

# Teaching the Module: Working in Teams

The assignments and activities in this module are designed to be incorporated into a class that has a group project to facilitate effective teamwork. The assignments are activities that are experiential in nature. Experiential learning is learning by doing; in other words, students learn how to work effectively and ethically in groups and teams by actually working in a group or team. Regardless of the type of project, group projects require careful facilitation from instructors to ensure that the work is shared equally across all members of the group, that communication in the team is respectful and effective, and that students experience and learn from a model of team or group work that is ethical and effective. In this way, students can practice being members of a group that functions well and can take this experience into other groups and teams that they are and will be a part of in the future.

In their work studying over 75 diverse teams, researchers Carl Larson and Frank LaFasto identified eight strategies that they argue are essential for effective work by a team or group.<sup>1</sup> Five strategies are helpful for framing student group projects:

- Establish clear and inspiring team goals
- Maintain a results-oriented team structure
- Strive for unified commitment
- Provide a collaborative climate
- Encourage standards of excellence

We have used these five strategies to develop the activities and assignments included in this module.

Suggested order of activities and assignments:

## Case study

The case study on teamwork by The Appalachian and Covering Climate Now can be used to introduce ideas of teamwork in journalism and give an overview of successful strategies.

## Previous Team Experience Discussion

This assignment should happen before teamwork has begun. See “Teaching Note: Previous Team Experience Discussion” for more details.

After the discussion, students could be asked to read Chapter 9, “Building Effective Teams and Teamwork,” from Whetten and Cameron’s “Developing Management Skills,” in preparation for the next activity/assignment, the Team Honor Code. Instructors could also ask students to read Whetten and Cameron’s Chapter 7, “Managing Conflict,” or they can present some of the key ideas from the chapter to help students prepare for and manage conflict effectively. Students need to recognize that conflict is inevitable and that a certain degree of conflict is necessary for teams to do their best work.

## Team Honor Code

This assignment should be the first thing that groups do once teams have been created.

Have groups sit with each other and begin discussing their honor code. Walk through the instruction sheet and use it as a set of questions that prompt discussion for the students. Groups tend to want to get to the details of how they will work together before talking in detail about the goals for the group and should be encouraged to focus on goals first. They should prompt discussion with questions like: what do you want to accomplish by the end of the project? Are there goals beyond just getting the work done that your group wants to accomplish? What does everyone in the group see as a successful group project beyond a particular grade? Once groups have these big picture goals articulated, then they can begin writing their team honor code, using the sample as a guide.

Instructors should facilitate some way for the honor code to be signed. For example, it could be a paper copy of the code that each group member signs and then the instructional team (e.g., the instructor and the TA) signs once they've reviewed it and offered feedback and comments (if necessary). Alternatively, an assignment where each member of the group turns in the honor code electronically in lieu of an actual signature on paper is effective. One additional benefit of this assignment is that group members who aren't paying attention to details will likely not turn in the assignment individually, and this is something that can be identified and addressed immediately.

Once the honor code contract has been signed and approved, it should be posted somewhere that all team members can see and refer to throughout the group project. If conflict or concerns arise that have not been covered by the team honor code, then the team should be encouraged to update and re-sign the honor code.

### **Team Leader Rotation and Self-Evaluation**

To ensure that each team member gets a chance to serve as leader, instructors can require students to create a schedule in which each team member serves as leader during a given week. At the end of their leadership week, students complete and turn in the activity "Self-Evaluation and Team Leadership," a reflection on their leadership. This may be an ungraded but required exercise. Students who are typically more hesitant to assume leadership have reported that they especially benefit from being required to serve as leader.

### **Team Work Plans and Team Reflection Responses**

These two assignments work in tandem to help teams function as effective, collaborative and successful teams as the group project unfolds. Work Plans and Reflection Responses can be due weekly once the teams are working on their projects. One way to do this is to have both assignments due on the last day of the course work week each week that the project is happening (e.g., Friday evening or Sunday evening).

See "Teaching Note: Team Work Plans and Team Reflection Responses" for more details regarding prompts for each assignment.

#### *Instructional Responses to Weekly Team Work Plans:*

Whether the assignment is graded, instructors should comment on the weekly team work plans as soon as possible after the team work plans are submitted. Responses might include notes about plans that seem less developed and/or groups that seem stalled in their work, or are not planning far enough in advance, or have an imbalance in terms of member responsibilities. For example, a comment might include notes about working backward from a deadline and including time for review and revision by the entire team before the team submits their work. Responses might also include notes about work plans that seem detailed and clear, include roles and responsibilities equitably across the team, or have clear end-of-project goals with helpful time for revision and review.

#### *Instructional Responses to Weekly Reflection Responses:*

Whether the weekly reflection responses are graded, instructors should answer questions and offer feedback and comments as soon as possible after the weekly reflection responses are submitted. For example, comments might help a group member problem solve how to handle a particular group dynamic. Or a comment might be one of encouragement for a group member who has been helpful throughout the process. Additionally, instructors can compile a document drawing on all the individual reflections of each group in total each week to help instructors identify groups and team members who are effective and helpful and/or struggling and ineffective. This document is particularly helpful for group projects that last several weeks so that instructors can identify trends over time as well as identify immediate successes or challenges.

### **Team Member Evaluation**

Giving and receiving feedback is key to the success of a group or team. Giving and receiving feedback in ways

that create and sustain collaborative and positive organizational culture takes practice. This assignment asks students to reflect on their own work as well as the work of their colleagues in a group project as a way to allow students to practice giving constructive feedback and to reflect on how their work in a group setting has been perceived by others. At the conclusion of the team project, instructors can ask students to complete the “Team Member Evaluation” activity to prompt them to provide feedback for each of their team members as well as to reflect on their own performance. One consideration for the assignment is to create a safe space for students to offer comments and feedback about their fellow team members. Instructors can make it clear that when they share the feedback with team members it will be generalized so that students will get the feedback but will not have specific names associated with the comments. A second consideration for this assignment is to help students understand that how they work in their teams has consequences. One way to do this is to have some mechanism for evaluations to have an impact on students’ individual grades. This can be in the form of an impact on the project grade or a separate grade for group member evaluation.

*This teaching note was written by Dr. Jennifer L. Jones Barbour for the purposes of facilitating activities and assignments related to working in groups and teams.*

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<sup>1</sup> LaFasto, Frank, Frank MJ LaFasto, and Carl Larson. “When teams work best: 6,000 team members and leaders tell what it takes to succeed.” Sage, 2001.