Getting Your Group Off to a Good Start

Why this worksheet?

- Due to inexperience with group work, many students don't appreciate the need for the careful planning and preparation needed to get groups to work effectively.
- Some students also think, "Why bother wasting time on this, let's just get to work and we'll deal with any problems if and when they arise." But that's a bit like saying, "I'll wait until my house burns down before worrying about getting house insurance."
- Other students are also concerned that "getting all heavy" could lead to some emotionally difficult interpersonal interactions. While this is a valid concern, avoiding the problem is not a helpful way of dealing with it. A better solution would be to read up on interpersonal communication skills so that you're better prepared to avoid or handle difficult situations.

> **Characteristics of high performing teams***
> 1. Clear sense of direction and vision.
> 2. Involvement, ownership, and commitment to the vision of the team.
> 3. A sense that personal values of individual team members are being realised by the vision of the team.
> 4. Clear and attainable goals with a results focus.
> 5. Clarity of roles and role expectations.
> 6. Leadership that is shared and balances both concern for task and people.
> 7. High energy and commitment of individuals.
> 8. Ability to manage conflicts.
>
> * From a handout by Professor John Baird, College of Business, San Jose State University.

Step 1: Getting to know each other

- As a way of getting to know each other better in your first meeting, you might like to take turns around the group to introduce yourself and why you're doing this course (unless it's a core requirement of a set professional degree) and what you hope to get out of it. It might also be helpful to identify any specific skills or knowledge you have that might be useful for completing this particular assignment.

Step 2: Reviewing previous experiences with groups

- Again, go around the group and share previous experiences with working in groups, both good and bad.
- The good experiences might help guide this group in how to be effective (e.g. you might have found the use of a group wiki really helpful, and this would be good for the rest of the group to know).
- Bringing up bad experiences might help the group decide what they need to address in the later sections of this worksheet.
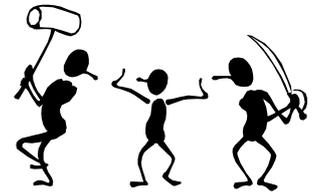
Step 3: Assigning an initial team coordinator ("chairperson") and note-taker ("secretary")

- The success of committee or team meetings is not left to chance in the business world – to keep things on track and to manage discussions a chairperson is designated, and to make sure that what is discussed and decided is captured and not forgotten, a secretary to take notes is also decided upon. (For more, see the information on team roles on this website.)
- You might like to share these roles around from meeting to meeting in order to share the work around (particularly that of official note-taker), to give everyone an opportunity to develop new skills, and to have an easy way of moving people out of roles they are found to be ineffective in.

Step 4: Deciding how your group will function

Things to come to an agreement on <u>and record</u> include:

- How often do you think you will need to meet?

- When and where can you all meet?
  (Passing around a weekly planner for people to mark out times when they are genuinely unavailable might help with this.)

- Who will take responsibility for calling and organising group meetings? (Sending out reminders, not only of the meeting time and place, but what everyone had agreed to have had done in preparation, is a useful practice.)

- What are the precise responsibilities of each member of the group?

- How will you ensure meetings are productive?

- How will you communicate with each other between meetings?

- How will you ensure that everyone is doing their fair share of the work?

- What are your expectations of group members when they come to meetings and how they will treat each other in meetings?

- What tasks does the group need to achieve to successfully complete the group assignment?

- How will the team ensure that all tasks are completed in a timely manner and to a high standard? (E.g. shared versus delegated roles and checks on progress. A group wiki helps with everyone being able to comment on other people's work.)

Dealing with Problems

- For some ideas on how to deal with group members who don't do their faire share of the work, see the appendix on "Coping with Hitchhikers and Couch Potatoes on Teams" in: http://www.ncsu.edu/felder-public/Papers/Oakley-paper(JSCL).pdf

- Communication issues? Check out:
  - http://www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=2385
  - http://www.reachout.com.au/default.asp?ti=2388

- Interested in using a group Wiki to aid interaction outside of group meetings? These sites might help: www.webpaint.com; www.wikispaces.com; www.pbwiki.com; www.wikidot.com