Focus on Group Work

Being a successful group worker

It's to your advantage to work in a group

- You can share problems, share information, and support each other.
- You can test your ideas in an informal setting.
- It gives you new ideas about the ways in which the work can be approached.
- Your group’s work is enriched by contributions from people who may have differing backgrounds/experiences.
- You'll probably make new friends and new contacts.
- Employers are looking for people who are good team workers.

When you start

- If you can choose who you work with, base your choice on informed discussion.
- Exchange names and contact details.
- Be clear about what your group has to do, and what your deadline is. Agree who will do what, and when by.
- Discuss how you will each do your agreed task.
- Agree your next meeting time and place.
- It will be helpful to keep notes of what has been agreed. You could keep records in a chart format (see it at a glance).

Doing your own preparation

- Know exactly what your own task is. Discuss it with colleagues if it helps.
- Start in good time – materials might have to be ordered, appointments made, etc.
- Keep a note of sources you find which might be useful to other group members.
- If you can't make it to the group meeting, let someone know, and pass on any points you would like discussed by the rest.
Working together
You might agree particular roles at meetings (time-keeper, note-taker, chairperson). Or, your meetings might be more informal than this, but they still need to be productive:

- it’s best to have an agenda/list of what needs to be covered
- discuss important things first – someone always has to leave early
- everyone should be given the opportunity to make their contribution
- everyone’s views should be listened to and considered
- the discussion should keep to the point, and within the time available
- the meeting should enable the group’s task to progress
- the group should discuss what has been achieved, and agree the next stages
- changes might need to be agreed – perhaps the work is moving forward more quickly or slowly than planned; or new ideas are coming in.

Reviewing your group work
When you have finished your group work, you should try and get together again to discuss it. This will help you to gain from the experience and to improve any future group work.

- Analyse what happened during the preparation and presentation of your work. There are published charts you can use.
- Employers are looking for graduates with the interpersonal skills that you can acquire from successful group work. Start to plan how you could express this on your CV.

The Planning stages
- Did the style/organisations of meetings (formal or informal) suit the task?
- Did group members take on roles within the group (by design or by chance)? To what extent were those roles successful?
- How were agreements reached/conflicts resolved?

Your role in the group
- What were your own strengths and weaknesses in the group?
- How can you aim to be a better group worker in the future?

The presentation of the work/feedback
- Was the final product (e.g. presentation, report, display) satisfactory to the group?
- What did the group learn from the feedback it was given on its work?

The future
- What would need to change if you were to do the project again?
- How would you analyse how you practised particular skills – e.g. teamwork, leadership?
Roles in group work

Why have roles in your group?

R. Meredith Belbin found that ‘teams with similar personalities did not perform well’ (Rice et al., 1995: p11). Your group might decide to organise its work by agreeing a specific role for each member. Use of roles can help the group to work together effectively. Decide whether you would like to do something you are already good at, or to do something unfamiliar and gain some new experience.

Even if the group decides against formal roles, you could benefit by discussing everyone’s

- strengths
- weaknesses
- approaches to work
- prior knowledge
- prior experience
- resources that can be used

What kind of roles could be used?
The following roles could be very useful, even for short projects:

- a leader or chairperson to co-ordinate strategy and give the group direction
- a timekeeper who can hold you to deadlines and keep your group meetings within specified time limits
- a note-taker to keep track of meetings
- a monitor to check progress and nudge things along if necessary
- a finisher to tie up the ends – perhaps collating the final draft of a written report or setting up rehearsals for a presentation

(Rice et al., 1995: p18)

More about the roles people take in groups

If you would like to analyse what kind of group-worker you are likely to be, try Belbin’s Self Perception Inventory. (Belbin, 1981 & Rice et al., 1995). Belbin’s list has eight named roles. Each has typical features, positive qualities, and allowable weaknesses. For example:

- a Monitor-Evaluator would be a ‘sober, unemotional, prudent’ person, with positive qualities of ‘judgement, discretion, hard-headedness’, and allowable weaknesses, ‘lacks inspiration or the ability to motivate others’
- for promoting team spirit you would need a Team-Worker
- for ‘drive, and a readiness to challenge inertia’, a Shaper and remember, there are five other categories as well.
How does a successful group function?

The different approaches taken by individual members, or by the group as a whole, have been defined by theorist as either task functions or maintenance functions.

These relate to the content of the work (task functions) and the process you go through to get it completed (maintenance functions).

If your group is aware of them it will be able to achieve its aims more effectively.

Task functions relate to the work

Recognising and practising them will help to make sure that the project is completed:

- **Initiating activity** – suggesting new ways to approach the work and encouraging others to do the same
- **Opinion/Information giving** – putting forward one’s views/information
- **Opinion/Information seeking** – asking for others’ views/information
- **Clarifying** – asking for, or offering, clear explanations
- **Elaborating** – developing ideas and making sure that they are fully explored; giving examples
- **Co-ordinating** – drawing out the relationships between ideas
- **Summarising** – bringing together the discussion points, briefly
- **Consensus taking** – asking what agreement there is
- **Recording** – noting suggestions and decisions
- **Orienting** – making sure the work is directed accurately towards its goals

Maintenance functions relate to the group’s unity

Recognising and practising them will help to strengthen the group:

- **Encouraging** – giving confidence to group members to make contributions; giving opportunities for them to do so
- **Harmonising/compromising** – dealing with disagreement, possibly by suggesting a compromise
- **Standard setting** – expressing standards for the group to work to, and making sure that it does so
- **Analysing the group’s effectiveness** – reviewing progress regularly and acting on the review

Dealing with difficulties – group meetings

How might you overcome problems with meetings?

It’s hard to agree meeting arrangements

Be flexible with places/days/times.

- If it’s a big problem to get everybody together, try splitting into three/pairs sometimes.
- If you can’t make it to a meeting, let the group know.
- Agree that someone will ‘phone or e-mail reminders to everyone about the meetings.

Discussions are dominated by one or two people

- Set an agenda with a time-slot for each person.
- Appoint a leader/Chairperson to direct the discussion.
• Set ground rules (e.g. no-one to speak longer than 3 minutes; no interrupting; no critical comment on people, only ideas).
• Thank the dominant members for making their points and ask if anyone else would like to speak.
• Is it you who dominates? If you have a number of points to make, list and circulate them beforehand.

There are people who don't speak much

• Arrange the chairs/ tables so that everyone can see, hear and be heard.

If you are the quiet one:

• make sure you have prepared your agreed task beforehand, write down one or two points you want to make
• start by saying something straightforward and uncontroversial – perhaps asking someone for an example to illustrate a point they have made, or adding to or agreeing with someone else's point
• take one or two deep breaths before you speak to help overcome nervous tension
• speak clearly
• bear in mind that you are an equally important member of the group, and that most of your colleagues are more worried about what they say than about what you say

If another member is quiet:

• listen carefully to make sure that his/ her good ideas don't get lost
• highlight any good ideas s/he has, and ask for more details
• consider sharing out the work in pairs to increase members' confidence and support

There's too much time-wasting at meetings

• Have an agenda, and/or a leader/chairperson to keep the discussion to the point.
• Avoid being drawn into arguments.
• Deal with the most important things first (including date of next meeting).
• Write down your aims or questions you need the answers to, and note the answers as you get them.
• Keep the group's deadline date in everyone's mind. You can set more than one deadline, within a staged work plan.

Dealing with difficulties – working relationships

It's hard to share the workload fairly

• Agree and list all the tasks that need to be done, defined as specifically as possible.
• Split larger tasks into component parts.
• Estimate how long each task will take, allocating deadline dates.
• Write down what you have agreed, so that everyone is clear.
• A Chart or diagram is a good format to use.
• Review the arrangements at every meeting. Make the necessary changes. It's often impossible to tell what is really fair, until you have started.
• Be adaptable - a member might take on less work at the beginning of a project, for example, and more at the end – if other commitments demand it.
Someone does not seem to be doing the allotted work

- Keep very clear records of who has agreed to do what, to avoid confusion.
- Find out where the problem lies.
- Check the agreed tasks – change it if some of the work is more time consuming or difficult than had been thought.
- Share resources.
- Be flexible about times/places to meet.
- Find out if there are penalties for those who do less – check the assessment criteria.

You aren't getting on well with the rest of the group

- Think about your role and the roles of others: can you identify the problem?
- How do you present yourself at meetings? Are your contributions being understood in the way you would wish? Ask the colleague who knows you best.
- Do you put other people down – even without meaning to? Offer apologies. Tactful, constructive, comments will be well received.
- Do you keep people waiting? If the meetings are at inconvenient times, explain why and re-negotiate the arrangements
- Do you do your agreed share? If not, offer to take extra tasks.

Leading or chairing a meeting

When are you likely to need a leader/chairperson?

If any of the following applies:

- a meeting has been formally convened
- accurate records need to be kept
- a group needs to speed up the decision-making process
- a group finds it difficult to stick to the point
- everyone tends to speak at once
- some members dominate discussions

How should the leader chairperson relate to the group members?

- In informal group work a leader co-ordinates the group’s work.
- In a more formal situation s/he is given authority over the other members.
- The group should understand and accept the use of such a role.
- You might decide to rotate the leadership role, or to have different leaders for each task.

What kind of person makes a good leader/chairperson?

Someone with loyalty to the group. According to Belbin, s/he would also be: ‘calm, self-confident and controlled. Positive qualities would include a capacity for treating and welcoming all contributors on their merits and without prejudice; and a strong sense of objectives’. (Rice et al., 1995)

To find out by self-analysis which group members have these attributes, use Belbin’s Self Perception Inventory (Belbin, 1981 & Rice et al., 1995).
What does the leader/chairperson do?

Before the meeting:
- sets and agrees an agenda based on the group’s objectives

At the meeting:
- starts and finishes on time
- makes sure the agenda is followed
- ensures that everyone has the opportunity to contribute
- is as impartial as possible and avoids getting into arguments
- keeps the discussion relevant
- checks for understanding and agreement
- sums up the main points
- checks that progress is made with the work

After the meeting
- ensures that everyone knows what action has been agreed
- agrees the accuracy of notes/minutes