Working in Groups: The Importance of Communication in Developing Trust and Cooperation[1]

Bryan D. Terry[2]

Overview

Working together in groups can be a great experience or one filled with stress and anxiety. The success of group work depends largely on the trust developed among group members and the respect they show each other. When an individual has had a positive experience in a group, he/she is more likely to take risks, ask questions, and share ideas that will benefit the total group.

A trusting, cooperative atmosphere does not happen automatically. Everyone in the group contributes to the overall group dynamic. When trust and cooperation exist in a group, then individuals, committees, organizations, and communities can benefit greatly.

Great discoveries and improvements invariably involve the cooperation of many minds.

– Alexander Graham Bell

Trust in a person, a group, or an institution is based on the reliability, truthfulness, ability, or strength of that person, group, or institution (Walumbwa, Luthans, Avey, and Oke 2011). Trust is essential for individuals to work effectively in committees, clubs, communities, offices, or families. Most "trust-related" research asserts that trust directly effects group performance and process (Dirks 1999). Trust has also been found to be associated with group/team satisfaction and increased level of perceived task performance (Costa 2003). For these reasons, developing a climate of trust is one of the most important tasks a group of people can undertake. It takes time, but the results can be very worthwhile.

Cooperation is working together for a common purpose or benefit (Oliphant 2011). Cooperation is essential to long-term group effectiveness and is frequently associated with trust (Dirks 1999). Cooperation "indirectly affects performance by enhancing a group's sense of efficacy (or effectiveness) in its ability to resolve conflicts and perform effectively" (Alper, Tjosvold, and Law 2000). When we cooperate in a group, our efforts are directed toward a common goal. We display cooperative behavior by performing our assigned job or participating in other activities to benefit the group (Tyler 2002).

Essentials of Communication in Developing Trust and Cooperation

Developing trust and cooperation includes elements such as expressing one's thoughts clearly and listening and interacting with others effectively. Among the many factors that account for group trust and cooperation, effective communication skills have historically been linked with successfully fostering a positive group dynamic. Elements of communication include group communication and interactions, active listening, and body language.

1. Group Communication

Groups with a low level of communication have less trust and cooperation. Lower levels of trust and cooperation lead to increased conflicts (Levi 2001). A group can be most effective when all members communicate with one another. As group members interact, question, disagree with, and support decisions, communication increases. Increased communication promotes overall group success (Limas 2003).

Keep communication simple; people absorb information differently and at varying rates. Use the best practices below for increasing effective group communication:

DURING A MEETING:

Restate group goals when a new member joins the group for the first time.

Restate the purpose of the group as often as needed to help group members focus on what is important.

Encourage the creativity and the exchange of ideas and open dialogue.

COMPLEX INFORMATION:

Provide step-by-step instructions in a logical order.

Present complex information to the group in multiple ways: (for example, both verbally and in print).

Check for understanding by asking, "Would someone share their interpretation of this information?"

OTHER EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES:

Use ice breakers and get-acquainted activities to help establish a positive, cooperative group climate.

Provide regular feedback to help the group to stay focused on goals.

Groups with a low level of communication have less trust and cooperation. To increase cooperation and trust: (1) practice effective communication during group meetings; (2) simplify complex information; and (3) ensure all group members have a voice and understand the topics presented. Encourage group members to pay attention to one another.

Discuss one topic at a time.

Work through group conflicts rather than avoiding them.

Ensure that all group members have an opportunity to state their views.

Clearly state decisions so that all members understand.

2. Active Listening

Applause is the only appreciated interruption.

 – Arnold Glasgow

Active listening is a multistep process of mindfully hearing and attempting to comprehend the meaning of words spoken by another person in a conversation or speech (Mc-Naughton, Hamlin, McCarthy, Head-Reeves, and Schreiner 2008). In group settings, the goal has been to develop a clear understanding of the speaker's concern and also to clearly communicate the listener's interest in the speaker's message. When all members of a group practice effective active listening, communication can be improved, which builds trust and cooperation. The following techniques have helped develop good active listening skills:

ACKNOWLEDGING WHAT YOU'RE HEARING

Example: "I see . . . Hmmm" (nodding).

ASKING FOR MORE INFORMATION

Example: "That sounds interesting. Tell us more."

PARAPHRASING

Example: "So, do I hear you saying that although the plans aren't finished, we should start marketing the workshop while the committee works on the details?"

SHARING INFORMATION

Example: "I have some names of people in my office that could help us with this problem. I will send those to you before we make the final decision."

CHECKING FEELINGS

Example: "It seems like you're frustrated. Tell us what concerns you about this situation."

REPORTING FEELINGS

Example: "It's been a long day. I'm not productive anymore. I'd like to think about this and get back together on Wednesday."

OFFERING OR REQUESTING MORE OPTIONS

Example: "We've listed some good ideas. Can we expand any of those ideas now?"

3. Body Language

Body language has been defined as communication without words. Miller (2005) stated that body language includes "overt behaviors such as facial expressions, eye contact, touching and tone of voice" (p. 28). Group members' body language helps communicate their interest, boredom or confusion, as well as whether they are in agreement or disagreement with other members.

When verbal and nonverbal messages are in alignment the most effective group communication and synergy tends to occur (Miller 2005). Care should be taken so that group members do not come to false conclusions. Observe nonverbal communication and then use it as a "check point" to confirm what group members have communicated. Check information with a question, such as:

Example: "I'm having a tough time guaging your reaction to the news. How are people feeling about this proposal right now?" Or, "I see some frowns. Would someone like to share a concern?"

Conclusion

A trusting, cooperative atmosphere does not happen automatically. Every leader and member of a group is responsible for creating and maintaining positive group dynamics through communication techniques. When trust and cooperation exist in a group, individuals, committees, organizations, and communities can greatly benefit. Effective group communication can be enhanced by applying techniques to increase group communication and interactions, active listening, and interpretations of body language.

For more information related to working in groups, refer to Working in Groups: Facilitating Positive Group Interactions for methods to facilitate group interaction.

References

Alper, S., D. Tjosvold, and K. Law. 2000. "Conflict management, efficacy, and performance in organizational teams." *Personnel Psychology*, 53(3), 625-642.

Costa, A. C. 2003. "Work team trust and effectiveness." *Personnel Review*, 32(5), 605-622.

Dirks, K. T. 1999. "The effects of interpersonal trust on work group performance." *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 84(3), 445-455.

Levi, D. 2001. *Group Dynamics for Teams*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Limas, J.R. 2003. "Small Group Dynamics in a Nutshell." *Manage*, 1(4), 3-5.

McNaughton, D., D. Hamlin, J. McCarthy, D. Head-Reeves, and M. Schreiner. 2008. "Teaching and Active Listening Strategy to Preservice Eduation Professionals." *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education*, 27(4), 223-231.

Miller, P. W. 2005. "Body Language in the Classroom." *Techniques*, November/December, 28 – 30. Available at: https://www.acteonline.org/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=2824

Oliphant, K. 2011. "Teacher development groups: Growth through cooperation." *Íkala*, 1(2), 67-86.

Tyler, T.R. 2002. "Leadership and Cooperation in Groups." *The American Behavioral Scientist*, 45(5), 769-782.

Walker, K. 2001. "Building Trust." Kansas State University Cooperative Extension Service: Manhattan, KS.

Walumbwa, F. O., F. Luthans, J. B. Avey, and A. Oke. 2011. "Authentically leading groups: The mediating role of collective psychological capital and trust." *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 32(1), 4-24.