Lil's LISTS for More Effective Groupwork
Lecture Notes

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Put your hand up if you can recall ever working with a great group.

There are two possible causes for this experience:

1) simply a happy accident — which is great, but not necessarily repeatable

2) you worked at having a successful group by planning activities, following through with commitments, and listening to each other's opinions and feelings.

If you think it was just a happy accident for you to be in a great group, chances are one member of the group was able to use organization and communication skills so smoothly that you weren't even aware.

This workshop deals a little bit with group structure and lot with hints and tips that you can put into practice later this week.

In the courses Dr. Baecker and his TAs ran last semester, students had to complete complex projects in groups of generally three or four. At the end of the courses students were asked what major problems their groups encountered. 61 students representing about 20 groups responded to the question. About 13 said their group had no problems, and of the problems stated some students said they were able to overcome the problems...but for many, it was clear that there was still some bitterness or resentment resulting from the group work.

Here are the main problems students faced:

INTERPERSONAL PROBLEMS

a) difficulty contacting members

b) feeling that your opinions were not considered

c) feeling that you had to take a leadership role to get anything done

d) difficulty taking or receiving feedback from team members

e) insufficient brainstorming

f) inflexible positions on the part of team members

g) defensiveness on the part of team members

h) misunderstandings due to unclear expression of ideas

i) misunderstandings due to poor listening

OTHER:
j) getting all members to agree on a meeting time

h) team members not preparing in advance for user test sessions

g) leadership issues

ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS

a) difficulty agreeing on a shared vision

b) failure to clearly define responsibilities

c) failure to divide tasks equitably

d) failure of some individuals to carry out what they had promised

e) difficulty adjusting to change when reevaluation plans seemed advisable

OTHER:
f) members did not take on new responsibilities when they had finished
    one part

g) some group members were working together in other classes so since
    they were meeting often they would make decisions without entire
    group

h) poor English writing skills meant more work editing and revising for
    those with better writing skills

COMMENTS:
    "In hindsight we should have dealt with the non-productivity of one member
of the group instead of letting the issue slide."

    "I had a problem with one group member. His lacked interpersonal and
communication skills and that slowed group work. He did not consider the
other members' opinions and work. As a result we all had to work three times as
hard to get high quality results."

    "It was obvious that not all members put forth a valiant effort. They basically
took orders providing no feedback nor creative thought."

I'm going to give you some information about 5 types of groups and show how
these problems tend to come up in a certain type of group. After that I will make
some suggestions on how to avoid those problems in the first place, or deal with
them should they arise.

STYLES OF GROUP WORK

1. AVOIDING GROUPS

  Low assertiveness - Low cooperativeness
  Low value on goal - Low value on relationships

  Problems encountered by Avoiding Groups:

1. difficulty agreeing on a shared vision
2. difficulty contacting members
3. getting all members to agree on a meeting time
4. misunderstandings due to unclear expression of ideas
5. misunderstandings due to poor listening
6. failure to carry out what they had promised

7. insufficient brainstorming

2. COMPETING GROUPS

High assertiveness - Low cooperativeness
High value on goal - Low value on relationships

Problems encountered by Competing Groups:

1. feeling that you had to take a leadership role to get anything done
2. difficulty taking or receiving feedback from team members
3. insufficient brainstorming
4. inflexible positions on the part of team members
5. defensiveness on the part of team members
6. difficulty adjusting to change when reevaluation plans seemed advisable

3. ACCOMMODATING GROUPS

Low assertiveness - High cooperativeness
Low value on goal - High value on relationships

Problems encountered by Accommodating Groups:

1. insufficient brainstorming
2. feeling that your opinions were not considered (members do not want to assert their ideas aggressively)
3. feeling that you had to take a leadership role to get anything done (may do more than your share in order not to inconvenience other group members)
4. misunderstandings due to poor listening (assertive listening involves seeking clarification)
5. difficulty adjusting to change when reevaluation plans seemed advisable (might mean more work for people, don't want to bother anyone)
6. failure to clearly define responsibilities (goes along with others, whatever members want)
7. failure to divide tasks equitably
8. misunderstanding due to unclear expression of ideas (others have not been assertive in getting everyone to be clear.)

4. COMPROMISING GROUPS

Medium assertiveness - Medium cooperativeness

Both goal and relationships are somewhat important

- Compromising groups are more functional than creative.
  (partners are the first audience for your ideas, the first reader for your written work)
- Tasks are agreed upon and distributed
- Members only do their own part.
- Since group members have been fairly isolated from one another, when problems arise, methods of solving them and working together have not been developed.
- In the end, one person may try to pull it all together, but feels put upon and alone.

Problems encountered by Compromising Groups:

1. Many of the same problems as Accommodating, Competing, and Avoiding Groups, particularly difficultly adjusting to change when reevaluation plans seem advisable.

2. Members do not take on new responsibilities when they finished one part.

5. COLLABORATING GROUPS

High assertiveness - High cooperativeness
High value on goal - High value on relationships

Problems encountered by Collaborating Groups:

1. Collaborating is more work, but also more fun and more exciting.
Here's a quote from one of last semester's groups which illustrates collaboration:

"Everybody in the group was committed, involved, and interested in his own part of the project and contributed in others' parts through brainstorming, reviewing, and editing. We had group meetings every week and other communications through e-mail. We shared the same vision and were open to others' suggestions and criticism."

PART ONE: GROUP FORMATION

A. Four things to say as soon as group has been formed:

1. Can we agree to check our e-mail/voice mail every day?

2. Can we give each other all relevant contact numbers RIGHT NOW.
3. Can we let one another know if we will be unavailable for communication
    (i.e. out of town) for any period of time

   The biggest frustrations cited by group members was

    a) difficulty contacting members
    b) failure of some members to carry out what they had promised,
       including agreeing to a meeting time and showing up for meetings

4. Can we agree now to meet once a week at a specific time?

B. One policy for all group members to agree on:

1. If we screw up by missing a meeting or not carrying out what we had
    promised can we admit it, do whatever damage repair needs to be done, and
    move on to the next task.

   When people begin to become nonproductive and are letting others down,
    they waste energy denying, blaming, and making excuses; thus, further
    dragging the group behind.

   One student in last year's class wrote: "In hindsight, we should have dealt
    with the non-productivity of one member of the group instead of letting it
    slide."

C. One more thing to say after group has been formed:

   Let's all verbalize and clarify the skills and strengths that we bring to the group
and be open about the areas where we have less confidence. Have someone
record this discussion. Be sure everyone speaks. It is best to collaborate at every
stage of the project, but certain people can take more leadership roles in the areas
where they are most confident.

D. Six areas of diversity that will enhance your group's effectiveness

1. imaginative understanding of computer science
2. design skills
3. engineering/artistry/carpentry (?) skills to build the prototype
4. understanding and talking to users (interpersonal communication skills,
      interview skills, helping-encouraging people to express their ideas)
5. organization/leadership skills to keep group focused and moving forward
6. planning, writing, editing, proofreading skills

"Teams that are diverse are more productive and more innovative than homogeneous groups, but they take longer to get started."

E. Five questions groups should consider:

1. How are we going to have fun?
2. How are we going to do something worthwhile?
3. What is our goal?
4. How are decisions going to be made?
5. What is important to us about how we work together?
   If problems arise go back to the these questions.
F. One tip on how to run a meeting:

You're working on a tight schedule. There will be lectures to attend, written material to study, written assignments to complete, and the project to design and test. Meetings must be productive.

Another professor designed a form like this which one group member would bring to each meetings. He found that the groups that used the form generally were working more consistently and were happier as a group. People were more inclined to take individual responsibility and to record their contributions.

CSC 318S: THE DESIGN OF INTERACTIVE COMPUTATIONAL MEDIA
GROUP ACTIVITY RECORD

Meeting: date/time
Attendance
Discussion Topic
Name-
Action to be taken

PART TWO: INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

G. Three things to say when one group member's ideas seem unclear:

1. I'm not sure I understand what you mean. Could you explain it again?
2. Can you draw me a picture?
3. So you're saying........
     Is that it?

One frequently cited frustration was misunderstandings due to unclear expression of ideas. Listeners must let the speakers know when they do not understand. Even if you think you DO understand, it is wise to seek verification. (Assertive Listening)

H. Two things to say when it seems that your opinions were not
   considered:

1. I can see your point about...., but let me repeat my previous idea and perhaps you can tell me why you think it won't work.

2. I won't feel right going ahead with that unless we consider this idea as well.

I. Four things to do if you find yourself going ahead with a project you don't
    totally believe in:

1. Share your doubts and reasons via e-mail.
2. Offer alternate suggestions.
3. Respond to other's doubts. Let them feel you are listening to them.
    Encouraging them or be willing to change direction

J. Three improvisational skills needed for effective brainstorming:

1. Flexibility: in the brainstorming phase, don't get too attached to one idea until
    all members have bought into it.
2. Fearlessness: Put your doubts and inhibitions aside and say whatever comes
    to mind.
3. Attentive Listening: Someone may have just a scrap of an idea.   Build on it.
    Write it down. Use it later.

    The students who cited insufficient brainstorming as a problem encountered by their group may just be saying:

    "The group got going on one idea and I was frustrated because I had a better idea that I didn't get a chance to express."

K. Guidelines for Brainstorming

Seven guidelines for brainstorming:

1. Give everyone the chance to suggest ideas.

Have group members call out ideas and later have them give their ideas and opinions in sequence.

2. Disallow criticism during initial phase.
   All suggestions should be welcome.

3. Encourage freewheeling.
   Outlandish ideas often prove quite useful. It's easier to tame a wild idea than to originate one.

4. Encourage quantity and variety.
   The greater number of ideas put forth, the greter the likelihood of a breakthrough idea.

5. Encourage combinations and improvements.
   Building upon the ideas of others, including combining different ideas is very productive. "Hitchhiking" or "piggybacking" is an essential part of brainstorming.

6. Have one group member take notes during the session.

7. Do not follow any suggestion too rigidly.
   Brainstorming is a spontaneous group process.

L. Three things to say while brainstorming to shut down communication:

1. That's dumb.
2. That'll never work.
3. I don't think so.

M. Three things to say to open up communication:

1. Go on.
2. What do you mean?
3. What else were you thinking?

PART THREE: LEADERSHIP

N. Two questions to ask group members regarding leadership:
1. How can we effectively share leadership responsibilities?
   (For example, for the different writing assignments, can team members

take turns generating the first draft, then use e-mail to edit and refine each assignment?)
2. In a conflict, how will decisions be made?
   (Aim for consensus for major decisions, and then have subgroups responsible for minor decisions.)

O. Three things to ask yourself if conflicts occur:
1. What do I not know about this situation?
2. What are your expectations for the behaviour of others. Are these expectations realistic?
3. Do the members of the group have a shared goal? What is it?
4. How can I present my concerns clearly?

P. Four parts of a clear assertive message:
   • State the behaviour that you find problematic.
   • Offer your interpretation of the behaviour (I think you did this because...)
   • Give the other person the benefit of the doubt.
   • Explain the consequences the behaviour has had on you and other team members.
   • State your intention, make a request, point the way

Q. Four behaviours guaranteed to make others defensive:
1. Evaluation instead of description.
   ("Your writing sucks," instead of "The paragraphs don't seem to follow one another logically. I think a step is missing.")
2. Control instead of problem orientation.
   ("This is how we should do this!!" instead of "We have a problem. We have to get the usability evaluation of our prototype done within the next two weeks. Let's look at some ideas for completing this.")
3. Superiority instead of equality.
   ("Well, your background is in the arts. No wonder you can't understand these computer science concepts." instead of "If you're still frustrated with some of the terminology, I'd be happy to go over it with you again.")
4. Certainty instead of provisionalism.
   ("That won't work," instead of "I'm not sure that'll work because.....What do you think?")