

How I improved group work in my course by applying “team-building” tools and approaches (Taryn Vian)

Course:

IH773, Financial Management for International Health

Need:

Students work in groups on a fundraising assignment. They sometimes have problems with the group work part of the class. I wanted to give students some orientation to how to work better in teams, and integrate some tools that would allow students to set team expectations and peer evaluate their teamwork.

Approach:

I had read the article “Improving student teamwork in a collaborative project-based course” by Edward Kapp (published in *College Teaching*, Summer 2009). I decided to use this approach in my course.

Process:

1. I used one hour of class time to introduce teamwork. See attached lesson plan which is based on Kapp article.
2. After students had developed their “team contract”, I created an evaluation tool which tried to capture the main elements of the contract. See attached for one example of a team contract and the corresponding evaluation tool.
3. Students filled out the peer evaluation tool at mid-point in semester. See attached instructions. This was not associated with grades, so it was low stakes. The process was anonymous, but not confidential; that is, team members did not put their name on the form, but the responses were shared with the rest of the team. Once I received the hand-written forms, I returned a packet to each team with scanned evaluation forms for their group. If a team had 4 members, they would receive a PDF file with 4 pages, one page with each of the filled in evaluation forms (team members evaluated each other and themselves).
4. I asked groups to meet to discuss the findings of the peer evaluation. The instructions for the peer evaluation also gave guidance for discussion of results.
5. At the end of the course, students again filled in the form to evaluate their peers, only this time they needed to put their name on the evaluation and the results were not shared. A teaching assistant entered scores into a spreadsheet. The peer evaluation was 25% of the fundraising project grade.

Results

At the end of the course, several students said that the team contract helped them to stay on track, and it made it possible to raise difficult issues (because often that was a teamwork criterion). In one team, a team member who was concerned about her course grade made more of an effort on her team after the mid-term evaluation. This extra effort was noticed and appreciated by other team members, who didn't necessarily realize the student was motivated by the peer evaluation grade. Other students said they wished their group had referred back to their team contract sooner, as it might have helped them avoid some problems. Even though they felt it hadn't helped them this time, it was an approach they might be willing to apply to their next team project.

Lesson plan for introducing teamwork skills. Second half of Session 2 in course.

65 min. **Fundraising Team Building**
7:40 – 8:45

5 min. **Review fundraising assignment**

20 min. **Human Values Continuum exercise.** Discuss implications, advantages, challenges of having teams with different personalities and working styles. You will have a range of styles on your team. You should try to appreciate differences & what they bring to table, but also anticipate where those differences might need to be managed and come up with working norms. (See facilitation guide below.)

20 min. **Form groups.** Introduce selves. Structured discussion in your group of past team experiences (good & bad). Identify opportunities and obstacles that these differences pose for your team performance. Decide on two characteristics to share with whole class. See suggestions below for how to facilitate.

20 min. **In groups.** Brainstorming ways to work together to take advantage of opportunities and avoid obstacles. Create a team contract. See below for guidance.

Human Values Continuum

Preparation. Push chairs to side to create space for people to move around.

Instructions to students: Move to side of the room which shows your level of agreement with one or the other of two related statements which I will read. You can also stand in-between if you are not strongly in agreement with the statement or are a mixture of two statements.

LEFT SIDE

Following a schedule appeals to me.

I can talk easily to anyone for as long as I have to.

People should “tell it like it is”, even if it hurts.
truth.

A person is “late” if they arrive even 1 minute after the designated start time.

I tend to focus on facts, details, and accuracy

I like making decisions, reaching closure. off opportunities.

RIGHT SIDE

Following a schedule cramps my style.

I find I have a lot to say only to certain people or under certain circumstances.

Maintaining harmony is critical, even it means not telling the complete truth.

A person not late if they arrive within 10 minutes of the designated start time.

I tend to focus on the big picture, to get “ball park” accuracy

I like brainstorming and prefer not to close off opportunities.

Objectives:

--conveys large range of working styles likely to be represented on teams.

--conveys advantages of mix of perspectives and working styles on a team.

Trainer Questions: advantages of integrating skills of team

Why might it being useful in a group to have a person who likes following a schedule? What value is there in sometimes ignoring the schedule (being flexible, open to ideas).

Have you been in a situation where you were relieved when someone “told it like it is”? Have you ever gotten in trouble for saying too much, being too honest?

Projects go through phases—this project has you review an organization, decide on a strategy or activity for fundraising, then plan it out, implement & report on the plan. In terms of the question about focusing on facts, details, & accuracy vs. focusing on big picture and “ball park” accuracy, when are you more likely to draw on your “big picture” thinkers? When might you need more of the facts and details?

Exercise 2: Structured Discussion of Group Experiences

Introduce yourselves to each other. Go around the circle for about 8-10 minutes to discuss past group experiences. Each person should speak for 1-2 minutes about positive and negative experiences in working in groups in the past. Make sure everyone has a chance to talk.

Then, as a group, decide on **2 attributes** from your collective past team experiences to present to the whole class. One should characterize a good team experience, and another should characterize a bad team experience.

Instructor writes the attributes on two lists on the board.

Class discussion of what characteristics are repeating. Handout on characteristics of effective teams from literature.

Exercise 3: Team Contracts

In groups, create a contract for team membership with 5-7 objective, measurable individual behaviors that the team members agreed were important to team performance and to which you are willing to commit yourselves. The individual behaviors are to be derived through **consensus** of team members.

Examples: attend all scheduled meetings; inform someone on team if you are going to be late; complete assignments on schedule.

Write the contract and all members should sign it. Give to instructor during next class (signed copy). You can either make copies for yourselves before handing it in to me, or I will make copies for you at break next week so you keep your contract. We will consider using the terms of the contract as part of peer review process.

Group H Team Contract

I. Equal opportunity:

- Ask everyone’s opinions and ideas
- Be respectful, polite and sensitive to all team members and their opinions

II. Be forthright about issues trumping/affecting the project

III. Be responsive to all communications

- within one day/24 hour period
- use the dropbox efficiently as a way of sharing documents
- use the doodle to schedule available times, both basic and variable
- use skype and facebook at designated group times
-

IV. Be flexible

- follow through on promises and commitments
- be accountable

Strengths of group members:

- **A** - going into situations in small groups, calling, compiling
- **B** - powerpoint, calling, scheduling
- **C** - writing, editing, proofreading, powerpoint, meeting schedules
- **D** - writing and editing

Weaknesses of group members:

- **A** - talking in large groups, writing
- **B**- writing and editing
- **C** - bad at talking on the street
- **D** - powerpoint

Peer Evaluation

For each of the questions below, circle the response (1 = strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) that best reflects how you evaluate your performance and your other team members' performance in your group work to date.

1. Treats other team members and their ideas with respect.

	(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)	
A	1	2	3	4	5
B	1	2	3	4	5
C	1	2	3	4	5
D	1	2	3	4	5

2. Informs others about any issues affecting project.

	(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)	
A	1	2	3	4	5
B	1	2	3	4	5
C	1	2	3	4	5
D	1	2	3	4	5

3. Is responsive to all communications.

	(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)	
A	1	2	3	4	5
B	1	2	3	4	5
C	1	2	3	4	5
D	1	2	3	4	5

4. Follows through on promises and commitments.

	(strongly disagree)			(strongly agree)	
A	1	2	3	4	5
B	1	2	3	4	5
C	1	2	3	4	5
D	1	2	3	4	5

Instructions for peer evaluation process

Dear Students,

We are going to do a peer evaluation of group work experience at this "mid-term" point in your fundraising project.

The purpose of the evaluation is to assess performance against the criteria which your group agreed upon in the group contract established at the start of the exercise. Often groups included criteria such as "communicates in a timely way", "treats others with respect", "fulfills agreed upon responsibilities," etc.

I have taken each group contract and translated it into evaluation questions. The number of questions varies depending on the number of clauses in your contract.

Each group member is asked to fill out a peer evaluation form. You will evaluate yourself and each of your team members according to each criterion. Give your filled out evaluation forms to Ellen. She will post scanned sets of evaluation forms for each group in the Group Drop Boxes.

How to use the peer evaluations in your group:

1. Feedback from peers is meant to be helpful. This midterm evaluation will not be used for grading.
2. Decide whether your group would like to discuss the feedback in person. If so, decide on a time and place.
3. When you meet, start by reviewing the criteria on the form so you are all sure you understand the original team contract and what the criteria mean.
4. If you received lower scores on some items than you expected, try not to be defensive. Ask your peers for help in understanding the feedback. You might say, "Some of you felt I did not follow through on commitments. Can you give me an example?" or "I see that some of you feel I was not always encouraging others to speak their mind. It would be helpful for me to hear suggestions for how I could do this better."
5. Be as specific and constructive as possible in giving feedback to your peers. Be prepared to provide examples of what you feel needs improvement, and examples of what works well.
6. The purpose of the evaluation is not to put people on the spot. If the meeting climate does not seem constructive, suggest reconvening at another time. You might also consider discussing feedback in pairs if that would be more supportive.

Tabulating peer evaluation scores

The total score each person gave to his or her peers was calculated. For each question, 5 points was the highest score. Example: if student A gave student C a "5" on all 4 questions, student C would get a score of "20". If student B gave student C a score of "4" on questions 1 and 2, and a score of "3" on questions 3 and 4, the total score would be 14.

We then calculated the average score for each person (averaging the grades given to them by each of their peers).