

## 7.5: Effective Collaboration Strategies

### Learning Objectives

1. Identify the nature and implications of theories that assume that people collaborate for instrumental reasons
2. Identify a theory of group collaboration that emphasizes social links among group members
3. Identify five strategies for fostering group collaboration

*I maintain that cooperation is good, and competition is bad, that society does not flourish by the antagonism of its atoms, but by the mutual helpfulness of human beings. - Helen Keller*

In the last section, we discussed ways to motivate individuals to act in certain ways. Now we turn to a harder question: How do we get them to work together?

### A Prevalent Theory

In addition to setting goals that are specific, challenging, and jointly developed, how we try to get people to work together with others depends on our view of what makes people decide to do so. A prevalent theory, which Tom Tyler (Tyler, T.R. (2011). *Why people cooperate: The role of social motivations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press) contends has been especially influential in the past few decades throughout American society, has been that people collaborate for instrumental reasons. What this means is that they weigh costs and benefits and choose what they feel will be most advantageous to themselves. Their amount and quality of participation in a group then depends on “material exchanges”—transfers of rewards back and forth between the group’s members. (Rusbult, C.E., & Van Lange, P.A.M. (1996). Interdependence processes. In E.T. Higgins & A.W. Kruglanski (eds.), *Social psychology: Handbook of basic principles* (pp. 564–596). New York: Guilford). If these transfers don’t favor them as individuals, they will simply abandon the group.

If we operate according to this theory, there are many implications. First, we may want to spend considerable effort to decide on incentives to offer group members. Second, we may feel we need to be continually vigilant to make sure our incentives are working. Third, we may need to watch people carefully to see who is pitching in sufficiently. And fourth, we may want to create sanctions that we can impose upon people who don’t comply with the group’s rules and directions.

### The Role of Social Links

An alternative theory, based on recent research by Tyler, (Tyler, T.R. (2006). *Why people obey the law* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press\_ and others, suggests that people do take their self-interest into account when they participate in groups, but that they collaborate primarily for social reasons.

According to this alternative theory, people will be best motivated to collaborate on the basis of social links. These are defined as “long-term connections based on attitudes, emotional connections, shared identities, common values, trust in the motivation of others, & joint commitment to fairness.” (Tyler, T.R. (2011). *Why people cooperate: The role of social motivations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). Tyler’s book *Why People Cooperate* presents the results of his studies in business, legal settings, and political organizations as evidence that people are often willing to give up the opportunity for personal gain in order to contribute to the welfare of a group as a whole. Specifically, Tyler’s research with groups in more than 15 countries showed that “in none of the countries were people’s behaviors consistent with a narrow self-interest model.” (Tyler, T.R. (2011). *Why people cooperate: The role of social motivations*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

The proponents of this theory believe that using a combination of incentives or punishments—“carrots” and “sticks”—is not always going to produce collaborative behavior in a group. It’s very possible, for instance, for group members who are treated this way to do just enough to get exactly the incentives they’ve been promised rather than to go beyond the call of duty for the sake of the group as a whole.

Tyler pointed out that soldiers can be forced into the military in times of war. Neither money nor legislation nor a military draft nor even the threat of severe legal actions such as courts-martial, however, can actually make them willing to lay down their lives. Something else has to be part of the picture.

## Strategies to Promote Collaboration

Indeed, fighting successfully in a war requires total and complete collaboration on the part of soldiers. In Shakespeare's *Henry V*, prior to the Battle of Agincourt, King Henry rallies troops in the famous "St. Crispin's Day Speech." In the speech, he refers to "we few, we happy few, we band of brothers—for whoever sheds his blood with me today shall be my brother." As a result of his speech, the English soldiers fight valiantly, and ultimately they defeat the French and win the battle.

What can we learn from Shakespeare's account, as well as from the thoughts of modern theorists, to promote collaboration within a group? Here are several strategies which researchers now believe can be successful:

### Appeal to Members' Social Links.

Appeal explicitly to members' social links, including their belief in and reliance on each other, rather than only to their narrow self-interest.

As Tyler and Blader, (Tyler, T.R., & Blader, S.L. (2000). *Cooperation in groups*. Philadelphia: Psychology Press]) wrote, "Social motivations lead not only to compliance, but to voluntary deference to rules and to more general willing cooperation." We don't have to say that our fellow group members are brothers and sisters, even metaphorically, but we can remind them of their mutual reliance.

### Identify and Revisit Values and Goals

Ensure that the group identifies and periodically revisits its values and goals by means of full participation of its members. Heath and Sias (Heath, R.G., & Sias, P.M. (1999). Communicating spirit in a collaborative alliance. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 27, 356–376). pointed out that leaving someone out of these processes at any time can weaken that person's social links with the group and thereby make it less likely for the person to work on behalf of its purposes later on.

### Create Relational Contracts

Besides adopting formal written agreements, create "relational contracts." (Baker, G., Gibbons, R., & Murphy, K.J. (2002). Relational contracts and the theory of the firm. *Quarterly journal of economics* (117), 39–84). These are informal statements that rest on mutual trust and describe the knowledge and other strengths that various group members will bring to bear in conducting the group's work. For instance, in a group planning a community bazaar, one person might pledge to prepare banners because he or she possesses artistic talent. This pledge would not be part of the group's initial goal-setting process. Neither would it last beyond the completion of the bazaar. Still, it would help carry the group successfully through one of its important activities.

Because relational contracts are tied to particular situations and circumstances, they are more flexible than formal, permanent agreements. At the same time, it's important to take into account that they are also harder to enforce because of their very informality.

### Think Big and Long Term

Ask group members to think big and think long-term. Burke, \*Burke, W.W. (2011). *Organization change: Theory and practice* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage) wrote that group members should engage in "systemic thinking." He meant by this that they should regard their group as an enduring and organic totality, rather than simply as the sum of many individuals at a particular time.

King Henry said this when he told his soldiers of the lasting importance of their combined actions:

"This story shall the good man teach his son,

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by

From this day to the ending of the world,

But we in it shall be remembered"

In the same spirit, Burke urged groups to build and maintain an organizational memory—a record, preferably in hard-copy or digital form, of the history of the group. Such a record will tend to promote cohesion and identity in a group. It should also help integrate new members into the group as they join it.

### Celebrate Group Accomplishments

Celebrate the group's accomplishments. People are busy, and members of groups may often feel rushed to accomplish their tasks and move on to other activities. Unless they pause from time to time and take stock of their accomplishments, therefore, they may

lose focus and energy.

Once a group is on the road to collaboration, its strengths can be further ensured through feedback and assessment. In the last section of this chapter, we'll consider those two final vital elements of effective motivational behavior.

## Key Takeaway

Understanding the significance of social links in a group can provide the foundation for five strategies to promote collaboration.

### Exercise 7.5.1

1. Think of a group of which you're a member. To what degree do you believe your fellow members are motivated to collaborate for instrumental reasons, including self-interest, and to what degree by what Tyler calls "social links"? Give examples which support your opinion.
2. When have you relinquished the opportunity to achieve personal gain in a group in order to contribute to the group as a whole? What made you do so? How did the other group members respond to your sacrifice?
3. Consider two academic groups of which you were once a part—perhaps your high school graduating class and a school club or athletic team. What efforts, if any, did each group make to maintain an organizational memory? Comparing the two groups, which one has experienced better collaboration among its members since you left it?

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