

Fundamentals of Organizational Communication

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Chapter 6



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Groups in Organizations

This chapter is designed to contribute to knowledge competencies by discussing groups common to most organizations, identifying individual experiences in groups, and describing group processes. We foster sensitivity competencies by relating individual participation to group effectiveness, distinguishing between positive and negative participation behaviors, and evaluating personal communication skills for participation. We develop skills by practicing positive participation behaviors and analyzing transcripts and group participation. Finally, we develop values by relating group effectiveness to individual participation behaviors and by identifying responsibilities for self-managing groups



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Small Group Experiences

- Organizations have many different types of formal and informal groups. Work teams, quality teams, sales teams, problem-solving groups, management teams, and unions are only a few examples of formally structured organizational groups. Informal groups come together for social events, athletic competition, coffee breaks, gripe sessions, and a variety of other purposes. Both types of groups are important for individual task accomplishment and social support.

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Small Group Experiences

- Baird suggested a group can be defined as “a collection of more than two persons who perceive themselves as a group, possess a common fate, have organizational structure, and communicate over time to achieve personal and group goals.”

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Small Group Experiences

- Organizations form groups to fulfill a variety of organizational needs. Work groups are formed for maximum task efficiency and effectiveness. Problem-solving groups address ongoing organizational issues as well as emergencies. Groups meet regularly to review organizational operations and make future plans, to negotiate labor–management agreements, and to respond to financial crises or unusual pressure from competition

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Types of Groups

- Organizations have many different types of formal and informal groups for important task and social considerations.
- Most of us will have multiple group memberships in addition to our primary work team.
- We are taking the perspective we will be part of multiple bona fide groups, that is, groups with permeable boundaries and interdependent with the broader environment.

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- **Primary Work Teams:** The first group assigned to us when we enter an organization is our primary work team. What we have been hired to do places us structurally within the organization and identifies our supervisor and related peer group.

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- **Long-Standing Teams:** for example, are formed when the overall responsibilities of the team change slowly with time and when team membership can be expected to remain relatively stable. Long-standing work teams have well-defined organizational responsibilities, enabling selection of new team members based on qualifications previously identified as important for the group.



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Types of Groups

- University departments are examples of long-standing teams. Although advances in knowledge change the content of courses, the general responsibilities for teaching, research, and service remain.
- **Project teams** form with highly specialized individuals to accomplish a specific project in a fixed period of time. These teams have specific goals, such as the design of a new product or the integration of technologies across the organization. Project teams are commonly used in high-technology industries for the research and design of products and processes.
- When members come from different functions throughout the organization (e.g., marketing, research and development, manufacturing), the team is often described as a cross-functional project team.



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- **Prefab Group** Whereas project teams are associated with high-technology research and development efforts, the prefab group is the invention of the U.S. service industry. As Cragan and Wright (1986) described the prefabricated group, “the job descriptions of this type of work group have been meticulously defined and rigidly structured so that a collection of people with no previous experience of working together can quickly form a work group that will produce a predictable level of productivity.” Fast-food restaurants and supermarket check-out lines are examples of the use of prefab groups. The prefab group is efficient and predictable.



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- **Self-managing team** A small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, have a defined set of performance goals, and execute an approach for which they hold themselves accountable.
- **Directional groups** Groups formally charged and structured to provide overall direction and oversight of the organization. . Management teams, standing committees, and boards of directors are examples of groups empowered both structurally and legally to develop vision and policy for the organization

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- **Quality Teams:** The term quality team applies to a group that meets regularly to identify and propose solutions to problems affecting product or process quality.
- **Task force groups:** Groups of individuals with diverse specialties and group memberships who are charged with accomplishing a specifically designed task or project. Unlike project teams, task force groups generally do not create products or implement processes but plan the initiation of projects or organizational changes. Simply put, task force groups are study groups charged with making recommendations. A task force may research and evaluate how to restructure organizational responsibilities.

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- **Steering committees:** Groups of individuals with diverse specialties and group memberships who are charged with implementing organizational plans, processes, or change. Whereas the task force might recommend a new recruiting process for the high-technology firm, a steering committee might be formed to implement recommendations and monitor the progress of the new plan.

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- **Focus groups** : Collections of individuals who have familiarity with a problem or issue and are asked in a somewhat nonstructured format to describe the issue and make recommendations; formed to discuss problems but not to take responsibility for final recommendations or implementation of change. Focus groups have been used by advertising and marketing organizations to understand consumer preferences, identify effective message strategies, and evaluate potential new products. The successful use of focus groups in advertising and marketing has stimulated their application to numerous other organizational issues. Focus groups are formed to discuss problems, not to take responsibility for final recommendations or implementation of change. Focus groups can be used to gather information and get reactions quickly to proposed courses of action.

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- **Geographically diverse teams:** Groups of individuals who form a work team but are separated in distance and linked through technology. Sometimes referred to as networked or virtual teams. Although many of the same issues apply as with other organizational groups, geographically diverse teams are heavily dependent on technology and the ability of group members to solve complex problems without face-to-face interaction.

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- **Social Support Groups:** Work teams, quality teams, task forces, steering committees, and focus groups can all be social support groups. Formed for task considerations, most continuous groups provide informal social support to group members. Social support groups form as subgroups of larger task groups among people with similar organizational interests and among friends. They have few formal task responsibilities as such but often support task accomplishment by stimulating trust and cohesiveness among group members.

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Types of Groups

- **Interorganizational Groups:** The global context, communications technologies, the complexity of our economic and social environment, and numerous other factors have contributed to the growing prevalence of groups working together across organizations. These interorganizational groups are usually formed for specific projects where organizations believe working together is more effective than each organization working separately. Governments form interorganizational groups to work on problems ranging from security to providing aid. International donor groups join efforts to address social problems. For-profit organizations work together for product and service development. These groups collaborate based on various capabilities including the different resources each brings to the project or need.

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Types of Groups

- **Communities of practice:** Groups of individuals with similar professional backgrounds who interact regularly to innovate and improve performance. Made famous by software developers, communities of practice use expertise both within an organization and across organizational boundaries

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The Team Based Organization

- Based on the successful use of teams in a variety of industries, one of the fastest growing of all contemporary organizational changes is the move to team-based structures. Characterized as a “flat organization” with fewer managers and supervisors than a traditional hierarchy, the team-based organization is composed of a variety of teams with defined responsibilities and accountabilities for which managers provide mostly indirect supervision. Self-managing teams, discussed earlier in this chapter, are the cornerstone of the team-based structure. The growing number of team-based organizations is in direct response to increased global competitiveness requiring overhead reductions and increased productivity.

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The Team Based Organization

- The team-based organization with its use of self-directed work teams is not without issues and concerns. First, working in a self-directed work team requires a complex mixture of technical and communication competencies. Many technically capable people report difficulty adapting to providing and receiving peer feedback. In addition, career advancement is less well understood in team-based organizations than in hierarchies with more established paths to increasing responsibility and associated prestige. The question of who gets credit for what is an issue as well as whether team members are adequately compensated by the organization for their contributions to increased competitiveness. Critics also charge that team-based structures have a potential for exploitation based on continual pressures to increase productivity.

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High- Reliability Organizations

- The term high-reliability organization has been developed to describe organizations in high-risk industries where the success of the organization is in recovering from or mitigating failures and crises.
- Police and fire departments, certain security organizations, and a host of organizations dealing with medical and hazardous events can be designated high-reliability organizations.
- All of us are impacted by the work of groups/teams in high-reliability organizations and some of us will spend significant time in high-reliability groups.
- High-reliability organizations focus on what can go wrong.
- Teams in high-reliability organizations develop redundancy in communication strategies, technologies, and tactics in order to avoid oversimplification of facts and interpretations

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Work Place Democracy

- George Cheney (1995) describes workplace democracy as a system of governance which truly values individual goals and feelings, as well as typical organizational problems.
- Workplace democracy actively fosters the connection between those two sets of concerns by encouraging individual contributions to important organizational choices and allowing for the ongoing modification of the organization's activities and policies by the group.
- Workplace democracy, as described by Cheney, may or may not be found in structured hierarchies, team-based organizations, or high-reliability organizations. In fact, few organizations incorporate practices that fully support all aspects of his definition.

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Group Norms & Communication Roles

- Group norms are unwritten behavior rules, ways of doing things that groups develop over time, usually through tacit rather than explicit agreement. Norms reflect what the group deems desirable, and they can be said to be cultural beliefs about effectiveness or appropriateness.
- Groups have general norms that apply to all members and role-specific norms that apply to individual members in such roles as leader, secretary, information collector, and critic.
- Generally speaking, group members disapprove and sometimes punish members who violate norms.
- Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats (1948) developed three important classifications of group communication roles: group task roles, group maintenance roles, and self-centered roles. Task roles help groups accomplish goals, whereas maintenance roles promote social support among group members. Self-centered roles support individual goals and may or may not be compatible with overall group goals and relationships

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Working in Groups

- Most of us will spend the majority of our work time in some form of group effort. Norms and group communication roles do not fully explain some of the subtle influences on our group experiences. Why are we more comfortable in some groups than in others? What makes one group more prestigious than another? Why is it that certain group memberships help our career and others hinder professional success? How can we determine the differences?
- There are no definite answers to these questions. Generally speaking, we are more comfortable in groups when the group goals and our individual goals are compatible.

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Diverse Work Groups

- We all bring our previous experiences and backgrounds to group participation. As our workforce and markets become increasingly diverse and global, an important component of our personal communication competency is the ability to work effectively in groups with those who have backgrounds different from our own.
- Research continually supports the importance of effective communication for group productivity. So what is effective communication within diverse groups? Although there is no definitive answer to this question, the competencies of members to work together to not only value differences but also use differences to enhance the group's productivity become the issue.

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Creativity and Collaboration

- In addition to day-to-day task responsibilities, groups in organizations have important responsibilities for solving difficult problems, creating new products, identifying process improvements, and resolving conflict.
- Creativity is needed for effective performance and is not necessarily part of the capability that members bring to the group. Simply put, creativity can be understood as the development of novel and useful ideas that are important for all types of innovation.

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Creativity and Collaboration

- Leigh Thompson (2003) describes some of the major threats to creativity in groups: social loafing, conformity, production blocking, and downward norm setting. Social loafing occurs when group members do not work as hard as they might individually, depending on others to come up with new approaches or ideas. Conformity becomes a danger when, in order to be liked or maintain harmony, group members publicly agree with one another even when they may have some doubts about a particular solution or idea. Production blocking refers to the loss of individual ideas when others are speaking and the difficulty of listening and trying to identify where individual contributions should fit in the discussion. Finally, downward norm setting is experienced when the performance level of the group is determined by the lowest performers.



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Virtual Groups

- The supervisor–employees (subordinate) relationship can be described as the primary interpersonal relationship structured by the organization. The supervisor–employees (subordinate) relationship can be described as the primary interpersonal relationship structured by the organization. Because it is formed to support task and job requirements, almost everyone in an organization—except perhaps at the very top of the hierarchy—is involved in such a dyad.
- Both supervisors and employees bring a wide variety of personal characteristics and predispositions to their relationships. The interaction of these characteristics influences the satisfaction each person feels with the other and helps determine the overall effectiveness of the relationship.
- Research suggests an employee’s perception of the supervisor’s ability to listen, respond quickly to employee messages, and be sensitive and understanding is the strongest predictor of satisfaction with both work and supervisor. Employees’ satisfaction with their supervisors also has been found to be directly related to their perception of their own personal communication competence



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Virtual Groups

- It is a rare individual today who will not spend at least part of his or her working time in virtual groups.
- Loosely defined, virtual groups are teams of individuals organized either temporarily or permanently to work together linked by technology across time and space.
- However, many virtual employees report feeling disconnected from their organizations, missing social interaction and informal relationships. Others report career damage believed to be linked to an invisibility that provides no connection to powerful organizational members.
- Finally, not everyone is suited to working in more isolated environments that require considerable independent action.
- However, the virtual environment does require a well-developed information technology infrastructure to support a remote workforce. Finally, managing a remote workforce requires skills many managers have never considered

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Groups, Knowledge Sharing, and Technology Use

- Some go so far as to claim successful knowledge sharing is essential to competitive advantage. Chances are as a student you use complex databases and work on group projects with others who retrieve information from similar sources.
- For some time, research has suggested communication problems within groups or entire organizations influence members to withhold knowledge from databases, making their use less effective.
- The challenge remains, however, to understand how individuals, groups, and organizations can generate environments and competencies to support knowledge transfer.
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Increasing Group Participation Effectiveness

- The question now becomes how to evaluate our competencies for group participation. What types of behaviors are most productive? What should be avoided? Are there particular communication skills we should develop for group effectiveness? The next section of this chapter seeks to increase our effectiveness by identifying negative and positive group participation behaviors

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Negative Participation Behaviors

- Each individual brings to group participation preferences for behavior. Research on group participation permits us to generalize about counterproductive individual behaviors.
- Negative Behaviors
 - 1. Argue stubbornly for your own ideas, positions, and conclusions. Make sure all members know exactly where you stand, and resist modifying or changing your views. Do not bother to listen actively to opposing viewpoints because of the rightness of your position.
 - 2. Suppress differences of opinion and conflict. Use formal techniques such as agendas or majority rule to quiet opposition. Don't encourage others to express controversial opinions, and make sure the group considers only safe topics.



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Negative Participation Behaviors

- 3. Work for quick agreement. Extended problem analysis and solution generation may contribute to dissent. Don't worry about "groupthink" because, after all, you are a group and everyone should support the same viewpoint.
- 4. If a stalemate occurs, pit one person against another so that there are clear winners and losers. This action will return the group to action and discourage others from blocking progress.
- 5. Use your power position to get others to agree with you. Don't hesitate to pull rank or threaten sanctions to preserve your ability to influence others. 6. Don't respond to e-mail requests. Send e-mails that attack others. Communicate only to selected members of the group

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Positive Participation Behaviors

- Positive Behaviors
- 1. Be prepared and informed when in decision-making and problem-solving groups. Review relevant materials before meetings, ask for additional needed information, formulate ideas, help with physical arrangements, and encourage other team members. Contributions to meetings should be based on knowledge about the topic, agenda, and facts that bear directly on the problem.
- 2. Exhibit cooperative and open-minded behaviors that encourage participation by all involved. In a group work setting, group goals have priority. Cooperation includes encouraging participation and encouraging listening and the clarification of meanings among group members. Cooperation also includes speaking with receivers in mind (concerning both content and style) to minimize message distortion. Groups tend to work best when all members accept a collective responsibility for productive outcomes.
- 3. Value diverse opinions and people. Promote different ideas, challenge team members to offer alternative views, support disagreement, and encourage broad participation

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Positive Participation Behaviors

- 4. Contribute ideas and seek information. Willingly risk ideas and opinions, ask for criticism, ask for opinions, support participation, and discourage negative evaluation.
- 5. Attempt to remain rational, and thoughtfully evaluate all information. Effective participation includes analyzing our own logic as well as the logic of others. Effective members exhibit enough patience for this examination to be possible. Effective members recognize good decisions are based on good information subjected to solid reasoning and evaluation.
- 6. Observe the participation process of the group. Members have not only a contribution responsibility but also a process responsibility for helping all members to participate thoughtfully. Those not speaking are in a position to observe when the group strays from its goals or when silent members are not given an opportunity for participation. Observation is also important for subtle cues that suggest some members may be holding important reservations that will ultimately affect their commitment..

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Positive Participation Behaviors

- 7. Actively participate as well as observe. Active participants who seek active participation from others set a tone in the group that encourages good decision making and problem solving.
- 8. Stress group productivity: encourage group members, note past successes, identify group strengths, and remember group responsibilities.
- 9. Avoid “role ruts.” Use diverse communication roles, encourage diversity among team members, and share roles with others.
- 10. Avoid self-centered roles. Identify disruptive behaviors, self-monitor behavior, and give feedback to those exhibiting self-centered roles.
- 11. Ease tensions. Facilitate positive expressions of differences, support people, evaluate ideas, and stress cooperation.

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Positive Participation Behaviors

- 12. Support leadership. Help leaders accomplish goals, and share leadership when necessary.
- 13. Build group pride. Create traditions, symbols, and slogans; celebrate work, progress, and success. Celebrate interpersonal relationships.
- 14. Produce results. Take responsibility for group outcomes, encourage responsibility from team members, and focus on effectiveness.
- 15. Think about the wise use of computer-mediated communication. Respond to requests thoughtfully and understand the difference between verbal and computermediated interactions.



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