

Team Dynamics - A Manual for Team Building and Remediations

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Guide to Symptoms, Sources and Remediation

SYMPTOM: Project is ambiguous, or little progress is made.

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. If the project is sponsored, students may not have contacted liaison.
2. Students and faculty have not negotiated a schedule of activities to which they adhere.
3. Students are not using the rhetorical move exercise to develop a project focus.
4. Students have not conducted a thorough literature review and thus do not know what questions to ask. Students fail to build effectively on previous findings.
5. The team is not functioning well as a group (see the other symptoms described here as well).

Possible Solutions:

1. Students should contact the liaison at the sponsoring agency, after which they should provide the advisor with a written summary of the contact and a two to three sentence written statement of the project goal as they understand it as a result of the discussion with the liaison. The goal statement should be followed by a list of specific objectives. This exercise encourages team discussion, and may need to be repeated several times. Each effort should focus the project goal further.
2. Members may be required to complete regular (for instance, weekly) progress reports, which may be factored into the final grade. Some advisors use "contracts" with students that are used to clarify tasks and deadlines.
3. Students should provide the advisor with a completed literature review. Collaboration on the literature review will encourage group discussion of the goals of the project.
4. Students should develop a schedule of when they will meet, working steadily rather than trying to cram group activities into the last few hours before a meeting with the faculty advisor. This is particularly important when the group is trying to define the problem and project goal, which requires creativity and careful thought.

SYMPTOM: Members make decisions independently, or one or more work alone.

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. Students have not negotiated early stages of team development, including the growth of basic trust.

2. Although heterogeneous groupings are more effective than homogeneous groups and should be mixed if possible by sex, major, and group communication style, it is unlikely that everyone in the group will know what the potential impact of such mixing might be. Moreover, even good friends have different styles of working and are unaware of the impact of those differences.

Possible Solutions

1. The process of team functioning must be clear; stages of team growth should be discussed with team members before work begins.
2. Teams need to assess their differences in working styles, using one of the diagnostic tools available to help with the diagnosis.
3. Careful attention to team building will help. Before work on the project begins, time must be spent on discussing team goals, roles, and tasks. Group members should explicitly discuss their expectations and personal individual and group responsibilities and accountability. The advisor's role also should be made clear, including expectations. Some faculty find it helpful to provide students with their expectations in writing; an example is provided in the Appendix. Positive interdependence among members of the team is the goal.

SYMPTOM: The team is communicating ineffectively.

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. Communication styles vary among members. It's easy (but often fatal to cooperation) to assume understanding on the part of the others.
2. Conflict exists but is not discussed. Sometimes students avoid exposing conflict because they do not want to be seen as tattling. They believe they should be able to resolve conflict without assistance, or they don't believe exposing conflict "is worth it."
3. One person has been split off from the other two and has become isolated from decisions.
4. One person monopolizes group sessions and is a poor listener.
5. One member is passive in group sessions but retaliates against teammates who are more verbal by not producing according to agreement.
6. Team members do not understand the tools of consensus building.
7. Team is not meeting regularly.
8. Work on the project is not shared evenly enough by all participants, due to different levels of self discipline, and/or of time, effort, or interest in the project. Resentment among the team members builds over time, and is not brought out as grading time approaches.

Possible Solutions

1. Team should schedule in daily meetings, even if they last only a few minutes to allow partners to "check in" with each other.

2. The project advisor may need to provide some help with models of communication styles and conflict resolution.
3. Conflict management skills should be discussed before project work begins. Students often attribute failure of communication to others.
4. The value of interdependence and balanced participation should be discussed. Arrangements are made to monitor levels of participation honestly, with the understanding that different levels will be rewarded differently in grades.
5. All problems should be considered group problems and confronted directly with all team members present.
6. The team can negotiate a signal for the person who tends to monopolize discussions. Or the advisor can request that the person who does not listen can be asked to reflect back to partners what they said.
7. The team can learn to invite the passive member's comments explicitly. If the actions of a verbally passive partner appear to be hostile or not according to agreement, the team can be taught to confront such behavior in meetings with the faculty advisor.
8. Consensus building should be taught, and team members should have an explicit way of acknowledging when consensus has been reached.
9. While scheduling can be a problem, the solution often requires an examination of more than tight or conflicting schedules. The team will often discover during such an examination that unexpressed conflict exists. When scheduling is truly a problem, weekly advance planning will usually eliminate the problem.

SYMPTOM: The team does not respond to advice from the faculty.

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. There is poor team communication among team members, or lack of understanding of goals and objectives and group dynamics.
2. One person is controlling the level of motivation of the group, or the whole group is not committed to the project.
3. The team is angry at the advisor but is not articulating its distress.
4. The team does not understand how to use new information and fails to articulate that as a problem.
5. The students have not mastered the art of information retrieval.
6. The students think that because they are closer to the problem than the faculty members, that the perspective and experience of the faculty advisor has little to offer.

Possible Solutions

1. See earlier suggestions on group dynamics and goal setting in section on **(Symptom: Ambiguous Problem)**. Contracts and weekly project reports may help productivity or give clues to trouble spots.

2. Advisor can invite discussion about the advising process to identify sources of tension between advisor and team. Students should be encouraged to ask for clarification and further explanation if they don't understand a point. They should also understand that disagreeing and not following faculty advice is acceptable as long as they can support that decision with another alternative or argument.
3. Advisor can confront team regarding suspected problems such as possible intimidation by one partner of the others.
4. Advisor can explore with students their methods of finding new information and guide them to new strategies and tools.
5. Students should ask questions if something is unclear during a meeting or they have difficulty implementing the idea.
6. Advisor can communicate comments in writing and if team responds to these written comments, can discuss why written communication was more effective than verbal communication.

SYMPTOM: Uneven team performance

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. The team is not considering the stages of group development, and the need to assign itself tasks so they can move together from stage to stage.
2. Project goes into "overtime" without the team members admitting it is because they cannot work things out well.
3. When fewer than the whole team approaches the advisor to complain about a partner, there may be several reasons: the motivation of one or more partner may be slacking off or has not developed, one is overly compulsive and does not have team skills, or two are closing out the third for a variety of reasons.
4. When no one from the team seeks out help between scheduled meetings with faculty, it may mean that the team is having trouble getting started or does not take the work seriously.
5. One partner may be intimidating the others; the result may be that the group level of productivity is sometimes lower than an individual partner may wish.
6. Sometimes students do not understand criticism but do not ask for clarification. One member of the group may not understand but it is rare that the whole group is not listening or understanding; however the group may not be communicating in between meetings with faculty. Students, also, can find it difficult to accept criticism, particularly from their peers.

Possible Solutions

1. Sometimes the use of weekly project activity reports will reveal to team members how uneven their performance as a team is, which can stimulate discussions about remediation.
2. The advisor should explore with the team the potential reasons for uneven performance. If students are unable to identify reasons, advisors may want to be explicit about what they view. Often the group will need more than one session in

- which the discussion takes place, because they will need time to incorporate what may feel like a threat at first.
3. A letter sent by faculty to the team members at the end of each term can serve to alert the team to the advisor's assessment of both accomplishments and weaknesses and can emphasize problem areas, such as deadlines missed. In addition, these letters can help both faculty and students to close the gap between expectations and the reality of the grade earned by the team for the project.
 4. When intimidation by one or more team members is a problem but is subtle, and group members are not aware of the dynamic until the advisor raises it as an issue, there may be a lag between recognition and attempts to rectify the situation. Individual team members may wish to approach the faculty to discuss this problem further, but, ideally, group members will realign control of the group process once they understand the dynamic. If that does not happen rather quickly, the advisor may want to take further measures.
 5. It helps sometimes to have the students refocus on the project by rereading their project proposal or goal statement and list of specific objectives.
 6. During weekly meetings, some advisors ask teams to develop a written statement of the goals and activities to be performed in the following week. The statement should contain specific assignments of individuals and should contain sufficient detail to measure progress to goals.
 7. Set aside some time at the weekly meeting to talk openly and honestly about how the process of working together is going.
 8. As a last resort, advisors may wish to help the team restructure tasks so that motivated students are not penalized by the work of an unmotivated partner or partners. Separate grades are sometimes used. (See Undergraduate Catalog under PROJECTS, "Group Qualifying Project Efforts.") Some advisors ask for confidential reports about the team process and achievement in the form of a letter to the advisor at the end of the project. Also, advisors should ask that students develop an authorship page at the beginning of a project report that lists individual contributions.
 9. Students and faculty can discuss giving and receiving constructive criticism.

SYMPTOM: The sections of the report clearly reflect the different writing skills of individual students and a lack of integration of sections

Possible Underlying Problems:

1. Team members do not know how to edit another's work.
2. Team members are not taking the time to edit each other's work.
3. The team is not allowing enough time for group editing.
4. The team is having problems that are interfering in their working together.
5. The team does not realize that in the professional world, everything goes through multiple drafts, with all team members contributing. In the real world, no professional project is finished when the first draft is finished.

Possible Solutions

1. Since the final report is not to appear as if it had several different authors and was spliced together, the advisor and team should discuss procedures for writing the report. The expectations should be clear in advance. All authors are to follow a common format, use data consistently, and read and comment on each other's drafts before they are submitted.
2. Some advisors ask students to initial their own sections and, likewise, to signify that they have read their partners' sections.
3. The writing resource center can be used by individual writers to bring the quality of their work to such a level that review by partners will not create an undue burden. Some advisors suggest the use of the campus writing center; others may require it.
4. The project group should establish its own interim draft deadlines consistent with the ultimate final-draft deadlines established by the advisor. Setting their own deadlines should result in an increased commitment within the project group.
5. Many advisors require each draft to be accompanied by the previous draft or drafts. This procedure tends to benefit both students and faculty because it allows both to monitor progress toward goals more easily. Also, it prevents miscommunication about expectations.
6. Some advisors will suggest that students who are having great difficulty writing read their sections aloud, first to themselves and then to their partners when the drafted section is being made ready for the advisor to read. Many conceptual and grammatical mistakes can be caught early through the use of this tool.
7. Some advisors refer to specific sections in a standard-grammar and style book when they correct drafts. This method of correction requires that students also use the same book, but it also means that students become very aware of their consistent errors, for which they have access to well described methods of remediation. In addition to the use of grammar and style books some advisors have developed their own help documents for writing, which they distribute to teams, of common errors students often make.