Communication in groups

Often a challenge for leaders and for group members is having strong communication skills. Communicating successfully is the key to getting your group to work together. If you can’t master this area, your work in a group becomes much more difficult. Here are some skills that could come in handy.

Communicating with congeniality
- Be flexible and open to others’ ideas.
- Physically and verbally show approval.
- Informality and friendliness are appreciated.
- Use your sense of humor.

Communicating with action
- Present ideas as opportunities.
- Provide autonomy to group members.
- Verbally spar on an equal basis — don’t use your formal or informal position in the group as leverage in an argument.

Communicating with reason
- Do your homework first, so you know what you’re talking about.
- Tie new ideas to old practices if the group is hesitant to try new things.
- Be organized and prepared in meetings.
- Present ideas in an analytical and systematic way.

Communicating with excellence
- Ask for help when you need it.
- Show concern for others and their support for the group.
- Show ways that the project will help the group to develop.
- Appeal to the group’s sense of excellence.

Information was adapted from the following source:

Designs for Development. “LeaderStyles Communication.”
Guide to Group Dynamics

What roles do individual members play?

To understand how an organization works, it’s important to understand what each member is contributing to it. Each person will play an important role or roles as the group comes together. Individual roles may change as the organization changes or faces new tasks. Most of these roles can be either positive or negative if taken to extremes, but all are important for group functioning.

Group task roles

These functions are required in selecting and carrying out a group task. They are primarily positive, but can be overused.

- The **initiator** suggests or proposes new ideas or new ways of regarding group problems or goals.
- The **information seeker** may ask for clarification of suggestions, information, and facts.
- The **opinion seeker** asks primarily for the opinions of other group members or for clarification of opinions already stated.
- The **information giver** offers facts or generalizations that are “authoritarian.” He or she may relate his or her own pertinent, personal experience.
- The **opinion giver** states his or her beliefs or opinions.
- The **elaborator** spells out suggestions in terms of examples, furthers development of a discussion point, offers rationale or suggestions previously made, or tries to deduce how an idea or suggestion would work if adopted.
- The **summarizer or integrator** shows or clarifies the relationships among various ideas and suggestions, tries to pull together ideas and suggestions, or tries to coordinate the activities of various members of subgroups.
- The **orienter** defines the position of the group with respect to its goals and points to departures from agreed-upon directions or goals. This person often raises questions about the direction the group discussion is taking.
- The **energizer** prods the group to action or decision. He or she attempts to stimulate or arouse the group to greater or higher quality activity.
- The **procedural technician** expedites group movement by performing routine tasks (such as distributing materials, rearranging the seating, or taking notes).

Group maintenance roles

These functions are required to build and maintain the group itself. They are most often positive and productive.

- The **encourager** praises, agrees with and accepts the contributions of others.
- The **harmonizer** mediates differences.
- The **gate-keeper** and **expeditor** attempt to keep communication channels open by encouraging or facilitating participation of others.
- The **standard setter** expresses standards for the group to attempt to achieve.

Non-functional group roles

These roles block the group’s progress. If identified, they can be neutralized. Individuals who play these roles may not know other ways to participate. A strong leader can encourage them to make positive contributions before the group becomes frustrated.

- The **aggressor** may work in many ways: deflating others; expressing disapproval of the values, requests, or feelings of others; attacking the group or its problems; joking aggressively.
- The **blocker** tends to have negative reactions and is stubbornly resistant, disagreeing and opposing beyond reason.
- The **recognition-seeker** works in various ways to call attention to him or herself, by boasting, acting in unusual ways, etc.
- The **self-confessor** uses the group setting to express personal and non-group-related feelings, insights, or ideologies.
- The **playboy/girl** makes a display of his or her lack of involvement. This may take several forms negative behavior.
- The **dominator** tries to assert authority or superiority. She or he works at manipulating the group or individuals.
- The **help-seeker** tries to get “sympathy” from others or from the whole group by expression of insecurity, personal confusion, etc.
- The **special interest pleader** speaks for a specific group or view.

Information on group roles based on the early work of Benne & Sheats (1948) and Knowles and Knowles (1959).