Communication and conflicts

Communication

Communication is the key to quality teamwork. Remember that you need to keep in touch not just at organised meetings but by email or text at regular times, or whatever works for you and your group. At all times be polite and speak clearly but respectfully.

Express your opinion, but don't put down others or aim to offend. Give praise where praise is due, and be constructive in your criticism – that means that you talk about both positives and negatives. If you only focus on the negatives you and your teammates will start to resent each other.

Asserting yourself

Try to communicate in an assertive manner at all times. Eunson (2012, p. 293) defines assertiveness as 'getting what you want from others without infringing on their rights'.

Communication styles can be broadly divided into assertive, aggressive, passive, or manipulative styles. The features of these styles are summarised in the matrix below:

	Overt (open)	Covert (secret)
Considers others	Assertive	Passive
Does not consider others	Aggressive	Manipulative

Each style also corresponds to an approach to conflict, in which a person sees things in terms of winning and losing:

	I win	I lose
You win	Assertive	Passive
You lose	Aggressive, manipulative	

The assertive communicator considers others and communicates openly. The outcome of the assertive style is 'I win and you win', and that's what group work is all about.

If you or other members of your team are aggressive, passive, manipulative, or even passive-aggressive, then the team as a whole is going to lose.

So how can you communicate assertively? Here are some tips:

→ Express your feelings, even negative ones, in appropriate ways
→ Make requests directly (don't 'beat around the bush'), but politely
→ Practise making small talk – this is practice for discussing more important matters
→ Stand up for yourself
→ Say no when appropriate, and give reasons
→ Express your thoughts, even when you disagree with someone

If others in the group communicate in passive, aggressive, or manipulative ways, responding assertively can help the group get back on track and working towards that common goal.

Assertive communication skills

Keep these skills in your personal toolkit for when you encounter conflict, miscommunication, and disagreement.

Say no

It sounds simple, because it is. If you do not have the time or ability to do something, then say no. Don't feel compelled to apologise, but you can give reasons if you wish.

Example:

'Sorry, Jessica, I can't do the bar graph tonight. I already spent last night working on the pie chart and tonight I have to work on a different assignment.'

Dismiss and redirect

This is for situations when another person is making excuses or discussing things not relevant to the topic at hand. You dismiss the comment and redirect the conversation back to the original topic.

Example:

'What's on TV tonight isn't relevant, Andrew. We have to finish this draft, so which part would you like to work on?'

Questioning

Sometimes people don't actually realise their behaviours. Questioning is a way to try to get a person to become aware of what they are doing.

Example:

'Niha, have you noticed that every time someone mentions the reference list, you change the subject? Are you having trouble putting it together?'

Fogging

When emotions are involved, some people make personal attacks. When people do this, they want a reaction: they want you to be upset. 'Fogging' means that you let the insults go right through you, like a cloud. When the person doesn't get the reaction they wanted, the dynamics change.

Example:

Insult: 'You're an idiot. How did you even get into uni?'
Response: 'Well, never mind, I'm here now. What's the next step for our assignment?'

Forcing a choice

When there's a lot going on, sometimes people get stressed and find it difficult to make decisions, or they might start demanding more of your time. If you give someone a choice between two options they will usually pick one and won't try to introduce a third.

Example:

'Joseph, do you want to write the introduction to the report or the conclusion?'

Broken record

Sometimes you just have to repeat yourself calmly until your message is heard.

Example:

'Andrew, like I said, we have to finish this draft tonight. Which section do you want to proofread?'

Ask for specifics

Someone who is upset can't always articulate *why* they feel the way they do. You may need to ask some questions to work out what is really bothering them.

Compromise

Yep, the c-word. Sometimes there's nothing to do but compromise. This means no one person 'gets their way', but everyone is part of a solution that works for all.

Example:

'Okay, Niha, since you're having trouble with the reference list, how about I take a look at it and you help Joseph with the conclusion?'

<div align="center">Ultimatum</div>

Make an ultimatum only as a last resort, if none of the above techniques have worked, and you are prepared to follow through. In the case of group work at uni, the threat will probably be going to the lecturer to complain about a fellow student. Again, only do this if you absolutely must.

The above advice also applies to communication by email or other methods – remember to write clearly and say what you mean. There are many collaborative tools and applications available such as instant messaging, social media, wikis, Google Drive, Blackboard/vUWS (vUWS help), and other apps. Work with your team to find the methods that work best for you all.

Dealing with conflicts

Like group work, conflict is a part of life. Conflict is a disagreement or argument, but it doesn't have to be bad: having an argument can really help two people learn from each other's point of view. There can be many sources of potential conflict, including personality clashes and perceptions that certain members of the group are 'taking over' or 'not pulling their weight'. Whatever the cause, if your team can't cope effectively with conflict, then your work is going to suffer.

If you're feeling angry or annoyed, try to voice your complaint in a calm manner. Use 'I' statements, e.g. 'I feel like I am doing most of the work' and avoid accusing others. Suggest changes to remedy the situation, e.g. 'I would appreciate it if Tasia wrote the conclusion and then John proofread everything.' Don't call names or be mean to other people – just focus on the problem and how to solve it. Give your team mates the benefit of the doubt, because they probably didn't set out to deliberately hurt you.

If someone else in the group says they have an issue, listen politely and calmly and try not to take offence. Don't assume you know how they are feeling or what they are thinking.

If members are not contributing or not participating, try to get them on board using the techniques discussed above. Some group assignments include an element of peer assessment where you can make a note of who may have been absent. Try to resolve conflicts within your group together and only go to the lecturer as a very last resort.

And finally, remember that you all want the same thing: to do well in the assignment. Conflict is an obstacle that has to be overcome so that you can perform the task well.

Adapted from Eunson (2012, pp. 293–303).

More information

→ For information about bullying and what to do if you are bullied: the Counselling Service page on bullying.

References

Eunson, B. (2012). *Communicating in the 21st century*. Milton, Qld: John Wiley & Sons Australia.