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Chapter 1 Introduction to Group Communication



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Grace has always wanted to be a pediatric nurse. When she was accepted into the nursing program at a local college, she looked forward to studying for her dream job. Her first day in Anatomy and Physiology class, however, turned her hopes into fears. Her professor explained that every student must learn and understand the significance of more than 15,000 terms. As she looked around the classroom, she could see that many of the other new nursing majors seemed just as stunned as she was.

After class was over, she walked down the hallway with four students from class. The mood was gloomy. After an uncomfortable period of silence, one of the other students suggested that they form a study group. Grace had her doubts. She thought, "A study group will just take up a lot of my time and energy, with no guarantee that it will help me earn a good grade. As much as I'd like to get to know these students better, I can probably learn more by studying alone. Besides, what if we don't get along? What if I end up doing most of the work or the others don't show up?"

Grace's concerns—like those of many people—are understandable. Groups use a lot of time, energy, and resources. In some cases, a single person can accomplish just as much or more by working alone. And even if a study group has the potential to aid learning, it also has the potential for interpersonal conflicts and long-lasting resentments.

When you finish reading this chapter, you should be able to answer the following critical thinking questions about this case study:

1. If you were in Grace's position, would you have similar concerns about spending valuable time and energy in a study group? What factors would you consider in deciding whether to join?
2. What communication strategies should a study group use to ensure that members are satisfied with the group experience?
3. Which dialectic tensions are most likely to affect how well Grace and her study group achieve their goals?
4. Is it ethical for a study group to work together to improve their chances of earning a good grade when other students in the same class study alone? If yes, why? If no, why not?



The Group Project



The Reunion

Before you read any further, visit Pearson's MyCommunicationLab website and watch the short videos "The Group Project" and "The Reunion," which illustrate **Chapter 1** concepts. Each video comes with a set of study questions to keep in mind as you read this chapter.

Succeeding in Groups

All of us work in groups. We work in groups at school and on the job; with family members, friends, and colleagues; in diverse locations, from sports fields and battlefields

to courtrooms and classrooms; face to face, by telephone, and through electronic communication channels. Whereas individual achievement was once the measure of personal success, success in today's complex world depends on the ability to work in groups. Researchers Steve Kozlowski and Daniel Ilgen describe our profound dependence on groups:

Teams of people working together for a common cause touch all of our lives. From everyday activities like air travel, fire fighting, and running the United Way drive to amazing feats of human accomplishments like climbing Mt. Everest and reaching for the stars, teams are at the center of how work gets done in modern times.¹

Working in groups may be the most important skill you learn in college. A study commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) asked employers to rank essential learning outcomes needed by college graduates entering the workplace. In two of four major categories ("Intellectual and Practical Skills" and "Personal and Social Responsibility"), the top-ranked outcome was "teamwork skills and the ability to collaborate with others in diverse group settings." Recent graduates ranked the same learning outcomes as top priorities.² A business executive in the same study wrote that they look for employees who "are good team people over anything else. I can teach the technical."³ In another major study, employers identified group-related communication skills as more important than written communication, proficiency in the field of study, and computer skills.⁴

Before reading any further, take a brief look at the Group Assessment survey at the end of this chapter on page 23. How well do you stack up against the list of group competencies?

Defining Group Communication

When does a collection of people become a group? Do people talking in an elevator or discussing the weather at an airport constitute a group? Are the members of a church congregation listening to a sermon or fans cheering at a baseball game a group? Although the people in these examples may look like a group, they are not necessarily working for or with other members. We define **group communication** as the interaction of three or more interdependent members working to achieve a common goal.

Remember This

Group communication is the interaction of three or more interdependent members working to achieve a common goal.

In this textbook, we use the terms *group* and *team* interchangeably. A group of friends organizing an annual block party can be just as diligent, organized, and productive as a corporate team organizing a stockholders' meeting. Even though we don't call a football team a football group or a group of family members a team (unless they're playing a sport or game together), we can say that all of these people are interdependent and interact in order to achieve a common goal.

Key Elements of Group Communication

Now, let's break down our definition into the essential components of group communication (see **Figure 1.1**).



Figure 1.1 Components of Group Communication

Three or More Members.

The saying “two’s company, three’s a crowd” recognizes that a conversation between two people is fundamentally different from a three-person discussion. If two people engage in a conversation, Jill communicates with Jack and Jack communicates with Jill. But if a third person is added, the dynamics change: A third person can be the listener who judges and influences the content and style of the conversation. She or he can listen while the other two talk, support or criticize one or both, offer alternatives, and contribute to a tie-breaking decision if the other two people can’t agree.

As the size of a group increases, the number of possible interactions (and potential misunderstandings) increases even faster. For example, a group with five members has the potential for 90 different types of interaction; a group with seven members has the potential for 966 different types of interaction.⁵

Many organizations have learned the importance of creating groups in a size most likely to achieve specific goals. For example, many successful megachurches in the United States may have thousands of members in their congregations, but small groups are the key to their success. Church members are encouraged to

Follow the Research

What Is the Ideal Group Size?

Research Question: What's the ideal size for a group working to achieve a common goal? Answer: It depends. It depends on member knowledge, attitudes, and skills; on the nature and needs of the task; and—most important of all—on the group's goal. Fortunately, researchers have looked at the group-size question and given us some useful guidelines:

- Groups of three to nine members are generally more productive.
- Groups of more than nine members are generally less productive.⁶

In general, the ideal group size for a *problem-solving* discussion is five to seven members. To avoid ties, an odd number of members is usually better than an even number.

Group communication scholar Susan Wheelan further defines the relationship of group size to group development and productivity. She concludes that groups of three to nine members are more effective than groups of ten or more members. As group size increases, cohesion and effective collaboration decreases, and members tend to divide into subgroups. In large groups, members are more argumentative, less unified, and more competitive than cooperative. Some members may feel left out or inconsequential. As a result, member satisfaction also decreases.⁷

Now, can you answer the question: What's the ideal size for a group working to achieve a common goal? Although there are always exceptions to most rules, you'd be wise to aim for three to nine members. When possible, follow Susan Wheelan's advice and limit "group size to the smallest number of members necessary to accomplish group goals."⁸

create or join tightly knit groups of five to seven people who meet in a member's home to pray and support one another in times of need. Worshipers match their interests with those of other group members—new parents, retired accountants, mountain bike riders—and use their commonalities as the basis for religious discussions, member support, and volunteer projects. Thus, while successful megachurches boast large congregations that share a common belief system, they rely on the motivation and comfort of small groups to strengthen their religious faith.⁹

Interaction.

Interaction requires communication among group members who use verbal and nonverbal messages to generate meanings and establish relationships.¹⁰ Communication allows members to share information and opinions, make decisions and solve problems, and develop interpersonal relationships. The way in which group members communicate does more than reveal group dynamics; it creates them.¹¹ Members learn which behaviors are appropriate and inappropriate, and which communication rules govern the interaction among members. Regardless of whether group members are meeting face to face or in cyberspace, group communication requires interaction.

Interdependence.

Interdependence means that each group member is affected and influenced by the actions of other members. A successful interdependent group functions as a cohesive team in which every member is responsible for doing his or her part. The failure of a single group member can adversely affect the entire group. For example, if one student in a study group fails to read an assigned chapter, the entire group will be unprepared for questions related to the subject matter covered in that chapter. There are not many tasks that can be accomplished by a group without information, advice, support, and assistance from all interdependent members.

Working.

Work is the physical or mental effort you use when trying to accomplish something. That “something” can be a social goal such as getting friends together for a surprise party, a family goal such as deciding jointly where to go on vacation, a

Theory in Groups

Systems Theory

Systems Theory examines how interdependent factors affect one another. In communication studies, Systems Theory recognizes that “communication does not take place in isolation, but rather necessitates a communication system.”¹²

Every group we describe in this textbook is a **system**, a collection of interacting, interdependent elements working together to form a complex whole that adapts to a changing environment. However, groups are not the only systems in our lives. For example, in biology, we study the digestive system, the nervous system, and the immune system. We also know that when one part of a biological system fails, the consequences can be serious or even deadly. We praise the democratic system of government, marvel at our solar system, and hope that our computer system doesn’t crash.

Systems Theory tells us a great deal about the nature of groups and helps prepare us for the tensions—both predictable and unpredictable—that characterize the work of a group and its members. It also helps us understand the behavior of groups and their members. For example, groups make decisions, solve problems, produce products, and implement programs that affect people within and outside the group. If one member fails to cooperate or contribute, the entire group may suffer. On the other hand, a group benefits if members suggest creative solutions to a problem.

medical team's goal such as planning training sessions for improving patient care, or a management goal in which members develop a strategic plan for their organization.

The title of this textbook, *Working in Groups*, focuses on the ways in which members work with one another to achieve a common goal. *Working* in a group is not about hard labor or exhausting effort. Rather, when we work effectively in groups, we join others in a productive and motivating experience in which members combine their talents and energy to achieve a worthy goal.

Common Goal.

Group members come together for a reason. Their collective reason or goal defines and unifies the group. A **goal** is the purpose or objective toward which group work is directed. The label—goal, objective, purpose, mission, assignment, or vision—doesn't matter. Without a common goal, groups would wonder: Why are we meeting? Why should we care or work hard? Where are we going?

Remember This

In their book, *TeamWork*, Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto observe that effective groups have “a clear, elevated goal.”¹³ Goals guide action, set standards for measuring success, provide a focus for resolving conflict, and motivate members.

While some groups have the freedom to develop their own goals, other groups are assigned a goal. For example, a gathering of neighbors may meet to discuss ways of reducing crime in the neighborhood. Nursing students may form a study group to prepare for an upcoming exam. On the other hand, a marketing instructor may assign a semester-long project to a group of students to assess their ability to develop a marketing

campaign. A chemical company may assemble a group of employees from various departments and ask them to develop recommendations for safer storage of hazardous chemicals. Whatever the circumstances, effective groups work to accomplish a common goal.



The Green Bay Packers have won more championships than any other team in National Football League history. How do the Packers exemplify the definition of group communication: the interaction of three or more interdependent members working to achieve a common goal?

Types of Groups

Groups, like their individual members, have diverse characteristics and goals. Although a basketball team, a study group, a corporate board of directors, and a homecoming committee all meet our definition of a group, each one has unique features and functions.

We have sorted the most common types of groups into eight categories: primary groups, social groups, self-help groups, learning groups, service groups, civic groups, work groups, and public groups (see **Figure 1.2**). These categories range from the most

personal and informal types of groups to more formal types. You can identify each type of group by observing its purpose (why the group meets) and its membership (who is in the group).

PURPOSE		MEMBERSHIP
Primary	To provide members with affection, support, and a sense of belonging	Family members, best friends
Social	To share common interests in a friendly setting or participate in social activities	Athletic team members, hobbyists, sorority and fraternity members
Self-Help	To support and encourage members who want or need help with personal problems	Therapy group members, participants in programs such as Weight Watchers or Alcoholics Anonymous
Learning	To help members gain knowledge and develop skills	Classmates, book club members, participants in a ceramics workshop or dance class, stock investing clubs
Service	To assist worthy causes that help other people <i>outside</i> the group	Members of Kiwanis, Police Athletic League, charity groups
Civic	To support worthy causes that help people <i>within</i> the group	Members of the PTA, labor unions, veterans' groups, community associations
Work	To achieve specific goals on behalf of a business or organization	Members of work-related project management teams, committees, task force members, management team
Public	To discuss important issues in front of or for the benefit of the public	Members of open-to-the-public panel discussions, forums, and governance groups

Figure 1.2 Types of Groups

The eight types of groups in **Figure 1.2** are not absolute categories. Many groups overlap. A Girl Scout belongs to both a social group and a learning group, whereas the scout leaders who operate under the direction of the national association belong to both a service group and a work group.

The last two types of groups in **Figure 1.2** —work groups and public groups—serve the interests of organizations and public audiences. Their goal may be as complex as reengineering a global corporation or as simple as reporting their progress at a weekly staff meeting. If you are employed, you probably belong to several work groups. You may be a member of a production team or a work crew. You may be part of a sales staff, service department, management group, or research team.

Public group members interact in front of or for the benefit of the public. Although public groups may engage in information sharing, decision making, or problem solving, they are also concerned with making a positive impression on a public audience. In **Appendix** , we recommend strategies and skills for developing and delivering effective presentations when serving in a public group.

Virtual Groups

Using Technology to Communicate

Instead of—or in addition to—meeting face to face, many groups interact virtually.

A **virtual group** uses technology to communicate, often across time, distance, and organizational boundaries. One key aspect of virtual group communication is that it can take place synchronously and/or asynchronously.

Synchronous communication occurs simultaneously and in real time.

Audioconferences, videoconferences, text conferences, and computer-mediated meeting systems such as webinars allow for synchronous interaction.

Asynchronous communication is electronic communication that does not occur simultaneously or in real time. Messages sent via email, voice mail, and electronic bulletin boards are asynchronous.

In the spring of 2010, when the airspace above Europe shut down due to ash clouds from Iceland’s Eyjafjallajökull volcano, the disruption in travel led to an increase in business teleconferencing. Even though the biggest fans of phone conferences acknowledge that virtual groups are not always the best substitute for face-to-face meetings, the volcano’s activity motivated many organizations to replace an expensive (and, in some cases, seriously delayed) business trip with a convenient virtual meeting.¹⁴ Even without the incentive of an erupting volcano, “organizations are no longer confined to team efforts that assemble people from the same location or the same time zone. Indeed, small groups of people from two or more locations and time zones routinely convene for collaborative purposes.”¹⁵

Virtual groups are complex. Members may come from different organizations, cultures, time zones, and geographic locations—not to mention the many technological variables they may encounter. For example, different group members may have different levels of experience and knowledge in using the virtual medium; they may also have computer systems with different capabilities, such as an older or newer version of the software being used for group communication. As a result, virtual groups develop a different group dynamic from those meeting face to face.¹⁶

Chapter 12 , “Technology and Virtual Groups,” discusses the unique issues these groups face. In most chapters, we offer additional recommendations on how to work effectively in virtual group environments.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Groups

If you’re like most people, there have probably been times when you have suffered through a long, boring meeting run by an incompetent leader. Perhaps you have lost patience with a group that couldn’t accomplish a simple task that you could easily do by yourself. Even so, the potential advantages of working in effective groups far outweigh the disadvantages.

Let’s begin acknowledging several certainties about the advantages of group work. There is no question that some tasks are impossible for one person to complete. Prehistoric people joined groups to hunt large, ferocious animals and to protect their nomadic family clans. Today we form groups to build skyscrapers and rocket ships, to perform life-saving surgery and classical symphonies, and to play football games and clean up oil spills.

We also rely on smaller groups in our day-to-day circumstances to make decisions and solve problems. Do these groups do a better job than one person can? If the group is poorly organized, lacks a clear goal, has unmotivated members with limited or inappropriate knowledge and skills, the answer is no. But when groups work effectively, efficiently, and ethically, they have the potential to outperform individuals working alone and can make significant contributions to the quality of our lives. The critical question is not, “Are groups better than individuals?” Rather, we must ask ourselves this: “How can we make sure that our groups are effective?”¹⁷ That question drives the content of this textbook. As we note in **Figure 1.3**, the potential advantages far outweigh the potential disadvantages.



Figure 1.3 Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Groups

Advantages

When a task is fairly simple and routine (write a memo, total the receipts), it may be more efficient for an individual working alone to accomplish the task. If one person knows the answer to a question or if the task requires a specialized expert, then a single person may be better equipped to get the job done. However, when the task is complex and the answers are unclear, a group has the potential to do the job more effectively.

Superior Resources.

Every group member brings a wide variety of resources to a group. Each member has different life experiences and unique perspectives, ideas, and information about a variety of issues. When group members share what they know and what they believe, the group's knowledge base is enriched.¹⁸ These collective perspectives, ideas, and information are likely to result in better-informed, more meaningful, and more effective group decision making and problem solving.¹⁹ With rare exceptions, a group will have more and better resources to call upon than an individual working alone.

Member Satisfaction.

The social benefits of group work can be just as important as task achievement. People belong to and work in groups because groups give them the opportunity to make friends, socialize, receive peer support, and feel part of a unified and successful team. Not surprisingly, the more opportunities group members have to communicate with one another, the more satisfied they are with the group experience.

Learning.

An added advantage of working in groups is the amount of learning that takes place. Groups can enhance learning by sharing collective information, stimulating critical thinking, and challenging assumptions. A review of 168 studies of college students comparing cooperative, group-based learning with traditional approaches indicates that collaborative learning promotes higher individual achievement in knowledge acquisition, retention, accuracy, creativity in problem solving, and higher-level reasoning.²⁰ New members learn from veterans, and amateurs learn from experts. Not only do members learn more about the topics they discuss, but they also learn more about how to work as a group.

Cultural Understanding.

Working effectively in groups requires that you understand, respect, and adapt to differences in members' skills, experiences, opinions, and behavior as well as differences in gender, age, race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, status, and worldviews. By recognizing, appreciating, and adapting to member differences, you can become a more effective communicator in your group, and in your community, your studies, your work, and your travels within this country or throughout the world. **Chapter 4** , "Diversity in Groups," examines the ways in which member similarities and differences benefit groups.

Creativity.

Not only do groups perform better than individuals working alone, they can also generate more innovative ideas and creative solutions. As MIT management professor Peter Senge writes, "If you want something really creative done, you ask a team to do it—instead of sending one person off to do it on his or her own."²¹

Lee Towe, author of *Why Didn't I Think of That? Creativity in the Workplace*, writes that the "key to creativity is the mental flexibility required to mix thoughts from our many different experiences."²² When you mix your thoughts with those of other group members, you increase the group's creative potential. In addition to providing a creative multiplier effect by tapping more information, more brainpower, and more insights, groups have "awesome superiority" when trying to unleash creativity and solve challenging problems.²³

Civic Engagement.

In recent years, many educational institutions have implemented service-learning programs as a way of connecting students to the community in which they live and work. Rather than confining the study of group communication to the classroom, service learning provides student groups with opportunities to use the strategies and skills they learn in class as they work together toward achieving a genuine, community-based goal.²⁴ Sara Chudnovsky Weintraub, an expert in service learning, claims that “service-learning projects [or any community-based group projects] help engage students in meaningful experiences that bridge the gap between theory and practice.”²⁵

Whether you participate in a service-learning group project, organize a neighborhood watch group, or join a city task force, learning effective group communication skills will help you serve your community with dedication and skill.

Disadvantages

The advantages of working in groups occur when groups are working efficiently and effectively. The disadvantages are more likely to occur when working in a group is not the appropriate way to achieve a goal, when members do not work to their full potential, or when problems interfere with group members’ willingness and ability to communicate. The most common complaints about working in groups concern the amount of time, energy, and resources expended by groups and the conflicts and people problems that can arise.

More Time, Energy, and Resources.

Working in groups costs time, energy, and resources. The 3M Corporation examined the many factors that affect the cost of meetings, including the hourly wages of group members, the wages of those who help prepare for meetings, the cost of materials used in meetings, and overhead costs. Here's its conclusion: The 3M Corporation spends a staggering \$78.8 million annually for meetings.²⁶ A Microsoft survey concludes that nonproductive meetings, poor communication, and hazy group objectives gobble up two of every five workdays. In another study, workers report that they spend an average of 5.6 hours a week in meetings and rate 69 percent of those meetings as "ineffective."²⁷ We spend a lot of time in groups; if that time and effort are wasted, we are throwing away valuable resources. In **Chapter 11** , "Planning and Conducting Meetings," we offer several strategies for making meetings more productive and satisfying.

Conflict.

Very few people enjoy or seek out conflict. However, when group members work together to achieve a common goal, there is always the potential for disagreement. Unfortunately, those who disagree may be seen as aggressive and disruptive. As a result, some people will do almost anything to avoid conflict and confrontation. They may go out of their way to avoid working in groups, even though, "in a good discussion, arguing our different viewpoints might lead to clarifying and reconciling them."²⁸ Yet because of apprehension about conflict, some people avoid meetings in which controversial issues are scheduled for discussion, or they are unwilling to express their opinions. In **Chapter 8** , "Conflict and Cohesion in Groups," we recommend specific conflict management strategies that address different types and styles of conflict.

People Problems.

As much as we may want others to share our interests, viewpoints, and willingness to work, there is always the potential for individual group members to create problems. Like anyone else in our daily lives, group members can be stubborn, lazy, and even cruel. When deciding whether to work in a group, we often consider whether we want to spend time working with certain members.

Members who lack confidence or who are unprepared may have little to contribute. To avoid conflict or extra work, some members may go along with the group or play “follow the leader” rather than search for the best solution to a problem. Strong, domineering members can put so much pressure on others that dissent is stifled. Although no one wants to work with a group of unpleasant members, there may be circumstances in which people problems cannot be avoided. Fortunately, the upcoming chapters in this textbook provide a wide range of effective strategies and skills for conducting successful and efficient meetings, for managing the inevitable conflicts that arises in groups, and for coping with and overcoming inappropriate member behavior.

The Nature of Group Communication

Beyond the basic components and types of groups, two concepts can help you to better understand the complex nature of group communication: (1) the critical functions of communication theories, strategies, skills and (2) the group communication process.

Theories, Strategies, and Skills

Management expert Peter Senge and his colleagues believe that theories, strategies, and skills are inseparable components of effective organizations.²⁹ Throughout this textbook, we examine the theories, strategies, and skills needed to promote and balance group productivity and member satisfaction.

- A **theory** is a statement that tries to explain or predict events and behavior. Group communication theories help us understand what is occurring in a group and why a group succeeds or fails.
- A **strategy** is a method, guideline, or technique for dealing with the issues and problems that arise in groups. Effective strategies are based on theories. Without theories, you won't know why a particular strategy works in one situation and fails in another.
- A **skill**, in the context of group work, is a specific ability that helps a group carry out or achieve its common goal. Communication skills are the most important skills available to group members. Like strategies, skills are most effective when their use is based on theories.

Although an effective group member can tell you what strategies and skills you should use, you may have no idea why the strategies work or how to do the required skills. In our eagerness to solve problems or achieve a group's goal, we may rely on easy-to-use skills that do not address the causes of a problem or help us achieve the goal. Using skills without an understanding of communication strategies and theories can make the process of working in groups inefficient, ineffective, and frustrating for all members.

The Group Communication Process

Central to group communication is the notion of *interaction*. That is, members must communicate with one another as they work together toward achieving a common goal. Communication is complex when just two people interact, and the process becomes more complicated when additional people are involved. At its most fundamental level, the group communication process includes six basic elements common to all forms of human communication; these are illustrated in **Figures 1.4**



Figure 1.4 The Group Communication Process

Basic Elements of Group Communication	Description	Group Examples
Members	People with distinct knowledge, experiences, personality traits, attitudes, skills, and cultural backgrounds who are recognized as belonging to the group	A surgical team includes one or more surgeons, an anesthesiologist, and function-specific surgical nurses.
Messages	The expression of ideas, information, opinions, and/or feelings that generate meaning	Group members take on a variety of communicative roles such as asking for or giving information and opinions, praising other members, and alleviating tension with friendly humor.
Context	The physical and psychological environment in which a group communicates, including factors such as group size, working conditions, and the relationships among members	A study group meeting in the college cafeteria communicates in a different context than a corporate marketing team holding a videoconference with international clients.
Channels	The media through which group members share messages using one or more of their five senses in face-to-face or mediated settings	Group members may respond by nodding and smiling, scowling and frowning; by expressing their opinions and reactions; by looking attentive or bored.
Feedback	Verbal or nonverbal responses or reactions to a message that help members assess how well others receive and interpret their messages	Group members may nod or scowl when someone makes a suggestion; may vote against a proposal; may look attentive when they agree and smile when pleased.
Noise	Any external (sounds, room conditions) or internal (attitudes, beliefs, and values) factors that interfere with how well members express themselves or interpret the messages of others	External Noise: Hallway sounds, hot/cold room, poor lighting, uncomfortable seating Internal Noise: biases, worried thoughts, anger, fatigue, hunger, headaches

Figure 1.5 Basic Elements of Group Communication

Balance: The Guiding Principle of Group Work

At the heart of this book is an important guiding principle: An ideal group succeeds because it achieves balance. **Balance** describes a state of equilibrium in which no significant factor dominates or interferes with other factors. In group communication, the group's common goal is the point on which members must balance many factors. A group that makes a decision or completes an assigned task is not in balance if group members end up hating one another. A group that relies on one or two members to do all the work is not in balance. Effective groups balance factors such as the group's task and social functions, individual and group needs, and the responsibilities of leadership and followership. Achieving balance requires an understanding of the interplay of the contradictory forces that operate in all groups.

Groups in Balance...

Create Synergy

When three or more interdependent group members interact and work toward a common goal, they have the potential to create a synergistic system. **Synergy** is a term that describes the cooperative interaction of several factors that result in a combined effect greater than the total of all individual contributions. In other words, the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. The term *synergy* comes from the Greek word *synergos*, meaning “working together.” Synergy does not occur when people work alone; it occurs only when people work together.

Effective groups are synergistic. Baseball teams without superstars have won the World Series. Companies whose executives earn modest salaries have surpassed other companies in which CEOs are paid millions of dollars. Ordinary groups have achieved extraordinary results.

Synergy occurs when the knowledge, talents, and dedication of group members merge into a force that surpasses anything group members could have produced without cooperative interaction.

Groups in Balance

All of us balance competing options every day. Should you work or play? Should you spend or save? Should you eat a big bowl of ice cream or a fresh salad? These kinds of tensions are best resolved by taking a *both/and* approach rather than an *either/or* perspective. For example, if you're lucky, you may *both* have a job that pays well *and* enjoy it as much as play. If you *both* spend wisely *and* save more, you can look forward to a more secure financial future. If you eat *both* small portions of ice cream *and* fresh salads, the result is a more balanced diet. Even in close personal relationships, a couple may *both* cherish their time together *and* respect each other's need for time apart. As you will see, this *both/and* approach also applies to achieving balance in group interactions.

Group Dialectics

We define **group dialectics** as the contradictory tensions groups experience as they work toward a common goal. Effective groups engage in a cooperative effort to balance group dialectics through effective communication strategies.

Although the word **dialectics** may be new to you, it captures the way in which successful groups balance competing pressures. It may help you to remember that the prefix *di-* means two, as in diagonal (joining two opposite points) or dialogue (a conversation between two people). Dialectics is a method for examining and resolving two contradictory or opposing ideas.

Successful groups balance dialectic tensions by using the *both/and* approach. For example, in some groups, you may *both* enjoy warm friendships with some members *and*

Theory in Groups

Relational Dialectics Theory

Communication scholars Leslie Baxter and Barbara Montgomery use the term *dialectics* to describe the complex and contradictory nature of personal relationships. Their **Relational Dialectics Theory** claims that relationships are characterized by ongoing, dialectic tensions between the multiple contradictions, complexities, and changes in human experiences.³⁰ The following pairs of common folk proverbs illustrate such contradictory, dialectic tensions:

“Opposites attract,” but “Birds of a feather flock together.”

“Two’s company; three’s a crowd,” but “The more, the merrier.”³¹

Rather than trying to prove that one of these contradictory proverbs is truer than the other—an *either/or* response—relational dialectics takes a *both/and* approach. There are several ways to resolve relational dialectic tensions:

- You can choose different options for different situations or different points in time. *Example:* A group’s monthly meeting always follows a highly structured agenda. When group members have difficulty coming up with a new ideas or possible solutions to a problem, however, you may set aside the agenda and do some unstructured brainstorming.
- You can choose one option and ignore the other. *Example:* Even though a group knows that two absent members would vote against a proposal they’re discussing, they go ahead and make the decision anyway.

Generally, choosing one option over another is the *least* effective way to resolve relational dialectics because you or someone else must “give up” or “lose” one option over another. Engaging *both* options to some degree is usually a better way.

Group Dialectics	Balancing Group Dialectics
Individual Goals ↔ Group Goals	Members' personal goals are balanced with the group's common goal.
Conflict ↔ Cohesion	The value of constructive conflict is balanced with the need for unity and cohesiveness.
Conforming ↔ Nonconforming	A commitment to group norms and standards is balanced with a willingness to differ and change.
Task Dimensions ↔ Social Dimensions	The responsibility and motivation to complete tasks are balanced with promoting member relationships.
Homogeneous ↔ Heterogeneous	Member similarities are balanced with member differences in skills, roles, personal characteristics, and cultural perspectives.
Leadership ↔ Followership	Effective and ethical leadership is balanced with committed and responsible followership.
Structure ↔ Spontaneity	The need for structured procedures is balanced with the need for innovative and creative thinking.
Engaged ↔ Disengaged	Member energy and labor are balanced with the group's need for rest and renewal.
Open System ↔ Closed System	External support and recognition are balanced with internal group solidarity and rewards.

Figure 1.6 Group Dialectics

effectively cope with members who are difficult. Your group may want *both* a stable, predictable process in some situations *and* the freedom to experiment and change in other circumstances. In **Figure 1.6**³² we present nine dialectic tensions that are balanced in effective groups.

Individual Goals Group Goals.

A group will not function well—or at all—if members focus entirely on their individual goals rather than on the group’s common goal. When a group agrees upon a clear and important goal, members can pursue both individual *and* group goals as long as their personal goals do not undermine the group goal. For example, if you join a group because you’re interested in forming a romantic attachment with another member, you may strongly support the group or its goal, because, hopefully, it will impress the person you desire.

In the best of groups, your personal goals support the group’s common goal. If you do not share the group’s goal, you may become frustrated or try to undermine the group. In ideal groups, members negotiate their personal needs and interests to achieve a balance between the dialectic tension of being an independent member in an interdependent group.



Successful groups learn to balance the competing and contradictory forces that operate in all groups. How does a cheerleading squad balance dialectic factors such as the squad’s task and social functions, individual and group needs, the responsibilities of leadership and followership, and the homogeneous and heterogeneous characteristics of group members?

Conflict Cohesion.

Conflict is unavoidable in effective groups. How else can members express disagreements that may lead to better solutions? How else can groups ensure that ethical standards are upheld? Groups without constructive conflict are groups without the means to analyze the wisdom of their decisions. At the same time, groups also benefit from cohesion—the mutual attraction that holds the members of a group together. All for one and one for all! Cohesive groups are committed and unified, but they are also willing to engage in conflict. **Chapter 9** , “Conflict and Cohesion in Groups,” examines the conflict-cohesiveness dialectic in detail.

Conforming Nonconforming.

Group norms (accepted standards of behavior) affect the quality and quantity of work by group members. Dialectic tensions can arise, however, when one or more members challenge a group norm or standard. At the same time, constructive criticism that promotes a group’s goal can contribute to group effectiveness. In **Chapter 2** , “Group Development,” we explore the ways in which group norms address the need for both conformity and nonconformity.

Task Dimensions Social Dimensions.

The best groups negotiate the task/social dialectic by balancing work with pleasure. A group's **task dimension** focuses on the job—the goal or product of group effort. The **social dimension** is concerned with people—the interpersonal relationships among group members. Thus, a group discussing a department's budget primarily focuses on its task. If, however, at the end of the meeting, the group surprises a member with a cake in celebration of her birthday, the group's focus shifts to the social dimension. More often, groups exhibit both task and social dimensions when they get the job done in a way that makes everyone feel socially accepted and valued.

When groups balance work and play, they are more productive. Think of how frustrating it is to work on a group task when members don't get along. Think of how disappointing it is to work with friends who don't take a task seriously or don't make significant contributions. The old saying "All work and no play makes Jack [or Jill] a dull boy [or girl]" certainly applies to groups. On the other hand, all play and no work can make you unemployed.³³

Homogeneous Heterogeneous.

The prefixes *homo* and *hetero* come from the Greek language. *Homo* means "same or similar"; *hetero* means "different." Thus, a **homogeneous group** is composed of members who are the same or very similar to one another, and a **heterogeneous group** includes members who are different from one another. Not surprisingly, there is no such thing as a purely homogeneous group because no two members can be exactly the same. Certainly some groups are more homogeneous than heterogeneous. For example, the Black Caucus in the U.S. Congress will be more homogeneous than the Congress as a whole. The legal team representing a client will be more homogeneous in terms of education, income, professional experience, and lifestyle than the jury selected to hear the case. In **Chapter 4**, "Diversity in Groups," we

emphasize that every person on this earth—and thus every member of a group—is different. And that's a good thing. If every group member were exactly alike, the group would not achieve much more than



Groups of teenagers meet monthly as part of the Joint 13-17 Project that helps impoverished Jewish families in Argentina. The project provides a social assistance network for members of the Jewish community. How would you describe this type of group in terms of its task and social dimensions?

one member working alone. At the same time, similarities assure members that they share some common characteristics, traits, and attitudes.

Leadership Followership.

Chapter 05 , “Group Leadership,” examines the components and challenges of effective leadership. Here, we only note that effective leadership is not a solo task—it requires competent and responsible followers. Effective leaders have the confidence to put their egos aside and bring out the leadership in others.³⁴ When group members assume specific leadership functions, the group has achieved an optimum balance of leadership and followership.

Structure Spontaneity.

In **Chapter 10**, “Structured and Creative Problem Solving in Groups,” we quote group communication scholar Marshall Scott Poole, who describes procedures as “the heart of group work [and] the most powerful tools we have to improve the conduct of meetings.”³⁵ Structured procedures help groups balance participation, resolve conflicts, organize discussions, and solve problems. If a group becomes obsessed with rigid procedures, however, it misses out on the benefits of spontaneity and creativity. Whether it’s just “thinking outside the box” or organizing a creative problem-solving session, groups can reap enormous benefits by encouraging innovation and “what-if” thinking. Effective groups balance the need for structure with time for spontaneous and creative thinking.

Engaged Disengaged.

The engaged-disengaged dialectic has two dimensions— one related to the amount of activity, the other related to the level of commitment. Groups often experience two opposite types of activities: high-energy, nonstop action relieved by periods of relaxation and renewal. Effective groups understand that racing toward a distant finish line may only exhaust group members and leave some sitting on the sidelines. At the same time, low energy and inaction will accomplish nothing. Balancing the urge to run with the need for rest and renewal challenges most groups.

Groups in Balance...

Enjoy Working Together

Have you or a group you're in ever been totally caught up in what you were doing, wholly focused on it, and also able to perform at a very high level with ease?³⁶ If your answer is yes, you have had an **optimal group experience** . When groups provide optimal experiences, members are highly motivated. They are committed and inspired. Creative thinking comes easily and working on the task is pleasurable. Hard work is energizing rather than exhausting. Some groups find the optimal experience so pleasurable that they'd rather do group work than relax or socialize.³⁷

To achieve this optimal level of motivation, you and your group must negotiate several dialectic tensions. First, you must have a worthy goal that motivates *both* individual members *and* the group as a whole. You must balance *both* task *and* social dimensions by encouraging members to complete tasks and by promoting strong interpersonal relationships. You must *both* support and reward member engagement *and* accommodate members who need to disengage by pausing, recharging, and relaxing.

Sometimes, high-energy action is unstoppable because group members are extremely motivated, personally committed, and appropriately rewarded for their work. Stopping to recharge or relax would only frustrate a group with pent-up energy. At the other end of the dialectic spectrum, groups that plod through problems with little enthusiasm may be unmotivated, uncaring, and unrewarded for their work. Asking them to pick up speed would only increase their resentment.

Open System Closed System.

Although all groups are systems, effective groups maintain a balance by moving between open and closed systems. When a group functions as an open system, it welcomes input from and interaction with its environment. That input can be the opinions of nongroup members, information from outside research, or challenges from competing groups. When a group functions as a closed system, it guards its boundaries and discourages input or interaction with the outside. Depending on the situation, a group may open its boundaries and welcome input or close them to protect the group and its work. Effective groups understand that there are times when they must function as an open system and other times when they must close the door and work in private. For example, a hiring committee may function as an open system in order to recruit candidates and research their backgrounds. When they have finished this process, they meet privately and confidentially to evaluate the candidates and make a hiring recommendation.

Ethics Group Communication

Ethics requires an understanding of whether behaviors meet agreed-upon standards of right and wrong.³⁸ Ethical questions—Are we doing the right thing? Is he dishonest? Is she tolerant of different viewpoints?—arise whenever we communicate because communication has consequences. What you say and do can help or hurt both group members and other people who are affected by the group’s decisions and actions.

Ethics in Balance

Initially, you may think that the “rules” of ethical behavior are absolute: “Thou shalt not steal,” or “Thou shalt not tell a lie.” Is it ethical, however, to steal a loaf of bread if

Groups in Balance...

Empower Members

Group empowerment is a documented dimension of successful groups and teams. **Empowerment** describes a shift in power and authority in a group so that members assume responsibility for their work. Rather than relying on a senior manager, boss, or designated leader to direct their work, empowered groups have the authority to make relevant decisions and carry out their work effectively.³⁹

A study by management expert Bradley L. Kirkman explains that empowered groups are more successful and generally share four characteristics:⁴⁰

- **Potency.** The group believes it has the power and ability to achieve its common goal.
- **Meaningfulness.** The group believes that its common goal is important, valuable, and worthwhile.
- **Autonomy.** The group is optimistic about achieving its goal because it has the freedom to make decisions and implement those decisions.
- **Impact.** The group believes that its work produces significant benefits for other people and organizations.

Not surprisingly, members of empowered groups feel powerful and able to control how the group works toward achieving its goal.⁴¹ Empowered groups enjoy a sense of excitement about their work. Members genuinely respect and like one another. They also look forward to working with one another to achieve common goals.

your family is starving? Is it acceptable to lie if telling the truth would do more harm than good? There are often dialectic tensions involved in making ethical decisions.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle offered his “doctrine of the mean”⁴² (*mean* as in “a point between extremes,” not *mean* as in “nasty” or “cruel”). He suggested that when you face an ethical decision, you should select an *appropriate* reaction somewhere between two extremes—such as a response somewhere between expressing mild annoyance at one extreme and uncontrolled rage at the other extreme. Aristotle maintained that anyone can become angry—that is easy. But to be angry at the right things, with the right people, to the right degree, at the right time, for the right purpose, and in the right way is worthy of praise.⁴³

Ethical questions arise whenever you work in groups. Is it ethical to share gossip about a job candidate in order to make sure a group doesn’t hire that person? Is it acceptable to tell exaggerated, heartbreaking stories about children who go hungry every day to persuade a group to financially support a local food bank? Is it fair for some group members to boycott a meeting because they are strongly opposed to the politics of a person who has been invited to participate in the meeting? Aristotle would tell us to avoid a yes or no answer. An ethical group and its members seek an appropriate and ethical *both/and* response. Throughout this textbook, we provide regular features about group ethics that address issues that you and your group will face as you work collectively toward a common goal.

Credo for Ethical Communication

The National Communication Association (NCA) provides a credo for ethical communication.⁴⁴ In Latin, the word *credo* means “I believe.” Thus, an ethics credo is a belief statement about what it means to be an ethical communicator. All of these ethical principles apply to working in groups. Ethical communication requires an understanding of the tensions that operate in all groups as well as a desire to communicate in a way that meets agreed-upon standards of right and wrong.

Ethics in Groups

The National Communication Association Credo for Ethical Communication

Preamble

Questions of right and wrong arise whenever people communicate. Ethical communication is fundamental to responsible thinking, decision making, and the development of relationships and communities within and across contexts, cultures, channels, and media. Moreover, ethical communication enhances human worth and dignity by fostering truthfulness, fairness, responsibility, personal integrity, and respect for self and others. We believe that unethical communication threatens the well-being of individuals and the society in which we live. Therefore we, the members of the National Communication Association, endorse and are committed to practicing the following principles of ethical communication

Principles of Ethical Communication

- We advocate truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason as essential to the integrity of communication.
- We endorse freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent to achieve the informed and responsible decision making fundamental to a civil society.
- We strive to understand and respect other communicators before evaluating and responding to their messages.
- We promote access to communication resources and opportunities as necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.
- We promote communication climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.
- We condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.
- We are committed to the courageous expression of personal conviction in pursuit of fairness and justice.
- We advocate sharing information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.
- We accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of our own communication and expect the same of others.

Summary Study Guide

Succeeding in Groups

- Working in groups is an inescapable part of everyday life; most people spend a considerable amount of time and energy working in groups.
- Many employers view group-related skills as more important than written communication skills, proficiency in the field of study, and computer skills.

Defining Group Communication

- Group communication is the interaction of three or more interdependent people working to achieve a common goal.
- A clear goal is the most significant factor separating successful groups from unsuccessful groups.
- Types of groups include primary, social, self-help, learning, service, civic, work, and public groups.
- Virtual groups rely on technology to communicate synchronously and/or asynchronously.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Working in Groups

- Advantages: superior performance, greater member satisfaction, learning, cultural sensitivity, creative thinking, and civic engagement.
- Disadvantages: the amount of time, energy, and resources expended by groups; the potential for interpersonal conflicts and people problems.

The Nature of Group Communication

- Understanding and applying theories, strategies, and skills are inseparable components in learning about group communication.
- Basic elements of the group communication process: members, messages, channels, feedback, noise, and context.
- Groups are complex systems in which the actions of individual members affect everyone in the group as well as the outcome of group work.

Balance: The Guiding Principle of Group Work

- Group dialectics represent the balance between competing and contradictory components of group work by taking a *both/and* approach to resolving such tensions.
- The nine group dialectics: individual goals ↔ group goals; conflict ↔ cohesion; conforming ↔ nonconforming; task dimensions ↔ social dimensions; homogeneous ↔ heterogeneous; leadership ↔ followership; structure ↔ spontaneity; engaged ↔ disengaged; open system ↔ closed system.

Ethics and Group Communication

- The National Communication Association (NCA) Credo for Ethical Communication sets forth guiding principles to assess how well communication behaviors meet agreed-upon standards of right and wrong.

GroupWork The Ethics Credo in Action

Directions: Review the preamble and principles in the NCA Credo for Ethical Communication. The following table lists each of the ethical principles with an example to demonstrate its application to groups. Consider the principle and the example, then work with your group to supply a second example that demonstrates your understanding of each principle. The example can be a situation you have experienced personally, or it can be taken from current events or from history.

Applying the Credo for Ethical Communication to Working in Groups

Credo for Ethical Communication Principles	Examples of Application to Working in Groups	Student Group Example
1. Truthfulness, accuracy, honesty, and reason are essential for ethical communication.	Groups should urge members to accurately quote and cite the sources of researched information.	
2. Freedom of expression, diversity of perspective, and tolerance of dissent are fundamental to a civil society.	Groups should create a supportive climate in which members feel free to express their ideas, opinions, and feelings.	
3. Ethical communicators understand and respect others before evaluating and responding to their messages.	Group members should strive to understand one another's messages before making judgments.	
4. Access to communication resources and opportunities are necessary to fulfill human potential and contribute to the well-being of families, communities, and society.	When working in virtual groups, group members should have access to similar equipment and software.	
5. Ethical communicators promote climates of caring and mutual understanding that respect the unique needs and characteristics of individual communicators.	Groups should respect and adapt to members whose cultural backgrounds are different than the majority of group members.	
6. Ethical communicators condemn communication that degrades individuals and humanity through distortion, intimidation, coercion, and violence, and through the expression of intolerance and hatred.	Group members should not tolerate statements that belittle or stereotype other group members.	
7. Ethical communicators express their personal convictions in pursuit of fairness and justice.	Group members should be encouraged to express well-informed and reasonable arguments.	
8. Ethical communicators share information, opinions, and feelings when facing significant choices while also respecting privacy and confidentiality.	Group leaders should keep members informed about their individual progress in private and in confidence.	
9. Ethical communicators accept responsibility for the short- and long-term consequences of their own communication and expect the same of others.	Group members who are justly criticized for disrupting group process should accept the consequences of their actions.	

Group Assessment Group Communication Competencies Survey

Directions: On a 5-point scale, where 5 is “extremely important” and 1 is “not at all important,” rate the following types of group competencies in terms of their importance for becoming a *highly effective* group member. Please circle one number for each item. When you are finished, ask yourself this question: How competent am I in the “extremely important” areas?

If time is available, form groups of five to seven students. Each group should identify five or six items that, in the group’s collective opinion, are the most important group communication competencies. When all of the groups have identified their top items, a group representative should write them on the board or be prepared to share them verbally.

Member and Group Competencies	Extremely Important	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Not Very Important	Not at All Important
1. Understand the group communication process.	5	4	3	2	1
2. Reduce your nervousness when speaking in a discussion or meeting.	5	4	3	2	1
3. Understand, respect, and adapt to diverse group members.	5	4	3	2	1
4. Communicate openly and ethically.	5	4	3	2	1
5. Carry out critical task roles (ask questions, summarize ideas) and/or social roles (encourage and support members).	5	4	3	2	1
6. Influence group members to change their attitudes and/or behavior.	5	4	3	2	1
7. Use and interpret nonverbal communication effectively.	5	4	3	2	1
8. Develop clear group goals.	5	4	3	2	1
9. Listen appropriately and effectively to other members.	5	4	3	2	1
10. Intervene appropriately to resolve member and group problems.	5	4	3	2	1
11. Develop good interpersonal relationships with group members.	5	4	3	2	1
12. Manage and resolve interpersonal conflicts.	5	4	3	2	1
13. Develop and follow a well-organized meeting agenda.	5	4	3	2	1
14. Actively contribute to group discussions.	5	4	3	2	1
15. Use gestures, body language, and eye contact effectively.	5	4	3	2	1

16. Demonstrate strong leadership skills.	5	4	3	2	1
17. Research and share important ideas and information with group members.	5	4	3	2	1
18. Use visual aids and presentation software effectively.	5	4	3	2	1
19. Plan and conduct effective meetings.	5	4	3	2	1
20. Use appropriate procedures for group decision making and problem solving.	5	4	3	2	1
21. Ask questions to clarify ideas and get needed information.	5	4	3	2	1
22. Motivate group members.	5	4	3	2	1
23. Use assertiveness strategies and skills confidently and effectively.	5	4	3	2	1
24. Respect and adapt to group norms (standards of behavior).	5	4	3	2	1
25. Prepare and deliver effective presentations or oral reports.	5	4	3	2	1
26. Use appropriate and effective words in a group discussion.	5	4	3	2	1
27. Use parliamentary procedure effectively and fairly in meetings.	5	4	3	2	1
28. Use effective technologies and skills to communicate in virtual groups.	5	4	3	2	1
29. Develop and present valid arguments and opinions in a group discussion.	5	4	3	2	1
30. Provide appropriate emotional support to group members.	5	4	3	2	1
31. Other strategies or skills:					
a. _____	5	4	3	2	1
b. _____	5	4	3	2	1
c. _____	5	4	3	2	1