

# CHAPTER 10: WORKING IN TEAMS

## ***Communication Essentials for College* by Jen Booth, Emily Cramer & Amanda Quibell**

- 10.1 – Team and Group Work
- 10.2 – How to present as a team
- 10.3 – Constructive Criticism

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# 10.1 - TEAM AND GROUP WORK

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## Learning Objectives

- Discuss the advantages and challenges of working in groups
- Identify the characteristics of effective working groups.
- List the stages of group formation.

Working in groups is a necessary and important skill. We will find ourselves having to work in groups in various situations—at home, at work, at play, and at school.

Working in groups in educational settings is a common occurrence. Instructors often require group work because it is such an important skill, particularly moving forward into the workplace. Working on labs together, group project work, group assignments, even online group work with classmates who are all over the world, are all standard situations. Getting along is important, but working effectively together can make a better project when each team member contributes according to their strengths, resulting in a better project than each could have done on their own. When we find ourselves working in groups—whether in a formal or informal situation—certain things tend to happen. Often the natural leaders will emerge to provide guidance and direction, and those who are natural followers will act accordingly. Conflicts will inevitably occur, as people have different visions for the outcome.

Working in groups has advantages and disadvantages and works better in some situations than others. Here are some reasons why you might choose to work alone or in a group:

Table 1: Working alone versus working in groups

Working Alone	Working in Groups
Free to make all the decisions	Can collaborate
Can use your own methods	Can share responsibility
Can be creative	Can share ideas and talents
Can do things on own time schedule	Can spread the workload
No disagreements	A more sociable way to work
No compromising – can do everything your way	Able to do something bigger and better
Can take all the credit	Can demonstrate ability to work in teams

## Effective Working Groups

Groups that work effectively have the following characteristics:

- The atmosphere is relaxed, engaged, open, comfortable and non-threatening.
- Group members share a sense of purpose or common goals that each member is willing to work toward. The tasks or objectives are understood and accepted by everyone. There is free discussion leading to group commitment and no hidden agendas.
- The group is concerned not only with the task, but also with its own processes and operating procedures. The group periodically evaluates its performance.
- The group members use one another as a resource. Roles are balanced and shared to ensure that the tasks are accomplished and that group cohesion and morale are enhanced. The group comes up with clear assigned tasks for people in the group.
- Communication is clear, direct, open and honest. Group members continually try to listen to and clarify what is being said, and show interest in what others say and feel. They feel freedom to build on each other's ideas. Differences of opinion are encouraged and freely expressed.
- The group focuses on problem solving rather than expending energy on competitive struggles or interpersonal issues. The group is willing to deal with conflict, and focus on it until it is resolved or managed in a way that does not reduce the effectiveness of the group and its members. Confrontation is accepted as a challenge to examine one's behaviour or ideas. It is not viewed as an uncaring personal attack.

- Mistakes are seen as sources of learning rather than reasons for punishment. This encourages creativity and risk taking.
- Conflict is seen as natural, even helpful. People work through problems together.
- The group has a clear set of expectations and standards for the behaviour of group members.
- The group that understands developing a climate of trust is important. In order to trust one another, individuals in a group must understand and get to know one another.

## Stages in Group Formation

Groups that form to accomplish a certain goal go through stages in getting to that goal. It's not a bad thing that conflict happens along the way. In fact, it's almost inevitable. How people handle the conflict will determine whether or not the process is a positive and successful one.

In the video *Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing*, the narrator describes Bruce Tuckman's simple model to explain the stages of team formation. Watch the video below to learn about the stages for group process:

Watch *Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing: Bruce Tuckman's Team Stages Model Explained on YouTube (2 mins)* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFE8IaoInQU>)

### Exercise: Groups

Think about some of the groups that you are involved in. What qualities do you have that helps in the group process? Is the group effective? What qualities of an effective team does your group have?

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## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter is adapted from " 4.4 Team and Group Work (<https://opentextbc.ca/studentsuccess/chapter/team-and-group-work/>)" In *Student Success* by Mary Shier licensed under CC BY. Adaptations include adjustments to the attributions and references.

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- "Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing: Bruce Tuckman's Team Stages Model Explained (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFE8IaoInQU>)" by MindToolsVideos. Standard YouTube Licence.

## 10.2 - HOW TO PRESENT AS A TEAM

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### Learning Objectives

- Identify key teamwork skills for presentations, including:
  - Strategies for project planning, process conversations, and conflict resolution
  - Ways to plan for presenting as a group.

Believe it or not team projects can be fun and rewarding. In this chapter we'll look at how to make team projects efficient and successful.

Teamwork is a huge part of most jobs, so being able to work well with others and manage team projects is an essential skill that will enhance your career. In school, team projects help you learn key teamwork and project management skills.

### Teamwork skills

Being a productive part of an effective team requires these skills:

- Understand group dynamics
  - Flexibility: accept and adapt to others and their contributions
  - Respect: support your teammates' diversity, perspectives and contributions
  - Give kind, useful feedback and accept feedback graciously
  - Contribute proactively and positively
  - Be a leader but allow others to lead when appropriate
  - Plan for and manage conflict
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## Project planning

Planning can make your team project successful and enjoyable. Create an effective team with pre-project planning:

1. Read the project assignment and rubric or grading plan
2. Create or join a team based on similar grade goals, ways of working, amount of time you're willing to invest, and team organization / leadership style. Avoid joining a team just because your friends are on it.
3. Organize your first meeting. Everyone must attend.
4. Create a team charter or have a process conversation (details below).
5. Record your plans: team organization / leadership; working style; roles & tasks; deadlines, etc
6. Schedule the project, working backwards from the due date. Allow time for personnel or tech problems.

## Process conversations

Process conversations make teamwork more productive and less frustrating. They're simple conversations where you discuss and agree how your team will function.

Process conversations are strengthened when the outcomes are documented and saved to the for later reference. Create one central place that all teammates can access and store all your files and decisions there.

Strong process conversations answer questions such as:

### Team format

- Who's in charge; will we have a leader or be democratic?
- How will we make decisions?

### Communication & work

- How will our team communicate? In person, by email, chat, text, zoom or other
- How often will we communicate? Daily check-ins, or only as needed
- How often will we meet? Daily, weekly, or only when necessary
- Where will we meet? Online, in a meeting room, at Tim Horton's
- Will we share a google doc, or work on individual files?
- What is our team home where all records, tasks and agreements are kept? A shared

document, Brightspace locker, Slack chat, Facebook group, or other

## Conflict Avoidance

- What's our plan to avoid conflict, and how will we deal with it when it arises? What if someone gets sick or isn't performing? What if we can't solve our conflict?
- How do each of us like to give and receive feedback?
- How closely does each of us like to be managed?
- What do deadlines mean to each of us: Do we wait until just before a deadline, or complete tasks in advance?

At the end of your team process conversation, make sure to ask if there's anything else: What else do we need to discuss?

## The 5-finger vote

Sometimes a simple *yes* or *no* isn't enough. The 5 finger vote gives useful nuance to discussions and decisions.

Instead of asking *yes/no* or *for/against* questions, ask team members to vote with their fingers. The scale is:

5 fingers – 100% support the idea or action  
4 fingers – Strongly agree  
3 fingers – Slightly in favour  
2 fingers – Mildly disagree  
1 finger – Strongly disagree  
0 – 100% disagree

For example, your team is trying to choose a topic – will it be topic A, B or C? So you take a 5 finger vote. Most members are: 3 fingers for topic A, 5 fingers for topic B, and 2 fingers for topic C. Topic B is the clear winner.

Or you can add up all the fingers and use the total to decide. For example, *That's 12 fingers for topic A, 19 fingers for topic B, and 7 fingers for topic C. Topic B's the winner.*

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## Team Conflict

Conflict is almost inevitable in teams of busy, stressed students. Do your best to avoid conflict by:

- Supporting each other (Remind yourself that you'll all do better if you cooperate)
- Communicating clearly and frequently, ensuring that everyone is clear on expectations
- Using a team charter or process conversation
- Being open-minded and respectful
- Addressing concerns or frustrations early

Teams that prepare for conflict can deal with it quickly and effectively when it happens.

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## During the presentation

### Introduce each other & remember transitions

Introduce each other at the start of your presentation. You can take turns introducing a teammate, or designate one person to act as the host, and introduce everyone. (Make sure you know each other's names and how to pronounce them!)

If you have a host, they can handle the introductions, thesis, overview, transitions and conclusion. This adds consistency to your presentation and helps the audience understand what's happening. If you're not using a host, ensure that you practice strong transitions from one teammate to another. For example: *"Now that I've explained the reasons you should have a LinkedIn profile, Sharika will explain how to make your LinkedIn profile."*

### Keep time

It's also a good idea to designate one teammate as timekeeper. They can make sure you don't go overtime, and help make sure all teammates have an equal chance to contribute.

## Present as a unified team

A team presentation is very different from an individual presentation. One of the biggest problems we see is team presentations that don't feel unified. You've got a team, present like a team!

For this reason, it is important to ensure that everyone is aware of what their teammates will be presenting, and know when transitions are meant to occur.

It is also important to show that you're paying attention to teammates when they are presenting, and avoid fidgeting, talking, looking bored, or turning off your camera (just because you're not talking doesn't mean that you disappear). You can suggest to the audience that your group is doing a good job by nodding when a teammate delivers a strong point.

In some less formal presentations, you may decide to interact with each other: have a conversation, interview each other, argue two sides of an issue, or have some teammates demonstrate what's being described.

Maybe some teammates can demonstrate or hold visual aids.

In online presentations, teammates can be working behind the scenes while others are presenting. One person might be handling the tech, another might be watching the chat, and another might be controlling presentation slides.

## Plan the Q&A

If you're including a Q&A at the end of your presentation, decide how your team will handle it. You might designate which teammate will answer different types of questions, or your team might take turns answering.

At the end of each answer, ask the other teammates if they have anything to add.

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### Teamwork Quiz

**Teamwork Quiz (Text version)**

1. What's included in a process conversation? Check all that apply.
  - a. Discussion about how your team will work
  - b. How to add teamwork skills to your resume
  - c. How to avoid and deal with conflict
  - d. Your team's work schedule
2. True or false? Team projects teach skills you can include in your resume & LinkedIn profile.
3. What can you learn from team projects? (select all correct answers)
  - a. Project management
  - b. Conflict avoidance & resolution
  - c. Compromise
  - d. Your teammates' skills
4. True or false? Conflict never happens in a functional team
5. Complete the statement by using the following terms to fill in the blanks: paying attention, time, introduce  
 It's important to a) \_\_\_\_\_ every team member, show that you're b) \_\_\_\_\_ to teammates when they're presenting, and designate one team member to monitor the c) \_\_\_\_\_.

**Check your Answer:**<sup>1</sup>

**Activity Source:** "How to present as a team" In *Business Presentation Skills* by Lucinda Atwood & Christian Westin licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0.

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## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter (text, images & H5P activities) is adapted from "How to present as a team (<https://pressbooks.bccampus.ca/businesspresentationskills/chapter/chapter-3-strengths/>)" In *Business Presentation Skills* by Lucinda Atwood & Christian Westin licensed under CC BY-NC 4.0. / "Process conversations" H5P extracted to HTML.

## Notes

1.
  1. a & b
  2. True.
  3. All are correct.
4. False. Conflict can happen in any team. It's how you deal with it that's important.
5. a) introduce, b) paying attention, c) time.

## 10.3 - CONSTRUCTIVE CRITICISM

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### Learning Objective

- Demonstrate best practices in delivering constructive criticism and feedback in person.

### Receiving Constructive Criticism

No one's perfect, not even you, so your professional success depends on people telling you how to improve your performance. When you receive well-phrased constructive criticism, accept it in good faith as a gift because that's what it is. If a close friend or colleague nicely tells you to pick out the broccoli between your teeth after lunching with them, they're doing you the favour of telling you what you don't know but need to in order to be successful or at least avoid failure. Your enemies, on the other hand, would say nothing, letting you go about your day embarrassing yourself in the hopes that it will contribute to your failure. Constructive criticism is an act of benevolence or mercy meant to improve not only your performance but also that of the team and company as a whole. Done well, constructive criticism is a quality assurance task rather than a personal attack. Be grateful and say *thank you* when someone is nice enough to look out for your best interests that way.

Receiving constructive criticism gracefully may mean stifling your defensive reflex. Important skills not only in the workplace but in basic communication include being a good listener and being able to take direction. Employees who can't take direction well soon find themselves out of job because it puts them at odds with the goals of the team and company. Good listening means stifling the defensive reflex in your head before it gets out and has you rudely interrupting the speaker. Even if you begin mounting defenses in your head, you're not effectively listening to the constructive criticism.

Receiving constructive criticism in a way that assures the speaker that you understand involves completing the communication process. You can indicate that you're listening first with your nonverbals:

- Maintaining **eye contact** shows that you're paying close attention to the speaker's words and nonverbal inflections
- **Nodding** your head shows that you're processing and understanding the information coming in, as well as agreeing
- **Taking notes** shows that you're committing to the information by reviewing it later

Once you understand the constructive criticism, paraphrase it aloud to confirm your understanding. "So you're basically saying that I should be doing X instead of Y, right?" If the speaker confirms your understanding, follow up by explaining how you're going to implement the advice to assure them that their efforts in speaking to you won't be in vain. Apologizing may even be necessary if you were clearly in the wrong.

Of course, if the constructive criticism isn't so constructive—if it's mere criticism (a "poop sandwich" without bread, to use the phrasing below), you would be right to ask for more help and specific direction. If the criticism is just plain wrong, perhaps because your manager is somehow biased or mistaken in thinking you're at fault when really there are other culprits they are unaware of, respectfully correcting them is the right thing to do. You don't want management to get the wrong impression about you in case that means you'll be passed up for promotion down the road. When disagreeing, focus on the faulty points rather than on your feelings even if you've taken the feedback as a personal insult. Always maintain professionalism throughout such exchanges.

## Giving "Poop Sandwich" Constructive Criticism

One of the most important functions of a supervisor or manager is to get the best work out of the people working under them. When those employees' work leaves room for improvement, it's the leader's job to convince them that they can do better with a clear explanation of how. As we saw above, clarity and precision are necessary here because the quality of improvement will only be as good as the quality of instruction. As miscommunication, vague and misleading instruction will lead to little-to-no improvement or even more damage from people acting on misunderstandings caused by poor direction. Not only must the content of constructive criticism be of a high quality itself, but its packaging must be such that it properly motivates the receiver.

An effective way of delivering constructive criticism is called the "poop sandwich,"

usually said with a more vulgar alternative to “poop.” Like sugar-coating bitter medicine, the idea here is to make the receiver feel good about themselves so that they’re in a receptive frame of mind for hearing, processing, and remembering the constructive criticism. If the constructive criticism (the poop) is focused on improvement and the receiver associates it with the praise that comes before and after (the slices of bread), the purely positive phrasing motivates them to actually improve. This message types’ organization divides into three parts as shown in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Poop Sandwich Feedback**

Feedback	Example
1. Sincere, specific praise	Your report really impressed me with its organization and visually appealing presentation of your findings. It’s almost perfect.
2. Constructive criticism	If there’s anything that you can improve before you send it on to the head office, it’s the writing. Use MS Word’s spellchecker and grammar checker, which will catch most of the errors. Perhaps you could also get Marieke to check it out because she’s got an eagle eye for that sort of thing. The cleaner the writing is, the more the execs will see it as a credible piece worth considering.
3. Sincere, specific praise	Otherwise, the report is really great. The abstract is right on point, and the evidence you’ve pulled together makes a really convincing case for investing in blockchain. I totally buy your conclusion that it’ll be the future of financial infrastructure.

Of course, this style of feedback may develop a bad reputation if done poorly, such as giving vague, weak praise (called “damning with faint praise”) when more specific, stronger praise is possible. If done well, however, the poop sandwich tends to make those receiving it feel good about themselves even as they’re motivated to do better.

Poop sandwich feedback can be challenging, however, if the receiver hasn’t done enough praiseworthy work to get two pieces of bread together. In such cases, you can always reach for something to flatter them with (“I like your hair today, but . . .”) in an attempt to put them at ease, then carefully word the constructive criticism so that it doesn’t put the receiver down. After all, the entire point of the poop sandwich is to make the constructive criticism more palatable by keeping it positive with feel-good sentiment.

## Attribution & References

Except where otherwise noted, this chapter was adapted from “Teamwork (<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/llscomm/chapter/11-1-teamwork/#1114>)” In *Professional Communications: A common approach to work-place writing* by Brian Dunphy & Andrew Stracuzzi, Fanshawe School of Language and Liberal Arts, licensed under CC-BY 4.0. / Content was edited and references no longer used removed from reference list.