

Study Skills: Managing teamwork challenges

Video transcript

Love them or hate them, group projects are an inevitable part of university. They can be rewarding but have unique challenges that test your patience and communication skills. By following these steps, you'll have the tools not just to survive, but to thrive in your next group project.

People have had negative group experiences, and it is easy to fall into harmful mindsets around that. Adopting a growth mindset is beneficial for group work, among other things. Universities are places of learning, and taking on new challenges helps you grow and learn more about yourself. Fear of failing can make new challenges seem scary, and we often prefer to stay in our comfort zones and miss out on growth. Observe when you're making excuses to avoid challenges and try to get the most out of the experience by being open and turning fear into excitement for learning.

Challenges in group work present the same opportunities for growth as any other. Your team will likely have some diversity. So, how could this diversity benefit you?

Culture can sometimes present challenges. Communication styles differ between groups, as does English proficiency and how people value deadlines. So, how could this diversity benefit you? You are likely to work in multicultural teams after graduation. Think of this experience as practice. If you can become adept at working in a multicultural group now, it will serve you later.

There could also be a mix of ages and experience in your group. People with experience in the field may have other perspectives, and mature-aged students may have different motivations than young adults. So, how could this diversity benefit you? Less-experienced members can learn from experienced ones, and experienced members might benefit from a fresh perspective. No matter someone's background, every member has something valuable to contribute.

Team members will have differing levels of outside commitments and availability. Some may work, and people's family lives can be demanding. So, how could this diversity benefit you? Learning to negotiate to accommodate the needs of team members is a vital workplace skill, and this is an opportunity to refine it. Any efforts that you make to navigate this now will pay dividends later.

Of course, every person will bring unique skills and personality traits to the group. Some students are more ambitious, and not everyone is reliable, skilful, or organised. Some will wish to dominate, and others will try to do the bare minimum. Many may prefer to work alone. So, how could this diversity benefit you? People are suited to different tasks, and learning to delegate duties according to skill set and aptitude is a useful workplace skill. Learn about your team members and see it as a chance to practice finding the correct role for them.

Ultimately, every challenge makes us stronger and more competent. Since the challenges will happen regardless, it is better to look positively at them and adopt a growth mindset.

So, how can we ensure our group functions smoothly? You can use a straightforward guideline at the beginning to steer your group in the right direction: the COPPER checklist.

- **Commitment:** Start by familiarizing yourselves with each other. Agree to share the responsibility collectively. Be upfront about other commitments that might impact your availability so you can plan accordingly.
- **Objectives:** Identify the skills you wish to develop this semester. What academic goals are you aiming for? Establish criteria for peer reviews. Are there any additional goals you want to pursue?
- **Project Management:** Choose your administrative tools. Select your preferred communication method (messaging, video calls, email, etc.). Determine your project management tools (Office 365 apps, OneDrive, Trello, Tricider, etc.).
- **Planning:** Set your meeting schedules. Decide where and how your meetings will take place. Establish deadlines for writing and drafting assignments.
- **Expectations:** Assign tasks to group members. Allocate roles based on each person's strengths and weaknesses. Be open about your skills and limitations. Ensure everyone is accountable.
- **Roles:** Distribute responsibilities among members. Assign roles considering individual strengths, weaknesses, and competencies. Everyone should support each other, maintain regular check-ins, and hold one another accountable if needed.

By using the COPPER checklist, you can effectively navigate the initial stages of group collaboration. Obviously, the best way to fix a problem is to prevent it, but some are inevitable. It's useful to prepare for them. Do this by planning for conflict and polishing your communication skills.

At some stage, you are bound to have a non-cooperative member. Getting frustrated won't help, so instead, try to find out why they can't fulfill their commitments. Kindly let them know that your own task is being made more difficult, and you would appreciate them holding up their responsibilities. Don't do their work, but try to help them complete their share. If it persists, be sure to note it in the peer assessment.

Sometimes, one or more members will dominate discussions and planning. This should be addressed so that everyone contributes equally. Make a point of asking the quieter members for their ideas. If it is uncomfortable, gently indicate to the dominating member(s) that they are taking more than their share of time.

You'll notice that some members are quiet, or even silent. Addressing this ensures a fairer contribution by all. Give silent members a chance to speak by asking for their input. They may be naturally quiet, but often, people need a space to speak into and if it isn't there they don't push for it. Leave adequate space for them, and when they contribute, pay attention and acknowledge them, even if you disagree.

Good communication is the foundation of all relationships, and it's worth developing your own skills.

One way to improve communication and minimize conflict is by using "I" statements. Instead of saying, "You never meet deadlines," try saying, "I feel stressed when deadlines are missed because it affects the whole group."

It's also important to practice active listening and pay full attention when someone is speaking. Nodding to show understanding and summarizing their points before responding shows respect and ensures everyone feels heard.

Another way to improve communication is by having more of it. Schedule regular check-ins to discuss progress, address any issues, and adjust plans as needed. This helps catch potential problems early and keeps everyone on the same page.

It's a good practice to acknowledge and respect each team member's unique strengths, weaknesses, and working styles. Encourage open discussions about how to leverage these differences to benefit the group.

If needed, give specific, constructive feedback that focuses on the behaviour rather than the person. For example, say, "I noticed the introduction was thorough, but it would be helpful if it were summarized more clearly."

When conflicts arise, it's better to address them directly and calmly. Use a kind, solutions-focused approach to identifying the issue, discussing possible solutions, and agreeing on a course of action together. Avoid letting issues fester.

Overall, the way we interact with others at university and in life plays a huge role in how successful we are. Make the most of the opportunity to practice these skills.

So, we have covered three methods of avoiding the challenges associated with group work. If you want to learn more, complete the activities on this page, or contact a Language and Learning Advisor.