

Document name: Working in groups and teams
Document date: 2014
Copyright information: Content is made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence
OpenLearn Study Unit: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/ocw/mod/oucontent/view.php?id=20471>
OpenLearn url: <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/money-management/developing-your-skills-hr-professional/content-section-0>



Working in groups and teams

Adapted from B716 Management: perspectives and practice

B863 Module Team (eds)(2014) 'Reader', B863 *The human resource professional*, Milton Keynes, The Open University

Working in groups and teams

This reading has been adapted from material used in the Open University course B716 Management: perspectives and practice.

Groups or teams?

Although the terms ‘groups’ and ‘teams’ are often used interchangeably, first of all it is necessary to examine what is meant by each. Essentially a team is a particular kind of group, so it is helpful to understand what is meant by a group before embarking on a discussion of particular issues surrounding teams.

Types and uses of groups

It is difficult to define the concept of a group precisely. The essential features are that it has two or more members who are aware of each other, interact and work towards a common goal and with the outcome less dependent on whether there is a contribution from all the members. However, this definition could apply to a collection of neighbours chatting in the street, a small crowd or a queue waiting at a bus stop. Schein (1980, p. 137) suggests that another important ingredient of a group is that the people ‘perceive themselves to be a group’. Thus, neighbours may come together to form a group to pursue a common interest – for example, a neighbourhood watch or in support of a local football team. Groups are generally fairly small, often developing a distinct identity, which may be reflected in a name, rituals, territory, and so on

There are various types of groups within organisations. Kakabadse et al. (1988) have suggested a useful categorisation: groups may be formal or informal, primary or secondary (see Figure 1).

	Formal	Informal
Primary	e.g., department, project team	e.g., group of friends
Secondary	e.g., large committee	e.g., a network of computer enthusiasts or women managers

Figure 1 Different types of groups

- Formal groups have some formal recognition and authority within the organisation, and usually have a defined purpose or task that is related to the overall task of the organisation. They might be departments, work groups or project teams. An organisation can be regarded as consisting of an interlocking set of such work groups.
- Informal groups do not have formal authority. Individuals within organisations interact with a wide range of other people who may not be part of their formal groups. They may form relationships with those people to pursue common interests, or to make various exchanges. Informal groups may form to fulfil special needs and goals – to provide friendship, a sense of identity and belonging, or to pursue a common interest such as sport. For example, a mixture of city bankers and lawyers who were lifelong Manchester United Football Club fans in the UK got a bid together to buy the club (Gibson, 2010). Informal groups may also form to pursue work-related interests.
- Primary groups are those whose members have regular and frequent interactions with each other in the pursuit of some common interests or tasks. A small work group, project team or family are all primary groups. They usually have an important influence on their members' values, attitudes and beliefs.
- Secondary groups are those whose members interact less frequently. A large committee, a professional group or an association are all examples. They are often larger than primary groups and their members may not have the opportunity to get to know each other well. As a result, secondary groups are usually less cohesive than primary groups.

Formal groups are used for a variety of functions in organisations, especially those requiring a combination of different skills, knowledge, perspectives or interests. These functions may include:

- distributing and managing work
- problem solving and decision making
- passing on information
- coordinating and liaising
- enabling people to participate in decision making
- negotiation or conflict resolution
- inquests or inquiries into the past.

Although informal groups, by their very nature, rarely have clearly defined organisational purposes, they may also serve some of the functions outlined. For example, a group of staff members who meet regularly to play badminton may serve also as a channel for passing on information, or to discuss past events and problems.

Individuals, too, may use groups to serve a variety of different needs and interests. Some of the main categories are summarised below.

Benefits to individuals of belonging to a group

- 1 Satisfying social needs
- 2 Establishing or confirming an identity
- 3 Gaining help and support in carrying out their particular objectives (which may not be the same as the organisation's)
- 4 Sharing and helping in a common activity.

(Source: adapted from Handy, 1976, p. 147)

Any group can be regarded as working at two levels: the level of the task (tackling the business of the group) and the social level (meeting people's needs for acceptance, recognition, belonging, and so on). So working in a group is both a task and a social process. These two aspects of a group are interrelated: people are unlikely to contribute effectively to the group task if they are feeling uncomfortable, threatened or anxious; and people are unlikely to feel happy and comfortable in a group unless they think that the group's task is being tackled in a reasonable manner. Both aspects of a group are important for its effectiveness.

Teams and what they offer

A team is more than a group. When you think of all the groups to which you belong, you will probably find that very few of them are really teams. A team is a special sort of group with the following characteristics:

- It has a common goal or task to pursue.
- The pursuit of this goal or task requires collaboration and the coordination of activities among the team's members.
- The team members have regular and frequent interactions with each other.
- It has a team identity, which is distinct from its members' individual identities.

Some common types of teams

Teams may be established for different reasons and can take a variety of forms. Teams are frequently established to tackle particular, discrete tasks. Small task teams are frequently set up to develop new strategies or policies in a particular area, and these teams are sometimes called working parties or task forces.

Teams may be established around a particular *function*. For example, a group of department heads may form the senior management team. Location is another basis on which teams develop. Close collaboration and coordination of work can occur between people sharing the same location.

This is quite common when a national organisation has several offices in different parts of the country. However, collaboration and coordination can also occur when people just happen to work in the same room or the same part of a building if there is a shared goal or task, because this is an important determinant of whether a team exists or not.

Teams are also formed to undertake particular *projects*. Project teams are normally established for a specific time and have a defined task or target to achieve. Project teams are usually distinguished from task teams by lasting over a longer term and having at least some workers who commit a high proportion or all of their working time to the project. Project teams may also have a higher degree of autonomy from the work of the rest of the organisation.

Working in teams has advantages, for example:

- the chance to bring a variety of skills and experiences to tackling a problem or task
- the opportunity for people to learn from each other
- mutual support
- the potential for team members to enthuse and motivate each other
- a degree of independence from the rest of the organisation.

Team-working may also have disadvantages, even when the team is working well, for example, there can be:

- too much isolation from the rest of the organisation, leading to goals being out of tune with organisational goals
- team pressures, leading to an unrealistic view of the world (groupthink)
- competition between teams, leading to conflict.

Of course, if the team is not working well, there may also be other disadvantages and these are considered later in this reading.

Improving group effectiveness

An effective group is one that achieves its agreed aims and enables its members to derive satisfaction from their work in the group. This subsection will examine some of the main factors that influence the effectiveness of formal groups. These factors can be divided into two sorts. Contextual factors or ‘givens’ are the first sort – these are factors that usually have to be negotiated with other people in the organisation outside the group. They include the *size* and *composition* of the group, the *task* it is to accomplish, the *resources* it has at its disposal and the *external recognition* it receives from other groups in the organisation. Once established, these factors often take some time to change and may be regarded as ‘givens’ or constraints within which the group will operate.

The second group of factors is internal or intervening factors. These are factors that are more under the direct control of group members and can therefore, in theory at least, be changed within a relatively short timescale

to improve group performance. They include *leadership, task and maintenance* functions, *interaction patterns, motivation and group development*.

Contextual factors or 'givens'

Group size

Many committees delegate specific tasks or projects to small groups of two to four people. The size of a group will depend in part on the nature of the task being addressed. For example, a stakeholder engagement group in a company may have to be quite large to represent all the different interests, whereas a team set up to examine ways of re-organising the reception area might be quite small. The larger the group is, the greater the diversity of skills and knowledge available to it. Yet at the same time, the larger the group, the less opportunity there is for each individual to participate and influence proceedings. The size of the group is therefore a trade-off. Research shows that, in order to enable all members to participate effectively, a group of between five and seven people is best, but to achieve the range of expertise and skills required, it may need to be larger. As a group increases beyond, say, ten or twelve people it may become less effective and perhaps may tend to split into smaller sub-groups.

Group composition

In deciding the composition of a group it is important to have members with the necessary competencies to tackle the group task. However, other considerations are important, too. *Homogeneous* groups, whose members share similar values and beliefs, tend to produce higher member satisfaction and less conflict, yet they tend to be less creative and produce greater pressures for conformity. *Heterogeneous* groups, in contrast, are likely to experience greater conflict, but have the potential for greater creativity and innovation. As the heterogeneous group members have a wider range of views and opinions, their decisions are also more likely to be widely accepted within the organisation. A successful implementation of diversity policies will lead to organisations employing people with a greater range of experiences, and backgrounds, as a result of which groups will become more heterogeneous.

Such diverse groupings can occur, for example, in partnerships between public sector and community groups where people are invited to represent the community in government planning. However, once invited, they may find that there is little recognition of their differing experiences and skills in a formal meeting setting. Groups can also become trans-national and cross-cultural, working in virtual teams across national boundaries. This is becoming more prevalent as a result of advances in information technology and the globalisation of business. It is inevitable that increasing the diversity of a group may also increase the potential for disagreement, and dealing with tensions and conflicts is an important topic that will be considered later in this reading.

The nature of the task

A group that is given a task that it feels is *realistic* and *important* is likely to perform better than one that is not. Some tasks may require very different forms of group behaviour and will be difficult to do together. For example, a group formed to disseminate information may not be the best place for attempting creative problem solving as well. It is probably best not to give one group such ‘conflicting’ tasks, and if they are, the tasks need to be clearly separated in some way, perhaps by dealing with them in separate meetings.

Ideally the task should contain the right degree of *challenge* for the group. A task that is too difficult may lead to failure and damage morale. A task that is too easy will leave the group with little sense of challenge or accomplishment when the task is complete. In most cases, a group that is given a clear and unambiguous task can perform more quickly than one that is given an open-ended and ambiguous task. Clearly, not all tasks can be well-defined, however. Groups given ill-defined tasks will probably need more support and members who can tolerate greater stress. They will also need to be allowed more time to become an effective group.

Resources and support

For a group to function effectively, it will need adequate resources. The people establishing the group will need access to the necessary equipment, finance and support services to do the job. One of the quickest ways of reducing group morale and effectiveness is to deprive it of the resources it needs to function smoothly.

External recognition

The standing of a group and its members in the wider organisation will also affect group productivity and morale. If members feel that the work of their group or committee is accepted as being important to the organisation and contributing to its goals then they are more likely to be motivated. Equally, the group will need to be clear how its results will be reported to the rest of the organisation. Again, the morale of the group is likely to diminish if it feels it cannot communicate relevant findings from its work to the rest of the organisation.

Internal or intervening factors

Internal factors are the aspects of group work that can be controlled directly by the group itself and can be modified in the short term, taking account of the contextual factors to improve group performance or satisfaction.

Leadership

The way in which leadership is exercised needs to be appropriate to the circumstances faced by the group and to be acceptable to its members if it is to perform well.

To be effective a group needs to be able not only to tackle the task in hand but also to maintain social relations within the group itself. Effective groups must therefore carry out **task functions** and **maintenance functions**.

Task functions include ensuring that the group shares a common understanding of the task in hand, problem solving, initiating structures to enable the task to be attained, and controlling the activities of a group to achieve its goal. The specific task functions that are needed will vary according to the nature of the task.

Some common task functions are described in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Common task functions

Proposing/initiating	Proposing ideas, courses of action that are relevant to the task
Building	Developing other people's proposals
Diagnosing	Analysing what is wrong or what is the cause of a particular situation
Giving and seeking information	Offering and seeking information that is relevant to the task
Evaluating	Evaluating the merits of particular proposals and outcomes
Decision making	Contributing to decisions on a particular proposal or course of action

All of these functions will probably be involved in any task that involves problem solving. It is worth noting that groups tackling problems in a considered and systematic way are likely to be more effective than those attempting to 'muddle through'. Groups frequently jump too quickly from initial proposals to opinion-seeking to evaluation and decision making, without exploring the problem or systematically examining a range of possible solutions. Problem solving also involves dealing with conflict in groups so that the group's efforts remain constructive rather than destructive.

Maintenance functions help to maintain the morale and harmony of a group and create an atmosphere in which people feel they can work together productively. In part this is about trying to meet individuals' needs for inclusion, control, affection and respect. Some common maintenance functions are listed in Table 1.2

Table 1.2 Common maintenance functions

Gate-keeping	Opening – positively attempting to involve others in discussion Closing – attempting to control or cut off other
Encouraging	Being friendly, supportive and responsive to other people by verbal or non-verbal means
Conflict resolution	Being prepared to acknowledge and deal with conflict
Giving feedback	Giving positive feedback on people's contribution
Dealing with feelings	Recognising and acknowledging people's feeling
Looking after physical needs	Meeting people's physical needs in the group, for example, by providing adequate amenities, refreshments, etc

A common tendency among people and groups is to give inadequate attention to maintenance functions – to believe that the task is really the

only thing that matters. While the task is obviously important, a group is unlikely to be effective for long if it denies maintenance functions. People will probably find the group provides a poor environment in which to work, destructive conflicts may develop and morale will fall.

Interaction patterns

Another factor that the group itself can control is the pattern of interaction or communication between members. The most common patterns are shown in Figure 2

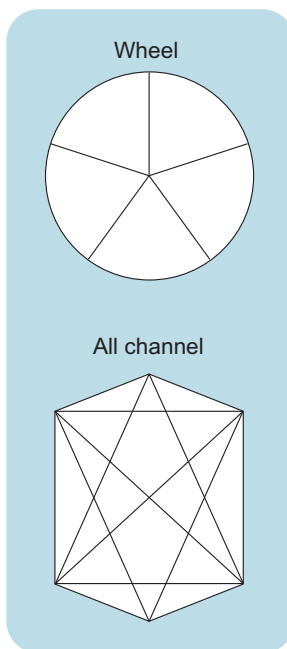


Figure 2 'Wheel' and 'all-channel' patterns of communication

In the 'wheel' pattern all communication in the group is channelled through one person, usually the manager or leader of the group. In the 'all-channel' pattern, anyone can communicate directly with anyone else in the group.

Experiments using these patterns have shown that:

- the wheel pattern is always the quickest to reach a solution or conclusion
- in dealing with complex open-ended problems, the all-channel pattern is the most likely to reach the best solution; with the wheel pattern, the abilities of the central person will determine the pattern's effectiveness
- the level of satisfaction for individuals is fairly high in the all-channel pattern and mixed in the wheel pattern, the central figure expressing greater satisfaction and those at the outlying positions feeling more isolated.

Chairs of meetings need to be aware of this last point.

Under pressure of time or competition the all-channel pattern is likely to restructure itself into a wheel, or disintegrate. In general, wheel patterns are good for speedy results where quality is not vital, but morale may be low for all but the leader. All-channel patterns are participative and produce good quality results, but they take time and do not stand up so well under pressure. It is a question of using the right pattern for the right task.

Motivation

Motivation is an important aspect of working in groups and there are certain aspects that need to be stressed here in relation to groups:

- 1 Motivation is more than satisfaction, which is one possible outcome of groups. Lack of satisfaction can lead to absenteeism and turnover of members. But a satisfied group is not necessarily a productive group.
- 2 Knowledge of expected results, together with a belief that what is expected is realistic, will help to motivate the individuals in a group. Information on how performance actually compares with expectations is also required. These factors are as vital to the motivation of groups as they are for individuals.
- 3 Motivation by involving people in decisions affecting the group will only work if the group and the task are important enough to the individual to justify acceptance of additional responsibility and any other costs.
- 4 Perhaps the most important aspect of motivation in groups is a mission or set of goals that is highly valued by the group's members. In the

absence of such a mission, group members are more likely to put their own individual goals and interests before those of the group. Group coherence and performance may also improve when the group perceives some external threat or competitor as a 'common enemy' of the group, though there is a danger of 'groupthink' (discussed later) in such a situation.

High performing teams

How to combine these different roles into effective and high performing teams both within and across organisational boundaries is an issue that concerns many in managerial roles. In the 1960s, Bruce Tuckman developed a theory of the stages of team development that he thought all teams went through (Tuckman, 1965).

He suggests that groups go through four stages: 'forming', 'storming', 'norming' and 'performing', which can be summarised as follows:

- 1 Forming – at this stage the group is not fully a group but rather a collection of individuals. It is characterised by general talk about the purpose, identity, composition, lifespan, leadership and working arrangements of the group. Individuals are usually keen to make an impression on the group and establish their own personal identities.
- 2 Storming – most groups go through a period of conflict after an initial superficial consensus. At this stage, the purpose, leadership and other roles, working patterns and behaviour of the group or of its members may all be challenged. People's individual goals, or 'personal agendas', may be revealed during this process and some interpersonal conflict is to be expected. This stage is particularly important in the formation of trust within the group – people are testing out each other and the group, and revealing more about themselves. If successfully handled, this stage leads to the formulation of more realistic goals and procedures.
- 3 Norming – this stage is characterised by the group establishing the norms and patterns of work under which it will operate, for example, how it should work, how decisions are taken and what degree of openness, trust and confidence are appropriate between members. There will probably be much tentative experimentation by people who are testing feelings and opinions within the group and establishing their level of commitment.
- 4 Performing – only when the previous three stages have been completed will the group be fully productive. Although some level of performance will have been achieved during earlier phases, output will have been diminished by the energy put into resolving the group processes and exploring individual objectives and roles. In many committees and groups that meet infrequently, the basic issues of objectives, procedures and appropriate leadership patterns are never fully resolved, and may continue to hinder the group, often leading to frustration and reduced effectiveness.

Tuckman later added a fifth stage, 'adjourning', which recognises that groups and teams often disband or re-form into other groupings once a task has been completed, and it is necessary to recognise the characteristics of

this stage as well (Tuckman and Jensen, 1977). People may be feeling uncertain about the future. They may be experiencing stress in the transition from one group setting to another, in parting from the group or in having nothing specific to move on to. Managers can help here by giving supportive feedback on past performance and by encouraging people to continue networking with former colleagues in the group. Social events to mark the end of the work of a group are valuable, too, not only as a way of marking the transition, but in interpersonal terms as well.

However, more recent research by Knight (2006) examines Tuckman's ideas and suggests that, much though his stages are used, they are not necessarily experienced by all teams. In particular, Knight found that very few teams followed the Tuckman model, although they did follow a variant of this. In particular, groups did not progress through the model in a linear way. Forming, norming and performing occurred alongside each other at 25 per cent of completing the task, norming at 40 per cent and performing at 45 per cent. Very little storming was observed. One area of work where effective team performance is often a life or death issue is in the military, so it is not surprising that much research in this area has been conducted for the armed forces. Knight's work was conducted in this setting, so it may be that these were highly disciplined teams. However, Tuckman himself observed little storming but explained this away by the artificial nature of the task in his own experiments.

Teams working virtually and across boundaries

A key facet of team-working nowadays is that teams are dispersed across both organisational and, often, national boundaries. Two types of teams that are increasingly being used are virtual teams and global teams. The formation of virtual teams allows organisations to draw talent quickly from different functions, locations and organisations (Duarte and Snyder, 2006). These approaches to team work have become possible through advances in information technology. Virtual teams can communicate from great distances or be part of a group that works in the same building (Duarte and Snyder, 2006). They rely on technology to make up for the lack of face-to-face meeting and use email, voicemail, video conferencing, internet and intranet technologies and various types of collaboration software to perform their work, although they might sometimes meet face to face (Daft, 2006).

Virtual teams present several unique challenges for managers. Daft (2006, p. 775) suggests the following critical issues:

- *Selecting the right team members.* The first step is creating a team of people who have the right mix of technical and interpersonal skills, task knowledge and personalities to work in a virtual environment.
- *Managing socialisation.* People need to get to know one another and understand the appropriate behaviours and attitudes.
- *Fostering trust.* An essential ingredient, as teams that exhibit high levels of trust tend to have clear roles and expectations of one another, get to know one another as individuals, and maintain positive action-orientated attitudes.

- *Effectively managing communications.* While frequent communication is essential, managers or team leaders need to understand when and how to use various forms of communication to best advantage.

Virtual teams are also sometimes global teams. Govindarajan and Gupta (2001, p. 63) define global teams as ‘a cross-border team of individuals of different nationalities, working in different cultures, businesses and functions, who come together to coordinate some aspect of the multinational operation on a global basis’. These types of teams also place challenges on managers to make them successful. Bringing people together from different nations means that they come with different values and beliefs, as well as the challenges of bridging gaps of time, distance and culture (Daft, 2006). Examples of challenges might include members speaking different languages, using different technologies and having different ideas about team work itself. Their success requires investment in resources and adequate time in preparation and orientation of the members at the beginning of the task.

Common problems in groups and teams

When a great deal of effort has gone into building a team, it can seem counter-productive to disband it and start over again with a new team for a new project. However, teams that have been together for a long time can develop problems that prevent them working together as effectively as they might. So, it is worth focusing on some of the common ways in which groups ‘go wrong’. For example, the group may be too large, its goal may be unrealistic, it may have the wrong people involved and it may not have developed successfully.

A common source of difficulties with groups arises when the same group is expected to perform two different functions simultaneously. For example, a management meeting that starts as a negotiation between departments is unlikely to proceed satisfactorily to a discussion of the long-term plans of the organisation. Thus, the functions of groups need to be clearly separated, perhaps by time, place, title or a change of style. For example, a committee might find it useful to separate the part of a meeting dealing with administrative matters from that part dealing with future plans, and to adopt a different style for each part. The committee could adopt a fairly brisk and formal style to deal with routine administration, have a break, and then choose a more relaxed and participative style to deal with future plans. It could take this separation even further and have occasional review days offsite to discuss plans in more detail.

However, there are several other problems that do not fit so readily into the categories discussed so far. Four will be discussed here:

- hidden agendas
- blind spots
- group anxiety
- ‘groupthink’.

Hidden agendas and blind spots

In attempting to understand group dynamics it is important to recognise that levels of ‘self-awareness’ between members of a group will differ. An individual will be aware of things that other members of the group are not aware of and vice versa. As we saw earlier, individuals bring their own objectives to groups. Things that an individual wants or expects from the group that the group does not know about are called **hidden agendas**

Common examples of hidden agendas include:

- someone using a meeting to impress another colleague
- someone resisting a proposal on spurious grounds because that person is not prepared to reveal the real reasons behind the resistance
- someone using a meeting to embarrass or ‘put down’ another member of the group for personal reasons.

The best way to handle hidden agendas is often to bring them into the open early on – at the storming stage of group development. For example, the group might have a round robin on ‘What are we personally hoping for from this project?’ or ‘What are our departments hoping to get out of this working party?’. Of course, there is no guarantee that people will be open about their motives. However, if you are prepared to be open about your agendas, particularly if you occupy a position of authority, others are more likely to be open about theirs – and then the group has far more of the information it needs to be effective. Resolving the differences may still be difficult, but at least everyone knows where everyone stands and the group is likely to waste less time reaching the performing stage.

The second type of imbalance in awareness – when other group members know things about an individual that the individual does not realise him or herself – is a **blind spot**. A typical example of a blind spot is a situation where the group is unwilling to tell someone that the real reason why her or his offer of help is not being accepted is because no one believes that she or he can do it.

One of the main reasons for blind spots is that the group members are afraid of hurting the feelings of another group member. It is never easy to tell people that you do not feel that they are competent, or that you do not trust them. However, while blind spots remain, the individual concerned is clearly disadvantaged. This individual can do nothing to challenge the assumptions of the rest of the group, or try to change his or her own behaviour. Again, the best remedy is usually to try sensitively to bring the situation out into the open. It may be better for a member of the group to tell the individual about the group’s feelings in private, to reduce the chances of public humiliation and to give the person a chance to collect his or her thoughts before having to deal with the whole group.

As the examples described here show, both hidden agendas and blind spots can damage the effectiveness of groups. Increasing a group’s level of openness and ‘self-awareness’ of these problems can increase trust and release energy.

Group anxiety

Group relationships are on the whole more stressful than individual relationships, and generally the larger the group, the greater the stress. People tend to feel exposed, on show, uncertain of where they fit in. This is particularly true in new groups and at large formal gatherings and meetings. There is less opportunity for immediate confirmation and feedback from other people and more space for fantasies to grow about what other people think or intend.

The anxiety this causes can be coped with creatively or destructively, both collectively by the group and by individuals. Collectively, the group may develop norms and structures that will alleviate anxiety and create a good working environment. Individually, people may develop communication skills and personal sensitivity that will reduce the element of fantasy in the group and promote personal contact. Alternatively, individuals may be left to cope in their own characteristic and idiosyncratic ways with whatever anxiety they feel. People may:

- talk too much through embarrassment
- intellectualise to get away from the anxious feelings
- chat to a neighbour to get some personal contact
- be so worried that they cannot listen and then ask irrelevant questions
- turn up late because they are worried about coming at all, or as a form of silent protest
- make bad jokes at inopportune moments
- attack and criticise others because they are afraid of being attacked themselves
- stray from the point because they are too anxious to concentrate
- smooth over all difficulties and avoid confrontation
- continually apologise for themselves.

More seriously, people may:

- withdraw, hide, try to become inconspicuous
- look for someone stronger to protect them or ally themselves with the person most likely to win, regardless of the ally's views
- look for someone to attack and begin hostilities against the nearest likely victim – this often leads to scapegoating (the situation where one person, often a 'weaker' member of the group or its leader, is unreasonably and unfairly blamed for a group's difficulties), where the group fantasises that, if this person is excluded, all its problems will disappear.

It is common for people to feel anxious about:

- belonging and fitting in
- their value to the group
- how criticism and conflict will be dealt with.

One of the very important maintenance functions of a group, discussed earlier, is to ensure that these sources of group anxiety are dealt with in a way that is felt to be constructive and mutually acceptable.

Groupthink

Groupthink is a term that was coined by Irving Janis, who was intrigued by how teams arrive at devastating decisions by ignoring evidence that might suggest that what they are planning to do or have done is ill-advised (Janis, 1972). By far some of the most famous cases include decisions to take military action when circumstances make a successful outcome highly unlikely, for example, the ‘Bay of Pigs’ attempted invasion of Cuba in 1961. More recent suggested examples include the 1986 *Challenger* space shuttle disaster (Esser and Lindoerfer, 1989, pp. 167–77) and the 2006 *Nimrod* disaster (Sengupta, 2009). In each case warnings were sounded about the dangers, but these were ignored. Janis suggests that under certain conditions commitment to the group overrides ability to assess situations realistically. These conditions are:

- 1 The group faces a situation where an important decision has to be made, under severe time pressure.
- 2 The group is already fairly cohesive.
- 3 The group has a tendency to isolate itself from outsiders.
- 4 The leader has a preferred solution, which the group actively pursues.

It is important for groups, especially ones that are close-knit, to realise that they are liable to groupthink, which can be recognised by the following symptoms:

- an exaggerated sense of the group’s importance and a feeling of invulnerability
- unanimity
- the rationalising away of less-preferred options
- appeals to morality
- stereotyping of opponents in negative terms
- pressure on members to conform
- self-censorship of doubts.

There are several possible defences against groupthink. First, try to ensure that important groups contain people with some diversity of opinions. Second, try to aim for a moderate, rather than a high, degree of consensus in the group. If there is a high degree of consensus, then invite one or two people to play the role of devil’s advocate, taking up contrary views for the sake of argument. Alternatively, new members with different ideas could be invited into the group – the disadvantage here being that the group would need to reform, which, of course, takes time

Both groupthink and scapegoating are often processes by which groups resist making changes to the group and how it works. Groups resist changes for many of the reasons that individuals do – they have their own vested

interests to protect and to admit that they are wrong may cause members pain and discomfort.

Working effectively in a team

When creating a team, managers often select on the basis of the skills needed, but it is also important to think about the roles and functions that people in the team need to perform. A number of psychologists have developed frameworks that help people to identify the roles they prefer to play in teams. Perhaps the best known, and one you may have come across, is Meredith Belbin's team roles (1981, 1993). He identifies nine roles:

- The 'coordinator', who establishes the goals, allocates roles and responsibilities, is assertive, conscientious and has drive.
- The 'plant', who advances new ideas and strategies with attention to major issues. This person is often imaginative and intelligent, but may resent criticism and be careless of detail.
- The 'implementer', who converts ideas and objectives into practical operational procedures and who is task-oriented, conscientious and affiliative.
- The 'monitor evaluator', who analyses rather than creates ideas. The monitor evaluator's main contribution is the ability to find weaknesses in what is going on, even though sometimes these could be issues that are remote to the team (but necessary to it).
- The 'shaper', who shapes the way in which team effort is applied, directs others attention to the team's priorities and objectives. The shaper imposes order on group discussions and the activities, often appearing aggressive at times.
- The 'team-worker', who is most concerned with harmony within the team and who is most supportive and understanding of other team members. The team-worker is likeable, popular, uncompetitive, which makes this person tend not to be noticed except when absent.
- The 'resource investigator', who is an extroverted, stable member who identifies ideas and resources in the external environment. The resource investigator's enthusiasm might not be maintained throughout the team's task, however.
- The 'completer finisher', who identifies areas that need more work and looks for possible omissions. The completer finisher can be anxious about detail and often has high standards and likes to push to complete the task on time.
- The 'specialist', who provides specialist knowledge and skills. The specialist is often single-minded and self-motivating.

Belbin's model provides a way of describing the team roles required for team work to be successful. He suggests that a team works best if there is:

- a match between an individual's responsibilities and his or her 'natural' team role

- diversity in members' mental abilities
- an ability to identify and adjust imbalances in the group
- a strong plant to produce ideas for the team
- a good coordinator to show patience and command, seek out ability and elicit trust
- a range of team roles available to the group.

Managers and practitioners have used his model widely, but it is not the only model of successful teams. Different team roles are important at different stages of a group's life. Although Belbin's roles do shed some light on preferences within a team, some people do not feel very comfortable with their categorisation, as some roles seem much more exciting than others, and there has been limited empirical support for using this model. Belbin's work has been criticised by Fincham and Rhodes (2005) who suggest that:

- the nature of assigning an individual to his or her team role is problematic
- the measures of team roles have poor reliability and validity, and thus roles are sometimes over-interpreted
- the role types are seen as being fixed, rigid attributes of individuals, and this can encourage labelling of individuals
- caution is required to avoid placing too much emphasis on team role specifics.

There are also issues about the extent to which Belbin's ideas travel across cultures.

References

- Belbin, R.M. (1981) *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*, London, Butterworth-Heinemann.
- Belbin, R.M. (1993) *Management Teams: Why They Succeed or Fail*, London, Heinemann.
- Daft, R.L. (2006) *The New Era of Management (int.ed)*, London, Thomson.
- Duarte, D.L. and Snyder, N.T. (2006) *Mastering Virtual Teams: Strategies, Tools, and Techniques that Succeed*, (3rd edn), San Francisco, CA, Jossey-Bass
- Esser, J.K. and Lindoerfer, J.S. (1989) 'Groupthink and the Space Shuttle Challenger accident: toward a quantitative case analysis', *Journal of Behavioural Decision Making*, vol. 2, no. 1 pp. 167–77
- Fincham, R. and Rhodes, P. (2005) *Principles of Organisational Behaviour*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Gibson, O. (2010) 'Red Knights confirm plans for Manchester United bid', *The Guardian*, 2 March [online]. Available at www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/mar/02/red-knights-manchester-united (Accessed 10 June 2010).

- Govindarajan, V. and Gupta, A. (2001) 'Building an effective global business team', *MIT Sloan Management Review*, vol. 42, no. 4, pp. 63–71.
- Handy, C.B. (1976/1999) *Understanding Organizations*, (4th edn), Harmondsworth, Penguin Books.
- Janis, I.L. (1972) *Victims of Groupthink*, Boston, MA, Houghton Mifflin
- Kakabadse, A., Ludlow, R. and Vinnicombe, S. (1988) *Working in Organisations*, Harmondsworth, Penguin.
- Knight, P.J. (2006) *Small, Short Duration Technical Team Dynamics*, Defense Acquisition University Press.
- Sengupta, K. (2009) "“Lamentable” failures led to Nimrod crash that killed 14: inquiry names 10 people to blame for worst military disaster since Falklands War", *The Independent*, 29 October [online], www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/lamentable-failures-led-to-nimrod-crash-that-killed-14-1811133.html (accessed 15 June 2010).
- Schein, E. (1980) *Organisational Psychology*, (3rd edn), London, Prentice-Hall.
- Tuckman, B.W. (1965) 'Development sequence in small groups', *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. 63, pp. 384–99
- Tuckman, B.W. and Jensen, M.A.C. (1977) 'Stages of small group development revisited', *Group and Organizational Studies*, vol. 2, pp. 419-427