

# What makes groups successful?

*This article offers some additional thoughts and sources which you might find useful in evaluating your group's progress and outcomes.*

Many students have mixed expectations about groupwork. On the negative side, you may be worried whether members will get along or if everyone will contribute equally. Will your group develop positive team spirit if group members don't seem well-matched in terms of skills/knowledge? These concerns are very common.

## Preparing for groupwork

There is an important problem here – if you approach a group with negative attitude/expectations then you can fall into the trap which psychologists call the 'self-fulfilling prophecy': you *expect* a poor experience; so you do not put much effort in; other group members respond negatively to your lack of effort; and the group experience becomes more and more dispiriting. This is self-fulfilling – you have confirmed your initial expectation. Researchers find that these negative experiences can have serious and long-lasting impact – “rather than learning to value group collaboration, students learn to hate it.” (Brown and McIlroy, 2011)

To avoid this, approach groupwork with a positive attitude: consider how the benefits we identify apply to you; look forward to developing new relationships and achieving more than you could on your own. Think about your group experience along the lines of this quote attributed to Michael Jordan - widely-recognised as the best basketball player of all time:

*“Talent wins games, but teamwork wins championships”*

## Characteristics of successful groups

Social scientists have identified several important characteristics which influence team performance. Different researchers have described these characteristics in different ways, as this table illustrates, comparing a list from our first edition with a recent summary:

Important factors identified by Seethamraju and Borman (2009).	Factors which contribute to 'real teamwork' from Lencioni (2016)
a common purpose,	“focus on results”
group members' commitment to the group goals,	“active commitment” “vulnerability-based trust”
group members' motivations and abilities,	“peer-to-peer accountability”
having a mix of expertise and backgrounds in the group	“healthy conflict”

Social scientists have used different observation methods – these give you different views so there is no ‘one best way’. For example, questionnaire and surveys can identify aspects like group climate (atmosphere) or openness to innovation. Many tools are freely available.

## Practical suggestions

You can find useful practical suggestions in these studies. For example, the Human Dynamics Group at MIT observed successful problem-solving groups who demonstrated (Coyle, 2018, p.8ff)

- Equal contributions from all members.
- Energetic conversation with lots of eye contact.
- Direct communication with everyone, not just the leader.
- Conversations on the side with other members.
- Breaks for members to search for information outside and bring back to the group.

## Critical skills

A recent review of successful groups from different contexts suggests three skills are essential for successful teamwork (Coyle, 2018):

- Building safety.  
*Successful groups develop a sense of ‘belonging’ so that members feel safe and are able to contribute fully. The good news is that group members can do a whole range of things which can develop this ‘belongingness’.*
- Sharing vulnerability  
*Coyle argues that “vulnerability tends to spark cooperation and trust.” (op cit, p.103) Rather than trying to cover up or hide weaknesses and uncertainties, leaders and members of many successful groups communicate much more openly and other members respond likewise.*
- Establishing purpose.  
*Successful groups have a very clear idea of where they want to be, what they want to achieve. But this is not ‘set in stone’ – they must also have the confidence and skills to adapt to change.*

People who demonstrate these skills establish and build positive relationships in the group/team. They do it through behaviours we can all adopt. Coyle identifies “a distinct pattern of interaction” and suggests this is “located not in the big things but in little moments of social connection.” (op cit, p.7) Simple behaviours like not interrupting, asking questions, talking to everyone, ‘no long speeches’ can add up and have major impact. We have mentioned many of these behaviours already such as active listening (pages ...).

## Understanding others

Another important principle which can help us establish good relationships is to avoid quick or hasty judgements about other group members. Do not jump to conclusions. The person who seems unwilling to join in at the start may be shy and/or anxious rather than unwilling.

A lot of research demonstrates a problem that regularly trips us up: “that we think we understand the minds of others ... better than we actually do.” (Epley, 2014, page 1) If we

act on an impression which is inaccurate then we create negative situations, like the self-fulfilling prophecy we mentioned above.

If you adopt an open-minded approach and emphasise the positive behaviours mentioned above then you are likely to foster good relationships and help the group make progress.

## References

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