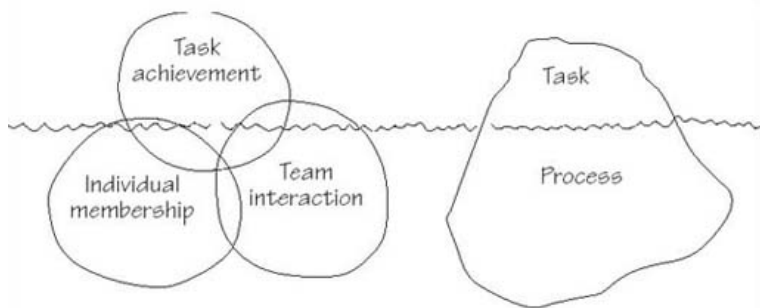
The Organization Benefits	The Individual Benefits	Possible Challenges and Disadvantages
People can be hired with the skills and competences needed regardless of location	People can work from anywhere at any time	Communicating effectively across distances
In some cases, working across different time zones can extend the working day	Physical location is not a recruitment issue; relocation is unnecessary	Management lacks the planning necessary for a virtual group
It can enable products to be developed more quickly	Travelling expenses and commuting time are cut	Technology is complicated and/or unfamiliar to some or all members
Expenses associated with travel and relocation can be cut; Carbon emissions can be reduced.	People can work from anywhere at any time	Difficult to coordinate times and hard to squeeze all the information into a more narrow time slot

## Why do (only some) teams succeed?

Clearly, there are no hard-and-fast rules which lead to team

effectiveness. The determinants of a successful team are complex and not equivalent to following a set of prescriptions. However, the results of poor teamwork can be expensive, so it is useful to draw on research, experience and case studies to explore some general guidelines. What do I mean by ‘team effectiveness’? – the achievement of goals alone? Where do the achievements of individual members fit in? and How does team member satisfaction contribute to team effectiveness?

Borrowing from Adair’s 1983 leadership model, the left-hand side of Figure 4 shows the main constituents of team effectiveness: the satisfaction of individual membership needs, successful team interaction and the achievement of team tasks. These elements are not discrete, so Figure 4 shows them as overlapping. For example, team member satisfaction will be derived not only from the achievement of tasks but also from the quality of team relationships and the more social aspects of team working: people who work almost entirely on their own, such as teleworkers and self-employed business owner-managers, often miss the opportunity to bounce ideas off colleagues in team situations. The experience of solitude in their work can, over time, create a sense of isolation, and impair their performance. The effectiveness of a team should also relate to the next step, to what happens after the achievement of team goals.



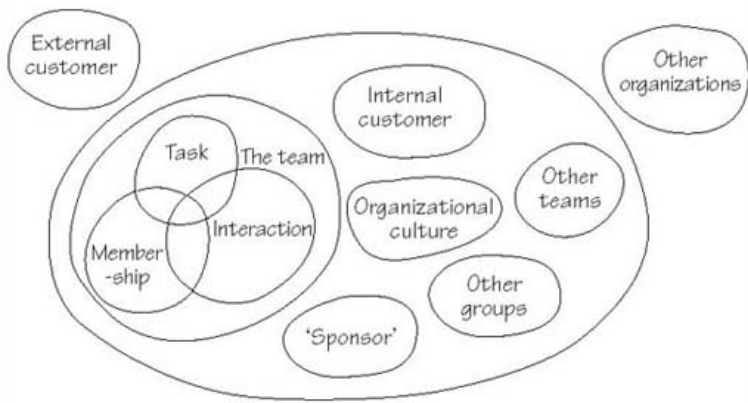
**Figure 4:** *The internal elements of team effectiveness*

The three elements could be reconfigured as an iceberg, most of which is below the water’s surface (the right-hand side of Figure 4). Superficial observation of teams in organizations might suggest

that most, if not all, energy is devoted to the explicit task (what is to be achieved, by when, with what budget and what resources). Naturally, this is important. But too often the concealed part of the iceberg (how the team will work together) is neglected. As with real icebergs, shipwrecks can ensue.

For instance, if working in a particular team leaves its members antagonistic towards each other and disenchanted with the organization to the point of looking for new jobs, then it can hardly be regarded as fully effective, even if it achieves its goals. The measure of team effectiveness could be how well the team has prepared its members for the transition to new projects, and whether the members would relish the thought of working with each other again.

In addition to what happens inside a team there are external influences that impact upon team operations. The factors shown in Figure 4 interact with each other in ways that affect the team and its development. We don't fully understand the complexity of these interactions and combinations. The best that we can do is discuss each factor in turn and consider some of the interactions between them and how they relate to team effectiveness. For instance, discussions about whether the wider culture of an organization supports and rewards teamworking, whether a team's internal and/or external customers clearly specify their requirements and whether the expectations of a team match those of its sponsor will all either help or hinder a team's ongoing vitality.



**Figure 5:** Systems map showing components influencing team effectiveness

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Small Groups

As with anything, small groups have their advantages and disadvantages. Advantages of small groups include shared decision making, shared resources, synergy, and exposure to diversity. It is within small groups that most of the decisions that guide our country, introduce local laws, and influence our family interactions are made. In a democratic society, participation in decision making

is a key part of citizenship. Groups also help in making decisions involving judgment calls that have ethical implications or the potential to negatively affect people. Individuals making such high-stakes decisions in a vacuum could have negative consequences given the lack of feedback, input, questioning, and proposals for alternatives that would come from group interaction. Group members also help expand our social networks, which provide access to more resources. A local community-theater group may be able to put on a production with a limited budget by drawing on these connections to get set-building supplies, props, costumes, actors, and publicity in ways that an individual could not. The increased knowledge, diverse perspectives, and access to resources that groups possess relates to another advantage of small groups—synergy.

Synergy refers to the potential for gains in performance or heightened quality of interactions when complementary members or member characteristics are added to existing ones (Larson Jr., 2010). Because of synergy, the final group product can be better than what any individual could have produced alone. When I worked in housing and residence life, I helped coordinate a “World Cup Soccer Tournament” for the international students that lived in my residence hall. As a group, we created teams representing different countries around the world, made brackets for people to track progress and predict winners, got sponsors, gathered prizes, and ended up with a very successful event that would not have been possible without the synergy created by our collective group membership. The members of this group were also exposed to international diversity that enriched our experiences, which is also an advantage of group communication.



**Working in groups and teams can have several advantages, including in exposing us to new people and perspectives. (Credit: Jopwell/[Group of People Sitting Inside a Room](#)/Pexels)**

Participating in groups can also increase our exposure to diversity and broaden our perspectives. Although groups vary in the diversity of their members, we can strategically choose groups that expand our diversity, or we can unintentionally end up in a diverse group. When we participate in small groups, we expand our social networks, which increase the possibility to interact with people who have different cultural identities than ourselves. Since group members work together toward a common goal, shared identification with the task or group can give people with diverse backgrounds a sense of commonality that they might not have otherwise. Even when group members share cultural identities, the diversity of experience and opinion within a group can lead to broadened perspectives as alternative ideas are presented and opinions are challenged and defended. One of my favorite parts of facilitating class discussion is when students with different

identities and/or perspectives teach one another things in ways that I could not on my own. This example brings together the potential of synergy and diversity. People who are more introverted or just avoid group communication and voluntarily distance themselves from groups—or are rejected from groups—risk losing opportunities to learn more about others and themselves.

There are also disadvantages to small group interaction. In some cases, one person can be just as or more effective than a group of people. Think about a situation in which a highly specialized skill or knowledge is needed to get something done. In this situation, one very knowledgeable person is probably a better fit for the task than a group of less knowledgeable people. Group interaction also has a tendency to slow down the decision-making process. Individuals connected through a hierarchy or chain of command often work better in situations where decisions must be made under time constraints. When group interaction does occur under time constraints, having one “point person” or leader who coordinates action and gives final approval or disapproval on ideas or suggestions for actions is best.

Group communication also presents interpersonal challenges. A common problem is coordinating and planning group meetings due to busy and conflicting schedules. Some people also have difficulty with the other-centeredness and self-sacrifice that some groups require. The interdependence of group members that we discussed earlier can also create some disadvantages. Group members may take advantage of the anonymity of a group and engage in social loafing, meaning they contribute less to the group than other members or than they would if working alone (Karau & Williams, 1993). Social loafers expect that no one will notice their behaviors or that others will pick up their slack. It is this potential for social loafing that makes many students and professionals dread group work, especially those who have a tendency to cover for other group members to prevent the social loafer from diminishing the group’s productivity or output.

## Conclusion

This reading has addressed four questions: what characterizes a group, what characterizes a team, how project teams are organized, and what can make teams ineffective. Groups can be formal or informal depending on the circumstances. Work groups or teams are generally more focused on particular tasks and outcomes, and use processes that aim to achieve a unity of purpose, communication and action. I looked at six major types of team: functional, project, matrix, contract, self-managing, self-organizing, and virtual teams. Each form has strengths and weaknesses that suit particular types of project within particular organizational cultures, and teams often involve a mixture of different forms. Team effectiveness is shaped by internal influences – task achievement, individual membership and team interaction – as well as external influences, such as customers, sponsors, other teams, and organizational culture.

### IMPROVING YOUR GROUP EXPERIENCES

If you experience feelings of fear and dread when an instructor says you will need to work in a group, you may experience what is called groupphate (Meyers & Goodboy, 2005). Like many of you, I also had some negative group experiences in college that made me think similarly to a student who posted the following on a teaching blog:

“Group work is code for ‘work as a group for a grade less than what you can get if you work alone’” (Weimer, 2008).

But then I took a course called “Small Group and Team Communication” with an amazing teacher who later became one of my most influential mentors. She emphasized the fact that we all needed to increase our knowledge about group communication and group dynamics in order to better our group communication experiences—and she was right. So the first piece of advice to help you start improving your group experiences is to closely study the group communication chapters in this textbook and to apply what you learn to your group interactions. Neither students nor faculty are born knowing how to function as a group, yet students and faculty often think we’re supposed to learn as we go, which increases the likelihood of a negative experience.

A second piece of advice is to meet often with your group (Myers & Goodboy, 2005). Of course, to do this you have to overcome some scheduling and coordination difficulties, but putting other things aside to work as a group helps set up a norm that group work is important and worthwhile. Regular meetings also allow members to interact with each other, which can increase social bonds, build a sense of interdependence that can help diminish social loafing, and establish other important rules and norms that will guide future group interaction. Instead of committing to frequent meetings, many student groups use their first meeting to equally divide up the group’s tasks so they can then go off and work alone (not as a group). While some group work can definitely be done independently, dividing up the work and assigning someone to put it all together doesn’t allow

group members to take advantage of one of the most powerful advantages of group work—synergy.

Last, establish group expectations and follow through with them. I recommend that my students come up with a group name and create a contract of group guidelines during their first meeting (both of which I learned from my group communication teacher whom I referenced earlier). The group name helps begin to establish a shared identity, which then contributes to interdependence and improves performance. The contract of group guidelines helps make explicit the group norms that might have otherwise been left implicit. Each group member contributes to the contract and then they all sign it. Groups often make guidelines about how meetings will be run, what to do about lateness and attendance, the type of climate they'd like for discussion, and other relevant expectations. If group members end up falling short of these expectations, the other group members can remind the straying member of the contract and the fact that he or she signed it. If the group encounters further issues, they can use the contract as a basis for evaluating the other group member or for communicating with the instructor.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

1. Do you agree with the student's quote about group work that was included at the beginning? Why or why not?
2. The second recommendation is to meet more with your group. Acknowledging that schedules are difficult to coordinate and that that is not really going to change, what are some strategies that you could use to overcome that challenge in order to get time

together as a group?

3. What are some guidelines that you think you'd like to include in your contract with a future group?

### Review & Reflection Questions

- What are the key characteristics of small groups?
- List some groups to which you have belonged that focused primarily on tasks and then list some that focused primarily on relationships. Compare and contrast your experiences in these groups.
- Synergy is one of the main advantages of small group communication. Explain a time when a group you were in benefited from or failed to achieve synergy. What contributed to your success/failure?
- Do you experience groupthink? If so, why might that be the case? What strategies could you use to have better group experiences in the future?

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## Authors and Attribution

The content included in this chapter is adapted from:

- Lindabary, J. R. (Ed.) (2020). *Small Group Communication: Forming & Sustaining Teams*. Emporia, KS: Emporia State University.
- Piercy, C. W. (2020). *Problem Solving in Teams and Groups*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Libraries.
- Two Open University chapters: [Working in Groups and Teams](#) and [Groups and Teamwork](#)

## 2. Group Formation

This chapter assumes that a thorough understanding of people requires a thorough understanding of groups. Each of us is an autonomous individual seeking our own objectives, yet we are also members of groups—groups that constrain us, guide us, and sustain us. Just as each of us influences the group and the people in the group, so, too, do groups change each one of us. Joining groups satisfies our need to belong, gain information and understanding through social comparison, define our sense of self and social identity, and achieve goals that might elude us if we worked alone. Groups are also practically significant, for much of the world's work is done by groups rather than by individuals. Success sometimes eludes our groups, but when group members learn to work together as a cohesive team their success becomes more certain.

Psychologists study groups because nearly all human activities—working, learning, worshipping, relaxing, playing, and even sleeping—occur in groups. The lone individual who is cut off from all groups is a rarity. Most of us live out our lives in groups, and these groups have a profound impact on our thoughts, feelings, and actions. Many psychologists focus their attention on single individuals, but social psychologists expand their analysis to include groups, organizations, communities, and even cultures.

This chapter examines the psychology of groups and group membership. It begins with a basic question: What is the psychological significance of groups? This chapter then reviews some of the key findings from studies of groups. Researchers have asked many questions about people and groups: Do people work as hard as they can when they are in groups? Are groups more cautious than individuals? Do groups make wiser decisions than single individuals? In many cases, the answers are not what common sense and folk wisdom might suggest.

# The Psychological Significance of Groups

Many people loudly proclaim their autonomy and independence. Like Ralph Waldo Emerson (1903/2004), they avow, “I must be myself. I will not hide my tastes or aversions . . . . I will seek my own” (p. 127). Even though people are capable of living separately and apart from others, they join with others because groups meet their psychological and social needs.

## The Need to Belong



*The need to belong is a strong psychological motivation.*  
(Credit: [CC0 Public Domain](#))

Across individuals, societies, and even eras, humans consistently seek inclusion over exclusion, membership over isolation, and acceptance over rejection. As Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary (1995) conclude, humans have a need to belong: “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and

impactful interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). And most of us satisfy this need by joining groups. When surveyed, 87.3% of Americans reported that they lived with other people, including family members, partners, and roommates (Davis & Smith, 2007). The majority, ranging from 50% to 80%, reported regularly doing things in groups, such as attending a sports event together, visiting one another for the evening, sharing a meal together, or going out as a group to see a movie (Putnam, 2000).

People respond negatively when their need to belong is unfulfilled. People who are accepted members of a group tend to feel happier and more satisfied. But should they be rejected by a group, they feel unhappy, helpless, and depressed. Studies of ostracism—the deliberate exclusion from groups—indicate this experience is highly stressful and can lead to depression, confused thinking, and even aggression (Williams, 2007). When researchers used a functional magnetic resonance imaging scanner to track neural responses to exclusion, they found that people who were left out of a group activity displayed heightened cortical activity in two specific areas of the brain—the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex and the anterior insula. These areas of the brain are associated with the experience of physical pain sensations (Eisenberger et al., 2003). It hurts, quite literally, to be left out of a group.

## Affiliation in Groups

Groups not only satisfy the need to belong, but they also provide members with information, assistance, and social support. Leon Festinger’s theory of social comparison (1950, 1954) suggested that in many cases people join with others to evaluate the accuracy of their personal beliefs and attitudes. Stanley Schachter (1959) explored this process by putting individuals in ambiguous, stressful situations and asking them if they wished to wait alone or with

others. He found that people *affiliate* in such situations—they seek the company of others.

Although any kind of companionship is appreciated, we prefer those who provide us with reassurance and support as well as accurate information. In some cases, we also prefer to join with others who are even worse off than we are. Imagine, for example, how you would respond when the teacher hands back the test and yours is marked 85%. Do you want to affiliate with a friend who got a 95% or a friend who got a 78%? To maintain a sense of self-worth, people seek out and compare themselves to the less fortunate. This process is known as *downward social comparison*.

## Identity and Membership

Groups are not only founts of information during times of ambiguity, they also help us answer the existentially significant question, “Who am I?” People are defined not only by their traits, preferences, interests, likes, and dislikes, but also by their friendships, social roles, family connections, and group memberships. The self is not just a “me,” but also a “we.”

Even demographic qualities such as sex or age can influence us if we categorize ourselves based on these qualities. Social identity theory, for example, assumes that we don’t just classify *other* people into such social categories as man, woman, White, Black, Latinx, elderly, or college student, but we also categorize ourselves. According to Tajfel and Turner (1986), social identities are directed by our memberships in particular groups or social categories. If we strongly identify with these categories, then we will ascribe the characteristics of the typical member of these groups to ourselves, and so stereotype ourselves. If, for example, we believe that college students are intellectual, then we will assume we, too, are intellectual if we identify with that group (Hogg, 2001).

Groups also provide a variety of means for maintaining and enhancing a sense of self-worth, as our assessment of the quality of groups we belong to influences our collective self-esteem (Crocker & Luhtanen, 1990). If our self-esteem is shaken by a personal setback, we can focus on our group's success and prestige. In addition, by comparing our group to other groups, we frequently discover that we are members of the better group, and so can take pride in our superiority. By denigrating other groups, we elevate both our personal and our collective self-esteem (Crocker & Major, 1989).

Mark Leary's (2007) sociometer model goes so far as to suggest that "self-esteem is part of a sociometer that monitors peoples' relational value in other people's eyes" (p. 328). He maintains self-esteem is not just an index of one's sense of personal value, but also an indicator of acceptance into groups. Like a gauge that indicates how much fuel is left in the tank, a dip in self-esteem indicates exclusion from our group is likely. Disquieting feelings of self-worth, then, prompt us to search for and correct characteristics and qualities that put us at risk of social exclusion. Self-esteem is not just high self-regard, but the self-approbation that we feel when included in groups (Leary & Baumeister, 2000).

## Evolutional Advantages of Group Living

Groups may be humans' most useful invention, for they provide us with the means to reach goals that would elude us if we remained alone. Individuals in groups can secure advantages and avoid disadvantages that would plague the lone individuals. In his theory of social integration, Moreland (1987) concludes that groups tend to form whenever "people become dependent on one another for the satisfaction of their needs" (p. 104). The advantages of group life may be so great that humans are biologically prepared to seek membership and avoid isolation. From an evolutionary psychology

perspective, because groups have increased humans' overall fitness for countless generations, individuals who carried genes that promoted solitude-seeking were less likely to survive and procreate compared to those with genes that prompted them to join groups (Darwin, 1859/1963). This process of natural selection culminated in the creation of a modern human who seeks out membership in groups instinctively, for most of us are descendants of "joiners" rather than "loners."

## Motivation and Performance

### Social Facilitation in Groups

Do people perform more effectively when alone or when part of a group? Norman Triplett (1898) examined this issue in one of the first empirical studies in psychology. While watching bicycle races, Triplett noticed that cyclists were faster when they competed against other racers than when they raced alone against the clock. To determine if the presence of others leads to the psychological stimulation that enhances performance, he arranged for 40 children to play a game that involved turning a small reel as quickly as possible (see Figure 1). When he measured how quickly they turned the reel, he confirmed that children performed slightly better when they played the game in pairs compared to when they played alone (see Stroebe, 2012; Strube, 2005).

Triplett succeeded in sparking interest in a phenomenon now known as social facilitation: the enhancement of an individual's performance when that person works in the presence of other people. However, it remained for Robert Zajonc (1965) to specify when social facilitation does and does not occur. After reviewing prior research, Zajonc noted that the facilitating effects of an

audience usually only occur when the task requires the person to perform *dominant responses* (i.e., ones that are well-learned or based on instinctive behaviors). If the task requires *nondominant responses* (i.e., novel, complicated, or untried behaviors that the organism has never performed before or has performed only infrequently) then the presence of others inhibits performance. Hence, students write poorer quality essays on complex philosophical questions when they labor in a group rather than alone (Allport, 1924), but they make fewer mistakes in solving simple, low-level multiplication problems with an audience or a co-actor than when they work in isolation (Dashiell, 1930).

Social facilitation, then, depends on the task: *other people facilitate performance when the task is so simple that it requires only dominant responses, but others interfere when the task requires nondominant responses*. However, a number of psychological processes combine to influence when social facilitation, not social interference, occurs. Studies of the challenge-threat response and brain imaging, for example, confirm that we respond physiologically and neurologically to the presence of others (Blascovich et al., 1999). Other people also can trigger *evaluation apprehension*, particularly when we feel that our individual performance will be known to others, and those others might judge it negatively (Bond et al., 1996). The presence of other people can also cause perturbations in our capacity to concentrate on and process information (Harkins, 2006). Distractions due to the presence of other people have been shown to improve performance on certain tasks, such as the *Stroop task*, but undermine performance on more cognitively demanding tasks (Huguet et al., 1999).

## Social Loafing

Groups usually outperform individuals. A single student, working

alone on a paper, will get less done in an hour than will four students working on a group project. One person playing a tug-of-war game against a group will lose. A crew of movers can pack up and transport your household belongings faster than you can by yourself. As the saying goes, “Many hands make light the work” (Littlepage, 1991; Steiner, 1972).

Groups, though, tend to be underachievers. Studies of social facilitation confirmed the positive motivational benefits of working with other people on well-practiced tasks in which each member’s contribution to the collective enterprise can be identified and evaluated. But what happens when tasks require a truly collective effort? First, when people work together they must coordinate their individual activities and contributions to reach the maximum level of efficiency—but they rarely do (Diehl & Stroebe, 1987). Three people in a tug-of-war competition, for example, invariably pull and pause at slightly different times, so their efforts are uncoordinated. The result is *coordination loss*: the three-person group is stronger than a single person, but not three times as strong. Second, people just don’t exert as much effort when working on a collective endeavor, nor do they expend as much cognitive effort trying to solve problems, as they do when working alone. They display *social loafing* (Latané, 1981).

Bibb Latané, Kip Williams, and Stephen Harkins (1979) examined both coordination losses and social loafing by arranging for students to cheer or clap either alone or in groups of varying sizes. The students cheered alone or in 2- or 6-person groups, or they were lead to believe they were in 2- or 6-person groups (those in the “pseudo-groups” wore blindfolds and headsets that played masking sound). Groups generated more noise than solitary subjects, but the productivity dropped as the groups became larger in size. In dyads, each subject worked at only 66% of capacity, and in 6-person groups at 36%. Productivity also dropped when subjects merely believed they were in groups. If subjects thought that one other person was shouting with them, they shouted 82% as intensely, and if they thought five other people were shouting,

they reached only 74% of their capacity. These losses in productivity were not due to coordination problems; this decline in production could be attributed only to a reduction in effort—to social loafing (Latané et al., 1979, Experiment 2).

## Teamwork

Social loafing is not a rare phenomenon. When sales personnel work in groups with shared goals, they tend to “take it easy” if another salesperson is nearby who can do their work (George, 1992). People who are trying to generate new, creative ideas in group brainstorming sessions usually put in less effort and are thus less productive than people who are generating new ideas individually (Paulus & Brown, 2007). Students assigned group projects often complain of inequity in the quality and quantity of each member’s contributions: Some people just don’t work as much as they should to help the group reach its learning goals (Neu, 2012). People carrying out all sorts of physical and mental tasks expend less effort when working in groups, and the larger the group, the more they loaf (Karau & Williams, 1993).

Groups can, however, overcome this impediment to performance through teamwork. A group may include many talented individuals, but they must learn how to pool their individual abilities and energies to maximize the team’s performance. Team goals must be set, work patterns structured, and a sense of group identity developed. Individual members must learn how to coordinate their actions, and any strains and stresses in interpersonal relations need to be identified and resolved (Salas et al., 2009).



Social loafing can be a problem. One way to overcome it is by recognizing that each group member has an important part to play in the success of the group and engaging in teamwork. (Credit: Marc Dalmulder/[Dragon Boat Races](#)/CC BY 2.0)

Researchers have identified two key ingredients to effective teamwork: a shared mental representation of the task and group cohesion. Teams improve their performance over time as they develop a shared understanding of the team and the tasks they are attempting. Some semblance of this shared mental model, is present nearly from its inception, but as the team practices, differences among the members in terms of their understanding of their situation and their team diminish as a consensus becomes implicitly accepted (Tindale et al., 2008). Effective teams are also, in most

cases, cohesive groups (Dion, 2000). Group cohesion is the integrity, solidarity, social integration, or unity of a group. In most cases, members of cohesive groups like each other and the group and they also are united in their pursuit of collective, group-level goals. Members tend to enjoy their groups more when they are cohesive, and cohesive groups usually outperform ones that lack cohesion. This cohesion-performance relationship, however, is a complex one. Meta-analytic studies suggest that cohesion improves teamwork among members, but that performance quality influences cohesion more than cohesion influences performance (Mullen & Copper, 1994; Mullen et al., 1998). Cohesive groups also can be spectacularly unproductive if the group's norms stress low productivity rather than high productivity (Seashore, 1954). Group cohesion will be discussed in more detail in a later chapter.

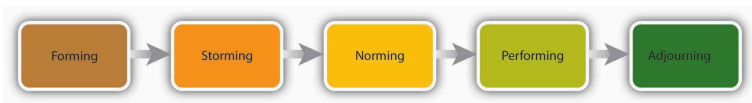
## Group Development

From the time they are formed, groups evolve and can go through a variety of changes over the course of their life cycles. Researchers have sought to identify common patterns in group development. These are referred to as descriptive models (Beebe & Masterson, 2016). Descriptive models can help us make sense of our group experiences by describing what might be 'normal' or 'typical' group processes. In the following sections, we will discuss two examples of descriptive models of group development — Tuckman's model and punctuated equilibrium.

### Tuckman Model of Group Development

American organizational psychologist Bruce Tuckman presented a robust model in 1965 that is still widely used today. Based on his

observations of group behavior in a variety of settings, he proposed a four-stage map of group evolution, also known as Tuckman's model of group development (Tuckman, 1965). Later he enhanced the model by adding a fifth and final stage, the adjourning phase. Interestingly enough, just as an individual moves through developmental stages such as childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, so does a group, although in a much shorter period of time. According to this theory, in order to successfully facilitate a group, the leader needs to move through various leadership styles over time. Generally, this is accomplished by first being more directive, eventually serving as a coach, and later, once the group is able to assume more power and responsibility for itself, shifting to a delegator. While research has not confirmed that this is descriptive of how groups progress, knowing and following these steps can help groups be more effective. For example, groups that do not go through the storming phase early on will often return to this stage toward the end of the group process to address unresolved issues. Another example of the validity of the group development model involves groups that take the time to get to know each other socially in the forming stage. When this occurs, groups tend to handle future challenges better because the individuals have an understanding of each other's needs.



**Figure 1:** Tuckman's Model of Group Development

## Forming

In the formal stage, the group comes together for the first time. The members may already know each other or they may be total strangers. In either case, there is a level of formality, some anxiety, and a degree of guardedness as group members are not sure what is going to happen next. “Will I be accepted? What will my role be? Who has the power here?” These are some of the questions participants think about during this stage of group formation. Because of the large amount of uncertainty, members tend to be polite, conflict avoidant, and observant. They are trying to figure out the “rules of the game” without being too vulnerable. At this point, they may also be quite excited and optimistic about the task at hand, perhaps experiencing a level of pride at being chosen to join a particular group. Group members are trying to achieve several goals at this stage, although this may not necessarily be done consciously. First, they are trying to get to know each other. Often this can be accomplished by finding some common ground. Members also begin to explore group boundaries to determine what will be considered acceptable behavior. “Can I interrupt? Can I leave when I feel like it?” This trial phase may also involve testing the appointed leader or seeing if a leader emerges from the group. At this point,

group members are also discovering how the group will work in terms of what needs to be done and who will be responsible for each task. This stage is often characterized by abstract discussions about issues to be addressed by the group; those who like to get moving can become impatient with this part of the process. This phase is usually short in duration, perhaps a meeting or two.

## Storming

Once group members feel sufficiently safe and included, they tend to enter the storming phase. Participants focus less on keeping their guard up as they shed social facades, becoming more authentic and more argumentative. Group members begin to explore their power and influence, and they often stake out their territory by differentiating themselves from the other group members rather than seeking common ground. Discussions can become heated as participants raise contending points of view and values, or argue over how tasks should be done and who is assigned to them. It is not unusual for group members to become defensive, competitive, or jealous. They may even take sides or begin to form cliques within the group. Questioning and resisting direction from the leader is also quite common. “Why should I have to do this? Who designed this project in the first place? Why do I have to listen to you?” Although little seems to get accomplished at this stage, group members are becoming more authentic as they express their deeper thoughts and feelings. What they are really exploring is “Can I truly be me, have power, and be accepted?” During this chaotic stage, a great deal of creative energy that was previously buried is released and

available for use, but it takes skill to move the group from storming to norming. In many cases, the group gets stuck in the storming phase.

## Avoid Getting Stuck in the Storming Phase

There are several steps you can take to avoid getting stuck in the storming phase of group development. Try the following if you feel the group process you are involved in is not progressing:

- *Normalize conflict.* Let members know this is a natural phase in the group-formation process.
- *Be inclusive.* Continue to make all members feel included and invite all views into the room. Mention how diverse ideas and opinions help foster creativity and innovation.
- *Make sure everyone is heard.* Facilitate heated discussions and help participants understand each other.
- *Support all group members.* This is especially important for those who feel more insecure.
- *Remain positive.* This is a key point to remember about the group's ability to accomplish its goal.
- *Don't rush the group's development.* Remember that working through the storming stage can take several meetings.

Once group members discover that they can be authentic and that the group is capable of handling differences without dissolving, they are ready to enter the next stage, norming.

## Norming

“We survived!” is the common sentiment at the norming phase. Group members often feel elated at this point, and they are much more committed to each other and the group’s goal. Feeling energized by knowing they can handle the “tough stuff,” group members are now ready to get to work. Finding themselves more cohesive and cooperative, participants find it easy to establish their own ground rules (or *norms*) and define their operating procedures and goals. The group tends to make big decisions, while subgroups or individuals handle the smaller decisions. Hopefully, at this point, the group is more open and respectful toward each other, and members ask each other for both help and feedback. They may even begin to form friendships and share more personal information with each other. At this point, the leader should become more of a facilitator by stepping back and letting the group assume more responsibility for its goal. Since the group’s energy is running high, this is an ideal time to host a social or team-building event.

# Performing

Galvanized by a sense of shared vision and a feeling of unity, the group is ready to go into high gear. Members are more interdependent, individuality and differences are respected, and group members feel themselves to be part of a greater entity. At the performing stage, participants are not only getting the work done, but they also pay greater attention to *how* they are doing it. They ask questions like, “Do our operating procedures best support productivity and quality assurance? Do we have suitable means for addressing differences that arise so we can preempt destructive conflicts? Are we relating to and communicating with each other in ways that enhance group dynamics and help us achieve our goals? How can I further develop as a person to become more effective?” By now, the group has matured, becoming more competent, autonomous, and insightful. Group leaders can finally move into coaching roles and help members grow in skill and leadership.

# Adjourning

Just as groups form, so do they end. For example, many groups or teams formed in a business context are project-oriented and therefore are temporary in nature. Alternatively, a working group may dissolve due to organizational restructuring. Just as when we graduate from school or leave home for the first time, these endings

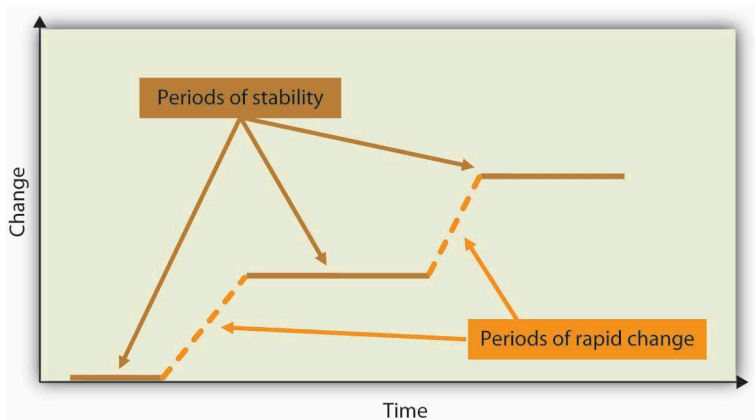
can be bittersweet, with group members feeling a combination of victory, grief, and insecurity about what is coming next. For those who like routine and bond closely with fellow group members, this transition can be particularly challenging. Group leaders and members alike should be sensitive to handling these endings respectfully and compassionately. An ideal way to close a group is to set aside time to debrief (“How did it all go? What did we learn?”), acknowledge each other, and celebrate a job well done.

## The Punctuated-Equilibrium Model

As you may have noted, the five-stage model we have just reviewed is a linear process. According to the model, a group progresses to the performing stage, at which point it finds itself in an ongoing, smooth-sailing situation until the group dissolves. In reality, subsequent researchers, most notably Joy H. Karriker, have found that the life of a group is much more dynamic and cyclical in nature (Karriker, 2005). For example, a group may operate in the performing stage for several months. Then, because of a disruption, such as a competing emerging technology that changes the rules of the game or the introduction of a new CEO, the group may move back into the storming phase before returning to performing. Ideally, any regression in the linear group progression will ultimately result in a higher level of functioning. Proponents of this cyclical

model draw from behavioral scientist Connie Gersick's study of punctuated equilibrium (Gersick, 1991).

The concept of punctuated equilibrium was first proposed in 1972 by paleontologists Niles Eldredge and Stephen Jay Gould, who both believed that evolution occurred in rapid, radical spurts rather than gradually over time. Identifying numerous examples of this pattern in social behavior, Gersick found that the concept applied to organizational change. She proposed that groups remain fairly static, maintaining a certain equilibrium for long periods of time. Change during these periods is incremental, largely due to the resistance to change that arises when systems take root and processes become institutionalized. In this model, revolutionary change occurs in brief, punctuated bursts, generally catalyzed by a crisis or problem that breaks through the systemic inertia and shakes up the deep organizational structures in place. At this point, the organization or group has the opportunity to learn and create new structures that are better aligned with current realities. Whether the group does this is not guaranteed. In sum, in Gersick's model, groups can repeatedly cycle through the storming and performing stages, with revolutionary change taking place during short transitional windows. For organizations and groups who understand that disruption, conflict, and chaos are inevitable in the life of a social system, these disruptions represent opportunities for innovation and creativity.



**Figure 2:** *The Punctuated Equilibrium Model*

### *Review & Reflection Questions*

- Why do people often join groups? What are some reasons you have joined groups in the past?
- Do people perform more effectively when alone or when part of a group? Under what conditions?
- If you were a college professor, what would you do to increase the success of in-class groups and teams?
- What do descriptive models do for us? How might they be useful to groups?
- Have you observed a group going through these phases in the past? What can you learn from those experiences?

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## Authors and Attribution

This chapter draws from Lindabary, J. R. (Ed.) (2020). *Small Group*

*Communication: Forming & Sustaining Teams*. Emporia, KS: Emporia State University.

The sections “The Psychological Significance of Groups” and “Motivation and Performance” are adapted and condensed from: Forsyth, D. R. (2019). [The psychology of groups](#). In R. Biswas-Diener & E. Diener (Eds.), *Noba textbook series: Psychology*. DEF publishers. [nobaproject.com](#). This content is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](#).

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# 3. Cooperation

## Introduction

People cooperate with others throughout their life. Whether on the playground with friends, at home with family, or at work with colleagues, cooperation is a natural instinct ([Keltner, Kogan, Piff, & Saturn, 2014](#)). Children as young as 14 months cooperate with others on joint tasks ([Warneken, Chen, & Tomasello 2006](#); [Warneken & Tomasello, 2007](#)). Humans' closest evolutionary relatives, chimpanzees and bonobos, maintain long-term cooperative relationships as well, sharing resources and caring for each other's young ([de Waal & Lanting, 1997](#); [Langergraber, Mitani, & Vigilant, 2007](#)).

As the following video demonstrates, there are examples of cooperation within closely related species.



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Ancient animal remains found near early human settlements suggest that our ancestors hunted in cooperative groups ([Mithen, 1996](#)). Cooperation, it seems, is embedded in our evolutionary heritage.

Yet, cooperation can also be difficult to achieve; there are often breakdowns in people's ability to work effectively in teams, or in their willingness to collaborate with others. Even with issues that can only be solved through large-scale cooperation, such as climate change and world hunger, people can have difficulties joining forces

with others to take collective action. Psychologists have identified numerous individual and situational factors that influence the effectiveness of cooperation across many areas of life. From the trust that people place in others to the lines they draw between “us” and “them,” many different processes shape cooperation. This module will explore these individual, situational, and cultural influences on cooperation.

## The Prisoner’s Dilemma

Imagine that you are a participant in a social experiment. As you sit down, you are told that you will be playing a game with another person in a separate room. The other participant is also part of the experiment but the two of you will never meet. In the experiment, there is the possibility that you will be awarded some money. Both you and your unknown partner are required to make a choice: either choose to “cooperate,” maximizing your combined reward, or “defect,” (not cooperate) and thereby maximize your individual reward. The choice you make, along with that of the other participant, will result in one of three unique outcomes to this task, illustrated below in Figure 1. If you and your partner *both cooperate* (1), you will each receive \$5. If you and your partner *both defect* (2), you will each receive \$2. However, if *one partner defects and the other partner cooperates* (3), the defector will receive \$8, while the cooperator will receive nothing. Remember, you and your partner cannot discuss your strategy. Which would you choose? Striking out on your own promises big rewards but you could also lose everything. Cooperating, on the other hand, offers the best benefit for the most people but requires a high level of trust.

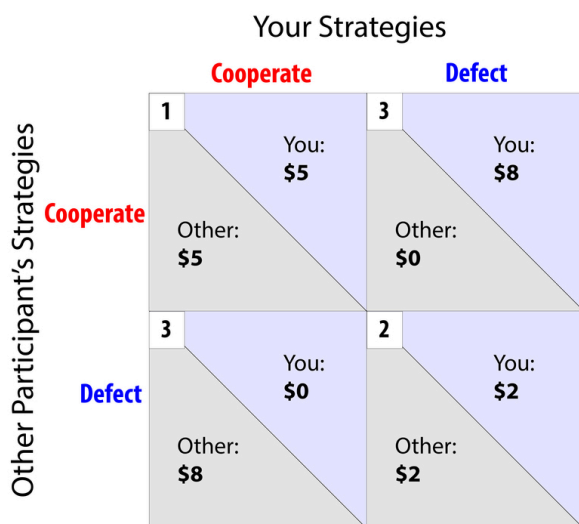


Figure 1. The various possible outcomes of a prisoner's dilemma scenario

This scenario, in which two people independently choose between cooperation and defection, is known as the [prisoner's dilemma](#). It gets its name from the situation in which two prisoners who have committed a crime are given the opportunity to either (A) both confess their crime (and get a moderate sentence), (B) rat out their accomplice (and get a lesser sentence), or (C) both remain silent (and avoid punishment altogether). Psychologists use various forms of the prisoner's dilemma scenario to study self-interest and cooperation. Whether framed as a monetary game or a prison game, the prisoner's dilemma illuminates a conflict at the core of many decisions to cooperate: it pits the motivation to maximize *personal reward* against the motivation to maximize *gains for the group* (you and your partner combined).

For someone trying to maximize his or her own personal reward, the most "rational" choice is to defect (not cooperate), because defecting always results in a larger personal reward, regardless of the partner's choice. However, when the two participants view their partnership as a joint effort (such as a friendly relationship),

cooperating is the best strategy of all, since it provides the largest combined sum of money (\$10—which they share), as opposed to partial cooperation (\$8), or mutual defection (\$4). In other words, although defecting represents the “best” choice from an individual perspective, it is also the worst choice to make for the group as a whole.

This divide between personal and collective interests is a key obstacle that prevents people from cooperating. Think back to our earlier definition of **cooperation**: *cooperation is when multiple partners work together toward a common goal that will benefit everyone.* As is frequent in these types of scenarios, even though cooperation may benefit the whole group, individuals are often able to earn even larger, personal rewards by defecting—as demonstrated in the prisoner’s dilemma example above.

You can see a small, real-world example of the prisoner’s dilemma phenomenon at live music concerts. At venues with seating, many audience members will choose to stand, hoping to get a better view of the musicians onstage. As a result, the people sitting directly behind those now-standing people are also forced to stand to see the action onstage. This creates a chain reaction in which the entire audience now has to stand, just to see over the heads of the crowd in front of them. While choosing to stand may improve one’s own concert experience, it creates a literal barrier for the rest of the audience, hurting the overall experience of the group.

Simple models of [rational self-interest](#) predict 100% defection in cooperative tasks. That is, if people were only interested in benefiting themselves, we would always expect to see selfish behavior. Instead, there is a surprising tendency to cooperate in the prisoner’s dilemma and similar tasks ([Batson & Moran, 1999](#); [Oosterbeek, Sloof, Van De Kuilen, 2004](#)). Given the clear benefits to defect, why then do some people choose to cooperate, whereas others choose to defect?

You can watch a short video outlining the experience at the heart of the prisoner’s dilemma.



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## Individual Differences in Cooperation

### Social Value Orientation

One key factor related to individual differences in cooperation is the extent to which people value not only their own outcomes, but also the outcomes of others. [Social value orientation](#) (SVO) describes people's preferences when dividing important resources between themselves and others ([Messick & McClintock, 1968](#)). A person might, for example, generally be competitive with others, or cooperative, or self-sacrificing. People with different social values differ in the importance they place on their own positive outcomes relative to the outcomes of others. For example, you might give your friend gas money because she drives you to school, even though that means you will have less spending money for the weekend. In this example, you are demonstrating a cooperative orientation.

People generally fall into one of three categories of SVO: cooperative, individualistic, or competitive. While most people want to bring about positive outcomes for all (cooperative orientation), certain types of people are less concerned about the outcomes of

others (individualistic), or even seek to undermine others in order to get ahead (competitive orientation).

Are you curious about your own orientation? One technique psychologists use to sort people into one of these categories is to have them play a series of [decomposed games](#)—short laboratory exercises that involve making a choice from various distributions of resources between oneself and an “other.” Consider the example shown in Figure 2, which offers three different ways to distribute a valuable resource (such as money). People with *competitive* SVOs, who try to maximize their relative advantage over others, are most likely to pick option A. People with *cooperative* SVOs, who try to maximize joint gain for both themselves and others, are more likely to split the resource evenly, picking option B. People with *individualistic* SVOs, who always maximize gains to the self, regardless of how it affects others, will most likely pick option C.

<i>SVO decomposed game</i>	<b>A</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>C</b>
<b>You get</b>	500	500	550
<b>Other gets</b>	100	500	300

Figure 2. Example of an SVO decomposed game used to determine how competitive or cooperative a person is

Researchers have found that a person’s SVO predicts how cooperative he or she is in both laboratory experiments and the outside world. For example, in one laboratory experiment, groups of participants were asked to play a [commons dilemma game](#). In this game, participants each took turns drawing from a central

collection of points to be exchanged for real money at the end of the experiment. These points represented a [common-pool resource](#) for the group, like valuable goods or services in society (such as farm land, ground water, and air quality) that are freely accessible to everyone but prone to overuse and degradation. Participants were told that, while the common-pool resource would gradually replenish after the end of every turn, taking too much of the resource too quickly would eventually deplete it. The researchers found that participants with cooperative SVOs withdrew fewer resources from the common-pool than those with competitive and individualistic SVOs, indicating a greater willingness to cooperate with others and act in a way that is sustainable for the group ([Kramer, McClintock, & Messick, 1986](#); [Roch & Samuelson, 1997](#)).

Research has also shown that people with cooperative SVOs are more likely to commute to work using public transportation—an act of cooperation that can help reduce carbon emissions—rather than drive themselves, compared to people with competitive and individualistic SVOs ([Van Vugt, Meertens, & Van Lange, 1995](#); [Van Vugt, Van Lange, & Meertens, 1996](#)). People with cooperative SVOs also more frequently engage in behavior intended to help others, such as volunteering and giving money to charity ([McClintock & Allison, 1989](#); [Van Lange, Bekkers, Schuyt, Van Vugt, 2007](#)). Taken together, these findings show that people with cooperative SVOs act with greater consideration for the overall well-being of others and the group as a whole, using resources in moderation and taking more effortful measures (like using public transportation to protect the environment) to benefit the group.

## Empathic Ability

[Empathy](#) is the ability to feel and understand another's emotional experience. When we empathize with someone else, we take on that person's perspective, imagining the world from his or her point of view and vicariously experiencing his or her emotions ([Davis, 1994](#); [Goetz, Keltner, & Simon-Thomas, 2010](#)). Research has shown that when people empathize with their partner, they act with greater cooperation and overall [altruism](#)—the desire to help the partner, even at a



*Feelings of empathy lead to greater levels of cooperation. Research shows that even young children cooperate more when experiencing feelings of empathy. [Image: US Army, <https://goo.gl/psWXOe>, CC BY 2.0, <https://goo.gl/BRvSA7>*

potential cost to the self. People that can experience and understand the emotions of others are better able to work with others in groups, earning higher job performance ratings on average from their supervisors, even after adjusting for different types of work and other aspects of personality ([Côté & Miners, 2006](#)).

When empathizing with a person in distress, the natural desire to help is often expressed as a desire to cooperate. In one study, just before playing an economic game with a partner in another room, participants were given a note revealing that their partner had just gone through a rough breakup and needed some cheering up. While half of the subjects were urged by the experimenters to “remain objective and detached,” the other half were told to “try and imagine how the other person feels.” Though both groups received the same information about their partner, those who were encouraged to engage in empathy—by actively experiencing their

partner's emotions—acted with greater cooperation in the economic game ([Batson & Moran, 1999](#)). The researchers also found that people who empathized with their partners were more likely to act cooperatively, even after being told that their partner had already made a choice to not cooperate ([Batson & Ahmad, 2001](#))! Evidence of the link between empathy and cooperation has even been found in studies of preschool children ([Marcus, Telleen, & Roke, 1979](#)). From a very early age, emotional understanding can foster cooperation.

Although empathizing with a partner can lead to more cooperation between two people, it can also undercut cooperation within larger groups. In groups, empathizing with a single person can lead people to abandon broader cooperation in favor of helping only the target individual. In one study, participants were asked to play a cooperative game with three partners. In the game, participants were asked to (A) donate resources to a central pool, (B) donate resources to a specific group member, or (C) keep the resources for themselves. According to the rules, all donations to the central pool would be increased by 50% then distributed evenly, resulting in a net gain to the entire group. Objectively, this might seem to be the best option. However, when participants were encouraged to imagine the feelings of one of their partners said to be in distress, they were more likely to donate their tickets to that partner and not engage in cooperation with the group—rather than remaining detached and objective ([Batson et al., 1995](#)). Though empathy can create strong cooperative bonds between individuals, it can sometimes lead to actions that, despite being well-intentioned, end up undermining the group's best interests.

# Situational Influences of Cooperation

## Communication and Commitment

Open communication between people is one of the best ways to promote cooperation ([Dawes, McTavish, & Shaklee, 1977](#); [Dawes, 1988](#)). This is because communication provides an opportunity to size up the trustworthiness of others. It also affords us a chance to prove our own trustworthiness, by verbally committing to cooperate with others. Since cooperation requires people to enter a [state of vulnerability](#) and trust with partners, we are very sensitive to the social cues and interactions of potential partners before deciding to cooperate with them.

In one line of research, groups of participants were allowed to chat for five minutes before playing a multi-round “public goods” game. During the chats, the players were allowed to discuss game strategies and make verbal commitments about their in-game actions. While some groups were able to reach a consensus on a strategy (e.g., “always cooperate”), other groups failed to reach a consensus within their allotted five minutes or even picked strategies that ensured *noncooperation* (e.g., “every person for themselves”). The researchers found that when group members made explicit commitments to each other to cooperate, they ended up honoring those commitments and acting with greater cooperation. Interestingly, the effect of face-to-face verbal commitments persisted even when the cooperation game itself was completely anonymous ([Kerr and Kaufman-Gilliland, 1994](#); [Kerr, Garst, Lewandowski, & Harris, 1997](#)). This suggests that those who explicitly commit to cooperate are driven not by the fear of external punishment by group members, but by their own personal desire to honor such commitments. In other words, once people make a specific promise to cooperate, they are driven by “that still, small

voice”—the voice of their own inner conscience—to fulfill that commitment ([Kerr et al., 1997](#)).

## Trust



Trust is essential for cooperation, people are much more motivated to cooperate if they know others in the group will support one another. [Image: Wesley Fryer, <https://goo.gl/LKNLWp>, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://goo.gl/rxiUsF>]

When it comes to cooperation, trust is key ([Pruitt & Kimmel, 1977](#); [Parks, Henager, & Scamahorn, 1996](#); [Chaudhuri, Sopher, & Strand, 2002](#)). Working with others toward a common goal requires

a level of faith that our partners will repay our hard work and generosity, and not take advantage of us for their own selfish gains. Social trust, or the belief that another person's actions will be beneficial to one's own interests ([Kramer, 1999](#)), enables people to work together as a single unit, pooling their resources to accomplish more than they could individually. Trusting others, however, depends on their actions and reputation.

One common example of the difficulties in trusting others that you might recognize from being a student occurs when you are assigned a group project. Many students dislike group projects because they worry about “social loafing”—the way that one person expends less effort but still benefits from the efforts of the group. Imagine, for example, that you and five other students are assigned to work together on a difficult class project. At first, you and your group members split the work up evenly. As the project continues, however, you notice that one member of your team isn't doing his “fair share.” He fails to show up to meetings, his work is sloppy, and he seems generally uninterested in contributing to the project. After a while, you might begin to suspect that this student is trying to get by with minimal effort, perhaps assuming others will pick up the slack. Your group now faces a difficult choice: either join the slacker and abandon all work on the project, causing it to collapse, or keep cooperating and allow for the possibility that the uncooperative student may receive a decent grade for others' work.

If this scenario sounds familiar to you, you're not alone. Economists call this situation the [free rider problem](#)—when individuals benefit from the cooperation of others without contributing anything in return ([Grossman & Hart, 1980](#)). Although these sorts of actions may benefit the free rider in the short-term, free riding can have a negative impact on a person's social reputation over time. In the above example, for instance, the “free riding” student may develop a reputation as lazy or untrustworthy, leading others to be less willing to work with him or her in the future.

Indeed, research has shown that a poor reputation for

cooperation can serve as a warning sign for others not to cooperate with the person in disrepute. For example, in one experiment involving a group economic game, participants seen as being uncooperative were punished harshly by their fellow participants. According to the rules of the game, individuals took turns being either a “donor” or a “receiver” over the course of multiple rounds. If donors chose to give up a small sum of actual money, receivers would receive a slightly larger sum, resulting in an overall net gain. However, unbeknownst to the group, one participant was secretly instructed *never* to donate. After just a few rounds of play, this individual was effectively shunned by the rest of the group, receiving almost zero donations from the other members ([Milinski, Semmann, Bakker, & Krambeck, 2001](#)). When someone is seen being consistently uncooperative, other people have no incentive to trust him/her, resulting in a collapse of cooperation.

On the other hand, people are more likely to cooperate with others who have a good reputation for cooperation and are therefore deemed trustworthy. In one study, people played a group economic game similar to the one described above: over multiple rounds, they took turns choosing whether to donate to other group members. Over the course of the game, donations were more frequently given to individuals who had been generous in earlier rounds of the game ([Wedekind & Milinski, 2000](#)). In other words, individuals seen cooperating with others were afforded a reputational advantage, earning them more partners willing to cooperate and a larger overall monetary reward.

## Group Identification



Sometimes the groups with which we identify can be formed based on preferences. Are you a dog person or a cat person? Just knowing that someone else shares your preference can affect the cooperation between you.  
[Image: Doris Meta F, <https://goo.gl/k8Zi6N>, CC BY-NC 2.0, <https://goo.gl/tgFydH>]

Another factor that can impact cooperation is a person's [social identity](#), or the extent to which he or she identifies as a member of a particular social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979/1986). People can identify with groups of all shapes and sizes: a group might be relatively small, such as a local high school class, or very large, such as a national citizenship or a political party. While these groups are often bound together by shared goals and values, they can also form according to seemingly arbitrary qualities, such as musical taste, hometown, or even completely randomized assignment, such as a coin toss (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971; Bigler, Brown, &

[Markell, 2001](#); [Locksley, Ortiz, & Hepburn, 1980](#)). When members of a group place a high value on their group membership, their identity (the way they view themselves) can be shaped in part by the goals and values of that group.

Research shows that when people's group identity is emphasized (for example, when laboratory participants are referred to as "group members" rather than "individuals"), they are less likely to act selfishly in a commons dilemma game. In such experiments, so-called "group members" withdraw fewer resources, with the outcome of promoting the sustainability of the group ([Brewer & Kramer, 1986](#)). In one study, students who strongly identified with their university were less likely to leave a cooperative group of fellow students when given an attractive option to exit ([Van Vugt & Hart, 2004](#)). In addition, the strength of a person's identification with a group or organization is a key driver behind participation in large-scale cooperative efforts, such as collective action in political and workers' groups ([Klandermans, 2002](#)), and engaging in organizational citizenship behaviors ([Cropanzano & Byrne, 2000](#)).

Emphasizing group identity is not without its costs: although it can increase cooperation *within* groups, it can also undermine cooperation *between* groups. Researchers have found that groups interacting with other groups are more competitive and less cooperative than individuals interacting with other individuals, a phenomenon known as [interindividual-intergroup discontinuity](#) ([Schopler & Insko, 1999](#); [Wildschut, Pinter, Vevea, Insko, & Schopler, 2003](#)). For example, groups interacting with other groups displayed greater self-interest and reduced cooperation in a prisoner's dilemma game than did individuals completing the same tasks with other individuals ([Insko et al., 1987](#)). Such problems with trust and cooperation are largely due to people's general reluctance to cooperate with members of an outgroup, or those outside the boundaries of one's own social group ([Allport, 1954](#); [Van Vugt, Biel, Snyder, & Tyler, 2000](#)). [Outgroups](#) do not have to be explicit rivals for this effect to take place. Indeed, in one study, simply telling groups of participants that other groups preferred a different style

of painting led them to behave less cooperatively than pairs of individuals completing the same task ([Insko, Kirchner, Pinter, Efav, & Wildschut, 2005](#)). Though a strong group identity can bind individuals within the group together, it can also drive divisions between different groups, reducing overall trust and cooperation on a larger scope.

Under the right circumstances, however, even rival groups can be turned into cooperative partners in the presence of superordinate goals. In a classic demonstration of this phenomenon, Muzafer Sherif and colleagues observed the cooperative and competing behaviors of two groups of twelve-year-old boys at a summer camp in Robber's Cave State Park, in Oklahoma ([Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, & Sherif, 1961](#)). The twenty-two boys in the study were all carefully interviewed to determine that none of them knew each other beforehand. Importantly, Sherif and colleagues kept both groups unaware of each other's existence, arranging for them to arrive at separate times and occupy different areas of the camp. Within each group, the participants quickly bonded and established their own group identity—"The Eagles" and "The Rattlers"—identifying leaders and creating flags decorated with their own group's name and symbols.

For the next phase of the experiment, the researchers revealed the existence of each group to the other, leading to reactions of anger, territorialism, and verbal abuse between the two. This behavior was further compounded by a series of competitive group activities, such as baseball and tug-of-war, leading the two groups to engage in even more spiteful behavior: The Eagles set fire to The Rattlers' flag, and The Rattlers retaliated by ransacking The Eagles' cabin, overturning beds and stealing their belongings. Eventually, the two groups refused to eat together in the same dining hall, and they had to be physically separated to avoid further conflict.

However, in the final phase of the experiment, Sherif and colleagues introduced a dilemma to both groups that could only be solved through mutual cooperation. The researchers told both groups that there was a shortage of drinking water in the camp,

supposedly due to “vandals” damaging the water supply. As both groups gathered around the water supply, attempting to find a solution, members from each group offered suggestions and worked together to fix the problem. Since the lack of drinking water affected both groups equally, both were highly motivated to try and resolve the issue. Finally, after 45 minutes, the two groups managed to clear a stuck pipe, allowing fresh water to flow. The researchers concluded that when conflicting groups share a superordinate goal, they are capable of shifting their attitudes and bridging group differences to become cooperative partners. The insights from this study have important implications for group-level cooperation. Since many problems facing the world today, such as climate change and nuclear proliferation, affect individuals of all nations, and are best dealt with through the coordinated efforts of different groups and countries, emphasizing the shared nature of these dilemmas may enable otherwise competing groups to engage in cooperative and collective action.

## Culture



*There are cultural differences in how and how much people cooperate. Some societies require more cooperation to ensure survival. [Image: Cindy Cornett Seigle, <http://goo.gl/u0kE9Z>, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0, <http://goo.gl/iF4hmM>]*

Culture can have a powerful effect on people's beliefs about and ways they interact with others. Might culture also affect a person's tendency toward cooperation? To answer this question, Joseph Henrich and his colleagues surveyed people from 15 small-scale societies around the world, located in places such as Zimbabwe, Bolivia, and Indonesia. These groups varied widely in the ways they traditionally interacted with their environments: some practiced

small-scale agriculture, others foraged for food, and still others were nomadic herders of animals ([Henrich et al., 2001](#)).

To measure their tendency toward cooperation, individuals of each society were asked to play the [ultimatum game](#), a task similar in nature to the prisoner's dilemma. The game has two players: Player A (the "allocator") is given a sum of money (equal to two days' wages) and allowed to donate any amount of it to Player B (the "responder"). Player B can then either accept or reject Player A's offer. If Player B accepts the offer, both players keep their agreed-upon amounts. However, if Player B rejects the offer, then neither player receives anything. In this scenario, the responder can use his/her authority to punish unfair offers, even though it requires giving up his or her own reward. In turn, Player A must be careful to propose an acceptable offer to Player B, while still trying to maximize his/her own outcome in the game.

According to a model of rational economics, a self-interested Player B should always choose to accept any offer, no matter how small or unfair. As a result, Player A should always try to offer the minimum possible amount to Player B, in order to maximize his/her own reward. Instead, the researchers found that people in these 15 societies donated on average 39% of the sum to their partner ([Henrich et al., 2001](#)). This number is almost identical to the amount that people of Western cultures donate when playing the ultimatum game ([Oosterbeek et al., 2004](#)). These findings suggest that allocators in the game, instead of offering the least possible amount, try to maintain a sense of fairness and "shared rewards" in the game, in part so that their offers will not be rejected by the responder.

Henrich and colleagues ([2001](#)) also observed significant variation between cultures in terms of their level of cooperation. Specifically, the researchers found that the extent to which individuals in a culture needed to collaborate with each other to gather resources to survive predicted how likely they were to be cooperative. For example, among the people of the Lamelara in Indonesia, who survive by hunting whales in groups of a dozen or more individuals,

donations in the ultimatum game were extremely high—approximately 58% of the total sum. In contrast, the Machiguenga people of Peru, who are generally economically independent at the family level, donated much less on average—about 26% of the total sum. The interdependence of people for survival, therefore, seems to be a key component of why people decide to cooperate with others.

Though the various survival strategies of small-scale societies might seem quite remote from your own experiences, take a moment to think about how your life is dependent on collaboration with others. Very few of us in industrialized societies live in houses we build ourselves, wear clothes we make ourselves, or eat food we grow ourselves. Instead, we depend on others to provide specialized resources and products, such as food, clothing, and shelter that are essential to our survival. Studies show that Americans give about 40% of their sum in the ultimatum game—less than the Lamelara give, but on par with most of the small-scale societies sampled by Henrich and colleagues ([Oosterbeek et al., 2004](#)). While living in an industrialized society might not require us to hunt in groups like the Lamelara do, we still depend on others to supply the resources we need to survive.

## Conclusion

Cooperation is an important part of our everyday lives. Practically every feature of modern social life, from the taxes we pay to the street signs we follow, involves multiple parties working together toward shared goals. There are many factors that help determine whether people will successfully cooperate, from their culture of origin and the trust they place in their partners, to the degree to which they empathize with others. Although cooperation can sometimes be difficult to achieve, certain diplomatic practices, such as emphasizing shared goals and engaging in open communication,

can promote teamwork and even break down rivalries. Though choosing not to cooperate can sometimes achieve a larger reward for an individual in the short term, cooperation is often necessary to ensure that the group as a whole—including all members of that group—achieves the optimal outcome.

## Take a Quiz

An optional quiz is available to accompany this chapter here:  
<https://nobaproject.com/modules/cooperation>

## Discussion Questions

1. Which groups do you identify with? Consider sports teams, home towns, and universities. How does your identification with these groups make you feel about other members of these groups? What about members of competing groups?
2. Thinking of all the accomplishments of humanity throughout history which do you believe required the greatest amounts of cooperation? Why?
3. In your experience working on group projects—such as group projects for a class—what have you noticed regarding the themes presented in this module (eg. Competition, free riding, cooperation, trust)? How could you use the material you have just learned to make group projects more effective?

# Vocabulary

## **Altruism**

A desire to improve the welfare of another person, at a potential cost to the self and without any expectation of reward.

## **Common-pool resource**

A collective product or service that is freely available to all individuals of a society, but is vulnerable to overuse and degradation.

## **Commons dilemma game**

A game in which members of a group must balance their desire for personal gain against the deterioration and possible collapse of a resource.

## **Cooperation**

The coordination of multiple partners toward a common goal that will benefit everyone involved.

## **Decomposed games**

A task in which an individual chooses from multiple allocations of resources to distribute between him- or herself and another person.

## **Empathy**

The ability to vicariously experience the emotions of another person.

## **Free rider problem**

A situation in which one or more individuals benefit from a common-pool resource without paying their share of the cost.

## **Interindividual-intergroup discontinuity**

The tendency for relations between groups to be less cooperative than relations between individuals.

**Outgroup**

A social category or group with which an individual does not identify.

**Prisoner's dilemma**

A classic paradox in which two individuals must independently choose between defection (maximizing reward to the self) and cooperation (maximizing reward to the group).

**Rational self-interest**

The principle that people will make logical decisions based on maximizing their own gains and benefits.

**Social identity**

A person's sense of who they are, based on their group membership(s).

**Social value orientation (SVO)**

An assessment of how an individual prefers to allocate resources between him- or herself and another person.

**State of vulnerability**

When a person places him or herself in a position in which he or she might be exploited or harmed. This is often done out of trust that others will not exploit the vulnerability.

**Ultimatum game**

An economic game in which a proposer (Player A) can offer a subset of resources to a responder (Player B), who can then either accept or reject the given proposal.

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## Authors & Attribution

- This chapter draws on Piercy, C. W. (2020). *Problem Solving in Teams and Groups*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas

Libraries (<https://teams1.pressbooks.com/chapter/cooperation/>) and from the [Noba Project](#) by Jake P. Moskowitz and Paul K. Piff at the University of California, Irvine.

## 4. Power

### *Learning Objectives*

- Explain different conceptualizations of power
- Describe the relationship between power and oppression
- Discuss behaviors associated with high status in a group
- Differentiate between the common power bases in groups
- Discuss what it means to exercise power ethically

Given the complexity of group interaction, it's short-sighted to try to understand group communication without looking at notions of power. Power influences how we interpret the messages of others and determines the extent to which we feel we have the right to speak up and voice our concerns and opinions to others. Power and status are key ways that people exercise influence within groups. In the storming phase of group development, members are likely to engage in more obvious power struggles, but power is constantly at work in our interactions within and outside our group whether we are fully conscious of it or not. In this chapter, we will define power and discuss its relationship to systems of privilege and oppression and to status within groups. We will also discuss the bases and tactics of power that can operate in groups and teams, as well as the ethical use of power.

# Defining Power

Take a moment to reflect on the different ways you think about power. What images come to mind for you when you think of power? Are there different kinds of power? Are some people inherently more powerful than others? Do you consider yourself to be a powerful person? We highlight three ways to understand power as it relates to group and team communication. The word “power” literally means “to be able” and has many implications.

If you associate power with control or dominance, this refers to the notion of power as **power-over**. According to Starhawk (1987), “power-over enables one individual or group to make the decisions that affect others, and to enforce control” (p. 9). Control can and does take many forms in society. Starhawk explains that,

*This power is wielded from the workplace, in the schools, in the courts, in the doctor’s office. It may rule with weapons that are physical or by controlling the resources we need to live: money, food, medical care; or by controlling more subtle resources: information, approval, love. We are so accustomed to power-over, so steeped in its language and its implicit threats, that we often become aware of its functioning only when we see its extreme manifestations. (p. 9)*

When we are in group situations and someone dominates the conversation, makes all of the decisions, or controls the resources of the group such as money or equipment, this is power-over.

**Power-from-within** refers to a more personal sense of strength or agency. Power-from-within manifests itself *when we can stand, walk, and speak “words that convey our needs and thoughts”* (Starhawk, 1987, p. 10). In groups, this type of power “arises from our sense of connection, our bonding with other human beings, and with the environment” (10). As Heider explains in The Tao of Leadership, “Since all creation is a whole, separateness is an illusion. Like it or not, we are team players. Power comes through cooperation, independence through service, and a greater self

through selflessness” (77). If you think about your role in groups, how have you influenced other group members? Your strategies indicate your sense of power-from-within.

Finally, groups manifest **power-with**, which is “the power of a strong individual in a group of equals, the power not to command, but to suggest and be listened to, to begin something and see it happen” (Starhawk, 1987, p. 10). For this to be effective in a group or team, at least two qualities must be present among members: (1) all group members must communicate respect and equality for one another, and (2) the leader must not abuse power-with and attempt to turn it into power-over. Have you ever been involved in a group where people did not treat each others as equals or with respect? How did you feel about the group? What was the outcome? Could you have done anything to change that dynamic?

## Understanding Power and Oppression



(Credit: National Numismatic Collection, National Museum of American History/[1854 \\$3 Indian Princess Head](#)/Public Domain).

Power and oppression can be said to be mirror reflections of one another in a sense or two sides of the same coin. Where you see power that causes harm, you will likely see oppression. Oppression is defined in Merriam-Webster dictionary as: “Unjust or cruel exercise of authority or power especially by the imposition of burdens; the condition of being weighed down; an act of pressing down; a sense of heaviness or obstruction in the body or mind.” This definition demonstrates the intensity of oppression, which also shows how difficult such a challenge is to address or eradicate. Further, the word oppression comes from the Latin root *primere*, which actually means “pressed down”. Importantly, we can conclude that oppression is the social act of placing severe restrictions on an individual, group, or institution.

Oppression emerges as a result of power, with its roots in global colonialism and conquests. For example, oppression as an action can deny certain groups jobs that pay living wages, can establish unequal education (e.g., through a lack of adequate capital per student for resources), can deny affordable housing, and the list goes on. You may be wondering why some groups live in poverty, reside in substandard housing, or simply do not measure up to the dominant society in some facet. As discussed at a seminar at the Leaven Center (2003), groups that do not have “power over” are those society classifies or labels as disenfranchised; they are exploited and victimized in a variety of ways by agents of oppression and/or systems and institutions. They are subjected to restrictions and seen as expendable and replaceable—particularly by agents of oppression. This philosophy, in turn, minimizes the roles certain populations play in society. Sadly, agents of oppression often deny that this injustice occurs and blame oppressive conditions on the behaviors and actions of the oppressed group.

Oppression subsequently becomes a system and patterns are adopted and perpetuated. Systems of privilege and oppression discriminate or advantage based on perceived or real differences among people. Privilege here refers to the benefits, advantages, and

power that are gained based on perceived status or membership in a dominant group. For example, Thai and Lien (2019) discuss diversity and highlight the impact of white privilege as a major contributor to systems and patterns of oppression for non-privileged individuals and groups.

Additionally, socialization patterns help maintain systems of privilege and oppression. Members of society learn through formal and informal educational environments that advance the ideologies of the dominant group, and how they should act and what their role and place are in society. Power is thus exercised in this instance but now is both psychologically and physically harmful. This process of constructing knowledge is helpful to those who seek to control and oppress, through power, because physical coercion may not last, but psychological ramifications can be perpetual, particularly without intervention. As shared knowledge is sustained through social processes, and what we come to know and believe is socially constructed, so it becomes ever more important to discuss dominant narratives of our society and the meaning they lend to our culture, including as it relates to our interactions in groups and teams.

So what do systems of privilege and oppression mean for groups? Members in groups do not leave their identities or social and cultural contexts at the door. Power and status in groups are still shaped by these broader systems of privilege and oppression that are external to the group. This requires group members to reflect on how these systems are shaping dynamics within the group and their own perceptions and behaviors.

## **The Relationship Between Power and Status**

In a group, members with higher status are apt to command greater respect and possess more prestige and power than those with lower

status. Status can be defined as a person's perceived level of importance or significance within a particular context.

Our status is often tied to our identities and their perceived value within our social and cultural context. Groups may confer status upon their members on the basis of their age, wealth, gender, race or ethnicity, ability, physical stature, perceived intelligence, and/or other attributes. Status can also be granted through title or position. In professional circles, for instance, having earned a “terminal” degree such as a Ph.D. or M.D. usually generates a degree of status. The same holds true for the documented outcomes of schooling or training in legal, engineering, or other professional fields. Likewise, people who've been honored for achievements in any number of areas may bring status to a group by virtue of that recognition if it relates to the nature and purpose of the group. Once a group has formed and begun to sort out its norms, it will also build upon the initial status that people bring to it by further allocating status according to its own internal processes and practices. For instance, choosing a member to serve as an officer in a group generally conveys status to that person.

Let's say you've either come into a group with high status or have been granted high status by the other members. What does this mean to you, and how are you apt to behave? Here are some predictions based on research from several sources (Beebe & Masterson, 2015; Borman, 1989; Brilhart & Galanes, 1997; Homans, 1992).

<sup>12</sup>First, the volume and direction of your speech will differ from those of others in the group. You'll talk more than the low-status members do, and you'll communicate more with other high-status members than you will with lower-status individuals. In addition, you'll be more likely to speak to the whole group than will members with lower status.

1.

2.

Second, some indicators of your participation will be particularly positive. Your activity level and self-regard will surpass those of lower-status group members. So will your level of satisfaction with your position. Furthermore, the rest of the group is less likely to ignore your statements and proposals than it is to disregard what lower-status individuals say.

Finally, the content of your communication will probably be different from what your fellow members discuss. Because you may have access to special information about the group's activities and may be expected to shoulder specific responsibilities because of your position, you're apt to talk about topics which are relevant to the central purposes and direction of the group. Lower-status members, on the other hand, are likely to communicate more about other matters.



*Those with higher status may communicate differently than those with lower status in group contexts like meetings. (Credit: [United States Mission Geneva](#)/flickr/CC BY 2.0).*

There's no such thing as a "status neutral" group—one in which everyone always has the same status as everyone else. Differences in status within a group are inevitable and can be dangerous if not recognized and managed. For example, someone who gains status without possessing the skills or attributes required to use it well may cause real damage to other members of a group, or to a group as a whole. A high-status, low-ability person may develop

an inflated self-image, begin to abuse power, or both. One of us worked for the new president of a college who acted as though his position entitled him to take whatever actions he wanted. In the process of interacting primarily with other high-status individuals who shared the majority of his viewpoints and goals, he overlooked or rejected concerns and complaints from people in other parts of the organization. Turmoil and dissension broke out. Morale plummeted. The president eventually suffered votes of no confidence from his college's faculty, staff, and students and was forced to resign.

## Bases of Power in Groups

Within groups, there are a number of different ways in which power can operate. French and Raven (1968) identified five primary ways in which power can be exerted in social situations, including in groups and teams. These are considered to be different bases of power.

### Reference Power

In some cases, person B looks up to or admires person A, and, as a result, B follows A largely because of A's personal qualities, characteristics, or reputation. In this case, A can use referent power to influence B. Referent power has also been called *charismatic power*, because allegiance is based on interpersonal attraction of one individual for another. Examples of referent power can be seen in advertising, where companies use celebrities to recommend their products; it is hoped that the star appeal of the person will rub off on the products. In work environments, junior managers often emulate senior managers and

assume unnecessarily subservient roles more because of personal admiration than because of respect for authority.

## **Expert Power**

Expert power is demonstrated when person A gains power because A has knowledge or expertise relevant to B. For instance, professors presumably have power in the classroom because of their mastery of a particular subject matter. Other examples of expert power can be seen in staff specialists in organizations (e.g., accountants, labor relations managers, management consultants, and corporate attorneys). In each case, the individual has credibility in a particular—and narrow—area as a result of experience and expertise, and this gives the individual power in that domain.

## **Legitimate Power**

Legitimate power exists when person B submits to person A because B feels that A has a right to exert power in a certain domain (Tjosvold, 1985). Legitimate power is really another name for authority. A supervisor has a right, for instance, to assign work. Legitimate power differs from reward and coercive power in that it depends on the official position a person holds, and not on his or her relationship with others.

## **Reward Power**

Reward power exists when person A has power over person B because A controls rewards that B wants. These rewards

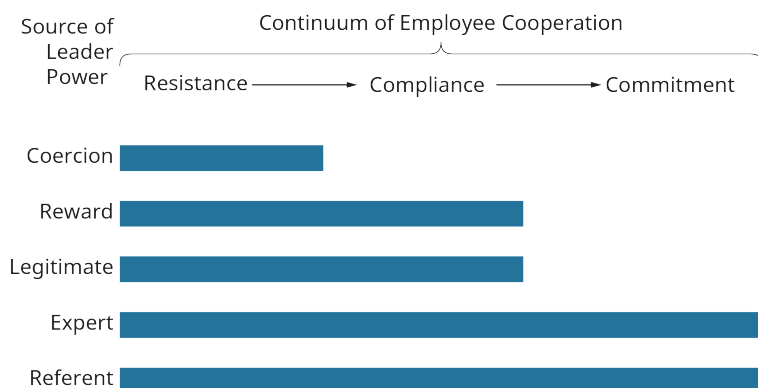
can cover a wide array of possibilities, including pay raises, promotions, desirable job assignments, more responsibility, new equipment, and so forth. Research has indicated that reward power often leads to increased job performance as employees see a strong performance-reward contingency (Shetty, 1978). However, in many organizations, supervisors and managers really do not control very many rewards. For example, salary and promotion among most blue-collar workers is based on a labor contract, not a performance appraisal.

## Coercive Power

Coercive power based primarily on fear. Here, person A has power over person B because A can administer some form of punishment to B. Thus, this kind of power is also referred to as punishment power. As Kipnis (1976) points out, coercive power does not have to rest on the threat of violence. "Individuals exercise coercive power through a reliance upon physical strength, verbal facility, or the ability to grant or withhold emotional support from others. These bases provide the individual with the means to physically harm, bully, humiliate, or deny love to others." Examples of coercive power in organizations include the ability (actual or implied) to fire or demote people, transfer them to undesirable jobs or locations, or strip them of valued perquisites. Indeed, it has been suggested that a good deal of organizational behavior (such as prompt attendance, looking busy, avoiding whistle-blowing) can be attributed to coercive, not reward, power. As Kipnis (1976) explains, "Of all the bases of power available to man, the power to hurt others is possibly the most often used, most often condemned and most difficult to control."

# Consequences of Power

We have seen, then, that at least five bases of power can be identified. In each case, the power of the individual rests on a particular attribute of the power holder, the follower, or their relationship. In some cases (e.g., reward power), power rests in the superior; in others (e.g., referent power), power is given to the superior by the subordinate. In all cases, the exercise of power involves subtle and sometimes threatening interpersonal consequences for the parties involved. In fact, when power is exercised, individuals have several ways in which to respond. These are shown in **Figure 1**.



**Figure 1** (Credit: Rice University Openstax/Employee Reactions to Bases of Power/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

If the subordinate accepts and identifies with the leader, their behavioral response will probably be one of *commitment*. That is, the subordinate will be motivated to follow the wishes of the leader. This is most likely to happen when the person in charge uses referent or expert power. Under these circumstances, the follower

believes in the leader's cause and will exert considerable energies to help the leader succeed.

A second possible response is *compliance*. This occurs most frequently when the subordinate feels the leader has either legitimate power or reward power. Under such circumstances, the follower will comply, either because it is perceived as a duty or because a reward is expected; but commitment or enthusiasm for the project is lacking. Finally, under conditions of coercive power, subordinates will more than likely use *resistance*. Here, the subordinate sees little reason—either altruistic or material—for cooperating and will often engage in a series of tactics to defeat the leader's efforts.

## Power Dependencies

In any situation involving power, at least two persons (or groups) can be identified: (1) the person attempting to influence others and (2) the target or targets of that influence. Until recently, attention focused almost exclusively on how people tried to influence others. More recently attention been given to how people try to nullify or moderate such influence attempts. In particular, we now recognize that the extent to which influence attempts are successful is determined in large part by the **power dependencies** of those on the receiving end of the influence attempts. In other words, all people are not subject to (or dependent upon) the same bases of power. What causes some people to be vulnerable to power attempts? At least three factors have been identified (Mitchell & Larson, 1988).

## Subordinate's Values

To begin, person B's values can influence his susceptibility to influence. For example, if the outcomes that A can influence are important to B, then B is more likely to be open to influence than if the outcomes were unimportant. Hence, if an employee places a high value on money and believes the supervisor actually controls pay raises, we would expect the employee to be highly susceptible to the supervisor's influence. We hear comments about how young people don't really want to work hard anymore. Perhaps a reason for this phenomenon is that some young people don't place a high value on those things (for example, money) that traditionally have been used to influence behavior. In other words, such complaints may really be saying that young people are more difficult to influence than they used to be.

## Nature of Relationship

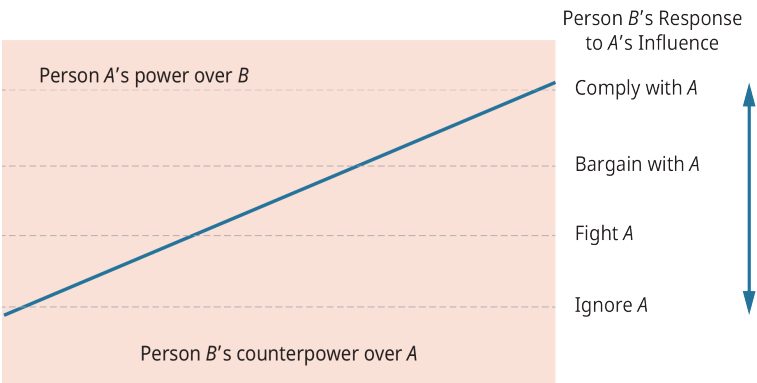
In addition, the nature of the relationship between A and B can be a factor in power dependence. Are A and B peers or superior and subordinate? Is the job permanent or temporary? A person on a temporary job, for example, may feel less need to acquiesce, because he won't be holding the position for long. Moreover, if A and B are peers or good friends, the influence process is likely to be more delicate than if they are superior and subordinate.

## Counterpower

Finally, a third factor to consider in power dependencies is counterpower. The concept of counterpower focuses on the extent to which B has other sources of power to buffer the effects of A's

power. For example, if B is unionized, the union's power may serve to negate A's influence attempts. The use of counterpower can be clearly seen in a variety of situations where various coalitions attempt to bargain with one another and check the power of their opponents.

**Figure 2** presents a rudimentary model that combines the concepts of bases of power with the notion of power dependencies. As can be seen, A's bases of power interact with B's extent of power dependency to determine B's response to A's influence attempt. If A has significant power and B is highly dependent, we would expect B to comply with A's wishes.



**Figure 2** (Credit: Rice University Openstax/Typical Response Patterns in Dyadic Power Relationships/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

If A has more modest power over B, but B is still largely power dependent, B may try to bargain with A. Despite the fact that B *would* be bargaining from an unstable/weaker position, this strategy may serve to protect B's interests better than outright compliance. For instance, if your boss asked you to work overtime, you might attempt to strike a deal whereby you would get compensatory time off at a later date. If successful, although you would not have decreased your working hours, at least you would not have increased them. Where power distribution is more evenly

divided, B may attempt to develop a cooperative working relationship with A in which both parties gain from the exchange. An example of this position is a labor contract negotiation where labor-management relations are characterized by a balance of power and a good working relationship.

If B has more power than A, B will more than likely reject A's influence attempt. B may even become the aggressor and attempt to influence A. Finally, when B is not certain of the power relationships, he may simply try to ignore A's efforts. In doing so, B will discover either that A does indeed have more power or that A cannot muster the power to be successful. A good illustration of this last strategy can be seen in some companies' responses to early governmental efforts to secure equal opportunities for minorities and women. These companies simply ignored governmental efforts until new regulations forced compliance.

## Uses of Power

As we look at our groups and teams as well as our organizations, it is easy to see manifestations of power almost anywhere. In fact, there are a wide variety of power-based methods used to influence others. Here, we will examine two aspects of the use of power: commonly used power tactics and the ethical use of power.

## Common Power Tactics in Organizations

As noted above, many power tactics are available for use. However, as we will see, some are more ethical than others. Here, we look at some of the more commonly used power tactics found in both business and public organizations (Pfeffer, 2011) that also have relevance for groups.

## Controlling Access to Information

Most decisions rest on the availability of relevant information, so persons *controlling access to information* play a major role in decisions made. A good example of this is the common corporate practice of pay secrecy. Only the personnel department and senior managers typically have salary information—and power—for personnel decisions.

## Controlling Access to Persons

Another related power tactic is the practice of *controlling access to persons*. A well-known factor contributing to President Nixon's downfall was his isolation from others. His two senior advisers had complete control over who saw the president. Similar criticisms were leveled against President Reagan.

## Selective Use of Objective Criteria

Very few questions have one correct answer; instead, decisions must be made concerning the most appropriate criteria for evaluating results. As such, significant power can be exercised by those who can practice *selective use of objective criteria* that will lead to a decision favorable to themselves. According to Herbert Simon, if an individual is permitted to select decision criteria, then that person needn't care who actually makes the decision. Attempts to control objective decision criteria can be seen in faculty debates in a university or college over who gets hired or promoted. One group tends to emphasize teaching and will attempt to set criteria for employment dealing with teacher competence, subject area, interpersonal relations, and so on. Another group may emphasize

research and will try to set criteria related to number of publications, reputation in the field, and so on.

## Controlling the Agenda

One of the simplest ways to influence a decision is to ensure that it never comes up for consideration in the first place. There are a variety of strategies used for *controlling the agenda*. Efforts may be made to order the topics at a meeting in such a way that the undesired topic is last on the list. Failing this, opponents may raise a number of objections or points of information concerning the topic that cannot be easily answered, thereby tabling the topic until another day.

## Using Outside Experts

Still another means to gain an advantage is *using outside experts*. The unit wishing to exercise power may take the initiative and bring in experts from the field or experts known to be in sympathy with their cause. Hence, when a dispute arises over spending more money on research versus actual production, we would expect differing answers from outside research consultants and outside production consultants. Most consultants have experienced situations in which their clients fed them information and biases they hoped the consultant would repeat in a meeting.

## Bureaucratic Gamesmanship

In some situations, the organizations own policies and procedures

provide ammunition for power plays, or *bureaucratic gamesmanship*. For instance, a group may drag its feet on making changes in the workplace by creating red tape, work slowdowns, or “work to rule.” (Working to rule occurs when employees diligently follow every work rule and policy statement to the letter; this typically results in the organization’s grinding to a halt as a result of the many and often conflicting rules and policy statements.) In this way, the group lets it be known that the workflow will continue to slow down until they get their way.

## Coalitions and Alliances

The final power tactic to be discussed here is that of *coalitions* and *alliances*. One unit can effectively increase its power by forming an alliance with other groups that share similar interests. This technique is often used when multiple labor unions in the same corporation join forces to gain contract concessions for their workers. It can also be seen in the tendency of corporations within one industry to form trade associations to lobby for their position. Although the various members of a coalition need not agree on everything—indeed, they may be competitors—sufficient agreement on the problem under consideration is necessary as a basis for action.

## Ethical Uses of Power

Several guidelines for the ethical use of power can be identified. These can be arranged according to our previous discussion of the five bases of power, as shown in **Table 1**. As will be noted, several techniques are available that accomplish their aims without compromising ethical standards. For example, a person using

reward power can verify compliance with work directives, ensure that all requests are both feasible and reasonable, make only ethical or proper requests, offer rewards that are valued, and ensure that all rewards for good performance are credible and reasonably attainable.

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**Table 1: The Ethical Use of Power**

<i>Basis of Power</i>	<i>Guidelines for Use</i>
Referent power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Treat subordinates fairly</li><li>• Defend subordinates' interests</li><li>• Be sensitive to subordinates' needs, feelings</li><li>• Select subordinates similar to oneself</li><li>• Engage in role modeling</li></ul>
Expert power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Promote the image of expertise</li><li>• Maintain credibility</li><li>• Act confident and decisive</li><li>• Keep informed</li><li>• Recognize employee concerns</li><li>• Avoid threatening subordinates' self-esteem</li></ul>
Legitimate power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Be cordial and polite</li><li>• Be confident</li><li>• Be clear and follow up to verify understanding</li><li>• Make sure request is appropriate</li><li>• Explain reasons for request</li><li>• Follow proper channels</li><li>• Exercise power regularly</li><li>• Enforce compliance</li><li>• Be sensitive to subordinates' concerns</li></ul>
Reward power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Verify compliance</li><li>• Make feasible, reasonable requests</li><li>• Make only ethical, proper requests</li><li>• Offer rewards desired by subordinates</li><li>• Offer only credible rewards</li></ul>
Coercive power	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inform subordinates of rules and penalties</li><li>• Warn before punishing</li><li>• Administer punishment consistently and uniformly</li><li>• Understand the situation before acting</li><li>• Maintain credibility</li><li>• Fit punishment to the infraction</li><li>• Punish in private</li></ul>

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**Table 1: The Ethical Use of Power**

*Basis of Power      Guidelines for Use*

*Credit: Rice University/Openstax/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Source: Adapted from Yukl (2013).*

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Even coercive power can be used without jeopardizing personal integrity. For example, a manager can make sure that all employees know the rules and penalties for rule infractions, provide warnings before punishing, administer punishments fairly and uniformly, and so forth. The point here is that people have at their disposal numerous tactics that they can employ without abusing their power.

#### *Review & Reflection Questions*

- Prior to reading the chapter, how did you define power? How might power-to, power-from-within and power-with make us think about power differently?
- What is the relationship between power and oppression?
- When you first joined your group, what assumptions did you make about the status of different members? Where did those assumptions come from?
- Identify five bases of power, and provide an example of each. Which base (or bases) of power do you feel would be most commonly found in groups?
- How can we exercise power ethically? What might be some best practices in the context of your group?

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## AUTHOR AND ATTRIBUTION

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The sections “Bases of Power” and “Uses of Power” are adapted from “[Organizational Power and Politics](#)” Black, J.S., & Bright, D.S. (2019). *Organizational behavior*. OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/books/organizational-behavior/>. Access the full chapter for free [here](#). The content is available under a [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 license](#).

The section “Understanding Power and Oppression” is adapted from Palmer, G.L, Fernández, J. S., Lee, G., Masud, H., Hilson, S., Tang, C., Thomas, D., Clark, L., Guzman, B., & Bernai, I. [Oppression and power](#). In L. A. Jason, O. Glantsman, J. F. O’Brien, & K. N. Ramian (Eds.), [Introduction to Community Psychology](#). Pressbooks. <https://press.rebus.community/introductiontocommunitypsychology/>. The content is available under a [Creative Commons Attribution International 4.0 License](#).

## 5. Thinking as a Group

### Thinking as a Group

One of the central aspects of being part of a group is collectively acting and/or making decisions. The ability to participate in a communicative process that values multiple voices and perspectives while coming to some level of agreement is aspirational, but not always what happens. We can look at a number of examples of how groups think together about shared issues of concern in order to better understand what is and isn't helpful when thinking together as part of a group. Charlan Nemeth (2018), in *In Defense of Troublemakers: The Power of Dissent in Life and Business*, makes an important point about consensus potentially swaying our judgments, even when it is in error. As she puts it:

“The more insidious aspect of consensus is that, whether or not we come to agree with the majority, it shapes the way we think. We start to view the world from the majority perspective. whether we are seeking or interpreting information, using a strategy in problem-solving, or finding solutions, we take the perspective of that majority. We think in narrow ways—the majority's ways. On balance, we make poorer decisions and think less creatively when we adopt the majority perspective” (p. 2-3).

Nemeth is quick to point out that dissent also influences our thinking, because “When we are exposed to dissent, our thinking does not narrow as it does when we are exposed to consensus. In fact, dissent broadens our thinking” (Nemeth, 2018, p. 2). The importance of dissenting voices, as will be highlighted in the film [\*Twelve Angry Men\*](#), can have significant impacts on individuals, groups, and society. The power of even a single dissenting voice can stimulate thinking about information so that a better decision

is reached. In the case of the jury in *Twelve Angry Men*, the art of influence and the ability to recognize the dynamics of a group helps us to value the minority perspective or position, not only to experience such a voice as a hurdle to quickly overcome.

The jury, as Gastil (2010, p. 57) argues, “occupies a special place in American law and the public imagination, and the term deliberation derives much of its current meaning from the jury. As a result, any theory that aims to understand how groups make decisions will need to encompass this most famous of small-group decision-making processes.” In *Political Communication and Deliberation*, Gastil (2008, p. 157) writes about analytic and social processes that impact how a group makes decisions through a deliberative process.

<i>Analytic Process</i>	
Create a solid information base.	Consider all of the facts and testimony provided during the trial. Avoid adding personal experiences and biases.
Prioritize the key values at stake.	The paramount values are ensuring justice and the rule of law.
Identify a broad range of solutions.	The judge specifies a range of verdicts or sentences (judgment) the jury can give. No others are available.
Weigh the pros, cons, and trade-offs among solutions.	Consider whether each possible verdict or sentence upholds the relevant laws identified by the judge and serves the larger cause of justice.
Make the best decision possible.	Follow standards for reasonable doubt and other guidelines to render the appropriate verdict or judgment.
<i>Social Process</i>	
Adequately distribute speaking opportunities.	The foreperson and others should ensure a balanced discussion by drawing out quiet jurors and welcoming dissenting jurors to speak up.
Ensure mutual comprehension.	Speak plainly to each other and ask for clarification when confused. Ensure understanding of technical evidence or finer points of law.
Consider other ideas and experiences.	Listen carefully to what others say, especially when you disagree with their view of the case. Try to understand their unique perspective on the case.
Respect other participants.	Presume that each juror is honest and well intentioned. Remember that cases go to trial most often because the parties involved see the facts of the case differently.

The analytic and social processes experienced in the jury room, through deliberation, illuminate the different elements of small group communication. When we think about the interplay between

deliberative communication with concerns about how a group thinks about a common problem or challenge, we confront the power and influence of majority perspectives. The likelihood of groupthink increases, especially when there are external factors that influence the time and commitment to the issue. *Twelve Angry Men* highlights a fictional account of how the actions of one member of a jury could alter the process shaped by a desire for consensus. What comes from the experience of a dissenting voice? This fictional film is a powerful example that shapes how we are to think about the power of a singular voice. As Nemeth (2018, p. 12) puts it, “Good decision-making, at its heart, is *divergent* thinking.” Conversely, bad decision-making is the reverse: “Thinking *convergently*, we focus more narrowly, usually in one direction” (Nemeth, 2018, p. 12-13).

It is important to stress that agreement is not to be opposed. However, moving too quickly to judgment means that groupthink can shape the decision. When groupthink takes over, we can lose the value of each person’s individual input, the experiences, and opinions one brings to bear on a decision or problem, and any of the creative tension from dissent is diminished. It is because of these concerns that Sam Kaner (2014, p. 19), in *Facilitator’s Guide to Participatory Decision-Making*, offers a helpful concept to think about the challenging work for groups moving from divergent thinking to convergent thinking: the groan zone.

## Moving Through the Groan Zone

As Kaner (2014) argues, there is an idealized process for group decision-making. Imagine a sideways diamond and on the far left is the starting point of the awareness of a new topic. It then moves left to right: familiar opinions, diverse perspectives, consolidated thinking, refinements, and finally ending on the far right side of the diamond at a decision point. As Kaner writes, “In theory, a group

that has committed itself to thinking through a difficult problem would move forward in orderly, thoughtful steps. First, the group would generate and explore a diverse set of ideas. Next, they would consolidate the best thinking into a proposal. Then, they'd refine the proposal until they arrived at a final decision that nicely incorporated the breadth of their thinking" (2014, p. 13)."

Kaner acknowledges that the ideal rarely occurs. In practice, it is hard for people to shift from expressing their own opinions to understanding the opinions of others. And it's particularly challenging to do so when a wide diversity of perspectives are in play. As he notes: "In such cases people can get overloaded, disoriented, annoyed, impatient – or all of the above. Some people feel misunderstood and keep repeating themselves. Others push for closure..." (Kaner 2014, p. 14). This is why the idea of "working through" a public issue is so complicated, going beyond simply public opinion to public judgment, a concept that requires a more thoughtful and deliberative engagement with content and others (Yankelovich, 1991).

Working through the groan zone, with a deliberative mindset, is according to Carcasson (2017), is critical because simply giving space for divergent opinion and providing opportunities for voice, access, and free speech ultimately fall short. Multiple viewpoints can be very difficult to handle, but it becomes essential. A process to create space for divergent voices as well as enable them to be in conversation with one another is key to democratic discussion. As Carcasson puts it, "divergent thinking without a good process to handle it often results in frustration, which in turn leads to increased polarization or cynicism—both of which are counterproductive to democratic decision-making" (Carcasson, 2017, p. 7). This is why small groups must ensure they don't fall victim to moving too quickly to agreement—to groupthink.

# The Challenge(r) of Groupthink: A Case

Have you ever thought about speaking up in a meeting and then decided against it because you did not want to appear unsupportive of the group's efforts? Or led a team in which the team members were reluctant to express their own opinions? If so, you have probably been a victim of "groupthink".

Groupthink is a phenomenon that occurs when the desire for group consensus overrides people's common sense desire to present alternatives, critique a position, or express an unpopular opinion. Here, the desire for group cohesion effectively drives out good decision-making and problem solving.

One well-known example of groupthink in action is the Challenger Space Shuttle disaster.

Engineers of the space shuttle knew about the potential of certain parts being a problem in cold weather, specifically "O-rings." But, as the Rogers Commission exploring what happened noted, it was a failure of communication. As spaceflight historian [Amy Shira Teitel \(2021\)](#) wrote about the Commission's findings:

"What it found was a stunning lack of communication—almost as if officials had been playing a game of broken telephone, with the result that incomplete and misleading information reached NASA's top echelons. And among that ill-translated information were concerns about the O-rings. The issue was completely absent from all the flight-readiness documents."

Not wanting negative press, NASA pushed ahead with the launch anyway. There was miscommunication within the organization as well as concern about public opinion because of the State of the Union address by President Reagan taking place just hours after the scheduled launch. The desire to complete this mission and have the ability to the president to laud the space program on a nationally-televised address led to the unfortunate reality of groupthink

costing seven people their lives. The unfortunate thing for those NASA astronauts who died, for NASA, and the United States of America more generally, is that some individuals tried to stop the launch but politics and pressure interfered.

Bob Ebeling was one of five booster rocket engineers at NASA contractor Morton Thiokol who tried to stop the 1986 Challenger launch. As a [2016 NPR article](#) put it, “They worried that cold temperatures overnight — the forecast said 18 degrees — would stiffen the rubber O-ring seals that prevent burning rocket fuel from leaking out of booster joints” (Berkes, 2016). “We all knew if the seals failed, the shuttle would blow up,” said engineer Roger Boisjoly in a [1986 interview](#) with NPR’s Daniel Zwerdling. Engineers with specific knowledge about the shuttle knew what would happen, but groupthink kept their voices sidelined until well after the fateful explosion.

Irving L. Janis coined the term “Groupthink,” and published his research in the 1972 book republished in 1982, *Groupthink : psychological studies of policy decisions and fiascoes*. His findings came from research into why a team reaches an excellent decision one time, and a disastrous one the next. What he found was that a lack of conflict or opposing viewpoints led to poor decisions, because alternatives were not fully analyzed, and because groups did not gather enough information to make an informed decision. Janis suggested that Groupthink happens when there is:

- A strong, persuasive group leader.
- A high level of group cohesion.
- Intense pressure from the outside to make a good decision.

In fact, it is now widely recognized that groupthink-like behavior is found in many situations and across many types of groups and team settings. So it’s important to look out for the key symptoms.

Groupthink is best understood a group pressure phenomenon that increases the risk of the group making flawed decisions by leading to reduced mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral

judgment. According to Janis (1982), groupthink is characterized by eight symptoms that include:



Avoiding groupthink can be a matter of life or death. In January 1986, the space shuttle Challenger exploded 73 seconds after liftoff, killing all seven astronauts aboard. The decision to launch the Challenger that day, despite problems with mechanical components of the vehicle and unfavorable weather conditions, is cited as an example of groupthink. (Credit: NASA/[Challenger flight 51-L crew](#)/Public Domain)

1. *Illusion of invulnerability* shared by most or all of the group members that creates excessive optimism and encourages them to take extreme risks.
2. *Collective rationalizations* where members downplay negative

information or warnings that might cause them to reconsider their assumptions.

3. *An unquestioned belief in the group's inherent morality* that may incline members to ignore ethical or moral consequences of their actions.
4. *Stereotyped views of out-groups* are seen when groups discount rivals' abilities to make effective responses.
5. *Direct pressure* on any member who expresses strong arguments against any of the group's stereotypes, illusions, or commitments.
6. *Self-censorship* when members of the group minimize their own doubts and counterarguments.
7. *Illusions of unanimity* based on self-censorship and direct pressure on the group; the lack of dissent is viewed as unanimity.
8. *The emergence of self-appointed mindguards* where one or more members protect the group from information that runs counter to the group's assumptions and course of action.

Groups do tend to be more likely to suffer from symptoms of groupthink when they are large and when the group is cohesive because the members like each other (Esser, 1998; Mullen et al., 1994). The assumption is that the more frequently a group displays one or more of the eight symptoms, the worse the quality of their decisions will be. However, if your group is cohesive, it is not necessarily doomed to engage in groupthink.

# Recommendations for Avoiding Groupthink

The following are strategies for avoiding groupthink:

## Groups Should:

- Discuss the symptoms of groupthink and how to avoid them.
- Assign a rotating devil's advocate to every meeting.
- Invite experts or qualified colleagues who are not part of the core decision-making group to attend meetings, and get reactions from outsiders

on a regular basis and share these with the group.

- Encourage a culture of difference where different ideas are valued.
- Debate the ethical implications of the decisions and potential solutions being considered.

## Individuals Should:

- Monitor their own behavior for signs of groupthink and modify behavior if needed.
- Check themselves for self-censorship.
- Carefully avoid mindguard behaviors.
- Avoid putting pressure on other group members to conform.
- Remind members of the ground rules for avoiding groupthink if they get off track.

## Group Leaders Should:

- Break the group into two subgroups from time to time.
- Have more than one group work on the same problem if time and resources allow it. This makes sense for highly critical decisions.
- Remain impartial and refrain from stating preferences at the outset of decisions.
- Set a tone of encouraging critical evaluations throughout deliberations.
- Create an anonymous feedback channel where all group members can contribute to if desired.

# Tools That Help You Avoid Groupthink

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## Group Techniques:

<a href="#">Brainstorming</a>	Helps ideas flow freely without criticism.
<a href="#">Modified Borda Count</a>	Allows each group member to contribute individually, so mitigating the risk that stronger and more persuasive group members dominate the decision making process.
<a href="#">Six Thinking Hats</a>	Helps the team look at a problem from many different perspectives, allowing people to play “Devil’s Advocate”.
<a href="#">The Delphi Technique</a>	Allows team members to contribute individually, with no knowledge of a group view, and with little penalty for disagreement.
<a href="#">Risk Analysis</a>	Helps team members explore and manage risk.
<a href="#">Impact Analysis</a>	Ensures that the consequences of a decision are thoroughly explored.
<a href="#">The Ladder of Inference</a>	Helps people check and validate the individual steps of a decision-making process.

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## Key Points

Groupthink can severely undermine the value of a group’s work and, at its worst, it can cost people their lives.

On a lesser scale, it can stifle teamwork, and leave all but the most vocal team members disillusioned and dissatisfied. If you’re on a team that makes a decision you don’t really support but you feel you can’t say or do anything about it, your enthusiasm will quickly fade.

Teams are capable of being much more effective than individuals but, when groupthink sets in, the opposite can be true. By creating a healthy group-working environment, you can help ensure that the group makes good decisions, and manages any associated risks appropriately.

Group techniques such as [Brainstorming](#), the [Modified Borda](#)

[Count](#), and [Six Thinking Hats](#) can help with this, as can other decision making and thinking tools.

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## Authors & Attribution

Sections of this chapter draw from Lindabary, J. R. (Ed.) (2020). *Small Group Communication: Forming & Sustaining Teams*. Emporia, KS: Emporia State University.

## 6. Listening



## Introduction

In our sender-oriented society, listening is often overlooked as an important part of the communication process. Yet research shows that adults spend about 45 percent of their time listening, which is more than any other communicative activity. In some contexts, we spend even more time listening than that. On average, workers spend 55 percent of their workday listening, and managers spend about 63 percent of their day listening (<sup>1</sup>

Listening is a primary means through which we learn new information, which can help us meet instrumental needs as we learn things that helps us complete certain tasks at work or school and get things done in general. The act of listening to our relational partners provides support, which is an important part of relational maintenance and helps us meet our relational needs. Listening to what others say about us helps us develop an accurate self-concept, which can help us more strategically communicate for identity needs in order to project to others our desired self. Overall, improving our listening skills can help us be better students, better relational partners, and more successful professionals.

## Understanding How and Why

1. Hargie, 2017, p. 177).

# We Listen

Listening is the learned process of receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding to verbal and nonverbal messages. We begin to engage with the listening process long before we engage in any recognizable verbal or nonverbal communication. It is only after listening for months as infants that we begin to consciously practice our own forms of expression. In this section we will learn more about each stage of the listening process, the main types of listening, and the main listening styles.

## The Listening Process

Listening is a process and as such doesn't have a defined start and finish. Like the communication process, listening has cognitive, behavioral, and relational elements and doesn't unfold in a linear, step-by-step fashion. Models of processes are informative in that they help us visualize specific components, but keep in mind that they do not capture the speed, overlapping nature, or overall complexity of the actual process in action. The stages of the listening process are receiving, interpreting, recalling, evaluating, and responding.

# Receiving

Before we can engage other steps in the listening process, we must take in stimuli through our senses. In any given communication encounter, it is likely that we will return to the receiving stage many times as we process incoming feedback and new messages. This part of the listening process is more physiological than other parts, which include cognitive and relational elements. We primarily take in information needed for listening through auditory and visual channels. Although we don't often think about visual cues as a part of listening, they influence how we interpret messages. For example, seeing a person's face when we hear their voice allows us to take in nonverbal cues from facial expressions and eye contact. The fact that these visual cues are missing in e-mail, text, and phone interactions presents some difficulties for reading contextual clues into meaning received through only auditory channels.

One's perception impacts the ways in which incoming stimuli are filtered. These perceptual filters also play a role in listening. Some stimuli never make it in, some are filtered into subconsciousness, and others are filtered into various levels of consciousness based on their salience. Recall that salience is the degree to which something attracts our attention in a particular context and that we tend to find salient things that are visually or audibly stimulating and things that meet our needs or interests. Think about how it's much easier to listen to a lecture on a subject that you find very interesting.

It is important to consider noise as a factor that influences how we receive messages. Some noise interferes primarily with hearing, which is the physical process of receiving stimuli through internal and external components of the ears and eyes, and some interferes with listening, which is the cognitive process of processing the stimuli taken in during hearing. While hearing leads to listening, they are not the same thing. Environmental noise such as other people talking, the sounds of traffic, and music interfere with the

physiological aspects of hearing. Psychological noise like stress and anger interfere primarily with the cognitive processes of listening. We can enhance our ability to receive, and in turn listen, by trying to minimize noise.

## Interpreting

During the interpreting stage of listening, we combine the visual and auditory information we receive and try to make meaning out of that information using schemata. The interpreting stage engages cognitive and relational processing as we take in informational, contextual, and relational cues and try to connect them in meaningful ways to previous experiences. It is through the interpreting stage that we may begin to understand the stimuli we have received. When we understand something, we are able to attach meaning by connecting information to previous experiences. Through the process of comparing new information with old information, we may also update or revise particular schemata if we find the new information relevant and credible. If we have difficulty interpreting information, meaning we don't have previous experience or information in our existing schemata to make sense of it, then it is difficult to transfer the information into our long-term memory for later recall. In situations where understanding the information we receive isn't important or isn't a goal, this stage may be fairly short or even skipped. After all, we can move something to our long-term memory by repetition and then later recall it without ever having understood it. I remember earning perfect scores on exams in my anatomy class in college because I was able to

memorize and recall, for example, all the organs in the digestive system. In fact, I might still be able to do that now over a decade later. But neither then nor now could I tell you the significance or function of most of those organs, meaning I didn't really get to a level of understanding but simply stored the information for later recall.

## Recalling

Our ability to recall information is dependent on some of the physiological limits of how memory works. Overall, our memories are known to be fallible. We forget about half of what we hear immediately after hearing it, recall 35 percent after eight hours, and recall 20 percent after a day (<sup>2</sup> Our memory consists of multiple “storage units,” including sensory storage, short-term memory, working memory, and long-term memory (<sup>3</sup>

Our sensory storage is very large in terms of capacity but limited in terms of length of storage. We can hold large amounts of unsorted visual information but only for about a tenth of a second. By comparison, we can hold large amounts of unsorted auditory information for longer—up to four seconds. This initial memory storage unit doesn't provide much use for our study of

2. Hargie, 2017, pp. 189–199).

3. Hargie, 2017, p. 184).

communication, as these large but quickly expiring chunks of sensory data are primarily used in reactionary and instinctual ways.

As stimuli are organized and interpreted, they make their way to short-term memory where they either expire and are forgotten or are transferred to long-term memory. Short-term memory is a mental storage capability that can retain stimuli for twenty seconds to one minute. Long-term memory is a mental storage capability to which stimuli in short-term memory can be transferred if they are connected to existing schema and in which information can be stored indefinitely (<sup>45</sup> Working memory is a temporarily accessed memory storage space that is activated during times of high cognitive demand. When using working memory, we can temporarily store information and process and use it at the same time. This is different from our typical memory function in that information usually has to make it to long-term memory before we can call it back up to apply to a current situation. People with good working memories are able to keep recent information in mind and process it and apply it to other incoming information. This can be very useful during high-stress situations. A person in control of a command center like the White House Situation Room should have a good working memory in order to take in, organize, evaluate, and then immediately use new information instead of having to wait for that information to make it to long-term memory and then be retrieved and used.

Although recall is an important part of the listening process, there isn't a direct correlation between being good at recalling information and being a good listener. Some people have excellent memories and recall abilities and can tell you a very accurate story from many years earlier during a situation in which they should actually be listening and not showing off their recall abilities. Recall is an important part of the listening process because it is most often

4. Hargie, 2017, p. 184)

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used to assess listening abilities and effectiveness. Many quizzes and tests in school are based on recall and are often used to assess how well students comprehended information presented in class, which is seen as an indication of how well they listened. When recall is our only goal, we excel at it. Experiments have found that people can memorize and later recall a set of faces and names with near 100 percent recall when sitting in a quiet lab and asked to do so. But throw in external noise, more visual stimuli, and multiple contextual influences, and we can't remember the name of the person we were just introduced to one minute earlier. Even in interpersonal encounters, we rely on recall to test whether or not someone was listening. Imagine that Aaron is talking to his friend Belle, who is sitting across from him in a restaurant booth. Aaron, annoyed that Belle keeps checking her phone, stops and asks, "Are you listening?" Belle inevitably replies, "Yes," since we rarely fess up to our poor listening habits, and Aaron replies, "Well, what did I just say?"

## Evaluating

When we evaluate something, we make judgments about its credibility, completeness, and worth. In terms of credibility, we try to determine the degree to which we believe a speaker's statements are correct and/or true. In terms of completeness, we try to "read between the lines" and evaluate the message in relation to what we know about the topic or situation being discussed. We evaluate the worth of a message by making a value judgment about whether we think the message or idea is good/bad, right/wrong, or desirable/undesirable. All these aspects of evaluating require critical thinking

skills, which we aren't born with but must develop over time through our own personal and intellectual development.

Studying communication is a great way to build your critical thinking skills, because you learn much more about the taken-for-granted aspects of how communication works, which gives you tools to analyze and critique messages, senders, and contexts. Critical thinking and listening skills also help you take a more proactive role in the communication process rather than being a passive receiver of messages that may not be credible, complete, or worthwhile. One danger within the evaluation stage of listening is to focus your evaluative lenses more on the speaker than the message. This can quickly become a barrier to effective listening if we begin to prejudge a speaker based on his or her identity or characteristics rather than on the content of his or her message. We will learn more about how to avoid slipping into a person-centered rather than message-centered evaluative stance later in the chapter.

## Responding

Responding entails sending verbal and nonverbal messages that indicate attentiveness and understanding or a lack thereof. From our earlier discussion of the communication model, you may be able to connect this part of the listening process to feedback. Later, we will learn more specifics about how to encode and decode the verbal and nonverbal cues sent during the responding stage, but we all know from experience some signs that indicate whether a person is paying attention and understanding a message or not.

We send verbal and nonverbal feedback while another person is

talking and after they are done. Back-channel cues are the verbal and nonverbal signals we send while someone is talking and can consist of verbal cues like “uh-huh,” “oh,” and “right,” and/or nonverbal cues like direct eye contact, head nods, and leaning forward. Back-channel cues are generally a form of positive feedback that indicates others are actively listening. People also send cues intentionally and unintentionally that indicate they aren’t listening. If another person is looking away, fidgeting, texting, or turned away, we will likely interpret those responses negatively.



Listeners respond to speakers nonverbally during a message using back-channel cues and verbally after a message using paraphrasing and clarifying questions.

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Paraphrasing is a responding behavior that can also show that you understand what was communicated. When you paraphrase information, you rephrase the message into your own words. For example, you might say the following to start off a paraphrased response: “What I heard you say...” or “It seems like you’re saying...” You can also ask clarifying questions to get

more information. It is often a good idea to pair a paraphrase with a question to keep a conversation flowing. For example, you might pose the following paraphrase and question pair: “It seems like you believe you were treated unfairly. Is that right?” Or you might ask a standalone question like “What did your boss do that made you think he was ‘playing favorites?’” Make sure to paraphrase and/or ask questions once a person’s turn is over, because interrupting can also be interpreted as a sign of not listening. Paraphrasing is also a good tool to use in computer-mediated communication, especially since miscommunication can occur due to a lack of nonverbal and other contextual cues.

## The Importance of Listening

Understanding how listening works provides the foundation we need to explore why we listen, including various types and styles of listening. In general, listening helps us achieve all the communication goals (physical, instrumental, relational, and identity). Listening is also important in academic, professional, and personal contexts.

In terms of academics, poor listening skills were shown to contribute significantly to failure in a person’s first year of college (In general, students with high scores for listening ability have greater academic achievement. Interpersonal communication skills

6. Zabava and Wolvin, 1993, pp. 215-217).

including listening are also highly sought after by potential employers, consistently ranking in the top ten in national surveys.<sup>7</sup>

Poor listening skills, lack of conciseness, and inability to give constructive feedback have been identified as potential communication challenges in professional contexts. Even though listening education is lacking in our society, research has shown that introductory communication courses provide important skills necessary for functioning in entry-level jobs, including listening, writing, motivating/persuading, interpersonal skills, informational interviewing, and small-group problem solving.<sup>8</sup> Training and improvements in listening will continue to pay off, as employers desire employees with good communication skills, and employees who have good listening skills are more likely to get promoted.

Listening also has implications for our personal lives and relationships. We shouldn't underestimate the power of listening to make someone else feel better and to open our perceptual field to new sources of information. Empathetic listening can help us expand our self and social awareness by learning from other people's experiences and by helping us take on different perspectives. Emotional support in the form of empathetic listening and validation during times of conflict can help relational partners manage common stressors of relationships that may otherwise lead a partnership to deteriorate.<sup>9</sup> The following list reviews some of the main functions of listening that are relevant in multiple contexts.

**The main purposes of listening are:**

- to focus on messages sent by other people or noises coming

7. National Association of Colleges and Employers, *Job Outlook 2011* (2010): 25.

8. DiSalvo, 1980, pp. 283–290).

9. Milardo and Helms-Erikson, (2000), p. 37).

from our surroundings;

- to better our understanding of other people's communication;
- to critically evaluate other people's messages;
- to monitor nonverbal signals;
- to indicate that we are interested or paying attention;
- to empathize with others and show we care for them (relational maintenance); and
- to engage in negotiation, dialogue, or other exchanges that result in shared understanding of or agreement on an issue.

## Listening Types

Listening serves many purposes, and different situations require different types of listening. The type of listening we engage in affects our communication and how others respond to us. For example, when we listen to empathize with others, our communication will likely be supportive and open, which will then lead the other person to feel “heard” and supported and hopefully view the interaction positively (<sup>10</sup> The main types of listening to be discussed are discriminative, informational, critical, and empathetic (<sup>11</sup>

10. Bodie and Villaume, 2003, p. 48).

11. Watson, Barker, and Weaver, 1995, pp. 1–13.

# Discriminative Listening

Discriminative listening is a focused and usually instrumental type of listening that is primarily physiological and occurs mostly at the receiving stage of the listening process. Here we engage in listening to scan and monitor our surroundings in order to isolate particular auditory or visual stimuli. For example, we may focus our listening on a dark part of the yard while walking the dog at night to determine if the noise we just heard presents us with any danger. Or we may look for a particular nonverbal cue to let us know our conversational partner received our message<sup>12</sup> In the absence of a hearing impairment, we have an innate and physiological ability to engage in discriminative listening. Although this is the most basic form of listening, it provides the foundation on which more intentional listening skills are built. This type of listening can be refined and honed. Think of how musicians, singers, and mechanics exercise specialized discriminative listening to isolate specific aural stimuli and how actors, detectives, and sculptors discriminate visual cues that allow them to analyze, make meaning from, or recreate nuanced behavior.

## <sup>13</sup>Informational Listening

Informational listening entails listening with the goal of comprehending and retaining information. This type of listening is not evaluative and is common in teaching and learning contexts

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ranging from a student listening to an informative speech to an out-of-towner listening to directions to the nearest gas station. We also use informational listening when we listen to news reports, voice mail, and briefings at work. Since retention and recall are important components of informational listening, good concentration and memory skills are key. These also happen to be skills that many college students struggle with, at least in the first years of college, but will be expected to have mastered once they get into professional contexts. In many professional contexts, informational listening is important, especially when receiving instructions. I caution my students that they will be expected to process verbal instructions more frequently in their profession than they are in college. Most college professors provide detailed instructions and handouts with assignments so students can review them as needed, but many supervisors and managers will expect you to take the initiative to remember or record vital information. Additionally, many bosses are not as open to questions or requests to repeat themselves as professors are.

## Critical Listening

Critical listening entails listening with the goal of analyzing or evaluating a message based on information presented verbally and information that can be inferred from context. A critical listener evaluates a message and accepts it, rejects it, or decides to withhold judgment and seek more information. As constant consumers of messages, we need to be able to assess the credibility of speakers and their messages and identify various persuasive appeals and

faulty logic (known as fallacies). Critical listening is important during persuasive exchanges, but you can always employ some degree of critical listening. This is because you may find yourself in a persuasive interaction that you thought was informative. People often disguise inferences as facts. Critical-listening skills are useful when listening to a persuasive speech in this class and when processing any of the persuasive media messages we receive daily. You can see judges employ critical listening, with varying degrees of competence, on talent competition shows like *America's Got Talent* or *The Voice*. While the exchanges between judge and contestant on these shows is expected to be subjective and critical, critical listening is also important when listening to speakers that have stated or implied objectivity, such as parents, teachers, political leaders, doctors, and religious leaders. We will learn more about how to improve your critical thinking skills later in this chapter.

## Empathetic Listening

Empathetic listening is the most challenging form of listening and occurs when we try to understand or experience what a speaker is thinking or feeling. Empathetic listening is distinct from sympathetic listening. While the word *empathy* means to “feel into” or “feel with” another person, *sympathy* means to “feel for” someone. Sympathy is generally more self-oriented and distant than

empathy (<sup>14</sup> Empathetic listening is other oriented and should be genuine. Because of our own centrality in our perceptual world, empathetic listening can be difficult. It's often much easier for us to tell our own story or to give advice than it is to really listen to and empathize with someone else. We should keep in mind that sometimes others just need to be heard and our feedback isn't actually desired.

Empathetic listening is key for dialogue and helps maintain interpersonal relationships. In order to reach dialogue, people must have a degree of open-mindedness and a commitment to civility that allows them to be empathetic while still allowing them to believe in and advocate for their own position. An excellent example of critical and empathetic listening in action is the international Truth and Reconciliation movement. The most well-known example of a [Truth and Reconciliation Commission \(TRC\)](#) occurred in South Africa as a way to address the various conflicts that occurred during apartheid. The first TRC in the United States occurred in [Greensboro, North Carolina](#), as a means of processing the events and aftermath of November 3, 1979, when members of the Ku Klux Klan shot and killed five members of the Communist Worker's Party during a daytime confrontation witnessed by news crews and many bystanders. The goal of such commissions is to allow people to tell their stories, share their perspectives in an open environment, and be listened to.

The truth and reconciliation process seeks to heal relations between opposing sides by uncovering all pertinent facts, distinguishing truth from lies, and allowing for acknowledgement, appropriate public mourning, forgiveness and healing. The focus often is on giving victims, witnesses and even perpetrators a chance to publicly tell their stories without fear of prosecution.

# Listening Styles

Just as there are different types of listening, there are also different styles of listening. People may be categorized as one or more of the following listeners: people-oriented, action-oriented, content-oriented, and time-oriented listeners. Research finds that 40 percent of people have more than one preferred listening style, and that they choose a style based on the listening situation (<sup>15</sup> Other research finds that people often still revert back to a single preferred style in times of emotional or cognitive stress, even if they know a different style of listening would be better (<sup>16</sup> Following a brief overview of each listening style, we will explore some of their applications, strengths, and weaknesses.

- **People-oriented listeners** are concerned about the needs and feelings of others and may get distracted from a specific task or the content of a message in order to address feelings.
- **Action-oriented listeners** prefer well-organized, precise, and accurate information. They can become frustrated with they perceive communication to be unorganized or inconsistent, or a speaker to be “long-winded.”
- **Content-oriented listeners** are analytic and enjoy processing complex messages. They like in-depth information and like to learn about multiple sides of a topic or hear multiple perspectives on an issue. Their thoroughness can be difficult to manage if there are time constraints.
- **Time-oriented listeners** are concerned with completing tasks and achieving goals. They do not like information perceived as

15. Bodie and Villaume, 2003, p. 50).

16. Worthington, 2003, p. 82).

irrelevant and like to stick to a timeline. They may cut people off and make quick decisions (taking short cuts or cutting corners) when they think they have enough information.

## People-Oriented Listeners

People-oriented listeners are concerned about the emotional states of others and listen with the purpose of offering support in interpersonal relationships. People-oriented listeners can be characterized as “supporters” who are caring and understanding. These listeners are sought out because they are known as people who will “lend an ear.” They may or may not be valued for the advice they give, but all people often want is a good listener. This type of listening may be especially valuable in interpersonal communication involving emotional exchanges, as a person-oriented listener can create a space where people can make themselves vulnerable without fear of being cut off or judged. People-oriented listeners are likely skilled empathetic listeners and may find success in supportive fields like counseling, social work, or nursing. Interestingly, such fields are typically feminized, in that people often associate the characteristics of people-oriented listeners with roles filled by women. We will learn more about how gender and listening intersect in [Section 5 “Listening and Gender”](#).

# Action-Oriented Listeners

Action-oriented listeners focus on what action needs to take place in regards to a received message and try to formulate an organized way to initiate that action. These listeners are frustrated by disorganization, because it detracts from the possibility of actually doing something. Action-oriented listeners can be thought of as “builders”—like an engineer, a construction site foreperson, or a skilled project manager. This style of listening can be very effective when a task needs to be completed under time, budgetary, or other logistical constraints. One research study found that people prefer an action-oriented style of listening in instructional contexts (<sup>17</sup> In other situations, such as interpersonal communication, action-oriented listeners may not actually be very interested in listening, instead taking a “What do you want me to do?” approach. A friend and colleague of mine who exhibits some qualities of an action-oriented listener once told me about an encounter she had with a close friend who had a stillborn baby. My friend said she immediately went into “action mode.” Although it was difficult for her to connect with her friend at an emotional/empathetic level, she was able to use her action-oriented approach to help out in other ways as she helped make funeral arrangements, coordinated with other family and friends, and handled the details that accompanied this tragic emotional experience. As you can see from this example, the action-oriented listening style often contrasts with the people-oriented listening style.

17. Imhof, 2004, p. 39).

# Content-Oriented Listeners

Content-oriented listeners like to listen to complex information and evaluate the content of a message, often from multiple perspectives, before drawing conclusions. These listeners can be thought of as “learners,” and they also ask questions to solicit more information to fill out their understanding of an issue. Content-oriented listeners often enjoy high perceived credibility because of their thorough, balanced, and objective approach to engaging with information. Content-oriented listeners are likely skilled informational and critical listeners and may find success in academic careers in the humanities, social sciences, or sciences. Ideally, judges and politicians would also possess these characteristics.

# Time-Oriented Listeners

Time-oriented listeners are more concerned about time limits and timelines than they are with the content or senders of a message. These listeners can be thought of as “executives,” and they tend to actually verbalize the time constraints under which they are operating.

For example, a time-oriented supervisor may say the following to an employee who has just entered his office and asked to talk: “Sure, I can talk, but I only have about five minutes.” These listeners may also exhibit nonverbal cues that indicate time and/or attention

shortages, such as looking at a clock, avoiding eye contact, or nonverbally trying to close down an interaction. Time-oriented listeners are also more likely to interrupt others, which may make them seem insensitive to emotional/personal needs. People often get action-oriented and time-oriented listeners confused. Action-oriented listeners would be happy to get to a conclusion or decision quickly if they perceive that they are acting on well-organized and accurate information. They would, however, not mind taking longer to reach a conclusion when dealing with a complex topic, and they would delay making a decision if the information presented to them didn't meet their standards of organization. Unlike time-oriented listeners, action-oriented listeners are not as likely to cut people off (especially if people are presenting relevant information) and are not as likely to take short cuts.

## Barriers to Effective Listening

Barriers to effective listening are present at every stage of the listening process (<sup>18</sup>At the receiving stage, noise can block or distort incoming stimuli. At the interpreting stage, complex or abstract information may be difficult to relate to previous experiences, making it difficult to reach understanding. At the recalling stage, natural limits to our memory and challenges to concentration can interfere with remembering. At the evaluating

18. Hargie, 2017, p. 200).

stage, personal biases and prejudices can lead us to block people out or assume we know what they are going to say. At the responding stage, a lack of paraphrasing and questioning skills can lead to misunderstanding. In the following section, we will explore how environmental and physical factors, cognitive and personal factors, and bad listening practices present barriers to effective listening.

## Environmental and Physical Barriers to Listening

Environmental factors such as lighting, temperature, and furniture affect our ability to listen. A room that is too dark can make us sleepy, just as a room that is too warm or cool can raise awareness of our physical discomfort to a point that it is distracting. Some seating arrangements facilitate listening, while others separate people. In general, listening is easier when listeners can make direct eye contact with and are in close physical proximity to a speaker. When group members are allowed to choose a leader, they often choose the person who is sitting at the center or head of the table<sup>19</sup> Even though the person may not have demonstrated any leadership abilities, people subconsciously gravitate toward speakers that are nonverbally accessible. The ability to effectively see and hear a person increases people's confidence in their abilities to receive

19. .

and process information. Eye contact and physical proximity can still be affected by noise. Environmental noises such as a whirring air conditioner, barking dogs, or a ringing fire alarm can obviously interfere with listening despite direct lines of sight and well-placed furniture.

Physiological noise, like environmental noise, can interfere with our ability to process incoming information. This is considered a physical barrier to effective listening because it emanates from our physical body. Physiological noise is noise stemming from a physical illness, injury, or bodily stress. Ailments such as a cold, a broken leg, a headache, or a poison ivy outbreak can range from annoying to unbearably painful and impact our listening relative to their intensity. Another type of noise, psychological noise, bridges physical and cognitive barriers to effective listening. Psychological noise, or noise stemming from our psychological states including moods and level of arousal, can facilitate or impede listening. Any mood or state of arousal, positive or negative, that is too far above or below our regular baseline creates a barrier to message reception and processing. The generally positive emotional state of being in love can be just as much of a barrier as feeling hatred. Excited arousal can also distract as much as anxious arousal. Stress about an upcoming events ranging from losing a job, to having surgery, to wondering about what to eat for lunch can overshadow incoming messages. While we will explore cognitive barriers to effective listening more in the next section, psychological noise is relevant here given that the body and mind are not completely separate. In fact, they can interact in ways that further interfere with listening. Fatigue, for example, is usually a combination of psychological and physiological stresses that manifests as stress (psychological noise) and weakness, sleepiness, and tiredness (physiological noise). Additionally, mental anxiety (psychological noise) can also manifest itself in our bodies through trembling, sweating, blushing, or even breaking out in rashes (physiological noise).

# Cognitive and Personal Barriers to Listening

Aside from the barriers to effective listening that may be present in the environment or emanate from our bodies, cognitive limits, a lack of listening preparation, difficult or disorganized messages, and prejudices can interfere with listening. Whether you call it multitasking, daydreaming, glazing over, or drifting off, we all cognitively process other things while receiving messages. If you think of your listening mind as a wall of ten televisions, you may notice that in some situations five of the ten televisions are tuned into one channel. If that one channel is a lecture being given by your professor, then you are exerting about half of your cognitive processing abilities on one message. In another situation, all ten televisions may be on different channels. The fact that we have the capability to process more than one thing at a time offers some advantages and disadvantages. But unless we can better understand how our cognitive capacities and personal preferences affect our listening, we are likely to experience more barriers than benefits.

# Difference between Speech and Thought Rate

Our ability to process more information than what comes from one speaker or source creates a barrier to effective listening. While people speak at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute, we can process between 400 and 800 words per minute (<sup>20</sup> This gap between speech rate and thought rate gives us an opportunity to side-process any number of thoughts that can be distracting from a more important message. Because of this gap, it is impossible to give one message our “undivided attention,” but we can occupy other channels in our minds with thoughts related to the central message. For example, using some of your extra cognitive processing abilities to repeat, rephrase, or reorganize messages coming from one source allows you to use that extra capacity in a way that reinforces the primary message.

The difference between speech and thought rate connects to personal barriers to listening, as personal concerns are often the focus of competing thoughts that can take us away from listening and challenge our ability to concentrate on others’ messages. Two common barriers to concentration are self-centeredness and lack of motivation. For example, when our self-consciousness is raised, we may be too busy thinking about how we look, how we’re sitting, or what others think of us to be attentive to an incoming message. Additionally, we are often challenged when presented with messages that we do not find personally relevant. In general, we employ selective attention, which refers to our tendency to pay attention to the messages that benefit us in some way and filter

20. Hargie, 2017, p. 195).

others out. So the student who is checking his or her Twitter feed during class may suddenly switch his or her attention back to the previously ignored professor when the following words are spoken: “This will be important for the exam.”

Another common barrier to effective listening that stems from the speech and thought rate divide is response preparation. Response preparation refers to our tendency to rehearse what we are going to say next while a speaker is still talking. Rehearsal of what we will say once a speaker’s turn is over is an important part of the listening process that takes place between the recalling and evaluation and/or the evaluation and responding stage. Rehearsal becomes problematic when response preparation begins as someone is receiving a message and hasn’t had time to engage in interpretation or recall. In this sense, we are listening with the goal of responding instead of with the goal of understanding, which can lead us to miss important information that could influence our response.

## Lack of Listening Preparation

Another barrier to effective listening is a general lack of listening preparation. Unfortunately, most people have never received any formal training or instruction related to listening. Although some people think listening skills just develop over time, competent listening is difficult, and enhancing listening skills takes concerted effort. Even when listening education is available, people do not embrace it as readily as they do opportunities to enhance their speaking skills. After teaching communication courses for several

years, I have consistently found that students and teachers approach the listening part of the course less enthusiastically than some of the other parts. Listening is often viewed as an annoyance or a chore, or just ignored or minimized as part of the communication process. In addition, our individualistic society values speaking more than listening, as it's the speakers who are sometimes literally in the spotlight. Although listening competence is a crucial part of social interaction and many of us value others we perceive to be "good listeners," listening just doesn't get the same kind of praise, attention, instruction, or credibility as speaking. Teachers, parents, and relational partners explicitly convey the importance of listening through statements like "You better listen to me," "Listen closely," and "Listen up," but these demands are rarely paired with concrete instruction. So unless you plan on taking more communication courses in the future (and I hope you do), this chapter may be the only instruction you receive on the basics of the listening process, some barriers to effective listening, and how we can increase our listening competence.

## Bad Messages and/or Speakers

Bad messages and/or speakers also present a barrier to effective listening. Sometimes our trouble listening originates in the sender. In terms of message construction, poorly structured messages or messages that are too vague, too jargon filled, or too simple can present listening difficulties. In terms of speakers' delivery, verbal fillers, monotone voices, distracting movements, or a disheveled appearance can inhibit our ability to cognitively process a message

(<sup>21</sup> Speakers can employ particular strategies to create listenable messages that take some of the burden off the listener by tailoring a message to be heard and processed easily. Listening also becomes difficult when a speaker tries to present too much information. Information overload is a common barrier to effective listening that good speakers can help mitigate by building redundancy into their speeches and providing concrete examples of new information to help audience members interpret and understand the key ideas.

## Bad Listening Practices

The previously discussed barriers to effective listening may be difficult to overcome because they are at least partially beyond our control. Physical barriers, cognitive limitations, and perceptual biases exist within all of us, and it is more realistic to believe that we can become more conscious of and lessen them than it is to believe that we can eliminate them altogether. Other “bad listening” practices may be habitual, but they are easier to address with some concerted effort. These bad listening practices include interrupting, distorted listening, eavesdropping, aggressive listening, narcissistic listening, and pseudo-listening.

21. Hargie, 2017, p. 196).

# Interrupting

Conversations unfold as a series of turns, and turn taking is negotiated through a complex set of verbal and nonverbal signals that are consciously and subconsciously received. In this sense, conversational turn taking has been likened to a dance where communicators try to avoid stepping on each other's toes. One of the most frequent glitches in the turn-taking process is interruption, but not all interruptions are considered "bad listening." An interruption could be unintentional if we misread cues and think a person is done speaking only to have him or her start up again at the same time we do. Sometimes interruptions are more like overlapping statements that show support (e.g., "I think so too.") or excitement about the conversation (e.g., "That's so cool!"). Back-channel cues like "uh-huh," as we learned earlier, also overlap with a speaker's message. We may also interrupt out of necessity if we're engaged in a task with the other person and need to offer directions (e.g., "Turn left here."), instructions (e.g., "Will you whisk the eggs?"), or warnings (e.g., "Look out behind you!"). All these interruptions are not typically thought of as evidence of bad listening unless they become distracting for the speaker or are unnecessary.

Unintentional interruptions can still be considered bad listening if they result from mindless communication. As we've already learned, intended meaning is not as important as the meaning that is generated in the interaction itself. So if you interrupt unintentionally, but because you were only half-listening, then the interruption is still evidence of bad listening. The speaker may form a negative impression of you that can't just be erased by you noting that you didn't "mean to interrupt." Interruptions can also be used as an attempt to dominate a conversation. A person engaging in this type of interruption may lead the other communicator to try to assert dominance, too, resulting in a competition to see who can hold the floor the longest or the most often. More than likely,

though, the speaker will form a negative impression of the interrupter and may withdraw from the conversation.

## Distorted Listening

Distorted listening occurs in many ways. Sometimes we just get the order of information wrong, which can have relatively little negative effects if we are casually recounting a story, annoying effects if we forget the order of turns (left, right, left or right, left, right?) in our driving directions, or very negative effects if we recount the events of a crime out of order, which leads to faulty testimony at a criminal trial. Rationalization is another form of distorted listening through which we adapt, edit, or skew incoming information to fit our existing schemata. We may, for example, reattribute the cause of something to better suit our own beliefs. If a professor is explaining to a student why he earned a “D” on his final paper, the student could reattribute the cause from “I didn’t follow the paper guidelines” to “this professor is an unfair grader.” Sometimes we actually change the words we hear to make them better fit what we are thinking. This can easily happen if we join a conversation late, overhear part of a conversation, or are being a lazy listener and miss important setup and context. Passing along distorted information can lead to negative consequences ranging from starting a false rumor about someone to passing along incorrect medical

instructions from one health-care provider to the next (<sup>22</sup> Last, the addition of material to a message is a type of distorted listening that actually goes against our normal pattern of listening, which involves reducing the amount of information and losing some meaning as we take it in. The metaphor of “weaving a tall tale” is related to the practice of distorting through addition, as inaccurate or fabricated information is added to what was actually heard. Addition of material is also a common feature of gossip.

## Eavesdropping

Eavesdropping is a bad listening practice that involves a calculated and planned attempt to secretly listen to a conversation. There is a difference between eavesdropping on and overhearing a conversation. Many if not most of the interactions we have throughout the day occur in the presence of other people. However, given that our perceptual fields are usually focused on the interaction, we are often unaware of the other people around us or don't think about the fact that they could be listening in on our conversation. We usually only become aware of the fact that other people could be listening in when we're discussing something private.

People eavesdrop for a variety of reasons. People might think another person is talking about them behind their back or that

22. Hargie, 2017, p. 191).

someone is engaged in illegal or unethical behavior. Sometimes people eavesdrop to feed the gossip mill or out of curiosity (<sup>23</sup> Regardless, this type of listening is considered bad because it is a violation of people's privacy. Consequences for eavesdropping may include an angry reaction if caught, damage to interpersonal relationships, or being perceived as dishonest and sneaky. Additionally, eavesdropping may lead people to find out information that is personally upsetting or hurtful, especially if the point of the eavesdropping is to find out what people are saying behind their back.

## Aggressive Listening

Aggressive listening is a bad listening practice in which people pay attention in order to attack something that a speaker says (<sup>24</sup> Aggressive listeners like to ambush speakers in order to critique their ideas, personality, or other characteristics. Such behavior often results from built-up frustration within an interpersonal relationship. Unfortunately, the more two people know each other, the better they will be at aggressive listening. Take the following exchange between long-term partners:

23. McCornack, 2007, p. 208).

24. McCornack, 2007, p. 209).

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Deb:	I've been thinking about making a salsa garden next to the side porch. I think it would be really good to be able to go pick our own tomatoes and peppers and cilantro to make homemade salsa.
Summer:	Really? When are you thinking about doing it?
Deb:	Next weekend. Would you like to help?
Summer:	I won't hold my breath. Every time you come up with some "idea of the week" you get so excited about it. But do you ever follow through with it? No. We'll be eating salsa from the store next year, just like we are now.

---

Although Summer's initial response to Deb's idea is seemingly appropriate and positive, she asks the question because she has already planned her upcoming aggressive response. Summer's aggression toward Deb isn't about a salsa garden; it's about a building frustration with what Summer perceives as Deb's lack of follow-through on her ideas. Aside from engaging in aggressive listening because of built-up frustration, such listeners may also attack others' ideas or mock their feelings because of their own low self-esteem and insecurities.

## Narcissistic Listening

Narcissistic listening is a form of self-centered and self-absorbed listening in which listeners try to make the interaction about them (25 Narcissistic listeners redirect the focus of the conversation to

them by interrupting or changing the topic. When the focus is taken off them, narcissistic listeners may give negative feedback by pouting, providing negative criticism of the speaker or topic, or ignoring the speaker. A common sign of narcissistic listening is the combination of a “pivot,” when listeners shift the focus of attention back to them, and “one-upping,” when listeners try to top what previous speakers have said during the interaction. You can see this narcissistic combination in the following interaction:

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Bryce:	My boss has been really unfair to me lately and hasn't been letting me work around my class schedule. I think I may have to quit, but I don't know where I'll find another job.
Toby:	Why are you complaining? I've been working with the same stupid boss for two years. He doesn't even care that I'm trying to get my degree and work at the same time. And you should hear the way he talks to me in front of the other employees.

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Narcissistic listeners, given their self-centeredness, may actually fool themselves into thinking that they are listening and actively contributing to a conversation. We all have the urge to share our own stories during interactions, because other people's communication triggers our own memories about related experiences. It is generally more competent to withhold sharing our stories until the other person has been able to speak and we have given the appropriate support and response. But we all shift the focus of a conversation back to us occasionally, either because we don't know another way to respond or because we are making an attempt at empathy. Narcissistic listeners consistently interrupt or follow another speaker with statements like “That reminds me of the time...,” “Well, if I were you...,” and “That's nothing...”<sup>26</sup> As we'll learn later, matching stories isn't considered empathetic listening, but occasionally doing it doesn't make you a narcissistic listener.

26. Nichols, 1995, pp. 68–72).

# Pseudo-listening

Do you have a friend or family member who repeats stories? If so, then you've probably engaged in pseudo-listening as a politeness strategy. Pseudo-listening is behaving as if you're paying attention to a speaker when you're actually not (<sup>27</sup> Outwardly visible signals of attentiveness are an important part of the listening process, but when they are just an "act," the pseudo-listener is engaging in bad listening behaviors. She or he is not actually going through the stages of the listening process and will likely not be able to recall the speaker's message or offer a competent and relevant response. Although it is a bad listening practice, we all understandably engage in pseudo-listening from time to time. If a friend needs someone to talk but you're really tired or experiencing some other barrier to effective listening, it may be worth engaging in pseudo-listening as a relational maintenance strategy, especially if the friend just needs a sounding board and isn't expecting advice or guidance. We may also pseudo-listen to a romantic partner or grandfather's story for the fifteenth time to prevent hurting their feelings. We should avoid pseudo-listening when possible and should definitely avoid making it a listening habit. Although we may get away with it in some situations, each time we risk being "found out," which could have negative relational consequences.

27. McCornack, 2007, p. 208).

# Improving Listening Competence

Many people admit that they could stand to improve their listening skills. This section will help us do that. In this section, we will learn strategies for developing and improving competence at each stage of the listening process. We will also define active listening and the behaviors that go along with it. Looking back to the types of listening discussed earlier, we will learn specific strategies for sharpening our critical and empathetic listening skills. In keeping with our focus on integrative learning, we will also apply the skills we have learned in academic, professional, and relational contexts and explore how culture and gender affect listening.

## Elements of Listening

We can develop competence within each stage of the listening process, as the following list indicates, based on the HURIER model of listening.

The HURIER model (Brownell, 2010, p. 148) is presented as an example of a behavioral approach that understands listening as the central communication function. In this framework, listening-centered communication is conceived as a cluster of interrelated,

overlapping components. In total, these six clusters allow one to think through the different elements of the listening process.

### **Component 1: Hearing messages**

Improve concentration

Use vocalized listening technique Prepare to listen

### **Component 2: Understanding messages**

Recognize assumptions

Listen to entire message without interrupting Distinguish main ideas from evidence Perception check for accurate comprehension

### **Component 3: Remembering messages**

Understand how memory works

Isolate and practice each memory process Practice with difficult material

### **Component 4: Interpreting messages**

Understand the nature of empathy Increase sensitivity to nonverbal cues Increase sensitivity to vocal cues Monitor personal nonverbal behaviors

### **Component 5: Evaluating messages**

Assess the speaker's credibility Recognize your personal bias Analyze logic and reasoning Identify emotional appeals

### **Component 6: Responding to messages**

Become familiar with response options Recognize the impact of each response option Increase behavioral flexibility

## Active Listening

Active listening refers to the process of pairing outwardly visible

positive listening behaviors with positive cognitive listening practices. Active listening can help address many of the environmental, physical, cognitive, and personal barriers to effective listening that we discussed earlier. The behaviors associated with active listening can also enhance informational, critical, and empathetic listening.

Being an active listener starts before you actually start receiving a message. Active listeners make strategic choices and take action in order to set up ideal listening conditions. Physical and environmental noises can often be managed by moving locations or by manipulating the lighting, temperature, or furniture. When possible, avoid important listening activities during times of distracting psychological or physiological noise. For example, we often know when we're going to be hungry, full, more awake, less awake, more anxious, or less anxious, and advance planning can alleviate the presence of these barriers. For college students, who often have some flexibility in their class schedules, knowing when you best listen can help you make strategic choices regarding what class to take when. And student options are increasing, as some colleges are offering classes in the overnight hours to accommodate working students and students who are just "night owls." Of course, we don't always have control over our schedule, in which case we will need to utilize other effective listening strategies that we will learn more about later in this chapter.

In terms of cognitive barriers to effective listening, we can prime ourselves to listen by analyzing a listening situation before it begins. For example, you could ask yourself the following questions:

1. "What are my goals for listening to this message?"
2. "How does this message relate to me / affect my life?"
3. "What listening type and style are most appropriate for this message?"

As noted earlier, the difference between speech and thought processing rate means listeners' level of attention varies while

receiving a message. Effective listeners must work to maintain focus as much as possible and refocus when attention shifts or fades<sup>28</sup> One way to do this is to find the motivation to listen. If you can identify intrinsic and or extrinsic motivations for listening to a particular message, then you will be more likely to remember the information presented. Ask yourself how a message could impact your life, your career, your intellect, or your relationships. This can help overcome our tendency toward selective attention. As senders of messages, we can help listeners by making the relevance of what we're saying clear and offering well-organized messages that are tailored for our listeners. We will learn much more about establishing relevance, organizing a message, and gaining the attention of an audience in public speaking contexts later in the book.

Given that we can process more words per minute than people can speak, we can engage in internal dialogue, making good use of our intrapersonal communication, to become a better listener. Three possibilities for internal dialogue include covert coaching, self-reinforcement, and covert questioning; explanations and examples of each follow (<sup>29</sup>

- **Covert coaching** involves sending yourself messages containing advice about better listening, such as “You’re getting distracted by things you have to do after work. Just focus on what your supervisor is saying now.”
- **Self-reinforcement** involves sending yourself affirmative and positive messages: “You’re being a good active listener. This will help you do well on the next exam.”
- **Covert questioning** involves asking yourself questions about the content in ways that focus your attention and reinforce the material: “What is the main idea from that PowerPoint slide?”

28. .

29. Hargie, 2017, p. 193).

“Why is he talking about his brother in front of our neighbors?”

Internal dialogue is a more structured way to engage in active listening, but we can use more general approaches as well. I suggest that students occupy the “extra” channels in their mind with thoughts that are related to the primary message being received instead of thoughts that are unrelated. We can use those channels to resort, rephrase, and repeat what a speaker says. When we resort, we can help mentally repair disorganized messages. When we rephrase, we can put messages into our own words in ways that better fit our cognitive preferences. When we repeat, we can help messages transfer from short-term to long-term memory.

Other tools can help with concentration and memory. Mental bracketing refers to the process of intentionally separating out intrusive or irrelevant thoughts that may distract you from listening (<sup>30</sup> This requires that we monitor our concentration and attention and be prepared to let thoughts that aren't related to a speaker's message pass through our minds without us giving them much attention. Mnemonic devices are techniques that can aid in information recall (<sup>31</sup> Starting in ancient Greece and Rome, educators used these devices to help people remember information. They work by imposing order and organization on information. Three main mnemonic devices are acronyms, rhymes, and visualization, and examples of each follow:

- **Acronyms.** HOMES—to help remember the Great Lakes (Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, and Superior).
- **Rhyme.** “Righty tighty, lefty loosey”—to remember which way most light bulbs, screws, and other coupling devices turn to make them go in or out.
- **Visualization.** Imagine seeing a glass of port wine (which is

30. McCornack, 2007, p. 192).

31. Hargie, 2017, p. 190.

red) and the red navigation light on a boat to help remember that the red light on a boat is always on the port side, which will also help you remember that the blue light must be on the starboard side.

## Listening in Relational Contexts

Listening plays a central role in establishing and maintaining our relationships. Without some listening competence, we wouldn't be able to engage in the self-disclosure process, which is essential for the establishment of relationships. Newly acquainted people get to know each other through increasingly personal and reciprocal disclosures of personal information. In order to reciprocate a conversational partner's disclosure, we must process it through listening. Once relationships are formed, listening to others provides a psychological reward, through the simple act of recognition, that helps maintain our relationships. Listening to our relational partners and being listened to in return is part of the give-and-take of any interpersonal relationship. Our thoughts and experiences "back up" inside of us, and getting them out helps us maintain a positive balance (<sup>32</sup> So something as routine and seemingly pointless as listening to our romantic partner debrief the events of his or her day or our roommate recount his or her weekend back home shows that we are taking an interest in their lives and are willing to put our own needs and concerns aside for a moment to attend to their needs. Listening also closely ties to conflict, as a lack of listening often plays a large role in creating conflict, while effective listening helps us resolve it.

Listening has relational implications throughout our lives, too. Parents who engage in competent listening behaviors with their children from a very young age make their children feel worthwhile

32. Nelson-Jones, 2006, p. 34–35).

and appreciated, which affects their development in terms of personality and character (Ni<sup>33</sup>

A lack of listening leads to feelings of loneliness, which results in lower self-esteem and higher degrees of anxiety. In fact, by the age of four or five years old, the empathy and recognition shown by the presence or lack of listening has molded children's personalities in noticeable ways (<sup>34</sup> Children who have been listened to grow up expecting that others will be available and receptive to them. These children are therefore more likely to interact confidently with teachers, parents, and peers in ways that help develop communication competence that will be built on throughout their lives. Children who have not been listened to may come to expect that others will not want to listen to them, which leads to a lack of opportunities to practice, develop, and hone foundational communication skills. Fortunately for the more-listened-to children and unfortunately for the less-listened-to children, these early experiences become predispositions that don't change much as the children get older and may actually reinforce themselves and become stronger.

## Listening and Culture

Some cultures place more importance on listening than other

33. chols, 1995, p. 25).

34. Nichols, 1995, p. 32).

cultures. In general, collectivistic cultures tend to value listening more than individualistic cultures that are more speaker oriented. The value placed on verbal and nonverbal meaning also varies by culture and influences how we communicate and listen. A low-context communication style is one in which much of the meaning generated within an interaction comes from the verbal communication used rather than nonverbal or contextual cues. Conversely, much of the meaning generated by a high-context communication style comes from nonverbal and contextual cues. For example, US Americans of European descent generally use a low-context communication style, while people in East Asian and Latin American cultures use a high-context communication style.

Contextual communication styles affect listening in many ways. Cultures with a high-context orientation generally use less verbal communication and value silence as a form of communication, which requires listeners to pay close attention to nonverbal signals and consider contextual influences on a message. Cultures with a low-context orientation must use more verbal communication and provide explicit details, since listeners aren't expected to derive meaning from the context. Note that people from low-context cultures may feel frustrated by the ambiguity of speakers from high-context cultures, while speakers from high-context cultures may feel overwhelmed or even insulted by the level of detail used by low-context communicators. Cultures with a low-context communication style also tend to have a monochronic orientation toward time, while high-context cultures have a polychronic time orientation, which also affects listening.

Cultures that favor a structured and commodified orientation toward time are said to be monochronic, while cultures that favor a more flexible orientation are polychronic. Monochronic cultures like the United States value time and action-oriented listening styles, especially in professional contexts, because time is seen as

a commodity that is scarce and must be managed (<sup>35</sup> This is evidenced by leaders in businesses and organizations who often request “executive summaries” that only focus on the most relevant information and who use statements like “Get to the point.” Polychronic cultures value people and content-oriented listening styles, which makes sense when we consider that polychronic cultures also tend to be more collectivistic and use a high-context communication style. In collectivistic cultures, indirect communication is preferred in cases where direct communication would be considered a threat to the other person’s face (desired public image). For example, flatly turning down a business offer would be too direct, so a person might reply with a “maybe” instead of a “no.” The person making the proposal, however, would be able to draw on contextual clues that they implicitly learned through socialization to interpret the “maybe” as a “no.”

## Listening and Gender

Research on gender and listening has produced mixed results. As we’ve already learned, much of the research on gender differences and communication has been influenced by gender stereotypes and falsely connected to biological differences. More recent research has found that people communicate in ways that conform to gender stereotypes in some situations and not in others, which shows that

35. McCornack, 2007, p. 205).

our communication is more influenced by societal expectations than by innate or gendered “hard-wiring.” For example, through socialization, men are generally discouraged from expressing emotions in public. A woman sharing an emotional experience with a man may perceive the man’s lack of emotional reaction as a sign of inattentiveness, especially if he typically shows more emotion during private interactions. The man, however, may be listening but withholding nonverbal expressiveness because of social norms. He may not realize that withholding those expressions could be seen as a lack of empathetic or active listening. Researchers also dispelled the belief that men interrupt more than women do, finding that men and women interrupt each other with similar frequency in cross-gender encounters.<sup>36</sup> So men may interrupt each other more in same-gender interactions as a conscious or subconscious attempt to establish dominance because such behaviors are expected, as men are generally socialized to be more competitive than women. However, this type of competitive interrupting isn’t as present in cross-gender interactions because the contexts have shifted.

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# 7. Deciding as a Group

## *Learning Objectives*

- Understand the pros and cons of individual and group decision-making
- Compare and contrast different group decision-making methods
- Describe strategies for reaching consensus
- Recognize the signs of groupthink

When it comes to decision-making, are two heads better than one? The answer to this question depends on several factors. In this chapter, we will discuss the advantages and drawbacks of group decision-making and identify different methods for making decisions as a group. We will also offer strategies for reaching consensus and address one of the common flaws in group decision-making — groupthink.

## Advantages and Disadvantages of Group Decision-Making

Group decision-making has the advantage of drawing from the experiences and perspectives of a larger number of individuals. Hence, the ideas have the potential to be more creative and lead to

a more effective decision. In fact, groups may sometimes achieve results beyond what they could have done as individuals. Groups also make the task more enjoyable for members in question. Finally, when the decision is made by a group rather than a single individual, implementation of the decision will be easier because group members will be invested in the decision. If the group is diverse, better decisions may be made because different group members may have different ideas based on their background and experiences. Research shows that for top management teams, groups that debate issues and that are diverse make decisions that are more comprehensive and better for the bottom line in terms of profitability and sales (Simons et al., 1999).

<sup>1</sup>Despite its popularity within organizations, group decision-making suffers from a number of disadvantages. While groups have the potential to arrive at an effective decision, they often suffer from process losses (Miner, 1984). For example, groups may suffer from coordination problems. Anyone who has worked with a team of individuals on a project can attest to the difficulty of coordinating members' work or even coordinating everyone's presence in a team meeting. Furthermore, groups can suffer from social loafing, as discussed in previously. Groups may also suffer from groupthink, the tendency to avoid critical evaluation of ideas the group favors, as will be discussed later in this chapter. Finally, group decision-making takes a longer time compared with individual decision-making, given that all members need to discuss their thoughts regarding different alternatives.

Thus, whether an individual or a group decision is preferable will depend on the specifics of the situation. For example, if there is an emergency and a decision needs to be made quickly, individual decision-making might be preferred. Individual decision-making may also be appropriate if the individual in question has all the information needed to make the decision and if implementation

problems are not expected. However, if one person does not have all the information and skills needed to make the decision, if implementing the decision will be difficult without the involvement of those who will be affected by the decision, and if time urgency is more modest, then decision-making by a group may be more effective.

## Methods of Making Decisions

Research does indicate that groups generate more ideas and make more accurate decisions on matters for which a known preferred solution exists, but they also operate more slowly than individuals (Hoy et al., 1982). Under time pressure and

other constraints, some group leaders exercise their power to make a decision unilaterally—alone—because they’re willing to sacrifice a degree of accuracy for the sake of speed. Sometimes this behavior turns out to be wise; sometimes it doesn’t.

Assuming that a group determines that it must reach a decision together on some matter, rather than deferring to the will of a single person, it can proceed according to several methods. Parker and Hoffman (2006), along with Hartley and Dawson (2010), place decision-making procedures in several categories. Here is a synthesis of their views of how decision-making can take place:

### “A Plop”

A group may conduct a discussion in which members express views and identify alternatives but then reach no decision and take no action. When people go their own ways after such a “plop,” things sometimes take care of themselves, and the lack of a decision causes

no difficulties. On the other hand, if a group ignores or postpones a decision which really needs attention, its members may confront tougher decisions later—some of which may deal with problems brought about by not addressing a topic when it was at an early stage.

## Delegation to an Expert

In some cases, groups may make a decision by relying on experts and their expertise. A group may not be ready to make a decision at a given time, either because it lacks sufficient information or is experiencing unresolved conflict among members with differing views. In such a situation, the group may not want to simply drop the matter and move on. Instead, it may turn to one of its members who everyone feels has the expertise to choose wisely among the alternatives that the group is considering. The group may also turn to an outside expert, someone who is external to the group who may be able to provide guidance. The group can either ask the expert to come back later with a final proposal or simply allow the person to make the decision alone after having gathered whatever further information he or she feels is necessary.

## Averaging

Group members may shift their individual stances regarding a question by “splitting the difference” to reach a “middle ground.” This technique tends to work most easily if numbers are involved. For instance, a group trying to decide how much money to spend on a gift for a departing member might ask everyone for a preferred amount and agree to spend whatever is computed by averaging those amounts.

## Voting

If you need to be quick and definitive in making a decision, voting is probably the best method. Everyone in mainstream American society is familiar with the process, for one thing, and its outcome is inherently clear and obvious. A majority vote requires that more than half of a group's members vote for a proposal, whereas a proposal subject to a two-thirds vote will not pass unless twice as many members show support as those who oppose it.

Voting is essentially a win/lose activity. You can probably remember a time when you or someone else in a group composed part of a strong and passionate minority whose desires were thwarted because of the results of a vote. How much commitment did you feel to support the results of that vote?

Voting does offer a quick and simple way to reach decisions, but it works better in some situations than in others. If the members of a group see no other way to overcome a deadlock, for instance, voting may make sense. Likewise, very large groups and those facing serious time constraints may see advantages to voting. Finally, the efficiency of voting is appealing when it comes to making routine or noncontroversial decisions that need only to be officially approved.

## Consensus

Consensus is another decision-making rule that groups may use when the goal is to gain support for an idea or plan of action. While consensus tends to take longer in the first place, it may make sense when support is needed to enact the plan. The process works by discussing the issues, generating a proposal, calling for consensus, and discussing any concerns. If concerns still exist, the proposal is modified to accommodate them. These steps are repeated until consensus is reached. Thus, this decision-making rule is inclusive,

participatory, cooperative, and democratic. Research shows that consensus can lead to better accuracy (Roch, 2007), and it helps members feel greater satisfaction with decisions (Mohammed & Ringseis, 2001) and to have greater acceptance. However, groups take longer with this approach and groups that cannot reach consensus become frustrated (Peterson, 1999).<sup>2</sup>



*While it can be challenging and time consuming, consensus is considered to be the most ideal method of decision-making. (Clay Banks/[We Are Better When We are United](#)/Unsplash)*

Consensus should not be confused with unanimity, which means only that no one has explicitly stated objections to a proposal or decision. Although unanimity can certainly convey an accurate perspective of a group's views at times, groupthink, as discussed below, also often leads to unanimous decisions. Therefore, it's

probably wise to be cautious when a group of diverse people seems to have formed a totally unified bloc with respect to choices among controversial alternatives.

When a consensus decision is reached through full interchange of views and is then adopted in good faith by all parties to a discussion, it can energize and motivate a group. Besides avoiding the win/lose elements intrinsic to voting, it converts each member's investment in a decision into a stake in preserving and promoting the decision after it has been agreed upon.

## Guidelines for Seeking Consensus

How can a group actually go about working toward consensus? Here are some guidelines for the process:

- **First, be sure everyone knows the definition of consensus and is comfortable with observing them.** For many group members, this may mean suspending judgment and trying something they've never done before. Remind people that consensus requires a joint dedication to moving forward toward improvement in and by the group.
- **Second, endeavor to solicit participation by every member of the group.** Even the naturally quietest person should be actively "polled" from time to time for his or her perspectives. In fact, it's a good idea to take special pains to ask for varied viewpoints when discussion seems to be stalled or

contentious.

- **Third, listen honestly and openly to each group member's viewpoints.** Attempt to seek and gather information from others. Do your best to subdue your emotions and your tendency to judge and evaluate.
- **Fourth, be patient.** To reach consensus often takes much more time than voting would. A premature “agreement” reached because people give in to speed things up or avoid conflict is likely later to weaken or fall apart.
- **Fifth, always look for mutually acceptable ways to make it through challenging circumstances.** Don't resort to chance mechanisms like flipping a coin, and don't trade decisions arbitrarily just so that things come out equally for people who remain committed to opposing views.
- **Sixth, resolve gridlock earnestly.** Stop and ask, “Have we really identified every possible feasible way that our group might act?” If members of a group simply can't agree on one alternative, see if they can all find and accept a next-best option. Then be sure to request an explicit statement from them that they are prepared to genuinely commit themselves to that option.

One variation on consensus decision-making calls upon a group's leader to ask its members, before initiating a discussion, to agree to a *deadline* and a “*safety valve*.” The deadline would be a time by which everyone in the group feels they need to have reached a decision. The “safety valve” would be a statement that any member can veto the will of the rest of the group to act in a certain way, but only if he or she takes responsibility for moving the group forward in some other positive direction.

Although consensus entails full participation and assent within a group, it usually can't be reached without guidance from a leader. One college president we knew was a master at escorting his executive team to consensus. Without coercing or rushing them, he would regularly involve them all in discussions and lead their

conversations to a point at which everyone was nodding in agreement, or at least conveying acceptance of a decision. Rather than leaving things at that point, however, the president would generally say, “We seem to have reached a decision to do XYZ. Is there anyone who objects?” Once people had this last opportunity to add further comments of their own, the group could move forward with a sense that it had a common vision in mind.

Consensus decision-making is easiest within groups whose members know and respect each other, whose authority is more or less evenly distributed, and whose basic values are shared. Some charitable and religious groups meet these conditions and have long been able to use consensus decision-making as a matter of principle. The Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers, began using consensus as early as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Its affiliated international service agency, the American Friends Service Committee, employs the same approach. The Mennonite Church has also long made use of consensus decision-making.

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# 8. Conflict

## *Learning Objectives*

- Define conflict
- Differentiate between functional and dysfunctional conflict
- Recognize various types of conflict in groups
- Describe the conflict process
- Identify and apply strategies for preventing or reducing conflict in groups

Most people probably regard conflict as something to avoid, or at least not something we go looking for. Still, we'd all agree that it's a familiar, perennial, and powerful part of human interaction, including among groups and teams. In this chapter, we will define conflict, consider whether conflict is functional or dysfunctional, discuss the conflict process, and identify strategies for preventing and reducing conflict in groups.

## Definitions of Conflict

Hocker and Wilmot (2001) defined conflict as an expressed struggle between interdependent parties over goals which they perceive as incompatible or resources which they perceive to be insufficient. Let's examine the ingredients in their definition.

First of all, conflict must be expressed. If two members of a group dislike each other or disagree with each other's viewpoints but never show those sentiments, there's no conflict.

Second, conflict takes place between or among parties who are interdependent—that is, who need each other to accomplish something. If they can get what they want without each other, they may differ in how they do so, but they won't come into conflict.

Finally, conflict involves clashes over what people want or over the means for them to achieve it. Party A wants X, whereas party B wants Y. If they either can't both have what they want at all, or they can't each have what they want to the degree that they would prefer to, conflict will arise.

## Positive and Negative Aspects of Conflict

There are some circumstances in which a moderate amount of conflict can be helpful. For example, conflict can stimulate innovation and change. Conflict can help individuals and group members grow and develop self-identities. As noted by Coser (1956):

*Conflict, which aims at a resolution of tension between antagonists, is likely to have stabilizing and integrative functions for the relationship. By permitting immediate and direct expression of rival claims, such social systems are able to readjust their structures by eliminating their sources of dissatisfaction. The multiple conflicts which they experience may serve to eliminate the causes for dissociation and to reestablish unity. These systems avail themselves, through the toleration and institutionalization of conflict, of an important stabilizing mechanism.*

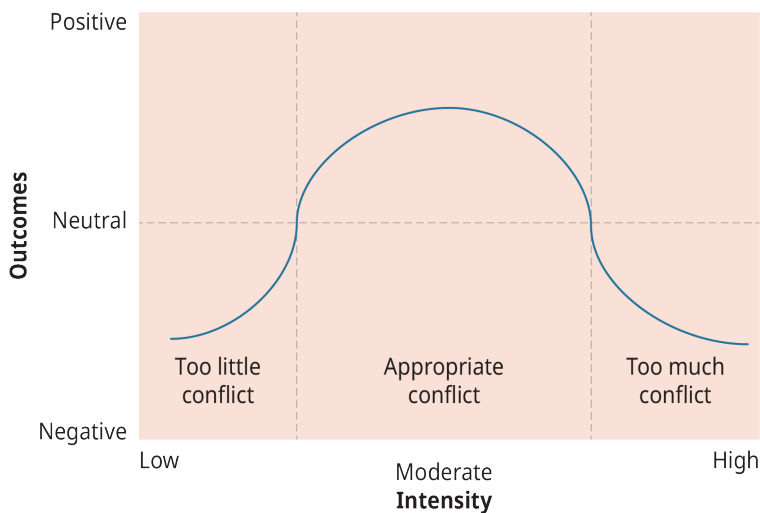
Conflict can have negative consequences when people divert energies away from performance and goal attainment and direct them toward resolving the conflict. Continued conflict can take a heavy toll in terms of psychological well-being. Conflict has a major influence on stress and the psychophysical consequences of stress.

Finally, continued conflict can also affect the social climate of the group and inhibit group cohesiveness.



*While often perceived as negative, some conflict can actually be productive.*  
(Credit: Arisa Chattasa/[Never Give Up for Boxing](#)/Unsplash)

Thus, conflict can be either functional or dysfunctional depending upon the nature of the conflict, its intensity, and its duration. Indeed, both too much and too little conflict can lead to a variety of negative outcomes, as discussed above. This is shown in **Figure 1**. In such circumstances, a moderate amount of conflict may be the best course of action. The issue for groups, therefore, is not how to eliminate conflict but rather how to manage and resolve it when it occurs.



**Figure 1:** The Relationship Between Conflict Intensity and Outcomes. Adapted from Brown (1986). (Credit: Rice University/OpenStax/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

## Types of Conflict

Group conflicts may deal with many topics, needs, and elements. Kelly (2006) identified the following five types of conflict:

First, there are **conflicts of substance**. These conflicts, which relate to questions about what choices to make in a given situation, rest on differing views of the facts. If Terry thinks the biology assignment requires an annotated bibliography but Robin believes a simple list of readings will suffice, they're in a conflict of substance. Another term for this kind of conflict is "intrinsic conflict."

**Conflicts of value** are those in which various parties either hold totally different values or rank the same values in a significantly different order. The famous sociologist Milton Rokeach (1979), for instance, found that freedom and equality constitute values in the four major political systems of the past 100 years—communism, fascism, socialism, and capitalism. What differentiated the systems,

however, was the degree to which proponents of each system ranked those two key values. According to Rokeach's analysis, socialism holds both values highly; fascism holds them in low regard; communism values equality over freedom, and capitalism values freedom over equality. As we all know, conflict among proponents of these four political systems preoccupied people and governments for the better part of the twentieth century.

**Conflicts of process** arise when people differ over how to reach goals or pursue values which they share. How closely should they stick to rules and timelines, for instance, and when should they let their hair down and simply brainstorm new ideas? What about when multiple topics and challenges are intertwined; how and when should the group deal with each one? Another term for these disputes is "task conflicts."

**Conflicts of misperceived differences** come up when people interpret each other's actions or emotions erroneously. You can probably think of several times in your life when you first thought you disagreed with other people but later found out that you'd just misunderstood something they said and that you actually shared a perspective with them. Or perhaps you attributed a different motive to them than what really underlay their actions. One misconception about conflict, however, is that it always arises from misunderstandings. This isn't the case, however. Robert Doolittle (1976) noted that "some of the most serious conflicts occur among individuals and groups who understand each other very well but who strongly disagree."

The first four kinds of conflict may interact with each other over time, either reinforcing or weakening each other's impact. They may also ebb and flow according to the topics and conditions a group confronts. Even if they're dealt with well, however, further emotional and personal kinds of conflict can occur in a group. **Relationship conflicts**, also known as personality clashes, often involve people's egos and sense of self-worth. Relationship conflicts tend to be particularly difficult to cope with, since they

frequently aren't admitted for what they are. Many times, they arise in a struggle for superiority or status.

## **A Model of the Conflict Process**

The most commonly accepted model of the conflict process was developed by Kenneth Thomas (1976). This model consists of four stages: (1) frustration, (2) conceptualization, (3) behavior, and (4) outcome.

### **Stage 1: Frustration**

As we have seen, conflict situations originate when an individual or group feels frustration in the pursuit of important goals. This frustration may be caused by a wide variety of factors, including disagreement over performance goals, failure to get a promotion or pay raise, a fight over scarce economic resources, new rules or policies, and so forth. In fact, conflict can be traced to frustration over almost anything a group or individual cares about.

### **Stage 2: Conceptualization**

In stage 2, the conceptualization stage of the model, parties to the conflict attempt to understand the nature of the problem, what they themselves want as a resolution, what they think their opponents want as a resolution, and various strategies they feel each side may employ in resolving the conflict. This stage is really the problem-solving and strategy phase. For instance, when management and union negotiate a labor contract, both sides attempt to decide what

is most important and what can be bargained away in exchange for these priority needs.

## Stage 3: Behavior

The third stage in Thomas's model is actual *behavior*. As a result of the conceptualization process, parties to a conflict attempt to implement their resolution mode by competing or accommodating in the hope of resolving problems. A major task here is determining how best to proceed strategically. That is, what tactics will the party use to attempt to resolve the conflict? Thomas has identified five modes for conflict resolution: (1) competing, (2) collaborating, (3) compromising, (4) avoiding, and (5) accommodating (see **Table 1**).

The choice of an appropriate conflict resolution mode depends to a great extent on the situation and the goals of the party (see **Figure 2**). According to this model, each party must decide the extent to which it is interested in satisfying its own concerns—called assertiveness—and the extent to which it is interested in helping satisfy the opponent's concerns—called cooperativeness. Assertiveness can range from assertive to unassertive on one continuum, and cooperativeness can range from uncooperative to cooperative on the other continuum.

Once the parties have determined their desired balance between the two competing concerns—either consciously or unconsciously—the resolution strategy emerges. For example, if a union negotiator feels confident she can win on an issue that is of primary concern to union members (e.g., wages), a direct competition mode may be chosen (see upper left-hand corner of **Figure 2**). On the other hand, when the union is indifferent to an issue or when it actually supports management's concerns (e.g., plant safety), we would expect an accommodating or collaborating mode (on the right-hand side of the figure).

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**Table 1 — Five Modes of Resolving Conflict**

<b>Conflict-Handling Modes</b>	<b>Appropriate Situations</b>
Competing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When quick, decisive action is vital—e.g., emergencies</li><li>2. On important issues where unpopular actions need implementing—e.g., cost cutting, enforcing unpopular rules, discipline</li><li>3. On issues vital to company welfare when you know you're right</li><li>4. Against people who take advantage of noncompetitive behavior</li></ol>
Collaborating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When trying to find an integrative solution when both sets of concerns are too important to be compromised</li><li>2. When your objective is to learn</li><li>3. When merging insights from people with different perspectives</li><li>4. When gaining commitment by incorporating concerns into a consensus</li><li>5. When working through feelings that have interfered with a relationship</li></ol>
Compromising	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When goals are important but not worth the effort or potential disruption of more assertive modes</li><li>2. When opponents with equal power are committed to mutually exclusive goals</li><li>3. When attempting to achieve temporary settlements to complex issues</li><li>4. When arriving at expedient solutions under time pressure</li><li>5. As a backup when collaboration or competition is unsuccessful</li></ol>

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1976). (Credit: Rice University/ OpenStax/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

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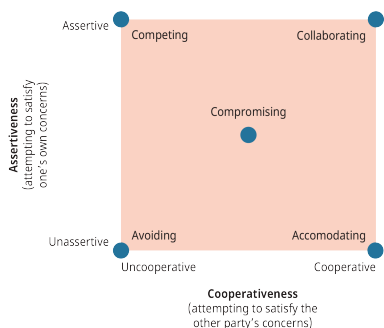
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**Table 1 — Five Modes of Resolving Conflict**

<b>Conflict-Handling Modes</b>	<b>Appropriate Situations</b>
Avoiding	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When an issue is trivial, or when more important issues are pressing</li><li>2. When you perceive no chance of satisfying your concerns</li><li>3. When potential disruption outweighs the benefits of resolution</li><li>4. When letting people cool down and regain perspective</li><li>5. When gathering information supersedes immediate decision</li><li>6. When others can resolve the conflict more effectively</li><li>7. When issues seem tangential or symptomatic of other issues</li></ol>
Accommodating	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. When you find you are wrong—to allow a better position to be heard, to learn, and to show your reasonableness</li><li>2. When issues are more important to others than yourself—to satisfy others and maintain cooperation</li><li>3. When building social credits for later issues</li><li>4. When minimizing loss when you are outmatched and losing</li><li>5. When harmony and stability are especially important.</li><li>6. When allowing subordinates to develop by learning from mistakes.</li></ol>

Source: Adapted from Thomas (1976). (Credit: Rice University/ OpenStax/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

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**Figure 2: Approaches to Conflict Resolution.** Adapted from Thomas (1976). (Credit: Rice University/OpenStax/CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

What is interesting in this process is the assumptions people make about their own modes compared to their opponents'. For example, in one study of executives, it was found that the executives typically described themselves as using collaboration or compromise to resolve conflict, whereas these same executives typically described their opponents as using a competitive mode almost exclusively (Thomas & Pondy, 1967). In other words, the executives underestimated their opponents' concern as uncompromising. Simultaneously, the executives had flattering portraits of their own willingness to satisfy both sides in a dispute.

## Stage 4: Outcome

Finally, as a result of efforts to resolve the conflict, both sides determine the extent to which a satisfactory resolution or outcome has been achieved. Where one party to the conflict does not feel satisfied or feels only partially satisfied, the seeds of discontent are sown for a later conflict, as shown in the preceding figure. One unresolved conflict episode can easily set the stage for a second episode. Action aimed at achieving quick and satisfactory resolution

is vital; failure to initiate such action leaves the possibility (more accurately, the probability) that new conflicts will soon emerge.

## RECOGNIZING YOUR EMOTIONS

Have you ever seen red, or perceived a situation through rage, anger, or frustration? Then you know that you cannot see or think clearly when you are experiencing strong emotions. There will be times in groups and teams when emotions run high, and your awareness of them can help you clear your mind and choose to wait until the moment has passed to tackle the challenge. This is an example of time when avoiding can be useful strategy, at least temporarily.

Emotions can be contagious, and fear of the unknown can influence people to act in irrational ways. The wise communicator can recognize when emotions are on edge in themselves or others, and choose to wait to communicate, problem-solve, or negotiate until after the moment has passed.

Bach and Wyden (1968) discuss gunnysacking (or backpacking) as the imaginary bag we all carry, into which we place unresolved conflicts or grievances over time. Holding onto the way things used to be can be like a stone in your gunnysack, and influence how you interpret your current context.

People may be aware of similar issues but might not know your history, and cannot see your backpack or its contents. For example, if you are used to things one way, and a group member handles them in a different way, this may cause you some degree of stress and frustration. Bottling up your frustrations only hurts you and can cause your relationships within the group to suffer. By addressing, or unpacking, the stones you carry, you can better assess the current situation with the current patterns and variables.

## Preventing and Reducing Conflict

There are many things group members can do to reduce or actually solve dysfunctional conflict when it occurs. These generally fall into two categories: actions directed at conflict *prevention* and actions directed at conflict *reduction*.

### Strategies for Conflict Prevention

We shall start by examining conflict prevention techniques, because preventing conflict is often easier than reducing it once it begins. These include:

1. *Emphasizing group goals and effectiveness.* Focusing on group goals and objectives should prevent goal conflict. If larger goals are emphasized, group members are more likely to see the big

- picture and work together to achieve corporate goals.
2. *Providing stable, well-structured tasks.* When work activities are clearly defined, understood, and accepted, conflict should be less likely to occur. Conflict is most likely to occur when task uncertainty is high; specifying or structuring roles and tasks minimizes ambiguity.
  3. *Facilitating dialogue.* Misperception of the abilities, goals, and motivations of others often leads to conflict, so efforts to increase the dialogue among group members and to share information should help eliminate conflict. As group members come to know more about one another, suspicions often diminish, and greater intergroup teamwork becomes possible.
  4. *Avoiding win-lose situations.* If win-lose situations are avoided, less potential for conflict exists.

## Strategies for Conflict Reduction

Where dysfunctional conflict already exists, something must be done, and you may pursue one of at least two general approaches: you can try to change *attitudes*, or you can try to change *behaviors*. If you change behavior, open conflict is often reduced, but group members may still dislike one another; the conflict simply becomes less visible. Changing attitudes, on the other hand, often leads to fundamental changes in the ways that groups get along. However, it also takes considerably longer to accomplish than behavior change because it requires a fundamental change in social perceptions.

Nine conflict reduction strategies are discussed below. The techniques should be viewed as a continuum, ranging from strategies that focus on changing behaviors near the top of the scale to strategies that focus on changing attitudes near the bottom of the scale.

1. *Physical separation.* The quickest and easiest solution to

conflict is physical separation. Separation is useful when conflicting individuals or groups are not working on a joint task or do not need a high degree of interaction. Though this approach does not encourage members to change their attitudes, it does provide time to seek a better accommodation.

2. *Use of rules and regulations.* Conflict can also be reduced through the increasing specification of rules, regulations, and procedures. Again, however, basic attitudes are not modified.
3. *Limiting intergroup interaction.* Another approach to reducing conflict is to limit intergroup interaction to issues involving common goals. Where groups agree on a goal, cooperation becomes easier.
4. *Use of integrators.* Integrators are individuals who are assigned a boundary-spanning role between two people or groups. To be trusted, integrators must be perceived by both groups as legitimate and knowledgeable. The integrator often takes the “shuttle diplomacy” approach, moving from one person or group to another, identifying areas of agreement, and attempting to find areas of future cooperation.
5. *Confrontation and negotiation.* In this approach, competing parties are brought together face-to-face to discuss their basic areas of disagreement. The hope is that through open discussion and negotiation, means can be found to work out problems. Contract negotiations between union and management represent one such example. If a “win-win” solution can be identified through these negotiations, the chances of an acceptable resolution of the conflict increase.
6. *Third-party consultation.* In some cases, it is helpful to bring in outside consultants for third-party consultation who understand human behavior and can facilitate a resolution. A third-party consultant not only serves as a go-between but can speak more directly to the issues, because she is not a member of the group.
7. *Rotation of members.* By rotating from one group to another,

individuals come to understand the frames of reference, values, and attitudes of other members; communication is thus increased. When those rotated are accepted by the receiving groups, change in attitudes as well as behavior becomes possible. This is clearly a long-term technique, as it takes time to develop good interpersonal relations and understanding among group members.

8. *Identification of interdependent tasks and superordinate goals.* A further strategy is to establish goals that require groups to work together to achieve overall success.
9. *Use of training.* The final technique on the continuum is training. Outside training experts are retained on a long-term basis to help groups develop relatively permanent mechanisms for working together. Structured workshops and training programs can help forge more favorable intergroup attitudes and, as a result, more constructive group behavior.

#### *Review & Reflection Questions*

- Is conflict in groups good or bad? Why?
- Identify the types of conflict and provide examples of each.
- What modes of conflict resolution do you find yourself using when faced with a conflict in a group? What modes have you observed at work in your current group?
- What strategies could you use to prevent or reduce conflict in your group?

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The sections “The Positive and Negative Sides of Conflict,” “A Model of the Conflict Process,” and “Managing Conflict in Groups” are adapted from Black, J.S., & Bright, D.S. (2019). *Organizational behavior*. OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/books/organizational->

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## 9. Confronting and Preventing Social Loafing

### *Learning Outcomes*

- Define social loafing
- Identify the causes of social loafing
- Understand how social loafing affects groups and their individual members
- Analyze different factors that affect social loafing behavior
- Describe ways that social loafing can be confronted and prevented

Groups may experience a variety of 'difficult' group members. As discussed in previous chapters, some group members take on roles that distract from the group's tasks or make it difficult for the group to make progress. This chapter will discuss one of the most common of these in more detail — the social loafers. In this chapter, we will discuss the origins of our understanding of social loafing, its causes and effects, and what we know of variations related to culture and gender. This chapter also offers strategies for confronting and preventing social loafing.

# DEFINING SOCIAL LOAFING

**Social loafing** describes the phenomenon that occurs when individuals exert less effort when working as a group than when working independently. Research indicates that there is some degree of social loafing within every group, whether high-functioning or dysfunctional.



Researcher Max Ringlemann identified social loafing in an experiment that involved participants pulling on a rope, similar to the classic game of 'Tug of War' (Credit: Charles Lucas/[1904 Tug of War](#)/Public Domain).

In 1913, a French agricultural engineer, Max Ringlemann, identified this social phenomenon. He recognized a collective group performance required less effort by individuals compared to the sum of their individual efforts (Kravitz & Martin, 1986). The effect he noted has been termed the **Ringlemann Effect**. In this experiment, participants pulled on a rope attached to a strain gauge. Ringlemann noted that two individuals pulling the rope only exerted 93% of their individual efforts. A group of three individuals exerted 85% and groups of eight exerted 49% of their combined individual effort. As more individuals pulled on the rope, each individual exerted themselves less. From these observations, Ringlemann determined that individuals perform below their potential when working in a group (LaFasto & Larson, 2001).

Since Ringlemann's observation, social loafing has been identified in numerous studies. Social loafing has several causes and effects that will be discussed in this document, as well as methods for dealing with social loafing to promote more effective group work. "Ringleman's brainchild of social loafing has now been used within a diverse variety of studies, ranging from its impact on sports teams

to the affects on groups within huge conglomerates” (Patel, 2002, p. 124).

## CAUSES OF SOCIAL LOAFING

Many theories explain why social loafing occurs, below are several explanations of social loafing causes:

- **Equitable contribution:** Team members believe that others are not putting forth as much effort as themselves. Since they feel that the others in the group are slacking, they lessen their efforts too. This causes a downward cycle that ends at the point where only the minimum amount of work is performed.
- **Submaximal goal setting:** Team members may perceive that with a well-defined goal and with several people working towards it, they can work less for it. The task then becomes optimizing rather than maximizing.
- **Lessened contingency between input and outcome:** Team members may feel they can hide in the crowd and avoid the consequences of not contributing. Or, a team member may feel lost in the crowd and unable to gain recognition for their contributions (Latane, 1998). This description is characteristic of people driven by their uniqueness and individuality. In a group, they lose this individuality and the recognition that comes with their contributions. Therefore, these group members lose motivation to offer their full ability since it will not be acknowledged (Charbonnier et al., 1998). Additionally, large group sizes can cause individuals to feel lost in the crowd. With so many individuals contributing, some may feel that their efforts are not needed or will not be recognized (Kerr, 1989).
- **Lack of evaluation:** Loafing begins or is strengthened in the absence of an individual evaluation structure imposed by the

environment (Price & Harrison, 2006). This occurs because working in the group environment results in less self-awareness (Mullen, 1983). For example, a member of a sales team will loaf when sales of the group are measured rather than individual sales efforts.

- **Unequal distribution of compensation:** In the workplace, compensation comes in monetary forms and promotions and in academics it is in the form of grades or positive feedback. If individuals believe compensation has not been allotted equally amongst group members, they will withdraw their individual efforts (Piezon & Donaldson, 2005).
- **Non-cohesive group:** A group functions effectively when members have bonded and created high-quality relationships. If the group is not cohesive, members are more prone to social loafing since they are not concerned about letting down their teammates (Piezon & Donaldson, 2005).

# EFFECTS OF SOCIAL LOAFING



Regardless of why someone might engage in social loafing, it can negatively impact groups and individuals. (Credit: Viktor Hanacek/[Man Relaxing With Legs Up/Picjumbo](#))

Social loafing engenders negative consequences that affect both the group as a whole as well as the individual.

## EFFECTS ON GROUPS

As explained in the Ringlemann Effect, output decreases with increased group membership, due to social loafing. This effect is demonstrated in another study by Latane, et al. (1979). In this experiment subjects were asked to yell or clap as loudly as possible. As in Ringlemann's study, the overall loudness increased while individual output decreased. People averaged 3.7 dynes/sq cm

individually, 2.6 in pairs, 1.8 in a group of four, and 1.5 in a group of six. In this study there was no block effect (indicating tiredness or lack of practice). Due to social loafing, average output for each individual decreases due to the perception that others in the group are not putting forth as much effort as the individual.

In considering this first experiment, some individuals suggested that results might be invalid due to acoustics (i.e., voices canceling each other out or voices not synchronized). To disprove this theory, another experiment was performed. For this study, participants were placed in individual rooms and wore headphones. In repeated trials, these participants were told they were either shouting alone or as part of a group. The results demonstrated the same trend as in the first experiment—individual performance decreased as a group size increased (Latane, 1979).

In reality, there are not many groups with the objective of yelling loud, however, the example above illustrates a principle that is common in business, family, education, and in social gatherings that harms the overall integrity and performance of a team by reducing the level of output, one individual at a time. The negative social cues involved with social loafing produce decreased group performance (Schnake, 1991). Reasonable consequences of social loafing also include dissatisfaction with group members who fail to contribute equally and the creation of in groups and out groups. Additionally, groups will lack the talents that could be offered by those who choose to not contribute. All of these factors result in less productivity.

## EFFECTS ON INDIVIDUALS

The preceding section identifies the effect of social loafing on a group which is arguably the most prominent consequence of the group behavior. However, social loafing also has an impact on the

individuals that comprise the group. There are various side effects that individuals may experience.

One potential side effect is the lack of satisfaction that a member of the group might experience, thereby becoming disappointed or depressed at the end of project. When a member of a group becomes a social loafer, the member reduces any opportunity he might have had to grow in his ability and knowledge. Today, many college-level classes focus on group projects. The ability for an individual to participate in social loafing increases as the group increases in number. However, if these groups remain small the individual will not have the opportunity to become invisible to the group and their lack of input will be readily evident. The lack of identifiability in a group is a psychological production that has been documented in several studies (Carron, Burke & Prapavessis, 2004).

Social loafing can also negatively impact individuals in the group who perform the bulk of the work. For example, in schoolwork teams are often comprised of children of varying capacities. Without individual accountability, often only one or a few group members will do most of the work to make up for what the other students lack. Cheri Yecke (2004), Minnesota's commissioner of education, explains that in these instances group work can be detrimental to the student(s) who feel resentment and frustration from carrying the weight of the work. Yecke (2004) recounted an experience of one child who felt she had to "slow down the pace of her learning and that she could not challenge the group, or she would be punished" with a lower grade than desired. Especially in situations where members of the group of differing abilities, social loafing negatively affects group members who carry the weight of the group.

# VARIATION IN SOCIAL LOAFING

Researchers have suggested there may be variation in social loafing by culture and gender, although further research is needed.

## CULTURE

Social loafing is more likely to occur in societies where the focus is on the individual rather than the group. This phenomenon was observed in a study comparing American managers ( **individualistic values** ) to Chinese managers ( **collectivistic values** ). Researchers found that social loafing occurred with the American managers while there was no such occurrence with the Chinese managers. The researchers explained this through a comparison between collectivistic and individualistic orientations.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, collectivistic orientation places group goals and collective action ahead of self-interests. This reinforces the participants' desires to pursue group goals in order to benefit the group. People from this orientation view their individual actions as an important contribution to the group's well-being. They also gain satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment from group outcomes. Further, collectivists anticipate that other group members will contribute to the groups' performance and so they choose to do the same in return. They view their contributions to group accomplishments as important and role-defined (Earley, 1989).

In contrast, an individualist's motive is focused on self-interest. Actions by these individuals emphasize personal gain and rewards based on their particular accomplishments. An individualist anticipates rewards contingent on individual performance.

Contribution toward achieving collective goals is inconsistent with the self-interest motive unless differential awards are made by the group. Individuals whose contributions to group output go unnoticed have little incentive to contribute, since they can “loaf” without fear of consequences. As a result, an individualist can maximize personal gain without putting forth as much effort as had he/she done the work individually. The self-interest motive stresses individual outcomes and gain over the collective good (Earley, 1989).

## GENDER

The few studies that have looked at gender and social loafing have recorded different levels of social loafing between men and women, with men more inclined to social loaf than women (Kerr, 1983, Kugihara, 1999; Stark, Shaw, & Duff, 2007). Some have suggested that due to the ways they have been socialized women tend to be more inclined to sustain group cohesion where men are more interested in task achievement. As a result, women, who deem collective tasks more significant than individual tasks, are less likely to engage in social loafing than men. This phenomenon is demonstrated in a study conducted by Naoki Kugihara (1999). To determine the social loafing effect on men versus women, he had 18 Japanese men and 18 Japanese women pull on a rope, similar to the Ringlemann experiment. On the questionnaire, several participants indicated their perception that they pulled with their full strength. However, Kugihara (1999) observed the men did decrease their effort once involved in collective rope pulling. Conversely, the women did not show a change in effort once involved collectively. Stark, Shaw, and Duff (2007) found consistent differences in social loafing by gender in both self and peer-evaluations among U.S. college students, with those identifying as women reporting lower levels of social loafing. They call for further research to understand the role of gender in social loafing.

# CONFRONTING THE SOCIAL LOAFER

No one ever likes to be confronted or told what to do. So in a group setting, what is the best way to make the most out of each individual's contributions? Especially in groups where there is no designated leader, it is difficult for one group member to confront another. However, Rothwell (2004) offers advice for handling these situations:

- **Private consultation:** The team leader or a selected team member should consult the social loafer individually. This individual should solicit the reasons for the perceived lack of effort. Perhaps there may be more going on than may be apparent at first glance. Additionally, the loafer should be encouraged to participate and understand the importance of his or her contributions.
- **Group discussion:** The entire group can address the problem to the dissenting team member and specifically address the problem(s) they have observed. They should attempt to resolve the problem and refrain from deleterious attacks on the individual. Revisiting a group contract and making changes or adjustments to that contract may be a way to build in new structures that better support the group and the individual.
- **Superior assistance:** After trying to address the problem with the individual both privately and as a group, group members should seek the advice of a superior, whether it be a teacher, boss or other authority figure. Where possible, group members should provide documented evidence of the loafing engaged by the individual (De Vita, 2001). The person in authority can directly address the problem with the team member or serve in a mediating role between members.
- **Exclusion:** The loafer should only be booted out of the group as a last resort. However, this option may not be feasible in some instances.

- **Circumvention:** If all the above steps have been attempted without result, then the group can reorganize tasks and responsibilities. This should be done in a manner that will result in a desirable outcome whether or not the loafer contributes (Rothwell, 2004).

## PREVENTING SOCIAL LOAFING

In order to prevent or limit the effects of social loafing, there are a number of guidelines a team might initiate to manage team members' efforts toward team goals. Though some do depend upon the nature of the team and the type of team, most of these guidelines can be adapted to provide a positive benefit to all teams. You will find that most of them should sound familiar by this point.

- **Write a team contract:** Confusion and miscommunication can cause social loafing. Although it may seem formal, writing a team contract is a good first step in setting group rules and preventing social loafing. This contract should include several important pieces of information such as group expectations, individual responsibilities, forms of group communication, and methods of discipline. If each group member has a measurable responsibility that they alone are accountable for, the member is not able to rely on the group for his portion of responsibility. Setting rules at the beginning will help all team members achieve the team objectives and performance goals. Establishing ground rules can help to prevent social loafing and free-riding behaviors by providing assurances that free-riding attempts will be dealt with (Cox & Brobrowski, 2000). Be sure to discuss consequences of not following rules and the process to call an individual on their negative behavior.
- **Create appropriate group sizes:** Whenever possible, minimize the number of people within a group. The fewer people

available to diffuse responsibility to, the less likely social loafing will occur. Also, do not create or allow a team to undertake a two-man job. For example, municipal maintenance crews might have crew members standing around watching one or two individuals work. Does that job really require that many crew members?

- **Establish individual accountability:** This is critical for initial assignments that set the stage for the rest of the task. Tasks that require pre-work and input from all group members produce a set of dynamics that largely prevent social loafing from happening in the first place. If this expectation is set early, individuals will avoid the consequences of being held accountable for poor work.
- **Specifically define the task:** Clarify the importance of the task to the team and assign members to do particular assignments. Establish expectations through specific measurable and observable outcomes, such as due dates. At the end of each meeting, refresh everyone's memories as to who is required to do what by when and offer clarification on required duties.
- **Create personal relationships:** Provide opportunities for members to socialize and establish trusting relationships. Dedicated relationships cause people to fulfill their duties more efficiently.
- **Manage discussions:** Ensure that all team members have the opportunity to speak. Make every individual feel they have a valuable role on the team and their input is important to group success.
- **Engage individuals:** When intrinsic involvement in the task is high, workers may feel that their efforts are very important for the success of the group and thus may be unlikely to engage in social loafing even if the task visibility is low.
- **Highlight achievement:** Open or close meetings by summarizing members' and the group's successes. Create a culture that recognizes and celebrates "wins" and task accomplishments.

- **Evaluate progress:** Meet individually with team members to assess their successes and areas of improvement. Discuss ways in which the team may provide additional support so the task may be completed. When possible, develop an evaluation based on an individual contribution. This can be accomplished through individual group members' peer evaluations of others on team.

### Review & Reflection Questions

- Why do group members engage in social loafing?
- Discuss past experiences with social loafing. What effects did it have on your group?
- What could you do in current and future groups to prevent social loafing?

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# 10. Identifying Leaders

## *Learning Objectives*

- Define and describe leadership
- Distinguish between the various perspectives on why and how people become leaders
- Identify strategies for leading virtual teams

Leadership is one of the most studied aspects of group communication. Scholars in business, communication, psychology, and many other fields have written extensively about the qualities of leaders, theories of leadership, and how to build leadership skills. It's important to point out that although a group may have only one official leader, other group members play important leadership roles. Making this distinction also helps us differentiate between leaders and leadership (Hargie, 2011). The **leader** is a group role that is associated with a high-status position and may be formally or informally recognized by group members. **Leadership** is a complex of beliefs, communication patterns, and behaviors that influence the functioning of a group and move a group toward the completion of its task. A person in the role of leader may provide no or poor leadership. Likewise, a person who is not recognized as a "leader" in title can provide excellent leadership. In this chapter, we will discuss some approaches to the study of leadership, leadership styles, and leadership and group dynamics.

# Why and How People Become Leaders

Throughout human history, some people have grown into, taken, or been given positions as leaders. Many early leaders were believed to be divine in some way. In some Indigenous cultures, shamans are considered leaders because they are believed to be bridges that can connect the spiritual and physical realms. Many early kings, queens, and military leaders were said to be approved by a god to lead the people. Today, many leaders are elected or appointed to positions of power, but most of them have already accumulated much experience in leadership roles. Some leaders are well respected, some are feared, some are hated, and many elicit some combination of these reactions. This brief overview illustrates the centrality of leadership throughout human history, but it wasn't until the last hundred years that leadership became an object of systematic study.



*We often think of leaders as those in designated roles – elected officials or perhaps our managers or bosses. However, not all leaders are designated and not all of those in leader roles exhibit leadership. (Credit: Brooke Lark/[My Favorite Mug](#)/Unsplash)*

Before we move onto specific approaches to studying leadership, let's distinguish between designated and emergent leaders. In general, some people gravitate more toward leadership roles than others, and some leaders are designated while others are emergent (Hargie, 2011). **Designated leaders** are officially recognized in their leadership role and may be appointed or elected by people inside or outside the group. Designated leaders can be especially successful when they are sought out by others to fulfill and are then accepted in leadership roles. On the other hand, some people seek out leadership positions not because they possess leadership skills and have been successful leaders in the past but because they have a drive to hold and wield power.

Many groups are initially leaderless and must either designate a leader or wait for one to emerge organically. **Emergent leaders** gain status and respect through engagement with the group and its task and are turned to by others as a resource when leadership is needed. Emergent leaders may play an important role when a designated leader unexpectedly leaves. We will now turn our attention to three common perspectives on why some people are more likely to be designated leaders than others and how leaders emerge in the absence of or in addition to a designated leader.

## Leaders Emerge Because of Their Traits

The **trait approach** to studying leadership distinguishes leaders

from followers based on traits, or personal characteristics (Pavitt, 1999). Some traits that leaders, in general, share are related to physical appearance, communication ability, intelligence, and personality (Cragan & Wright, 1991). In terms of physical appearance, designated leaders tend to be taller and more attractive than other group members. This could be because we consciously and/or subconsciously associate a larger size (in terms of height and build, but not body fat) with strength and strength with good leadership. As far as communication abilities, leaders speak more fluently, have a more confident tone, and communicate more often than other group members. Leaders are also moderately more intelligent than other group members, which is attractive because leaders need good problem-solving skills. Interestingly, group members are not as likely to designate or recognize an emergent leader that they perceive to be exceedingly more intelligent than them. Last, leaders are usually more extroverted, assertive, and persistent than other group members. These personality traits help get these group members noticed by others, and expressivity is often seen as attractive and as a sign of communication competence.

The trait approach to studying leaders has provided some useful information regarding how people view ideal leaders, but it has not provided much insight into why some people become and are more successful leaders than others. The list of ideal traits is not final, because excellent leaders can have few, if any, of these traits and poor leaders can possess many. Additionally, these traits are difficult to change or control without much time and effort. Because these traits are enduring, there isn't much room for people to learn and develop leadership skills, which makes this approach less desirable for communication scholars who view leadership as a communication competence. Rather than viewing these traits as a guide for what to look for when choosing your next leader, view them as traits that are made meaningful through context and communication behaviors.

# Leaders Emerge Because of the Situation

The **emergent approach** to studying leadership considers how leaders emerge in groups that are initially leaderless and how situational contexts affect this process (Pavitt, 1999). The situational context that surrounds a group influences what type of leader is best. Situations may be highly structured, highly unstructured, or anywhere in between (Cragan & Wright, 1991). Research has found that leaders with a high task orientation are likely to emerge in both highly structured contexts like a group that works to maintain a completely automated factory unit and highly unstructured contexts like a group that is responding to a crisis. Relational-oriented leaders are more likely to emerge in semistructured contexts that are less formal and in groups composed of people who have specific knowledge and are therefore be trusted to do much of their work independently (Fiedler, 1967). For example, a group of local business owners who form a group for professional networking would likely prefer a leader with a relational-oriented style, since these group members are likely already leaders in their own right and therefore might resent a person who takes a rigid task-oriented style over a more collegial style.

Leaders emerge differently in different groups, but there are two stages common to each scenario (Bormann & Bormann, 1988). The first stage only covers a brief period, perhaps no longer than a portion of one meeting. During this first stage, about half of the group's members are eliminated from the possibility of being the group's leader. Remember that this is an informal and implicit process—not like people being picked for a kickball team or intentionally vetted. But there are some communicative behaviors that influence who makes the cut to the next stage of informal leader consideration. People will likely be eliminated as leader

candidates if they do not actively contribute to initial group interactions, if they contribute but communicate poorly, if they contribute but appear too rigid or inflexible in their beliefs, or if they seem uninformed about the task of the group.

The second stage of leader emergence is where a more or less pronounced struggle for leadership begins. In one scenario, a leader candidate picks up an ally in the group who acts as a supporter or lieutenant, reinforcing the ideas and contributions of the candidate. If there are no other leader candidates or the others fail to pick up a supporter, the candidate with the supporter will likely become the leader. In a second scenario, there are two leader candidates who both pick up supporters and who are both qualified leaders. This leads to a more intense and potentially prolonged struggle that can actually be uncomfortable for other group members. Although the two leader candidates don't overtly fight with each other or say, "I should be leader, not you!" they both take strong stances in regards to the group's purpose and try to influence the structure, procedures, and trajectory for the group. Group members not involved in this struggle may not know who to listen to, which can lead to low task and social cohesion and may cause a group to fail. In some cases, one candidate-supporter team will retreat, leaving a clear leader to step up. But the candidate who retreated will still enjoy a relatively high status in the group and be respected for vying for leadership. The second-place candidate may become a nuisance for the new emergent leader, questioning his or her decisions. Rather than excluding or punishing the second-place candidate, the new leader should give him or her responsibilities within the group to make use of the group member's respected status.

# Leaders Emerge Based on Communication Skill and Competence

This final approach to the study of leadership is considered a **functional approach**, because it focuses on how particular communication behaviors function to create the conditions of leadership. This last approach is the most useful for communication scholars and for people who want to improve their leadership skills, because leadership behaviors (which are learnable and adaptable) rather than traits or situations (which are often beyond our control) are the primary focus of study. As we've already learned, any group member can exhibit leadership behaviors, not just a designated or emergent leader. Therefore leadership behaviors are important for all of us to understand even if we don't anticipate serving in leadership positions (Cragan & Wright, 1991).

The communication behaviors that facilitate effective leadership encompass three main areas of group communication including task, procedural, and relational functions. Although any group member can perform leadership behaviors, groups usually have patterns of and expectations for behaviors once they get to the norming and performing stages of group development. Many groups only meet one or two times, and in these cases it is likely that a designated leader will perform many of the functions to get the group started and then step in to facilitate as needed.

Leadership behaviors that contribute to a group's **task-related functions** include providing, seeking, and evaluating information. Leaders may want to be cautious about contributing ideas before soliciting ideas from group members, since the leader's contribution may sway or influence others in the group, therefore diminishing

the importance of varying perspectives. Likewise a leader may want to solicit evaluation of ideas from members before providing his or her own judgment. In group situations where creativity is needed to generate ideas or solutions to a problem, the task leader may be wise to facilitate brainstorming and discussion. This can allow the leader to keep their eye on the “big picture” and challenge group members to make their ideas more concrete or discuss their implications beyond the group without adding his or her own opinion.

Leadership behaviors that contribute to a group’s **procedural-related functions** help guide the group as it proceeds from idea generation to implementation. Some leaders are better at facilitating and managing ideas than they are at managing the administrative functions of a group. So while a group leader may help establish the goals of the group and set the agenda, another group member with more experience in group operations may step in to periodically revisit and assess progress toward completion of goals and compare the group’s performance against its agenda. It’s also important to check in between idea-generating sessions to clarify, summarize, and gauge the agreement level of group members. A very skilled and experienced leader may take primary responsibility for all these behaviors, but it’s often beneficial to share them with group members to avoid becoming overburdened.

Leadership behaviors that contribute to a group’s **relational functions** include creating a participative and inclusive climate, establishing norms of reflection and self-analysis, and managing conflict. By encouraging participation among group members, a leader can help quell people who try to monopolize discussion and create an overall climate of openness and equality. Leaders want to make sure that people don’t feel personally judged for their ideas and that criticism remains idea centered, not person centered. A safe and positive climate typically leads to higher-quality idea generation and decision making. Leaders also encourage group members to metacommunicate, or talk about the group’s communication. This can help the group identify and begin to

address any interpersonal or communication issues before they escalate and divert the group away from accomplishing its goal. A group with a well-established participative and inclusive climate will be better prepared to handle conflict when it emerges. Remember that conflict when handled competently can enhance group performance. Leaders may even instigate productive conflict by playing devil’s advocate or facilitating civil debate of ideas.

Table 1: Key Leadership Behaviors		
Task Functions	Procedural Functions	Relational Functions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Contributing ideas</li><li>• Seeking ideas</li><li>• Evaluating ideas</li><li>• Seeking idea evaluation</li><li>• Visualizing abstract ideas</li><li>• Generalizing from specific ideas</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Goal setting</li><li>• Agenda making</li><li>• Clarifying</li><li>• Summarizing</li><li>• Verbalizing consensus</li><li>• Generalizing from specific ideas</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Regulating participation</li><li>• Climate making</li><li>• Instigating group self-analysis</li><li>• Resolving conflict</li><li>• Instigating productive conflict</li></ul>

Source: Cragan & Wright (1991)

# LEADERSHIP IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

In order to be most effective, groups or teams need a sense of community. A **community** can be defined as a physical or virtual space where people seeking interaction and shared interest come together to pursue their mutual goals, objectives, and shared values (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). For our purposes, the setting or space can be anywhere, at any time, but includes group or team members and, as you might have guessed, a leader. The need for clear expectations is key to the effective community, and it is never more true than in an online environment where asynchronous communication is the norm and physical interaction is limited or non-existent.

Increasingly we manage teams from a distance, outsource services to professionals across the country, and interact across video and voice chats on a daily basis. The effective leader understands this and leverages the tools and technology to maximize group and team performance.



*Whether a team meets face to face, virtually, or a combination of both, a leader leverages the tools at their disposal to maximize effectiveness and build a sense of community within the team. (Credit: Christina/[WOCinTechChat](#)/Unsplash)*

From the opening post, welcome letter, or virtual meeting, the need to perceive acknowledgement and belonging is present, and the degree to which we can reinforce these messages will contribute to higher levels of interaction, better engagement across the project, retention throughout the mission, and successful completion of the goal or task. Online communities can have a positive effect by reducing the group member's feeling of isolation through extending leader-to-team member and team member-to-team member interaction. Fostering and developing a positive group sense of

community is a challenge, but the effective leader recognizes it as an important, if not critical, element of success.

Given the diversity of our teams and groups, there are many ways to design and implement task-oriented communities. Across this diversity, communication and the importance of positive interactions in each group is common ground. The following are five “best practices” for developing an effective online community as part of a support and interaction system for your team or group:

1. **Clear expectations:** The plan is the central guiding document for your project. It outlines the project information, expectations, deadlines, and often how communication will occur in the group. Much like a syllabus guides a course, a plan of action, from a business plan to a marketing plan, can serve as an important map for group or team members. With key benchmarks, quality standards, and proactive words of caution on anticipated challenges, the plan of action can be an important resource that contributes to team success.
2. **Effective organization:** Organization may first bring to mind the tasks, roles, and job assignments and their respective directions but consider: Where do we interact? What are the resources available? When do we collaborate? All these questions should be clearly spelled out to help team members know when and where to communicate.
3. **Prompt and meaningful responses:** Effective leaders are prompt. They know when people will be available and juggle time zones and contact information with ease. Same day responses to team members is often the norm, and if you anticipate longer periods of time before responding, consider a brief email or text to that effect. The online community is fragile and requires a leader to help facilitate effective communication.
4. **A positive tone in interaction and feedback:** Constructive criticism will no doubt be a part of your communication with

team members, but by demonstrating respect, offering praise as well as criticism, and by communicating in a positive tone, you'll be contributing to a positive community. One simple rule of thumb is to offer two comments of praise for every one of criticism. Of course you may adapt your message for your own needs, but as we've discussed previously, trust is the foundation of the relationship and the student needs to perceive you are supportive of their success.

### Review & Reflection Questions

- What is the difference between a leader and leadership?
- In what situations would a designated leader be better than an emergent leader, and vice versa? Why?
- How do the trait, emergent, and functional approaches to leadership differ?
- Do you have a clear 'leader' in your group? How did that person become the 'leader'?
- How can you exhibit leadership in virtual teams?

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## II. Leading in Groups

### *Learning Objectives*

- Identify situations where you may need to enact different leadership styles or strategies based on the context and needs of your group
- Distinguish between transactional and transformative leaders
- Identify the four characteristics of transformative leaders

In the previous chapter, you were introduced to definitions of leaders and leadership and to the various ways leaders are identified and emerge in groups. In this chapter, we will dive deeper into two specific theories and approaches to leadership relevant to groups and teams, specifically situational leadership and transformational leadership.

### Situational Leadership

**Situational leadership**, or leadership in context, means that leadership itself depends on the situation at hand. In sharp contrast to the idea of a “natural born leader” found in traits approaches to leadership, this viewpoint is relativist. Leadership is relative, or varies, based on the context. There is no one “universal trait” to

which we can point or principle to which we can observe in action. There is no style of leadership that is more or less effective than another unless we consider the context. Then our challenge presents itself: how to match the most effective leadership strategy with the current context?

In order to match leadership strategies and context we first need to discuss the range of strategies as well as the range of contexts. While the strategies list may not be as long as we might imagine, the context list could go on forever. If we were able to accurately describe each context, and discuss each factor, we would quickly find the task led to more questions, more information, and the complexity would increase, making an accurate description or discussion impossible. Instead, we can focus our efforts on factors that each context contains and look for patterns, or common trends, that help us make generalizations about our observations.

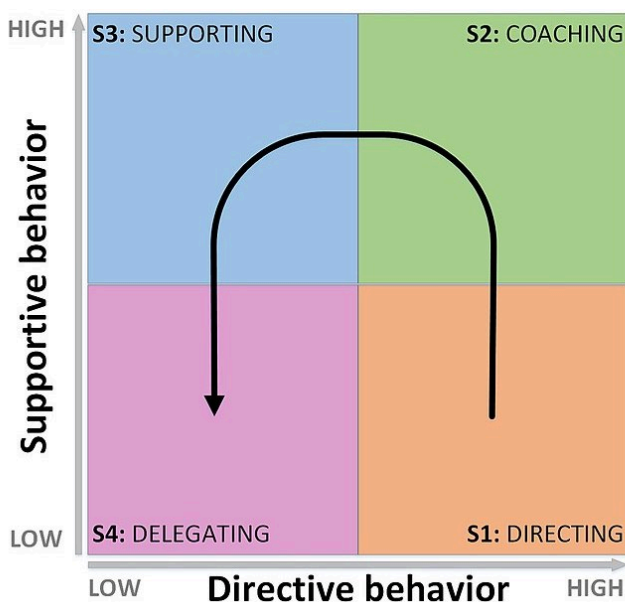
For example, an emergency situation may require a leader to be direct, giving specific order to each person. Since each second counts the quick thinking and actions at the direction of a leader may be the most effective strategy. To stop and discuss, vote, or check everyone's feelings on the current emergency situation may waste valuable time. That same approach applied to common governance or law-making may indicate a dictator is in charge, and that individuals and their vote are of no consequence. Instead an effective leader in a democratic process may ask questions, gather view points, and seek common ground as lawmakers craft a law that applies to everyone equally.

## Hersey and Blanchard Model of Situational Leadership

Hersey and Blanchard (1977) take the situational framework and apply to an organizational perspective that reflects our emphasis on group communication. They assert that, in order to be an effective

manager, one needs to change their leadership style based on the context, including the skills, knowledge, and motivation of the people they are leading and the task details. Hersey and Blanchard focus on two key issues: tasks and relationships, and present the idea that we can to a greater or lesser degree focus on one or the other to achieve effective leadership in a given context. They offer four distinct leadership styles or strategies (abbreviated with an “S”):

1. **Directing (S1).** Leaders tell people what to do and how to do it.
2. **Coaching (S2).** Leaders provide direction, information, and guidance, but sell their message to gain compliance among group members.
3. **Supporting (S3).** Leaders focus on the relationships with group members and shares decision-making responsibilities with them.
4. **Delegating (S4).** Leaders focus on relationships, rely on professional expertise or group member skills, and monitor progress. They allow group members to more directly responsible for individual decisions but may still participate in the process.



**Figure 1:** Situational Leadership (Credit: Ftsn-Wikimedia/[Figure of situational leadership](#)/CC BY-SA 4.0)

Directing and coaching strategies are all about getting the task done. Supporting and delegating styles are about developing relationships and empowering group members to get the job done. Each style or approach is best suited, according to Hersey and Blanchard, to a specific context. Again, assessing a context can be a challenging task but they indicate the focus should be on the development level of the group members. It is a responsibility of the leader to assess the group members and the degree to which they possess the ability to work independently or together effectively, including whether they have the competence, or the right combination of skills and abilities that the task requires, as well as the commitment or motivation to complete the task. Once again, they offer us four distinct levels (abbreviated with “D” for development):

1. **D1, or level one (low competence and high commitment).** This is the most basic level where group members lack the skills, prior knowledge, skills, or self-confidence to accomplish the task effectively. They need specific directions, and systems of rewards and punishment (for failure) may be featured. They will need external motivation from the leader to accomplish the task.
2. **D2, or level two (some competence and low commitment)** At this level the group members may possess the motivation, or the skills and abilities, but not both. They may need specific, additional instructions or may require external motivation to accomplish the task.
3. **D3, or level three (high competence and some commitment).** In this level we can observe group members who are ready to accomplish the task, are willing to participate, but may lack confidence or direct experience, requiring external reinforcement and some supervision.
4. **D4, or level four (high competence and high commitment).** Finally we can observe group members that are ready, prepared, willing, and confident in their ability to solve the challenge or complete the task. They require little supervision.

Now it is our task to match the style or leadership strategy to the development level of the group members as shown in the table below.

	Leadership Style (S)	Development Level (D)
1	S1	D1
2	S2	D2
3	S3	D3
4	S4	D4

This is one approach to situational leadership that applies to our exploration of group communication, but it does not represent all approaches. What other factors might you consider? How might we

assess diversity, for example, in this approach? We might have a skilled professional who speaks English as their second language, and who comes from a culture where constant supervision is viewed as controlling or domineering, and if a leader takes a S1 approach to provide leadership, we can anticipate miscommunication and even frustration. The effective group communicator recognizes the Hersey-Blanchard approach provides insight and possible solutions to consider, but also keeps the complexity of the context in mind when considering a course of action.

## Path-Goal Theory

A second situational leadership theory comes from Robert J. House and Martin Evans. Like Hersey and Blanchard, they assert that the type of leadership needed to enhance organizational effectiveness depends on the situation in which the leader is placed.

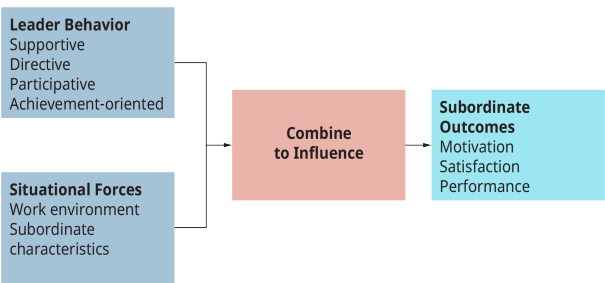
The model of leadership advanced by House and Evans is called the **path-goal theory of leadership** because it suggests that an effective leader provides organizational members with a *path* to a valued *goal*. According to House (1971), the motivational function of the leader consists of increasing personal payoffs to organizational members for work-goal attainment, and making the path to these payoffs easier to travel by clarifying it, reducing roadblocks and pitfalls, and increasing the opportunities for personal satisfaction en route.

Effective leaders therefore provide rewards that are valued by group members. In an organization, these rewards may be pay, recognition, promotions, or any other item that gives members an incentive to work hard to achieve goals. Effective leaders also give clear instructions so that ambiguities about work are reduced and followers understand how to do their jobs effectively. They provide coaching, guidance, and training so that followers can perform the task expected of them. They also remove barriers to task

accomplishment, correcting shortages of materials, inoperative machinery, or interfering policies.

According to the path-goal theory, the challenge facing leaders is basically twofold. First, they must analyze situations and identify the most appropriate leadership style. For example, experienced employees who work on a highly structured assembly line don't need a leader to spend much time telling them how to do their jobs—they already know this. The leader of an archeological expedition, though, may need to spend a great deal of time telling inexperienced laborers how to excavate and care for the relics they uncover.

Second, leaders must be flexible enough to use different leadership styles as appropriate. To be effective, leaders must engage in a wide variety of behaviors. Without an extensive repertoire of behaviors at their disposal, a leader's effectiveness is limited (Hoojiberg, 1996). All team members will not, for example, have the same need for autonomy. The leadership style that motivates organizational members with strong needs for autonomy (participative leadership) is different from that which motivates and satisfies members with weaker autonomy needs (directive leadership). The degree to which leadership behavior matches situational factors will determine members' motivation, satisfaction, and performance (see Figure 1; House & Dessler, 1974; House & Mitchell, 1974).



**Figure 2:** The Path-Goal Leadership Model (Credit: Rice University/ OpenStax/ CC-BY 4.0 license)

According to path-goal theory, there are four important dimensions

of leader behavior, each of which is suited to a particular set of situational demands (House & Dessler, 1974; House & Mitchell, 1974; Keller, 1989).

- **Supportive leadership**—At times, effective leaders demonstrate concern for the well-being and personal needs of organizational members. Supportive leaders are friendly, approachable, and considerate to individuals in the workplace. Supportive leadership is especially effective when an organizational member is performing a boring, stressful, frustrating, tedious, or unpleasant task. If a task is difficult and a group member has low self-esteem, supportive leadership can reduce some of the person's anxiety, increase his confidence, and increase satisfaction and determination as well.
- **Directive leadership**—At times, effective leaders set goals and performance expectations, let organizational members know what is expected, provide guidance, establish rules and procedures to guide work, and schedule and coordinate the activities of members. Directive leadership is called for when role ambiguity is high. Removing uncertainty and providing needed guidance can increase members' effort, job satisfaction, and job performance.
- **Participative leadership**—At times, effective leaders consult with group members about job-related activities and consider their opinions and suggestions when making decisions. Participative leadership is effective when tasks are unstructured. Participative leadership is used to great effect when leaders need help in identifying work procedures and where followers have the expertise to provide this help.
- **Achievement-oriented leadership**—At times, effective leaders set challenging goals, seek improvement in performance, emphasize excellence, and demonstrate confidence in organizational members' ability to attain high standards. Achievement-oriented leaders thus capitalize on members'

needs for achievement and use goal-setting theory to great advantage.

Overall, there is no “One Size Fits All” leadership approach that works for every context, but the situational leadership viewpoint reminds us of the importance of being in the moment and assessing our surroundings, including our group members and their relative strengths and areas of emerging skill.

## Transformational Leadership

Our second approach, **transformational leadership**, emphasizes the vision, mission, motivations, and goals of a group or team and motivates them to accomplish the task or achieve the result. This model of leadership asserts that people will follow a person who inspires them, who clearly communicates their vision with passion, and helps get things done with energy and enthusiasm.

James MacGregor Burns (1978), a presidential biographer, first introduced the concept, discussing the dynamic relationship between the leader and the followers, as they together motivate and advance towards the goal or objective. Bass (1985) contributed to his theory, suggesting there are four key components of transformation leadership:

1. **Idealized Influence:** Transformational leaders serve as role models, demonstrating expertise, skills, and talent that others seek to emulate, inspiring positive actions while reinforcing trust and respect.
2. **Inspirational Motivation:** Transformational leaders communicate a clear vision, helping followers understand the individual steps necessary to accomplish the task or objective while sharing in the anticipation of completion.
3. **Individualized Consideration:** Transformational leaders

recognize and celebrate each follower's unique contributions to the group.

4. **Intellectual stimulation:** Transformational leaders encourage creativity and ingenuity, challenging the status quo and encouraging followers to explore new approaches and opportunities.

The leader conveys the group's goals and aspirations, displays passion for the challenge that lies ahead, and demonstrates a contagious enthusiasm that motivates group members to succeed. This approach focuses on the positive changes that need to occur in order for the group to be successful, and requires the leader to be energetic and involved with the process, even helping individual members complete their respective roles or tasks.



An example of transformational leadership can be found in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who inspired others to follow and join in the fight for civil rights in the United States. (Credit: National Archives and Records Administration-Wikimedia/[Civil Rights March on Washington, D.C.](#)/CC0 1.0)

Transformational leadership is considered to be distinct from transactional models of leadership. Bryman (1992) wrote that **transactional leaders** exchange rewards for performance. Transformational leaders, by contrast, provide group members with a vision to which they can all aspire. They also work to develop a team spirit so that it becomes possible to achieve that vision.

Den Hartog, Van Muijen, and Kopman (1997) distinguished clearly between these two kinds of leaders. They held that transactional leaders motivate group members to perform as expected, whereas transformational leaders inspire followers to achieve more than what is expected. Nanus (1992) wrote that transformational leaders accomplish these tasks by instilling pride and generating respect and trust; by communicating high expectations and expressing important goals in straightforward language; by promoting rational, careful problem-solving; and by devoting personal attention to group members.

#### *Review & Reflection Questions*

- Should our approach to leadership depend on the context? Why or why not?
- Using the two different theories of situational leadership, what leadership styles or strategies might be appropriate to use in your group? Why?
- What is the difference between a transactional and a transformational leader? What examples of transformational leadership have you observed?

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The section on “Path-Goal Theory” in this chapter was adapted from Bright, D.S., & Cortes, A. H. (2019). *Principles of management*. OpenStax. <https://openstax.org/books/principles-management>. Access the full chapter for free [here](#). The content is available under a [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 license](#).

# 12. Diversity in Groups: Culture, Identity, and Thought

## Introduction

When someone mentions “diversity,” what do you first think of in your mind? Is it how someone looks? Is it about where their family is from? Does it matter that their ancestors were from “someplace else”? Do you think about who someone might have voted for in a recent election? All of these questions *could* be how you think about a concept such as diversity. This chapter will explore different notions of diversity and invite us to think about how we approach diverse groups of individuals within a small group setting.

## Diversity as Culture

Culture is a complicated word to define, as there are at least six common ways that culture is used in the United States. For the purposes of exploring the communicative aspects of culture, we will define culture as the ongoing negotiation of learned and patterned beliefs, attitudes, values, and behaviors. Unpacking the definition, we can see that culture shouldn’t be conceptualized as stable and unchanging. Culture is “negotiated,” and as we will learn later in this chapter, culture is dynamic, and cultural changes can be traced and analyzed to better understand why our society is the way it is. The definition also points out that culture is learned, which accounts for

the importance of socializing institutions like family, school, peers, and the media. Culture is patterned in that there are recognizable widespread similarities among people within a cultural group. There is also deviation from and resistance to those patterns by individuals and subgroups within a culture, which is why cultural patterns change over time. Last, the definition acknowledges that culture influences our beliefs about what is true and false, our attitudes including our likes and dislikes, our values regarding what is right and wrong, and our behaviors. It is from these cultural influences that our identities are formed.

## Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities

Ask yourself the question “Who am I?” Recall from our earlier discussion of self-concept that we develop a sense of who we are based on what is reflected back on us from other people. Our parents, friends, teachers, and the media help shape our identities. While this happens from birth, most people in Western societies reach a stage in adolescence where maturing cognitive abilities and increased social awareness lead them to begin to reflect on who they are. This begins a lifelong process of thinking about who we are now, who we were before, and who we will become (Tatum, B. D., 2000). Our identities make up an important part of our self-concept and can be broken down into three main categories: personal, social, and cultural identities (see Table 8.1 “Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities”).

We must avoid the temptation to think of our identities as constant. Instead, our identities are formed through processes that started before we were born and will continue after we are gone; therefore our identities aren’t something we achieve or complete. Two related but distinct components of our identities are our personal and social identities (Spreckels, J. & Kotthoff, H., 2009). Personal identities include the components of self that are primarily

intrapersonal and connected to our life experiences. For example, I consider myself a puzzle lover, and you may identify as a fan of hip-hop music. Our social identities are the components of self that are derived from involvement in social groups with which we are interpersonally committed.

For example, we may derive aspects of our social identity from our family or from a community of fans for a sports team. Social identities differ from personal identities because they are externally organized through membership. Our membership may be voluntary (Greek organization on campus) or involuntary (family) and explicit (we pay dues to our labor union) or implicit (we purchase and listen to hip-hop music). There are numerous options for personal and social identities. While our personal identity choices express who we are, our social identities align us with particular groups. Through our social identities, we make statements about who we are and who we are not.

**Table 1: Personal, Social, and Cultural Identities**

Personal	Social	Cultural
Antique Collector	Member of Historical Society	Irish American
Dog Lover	Member of Humane Society	Male/Female
Cyclist	Fraternity/Sorority Member	Greek American

Personal identities may change often as people have new experiences and develop new interests and hobbies. A current interest in online video games may give way to an interest in graphic design. Social identities do not change as often because they take more time to develop, as you must become interpersonally invested. For example, if an interest in online video games leads someone to become a member of a MMORPG, or a massively multiplayer online role-playing game community, that personal identity has led to a social identity that is now interpersonal and more entrenched.

Cultural identities are based on socially constructed categories that teach us a way of being and include expectations for social behavior or ways of acting (Yep, G. A., 2002). Since we are often a part of them since birth, cultural identities are the least changeable of the three. The ways of being and the social expectations for behavior within cultural identities do change over time, but what separates them from most social identities is their historical roots (Collier, M. J., 1996). For example, think of how ways of being and acting have changed for African Americans since the civil rights movement. Additionally, common ways of being and acting within a cultural identity group are expressed through communication. In order to be accepted as a member of a cultural group, members must be acculturated, essentially learning and using a code that other group members will be able to recognize. We are acculturated into our various cultural identities in obvious and less obvious ways. We may literally have a parent or friend tell us what it means to be a man or a woman. We may also unconsciously consume messages from popular culture that offer representations of gender.

Any of these identity types can be ascribed or avowed. Ascribed identities are personal, social, or cultural identities that are placed on us by others, while avowed identities are those that we claim for ourselves (Martin & Nakayama, 2010). Sometimes people ascribe an identity to someone else based on stereotypes. You may see a person who likes to read science-fiction books, watches documentaries, has glasses, and collects Star Trek memorabilia and label him or her a nerd. If the person doesn't avow that identity, it can create friction, and that label may even hurt the other person's feelings. But ascribed and avowed identities can match up. To extend the previous example, there has been a movement in recent years to reclaim the label nerd and turn it into a positive, and a nerd subculture has been growing in popularity. For example, MC Frontalot, a leader in the nerdcare hip-hop movement, says that being branded a nerd in school was terrible, but now he raps about "nerdy" things like blogs to sold-out crowds (Shipman, 2007). We can see from this example that our ascribed and avowed identities

change over the course of our lives, and sometimes they match up and sometimes not.

Although some identities are essentially permanent, the degree to which we are aware of them, also known as salience, changes. The intensity with which we avow an identity also changes based on context. For example, an African American may not have difficulty deciding which box to check on the demographic section of a survey. But if an African American becomes president of her college's Black Student Union, she may more intensely avow her African American identity, which has now become more salient. If she studies abroad in Africa her junior year, she may be ascribed an identity of American by her new African friends rather than African American. For the Africans, their visitor's identity as American is likely more salient than her identity as someone of African descent. If someone is biracial or multiracial, they may change their racial identification as they engage in an identity search. One intercultural communication scholar writes of his experiences as an "Asianlatinoamerican" (Yep, 2002). He notes repressing his Chinese identity as an adolescent living in Peru and then later embracing his Chinese identity and learning about his family history while in college in the United States. This example shows how even national identity fluctuates. Obviously one can change nationality by becoming a citizen of another country, although most people do not. My identity as a US American became very salient for me for the first time in my life when I studied abroad in Sweden.

Throughout modern history, cultural and social influences have established dominant and nondominant groups (Allen, 2011). Dominant identities historically had and currently have more resources and influence, while nondominant identities historically had and currently have less resources and influence. It's important to remember that these distinctions are being made at the societal level, not the individual level. There are obviously exceptions, with people in groups considered nondominant obtaining more resources and power than a person in a dominant group. However, the overall trend is that difference based on cultural groups has

been institutionalized, and exceptions do not change this fact. Because of this uneven distribution of resources and power, members of dominant groups are granted privileges while nondominant groups are at a disadvantage. The main nondominant groups must face various forms of institutionalized discrimination, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, and ableism. As we will discuss later, privilege and disadvantage, like similarity and difference, are not “all or nothing.” No two people are completely different or completely similar, and no one person is completely privileged or completely disadvantaged.

## Difference Matters

Whenever we encounter someone, we notice similarities and differences. While both are important, it is often the differences that are highlighted and that contribute to communication troubles. We don't only see similarities and differences on an individual level. In fact, we also place people into in-groups and out-groups based on the similarities and differences we perceive. This is important because we then tend to react to someone we perceive as a member of an out-group based on the characteristics we attach to the group rather than the individual (Allen, 2011). In these situations, it is more likely that stereotypes and prejudice will influence our communication. Learning about difference and why it matters will help us be more competent communicators. The flip side of emphasizing difference is to claim that no differences exist and that you see everyone as a human being. Rather than trying to ignore difference and see each person as a unique individual, we should know the history of how differences came to be so socially and culturally significant and how they continue to affect us today.

Culture and identity are complex. You may be wondering how some groups came to be dominant and others nondominant. These differences are not natural, which can be seen as we unpack how

various identities have changed over time in the next section. There is, however, an ideology of domination that makes it seem natural and normal to many that some people or groups will always have power over others (Allen, 2011). In fact, hierarchy and domination, although prevalent throughout modern human history, were likely not the norm among early humans. So one of the first reasons difference matters is that people and groups are treated unequally, and better understanding how those differences came to be can help us create a more just society. Difference also matters because demographics and patterns of interaction are changing.

In the United States, the population of people of color is increasing and diversifying, and visibility for people who are gay or lesbian and people with disabilities has also increased. The 2010 Census shows that the Hispanic and Latino/a populations in the United States are now the second largest group in the country, having grown 43 percent since the last census in 2000 (Saenz, 2011). By 2030, racial and ethnic minorities will account for one-third of the population (Allen, 2011). Additionally, legal and social changes have created a more open environment for sexual minorities and people with disabilities. These changes directly affect our interpersonal relationships. The workplace is one context where changing demographics has become increasingly important. Many organizations are striving to comply with changing laws by implementing policies aimed at creating equal access and opportunity. Some organizations are going further than legal compliance to try to create inclusive climates where diversity is valued because of the interpersonal and economic benefits it has the potential to produce.

We can now see that difference matters due to the inequalities that exist among cultural groups and due to changing demographics that affect our personal and social relationships. Unfortunately, there are many obstacles that may impede our valuing of difference (Allen, 2011). Individuals with dominant identities may not validate the experiences of those in nondominant groups because they do not experience the oppression directed at those with nondominant

identities. Further, they may find it difficult to acknowledge that not being aware of this oppression is due to privilege associated with their dominant identities. Because of this lack of recognition of oppression, members of dominant groups may minimize, dismiss, or question the experiences of nondominant groups and view them as “complainers” or “whiners.” Recall from our earlier discussion of identity formation that people with dominant identities may stay in the unexamined or acceptance stages for a long time. Being stuck in these stages makes it much more difficult to value difference.

Members of nondominant groups may have difficulty valuing difference due to negative experiences with the dominant group, such as not having their experiences validated. Both groups may be restrained from communicating about difference due to norms of political correctness, which may make people feel afraid to speak up because they may be perceived as insensitive or racist. All these obstacles are common and they are valid. However, as we will learn later, developing intercultural communication competence can help us gain new perspectives, become more mindful of our communication, and intervene in some of these negative cycles.

We can get a better understanding of current cultural identities by unpacking how they came to be. By looking at history, we can see how cultural identities that seem to have existed forever actually came to be constructed for various political and social reasons and how they have changed over time. Communication plays a central role in this construction. As we have already discussed, our identities are relational and communicative; they are also constructed. Social constructionism is a view that argues the self is formed through our interactions with others and in relationship to social, cultural, and political contexts (Allen, 2011). In this section, we'll explore how the cultural identities of race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability have been constructed in the United States and how communication relates to those identities. There are other important identities that could be discussed, like religion, age, nationality, and class. Although they are not given their own section,

consider how those identities may intersect with the identities discussed next.

## Race

Would it surprise you to know that human beings, regardless of how they are racially classified, share 99.9 percent of their DNA? This finding by the Human Genome Project asserts that race is a social construct, not a biological one. The American Anthropological Association agrees, stating that race is the product of “historical and contemporary social, economic, educational, and political circumstances” (Allen, 2011). Therefore, we’ll define race as a socially constructed category based on differences in appearance that has been used to create hierarchies that privilege some and disadvantage others.

Race didn’t become a socially and culturally recognized marker until European colonial expansion in the 1500s. As Western Europeans traveled to parts of the world previously unknown to them and encountered people who were different from them, a hierarchy of races began to develop that placed lighter skinned Europeans above darker skinned people. At the time, newly developing fields in natural and biological sciences took interest in examining the new locales, including the plant and animal life, natural resources, and native populations. Over the next three hundred years, science that we would now undoubtedly recognize as flawed, biased, and racist legitimated notions that native populations were less evolved than white Europeans, often calling them savages. In fact, there were scientific debates as to whether some of the native populations should be considered human or animal. Racial distinctions have been based largely on phenotypes, or physiological features such as skin color, hair texture, and body/facial features. Western “scientists” used these differences as “proof” that native populations were less evolved than the

Europeans, which helped justify colonial expansion, enslavement, genocide, and exploitation on massive scales (Allen, 2011). Even though there is a consensus among experts that race is social rather than biological, we can't deny that race still has meaning in our society and affects people as if it were "real."

Given that race is one of the first things we notice about someone, it's important to know how race and communication relate (Allen, 2011). Discussing race in the United States is difficult for many reasons. One is due to uncertainty about language use. People may be frustrated by their perception that labels change too often or be afraid of using an "improper" term and being viewed as racially insensitive. It is important, however, that we not let political correctness get in the way of meaningful dialogues and learning opportunities related to difference. Learning some of the communicative history of race can make us more competent communicators and open us up to more learning experiences.

Racial classifications used by the government and our regular communication about race in the United States have changed frequently, which further points to the social construction of race. Currently, the primary racial groups in the United States are African American, Asian American, European American, Latino/a, and Native American, but a brief look at changes in how the US Census Bureau has defined race clearly shows that this hasn't always been the case (see Table 8.2 "Racial Classifications in the US Census"). In the 1900s alone, there were twenty-six different ways that race was categorized on census forms (Allen, 2011). The way we communicate about race in our regular interactions has also changed, and many people are still hesitant to discuss race for fear of using "the wrong" vocabulary.

### **Table 8.2 Racial Classifications in the US Census**

Years(s)	Development
1790	No category for race
1800s	Race was defined by the percentage of African “blood.” Mulatto was one black and one white parent, quadroon was one-quarter African blood, and octoroon was one-eighth.
1830–1940	The term color was used instead of race.
1900	Racial categories included white, black, Chinese, Japanese, and Indian. Census takers were required to check one of these boxes based on visual cues. Individuals did not get to select a racial classification on their own until 1970.
1950	The term color was dropped and replaced by race.
1960, 1970	Both race and color were used on census forms.
1980–2010	Race again became the only term.
2000	Individuals were allowed to choose more than one racial category for the first time in census history.
2010	The census included fifteen racial categories and an option to write in races not listed on the form.

Source: Adapted from Brenda J. Allen, *Difference Matters: Communicating Social Identity* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2011), 71–72.

What’s striking in the most recent [US Census data from 2020](#) is that, for the first time since 1790 when the first census took place, the absolute number of people who identify as White alone has shrunk. The number of people identifying as non-Hispanic White and no other race dropped by 5.1 million people, to 191.7 million, a decrease of 2.6 percent. The country also passed two more milestones on

its way to becoming a majority-minority society in the coming decades: For the first time, the portion of White people dipped below 60 percent, slipping from 63.7 percent in 2010 to 57.8 percent in 2020. And the under-18 population is now majority people of color, at 52.7 percent. [Reports](#) about these data highlights the transformations taking place within the United States today.

The transformation of communities, both urban and rural, is altering the ways in which people experience others. For example, the population of US metro areas grew by 9% from 2010 to 2020, resulting in 86% of the population living in U.S. metro areas in 2020, compared to 85% in 2010. The impact on rural communities is real; young people continue to out migrate to metro areas with more opportunities, professional and otherwise. When we think about these shifts within the context of small groups, being part of a team or a member of a workplace within these metro areas raises the possibility that will you be interacting with those who come from diverse backgrounds. Conversely, being in a small, rural community increases the chance that one experiences a more homogeneous experience. This leads us to think about the issue of diversity of thought within groups.

## Diversity of Thought

When we think of diversity, we often default to categories such as one's racial or gender identity, but we don't immediately think about ideological differences. However, in recent years, the discussion about ideological diversity within universities and workplaces has open the door to more robust discussion about what it means to take seriously the idea of heterodox views within organizations, institutions, and groups. For small groups to be able to function together, there must be a recognition that we must find ways to navigate conflict and tension. One of the contemporary challenges is rooted in how we see the world. From making decisions to acting

together, diverse ideas all groups to consider different possibilities and explore different outcomes. As highlighted in chapter 5 “Thinking as a Group,” the allure of groupthink is an easy way to dismiss a minority voice or position. As highlighted in *Twelve Angry Men*, the outcome of such a dismissal of an alternative view has can dire consequences. Chapter 8 offered an exploration of conflict. Tensions are inevitable. But small groups, given the inherent nature of some level of shared interest, require the consideration and respect of others. While efforts for raising awareness and understanding of diversity can and should focus on outward manifestations of difference, the cultivation of space for diversity of thought is essential.

Diversity of thought does not mean that people in a group don't need to look different or identify with an underrepresented group in order to bring varying, diverse viewpoints to the table. In some ways similar to bipartisanship in legislative settings, diversity of thought can best be thought of as a means and not necessarily an end. By focusing on diversity of thought, we may distract ourselves from the reasons we need to be focusing on efforts to foster diversity, equity, and inclusions efforts. Yet, we cannot simply dismiss the topic. What do we gain from creating space for diverse voices to shape our thinking about common problems. Groupthink is more likely when we don't have have difference and good leaders recognize this. As Nemeth (2018, p. 175) writes:

“Some executives recognize that diversity of background and perspective is important but that opinion differences, when they exist, need to be communicated. Diversity might provide a range of views, but to have value, those views need to be expressed—perhaps even welcomed in a debate between views. For this to happen, however, there must be a leader who actually welcomes differences in viewpoint.”

A key insight from research is that diversity of demographics bears an unreliable relationship to team decision making and performance. Diversity of perspective bears more promise, if they are able to be communicated. All of the efforts of creating a mix

of people based on background, race, sex, class, and so on can be aspects that help bring diverse views, but the “persistent expression of a differing view, which stimulates thought about the decision at hand” is what allows for the improvement of decisions because of genuine dissent and viewpoint diversity shaping the outcome (Nemeth, 2018, p. 177). Dissenting voices, when able to speak and to be able to be genuinely heard, allow a group to at least pause as they make decisions. If we only have homogeneity based on a number of identifiable characteristics,

## Conclusion

So we return to the questions at the beginning of this chapter: When someone mentions “diversity,” what do you first think of in your mind? Is it how someone looks? Is it about where their family is from? Does it matter that their ancestors were from “someplace else”? Do you think about who someone might have voted for in a recent election? All of these questions could be how you think about a concept such as diversity. This chapter has explored different notions of diversity. As we think about how we want to engage in small group communication, identifying the ways in which we can cultivate diversity of thought affords an opportunity to think about what it means to have diverse members of a group who can work together and advance the group’s purpose for existence.

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