PRLN8101

Group Work: A Template for Addressing Issues & Conflict

Group work. Some people love it, some people hate it. It's the way we all work in the "real world." It is the basis of every Public Relations practitioner's life. We work with clients and suppliers and our department teams, whether that is an agency or a corporate communications department. That's one of the reasons it is so important that you learn how to work in groups while you are here in PRLN8101 and the Strategic Marketing Communications program.

One part of working in groups means you are working with other people. That means group diversity! You may be working with people who have:

- A different working style than you do.
- A different communication style from you.
- A different perspective of what is their priority.
- A different understanding of the group's goals.
- A desire to do things a different way from other group members.

This may lead to issues arising and conflict between group members. If left unresolved, assignments can be severely impacted which can lead to extra stress, extra work for some group members, anger amongst group members and poor grades for all members.

The purpose of this document is to provide a step-by-step process to help you work through these issues and conflicts as they arise, as a group, so that you can avoid these negative outcomes.

Step 1. Recognize that each Group Member may react differently to the same situation. Ask yourself, how do you find yourself responding in these situations of conflict:

- Do I want to win this discussion? "I'm right, they are wrong." You may be Competitive.
- Do I always give in? "You're right, I'm wrong." You may be Accommodating.
- Do I always avoid these situations? "You go, no you go." You may be Avoiding.
- Do I always look for the win-win situation? "Let's work together." You may be a Collaborator.
- Do I always try and find the middle ground? "You give a bit and I'll give a bit." You may be Compromising.

Step 2: Each Group Member needs to consider their role in the situation. Ask yourself:

- Is my working style different than those of the other group members?
- Does my communication style seem to be different than theirs?
- Am I responding to them promptly as we agreed to in the Team Contract?
- Am I going to the team meetings?
- Have I done the work I promised I would get done? On my deadline?
- Is my job or going to the gym or my family more of a focus than this group project? Have I been honest with the group about this? Is it affecting the group's efforts to do the assigned project work?
- Do I think the assignment should be done differently than the rest of the group?
- Have I been honest with my team member's and told them how I feel?
- If I think another member has not been honest about these issues, can I separate the person from their actions?
- What are the actual concerns/behaviours that need to be discussed as a group?
- Have I been able to have a calm, open discussion with the group?

Step 3: Identify ways the group can take early action and address the problem.

- Make sure you have thought through the previous questions and be honest!
- Group members need to decide:
    - Are the actions of a few impacting just the few or everybody?
    - Can just those involved in the present conflict meet or do we all need to meet?
    - This will determine if you proceed to a small group meeting or a full group meeting.
- You may find that both of these situations are the case and both types of meetings will need to be held: one between parties in major conflict and then one with the full group as they are also being affected.

Step 4: Hold a meeting to find concessions and agreement and prepare an action plan for moving forward.

- Based on what was previously decided, meet. Either:
    - a) Members who are directly involved with a conflict should hold a face-to-face meeting to discuss the concerns and behaviours or,
    - b) Hold a fact-to-face meeting with all group members to discuss the concerns and behaviours.
- When setting up the meeting, create an agenda with a timeframe, an outline of the topics you will discuss, an order of how the discussion will go, a section for brainstorming options and solutions, and note that decisions will be documented and shared with the group.
- If it appears the order of who will speak first is going to be contentious, flip a coin in the meeting!
- Be prepared to listen opening and fairly.
- What are the issues? What can you come to some kind of an agreement on? Remember, in your Team Contract your agreement to have unanimous agreement, but if that is achievable, you will go with majority rules and keep a written record to show that everyone was aware of the vote.
- Identify how you are meeting your timelines and deadlines as initially outlined.
- Ask yourselves, how do we move forward? What is our action plan? Include a follow-up check-in meeting as a next step.
- This is where your Team Contract roles can come in. Have the Agency Director lead the meeting. Have the Agency Editor take notes for the Meeting Contact Report.
- Share the Meeting Contact Report with all the agreements after the meeting to all Group Members.

Step 5: If Group Members can't agree, escalate situation to the Professor.

- If after meeting as a full group no agreement on the conflict can be found, reach out the Professor via email to set up a Group Meeting.
- Send an email to the Professor and include the following information:
    - Agency Name and list of Group Members
    - Identify Members that are involved in the conflict: initially and at the present time. For example, did it start with two members and then involve the entire group.
    - Nature of the conflict: conflict in working styles, members not attending meetings, fulfilling commitments, submitting work on time, etc.
    - Steps that have been taken to resolve the conflict
    - How is this conflict affecting the group? Have you missed a deadline? Are you going to miss a deadline? Are you off your agreed-to goals?
    - Have you brainstormed options and solutions? Yes or No?
    - What do you think your group needs to do to resolve this conflict?
- As outlined in the Team Contract, the Professor will not become involved in conflicts that occur within 7 days of the final deadline of a project.

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My hope is that by providing you with some tools to work through the conflicts that will arise when you are working in groups, you will learn how to problem solve at this stage and take these skills with you into your career.

Step 1: Recognize that each Group Member may react differently to the same situation. Ask yourself, how do you find yourself responding in these situations of conflict.

Step 2: Each Group Member needs to consider their role in the situation. Ask yourself honest questions to examine whether your beliefs and actions are contributing to the issues and conflict.

Step 3: Identify ways the Group can take early action and address the problem. Ask: are the actions of a few impacting just the few or everybody? Can just those involved in the present conflict meet or do we all need to meet?

Step 4: Hold a meeting to find concessions and agreement and prepare an action plan for moving forward. This may need to be a small meeting of only the Group Members in conflict followed by a larger full Group Meeting.

Step 5: If Group Members can't agree, escalate situation to the Professor.

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