



Effective Collaboration

Four Pillars of Good Collaboration

When we think of great leadership, we tend to think about individuals and the impressive things they have accomplished. The reality of leadership, though, is grounded in our ability to collaborate effectively.

Leadership Toolbox: Collaboration



Collaboration is not just important for leaders, of course. Collaboration is

fundamental to everything we do, especially our careers. It is worth noting that **in a 2015 study commissioned by the AAC&U (<https://www.aacu.org/leap/public-opinion-research/2015-survey-falling-short>)**, 91% of employers reported that a job candidate's skills were more important than their college major. Being able to work effectively in teams was rated the second most important skill. Oral communication, which is integral to collaboration, was the most important.

Students in the **Honors Mentor Program ([../Leadership-Opportunities/mentor-program/index.php](https://honors.purdue.edu/current-students/Leadership-Development/mentor-program/index.php))** gain significant experience with helping students develop collaboration skills in group project settings, which gives them a good deal of insight on this topic. Based on mentors' input and existing scholarship, here are four pillars of good collaboration that all students should keep in mind.

I. Psychological Safety

- Definition: Psychological Safety is considered by many experts to be the most essential ingredient for good collaboration. Teams must work to create an environment that is safe for interpersonal and ideational risk taking. In a healthy team, everyone feels comfortable sharing their motivations, their concerns, and their most outrageous ideas.
- Elements for Good Psychological Safety
 1. **Group norms:** Groups norms are routines and typical ways of engaging that work for everyone. Some groups like to chat first, some get to business, some get together outside of class. The most important thing is that the group identifies a standard for working together that works for everyone.
 - Strategies: 1.) create a covenant or code of cooperation, 2.) incorporate standard procedures for holding each other accountable and providing feedback.

2. **Equitable Participation:** Research shows that groups with equitable turn taking tend to have higher collective IQs and are more successful overall. This occurs because the group is benefiting from everyone's unique perspective, knowledge base, and skills. Equitable participation often requires a concerted effort, though, including avoiding practices that might discourage some group members from participating.
 - Strategies: 1.) start a conversation by going around the circle and giving everyone a chance to participate; 2.) include reflection moments so people can gather their thoughts and share them; 3.) avoid insider jokes that not everyone in the group will understand.

3. **Encouraging Vulnerability:** Embracing low levels of vulnerability can accelerate team bonding, lead to greater comfort and inclusivity, and promote better collaboration.
 - Strategies: 1.) use icebreakers, such as highs & lows; 2.) acknowledge common challenges or struggles.

II. Communication

- Definition: Strong communicators are first and foremost strong listeners who pay careful attention to the verbal and non-verbal language of others. Groups that communicate well are thoughtful and deliberate in selecting the strategies and styles of communication that work for different situations.

- Elements of Good Communication
 1. **Active Listening:** Good active listening involves giving the speaker your full attention, focusing not just on their words but being aware of the whole person. This means paying attention to their body language or their tone of voice to really understand what they are saying and feeling. Good

active listeners also ensure that the speaker sees them listening and confirms that they have heard what the speaker has said.

- Strategies: 1.) assign yourself the group role of active listener; 2.) summarize what others have said before you respond to confirm you understood; 3.) employ add-on conversations where each person most build on to something said before.

2. **Being Deliberate:** Groups should be deliberate in choosing communication styles and strategies that best fit the context or task. Individuals should also take care to be deliberate with their words and make sure their actions, body language, and phrasing is set up in a way to achieve the maximum possible success.

- Strategies: 1.) withhold judgement or criticism during brainstorming sessions; 2.) acknowledge shifts in conversation to topics that are distinctly more or less serious in nature; 3.) convey sincerity when praising others or addressing others' concerns.

3. **Visual Tools:** Some types of collaboration work best when put in writing or drawn out on a board. Writing out ideas or plans helps ensure shared understanding, allows for accountability, and can make it easier for multiple people to do complex thinking together - like drawing connections between each other's ideas.

- Strategies: 1.) use visual agendas for meetings to help the group stay on track; 2.) create scoreboards to celebrate the accomplishments of group members and ensure accountability

III. Team Roles & Strengths

- Definition: Not all group members bring the same backgrounds, histories,

knowledges, and talents to a group. Rather than ignore these differences, groups should embrace them. The first step is simply appreciating these differences, and the fact that each person will inevitably play a different role in the group's success. From there, identified roles can help individuals understand how they and others fit into the team. Roles work best when they are suited to the needs of the group and when they are based on the strengths and interests of the individuals.

- Elements of Good Team Roles

1. **Recognize Individual Strengths and Interests:** Groups work best when they take advantage of their members' individual differences and strengths. Identifying individual roles based on personal interests ensures group members feel valued and stay committed to the group task.
 - Strategies: 1.) have a candid discussion about individual strengths and interests; 2.) take note of what roles individuals like to take in group settings and consider how those roles might be formalized.
2. **Establish Roles Based on Team Needs:** Roles are good, but only if they address what the team actually needs. Groups should consider their larger goals and what roles will ensure that those goals are reached in an effective manner. Not all roles should be task oriented, though - some roles should focus on maintaining a healthy group dynamic. Some roles can even be used to mitigate problem behaviors.
 - Strategies: 1.) visually list major goals and individual strengths, then assign tasks based on strengths, interests, and team priorities; 2.) create roles to ensure necessary behaviors, like someone to lead meetings or someone to offer positive feedback; 3.) assign a dominating personality the role of note-taker or active listener.

IV. Consensus

- **Definition:** Consensus means that all members of a group have a shared understanding of their goals and that they come to an agreement about how best to achieve those goals. Of course, group members will not always agree; in fact, disagreement can be valuable. Disagreement often leads to a group's best and most unique ideas, and it can help identify gaps in shared understanding that had not been recognized before.
- **Elements of Good Consensus**
 1. **Shared Purpose and Goals:** All group members should have a shared sense of the group's purpose -- why does the group exist? what do the group members want to get out of their work together? With a shared sense of purpose in mind, the group can then begin to identify major goals that best suit that purpose.
 - **Strategies:** 1.) Write up a statement of purpose that the group agrees on; 2.) Before jumping into a project, take a moment to define major goals. What is the group trying to achieve? 3.) Create opportunities to re-evaluate how a current goal aligns with the group's purpose.
 2. **Making Group Decisions:** Groups should consider developing strategies or group norms for making decisions together. Group decisions are best when everyone has a voice in the process, when everyone in the group understands how the decisions align with the larger goals, and when everyone agrees on the final decision.
 - **Strategies:** 1.) When coming to key decisions, take a moment to get the perspectives of all the group members; 2.) Create a map of the major goals and use that as a framework for making decisions together; 3.) Be an advocate for others in the group who are not being heard.
 3. **Checking in & Managing Conflict:** Accepting conflict leads to healthy collaboration, and it starts with regularly touching base with all members of the group to assess whether disagreement or conflict has occurred. If a

conflict has come up, allow members to voice their perspectives and keep in mind the larger goals and purposes of the group.

- Strategies: 1) Start each meeting with a description of what the group has accomplished and where the group is heading; open up this time for group members to ask questions or voice different perspectives. 2) Meet one-on-one periodically to determine how individuals are feeling about group decisions.

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