

Working with Others: Developing Trust and Cooperation¹

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When someone has 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 doesn't happen automatically. Everyone in the group contributes to the group dynamics. When trust and cooperation exist in a group, then individuals, committees, organizations, and communities benefit.

Trust is essential for individuals to work effectively in committees, clubs, communities, offices, or families. "(Trust is) one of the most valuable 'group components' – (and) is essential to the processes of influence and collaboration" (Walker, 2001). Group members are more satisfied and more productive when they work in a trusting and cooperative atmosphere. So, developing a climate of trust is one of the most important tasks a group of people can undertake. It takes time, but the results are worthwhile.

Cooperation is also essential to long-term group effectiveness. 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, & 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).

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

Alexander Graham Bell

4 Key Elements for Developing Trust and Cooperation

Communication is key to developing trust and cooperation in a group. The broad term of "communication" includes many concepts from expressing one's thoughts clearly to listening and interacting with others effectively. There are four elements of communication that contribute to group trust and cooperation. They are group communication, active listening, body language, and group interaction.

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1. Group Communication

Effective communication in a group is closely linked to mutual trust and cooperation among group members. Groups with a low level of trust have weak communication, less cooperation, and more conflicts (Levi, 2001). A group is most effective when all members contribute. As we interact, question, disagree with, and support decisions in a positive way, we build confidence in one another and promote overall group success (Limas, 2003).

Keep communication simple. Most people can only absorb 80% of what they hear. Give the most important information first. Then, more information can be provided as individuals learn and understand.

During a meeting, effective communication occurs as you:

- Restate group goals when a new member joins the group for the first time.
- Restate the purpose of a project as often as needed to help people focus on what is important.
- Refresh people's memories, or refocus attention, periodically during a meeting.
- Encourage the exchange of ideas and open dialogue.
- Encourage creativity.

Complex information should be:

- Given in a step-by-step, logical order.
- Presented to the group in multiple ways: (ex., verbal and print).
- Checked for understanding by asking, "Would someone volunteer to share their interpretation of this information?"

Additional ways to ensure effective communication, happens when:

- Get-acquainted activities are conducted early in a meeting to help establish a positive, cooperative group climate.

- Group members listen and pay attention to one another.
- One topic is discussed at a time.
- Members work through conflict rather than avoiding it.
- Everyone has a chance to state his/her views.
- Decisions are clearly stated so all members understand.
- Regular feedback helps the group to stay focused on goals.

Open communication promotes trust as we share information about ourselves and learn about one another. People need to know how each person fits into the group and how each can contribute. Interaction helps individuals learn about goals they have in common.

2. Active Listening

When all members of a group practice effective communication, then trust, cooperation, and productivity are enhanced. The following techniques help us practice good listening skills.

1. Acknowledging what you're hearing
Ex: "I see . . . HmMMM" (nodding)
2. Asking for more information
Ex: "That sounds interesting. Tell us more. ."
3. Paraphrasing
Ex: "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?"
4. Sharing Information
Ex: "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."
5. Checking feelings
Ex: "It seems like you're frustrated. Tell us what concerns you about this situation."

6. Reporting feelings

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

7. Offering or requesting more options

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

Applause is the only appreciated interruption.

Arnold Glasgow

3. Body Language

Facial expressions, gestures, eye contact, and posture express nonverbal communication called body language. Body language can tell us if listeners are interested, bored, confused, and if they are in agreement or disagreement.

Take care not to jump to conclusions about what you see in body language. It is important to observe nonverbal communication, then use it as a "check point" to confirm what you hear. You can check information with a question, such as:

Ex: "There has been very little reaction. How do people feel about this proposal right now?"
Or, "I see some frowns. Would someone like to share a concern?"

4. Group Interaction

Some people may be quiet during a meeting and a few members may dominate. A spirit of trust and cooperation develops when every person has an opportunity to participate.

Early in the group's development, a facilitator can assist in the successful interaction of members. A facilitator takes responsibility for communicating guidelines and boundaries. A facilitator can provide structure for group activity, establish time limits, maintain group order, ensure that everyone is heard, encourage creativity, answer questions, and collect reports as needed.

Round robin, small group discussion, brainstorming, and nominal group are all techniques that encourage active involvement by all individuals in a group.

Round Robin

The Round Robin technique provides an opportunity for everyone in the group to respond to one specific question or to make a comment about an issue. Once the question is posed, allow several minutes for members to think.

1. If the issue is complex, allow time for members to write their thoughts down.
2. Invite each person in the room to share their response with the entire group.
3. Any person may choose the option to say "pass" if they choose not to respond.

This technique ensures that everyone will speak, even if it is to say, "pass."

It works best with a minimum of 4 people and a maximum of 20 people. Each person should be allowed at least 1 minute to respond to a question.

Small Group Discussion

In small groups of 4 to 8, people may be willing to say more and share concerns, they might not in a large group.

1. Each small group could discuss one question for a specific amount of time (ex., 10 minutes).
2. Then one representative from each small group reports to the larger group with a summary of their discussion. (Reports often require five to seven minutes per group.)
3. Each small group could be asked to submit a written summary or list, for future consideration.

A variation of this technique is for each small group to discuss a different perspective on the same topic. Or, each small group may even discuss a different topic. A facilitator is responsible for establishing and communicating the structure.

Brainstorming

The brainstorming technique is the process of collecting as many ideas as possible in a short time. A facilitator reviews the rules of brainstorming as:

1. Participants are invited to list a quantity of ideas. Wild ideas are welcome. Creativity is good. Ideas don't have to be practical.
2. It's okay to expand an idea that has already been mentioned.
3. No judgment is allowed regarding any idea during brainstorming.
4. Someone will write each idea (a key word or phrase) on a public list for others to see during the activity.
5. A maximum time limit (ex., 5 minutes for a group of 5 to 15) may be placed on the brainstorming exercise. A facilitator should stop the brainstorming when no new ideas are added over a 10 second period. Stop the activity when there are many of ideas posted, but while there is still enthusiasm around the topic.

This technique encourages participation from individuals who have diverse styles. A group may choose to use this list to make decisions at future meetings, or committees may be assigned to examine several ideas for future discussion.

Nominal Group

This technique is a process that usually begins with brainstorming. After many creative ideas have been posted, the next steps are:

1. The group discusses the total list of ideas and begins to narrow the list. The group needs to come to agreement about which idea(s) to discard and why (ex., cost, space, time, too impractical). Allow enough time to make good group decisions during this discussion.
2. Next, the group reviews the remaining ideas. Should any of the existing ideas be combined? Allow time for the group to think and discuss these decisions.
3. Every person will be able to cast 3 (or 5) votes for their favorite ideas on the final list. Each person can receive "sticky dots" to use during voting. Participants may use their three votes for one idea or for three different ideas.

4. When the votes are added, the priority ideas will be ranked highest.

The open discussion between steps in this process encourages people to participate and cooperate. By the close of the nominal group process, everyone has a vote. Although this technique takes time (30–60 minutes), it is an effective means of group interaction and shared decision-making.

Leadership is based on inspiration, not domination; on cooperation, not intimidation.

William Arthur Ward

Conclusion

A trusting, cooperative atmosphere doesn't happen automatically. Every leader and member of a group is responsible for creating and maintaining positive group dynamics. When trust and cooperation exist in a group, then individuals, committees, organizations, and communities benefit.

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