Group work summary

Introduction

Purpose

Group work has become an important means of assessment in university. Many subjects require students to collaborate to achieve tasks, which brings its own challenges.

Why we do group work

Developing your team skills is essential to success in your studies and future career. Teamwork is very common in modern education and workplaces as some tasks are too large for an individual to manage.

However, a group is not the same as a team. A group is simply a collection of people. A team has a clear purpose and each member is usually assigned a specific role. Effective teamwork requires flexibility, negotiation, and compromise. You need to work with people with differing backgrounds, expectations, and experience. It requires you to resolve disagreements, handle criticism, and work with people who are different to you. It also tests your organisational skills, ability to set and keep deadlines, and capacity to coordinate individual responsibilities.

The lifecycle of a team

The concept of a team's lifecycle is key to understanding how teams evolve and function over time. Just like living organisms, teams go through various stages of development, each with its own characteristics and challenges. Recognising these stages can help leaders and team members navigate the complexities of team dynamics more effectively.

Stage 1- A group of people from different backgrounds come together to achieve a goal
Stage 2 - The group may experience difficulties and conflict
Stage 3 – The group becomes more cohesive over time
Stage 4 – The group is now able to be productive and achieve goals

Challenges to teamwork

Teams encounter various obstacles as they progress through their lifecycle, from initial uncertainty and conflicts over roles to the complexities of coordinating efforts and maintaining motivation. However, these challenges also present opportunities for growth and development.

Culture - Culture can sometimes present challenges. Communication styles differ between groups, as does English proficiency and how people value deadlines.

Age and experience levels - There could also be a mix of ages and experience in your group. People with experience in the field may have other perspectives, and mature-aged students may have different motivations than young adults.

Commitment and availability - Team members will have differing levels of outside commitments and availability. Some may work, and people's family lives can be demanding.

Individual personalities - Every person will bring unique skills and personality traits to the group. Some students are more ambitious, and not everyone is reliable, skilful, or organised. Some will wish to dominate, and others will try to do the bare minimum. Many may prefer to work alone

Overcoming the challenges

One approach to overcoming the challenges of teamwork is the COPPER checklist.

Commitment: Start by familiarizing yourselves with each other. Agree to share the responsibility collectively. Be upfront about other commitments that might impact your availability so you can plan accordingly.

Objectives: Identify the skills you wish to develop this semester. What academic goals are you aiming for? Establish criteria for peer reviews. Are there any additional goals you want to pursue?

Project Management: Choose your administrative tools. Select your preferred communication method (messaging, video calls, email, etc.). Determine your project management tools (Office 365 apps, OneDrive, Trello, Tricider, etc.).

Planning: Set your meeting schedules. Decide where and how your meetings will take place. Establish deadlines for writing and drafting assignments.

Expectations: Assign tasks to group members. Allocate roles based on each person's strengths and weaknesses. Be open about your skills and limitations. Ensure everyone is accountable.

Roles: Distribute responsibilities among members. Assign roles considering individual strengths, weaknesses, and competencies. Everyone should support each other, maintain regular checkins, and hold one another accountable if needed.

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