

3.8.1: Understanding Small Groups

Learning Objectives

1. Define small group communication.
2. Discuss the characteristics of small groups.
3. Explain the functions of small groups.
4. Compare and contrast different types of small groups.
5. Discuss advantages and disadvantages of small groups.

Most of the communication skills discussed in this book are directed toward dyadic communication, meaning that they are applied in two-person interactions. While many of these skills can be transferred to and used in small group contexts, the more complex nature of group interaction necessitates some adaptation and some additional skills. Small group communication refers to interactions among three or more people who are connected through a common purpose, mutual influence, and a shared identity. In this section, we will learn about the characteristics, functions, and types of small groups.

Characteristics of Small Groups

Different groups have different characteristics, serve different purposes, and can lead to positive, neutral, or negative experiences. While our interpersonal relationships primarily focus on relationship building, small groups usually focus on some sort of task completion or goal accomplishment. A college learning community focused on math and science, a campaign team for a state senator, and a group of local organic farmers are examples of small groups that would all have a different size, structure, identity, and interaction pattern.

Size of Small Groups

There is no set number of members for the ideal small group. A small group requires a minimum of three people (because two people would be a pair or dyad), but the upper range of group size is contingent on the purpose of the group. When groups grow beyond fifteen to twenty members, it becomes difficult to consider them a small group based on the previous definition. An analysis of the number of unique connections between members of small groups shows that they are deceptively complex. For example, within a six-person group, there are fifteen separate potential dyadic connections, and a twelve-person group would have sixty-six potential dyadic connections (Hargie, 2011). As you can see, when we double the number of group members, we more than double the number of connections, which shows that network connection points in small groups grow exponentially as membership increases. So, while there is no set upper limit on the number of group members, it makes sense that the number of group members should be limited to those necessary to accomplish the goal or serve the purpose of the group. Small groups that add too many members increase the potential for group members to feel overwhelmed or disconnected.

Structure of Small Groups

Internal and external influences affect a group's structure. In terms of internal influences, member characteristics play a role in initial group formation. For instance, a person who is well informed about the group's task and/or highly motivated as a group member may emerge as a leader and set into motion internal decision-making processes, such as recruiting new members or assigning group roles, that affect the structure of a group (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). Different members will also gravitate toward different roles within the group and will advocate for certain procedures and courses of action over others. External factors such as group size, task, and resources also affect group structure. Some groups will have more control over these external factors through decision making than others. For example, a commission that is put together by a legislative body to look into ethical violations in athletic organizations will likely have less control over its external factors than a self-created weekly book club.



Figure 3.8.1.1 A self-formed study group likely has a more flexible structure than a city council committee. William Rotza – [Group](#) – CC BY-NC-ND 2.0.

Group structure is also formed through formal and informal network connections. In terms of formal networks, groups may have clearly defined roles and responsibilities or a hierarchy that shows how members are connected. The group itself may also be a part of an organizational hierarchy that networks the group into a larger organizational structure. This type of formal network is especially important in groups that have to report to external stakeholders. These external stakeholders may influence the group's formal network, leaving the group little or no control over its structure. Conversely, groups have more control over their informal networks, which are connections among individuals within the group and among group members and people outside of the group that aren't official. For example, a group member's friend or relative may be able to secure a space to hold a fundraiser at a discounted rate, which helps the group achieve its task. Both types of networks are important because they may help facilitate information exchange within a group and extend a group's reach in order to access other resources.

Size and structure also affect communication within a group (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). In terms of size, the more people in a group, the more issues with scheduling and coordination of communication. Remember that time is an important resource in most group interactions and a resource that is usually strained. Structure can increase or decrease the flow of communication. Reachability refers to the way in which one member is or isn't connected to other group members. For example, the "Circle" group structure in Figure 3.8.1.1 shows that each group member is connected to two other members. This can make coordination easy when only one or two people need to be brought in for a decision. In this case, Erik and Callie are very reachable by Winston, who could easily coordinate with them. However, if Winston needed to coordinate with Bill or Stephanie, he would have to wait on Erik or Callie to reach that person, which could create delays. The circle can be a good structure for groups who are passing along a task and in which each member is expected to progressively build on the others' work. A group of scholars coauthoring a research paper may work in such a manner, with each person adding to the paper and then passing it on to the next person in the circle. In this case, they can ask the previous person questions and write with the next person's area of expertise in mind. The "Wheel" group structure in Figure 3.8.1.1 shows an alternative organization pattern. In this structure, Tara is very reachable by all members of the group. This can be a useful structure when Tara is the person with the most expertise in the task or the leader who needs to review and approve work at each step before it is passed along to other group members. But Phillip and Shadow, for example, wouldn't likely work together without Tara being involved.

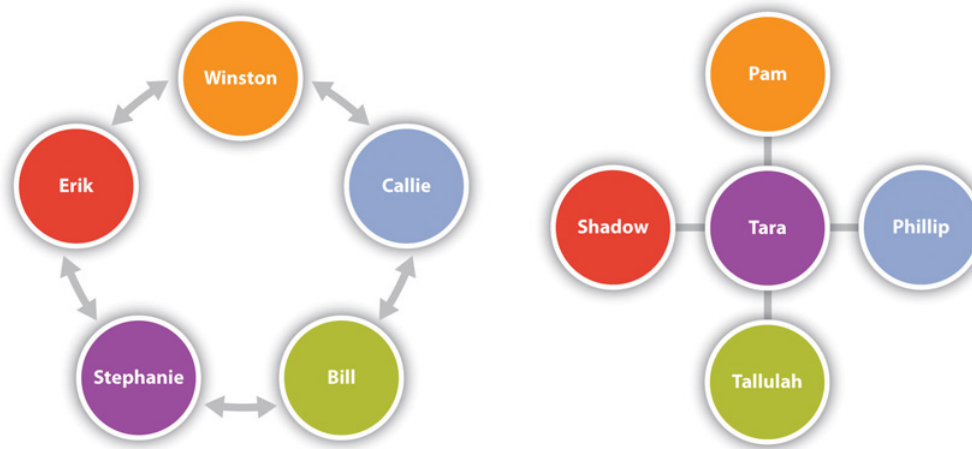


Figure 3.8.1.2 Small Group

Structures

Looking at the group structures, we can make some assumptions about the communication that takes place in them. The wheel is an example of a centralized structure, while the circle is decentralized. Research has shown that centralized groups are better than decentralized groups in terms of speed and efficiency (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). But decentralized groups are more effective at solving complex problems. In centralized groups like the wheel, the person with the most connections, person C, is also more likely to be the leader of the group or at least have more status among group members, largely because that person has a broad perspective of what's going on in the group. The most central person can also act as a gatekeeper. Since this person has access to the most information, which is usually a sign of leadership or status, he or she could consciously decide to limit the flow of information. But in complex tasks, that person could become overwhelmed by the burden of processing and sharing information with all the other group members. The circle structure is more likely to emerge in groups where collaboration is the goal and a specific task and course of action isn't required under time constraints. While the person who initiated the group or has the most expertise in regards to the task may emerge as a leader in a decentralized group, the equal access to information lessens the hierarchy and potential for gatekeeping that is present in the more centralized groups.

Interdependence

Small groups exhibit **interdependence**, meaning they share a common purpose and a common fate. If the actions of one or two group members lead to a group deviating from or not achieving their purpose, then all members of the group are affected. Conversely, if the actions of only a few of the group members lead to success, then all members of the group benefit. This is a major contributor to many college students' dislike of group assignments, because they feel a loss of control and independence that they have when they complete an assignment alone. This concern is valid in that their grades might suffer because of the negative actions of someone else or their hard work may go to benefit the group member who just skated by. Group meeting attendance is a clear example of the interdependent nature of group interaction. Many of us have arrived at a group meeting only to find half of the members present. In some cases, the group members who show up have to leave and reschedule because they can't accomplish their task without the other members present. Group members who attend meetings but withdraw or don't participate can also derail group progress. Although it can be frustrating to have your job, grade, or reputation partially dependent on the actions of others, the interdependent nature of groups can also lead to higher-quality performance and output, especially when group members are accountable for their actions.

Shared Identity

The shared identity of a group manifests in several ways. Groups may have official charters or mission and vision statements that lay out the identity of a group. For example, the Girl Scout mission states that "Girl Scouting builds girls of courage, confidence, and character, who make the world a better place" (Girl Scouts, 2012). The mission for this large organization influences the identities of the thousands of small groups called troops. Group identity is often formed around a shared goal and/or previous accomplishments, which adds dynamism to the group as it looks toward the future and back on the past to inform its present. Shared identity can also be exhibited through group names, slogans, songs, handshakes, clothing, or other symbols. At a family reunion, for example, matching t-shirts specially made for the occasion, dishes made from recipes passed down from generation to generation, and shared stories of family members that have passed away help establish a shared identity and social reality.

A key element of the formation of a shared identity within a group is the establishment of the in-group as opposed to the out-group. The degree to which members share in the in-group identity varies from person to person and group to group. Even within a family, some members may not attend a reunion or get as excited about the matching t-shirts as others. Shared identity also emerges as groups become cohesive, meaning they identify with and like the group's task and other group members. The presence of cohesion and a shared identity leads to a building of trust, which can also positively influence productivity and members' satisfaction.

Functions of Small Groups

Why do we join groups? Even with the challenges of group membership that we have all faced, we still seek out and desire to be a part of numerous groups. In some cases, we join a group because we need a service or access to information. We may also be drawn to a group because we admire the group or its members. Whether we are conscious of it or not, our identities and self-concepts are built on the groups with which we identify. So, to answer the earlier question, we join groups because they function to help us meet instrumental, interpersonal, and identity needs.

Groups Meet Instrumental Needs

Groups have long served the instrumental needs of humans, helping with the most basic elements of survival since ancient humans first evolved. Groups helped humans survive by providing security and protection through increased numbers and access to resources. Today, groups are rarely such a matter of life and death, but they still serve important instrumental functions. Labor unions, for example, pool efforts and resources to attain material security in the form of pay increases and health benefits for their members, which protects them by providing a stable and dependable livelihood. Individual group members must also work to secure the instrumental needs of the group, creating a reciprocal relationship. Members of labor unions pay dues that help support the group's efforts. Some groups also meet our informational needs. Although they may not provide material resources, they enrich our knowledge or provide information that we can use to then meet our own instrumental needs. Many groups provide referrals to resources or offer advice. For example, several consumer protection and advocacy groups have been formed to offer referrals for people who have been the victim of fraudulent business practices. Whether a group forms to provide services to members that they couldn't get otherwise, advocate for changes that will affect members' lives, or provide information, many groups meet some type of instrumental need.

Groups Meet Interpersonal Needs

Group membership meets interpersonal needs by giving us access to inclusion, control, and support. In terms of inclusion, people have a fundamental drive to be a part of a group and to create and maintain social bonds. As we've learned, humans have always lived and worked in small groups. Family and friendship groups, shared-interest groups, and activity groups all provide us with a sense of belonging and being included in an in-group. People also join groups because they want to have some control over a decision-making process or to influence the outcome of a group. Being a part of a group allows people to share opinions and influence others. Conversely, some people join a group to be controlled, because they don't want to be the sole decision maker or leader and instead want to be given a role to follow.

Just as we enter into interpersonal relationships because we like someone, we are drawn toward a group when we are attracted to it and/or its members. Groups also provide support for others in ways that supplement the support that we get from significant others in interpersonal relationships. Some groups, like therapy groups for survivors of sexual assault or support groups for people with cancer, exist primarily to provide emotional support. While these groups may also meet instrumental needs through connections and referrals to resources, they fulfill the interpersonal need for belonging that is a central human need.

Groups Meet Identity Needs

Our affiliations are building blocks for our identities, because group membership allows us to use reference groups for social comparison—in short, identifying us with some groups and characteristics and separating us from others. Some people join groups to be affiliated with people who share similar or desirable characteristics in terms of beliefs, attitudes, values, or cultural identities. For example, people may join the National Organization for Women because they want to affiliate with others who support women's rights or a local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) because they want to affiliate with African Americans, people concerned with civil rights, or a combination of the two. Group memberships vary in terms of how much they affect our identity, as some are more prominent than others at various times in our lives. While religious groups as a whole are too large to be considered small groups, the work that people do as a part of a religious community—as a lay leader, deacon, member of a prayer group, or committee—may have deep ties to a person's identity.



Figure 3.8.1.3 Group membership helps meet our interpersonal needs by providing an opportunity for affection and inclusion. Lostinthetredwoods – [Spiral of Hands](#) – CC BY-ND 2.0.

The prestige of a group can initially attract us because we want that group's identity to "rub off" on our own identity. Likewise, the achievements we make as a group member can enhance our self-esteem, add to our reputation, and allow us to create or project certain identity characteristics to engage in impression management. For example, a person may take numerous tests to become a part of Mensa, which is an organization for people with high IQs, for no material gain but for the recognition or sense of achievement that the affiliation may bring. Likewise, people may join sports teams, professional organizations, and honor societies for the sense of achievement and affiliation. Such groups allow us opportunities to better ourselves by encouraging further development of skills or knowledge. For example, a person who used to play the oboe in high school may join the community band to continue to improve on his or her ability.

Types of Small Groups

There are many types of small groups, but the most common distinction made between types of small groups is that of task-oriented and relational-oriented groups (Hargie, 2011). Task-oriented groups are formed to solve a problem, promote a cause, or generate ideas or information (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 1995). In such groups, like a committee or study group, interactions and decisions are primarily evaluated based on the quality of the final product or output. The three main types of tasks are production, discussion, and problem-solving tasks (Ellis & Fisher, 1994). Groups faced with production tasks are asked to produce something tangible from their group interactions such as a report, design for a playground, musical performance, or fundraiser event. Groups faced with discussion tasks are asked to talk through something without trying to come up with a right or wrong answer. Examples of this type of group include a support group for people with HIV/AIDS, a book club, or a group for new fathers. Groups faced with problem-solving tasks have to devise a course of action to meet a specific need. These groups also usually include a production and discussion component, but the end goal isn't necessarily a tangible product or a shared social reality through discussion. Instead, the end goal is a well-thought-out idea. Task-oriented groups require honed problem-solving skills to accomplish goals, and the structure of these groups is more rigid than that of relational-oriented groups.

Relational-oriented groups are formed to promote interpersonal connections and are more focused on quality interactions that contribute to the well-being of group members. Decision making is directed at strengthening or repairing relationships rather than completing discrete tasks or debating specific ideas or courses of action. All groups include task and relational elements, so it's best to think of these orientations as two ends of a continuum rather than as mutually exclusive. For example, although a family unit works together daily to accomplish tasks like getting the kids ready for school and friendship groups may plan a surprise party for one of the members, their primary and most meaningful interactions are still relational. Since other chapters in this book focus specifically on interpersonal relationships, this chapter focuses more on task-oriented groups and the dynamics that operate within these groups.

To more specifically look at the types of small groups that exist, we can examine why groups form. Some groups are formed based on interpersonal relationships. Our family and friends are considered primary groups, or long-lasting groups that are formed based on relationships and include significant others. These are the small groups in which we interact most frequently. They form the basis of our society and our individual social realities. Kinship networks provide important support early in life and meet

physiological and safety needs, which are essential for survival. They also meet higher-order needs such as social and self-esteem needs. When people do not interact with their biological family, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, they can establish fictive kinship networks, which are composed of people who are not biologically related but fulfill family roles and help provide the same support.

We also interact in many secondary groups, which are characterized by less frequent face-to-face interactions, less emotional and relational communication, and more task-related communication than primary groups (Barker, 1991). While we are more likely to participate in secondary groups based on self-interest, our primary-group interactions are often more reciprocal or other oriented. For example, we may join groups because of a shared interest or need.

Groups formed based on shared interest include social groups and leisure groups such as a group of independent film buffs, science fiction fans, or bird watchers. Some groups form to meet the needs of individuals or of a particular group of people. Examples of groups that meet the needs of individuals include study groups or support groups like a weight loss group. These groups are focused on individual needs, even though they meet as a group, and they are also often discussion oriented. Service groups, on the other hand, work to meet the needs of individuals but are task oriented. Service groups include Habitat for Humanity and Rotary Club chapters, among others. Still other groups form around a shared need, and their primary task is advocacy. For example, the Gay Men's Health Crisis is a group that was formed by a small group of eight people in the early 1980s to advocate for resources and support for the still relatively unknown disease that would later be known as AIDS. Similar groups form to advocate for everything from a stop sign at a neighborhood intersection to the end of human trafficking.

As we already learned, other groups are formed primarily to accomplish a task. Teams are task-oriented groups in which members are especially loyal and dedicated to the task and other group members (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). In professional and civic contexts, the word *team* has become popularized as a means of drawing on the positive connotations of the term—connotations such as “high-spirited,” “cooperative,” and “hardworking.” Scholars who have spent years studying highly effective teams have identified several common factors related to their success. Successful teams have (Adler & Elmhurst, 2005)

- clear and inspiring shared goals,
- a results-driven structure,
- competent team members,
- a collaborative climate,
- high standards for performance,
- external support and recognition, and
- ethical and accountable leadership.

Increasingly, small groups and teams are engaging in more virtual interaction. Virtual groups take advantage of new technologies and meet exclusively or primarily online to achieve their purpose or goal. Some virtual groups may complete their task without ever being physically face-to-face. Virtual groups bring with them distinct advantages and disadvantages that you can read more about in the “Getting Plugged In” feature next.

“Getting Plugged In”: Virtual Groups

Virtual groups are now common in academic, professional, and personal contexts, as classes meet entirely online, work teams interface using webinar or video-conferencing programs, and people connect around shared interests in a variety of online settings. Virtual groups are popular in professional contexts because they can bring together people who are geographically dispersed (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Virtual groups also increase the possibility for the inclusion of diverse members. The ability to transcend distance means that people with diverse backgrounds and diverse perspectives are more easily accessed than in many offline groups.

One disadvantage of virtual groups stems from the difficulties that technological mediation presents for the relational and social dimensions of group interactions (Walther & Bunz, 2005). As we will learn later in this chapter, an important part of coming together as a group is the socialization of group members into the desired norms of the group. Since norms are implicit, much of this information is learned through observation or conveyed informally from one group member to another. In fact, in traditional groups, group members passively acquire 50 percent or more of their knowledge about group norms and procedures, meaning they observe rather than directly ask (Comer, 1991). Virtual groups experience more difficulty with this part of socialization than copresent traditional groups do, since any form of electronic mediation takes away some of the richness present in face-to-face interaction.

To help overcome these challenges, members of virtual groups should be prepared to put more time and effort into building the relational dimensions of their group. Members of virtual groups need to make the social cues that guide new members' socialization more explicit than they would in an offline group (Ahuja & Galvin, 2003). Group members should also contribute often, even if just supporting someone else's contribution, because increased participation has been shown to increase liking among members of virtual groups (Walther & Bunz, 2005). Virtual group members should also make an effort to put relational content that might otherwise be conveyed through nonverbal or contextual means into the verbal part of a message, as members who include little social content in their messages or only communicate about the group's task are more negatively evaluated. Virtual groups who do not overcome these challenges will likely struggle to meet deadlines, interact less frequently, and experience more absenteeism. What follows are some guidelines to help optimize virtual groups (Walter & Bunz, 2005):

- Get started interacting as a group as early as possible, since it takes longer to build social cohesion.
 - Interact frequently to stay on task and avoid having work build up.
 - Start working toward completing the task while initial communication about setup, organization, and procedures are taking place.
 - Respond overtly to other people's messages and contributions.
 - Be explicit about your reactions and thoughts since typical nonverbal expressions may not be received as easily in virtual groups as they would be in colocated groups.
 - Set deadlines and stick to them.
1. Make a list of some virtual groups to which you currently belong or have belonged to in the past. What are some differences between your experiences in virtual groups versus traditional colocated groups?
 2. What are some group tasks or purposes that you think lend themselves to being accomplished in a virtual setting? What are some group tasks or purposes that you think would be best handled in a traditional colocated setting? Explain your answers for each.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Small Groups

As with anything, small groups have their advantages and disadvantages. Advantages of small groups include shared decision making, shared resources, synergy, and exposure to diversity. It is within small groups that most of the decisions that guide our country, introduce local laws, and influence our family interactions are made. In a democratic society, participation in decision making is a key part of citizenship. Groups also help in making decisions involving judgment calls that have ethical implications or the potential to negatively affect people. Individuals making such high-stakes decisions in a vacuum could have negative consequences given the lack of feedback, input, questioning, and proposals for alternatives that would come from group interaction. Group members also help expand our social networks, which provide access to more resources. A local community-theater group may be able to put on a production with a limited budget by drawing on these connections to get set-building supplies, props, costumes, actors, and publicity in ways that an individual could not. The increased knowledge, diverse perspectives, and access to resources that groups possess relates to another advantage of small groups—synergy.

Synergy refers to the potential for gains in performance or heightened quality of interactions when complementary members or member characteristics are added to existing ones (Larson Jr., 2010). Because of synergy, the final group product can be better than what any individual could have produced alone. When I worked in housing and residence life, I helped coordinate a “World Cup Soccer Tournament” for the international students that lived in my residence hall. As a group, we created teams representing different countries around the world, made brackets for people to track progress and predict winners, got sponsors, gathered prizes, and ended up with a very successful event that would not have been possible without the synergy created by our collective group membership. The members of this group were also exposed to international diversity that enriched our experiences, which is also an advantage of group communication.

Participating in groups can also increase our exposure to diversity and broaden our perspectives. Although groups vary in the diversity of their members, we can strategically choose groups that expand our diversity, or we can unintentionally end up in a diverse group. When we participate in small groups, we expand our social networks, which increase the possibility to interact with people who have different cultural identities than ourselves. Since group members work together toward a common goal, shared identification with the task or group can give people with diverse backgrounds a sense of commonality that they might not have otherwise. Even when group members share cultural identities, the diversity of experience and opinion within a group can lead to broadened perspectives as alternative ideas are presented and opinions are challenged and defended. One of my favorite parts of facilitating class discussion is when students with different identities and/or perspectives teach one another things in ways that I

could not on my own. This example brings together the potential of synergy and diversity. People who are more introverted or just avoid group communication and voluntarily distance themselves from groups—or are rejected from groups—risk losing opportunities to learn more about others and themselves.



Figure 3.8.1.4 A social loafer is a dreaded group member who doesn't do his or her share of the work, expecting that others on the group won't notice or will pick up the slack. Henry Burrows – [Sleeping On The Job](#) – CC BY-SA 2.0.

There are also disadvantages to small group interaction. In some cases, one person can be just as or more effective than a group of people. Think about a situation in which a highly specialized skill or knowledge is needed to get something done. In this situation, one very knowledgeable person is probably a better fit for the task than a group of less knowledgeable people. Group interaction also has a tendency to slow down the decision-making process. Individuals connected through a hierarchy or chain of command often work better in situations where decisions must be made under time constraints. When group interaction does occur under time constraints, having one "point person" or leader who coordinates action and gives final approval or disapproval on ideas or suggestions for actions is best.

Group communication also presents interpersonal challenges. A common problem is coordinating and planning group meetings due to busy and conflicting schedules. Some people also have difficulty with the other-centeredness and self-sacrifice that some groups require. The interdependence of group members that we discussed earlier can also create some disadvantages. Group members may take advantage of the anonymity of a group and engage in social loafing, meaning they contribute less to the group than other members or than they would if working alone (Karau & Williams, 1993). Social loafers expect that no one will notice their behaviors or that others will pick up their slack. It is this potential for social loafing that makes many students and professionals dread group work, especially those who have a tendency to cover for other group members to prevent the social loafer from diminishing the group's productivity or output.

"Getting Competent": Improving Your Group Experiences

Like many of you, I also had some negative group experiences in college that made me think similarly to a student who posted the following on a teaching blog: "Group work is code for 'work as a group for a grade less than what you can get if you work alone'" (Weimer, 2008). But then I took a course called "Small Group and Team Communication" with an amazing teacher who later became one of my most influential mentors. She emphasized the fact that we all needed to increase our knowledge about group communication and group dynamics in order to better our group communication experiences—and she was right. So the first piece of advice to help you start improving your group experiences is to closely study the group communication chapters in this textbook and to apply what you learn to your group interactions. Neither students nor faculty are born knowing how to function as a group, yet students and faculty often think we're supposed to learn as we go, which increases the likelihood of a negative experience.

A second piece of advice is to meet often with your group (Myers & Goodboy, 2005). Of course, to do this you have to overcome some scheduling and coordination difficulties, but putting other things aside to work as a group helps set up a norm that group work is important and worthwhile. Regular meetings also allow members to interact with each other, which can increase social bonds, build a sense of interdependence that can help diminish social loafing, and establish other important rules and norms that will guide future group interaction. Instead of committing to frequent meetings, many student groups use their first meeting to equally divide up the group's tasks so they can then go off and work alone (not as a group). While some

group work can definitely be done independently, dividing up the work and assigning someone to put it all together doesn't allow group members to take advantage of one of the most powerful advantages of group work—synergy.

Last, establish group expectations and follow through with them. I recommend that my students come up with a group name and create a contract of group guidelines during their first meeting (both of which I learned from my group communication teacher whom I referenced earlier). The group name helps begin to establish a shared identity, which then contributes to interdependence and improves performance. The contract of group guidelines helps make explicit the group norms that might have otherwise been left implicit. Each group member contributes to the contract and then they all sign it. Groups often make guidelines about how meetings will be run, what to do about lateness and attendance, the type of climate they'd like for discussion, and other relevant expectations. If group members end up falling short of these expectations, the other group members can remind the straying member of the contract and the fact that he or she signed it. If the group encounters further issues, they can use the contract as a basis for evaluating the other group member or for communicating with the instructor.

1. Do you agree with the student's quote about group work that was included at the beginning? Why or why not?
2. The second recommendation is to meet more with your group. Acknowledging that schedules are difficult to coordinate and that that is not really going to change, what are some strategies that you could use to overcome that challenge in order to get time together as a group?
3. What are some guidelines that you think you'd like to include in your contract with a future group?

Key Takeaways

- Getting integrated: Small group communication refers to interactions among three or more people who are connected through a common purpose, mutual influence, and a shared identity. Small groups are important communication units in academic, professional, civic, and personal contexts.
- Several characteristics influence small groups, including size, structure, interdependence, and shared identity.
 - In terms of size, small groups must consist of at least three people, but there is no set upper limit on the number of group members. The ideal number of group members is the smallest number needed to competently complete the group's task or achieve the group's purpose.
 - Internal influences such as member characteristics and external factors such as the group's size, task, and access to resources affect a group's structure. A group's structure also affects how group members communicate, as some structures are more centralized and hierarchical and other structures are more decentralized and equal.
 - Groups are interdependent in that they have a shared purpose and a shared fate, meaning that each group member's actions affect every other group member.
 - Groups develop a shared identity based on their task or purpose, previous accomplishments, future goals, and an identity that sets their members apart from other groups.
- Small groups serve several functions as they meet instrumental, interpersonal, and identity needs.
 - Groups meet instrumental needs, as they allow us to pool resources and provide access to information to better help us survive and succeed.
 - Groups meet interpersonal needs, as they provide a sense of belonging (inclusion), an opportunity to participate in decision making and influence others (control), and emotional support.
 - Groups meet identity needs, as they offer us a chance to affiliate ourselves with others whom we perceive to be like us or whom we admire and would like to be associated with.
- There are various types of groups, including task-oriented, relational-oriented, primary, and secondary groups, as well as teams.
 - Task-oriented groups are formed to solve a problem, promote a cause, or generate ideas or information, while relational-oriented groups are formed to promote interpersonal connections. While there are elements of both in every group, the overall purpose of a group can usually be categorized as primarily task or relational oriented.
 - Primary groups are long-lasting groups that are formed based on interpersonal relationships and include family and friendship groups, and secondary groups are characterized by less frequent interaction and less emotional and relational communication than in primary groups. Our communication in primary groups is more frequently other oriented than our communication in secondary groups, which is often self-oriented.
 - Teams are similar to task-oriented groups, but they are characterized by a high degree of loyalty and dedication to the group's task and to other group members.

- Advantages of group communication include shared decision making, shared resources, synergy, and exposure to diversity. Disadvantages of group communication include unnecessary group formation (when the task would be better performed by one person), difficulty coordinating schedules, and difficulty with accountability and social loafing.

Exercises

1. Getting integrated: For each of the follow examples of a small group context, indicate what you think would be the ideal size of the group and why. Also indicate who the ideal group members would be (in terms of their occupation/major, role, level of expertise, or other characteristics) and what structure would work best.
 - A study group for this class
 - A committee to decide on library renovation plans
 - An upper-level college class in your major
 - A group to advocate for more awareness of and support for abandoned animals
2. List some groups to which you have belonged that focused primarily on tasks and then list some that focused primarily on relationships. Compare and contrast your experiences in these groups.
3. Synergy is one of the main advantages of small group communication. Explain a time when a group you were in benefited from or failed to achieve synergy. What contributed to your success/failure?

References

- Adler, R. B., and Jeanne Marquardt Elmhurst, *Communicating at Work: Principles and Practices for Businesses and the Professions*, 8th ed. (Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 248–50.
- Ahuja, M. K., and John E. Galvin, “Socialization in Virtual Groups,” *Journal of Management* 29, no. 2 (2003): 163.
- Barker, D. B., “The Behavioral Analysis of Interpersonal Intimacy in Group Development,” *Small Group Research* 22, no. 1 (1991): 79.
- Comer, D. R., “Organizational Newcomers’ Acquisition of Information from Peers,” *Management Communication Quarterly* 5, no. 1 (1991): 64–89.
- Ellis, D. G., and B. Aubrey Fisher, *Small Group Decision Making: Communication and the Group Process*, 4th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994), 57.
- Girl Scouts, “Facts,” accessed July 15, 2012, http://www.girlscouts.org/who_we_are/facts.
- Hargie, O., *Skilled Interpersonal Interaction: Research, Theory, and Practice*, 5th ed. (London: Routledge, 2011), 452–53.
- Karau, S. J., and Kipling D. Williams, “Social Loafing: A Meta-Analytic Review and Theoretical Integration,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65, no. 4 (1993): 681.
- Larson, C. E., and Frank M. J. LaFasto, *TeamWork: What Must Go Right/What Must Go Wrong* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989), 73.
- Larson Jr., J. R., *In Search of Synergy in Small Group Performance* (New York: Psychology Press, 2010).
- McKay, M., Martha Davis, and Patrick Fanning, *Messages: Communication Skills Book*, 2nd ed. (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 1995), 254.
- Myers, S. A., and Alan K. Goodboy, “A Study of Groupware in a Course on Small Group Communication,” *Psychological Reports* 97, no. 2 (2005): 385.
- Walther, J. B., and Ulla Bunz, “The Rules of Virtual Groups: Trust, Liking, and Performance in Computer-Mediated Communication,” *Journal of Communication* 55, no. 4 (2005): 830.
- Weimer, M., “Why Students Hate Groups,” *The Teaching Professor*, July 1, 2008, accessed July 15, 2012, www.teachingprofessor.com/art.ts-hate-groups.

This page titled [3.8.1: Understanding Small Groups](#) is shared under a [CC BY-NC-SA](#) license and was authored, remixed, and/or curated by [Anonymous](#).

- [13.1: Understanding Small Groups](#) by Anonymous is licensed [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0](#). Original source: <https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/a-primer-on-communication-studies/>.