

The following is a set of suggestions which may help in group formation. They are offered as suggestions, no more; a group will work towards its own practices and norms. (Taken from "Groups that Work" by Gerard Blair <http://www.see.ed.ac.uk/~gerard/Management/art0.html>)

### **Focus**

The two basic foci should be the *group* and the *task*.

If something is to be decided, it is the group that decides it. If there is a problem, the group solves it. If a member is performing badly, it is the group who asks for change.

If individual conflicts arise, review them in terms of the task. If there is initially a lack of structure and purpose in the deliberations, impose both in terms of the task. If there are disputes between alternative courses of action, negotiate in terms of the task.

### **Clarification**

In any project management, the clarity of the specification is of paramount importance - in group work it is exponentially so. Suppose that there is a 0.8 chance of an individual understanding the task correctly (which is very high). If there are 8 members in the group then the chance of the group all working towards that same task is 0.17. And the same reasoning holds for every decision and action taken throughout the life of the group.

It is the first responsibility of the group to clarify its own task, and to record this understanding so that it can be constantly seen. This *mission statement* may be revised or replaced, but it should always act as a focus for the groups deliberations and actions.

### **The mouse**

In any group, there is always the quiet one in the corner who doesn't say much. That individual is the most underutilized resource in the whole group, and so represents the best return for minimal effort by the group as a whole. It is the responsibility of that individual to speak out and to contribute. It is the responsibility of the group to encourage and develop that person, to include him/her in the discussion and actions, and to provide positive reinforcement each time that happens.

### **The loud-mouth**

In any group, there is always a dominant member whose opinions form a disproportionate share of the discussion. It is the responsibility of each individual to consider whether they are that person. It is the responsibility of the group to ask whether the loud-mouth might like to summarize briefly, and then ask for other views.

### **The written record**

Often a decision which is not recorded will become clouded and have to be rediscussed. This can be avoided simply by recording on a large display (where the group can clearly see) each decision as it is made. This has the further advantage that each decision must be expressed in a clear and concise form which ensures that it is clarified.

### **Feedback (negative)**

All criticism must be neutral: focused on the task and not the personality. So rather than calling Johnnie an innumerate moron, point out the error and offer him a calculator. It is wise to adopt the policy of giving feedback frequently, especially for small things - this can be couched as mutual coaching, and it reduces the destructive impact of criticism when things go badly wrong. Every criticism must be accompanied by a positive suggestion for improvement.

### **Feedback (positive)**

If anyone does something well, praise it. Not only does this reinforce commendable actions, but it also mollifies the negative feedback which may come later. Progress in the task should be emphasised.

### **Handling failure**

The long term success of a group depends upon how it deals with failure. It is a very British tendency to brush off failure and to get on with the next stage with no more than a mention - it is a very foolish tendency. Any failure should be explored by the group. This is not to attribute blame (for that is shared by the whole group as an individual only acts with delegated responsibility), but rather to examine the causes and to devise a mechanism which either monitors against or prevents repetition. A mistake should only happen once if it is treated correctly.

One practise which is particularly useful is to delegate the agreed solution to the individual or sub-group who made the original error. This allows the group to demonstrate its continuing trust and the penitent to make amends.

### **Handling deadlock**

If two opposing points of view are held in the group then some action must be taken. Several possibly strategies exist. Each sub-group could debate from the other sub-group's view-point in order to better understand it. Common ground could be emphasised, and the differences viewed for a possible middle or alternative strategy. Each could be debated in the light of the original task. But firstly the group should decide how much time the debate actually merits and then guillotine it after that time - then, if the issue is not critical, toss a coin.

### **Sign posting**

As each small point is discussed, the larger picture can be obscured. Thus it is useful frequently to remind the group: this is where we came from, this is where we got to, this is where we should be going.

### **Avoid single solutions**

First ideas are not always best. For any given problem, the group should generate alternatives, evaluate these in terms of the task, pick one and implement it. But most importantly, they must also monitor the outcome, schedule a review and be prepared to change the plan.

### **Active communication**

Communication is the responsibility of both the speaker and the listener. The speaker must actively seek to express the ideas in a clear and concise manner - the listener must actively seek to understand what has been said and to ask for clarification if unsure. Finally, both parties must be sure that the ideas have been correctly communicated perhaps by the listener summarizing what was said in a different way.