

Components of Small Group Communication

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After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

1. define small group communication,
2. identify and explain the three primary features of small group communication,
3. identify and explain the three secondary features of small group communication,
4. differentiate among the eight types of groups, and
5. explain the role ethical responsibility plays in the small group.

Case Study | It is the second day of COMM 112: Small Group Communication, and students are assigned to their work groups for the semester. This group consists of five members—David Cohen, Hassan Dedhia, Julie Miller, Shanika Bonvillian, and Joseph O’Day—whose first task is to develop a name, logo, and slogan for their group.





Photo 1.1 Being assigned to work in a small group is common in college courses.

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David: I can't believe we're being made to start working in groups already. I mean, it's only the second day of class! How are we supposed to develop a name, logo, and slogan when we don't even know each other?

Julie: I think the purpose of the assignment is so we get to know each other. Remember, the name of the class is Small Group Communication, so it makes sense we would work in groups.

Hassan: I agree with Dave. It's only the second day of class! Usually when I work with people in a group I like to spend some time getting to know them before we start working together. I can't tell you how many groups I've been in where people don't get to know each other and they end up not doing the best job they could.

Shanika: Why don't we go around the group then and tell a little about ourselves? This way we can get to know each other, and that might help us start thinking about how to complete the assignment. Plus, we're all communication studies majors, so we may be more alike than we think. Joseph, would you like to start?

- Joseph:** Not really. (awkward silence)
- David:** Fine. I'll start. My name is Dave, I'm on the swim team, I don't work, and I have a girlfriend.
- Hassan:** I'm Hassan, but my friends call me "Wizard." I work at Rockin' Rod's on the weekends, and I'm doing an internship with First American Savings & Loan, so I'll be really busy this semester. Plus, I'm a deejay at U-101.5, the campus radio station, and I work every night, so it's going to be tough for me to meet with you guys.
- Julie:** Hi everyone. My name is Julie Miller, and I'm a fifth-year senior double majoring in communication studies and Spanish. I hope to go to graduate school next year in either comm. or Spanish—I haven't made up my mind yet. Eventually I hope to move to New York City and work for the United Nations as an interpreter, but that will probably depend on whether I get married to my boyfriend. He is from Indiana and doesn't like the thought of living in New York City, but I'm hoping I can change his mind (giggle). Anyway, I'm looking forward to this class and working in this group. I think we can do a great job, and I'm always looking for a challenge, so hopefully this class will be a great experience.
- Shanika:** Well, I don't have much to add. My name is Shanika, and I'm also a fifth-year senior. I work at Payless ShoeSource at the mall, so if you ever need shoes, let me know and I can get you a discount.
- Joseph:** My name is Joseph. Just so you know, I'm not a comm. major. I'm just taking this class because I needed a class. (another awkward silence)
- Shanika:** It sounds like we all have a lot of things going on in our lives, so maybe we should look at our schedules and figure out a time when we can all meet and sort out this first assignment.
- David:** If we meet at night, we could always meet at my house. I don't live too far from campus and my roommate is never home, so we'd have the place to ourselves.
- Hassan:** If we're going to meet at night, it'd be easier if we met at the radio station. Like I said, I work every night. If you want to meet after 10 p.m., that's fine, but I'm unavailable until then.
- Julie:** I think I'd be more comfortable meeting at the Student Center or the library. This way, we won't interrupt anyone's home life or job.

- David:** You won't be interrupting anything at my house. I'm the only one there most of the time.
- Hassan:** We won't be interrupting anything at the radio station either. As long as I have music playing, I can do what I want.
- Shanika:** I don't care where we meet, just as long as we do it soon. This assignment is due next Monday! That's less than a week away. Joseph, what do you think?
- Joseph:** I don't care, either. The sooner, the better.
- Shanika:** Why don't we all write our e-mail addresses and phone numbers on a piece of paper and then make five copies? This way we won't have an excuse not to contact one another.
- David:** If you want, I can photocopy it. My roommate works at Kinko's so if we ever need photocopies, I can do it.
- Julie:** David, that's a good idea. You know, I think we're going to work well together.
- Shanika:** Now I think we need to start thinking about some ideas on completing the assignment.
- Hassan:** Why don't we all come up with ideas on our own and then get together and talk about them?
- David:** Yeah, everyone should come up with three ideas, and we can choose the best one. Shanika, give me the paper, and I'll photocopy it and bring the copies to the meeting.
- Shanika:** Okay. So when are we meeting?
- Hassan:** Let's meet at the radio station Thursday night around 8 p.m. Does anyone have a problem with that?
- Julie:** I guess that's okay, Wizard. I've always wanted to see what a radio station looks like anyway.
- Hassan:** Joseph?
- Joseph:** Whatever.
- Hassan:** Dave?
- David:** That's fine. If it gets too busy there, we can always go to my house.
- Shanika:** Then it's settled. Thursday night at 8 p.m. at the radio station. See you then.



As this case study demonstrates, working in a small group can be simultaneously exciting and frustrating. On one hand, working in a small group can be exciting when joint efforts are recognized and celebrated, when relationships with new people are formed, and when you can identify your contributions to making a small group endeavor successful. On the other hand, working in a small group can be frustrating due to the lack of cooperation that may exist among members, the possibility of the emergence of conflict, and the clash of personalities of group members. But regardless of the feelings you have about working (and communicating) in a small group, knowing about the small group communication process is beneficial.

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to small group communication. In this chapter, you will be provided with the advantages and disadvantages of working in a small group as well as a definition of small group communication. We then will identify and explain the three primary features and the three secondary features associated with small group communication. Once these features have been explained, we will explore the eight types of groups to which you may belong. Finally, we will examine the ethics associated with working in a small group.

Definition of Small Group Communication

Think back to the communication encounters in which you participated yesterday. Chances are you engaged in a variety of them: eating breakfast with your roommate, exchanging pleasantries with the clerk at the Daily Grind when you purchased your late-morning coffee, stopping by your favorite professor's office during her office hours, presenting a speech in your public-speaking class, spending time with your history study group preparing for an upcoming project, calling your dad to discuss your weekend trip home, e-mailing your romantic partner who attends another university, and yelling at the television when your team won in double overtime. Of these encounters, however, only one can be considered small group communication. Can you identify which encounter it is?

If you chose the encounter with the study group, you are correct. As you reflect again on these examples, you will note several characteristics that separate the time spent with the study group from the time spent in the other encounters. Once you've read this chapter, the characteristics will become even more apparent.

Before we offer a definition of small group communication, it is important to identify the advantages and disadvantages of working in a small group. Four advantages are associated with working in a small group. The first centers on the group's access to resources, which is considered to be the key advantage to working in groups (Baker & Campbell, 2004). In this sense, resources refer to time; money; member expertise, talent, or ability; or information. Successful groups take advantage of their access to resources. The second advantage is that group work provides members with a better understanding and retention of the concepts being examined by the group (Young & Henquinet, 2000). The third advantage is diversity in terms of group member opinion. The fourth advantage is **creativity**, which refers to the process by which group members engage in idea generation (Sunwolf, 2002).

Four disadvantages are associated with working in a group. The first is group member task coordination. As the number of group members increases, so does the ability for group members to coordinate, monitor, and regulate how the group task is accomplished. When group size increases, so too does the tendency for group communication to become less efficient as group members encounter more difficulty managing their relationships with each other (Bertcher & Maple, 1996) and less communication centers on the group task (Wheelan & McKeage, 1993). The second disadvantage is **social loafing**, which refers to the process by which individual member efforts decrease as the number of group members increases (Latane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). The larger the group, the greater the likelihood that individual group members will become more lax in contributing to the group task.

The third disadvantage centers on conflict. Although conflict is inherent in group work (Fisher, 1970), excessive or destructive fighting and arguing among group members can occur. Conflict will be explored further in Chapter 11. The



What are some additional advantages and disadvantages associated with working in your work group? Do the advantages outweigh the disadvantages? How?

fourth disadvantage is coping with member misbehaviors. Examples of misbehaviors include missing group meetings, failing to meet deadlines, spending more time on interpersonal issues than task issues, and failing to respond to member requests. Although these misbehaviors may be minor, they

can become problematic because they affect how the group eventually completes its task. Additionally, not all members will participate in group interaction. Some may feel their contributions are not welcomed by other members, some may

figure it is easier to let other group members speak for them, some may feel like they have to fight for the chance to be heard by the group, or some may be apprehensive about communicating and therefore their contributions (or lack thereof) are never acknowledged by the group.

Now that you are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of working in a small group, let's turn our attention to the definition of small group communication. We define **small group communication** as three or more people working interdependently for the purpose of accomplishing a task. To further understand small group communication, we need to examine the three primary features of small group communication: group size, interdependence, and task.

Primary Features of Small Group Communication

Group Size

Although small group researchers have disagreed over exactly how many members equate to a group (Bertcher & Maple, 1996; Shaw, 1981; Simmel, 1902), the general consensus is that for a small group to exist, it must have a minimum of 3 members and no more than 15 members (Socha, 1997). John Cragan and David Wright (1999), two prominent researchers in the field of small group communication, identified the ideal small group size as five to seven members. Regardless of how many members a group comprises, it is important to consider that all members have an influence on each other. This leads us to the next characteristic of a small group, interdependence.

Interdependence

The concept of interdependence is most closely associated with systems theory, which states that all parts of a system work together to adapt to its environment. Because the parts are linked to one another, a change in one part affects, in some way, the other parts. The process by which a change in one part affects the other parts is called **interdependence**. In a small group, interdependence occurs when members coordinate their efforts to accomplish their task. When something happens to, or affects, one group member, it will impact the rest of the group members—that is, interdependence means that any group member's behavior influences both group members' task behaviors and their relational behaviors (Bertcher, 1994). Additionally, interdependence explains why a group

can accomplish something collectively that individual members cannot accomplish alone (Henman, 2003). For example, suppose that Malik, a member of your history study group, does not attend the group's study session. His absence could affect the task behaviors of the group in numerous ways: If Malik has the only copy of the group's paper, your group now has to reconstruct the paper based on members' recollection of prior work. If Malik borrowed your class notes, you might have to borrow the notes from Mei-Len, another group member. If your group relies on Malik to question its decisions, his absence might cause the group to not examine its position. Malik's absence also could affect the relational behaviors of the group. For instance, when you ask Mei-Len to lend you her notes, she might hesitate based on her interpretation of Malik's behavior. Or if Malik is known to infuse humor into a tense group moment, his absence might cause conflict to escalate whereas his presence would cause conflict to subside. The bottom line is that regardless of how Malik's absence affects the rest of the group, his absence will affect, somehow, the ways in which group members complete the task and interact with each other.

Interdependence is a vital characteristic of a small group and should not be confused with independence (i.e., group members can work without ever having an effect on each other) or dependence (i.e., group members cannot function without being in the presence of each other). Rather, it is important to consider that a group's interdependence ultimately will have an impact on how the group accomplishes its task (sometimes referred to as an activity or goal), the primary reason why groups are formed.

Task

Without a task, a group need not exist. Often considered the purpose behind a group, a **task** is defined as an activity in which no externally correct decision exists and whose completion depends on member acceptance (Fisher, 1971). According to Ira Steiner (1972), small groups face additive tasks and conjunctive tasks. An **additive task** calls for group members to work individually on a task or one aspect of a task. Once all group members have completed their individual tasks, they then combine their efforts to create a final product. Groups that engage in an additive task often do not demonstrate interdependence until members combine their efforts. A **conjunctive task** requires group members to coordinate their efforts. Rather than work individually, group members work collectively to create a final product. This case necessitates interdependence from the moment a task is assigned to the moment of its accomplishment.

Regardless of whether a task is additive or conjunctive, consider the following: First, all members should participate in a group task. If a task is divisible or can be completed independently by group members, the nature of the task

may need to be reevaluated. Second, group members may not fully comprehend the task assigned to them. Third, one member may have a vested interest in the group task, even though all group members should be working toward the same group goals. Not only should hidden agendas be discouraged; they should not be allowed. Fourth, after task completion, the group may terminate. Although this consideration may not apply to all groups, a group generally need not continue its existence if the purpose of the group centered on task accomplishment and this accomplishment was reached.

Secondary Features of Small Group Communication

In addition to group size, interdependence, and task, three secondary features of small group communication—norms, identity, and talk—need examining.

Norms

A **norm** is defined as “the limits of allowable behaviors of individual members of the group” (Bonney, 1974, p. 449). In other words, a norm is a guideline or rule designed to regulate the behaviors of group members (Fujishin, 2007). Norms can be one of three types: task, procedural, or social. A **task norm** enables the group to work toward task accomplishment. For instance, imagine a volunteer group engaging in brainstorming to select the best way to raise funds for a local charity. To accomplish this task—selecting the best way to raise funds for a local charity—the group may establish task norms such as asking members to hold their criticism until all ideas have been generated or requiring members to provide some support for the idea they are advocating. A **procedural norm** indicates the procedures the group will follow. One way the volunteer group can enact a procedural norm is by putting a time limit on the brainstorming session. A **social norm** governs how group members engage in interpersonal communication. Examples of social norms include having the members of the volunteer group address each other by their first names and going out for coffee after the group meeting.

Keep in mind three considerations about norms. First, they can be developed in one of four ways (Feldman, 1984). Primarily developed through an explicit statement made by a group member, norms often transpire verbally (in either spoken or written form) and are agreed upon by the rest of the members. Norms also emerge based on a critical event in the group’s history, the initial behaviors used by one member that make a lasting impression on the other group members,

and members' experiences from previous group encounters. If you refer back to the case study, what norms has the group begun to develop? Which of the four



Identify several examples of task, procedural, and social norms used in your work group. What sanctions exist for breaking these norms?

ways of norm development explains the emergence of group norms for David, Hassan, Julie, Shanika, and Joseph?

Second, a group might choose to impose a sanction on a group member if he or she violates a norm (Shaw, 1981). A **sanction** can be thought of as

a punishment in response to a norm violation. Interestingly, the group also develops sanctions. For a sanction to be effective, the group must have both the power and the willingness to enforce it. Third, norms (and the possible accompanying sanctions) usually emerge after the second or third group meeting (Cragan & Wright, 1999). During the first meeting, most group members act on their best behavior because they are either unsure about the group task or concerned with the impressions they will make on other members. Once group members reduce their initial uncertainty about the task and each other, they let their guards down and group norms begin to develop.

Norms powerfully influence group member behavior. Developing a norm can determine not only how a group approaches its task and how group members communicate with each other but also how a group forges its identity.

Identity

Norms constitute one way a group establishes and maintains its identity (Olmsted & Hare, 1978). **Identity** refers to the psychological and/or physical boundaries that distinguish a group member from a non-group member. Psychological boundaries refer to the feelings experienced by group members based directly on their group membership. This psychological identity sometimes is referred to as “we-ness” and can result in both positive and negative feelings. Positive feelings include pride, cohesion, inclusion, and superiority. Negative feelings include disappointment, disgust, disapproval, and perhaps even embarrassment. Although these psychological boundaries are intangible, they play an important role in whether (and how) group members participate in group tasks, interact with one another, and perceive the group experience as enjoyable and worth their time.

Physical boundaries refer to the use of artifacts to indicate whether an individual belongs to a group. These boundaries include such things as clothing (e.g., wearing a sweatshirt or jacket emblazoned with the group's name or logo), seating arrangements in a social setting or the workplace (e.g., group members sitting next to each other in class when they are assigned a group project), and living arrangements (e.g., members of a fraternity sharing an apartment).



Photo 1.2 A uniform is one type of physical boundary that separates group members from non-group members.

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Although the identity shared by group members acts as a powerful influence on them, group identity also can influence how nonmembers (i.e., people who do not belong to the group) react to group members. This influence is group typing. **Group typing** arises when a nonmember makes assumptions (either positive or negative) about a person based on the person's group memberships. These assumptions can be based on any number of factors: what nonmembers have heard about the group (i.e., the group's reputation), nonmembers' observations of group members, nonmembers' interactions with one member of the group, or the public display of artifacts by any group member. Suppose you decide to go study at the Student Center. As you scan the food court looking for a place to sit, you notice three available seats: one next to a student wearing a T-shirt with the letters of a sorority, one next to a student dressed in her ROTC uniform, and one next to a student wearing a Ben Roethlisberger football jersey. Which seat would you choose? If you made a judgment (whether positive or negative) about any of these three students based on their public display of artifacts announcing their group membership, you have engaged in group typing.

As you can guess, group identity produces ramifications for both group members and nonmembers. A group's identity will be reflected not only in how

outsiders perceive the group but also in the types of talk in which group members participate.

Types of Talk

Small group communication researchers Lawrence Frey and Sunwolf (2005) posited communication is the essential defining feature of any small group. Group communication comprises four types of talk: problem-solving talk, role talk, consciousness-raising talk, and encounter talk (Cragan & Wright, 1999).

Problem-solving talk centers on accomplishing the group task. Because a group exists for the purpose of task accomplishment, members should participate in this type of talk. At the same time, it is essential to realize the bulk of a group's communication time should be spent on problem-solving talk. Although groups can use any number of discussion techniques to enhance problem-solving talk, the informal interaction of a group also can center on problem-solving talk.

Role talk centers on the specific role each group member plays in the group. Behind it is the idea that the role played by group members determines both the content and the relational aspect of their communication. In the case study provided at the beginning of this chapter, both David and Hassan struggle to establish themselves as the task leader. When David offers his house as a meeting place and Hassan suggests the group meet at the radio station, both are engaging in communication reflective of the task leader role. As you reread the exchange among the group members, what roles do Julie, Shanika, and Joseph play? You can identify these roles because group members' communication generally reflects the roles they desire to play.

Consciousness-raising talk centers on group identification and pride and is essential to group development, morale, and identity. Too much consciousness-raising talk is not productive, however. Although consciousness-raising talk enhances member satisfaction, when either a group's communication contains an inordinate amount of consciousness-raising talk or a group places greater emphasis

on consciousness-raising talk than problem-solving talk, it can decrease a group's performance.

Encounter talk consists of interpersonal communication. Examples include self-disclosure, responsiveness, and empathy. When group members self-disclose to each other, respond to



To what extent do the members of your work group engage in problem-solving talk? How often does your group engage in role talk, consciousness-raising talk, and encounter talk?

each other's needs, and listen to each other empathically, they develop a supportive communication climate. Furthermore, when group members feel satisfied with their group experience, they report greater feelings of closeness with their group members (Wheless, Wheless, & Dickson-Markman, 1982).

As such, all four types of talk contribute to effective small group communication. A group that engages in a balance of problem-solving talk, role talk, consciousness-raising talk, and encounter talk not only will accomplish its task effectively but also will act as a positive force behind whether its members enjoy the group experience. A group that fails to engage in one of these four types of talk or overemphasizes one type of talk runs the risk of hindering task accomplishment or alienating group members.

Types of Small Groups

Together, the small group communication process comprises three primary features and three secondary features. In any small group, size, interdependence, and task affect how its members communicate with each other. Norms, identity, and talk emerge from group member communication as well. These characteristics, however, are not restricted to just any one type of group.

Small group communication experts Isa Engleberg and Dianna Wynn (2003) have identified seven types of groups to which you can belong: primary, social, self-help, learning, service, work, and public. Another type of small group is the virtual group. As you read the definition of each of these eight groups, consider how the primary and the secondary features of small group communication apply to each group.

The first type of group is a **primary group**, which consists of members engaged in an intimate relationship. In this sense, intimacy centers on the use of several interpersonal communicative behaviors such as self-disclosure, empathy, trust, and perceived understanding. In a primary group, membership is based on sentiment (Olmsted & Hare, 1978). Two examples of a primary group are your family and your close circle of friends.

The second type of group is a **social group**. Unlike a primary group whose membership is composed of individuals in intimate relationships, a social group comprises members who share a common interest or engage in a common activity that binds them. Examples of a social group include membership in a fraternity or sorority, an intramural sports team, or an honor society such as Lambda Pi Eta, a national honorarium for students enrolled in communication studies courses. Although an intimate relationship can develop among members in a social group, the common interest or activity binds them.

The third type of group is a **self-help group**, whose membership comprises individuals who share a common problem or life situation (Meissen, Warren, & Kendall, 1996). Approximately 40% of the American population seeks help at some point from some type of a self-help group (Wuthnow, 1994). Examples of

self-help groups include Alcoholics Anonymous and any number of support groups available on the Internet providing help for health, personal, or relationship issues. Greg Meissen and his colleagues (1996) found that college students are more likely to join self-help groups when dealing with such issues as a physical handicap, sexual assault, childhood abuse, AIDS, or drug abuse but are less likely to do so when dealing with such issues as relationship problems, sexual harassment, anxiety about school, or parental divorce. Once members have resolved the issue or solved the problem that influenced them to join the group, their membership in the group usually terminates.

The fourth type of group is a **learning group**. The purpose behind membership in a learning group is to enhance members' skills, abilities, or cognitive processes. In 2001, 47% of working adults joined a learning group to enhance job and language training (Snapshot, 2004). By belonging to a learning group, members hope to gain additional knowledge or improve a behavior. One example of a learning group is the group identified at the beginning of this chapter. Through membership in their classroom group, David, Hassan, Julie, Shanika, and Joseph should learn more about the small group communication process. Other examples of learning groups include enrolling in a yoga class, obtaining CPR certification, or taking a Lamaze class when you and your partner are expecting a child. Similar to membership in a self-help group, once members have acquired the needed skills, abilities, or cognitive processes (i.e., have mastered yoga, obtained their CPR certification, or experienced the birth of their child), they will no longer need to retain membership in the learning group.

The fifth type of group is a **service group**, composed largely of volunteers who donate their time, energy, and effort to help others in need of a particular service or who lack something that would help them lead a functional life. Although volunteers may belong to a service group for any number of reasons, a service group's task is to help someone less fortunate. A common service group found on many college campuses is Alpha Phi Omega. According to www.apo.org (n.d.), Alpha Phi Omega is a national, undergraduate fraternity dedicated to campus-based volunteerism. What are some examples of service groups on your college campus?

The sixth type of group is a **public group**, in which group members interact for the benefit of an audience. In most cases, little interaction occurs between the public group and the audience. At this point in your college career, you already may have participated in this type of group. One example of a public group is a **symposium**, in which each group member presents a speech on one aspect of a topic, whose theme unifies the group members in that each member is responsible for a subtopic. Another example is a **panel discussion**, when a group engages in a discussion about a topic. Usually, members of the panel provide the answers to questions posed by a moderator. The moderator may or may not be a member



Photo 1.3 Membership in a yoga class is one example of a learning group.

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of the group. If you have taken a public speaking course, you may have engaged in either a symposium or a panel discussion as one of the course requirements. Other examples of a public group include a governance board (e.g., the Student Government Association, your city council), a public forum, or some news programs on television (e.g., *Hardball* on MSNBC, *Crossfire* on CNN). These types will be discussed in greater detail in Appendix B.

The seventh type of group is a **work group**, which occurs within an organizational context. A work group's members complete a common task on behalf of an organization whose members take collective responsibility for the task (Keyton, 1993). Work groups are differentiated by the physical and intellectual abilities needed by group members, the amount of time the group dedicates to task completion, the task structure, the resistance group members encounter when attempting to complete the task, the degree to which task completion depends on technology, and the health risks assumed by group members as they engage in task completion (Devine, 2002). Take a moment and peruse the types of work groups listed in Table 1.1. To how many types of work groups have you belonged? What are some examples of each type?

Table 1.1 Types of Work Groups

<i>Type</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Executive	Plan/direct
Command	Coordinate
Negotiation	Deal/persuade
Commission	Choose/investigate
Design	Create/develop
Advisory	Suggest/diagnose
Service	Provide/repair
Production	Assemble/build
Performance	Enact
Medical	Treat/heal
Response	Protect/rescue
Military	Protect/neutralize
Transportation	Haul
Sports	Compete/win

Source: From Devine, D. J. (2002). A review and integration of classification systems relevant to teams in organizations. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 6, 291–310. Copyright © American Psychological Association.

The eighth type of group is a **virtual group**, composed of members who work interdependently on a task but from different physical locations via communication technology (Walther & Bunz, 2005). Unlike members of primary or social groups, members of virtual groups are less likely to exchange social-emotional information and their relationships may not develop as quickly or as fully (Krebs, Hobman, & Bordia, 2006). In some cases, virtual groups evolve into a **virtual community**, or a group that meets regularly in cyberspace for members to share their experiences, opinions, and knowledge on a particular topic or interest (Nicolopoulou, Kostomaj, & Campos, 2006). With the proliferation of technology and the Internet, membership in a variety of virtual groups and communities (Parker, 2003) is easily accessible.

Not all small groups can be classified neatly into one of these eight types, however. Other types of small groups, such as treatment groups and residential

groups (Bertcher & Maple, 1996), exist. Also, one type of group may contain the characteristics of several of the eight types of groups. For instance, the Alpha Phi Omega Web site states membership in Alpha Phi Omega features three benefits: Membership allows members to develop their leadership skills (i.e., a learning group), experience friendship (i.e., a primary group), and engage in service activities (i.e., a service group). Although Alpha Phi Omega primarily fits the service group category, through group membership members also gain the benefits associated with a learning group and a social group.

Ethics of Small Group Membership

So far, we have provided the advantages and disadvantages of working in a small group, defined small group communication, identified and explained the primary and secondary features of small groups, and explored the eight types of groups to which you can belong. We have not yet discussed, however, the ethics associated with small group membership. **Ethics**, or the process of making judgments (e.g., good-bad/right-wrong/worthy-unworthy) about a person's behaviors or actions (Northouse, 2004; Seeger, 1997), surrounds the communication process (Jensen, 1997). In a small group, ethics is particularly important because as groups move through the decision-making or problem-solving process, several questions arise that must be addressed: For example, "Why are we doing this?" "Should we be doing this?" "What are the consequences (i.e., intended versus unintended, short-versus long-term) of doing this?" (Arnett, 1990; Minnick, 1980). At the same time, group members need to take into account how their verbal communication, nonverbal communication, and listening behaviors affect how they construct messages and how they interpret these messages. See Table 1.2 for ways to be an ethically responsible group member.

Many people's communicative behaviors reveal their sense of ethics. Examples of communicating in an unethical manner include deliberately lying, knowingly distorting or twisting the truth, using emotional appeals that cannot be supported, misrepresenting a position or stance on a topic, and pretending to be informed about a topic (Brown & Keller, 1994). To avoid communicating unethically, group members should follow four guidelines (Wallace, 1955): First, do not withhold information from group members. Second, be truthful and accurate when sharing information with group members. Facts and opinions should be presented fairly, the use of propaganda should be avoided, and the appropriate

“ *Ethically Speaking:* What are some ethical guidelines that your work group has adopted? How have these guidelines impacted how your group approaches a task? ”

Table 1.2 Assuming Ethical Responsibility

<i>To assume ethical responsibility, group members should:</i>
1. be able to make up their minds without normative pressure to conform.
2. share the accountability of the task decisions and consequences.
3. communicate with each other as they would want other members to communicate with them.
4. self-disclose appropriately to share values and opinions in a spirit of openness and honesty.
5. be allowed to develop their potential as an individual and as a group member.
6. avoid attacking the competencies of other members.
7. engage in sound reasoning behaviors that reflect value.

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vocabulary and language should be used when communicating with each other. Third, group members should reveal all sources of information and opinion by ensuring that the information does not contain rumor, gossip, or unsubstantiated fact. Moreover, group members should acknowledge any personal motivation they have when it comes to the group making a decision or solving a problem. Fourth, respect dissent by recognizing the diversity of argument and opinion that can exist among group members.

Perhaps the best method by which group members can embrace ethics is to adopt a code of ethical responsibility. **Ethical responsibility** requires group members to act in a way that not only promotes caring for both themselves and each other but also requires members to share equally in assuming responsibility for the consequences of their actions (Littlejohn & Jabusch, 1982). Ethics expert Richard Johannesen (2002) identified a host of ways in which group members can embrace ethical responsibility. By adopting a code of ethical responsibility, group members can establish a foundation for quality decision making and problem solving that considers the consequences of these decisions and problems.

A Final Note About Small Group Communication

After reading this book and completing this course, you will learn more about your own feelings about working in groups. Specifically, you will be able to identify the

aspects of group work that intrigue, motivate, or perhaps even irritate you. You also may be able to determine whether any feelings of **grouphate**—feelings of dread that arise when faced with the possibility of having to work in a group (Sorensen, 1981)—are warranted or whether these feelings pertain to membership in a particular group. In such learning groups as classroom groups, grouphate can be particularly detrimental. Grouphate emerges in classroom groups for many reasons: Group members misbehave, fail to contribute equally to the task, receive the same grade regardless of their input, and experience personality clashes (Myers, Goodboy, & Members of COMM 612, 2004). Unfortunately, when students working in classroom groups experience grouphate, they report less learning, less group cohesion, less group consensus, less relational satisfaction, and fewer positive attitudes about group work (Keyton, Harmon, & Frey, 1996; Myers & Goodboy, 2005).

As researchers have noted, however, knowing how and being able to work effectively in a small group, both in and out of the classroom (Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989; Hawkins & Fillion, 1999; Wardrope & Bayless, 1999; Winsor, Curtis, & Stephens, 1997; Winter & Neal, 1995), has important ramifications. In fact, the results obtained from a national survey found that being able to work in a group is one of the most important competencies an employee can have (Echternacht & Wen, 1997). Because “membership in groups is almost inescapable” (Bonney, 1974, p. 445), being able to reflect on what you have learned as a member of a small group undoubtedly will help you become a viable partner in future academic, work, and community endeavors.

Conclusion

With the purpose of introducing you to small group communication, this chapter provided the advantages and disadvantages of working in a small group, defined small group communication, identified and explained the three primary features and the three secondary features associated with group communication, explored the eight types of groups to which you can belong, and examined the ethics associated with working in a small group. As you read the next chapter, consider how the features of small group communication contribute to the socialization process you experience when you join a group.

Discussion Questions

1. How would you define small group communication? In addition to the three primary features and the three secondary features of small group communication identified in this chapter, what additional features would you add? Why?

2. Review the advantages and disadvantages of group work. To what extent do these advantages and disadvantages depend on whether the group is a primary, social, self-help, learning, service, public, work, or virtual group?
3. Select two of the eight types of groups. For each group, generate examples of problem-solving talk, role talk, consciousness-raising talk, and encounter talk that have occurred. Is there a difference in the quantity of the types of talk between the two groups? Is there a difference in the quality of the types of talk between the two groups? How might you explain these differences?
4. Apply the three primary features and the three secondary features of small group communication to the case study provided at the beginning of this chapter. Based on this group's first interaction, how successful do you think the group will be?
5. How would the three primary features of small group communication and the three secondary features of small group communication apply to a virtual group?

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