How to have a successful group

Overview

- Get together in a non-academic setting and decide what needs to be done and when

- Determine what people are good at, and divide into teams to accomplish the required tasks

    ◦ Minimum of two people per team

    ◦ Each person likely on more than one team

- Have a "leader" at all times- can take turns

- Decide and agree in advance what to do about team members who don't pull their weight.

It's up to you

Working in groups is its own skill that is seldom taught specifically. In fact, in many cases the effectiveness of the group is not even a consideration for your grade- only the final product. The work is assigned and people go about it (or not) in their own ways. The resulting chaos becomes your problem to deal with. Dealing with the chaos is what we call *managing* it. If you are having this problem you will be pleased to learn that there are best practices for managing the group so it is successful.

If the group doesn't get organized in a reasonable way then the group will suck. And we've all been there. A few people end up doing all of the work. They can get resentful, pissed off, and even vindictive.

The answer is to put a plan in place so that doesn't happen.

Plan the work and work the plan

Plan the work of the group in the same way that you would plan a project that you are working on alone: Work backwards from the end to the start. Leave a 10% time buffer at the end. So if you have 30 days to do a project, plan to finish 3 days early. If you have 10 weeks, finish in nine. We'll call this your "internal deadline." This is just to keep from having to panic if things start to slip.

Once you have your internal deadline, break the project up into steps. What has to be done? In what order? You will have to do some things before you can do others. If you have to give a presentation, clearly the research has to be done before the presentation can be scripted and rehearsed. Materials have to be purchased before art or props can be crafted. Art and props should probably be designed (at least roughly) before materials are purchased.

The tasks that can hold up others if they are not completed are called *pacing* items. Identify them.

While looking at a calendar, set deadlines for each pacing item. Set milestones that are to be met, *and plan to celebrate those milestones as a group when you accomplish them*. Celebration is important and can help the group become a stronger team.

Determining who does what

Once you know what needs to be done, find out everybody's strengths and preferences, and allocate the work accordingly. Here is a completely fabricated and too-easy example, but it provides a good illustration. The real world will be messier unless you are unreasonably fortunate.

Let's imagine that a group consisting of Alice, Bernie, Carol and Doug are in a group working on a project that requires researching a topic, turning in a paper and presenting their results. The big steps here are researching, writing, making the presentation, and presenting.

Make a matrix of the group members' strengths compared to what needs to happen:

	Alice	Bernie	Carol	Doug
Research	#2	#1	#3	#4
Writing	#1	#3	#2	#3
Graphics	#4	#2	#4	#1
Presenting	#3	#4	#1	#2

Now, break the team into sub-teams of at least two people to handle the steps. Take the top two strongest in each category. So Bernie will do the research because that's his #1, and Alice will back him up because research is her #2. Alice will do the writing (her #1) and Carol will back her up (her #2). Likewise, Doug and Bernie are on graphics and Carol and Doug have the presentation. How these members of the sub-team split the work depends on their respective strengths and the project. Bernie may do the bulk of the research and Alice handle one piece that is troubling or obscure. Maybe Alice will write and Carol will edit. Carol will physically give the presentation and Doug will help her rehearse. Perhaps Doug handles creating the graphics and Bernie puts them into the presentation slides. The key is that no single person has to do a single thing alone. Having sub-teams like this will help things stay on track.

While in any real situation things will be messier (maybe nobody will want to present, or nobody will want to write, etc.), keep this model in mind as you decide who is going to take responsibility for what. Do it based on the strengths of the people in your group. And form sub-teams, as this keeps progress forward and helps avoid the pitfalls of "Social Loafing."

Social Loafing: What it is and how to deal with it

"Social loafing" is the term for people not pulling their weight in a social arrangement because they can get away with it. Group work can bring out the worst in social loafing. Wise instructors will have a mechanism built into the project to deal with this: Regular meetings with the professor, group

evaluations, and the like. However there are many unenlightened instructors out there so you need to be prepared to handle things on your own.

Decide as a group at the outset what you are going to do about social loafing. Probably the most effective response is to agree that everybody will turn in a group evaluation if somebody doesn't pull his or her weight. The evaluation will have the names of the group members and a rating for each in the categories of cooperativeness, timeliness, and contributions to the group. Optionally, you may add the category of responsiveness if you will be relying a lot on electronic communication. You agree that in the event that someone is not working for the group then each group member will turn in such an evaluation to the professor even if he or she doesn't ask for it.

In your group evaluation, you really just need three grades for your fellow group members: A, C and F or 1, 2 and 3 where A/1 means strong contribution, C/2 means some contribution, and F/3 means rare or no contribution.

As an example, imagine that the team described above is a very good team but Bernie is a social loafer. By agreement each member of the team would turn in a separate evaluation of the team. Doug's might look like the table below. You can collect them and put them together in an envelope marked "Confidential Evaluations for Group 6 Env. 232 Section 1 Parker" and give them to professor Parker. Tell Professor Parker that you are doing this per the ground rules your group laid out at the beginning as to what to do if someone doesn't pull his or her weight. You understand that Professor Parker is under no obligation to use them, but you hope that she finds them useful nonetheless. Thank her. Don't make a big deal out of it. Don't lecture the professor about how to give group assignments. She's pretty crafty; she'll figure it out.

Alice	Cooperativeness	A
	Timeliness	A
	Strength of contribution	A
Bernie	Cooperativeness	F
	Timeliness	F
	Strength of contribution	F
Carol	Cooperativeness	A
	Timeliness	A
	Strength of contribution	A

If you organize the sub-teams discussed above, then you will nip any problem in the bud before it

becomes a big issue. Alice will be able to put pressure on Bernie to do the research because she is working with him. She will also be able to alert the group early in the process if she's having a difficult time getting things done with Bernie so that the group can affect a timely workaround and nobody has to panic.

What a group leader does

It's usually considered best practice to have someone on "point." While the role of group leader on a simple project doesn't have to be complex, it is important to getting things done well and, in fact, research indicates that effective group management is valued by the team at least as highly as intellectual contributions. On a large projects you may want one member to act only as the leader (often called a "manager" in this situation). This would be the case if the project required an exceptional amount of planning and communication, and possibly if there were many items "due" (usually called "deliverables") in the course of the project. An example is if the group had to turn in a progress report every week or two. Hopefully if you've made it to *that* stage of group work in your classes then you are already way beyond the scope of this paper.

GROUP PROGRESS

The group leader facilitates communication and keeps everybody abreast of what is going on. A simple way to do this is to make a sharable spreadsheet with the pacing item tasks, the dates due, and other milestones the team has decided on. The sub-team periodically estimates how far along they are and the group leader updates the amount with a percentage.

Task	Who	Due	%
Research	B & A	09/21	75
Writing	A & C	10/21	10
Graphics	D & B	11/15	25
Presenting	C & D	11/29	0

This is shared with the group so everybody can see. Note that progress is being made "downstream" even though the research isn't fully complete. For example, the table above shows that the team started on the graphics and even the writing before the research was fully finished. The leader can help coordinate this if necessary.

GROUP MEETINGS

A key to good group management is clear and frequent communication. The group leader will also schedule the full-group meetings to celebrate milestones and exchange ideas.

For every group meeting the group leader should send out both a short agenda in advance of the meeting and a communication recapping the highlights afterward. This is more important that it may initially sound. Having an agenda keeps the meeting on track and makes sure that you don't forget anything. Sending it out in advance gives other people a chance to look at it and add to it. This makes sure every member has an opportunity to be heard and the meeting doesn't become a shouting match.

When the meeting starts, note who isn't there (or who is there if you prefer). As you progress through your agenda, simply keep notes on what was resolved, what was agreed to and new important issues that arise. These notes can by taken using the agenda as an outline. Send the notes out to the group after the meeting as your summary. You will be surprised at how helpful it is to be able to look at an email and be reminded of the meeting a couple days afterwards.

Notes taken in meetings are usually called "minutes" when they are the official record. Some groups have somebody other than the group leader take those notes.

CONFLICTS

The leader is also a problem solver of group conflicts and issues. In the case of Bernie being a social loafer, Alice (working with Bernie) would notify Doug (acting leader) and they would discuss some solutions to present to Carol (the rest of the team- keep everybody in the loop). They may decide that Carol (#3 research) would work with Alice on the research, and as a result Doug (#3 writing) would do some of the writing in turn.

The role of group leader can be shared by taking turns at it, which is especially nice if the sub-team members are busy at different times of the semester. For instance, Doug isn't involved very much with the research and writing, so he can manage first. Later on, Alice can take over. Transferring the leadership role will work most easily if the job of what the leader actually does is well established and routine.

SUMMARY

To summarize, the group leader should:

- Keep track of progress, milestones and accomplishments;

- Organize group meetings; circulate agenda and minutes to the group; and

- Help solve group problems

What the group should do first

Your first meeting should happen as soon as possible after the project is assigned. It doesn't have to be a long meeting in a studious atmosphere, but it has to happen because nobody can or will get started until you have it. During this first meeting you need to

- Determine the big-picture tasks (skip the details) and decide the pacing items

- Set internal (group) deadlines for the pacing items while looking at a calendar

- Find everybody's strengths and/or preferences

- Form the sub-teams to complete the big-picture tasks

- Decide how people are going to communicate and exchange information

- Pick a group leader