AFTER STUDYING THE MATERIAL IN THIS CHAPTER . . .

You should understand:
1. The advantages of solving problems in groups and when groups are not effective.
2. The characteristics of several common discussion formats.
3. The advantages and drawbacks of computer-mediated groups.
4. The steps in the rational problem-solving method.
5. The developmental stages in a problem-solving group.
6. The factors that contribute to group cohesiveness.
7. The various approaches to studying leadership.
8. The factors that contribute to better informed members, balanced participation, and freedom from excessive conformity.

You should be able to:
1. Use the problem-solving steps outlined in this chapter in solving a group task.
2. Decide when to hold face-to-face group meetings, and know when a computer-mediated format would be more efficient and effective.
3. Suggest ways to build the cohesiveness and participation in a group.
4. Analyze the sources of leadership and power in a group.
5. Suggest the most effective leadership approach for a specific task.
6. Identify the obstacles to effective functioning of a specific group and suggest more-effective ways of communicating.
Solving Problems in Groups

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

In this chapter we will discuss solving problems in groups, including:

- When to use (and not use) groups for solving problems
- What formats are best for different problem-solving situations
- The pros and cons of computer-mediated groups

While groups can solve problems in many different ways, the most successful groups:

- Tend to follow a structured, six-step approach
- Understand the stages groups experience while working on a problem
- Maintain positive relationships and an optimal level of cohesiveness

You will see that leadership and team member influence comes in many forms:

- Group members can use six types of power
- The effectiveness of leaders can be defined in different ways
- There are many different leadership styles, which are effective in different circumstances

Finally, we'll look at the dangers to effective problem solving in groups.
Chapter 8 described various types of groups—learning, growth, social, and problem-solving groups. Of all these, problem-solving groups have been studied most intensively by social scientists. After we understand the nature of problem solving, the reason becomes clear. Solving problems, as we define it here, doesn’t refer only to situations where something is wrong. Perhaps meeting challenges and performing tasks are better terms. After you recognize this fact, you can see that problem solving occupies a major part of working life. The figures from just one company illustrate the scope of group problem solving: At 3M Corporation, managers spend a total of 4.4 million hours per year in meetings, at a cost to the company of $78.8 million in salaries.\(^1\) Away from work, groups also meet to solve problems: Nonprofit organizations plan fund-raisers, athletic teams work to improve their collective performance, neighbors meet to improve the quality of life where they live, educators and parents work together to improve schools—the list is almost endless.

This chapter will focus on both the task and the relational aspects of problem-solving groups. In addition, it will explore the nature of leadership, defining that important term and suggesting how groups can be led most effectively. Finally, it will list several common problems task-oriented groups can encounter and describe how to overcome them.

**Problem Solving in Groups: When and Why**

To many people, groups are to communication what Muzak is to music or Twinkies are to food—a joke. The snide remark, “A camel is a horse designed by a committee,” reflects this attitude, as does this ditty:

> Search all your parks in all your cities . . .
> You’ll find no statues to committees!\(^2\)

This unflattering reputation is at least partly justified. Most of us would wind up with a handsome sum if we had a dollar for every hour wasted in groups. On the other hand, it’s unfair to view all groups as bad, especially when this accusation implies that other types of communication are by nature superior. After all, we also have wasted time listening to boring lectures, reading worthless books, and making trivial conversation.

So what’s the truth? Is group problem solving a waste of effort, or is it the best way to manage a task? As with most matters, the truth falls somewhere between these two extremes. Groups do have their shortcomings, which we will discuss in a few pages. But extensive research has shown that when these shortcomings can be avoided, groups are clearly the most effective way to handle many tasks.

**Advantages of Group Problem Solving**

Research over fifty years that has compared problem solving by groups to that by individuals shows that, in most cases, groups can produce more solutions to a problem than individuals working alone—and that the solutions will be of higher quality.\(^3\) Groups have proved superior at a wide range of tasks—everything from assembling jigsaw puzzles to solving complex reasoning problems. There are several reasons why groups are effective.\(^4\)
RESOURCES

For many tasks, groups possess a greater collection of resources than do most individuals. Sometimes the resources are physical. For example, three or four people can put up a tent or dig a ditch better than a lone person. But on other problems the pooled resources lead to qualitatively better solutions. Think, for instance, about times when you have studied with other students for a test, and you will remember how much better the group was at preparing for all the questions that might be asked and at developing answers to them. (This, of course, assumes that the study group members cared enough about the exam to have studied for it before the group meeting.) Groups not only have more resources than individuals, but also through interaction among the members they are better able to mobilize them. Talking about an upcoming test with others can jog your memory about items you might not have thought of if you had been working alone.

ACCURACY

Another benefit of group work is the increased likelihood of catching errors. At one time or another, we all make stupid mistakes, like the man who built a boat in his basement and then wasn’t able to get it out the door. Working in a group increases the chance that foolish errors like this won’t slip by. Some-
times, of course, errors aren’t so obvious, which makes groups even more valuable as an error-checking mechanism. Another side to the error-detecting story is the risk that group members will support each other in a bad idea. We’ll discuss this problem later in this chapter when we focus on conformity.

**COMMITMENT** Besides coming up with superior solutions, groups also generate a higher commitment to carrying them out. Members are most likely to accept solutions they have helped create, and they will work harder to carry out those solutions. This fact has led to the principle of *participative decision making*, in which the people who will live with a plan help make it. This is an especially important principle for those in authority, such as supervisors, teachers, and parents. As professors, we have seen the difference between the sullen compliance of students who have been forced to accept a policy with which they disagree and the much more willing cooperation of students who have helped develop it. Though the benefits of participative decision making are great, we need to insert a qualification here: There are times when an autocratic approach of imposing a decision without discussion is most effective. We will discuss this question of when to be democratic and when to be directive in the section on leadership later in this chapter.

**When to Use Groups for Problem Solving**

Despite their advantages, groups aren’t always the best way to solve a problem. Many jobs can be tackled more quickly and easily—even more efficiently—by one or more people working independently. Answering the following questions will help you decide when to solve a problem using a group and when to tackle it alone.5

**IS THE JOB BEYOND THE CAPACITY OF ONE PERSON?** Some jobs are simply too big for one person to manage. They may call for more information than a single person possesses or can gather. For example, a group of friends planning a large New Year’s party will probably have a better event if they pool their ideas than
if one person tries to think of everything. Some jobs also require more time and energy than one person can spare. Putting on the New Year’s party could involve a variety of tasks: inviting the guests, hiring a band, finding a place large enough to hold the party, buying food and drinks, and so on. It’s both unrealistic and unfair to expect one or two people to do all this work.

**ARE INDIVIDUALS’ TASKS INTERDEPENDENT?**  Remember that a group is more than a collection of individuals working side by side. The best tasks for groups are ones where the individuals can help one another in some way. Think of a group of disgruntled renters considering how to protest unfair landlords. In order to get anywhere, they realize that they have to assign areas of responsibility to each member: researching the law, getting new members, publicizing their complaints, and so on. It’s easy to see that these jobs are all interdependent: Getting new members, for example, will require publicity; and publicizing complaints will involve showing how the renters’ legal rights are being violated.

One manager let employees know how valuable they are with the following memo:

**YOU ARE A KEY PERSON**

Xvxn though my typxwrxtxr is an old modxl, it works vxry vxll—xxcxpt for onx kxy. You would think that with all thx othxr kxys functioning propxrly, onx kxy not working would hardly bx noticxd; but just onx kxy out of whack sxxts to ruin thx wholx xffort.

You may say to yoursxlf—Wxll I’m only onx pxrson. No onx will noticx if I don’t do my bxst. But it doxs makx a diffxrnxn cx bxcaux to bx xffxctivx an organization nxxds activx participation by xvxry onx to thx bxst of his or hxr ability.

So thx nxxt timx you think you arx not important, rxmxmbxr my old typxwrxtr. You arx a kxy pxrson.

Even when everyone is working on the same job, there can be interdependence if different members fulfill the various functional roles described in Chapter 8. Some people might be better at task-related roles like information giving, diagnosing, and summarizing. Others might contribute by filling social roles such as harmonizing, supporting, or relieving tension. People working independently simply don’t have the breadth of resources to fill all these functions.

**IS THERE MORE THAN ONE DECISION OR SOLUTION?**  Groups are best suited to tackling problems that have no single, cut-and-dried answer: What’s the best way to boost membership in a campus organization? How can funds be raised for a charity? What topic should the group choose for a class project? Gaining the perspectives of every member boosts the odds of finding high-quality answers to questions like these.

By contrast, a problem with only one solution won’t take full advantage of a group’s talents. For example, phoning merchants to get price quotes and looking up a series of books in the library don’t require much creative thinking. Jobs like these can be handled by one or two people working alone. Of course, it may take a group meeting to decide how to divide the work to get the job done most efficiently.
IS THERE POTENTIAL FOR DISAGREEMENT? Tackling a problem as a group is essential if you need the support of everyone involved. Consider a group of friends planning a vacation trip. Letting one or two people choose the destination, schedule, and budget would be asking for trouble, because their decisions would almost certainly disappoint at least some of the people who weren’t consulted. It would be far smarter to involve everyone in the most important decisions, even if doing so took more time. After the key decisions were settled, it might be fine to delegate relatively minor issues to one or two people.

GROUP PROBLEM-SOLVING FORMATS

Groups meet to solve problems in a variety of settings and for a wide range of reasons. The formats they use are also varied. Some groups meet before an audience to address a problem. The onlookers may be involved in, and affected by, the topic under discussion, like the citizens who attend a typical city council meeting or voters who attend a candidates’ debate. In other cases, the audience members are simply interested spectators, as occurs in televised discussions such as Meet the Press and Face the Nation.

Types of Problem-Solving Groups

This list of problem-solving formats and approaches is not exhaustive, but it provides a sense of how a group’s structure can shape its ability to come up with high-quality solutions.

1. Buzz groups When the number of members is too large for effective discussion, buzz groups can be used to maximize effective participation. In this approach, subgroups (usually consisting of five to seven members) simultaneously address an issue and then report back to the group at large. The best ideas of each buzz group are then assembled to form a high-quality decision.

2. Problem census This approach is useful when groups want to identify important issues or problems. Problem census works especially well when some members are more vocal than others, because it equalizes participation. Members use a separate card to list each of their ideas. The leader collects all cards and reads them to the group one by one, posting each on a board visible to everyone. Because the name of the person who contributed each item isn’t listed, issues are separated from personalities. As similar items are read, the leader posts and arranges them in clusters. After all items are read and posted, the leader and members consolidate similar items into a number of ideas that the group needs to address.

3. Focus group Focus groups are used as a market research tool to enable sponsoring organizations to learn how potential users or the public at large regards a new product or idea. Unlike other groups discussed here, focus groups don’t include decision makers or other members who claim any expertise on a subject. Instead, their comments are used by decision makers to figure out how people in the wider world might react to ideas.

4. Parliamentary procedure Problem-solving meetings can follow a variety of formats. A session that uses parliamentary procedure observes specific rules about how topics may be discussed and decisions made. The standard ref-
The reference book for parliamentary procedure is the revised edition of Robert’s Rules of Order. Although the parliamentary rules may seem stilted and cumbersome, when well used, they do keep a discussion on track and protect the rights of the minority against domination by the majority.

5. **Panel discussion** Another common problem-solving format is the panel discussion, in which the participants talk over the topic informally, much as they would in an ordinary conversation. A leader (called a “moderator” in public discussions) may help the discussion along by encouraging the comments of some members, cutting off overly talkative ones, and seeking consensus when the time comes for making a decision.

6. **Symposium** In a symposium the participants divide the topic in a manner that allows each member to deliver in-depth information without interruption. Although this format lends itself to good explanations of each person’s decision, the one-person-at-a-time nature of a symposium won’t lead to a group decision. The contributions of the members must be followed by the give-and-take of an open discussion.

7. **Forum** A forum allows nonmembers to add their opinions to the group’s deliberations before the group makes a decision. This approach is commonly used by public agencies to encourage the participation of citizens in the decisions that affect them.

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**Table 9-1 Some Communication Factors Associated with Group Productivity**

| Factor                                                                 | Description
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Group contains the smallest number of members necessary to accomplish its goals.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Members care about and agree with the group’s goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members are clear about and accept their roles, which match the abilities of each member.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group norms encourage high performance, quality, success, and innovation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group members have sufficient time together to develop a mature working unit and accomplish its goals.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group is highly cohesive and cooperative.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group spends time defining and discussing problems it must solve and decisions it must make.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periods of conflict are frequent but brief, and the group has effective strategies for dealing with conflict.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group has an open communication structure in which all members may participate.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The group gets, gives, and uses feedback about its effectiveness.</td>
<td></td>
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Computer-Mediated Groups

Face-to-face meetings can be difficult. Just scheduling a session can be maddening: Almost every date or time that one person suggests doesn’t work for someone else. If the participants come from different locations, the time and cost of a meeting can be significant. Challenges don’t end after a meeting time is finally arranged. Some members may be late. Others have to leave early. And during the meeting distractions are common: Members are sidetracked by off-the-topic digressions and other distractions. One or more people dominate the conversation, whereas others rarely speak.

Given the drawbacks of meeting in person, the idea of using technology to create other ways of working together has strong appeal. One approach is teleconferencing: a multiway phone call in which members from several locations can collaborate. Other approaches involve computer conferencing, in which members exchange messages over digital networks. In a synchronous “chat room” computer conference members communicate in real time, as if they were talking over the phone or meeting in person. Asynchronous discussions resemble e-mail: Group members don’t have to be online on at the same time. They can log on to the network at their convenience, check messages others have sent, and contribute their own ideas for other team members to read later.

In the 1990s, communication researchers began to sort out the advantages and disadvantages of computer-mediated meetings as compared to face-to-face interaction. Studies suggest that computer conferencing does have several advantages. Most obviously, it is much easier to schedule and “meet” online, because members don’t need to travel any farther than their desktop PCs. Asynchronous meetings are especially convenient, because group members can log on at their convenience, independent of other participants. Furthermore, computer-mediated sessions encourage more balanced participation: Members who might have kept quiet in face-to-face sessions are more comfortable “speaking out” online. Also, online meetings generate a permanent record of the proceedings, which can be convenient.

Despite their advantages, computer-mediated groups aren’t a panacea. The lack of nonverbal cues makes it difficult to convey and understand members’ emotions and attitudes. Mediated meetings may be more convenient, but groups working at a distance take more time to reach decisions than those who meet face to face. Because typing takes more time and effort than speaking, messages conveyed via computer can lack the detail of spoken ones. In some cases, members may not even bother to type out a message online that they would have shared in person. Finally, the string of separate messages that is generated in a computerized medium can be hard to track, sort out, and synthesize in a meaningful way.

Research comparing the quality of decisions made by face-to-face and online groups is mixed. Some studies have found no significant differences. Others have found that computer-mediated groups generate more ideas than people meeting in person, although they take longer to reach agreement on which are best. The growing body of research suggests that certain types of mediated communication work better than others. For example, asynchronous groups seem to make better decisions than those functioning in a “chat” mode. Groups who have special decision-support software perform better than ones operating without this advantage. Having a moderator also improves the effectiveness of online groups.
What use does this information have for groups who want to decide how to meet? Perhaps the most valuable lesson is that online meetings should not replace face-to-face ones, but they can be a supplement to in-person sessions. Combining the two forms of interaction can help groups operate both efficiently and effectively.

APPROACHES AND STAGES IN PROBLEM SOLVING

Groups may have the potential to solve problems effectively, but they don’t always live up to this potential. What makes some groups succeed and others fail? Researchers spent much of the twentieth century asking this question. Two useful answers emerged from their work.

A Structured Problem-Solving Approach

Although we often pride ourselves on facing problems rationally, social scientists have discovered that much of the time logic and reason play little part in the way we make decisions. The tendency to use nonrational approaches is unfortunate, because research shows that, to a great degree, a group’s effectiveness is determined by whether or not it approaches a problem rationally and systematically. Just as a poor blueprint or a shaky foundation can weaken a house, groups can fail by skipping one or more of the necessary steps in solving a problem.

As early as 1910, John Dewey introduced his famous “reflective thinking” method as a systematic method for solving problems. Since then, other experts have suggested modifications of Dewey’s approach. Some emphasize answering key questions, whereas others seek “ideal solutions” that meet the needs of all members. Research comparing various methods has clearly shown
that, although no single approach is best for all situations, a structured procedure produces better results than “no pattern” discussions.11

The following problem-solving model contains the elements common to most structured approaches developed in the last eighty years:

1. Identify the problem
   a. What are the group’s goals?
   b. What are individual members’ goals?
2. Analyze the problem
   a. Word the problem as a probative question
   b. Gather relevant information
   c. Identify impelling and restraining forces
3. Develop creative solutions through brainstorming or the nominal group technique
   a. Avoid criticism at this stage
   b. Encourage “freewheeling” ideas
   c. Develop a large number of ideas
   d. Combine two or more individual ideas
4. Evaluate the solutions by asking which solution:
   a. Will best produce the desired changes
   b. Is most achievable
   c. Contains the fewest serious disadvantages
5. Implement the plan
   a. Identify specific tasks
   b. Determine necessary resources
   c. Define individual responsibilities
   d. Provide for emergencies
6. Follow up on the solution
   a. Meet to evaluate progress
   b. Revise approach as necessary

**IDENTIFY THE PROBLEM** Sometimes a group’s problem is easy to identify. The crew of a sinking ship, for example, doesn’t need to conduct a discussion to understand that its goal is to avoid drowning or being eaten by a large fish.

There are many times, however, when the problems facing a group aren’t so clear. As an example, think of an athletic team stuck deep in last place well into the season. At first the problem seems obvious: an inability to win any games. But a closer look at the situation might show that there are unmet goals—and thus other problems. For instance, individual members may have goals that aren’t tied directly to winning: making friends, receiving acknowledgment as good ath-
letes, not to mention the simple goal of having fun—of playing in the recreational sense of the word. You can probably see that if the coach or team members took a simplistic view of the situation, looking only at the team’s win-lose record, analyzing player errors, training methods, and so on, some important problems would probably go overlooked. In this situation, the team’s performance could probably be best improved by working on the basic problems—the frustration of the players about having their personal needs unmet. What’s the moral here? That the way to start understanding a group’s problem is to identify the concerns of each member.

What about groups who don’t have problems? Several friends planning a surprise birthday party and a family deciding where to go for its vacation don’t seem to be in the dire straits of a losing athletic team: They simply want to have fun. In cases like these, it may be helpful to substitute the word challenge for the more gloomy word problem. However we express it, the same principle applies to all task-oriented groups: The best place to start work is to identify what each member seeks as a result of belonging to the group.

ANALYZE THE PROBLEM After you have identified the general nature of the problem facing the group, you are ready to look at the problem in more detail. There are several steps you can follow to accomplish this important job.

Word the Problem as a Probative Question If you have ever seen a formal debate, you know that the issue under discussion is worded as a proposition: “The United States should reduce its foreign aid expenditures,” for example. Many problem-solving groups define their task in much the same way. “We ought to spend our vacation in the mountains,” suggests one family member. The problem with phrasing problems as propositions is that such wording invites people to take sides. Though this approach is fine for formal debates (which are contests rather like football or card games), premature side taking creates unnecessary conflict in most problem-solving groups.

A far better approach is to state the problem as a question. Note that this should be a probative question—an open one that encourages exploratory thinking. Asking, “Should we vacation in the mountains or at the beach?” still forces members to choose sides. A far better approach involves asking a question to help define the general goals that came out during the problem-identification stage: “What do we want our vacation to accomplish?” (that is, “relaxation,” “adventure,” “low cost,” and so on).

Notice that this question is truly exploratory. It encourages the family members to work cooperatively, not forcing them to make a choice and then defend it. This absence of an either-or situation boosts the odds that members will listen openly to one another rather than listening selectively in defense of their own positions. There is even a chance that the cooperative, exploratory climate that comes from wording the question probatively will help the family arrive at consensus about where to vacation, eliminating the need to discuss the matter any further.

Gather Relevant Information Groups often need to know important facts before they can make decisions or even understand the problem. We remember one group of students who determined to do well on a class presentation. One of their goals, then, was “to get an A grade.” They knew that, to do so, they would have to
present a topic that interested both the instructor and the students in the audience. Their first job, then, was to do a bit of background research to find out what subjects would be well received. They interviewed the instructor, asking what topics had been successes and failures in previous semesters. They tested some possible subjects on a few classmates and noted their reactions. From this research they were able to modify their original probative question—“How can we choose and develop a topic that will earn us an A grade?”—into a more specific one—“How can we choose and develop a topic that contains humor, action, and lots of information (to demonstrate our research skills to the instructor) and that contains practical information that will improve either the audience’s social life, academic standing, or financial condition?”

Identify Impelling and Restraining Forces After members understand what they are seeking, the next step is to see what forces stand between the group and its goals. One useful tool for this approach is the force field analysis—a list of the forces that help and hinder the group.12 By returning to our earlier example of the troubled team, we can see how the force field operates. Suppose the team defined its problem-question as “How can we (1) have more fun and (2) grow closer as friends?”

One restraining force in Area (1) was clearly the team’s losing record. But, more interestingly, discussion revealed that another damper on enjoyment came from the coach’s obsession with winning and his infectiously gloomy behavior when the team failed. The main restraining force in Area (2) proved to be the lack of socializing among team members in nongame situations. The helping forces in Area 1 included the sense of humor possessed by several members and the confession by most players that winning wasn’t nearly as important to them as everyone had suspected. The helping force in Area 2 was the desire of all team members to become better friends. In addition, the fact that members shared many interests was an important plus.

It’s important to realize that most problems have many impelling and restraining forces, all of which need to be identified during this stage. This may call for another round of research. After the force field is laid out, the group is ready to move on to the next step—namely, deciding how to strengthen the impelling forces and weaken the restraining ones.

DEVELOP CREATIVE SOLUTIONS After the group has set up a list of criteria for success, the next job is to develop a number of ways to reach its goal. Considering more than one solution is important, because the first solution may not be the best one. During this development stage, creativity is essential.13 The biggest danger is the tendency of members to defend their own idea and criticize others. This kind of behavior leads to two problems. First, evaluative criticism almost guarantees a defensive reaction from members whose ideas have been attacked. Second, evaluative criticism stifles creativity. People who have just heard an idea rebuked—however politely—will find it hard even to think of more alternatives, let alone share them openly and risk possible criticism. The following strategies can keep groups creative and maintain a positive climate.
Brainstorming is probably the best-known strategy for encouraging creativity and avoiding the dangers just described. There are four important rules connected with this strategy:

1. **Criticism Is Forbidden.** As we have already said, nothing will stop the flow of ideas more quickly than critical evaluation.
2. **Freewheeling Is Encouraged.** Sometimes even the most outlandish ideas prove workable, and even an impractical suggestion might trigger a workable idea.
3. **Quantity Is Sought.** The more ideas generated, the better the chance of coming up with a good one.
4. **Combination and Improvement Are Desirable.** Members are encouraged to "piggyback" by modifying ideas already suggested and to combine previous suggestions.

Although brainstorming is a popular creativity booster, it isn’t a guaranteed strategy for developing novel and high-quality ideas. In some experiments, individuals working alone were able to come up with a greater number of high-quality ideas than were small groups.

**Use the Nominal Group Technique** Because people in groups often can’t resist the tendency to criticize one another’s ideas, the nominal group technique was developed to let members present ideas without being attacked but at the same time to retain the key elements of brainstorming. As the following steps show, the pattern involves alternating cycles of individual work followed by discussion.

1. Each member works alone to develop a list of possible solutions.
2. In round-robin fashion, each member in turn offers one item from his or her list. The item is listed on a chart visible to everyone. Other members may ask questions to clarify an idea, but no evaluation is allowed during this step.
3. Each member privately ranks his or her choice of the ideas in order, from most preferable (five points) to least preferable (one point). The rankings are collected, and the top ideas are retained as the most promising solutions.
4. A free discussion of the top ideas is held. At this point critical thinking (though not personal criticism) is encouraged. The group continues to discuss until a decision is reached, either by majority vote or consensus.

**Creativity Killers in Group Discussion**

Nothing squelches creativity like criticism. Although evaluating ideas is an important part of problem solving, judging suggestions too early can discourage members from sharing potentially valuable ideas. Here is a list of creativity-stopping statements that people should avoid making in the development phase of group work.

- “That’s ridiculous.”
- “It’ll never work.”
- “You’re wrong.”
- “What a crazy idea!”
- “We tried it before, and it didn’t work.”
- “It’s too expensive.”
- “There’s no point in talking about it.”
- “It’s never been done like that.”
- “We could look like fools.”
- “It’s too big a job.”
- “We could never do that.”
- “It’s too risky.”
- “You don’t know what you’re talking about.”

**Cultural Idiom**

- Freewheeling: unrestricted thinking
- Piggyback: adding onto
- In round-robin fashion: go around in a circle, one after another
EVALUATE POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS  After it has listed possible solutions, the group can evaluate the usefulness of each. One good way of identifying the most workable solutions is to ask three questions.

1. **Will This Proposal Produce the Desired Changes?** One way to find out is to see whether it successfully overcomes the restraining forces in your force field analysis.

2. **Can the Proposal Be Implemented by the Group?** Can the members strengthen impelling forces and weaken restraining ones? Can they influence others to do so? If not, the plan isn’t a good one.

3. **Does the Proposal Contain Any Serious Disadvantages?** Sometimes the cost of achieving a goal is too great. For example, one way to raise money for a group is to rob a bank. Although this plan might be workable, it raises more problems than it solves.

IMPLEMENT THE PLAN  Everyone who makes New Year’s resolutions knows the difference between making a decision and carrying it out. There are several important steps in developing and implementing a plan of action.

1. **Identify Specific Tasks to Be Accomplished.** What needs to be done? Even a relatively simple job usually involves several steps. Now is the time to anticipate all the tasks facing the group. Remember everything now, and you will avoid a last-minute rush later.

2. **Determine Necessary Resources.** Identify the equipment, material, and other resources the group will need in order to get the job done.

3. **Define Individual Responsibilities.** Who will do what? Do all the members know their jobs? The safest plan here is to put everyone’s duties in writing, including the due date. This might sound compulsive, but experience shows that it increases the chance of having jobs done on time.

4. **Provide for Emergencies.** Murphy’s Law states, “Whatever can go wrong, will.” Anyone experienced in group work knows the truth of this law. People forget or welsh on their obligations, get sick, or quit. Machinery breaks down. (One corollary of Murphy’s Law is “The copying machine will be out of order whenever it’s most needed.”) Whenever possible, you ought to develop contingency plans to cover foreseeable problems. Probably the single best suggestion we can give here is to plan on having all work done well ahead of the deadline, knowing that, even with last-minute problems, your time cushion will allow you to finish on time.

FOLLOW UP ON THE SOLUTION  Even the best plans usually require some modifications after they’re put into practice. You can improve the group’s effectiveness and minimize disappointment by following two steps.

1. **Meet Periodically to Evaluate Progress.** Follow-up meetings should be part of virtually every good plan. The best time to schedule these meetings is as you put the group’s plan to work. At that time, a good leader or member will suggest: “Let’s get together in a week (or a few days or a month, depending on the nature of the task). We can see how things are going and take care of any problems.”

2. **Revise the Group’s Approach as Necessary.** These follow-up meetings will often go beyond simply congratulating everyone for coming up with a good solution. Problems are bound to arise, and these periodic meetings, in which the key players are present, are the place to solve them.
Although these steps provide a useful outline for solving problems, they are most valuable as a general set of guidelines and not as a precise formula that every group should follow. As Table 9–2 suggests, certain parts of the model may need emphasis depending on the nature of the specific problem; the general approach will give virtually any group a useful way to consider and solve a problem.

Despite its advantages, the rational, systematic problem-solving approach isn't perfect. The old computer saying “Garbage in, garbage out” applies here: If the group doesn’t possess creative talent, a rational and systematic approach to solving problems won’t do much good. Despite its drawbacks, the rational approach does increase the odds that a group can solve problems successfully. Following the guidelines—even imperfectly—will help members analyze the problem, come up with solutions, and carry them out better than they could probably do without a plan.

### Developmental Stages in Problem-Solving Groups

When it comes to solving problems in groups, research shows that the shortest distance to a solution isn’t always a straight line. Communication scholar Aubrey Fisher analyzed tape recordings of problem-solving groups and discovered that many successful groups seem to follow a four-stage process when arriving at a decision. As you read about his findings, visualize how they have applied to problem-solving groups in your experience.

In the **orientation stage**, members approach the problem and one another tentatively. In some groups people may not know one another well, and even in ones where they are well acquainted they may not know one another’s position on the issue at hand. For these reasons, people are reluctant to take a stand during the orientation stage. Rather than state their own position clearly and unambiguously, they test out possible ideas cautiously and rather politely. There is little disagreement. This cautiousness doesn’t mean that members agree with one another; rather, they are sizing up the situation before asserting themselves. The orientation stage can be viewed as a calm before the storm.

### Table 9–2  Adapting Problem-Solving Methods to Special Circumstances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Circumstances</th>
<th>Method</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Members have strong feelings about the problem.</td>
<td>Consider allowing a period of emotional ventilation before systematic problem solving.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task difficulty is high.</td>
<td>Follow the structure of the problem-solving method carefully.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many possible solutions.</td>
<td>Emphasize brainstorming.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of member acceptance required.</td>
<td>Carefully define needs of all members, and seek solutions that satisfy all needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level of technical quality required.</td>
<td>Emphasize evaluation of ideas; consider inviting outside experts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After members understand the problem and become acquainted, a successful group enters the conflict stage. During this stage, members take strong positions and defend them against those who oppose their viewpoint. Coalitions are likely to form, and the discussion may become polarized. The conflict needn’t be personal; it can focus on the issues at hand while preserving the members’ respect for one another. Even when the climate does grow contentious, conflict seems to be a necessary stage in group development. The give-and-take of discussion tests the quality of ideas, and weaker ones may suffer a well-deserved death here.17

After a period of conflict, effective groups move to an emergence stage. One idea might emerge as the best one, or the group might combine the best parts of several plans into a new solution. As they approach consensus, members back off from their dogmatic positions. Statements become more tentative again: “I guess that’s a pretty good idea,” “I can see why you think that way.”

Finally, an effective group reaches the reinforcement stage. At this point not only do members accept the group’s decision, but also they endorse it. Whereas members used evidence to back up differing positions in the conflict stage, now they find evidence that will support the decision. Even if members disagree with the outcome, they do not voice their concerns. There is an unspoken drive toward consensus and harmony.

Ongoing groups can expect to move through this four-stage process with each new issue, so that their interaction takes on a cyclic pattern (see Figure 9–1). In fact, a group who deals with several issues at once might find itself in a different stage for each problem. In one series of studies, slightly less than 50 percent of the problem-solving groups examined followed this pattern.18 The same research

![Figure 9-1](image-url)
showed that a smaller percentage of groups (about 30 percent) didn’t follow a cyclical pattern. Instead, they skipped the preliminary phases and focused on the solution.

What is the significance of the findings? They tell us that, like children growing toward adulthood, many groups can expect to pass through phases. Knowing that these phases are natural and predictable can be reassuring. It can help curb your impatience when the group is feeling its way through an orientation stage. It can also help you feel less threatened when the inevitable and necessary conflicts take place. Understanding the nature of emergence and reinforcement can help you know when it is time to stop arguing and seek consensus.

MAINTAINING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS

The task-related advice in the preceding pages will be little help if the members of a group don’t get along. We therefore need to look at some ways to maintain good relationships among members. Many of the principles described earlier in this book apply here. Because these principles are so important, we will review them here.

Basic Skills

Groups are most effective when members feel good about one another.19 Probably the most important ingredient in good personal relationships is mutual respect, and the best way to demonstrate respect for the other person is to listen carefully. A more natural tendency, of course, is to assume you understand the other members’ positions and to interrupt or ignore them. Even if you are right, however, this tendency can create a residue of ill feelings. On the other hand, careful listening can at least improve the communication climate—and it may even teach you something.

Groups are bound to disagree sooner or later. When they do, the win–win problem-solving methods outlined in Chapter 7 boost the odds of solving the immediate issue in the most constructive way.20 As you read in Chapter 8, taking votes and letting the majority rule can often leave a sizable minority whose unhappiness can haunt the group’s future work. Consensus is harder to reach in the short term but far more beneficial in the long term.

Building Cohesiveness

Cohesiveness can be defined as the totality of forces that causes members to feel themselves part of a group and makes them want to remain in that group. You might think of cohesiveness as the glue that bonds individuals together, giving them a collective sense of identity.

Highly cohesive groups communicate differently than less cohesive ones. Members spend more time interacting, and there are more expressions of positive feelings for one another. They report more satisfaction with the group and its work. In addition, co-
hesive groups have greater control over the behavior of their members. With characteristics like these, it’s no surprise that highly cohesive groups have the potential to be productive. In fact, one study revealed that cohesiveness proved to be the best predictor of a group’s performance, both initially and over time.

Despite its advantages, cohesiveness is no guarantee of success: If the group is united in supporting unproductive norms, members will feel close but won’t get the job done. For example, consider members of a group of employees who have a boss they think is incompetent and unfair. They might grow quite cohesive in their opposition to the perceived tyranny, spending hours after (or during) work swapping complaints. They might even organize protests, work slowdowns, grievances to their union, or mass resignations. All these responses would boost cohesiveness, but they would not necessarily make the company more successful nor help the employees.

Research has disclosed a curvilinear relationship between cohesiveness and productivity: Up to a certain point, productivity increases as group members become a unified team. Beyond this point, however, the mutual attraction members feel for one another begins to interfere with the group’s efficient functioning. Members may enjoy one another’s company, but this enjoyment can keep them from focusing on the job at hand.

The goal, then, is to boost cohesiveness in a way that also helps get the job done. There are eight factors that can bring about these goals.

1. **Shared or Compatible Goals** People draw closer when they share a similar aim or when their goals can be mutually satisfied. For example, members of a conservation group might have little in common until a part of the countryside they all value is threatened by development. Some members might value the land because of its beauty; others, because it provides a place to hunt or fish; and still others, because the nearby scenery increases the value of their property; but as long as their goals are compatible, this collection of individuals will find that a bond exists that draws them together.

2. **Progress toward These Goals** While a group is making progress, members feel highly cohesive; when progress stops, cohesiveness decreases. All other things being equal, players on an athletic team feel closest when the team is winning. During extended losing streaks, it is likely that players will feel less positive about the team and less willing to identify themselves as members of the group.

3. **Shared Norms and Values** Although successful groups will tolerate and even thrive on some differences in members’ attitudes and behavior, wide variation in the group’s definition of what actions or beliefs are proper will reduce cohesiveness. If enough members hold different ideas of what behavior is acceptable, the group is likely to break up. Disagreements over values or norms can fall into many areas, such as humor, finance, degree of candor, and proportion of time allotted to work and play.

4. **Lack of Perceived Threat between Members** Cohesive group members see no threat to their status, dignity, and material or emotional well-being. When such interpersonal threats do occur, they can be very destructive. Often competition arises within groups, and as a result members feel threatened. Sometimes there is a struggle over who will be the nominal leader. At other times, members view others as wanting to take over a functional role (prob-
lem solver, information giver, and so on), either through competition or criticism. Sometimes the threat is real, and sometimes it’s only imagined, but in either case the group must neutralize it or face the consequences of reduced cohesiveness.

5. **Interdependence of Members**  Groups become cohesive when their needs can be satisfied only with the help of other members. When a job can be done just as well by one person alone, the need for membership decreases. This factor explains the reason for food cooperatives, neighborhood yard sales, and community political campaigns. All these activities enable the participants to reach their goal more successfully than if they acted alone.

6. **Threat from outside the Group**  When members perceive a threat to the group’s existence or image (groups have self-concepts, just as individuals do), they grow closer together. Almost everyone knows of a family whose members seem to fight constantly among themselves—until an outsider criticizes one of them. At this point, the internal bickering stops, and for the moment the group unites against its common enemy. The same principle often works on a larger scale when nations bind up their internal differences in the face of external aggression.

7. **Mutual Perceived Attractiveness and Friendship**  The factor of mutual attraction and friendship is somewhat circular because friendship and mutual attraction often are a result of the points just listed, yet groups often do become close simply because the members like each other. Social groups are a good example of a type of group that stays together because its members enjoy one another’s company.

8. **Shared Group Experiences**  When members have been through some unusual or trying experience, they draw together. This explains why soldiers who have been in combat together often feel close and stay in touch for years after; it also accounts for the ordeal of fraternity pledging and other initiations. Many societies have rituals that all members share, thus increasing the group’s cohesiveness.

It’s important to realize that the eight factors just described interact with one another, often in contradictory ways. For instance, members of many groups are good friends who have been through thick and thin together (cohesiveness builders), but they find themselves less dependent on each other than before and now struggle over playing certain roles. In cases like this, cohesiveness can be figured as the net sum of all attracting and dividing forces.

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**CRITICAL THINKING PROBE**

**THE PROS AND CONS OF COHESIVENESS**

1. Based on the information on pages 305–307 of this chapter and your own experiences, give examples of groups who meet each of the following descriptions:
   a. A level of cohesiveness so low that it interferes with productivity
   b. An optimal level of cohesiveness
   c. A level of cohesiveness so high that it interferes with productivity

2. For your answers to a and c, offer advice on how the level of cohesiveness could be adjusted to improve productivity.

3. Are there ever situations where maximizing cohesiveness is more important than maximizing productivity? Explain your answer, supporting it with examples.
LEADERSHIP AND POWER IN GROUPS

Leadership...power...influence. For most of us, being in control of events ranks not far below parenthood in the hierarchy of values. “What are you, a leader or a follower?” we’re asked, and we know which position is the better one. Even in groups without designated leaders, some members are more influential than others, and those who aren’t out front at least some of the time are likely to feel frustrated.

The following pages will focus on how communication operates to establish influence. We will begin by looking at sources of power in groups, showing that not all influence rests with the person who is nominally in charge. We will then take a look at the communication behaviors that work best when one communicator is designated as the leader—or wants to acquire that role.

Power in Groups

We can begin by defining power as the ability to influence others. A few examples show that influence can appear in many forms.23

- In a tense meeting, apartment dwellers are arguing over crowded parking and late-night noise. One tenant cracks a joke and lightens up the tense atmosphere.
- A project team at work is trying to come up with a new way to attract customers. The youngest member, fresh from a college advertising class, suggests a winning idea.
- Workers are upset after the boss passes over a popular colleague and hires a newcomer for a management position. Despite their anger, they accept the decision after the colleague persuades them that she is not interested in a career move anyhow.
- A teacher motivates students to meet a deadline by awarding bonus points for projects that are turned in early and deducting points for ones turned in late.

These examples suggest that power comes in a variety of forms. We will examine each of them now.

LEGITIMATE POWER

Sometimes the ability to influence others comes from legitimate power (sometimes called position power). Legitimate power arises from the title one holds—supervisor, parent, or professor, for example. In many cases we follow the directions of others without knowing much about their qualifications, simply because we respect the role they occupy. In church we honor the request of the minister, and in courts we rise at judges’ approach primarily because their positions confer authority on them.

Social scientists use the term nominal leader to label the person who is officially designated as being in charge of a group. Realize, however, that not all legitimate power resides with nominal leaders. The men and women with orange caps and vests who direct traffic at road repair sites are unlikely to be in charge of the project, yet they possess legitimate power in the eyes of motorists, who stop and start at their command.

The easiest way to acquire legitimate power is to have it conferred upon you by an outside authority. But being appointed isn’t the only path to legitimate
power. Even in groups who begin with no official leader, members can acquire legitimate power by the acknowledgment of others. Juries elect forepersons, and committees elect chairpersons. Teams choose a captain. Negotiating groups elect spokespeople. The subject of leadership emergence has been studied extensively. Researchers have discovered several communicator characteristics that members who emerge as leaders possess: They speak up in group discussions without dominating others, they demonstrate their competence on the subject being discussed, they observe group norms, and they have the support of other influential members.

**COERCIVE POWER**  
Coercive power occurs when influence comes from the threat or actual imposition of some unpleasant consequences. In school, at home, on the job, and in many other settings we sometimes do what others tell us, not because of any respect for the wisdom of their decisions but rather because the results of not obeying would be unpleasant. Economic hardship, social disapproval, undesirable work, even physical punishment—all are coercive forces that can shape behavior.

There are three reasons why coercion usually isn’t the most effective type of power. First, it’s likely to create a negative communication climate, because nobody likes to be threatened. Second, it can produce what has been called a “boomerang effect” in which a member who is threatened with punishment resists by doing exactly what the other members don’t want. Third, coercion alone may tell others what not to do, but it doesn’t tell them what you do want them to do. Telling an unproductive member, “If you can’t contribute useful information, we’ll kick you out of the group” doesn’t offer much advice about what would count as “useful information.”

Social scientists say that coercion has the best chance of success when it involves denial of an expected reward rather than the imposition of a negative consequence. For example, canceling an upcoming vacation of a working group who doesn’t meet its deadline is better than reducing employees’ salaries. Even under circumstances like this, however, coercion alone is not as effective as the next kind of power, which involves rewards.

**REWARD POWER**  
Reward power exists when others are influenced by the grant or promise of desirable consequences. Rewards come in a variety of forms. The most obvious are material reinforcers: money, awards, and so on. Other rewards can be social in nature: The praise of someone you respect can be a powerful motivator. Even spending time with people you like can be reinforcing.

Rewards don’t come only from the official leader of a group. The goodwill of other members can sometimes be even more valuable. In a class group, for example, having your fellow students think highly of you might be a more powerful reward than the grade you could receive from the instructor. In fact, subordinates sometimes can reward nominal leaders just as much as the other way around. A boss might work hard to accommodate employees in order to keep them happy, for example.
EXPERT POWER  Expert power exists when we are influenced by people because of what we believe they know or can do. For example, when a medical emergency occurs, most group members would gladly let a doctor, nurse, or paramedic make decisions because of that person’s obvious knowledge. In groups it isn’t sufficient to be an expert: The other members have to view you as one. This means that it is important to make your qualifications known if you want others to give your opinions extra weight.

INFORMATION POWER  As its name implies, information power comes from a member’s knowledge that he or she can help the group reach its goal. Not all useful information comes from experts with special credentials. For instance, a fundraising group seeking donations from local businesses might profit from the knowledge that one member has about which merchants are hospitable to the group’s cause. Likewise, a class group working on a term project might benefit from the knowledge of one student who had taken other classes from the instructor who will be grading their work.

REFERENT POWER  Referent power comes from the respect, liking, and trust others have for a member. If you have high referent power, you may be able to persuade others to follow your lead because they believe in you or because they are willing to do you a favor. Members acquire referent power by behaving in ways others in the group admire and by being genuinely likable. The kinds ofconfirming communication behaviors described in Chapter 7 can go a long way toward boosting referent power. Listening to others’ ideas, honoring their contributions, and taking a win–win approach to meeting their needs lead to liking and respect.

After our look at various ways members can influence one another, three important characteristics of power in groups become clearer.

- Power Is Group-Centered. Power isn’t something an individual possesses. Instead, it is conferred by the group. You may be an expert on the subject being considered, but if the other members don’t think you are qualified to talk, you won’t have expert power. You might try to reward other people by praising their contributions; but if they don’t value your compliments, then all the praise in the world won’t influence them.

- Power Is Distributed among Group Members. Power rarely belongs to just one person. Even when a group has an official leader, other members usually have the power to affect what happens. This influence can be positive, coming from information, expertise, or social reinforcement. It can also be negative, coming from punishing behaviors such as criticizing or withholding the contributions that the group needs to succeed. You can appreciate how power is distributed among members by considering the effect just one member can have by not showing up for meetings or failing to carry out his or her part of the job.

- Power Isn’t an Either-Or Concept. It’s incorrect to assume that power is an either-or concept that members either possess or lack. Rather, it is a matter of degree. Instead of talking about someone as “powerful” or “powerless,” it’s more accurate to talk about how much influence he or she exerts.

By now you can see that power is available to every member of a group. Table 9–3 outlines ways of acquiring the various types of power we have just examined.
What Makes Leaders Effective?

Even though power is distributed among members of a group, it is still important to explore the special role played by the nominal leader. In the next few pages we will describe the communication-related factors that contribute to leader effectiveness.

**TABLE 9-3 Methods for Acquiring Power in Small Groups**

Power isn’t the only goal to seek in a group. Sometimes being a follower is a comfortable and legitimate role to play. But when you do seek power, the following methods outline specific ways to shape the way others behave and the decisions they make.

**Legitimate Authority**

1. Become an authority figure. If possible, get yourself appointed or elected to a position of leadership. Do so by following Steps 2–5.
2. Speak up without dominating others. Power comes from visibility, but don’t antagonize others by shutting them out.
3. Demonstrate competence on the subject. Enhance legitimate authority by demonstrating information and expertise power.
4. Follow group norms. Show that you respect the group’s customs.
5. Gain support of other members. Don’t try to carve out authority on your own. Gain the visible support of other influential members.

**Information Power**

1. Provide useful but scarce or restricted information. Show others that you possess information that isn’t available elsewhere.
2. Be certain the information is accurate. One piece of mistaken information can waste the group’s time, lead to bad decisions, and destroy your credibility. Check your facts before speaking up.

**Expert Power**

1. Make sure members are aware of your qualifications. Let others know that you have expertise in the area being discussed.
2. Don’t act superior. You will squander your authority if you imply your expertise makes you superior to others. Use your knowledge for the good of the group, not ego building.

**Reward and Coercive Power**

1. Try to use rewards as a first resort and punishment as a last resort. People respond better to pleasant consequences than unpleasant ones, so take a positive approach first.
3. Be generous with praise. Let others know that you recognize their desirable behavior.

**Referent Power**

1. Enhance your attractiveness to group members. Do whatever you can to gain the liking and respect of other members without compromising your principles.
2. Learn effective presentation skills. Present your ideas clearly and effectively in order to boost your credibility.

A leader is best
When people barely know
that he exists,
Not so good when people
obey and acclaim him,
Worse when they despise
him.
“Fail to honor people,
They fail to honor you”;
But of a good leader who
talks little,
When his work is done, his
aim fulfilled,
They will say, “We did it
ourselves.”
Lao-tzu

TRAIT ANALYSIS  Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle proclaimed, “From
the hour of their birth some are marked out for subjugation, and others for com-
mand.”27 This is a radical expression of trait theories of leadership, some-
times labeled as the “great man” (or “great woman”) approach. Social scientists
began their studies of leader effectiveness by conducting literally hundreds of studies
that compared leaders to nonleaders. The results of all this research were
mixed. Yet, as Table 9–4 shows, a number of distinguishing characteristics did
dominate in several categories.

The majority of these categories involved social skills. For example, leaders talk
more often and more fluently and are regarded as more popular, cooperative, and
socially skillful.28 Leaders also possess goal-related skills that help groups perform
their tasks. They are somewhat more intelligent, possess more task-relevant in-
formation, and are more dependable than other members. Just as important,
leaders want the role and act in ways that will help them achieve it. Finally,
physical appearance seems to play a role in leadership. As a rule, leaders tend to
be slightly taller, heavier, and physically more attractive than other members. They
also seem to possess greater athletic ability and stamina.

Despite these general findings, trait theories have limited practical value.
Later research has shown that many other factors are important in determining
leader success and that not everyone who possesses these traits becomes a leader.
Organizational researchers Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus interviewed ninety
American leaders, including Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald’s; professional
football coach John Robinson; and John H. Johnson, publisher of Ebony. Their
analysis led to the conclusion that the principle “leaders must be charismatic” is
a myth.

Some are, most aren’t. Among the ninety there were a few—but damned few—who
probably correspond to our fantasies of some “divine inspiration,” that “grace under
stress” we associated with J.F.K. or the beguiling capacity to spellbind for which we
remember Churchill. Our leaders were all “too human”; they were short and tall, artic-
ulate and inarticulate, dressed for success and dressed for failure, and there was virtu-
ally nothing in terms of physical appearance, personality, or style that set them apart
from their followers. Our guess is that it operates in the other direction; that is,
charisma is the result of effective leadership, not the other way around, and that
those who are good at it are granted a certain amount of respect and even awe by
their followers, which increases the bond of attraction between them.29

LEADERSHIP STYLE  As researchers began to realize that traits aren’t the key
to effective leadership, they began to look in other areas. Some scholars theorized
that good leadership is a matter of communication style—the way leaders deal
with members. Three basic approaches were identified. The first approach was an
authoritarian leadership style that relied on legitimate, coercive, and reward
power to influence others. The second approach was a democratic leader-
ship style, which invited other members to share in decision making. The third
approach was the laissez-faire leadership style, in which the leader gave up
the power to dictate, transforming the group into a leaderless collection of equals.
Early research suggested that the democratic style produced the highest-quality
results,30 but later research showed that matters weren’t so simple.31 For instance,
groups with autocratic leaders proved more productive under stressful condi-
tions, but democratically led groups did better when the situation was non-
stressful.32
### Table 9-4 Some Traits Associated with Leaders

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor No.</th>
<th>Factors Appearing in Three or More Studies</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Social and interpersonal skills</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Technical skills</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Administrative skills</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Leadership effectiveness and achievement</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Social nearness, friendliness</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Intellectual skills</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Maintaining cohesive work group</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Maintaining coordination and teamwork</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Task motivation and application</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>General impression</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Group task supportiveness</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Maintaining standards of performance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Willingness to assume responsibility</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Emotional balance and control</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Informal group control</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Nurturant behavior</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Ethical conduct, personal integrity</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Communication, verbosity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ascendence, dominance, decisiveness</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Physical energy</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Experience and activity</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Mature, cultured</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Courage, daring</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>Aloof, distant</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Creative, independent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>Conforming</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research showed that there is some merit to the styles approach. One extensive study of more than twelve thousand managers showed that a democratic approach to leadership correlated highly with success. Effective managers usually sought the advice and opinions of their subordinates, whereas average or unsuccessful ones were more authoritarian and less concerned with the welfare or ideas of the people who reported to them. Despite this fact, a democratic approach isn’t always the best one. For example, an autocratic approach gets the job done much more quickly, which can be essential in situations where time is of the essence.

Some researchers have focused on leadership style from a different perspective. Robert R. Blake and Jane S. Mouton developed an approach based on the relationship between the designated leader’s concern with the task and with the relationships among members. Their Leadership Grid consists of a two-dimensional model pictured in Figure 9–2. The horizontal axis measures the

![Figure 9-2](image-url)
leader’s concern for production. This involves a focus on accomplishing the organizational task, with efficiency being the main concern. The vertical axis measures the leader’s concern for people’s feelings and ideas. Blake and Mouton suggest that the most effective leader is the one who adopts a 9,9 style—showing high concern for both task and relationships.

**SITUATIONAL APPROACHES** Most contemporary scholars are convinced that the best style of leadership varies from one set of circumstances to another. In an effort to pin down which approach works best in a given type of situation, psychologist Fred Fiedler attempted to find out when a task-oriented approach was most effective and when a more relationship-oriented approach was most effective. From his research, Fiedler developed a situational theory of leadership. Although the complete theory is too complex to describe here, the general conclusion of situational leadership is that a leader’s style should change with the circumstances. A task-oriented approach works best when conditions are either highly favorable (good leader-member relations, strong leader power, and clear task structure) or highly unfavorable (poor leader-member relations, weak leader power, and an ambiguous task), whereas a more relationship-oriented approach is appropriate in moderately favorable or moderately unfavorable conditions.

More recently, Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard have suggested that a leader’s focus on task or relational issues should vary according to the readiness of the group being led (see Figure 9–3). Readiness involves the members’ level of motivation, willingness to take responsibility, and the amount of knowledge and experience they have in a given situation. For example, a new, inexperienced group would need more task-related direction, whereas a more experienced group might require more social support and less instruction about how to do the job. A well-seasoned group could probably handle the job well without much supervision at all. Because an employee’s readiness changes from one job to another, Hersey and Blanchard suggest that the best way to lead should vary as well.

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**CULTURAL IDIOM**

*to pin down:* to identify specifically

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**Figure 9-3** Hersey and Blanchard’s Leadership Model. Source: “Situational Leadership Behavior.” From *Management of Organizational Behavior*, 8th edition, © 2001. Adapted/reprinted with permission of Center for Leadership Studies, Escondido, CA 92025. All Rights Reserved.
OVERCOMING DANGERS IN GROUP DISCUSSION

Even groups with the best of intentions often find themselves unable to reach satisfying decisions. At other times, they make decisions that later prove to be wrong. Though there’s no foolproof method of guaranteeing high-quality group work, there are several dangers to avoid.

Information Underload and Overload

**Information underload** occurs when a group lacks information necessary to operate effectively. Sometimes the underload results from overlooking parts of a problem. We know of one group who scheduled a fund-raising auction without considering what other events might attract potential donors. They later found that their event was scheduled opposite an important football game, resulting in a loss of sorely needed funds. In other cases, groups suffer from underload because they simply don’t conduct enough research. For example, a group of partners starting a new business has to be aware of all the startup costs to avoid going bankrupt in the first months of operation. Overlooking one or two important items can make the difference between success and failure.

Sometimes groups can suffer from too much information. **Information overload** occurs when the rate or complexity of material is too great to manage. Having an abundance of information might seem like a blessing, but anyone who has tried to do conscientious library research has become aware of the paralysis that can result from being overwhelmed by an avalanche of books, magazine and newspaper articles, reviews, films, and research studies. When too much information exists, it is hard to sort out the essential from the unessential information. Group expert J. Dan Rothwell offers several tips for coping with information overload. First, specialize whenever possible. Try to parcel out areas of responsibility to each member instead of expecting each member to explore every angle of the topic. Second, be selective: Take a quick look at each piece of information to see whether it has real value for your task. If it doesn’t, move on to examine more promising material. Third, limit your search. Information specialists have discovered that there is often a curvilinear relationship between the amount of information a group possesses and the quality of its decision. After a certain point, gathering more material can slow you down without contributing to the quality of your group’s decisions.

Unequal Participation

The value of involving group members in making decisions—especially decisions that affect them—is great. When people participate, their loyalty to the group increases. (Your own experience will probably show that most group dropouts were quiet and withdrawn.) Broad-based participation has a second advantage: It increases the amount of resources focused on the problem. As a result, the quality of the group’s decisions goes up. Finally, participation increases members’ loyalty to the decisions that they played a part in making.

The key to effective participation is balance. Domination by a few vocal members can reduce a group’s ability to solve a problem effectively. Research shows that the proposal receiving the largest number of favorable comments is usually the one chosen even if it isn’t the best one. Furthermore, ideas of high-status members (who aren’t always talkers) are given more consideration than
those of lower-status members. The moral to this story? Don’t assume that quantity of speech or the status of the speaker automatically defines the quality of an idea. Instead, seek out and seriously consider the ideas of quieter members.

Not all participation is helpful, of course. It’s better to remain quiet than to act out the kind of dysfunctional roles described in Chapter 8—cynic, aggressor, dominator, and so on. Likewise, the comments of a member who is uninformed can waste time. Finally, downright ignorant or mistaken input can distract a group.

You can encourage the useful contributions of quiet members in a variety of ways. First, keep the group small. In groups with three or four members, participation is roughly equal; but after size increases to between five and eight, there is a dramatic gap between the contributions of members. Even in a large group you can increase the contributions of quiet members by soliciting their opinions. This approach may seem obvious, but in their enthusiasm to speak out, more verbal communicators can overlook the people who don’t speak up. When normally reticent members do offer information, reinforce their contributions. It isn’t necessary to go overboard by gushing about a quiet person’s brilliant remark, but a word of thanks and an acknowledgment of the value of an idea increase the odds that the contributor will speak up again in the future. A third strategy is to assign specific tasks to normally quiet members. The need to report on these tasks guarantees that they will speak up. A fourth strategy is to use the nominal group technique, described in Chapter 8, to guarantee that the ideas of all members are heard.

Different strategies can help when the problem is one or more members talking too much—especially when their remarks aren’t helpful. If the talkative member is at all sensitive, withholding reinforcement can deliver a diplomatic hint that it may be time to listen more and speak less. A lack of response to an idea or suggestion can work as a hint to cut back on speaking. Don’t confuse lack of reinforcement with punishment, however. Attacking a member for dominating the group is likely to trigger a defensive reaction and cause more harm than good. If the talkative member doesn’t respond to subtle hints, politely expressing a desire to hear from other members can be effective. The next stage in this series of escalating strategies for dealing with dominating members is to question the relevancy of remarks that are apparently off the wall: “I’m confused about what last Saturday’s party has to do with the job we have to do today. Am I missing something?”

**ETHICAL CHALLENGE**

**DEALING WITH OVERLY TALKATIVE AND QUIET GROUP MEMBERS**

Balancing participation in group discussions can involve stifling some members and urging others to speak up when they would prefer to be silent. Explore the ethical justification for these actions by answering the following questions.

1. Are there any circumstances when it is legitimate to place quiet group members in the position of speaking up when they would rather remain quiet? When does it become unreasonable to urge quiet members to participate?

2. Does discouraging talkative members ever violate the principles of free speech and tolerance for others’ opinions? Describe when it is and is not appropriate to limit a member’s contributions.

After developing your ethical guidelines, consider how willing you would feel if they were applied to you.
Pressure to Conform

There’s a strong tendency for group members to go along with the crowd, which often results in bad decisions. A classic study by Solomon Asch illustrated this point. College students were shown three lines of different lengths and asked to identify which of them matched with a fourth line. Although the correct answer was obvious, the experiment was a setup: Asch had instructed all but one member of the experimental groups to vote for the wrong line. As a result, fully one-third of the uninformed subjects ignored their own good judgment and voted with the majority. If simple tasks like this one generate such conformity, it is easy to see that following the (sometimes mistaken) crowd is even more likely in the much more complex and ambiguous tasks that most groups face.

Even when there’s no overt pressure to follow the majority, more subtle influences motivate members—especially in highly cohesive groups—to keep quiet rather than voice any thoughts that deviate from what appears to be the consensus. “Why rock the boat if I’m the only dissenter?” members think. “And if everybody else feels the same way, they’re probably right.”

With no dissent, the group begins to take on a feeling of invulnerability: an unquestioning belief that its ideas are correct and even morally right. As its position solidifies, outsiders who disagree can be viewed as the enemy, disloyal to what is obviously the only legitimate viewpoint. Social scientists use the term groupthink to describe a group’s collective striving for unanimity that discourages realistic appraisals of alternatives to its chosen decision. Several group practices can discourage this troublesome force. A first step is to recognize the prob-
lem of groupthink as it begins to manifest itself. If agreement comes quickly and easily, the group may be avoiding the tough but necessary search for alternatives. Beyond vigilance, a second step to discourage groupthink is to minimize status differences. If the group has a nominal leader, he or she must be careful not to use various types of power that come with the position to intimidate members. A third step involves developing a group norm that legitimizes disagreement. After members recognize that questioning one another’s positions doesn’t signal personal animosity or disloyalty, a constructive exchange of ideas can lead to top-quality solutions. Sometimes it can be helpful to designate a person or subgroup as “devil’s advocate” who reminds the others about the dangers of groupthink and challenges the trend toward consensus.

CULTURAL IDIOM
“devil’s advocate”: one who argues against a widely held view in order to clarify issues

SUMMARY

Despite the bad reputation of groups in some quarters, research shows that they are often the most effective setting for problem solving. They command greater resources, both quantitatively and qualitatively, than do either individuals or collections of people working in isolation; their work can result in greater accuracy; and the participative nature of the solutions they produce generates greater commitment from members.

Groups aren’t always the best forum for solving problems. They should be used when the problem is beyond the capacity of one person to solve, when tasks are interdependent, when there is more than one desired solution or decision, and when the agreement of all members is essential.

Groups use a wide variety of discussion formats when solving problems. Some use parliamentary procedure to govern decision-making procedures. Others use moderated panel discussions, symposia, or forums. The best format depends on the nature of the problem and the characteristics of the group.

Since face-to-face meetings can be time-consuming and difficult to arrange, computer-mediated communication can be a good alternative for some group tasks. Some groupwork can be handled via computer or teleconferencing, where members communicate in real time over digital networks. Other tasks can be handled via asynchronous discussions, in which members exchange messages at their convenience. Mediated meetings provide a record of discussion and they can make it easier for normally quiet members to participate, but they can take more time and they lack the nonverbal richness of face-to-face conversation. Given the pros and cons of mediated meetings, smart communicators should give thoughtful consideration about when to use this approach.

Groups stand the best chance of developing effective solutions to problems if they begin their work by identifying the problem, avoiding the mistake of failing to recognize the hidden needs of individual members. Their next step is to analyze the problem, including identification of forces both favoring and blocking progress. Only at this point should the group begin to develop possible solutions, taking care not to stifle creativity by evaluating any of them prematurely. During the implementation phase of the solution, the group should monitor the situation carefully and make any necessary changes in its plan.

Most groups can expect to move through several stages as they solve a problem. The first of these stages is orientation, during which the members sound each other out. The conflict stage is characterized by partisanship and open debate over the merits of contending ideas. In the emergence stage, the group begins to move toward choosing a single solution. In the reinforcement stage, members endorse the group’s decision.

Groups who pay attention only to the task dimension of their interaction risk strains in the relationships among members. Many of these interpersonal problems can be avoided by using the skills described in Chapter 7 as well as by following the guidelines in
this chapter for building group cohesiveness and encouraging participation.

Many naive observers of groups confuse the concepts of leader and leadership. We defined leadership as the ability to influence the behavior of other members through the use of one or more types of power—legitimate, coercive, reward, expert, information, or referent. We saw that many nominal leaders share their power with other members. Leadership has been examined from many perspectives—trait analysis, leadership style, and situational variables.

Smart members will avoid some common dangers that threaten a group’s effectiveness. They will make sure to get the information they need, without succumbing to overload. They will make sure that participation is equal by encouraging the contributions of quiet members and keeping more talkative people on track. They will guard against groupthink by minimizing pressure on members to conform for the sake of harmony or approval.

**KEY TERMS**

- authoritarian leadership style 312
- brainstorming 301
- buzz group 294
- coercive power 309
- cohesiveness 305
- conflict stage 304
- democratic leadership style 312
- emergence stage 304
- expert power 310
- focus group 294
- force field analysis 300
- forum 295
- groupthink 318
- information overload 316
- information power 310
- information underload 316
- laissez-faire leadership style 312
- leader 308
- Leadership Grid 314
- legitimate power 308
- nominal group technique 301
- nominal leader 308
- orientation stage 303
- panel discussion 295
- parliamentary procedure 294
- participative decision making 292
- power 308
- probative question 299
- problem census 294
- referent power 310
- reinforcement stage 304
- reward power 309
- situational leadership 315
- symposium 295
- trait theories of leadership 312

**ACTIVITIES**

1. **When to Use Group Problem Solving** Explain which of the following tasks would best be managed by a group:

   1. Collecting and editing a list of films illustrating communication principles.
   2. Deciding what the group will eat for lunch at a one-day meeting.
   3. Choosing the topic for a class project.
   4. Finding which of six companies had the lowest auto insurance rates.
   5. Designing a survey to measure community attitudes toward a subsidy for local artists.

2. **Increasing Group Creativity** You can increase your skill at increasing creativity in group discussions by trying the approaches described in *Understanding Human Communication*. Your group should begin by choosing one of the following problems:

   1. How can out-of-pocket student expenses (e.g., books, transportation) be decreased?
   2. How can the textbook you are using in this (or any other) class be improved?
   3. How could your class group (legally) earn the greatest amount of money between now and the end of the term?
   4. What strategies can be used effectively when confronted with employer discrimination or harassment? (Assume you want to keep the job.)
   5. Imagine that your group has been hired to develop a way of improving the course registration system at your institution. What three recommendations will be most effective?

   Choose either brainstorming or the nominal group technique to develop possible solutions to your chosen problem. Explain why you chose the method. Under what conditions would the other method be more appropriate?

3. **Stages in Group Development** Identify a problem-solving group, either from your personal experience or from a book or film. Analyze the group’s approach to problem solving. Does it follow the cyclical model pictured in Figure 9–1? Does it follow a more linear approach? Or does the group follow no recognizable pattern at all?
4. Power in Groups

1. Think of examples from groups you have belonged to or observed in which members had and used each type of power:
   - Legitimate
   - Coercive
   - Reward
   - Expert
   - Information
   - Referent

2. Describe the types of power you have possessed in groups. Evaluate whether your use of that power has helped or hindered the group’s effectiveness.

5. Choosing the Most Effective Leadership Style

Think of two effective leaders you have known. How would you describe the style of each one: autocratic, democratic, or laissez-faire? Task- or relationship-oriented? Imagine that the two leaders were transferred, so that each one was directing the other's group. Would the same style work equally well in each situation? Why or why not?

FOR FURTHER EXPLORATION

Print Resources

For a more detailed list of readings about group problem solving, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the Understanding Human Communication Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.


Chapter 9 offers a variety of tips on how to hold effective meetings: when to hold (and not hold) a meeting, how to prepare for an effective session, how to encourage balanced participation and keep discussion on track, and how to maintain a positive tone, even when members disagree.


Robert’s Rules of Order has served for over 125 years as a guide for using parliamentary procedure to bring order out of meetings that might otherwise be disorganized, and even chaotic. Cochran has created a less formal approach that strives for consensus instead of majority rule. For groups that find the traditional approach too confining, this book may be a useful guide.


This summary by a leading scholar provides a research-based review of both task-related and relational skills that contribute to effective group problem solving.


This survey of small group communication combines readability with a comprehensive look at scholarship on the subject. Rothwell pays special attention to how gender and culture affect group work and discusses the features that distinguish effective teams.


This readable book explores a deceptively simple idea that has profound implications: groups of people make better decisions than an elite few, no matter how brilliant.
Feature Films

For descriptions of each film below and descriptions of other movies that illustrate group problem solving, see the CD-ROM that came with this book, and the Understanding Human Communication Web site at www.oup.com/us/uhc.

The Importance of Problem-Solving Skills


Loosely based on Homer’s *Odyssey*, this comedy follows three convicts who have escaped from a Depression-era chain gang. As reviewers have noted, this group has a plan but not a clue about how to work together. Their problem-solving skills are rudimentary at best, and their bumbling provides an entertaining contrast to the skills in this chapter.

Creative Problem Solving


This film chronicles the 1962 nuclear showdown between the United States and the Soviet Union. President John F. Kennedy and his team of advisors must come up with a plan that deters the Soviets from completing the installation of missiles in Cuba without triggering a nuclear war. The intense deliberations offer a window into high-stakes decision making that illuminates the importance of using the input of talented group members to develop an effective solution.

*Apollo 13*(1995). Rated PG.

This is the gripping story of how teamwork and courage saved the lives of three astronauts who faced death when their spacecraft malfunctioned on its mission to the moon. After an onboard explosion, the three astronauts—Jim Lovell, Fred Haise, and Jack Swigert—were faced with the possibility of becoming marooned in space where the options were all grim: running out of oxygen, being poisoned by carbon dioxide, or freezing to death. The film chronicles how the engineers on the ground worked with the astronauts to devise a solution to this deadly challenge. The story shows how a dedicated team can work harmoniously to triumph over even apparently impossible challenges.
Kidco (1983). Rated G.
This is the story of a group of children, ages nine to sixteen, who triumph over the chores of cleaning out horse stables by creating the largest pest control and fertilizer service in San Diego County. State bureaucrats get wind of their scheme and attempt to shut the company down. The film—based on actual events—illustrates how a creative group can devise win-win solutions in an apparently win-lose or lose-lose situation.

A young ghetto-dwelling boy has been accused of stabbing his father to death. A jury deliberates his fate. At first only one juror (Henry Fonda/Jack Lemmon) votes for acquittal, but during the course of deliberations the opinion slowly shifts as the group reviews testimony from the trial. The film is an outstanding example of both the potential weaknesses and strengths of group problem solving; in keeping with the theme, this film is an exercise in ensemble acting rather than a showcase for a single performer.

Leadership

Chicken Run (2000). Rated G.
The inhabitants of a prison-like British chicken farm are complacent in the face of impending extermination until inmate Ginger (voice of Julia Sawalha) and flying rooster Rocky (voice of Mel Gibson) develop an escape plan.

The chickens in this clever animated film exemplify the trait theory of leadership, illustrating how key members can help a group face long odds to solve daunting challenges. Rocky and Ginger show the value of spirit and energy in the face of adversity.