

Contribution problems in student work groups: cause and solutions

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1. Introduction

Initial interaction has enormous impact to groups' structure (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 141). Structure helps people to define their roles, statuses and power. Without certain structure negative conflicts are more important. Also key elements, which effect to groups' interaction and performance, is group size and history among its members effects (Hollingshead, Wittenbaum, Paulus, Hirokawa, Ancona, Peterson, Jehn, & Yoon 2005, 38–40).

Student group as a context is a little different to comparing work and free-time groups. I do think university students groups should be academic, intelligent and effective. In Finland my group sometimes did have problems with social level and in storming. Finland we try to avoid conflict and it is making as too careful. In social level we do not talk so much about ourselves so won't know the group members so well. In University of Ulster the first problem is the effectiveness. Sometimes people do not show if they shows up they haven't done anything and the time is just going by talking personal things, like the night clubs. This not showing is happening although it was explicit norm in my group (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 115). One of the problems is also skills, like doing presentation to get right kind of information and knowledge how power point is effective, e.g. full slide in font 12 isn't working. Working in this kind of group can fun but also frustrating. In a work group this kind of effectiveness would not be accepted.

2. Definition of the terms

2.1. Conflict

Boulding (1962, Cited in Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 143) defines conflict “as awareness by the parties involved as differences, discrepancies, incompatible wishes, or irreconcilable desires”. Conflict is usually saw as a problem in groups and it is tried to avoid but there is two kind of conflict: negative which tears group members or member apart from each other and may cause group not working at all. There are also positive conflicts which can give new angles to looking something. Positive conflicts also increases critical thinking and prevents group-thinking. In this essay conflict is usually used on negative meaning.

2.2. Group norms

Group norms are largely shared ideas what members should think or feel (Mills 1967, 74). Group norms can be invisible to outsiders but those can also be written rules. Breaking the norms can cause problems, like in worst case e.g. sexual harassment lawsuits. (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 106; 112–114.)

2.3. Cohesion and group-thinking

Workgroup is cohesive when its members are sticking together and wants to remain in group (Brown 2000, 45). Task cohesion is commitment to the goals, tasks and activities of the group. Social cohesion is attraction towards and liking amongst group members. ”The more cohesive group is the more power it gains over its members” (Myers 2002, 226). Janis (1971, Cited in Myers 2002, 309) defined groupthink, ”The mode of thinking that persons engage in when concurrence-seeking becomes so dominant in a cohesive in-group that it tends to override realistic appraisal of alternative courses of action.”

3. Causing conflicts

Different background and personalities

Problems are also caused by different working culture, tool use, different traditions and norms. Diversity can lead to lower levels of co-operation and conflict (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 142). In our group different working culture, tradition and norms was causing problems because I am used to more effective and academic approach to the group work. Also meeting the deadlines was different or the tradition to make agreement. For me if somebody suggests something and nobody protest is agreement.

Problems can occur as personal differences, information deficiency, role incompatibility and environmental stress. Distracting life events, conflicting expectations, promotion and betrayal usually makes relationships worse and may cause conflicts (Sias 2006, 71–73). Usually environment is decided by a group so it is usually good. Role incompatibles can appear on three different level, person-person, role-role and person-role. These incompatibles can appear between two people but also intrapersonal level, like person's giving role can be totally different to person, e.g. vegetarian who is making advertisement for Meat Corporation. Role-role conflict is happening e.g. when one is trying study on computer and another is trying updating it. Person to person can only happen between two people, this is just those two peoples personalities' doesn't match. (Duck, Foley & Kirkpatrick 2006.)

Timetable

One normal problem is too tight timetables. It can be that there isn't enough time be as a group and agree what everybody will do. Or the deadline can be too quick so it isn't possible to do the best possible work. For my experience if in the beginning isn't enough time to forming as a group. It will affect as increased groupthinking or conflicts. The group isn't then working in social level.

Lack of attention, commitment and frustration

One of the main problems in our group was lack of attention and commitment. People weren't looking material for our meetings. In our meetings we weren't talking about the material usually we were talking off-topic and in some point I did explain what I had found. I did try to maximize my own and groups outcomes but I wasn't successful. Interdependence wasn't really working because we were only depending each other in presentation. That we have enough material for 10–15minutes which mend everybody had own section. I did have mixed motives, sometimes I did lose some of my motives for groups, like too much pushing talking on-topic. I think I and other members did have different preferences, recourses and choices. (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 141.) These could have lead to conflict and afterword thinking it would have been good decision because it would probably eased my frustration but on the other hand this can be just cultural difference. We also had power and status differences but there wasn't any possibility that those would have lead to conflict, like those can (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 141).

Canary (2003, 522) gives even more conflict potential, including these previous he also states that aggression, frustration, lack of fairness, incompetence, relationship threat, predispositions and generally learned responses. In our group work I was often frustrated whi ch can be put four sub categories, goal interference, which mean that somebody else is intertwine between you and your goal. In expectation violation this is when you expect something which isn't coming true. Thwarted plans are, like when your bus connection is cancelled because of mechanical failure. Fourth one is impotence, when somebody doesn't believe you, like video rental shop doesn't believe that you have returned the DVD. (Canary 2003, 522.) In our group work I did felt frustration many times and through this theory I can specify it to be expectation violation because I waited more effective working which based on my previous experiences about the group works. Also I waited sticking on

agreements.

Napier & Gershenfeld (2004, 354–359) adds that perception can cause conflicts, sometimes there can be two different perceptions about one thing. Stereotypes prejudice and bias can be one of the reasons for conflicts, as well as values and beliefs, like in Northern-Ireland the beliefs of should NI stay apart of UK may cause problems. These are usually voided by not talking about those if is not necessary. Power, authority and control also lead to problems if those aren't balanced or those are used wrongly. Transgression is also one of problems causing. Still one of the most common problems causing thing is choices, like do we choose this or that topic.

Lack of leadership

My experience the lack of leadership is causing effectiveness but also authoritarian leader (Hackman & Johnson 2004, 39) who isn't doing his/her task properly and this can cause frustration which can cause conflicts and other problems.

4. Coping with the problems

Helping with problems

Communication between the members is the key, sooner the problem is recognised and discussed is better, so open and talking atmosphere is important. Conflicts should also be seen as constructive way and not to be avoided.

Usually group decision making is helping cooperation between members and in creating cohesion.

Feedback mechanism helps people to get their voice through so it is also helping with problems and making those visible.

If group have expectations about the future, it increases co-operation and so reduces negative conflicts (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 142). Usually then they are acknowledge the norms and do not break them.

Before making groups

Group size have affect, Wheelan's (2009) research showed that group which has three or four members is more effective than group of five or six. So smaller groups are less there is frustration and so probably less conflicts. Also smaller number makes possible to know the members better in less of time.

Preventing social loafing

Social loafing is usually a problem so preventing it is important. One thing to prevent it is to group having common goal and task should be challenging, appealing, involving and motivating. Motivation is decreased when performing additive tasks. Secondly each member's contribution should be detected through monitoring. Thirdly reward system must reflect individual's contributions. If members are friends there will be less loafing. (Myers 1990, 289–294.)

Our goal in the group work wasn't clear from the start. First it was discussing in groups about the topic and making presentation and diary how our group is working. Then it was changed to make presentation our topic. So we then had two goals, and our group work wasn't challenging because it was discussion and reporting. For me it wasn't motivating or appealing but it did involve me to be group member and do my part but most of our group wasn't so involved.

Our work was monitored by one discussion with the lecturer and also how we perform in presentation but the main monitoring was happening through our diaries. There was option to do that anonymously and one member demanded it so we were forced to do that anonymously. After that the monitoring through this way is useless because the social loafer cannot be identified. Diaries can only tell that we did have a social loafer in our group. Reward system, the grades, can only works based on the presentation, not the most off the work which happened before it.

In our group social loafer was identified and when we start really began to build up the presentation social loafer was delivering, so we did made to involve one by giving certain area. If one haven't had done it, one would have been identified in our presentation. Which was more choking to realize that these another three didn't have any material in our 7th meeting. I just wonder was the named social loafer the biggest loafer because one usually had some information and when we decided something more important one did deliver. Our first meetings leader another hand didn't got any material in any of our meeting until the 8th time. Even then one had only text which weren't ready for power point. One did also make our discussion off-topic and one was usually saying that we don't have anything to discuss so we can end the meeting.

Effective Coping Strategies

There isn't always something to change to prevent problems but there is some tactics to copy with those. Any usually not so appropriate tactic is depersonalization, to try to get as far as possible from the problem. Two described maximally effective coping strategies are Problem solving and Cognitive

reappraisal. In problem solving “the person explores the sources of stress and designs a plan or strategies to overcome the stressors.” This is emotionally based problem solving where the aim is reduce psychological discomfort. In Cognitive reappraisal “the person reframes the experience in such a way that benefits or growth points are identified”, e.g. what you can learn from this conflict. It isn’t focusing on ending the conflict but it tries to see it more constructive way. Both of these tactics have same order, first looks for information. Secondly thinking which parts are causing stress and discomfort. Thirdly analysing different alternatives and fourthly making plans. (Omdahl 2006.)

5. Problem solving

5.1. General

Napier and Gershenfeld (2004, 296) have said conflict can be seen as a way of solving problems. Mutual goals, problem-solving and decision-making strategies can increase trust and cohesion. (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 296.)

Creating a Cooperative climate

For creating a cooperative climate, first thing is joint efforts which can be created by open and honest communication. Communication should emphasize on similarities and trusting each other. Just generally have a friendly attitude. In a cooperative climate problems are solved together. Also conflicting interests should be reduced. Tit for Tat strategy for a cooperative climate has three rules, 1st be nice. 2nd respond to provocation. 3rd be forgiving. (Hackman & Johnson 2004, 171.)

5.2. Negotiation as joint problem solving

First key to conflict solving through negotiation is to separate people from the problem. The people aren't usually the problem and when this is acknowledged it is easier to search for a satisfaction result. Then focus on interests, not on needs. After that it is possible to reach both satisfying results through brainstorming and thinking outside the box. All the time insist on objective criteria, through it is possible to find both satisfaction results. (Hackman & Johnson 2004, 173-175.) The end result is usually something where both have made some compromises but sometimes there could be a new kind of result. When people aren't just thinking their best solution, they can't think outside of the box and find even better solutions which can satisfy both parties.

Conflict starts to solve by agreeing on some aspects of the other's position.

4-R method

Receive, let the other's comment on the issue, without interruption. Then Repeat the other's comments as objectively as possible. Thirdly Request the other's to make suggestions, how to deal with the problem. Fourth is to Review options and decide which the best result is for both parties.

The six stages of rational problem solving

First stage in rational problem solving is identification and clarification, to know what is to be solved. Secondly is the diagnostic phase, where the problem is clarified and relationships identified. In this point the problem's scale is recognized. In this point polarization should be avoided and try to isolate specific causal factors. Then it is time to generate alternatives how to solve the problem. It's also possible to get outside help. Stage four is selecting solutions and fifth is implementation. Sixth stage is evaluation and adjustment. Problem solving must be flexible and open to new ideas. (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 305-309.) Another instrument for rational problem solving is the Pareto system (see Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 315-317). The most of the problems are still solved in the moment through intuition (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 318).

Finding solutions through brainstorming

Brainstorming is strictly rational, linear and highly controlled approach. It was introduced by Alex Storm (1953, Cited in Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 320). Brainstorm technique is trying not to limit individual creativeness. Limiting powers are e.g. social embarrassment and pressure for conformity. Brainstorming is also trying to get maximum benefit of all creativity-enhancing force in the group, like social support.

Brainstorming has ground rules, one of the important ones is that no criticism or evaluating is allowed. Ideas are presented as fast as possible without discussion, clarification or comment. Quantity rules, it is better to get as many ideas as possible, piggybacking is allowed. Sometime it is good to limit number of ideas per time to encourage the less vocal people to present their ideas. It is necessary that everybody knows and understands the rules of brainstorming to put creativeness to role in the group. To make brainstorm work efficiently secretary who records all the ideas is needed as also time limit. Time limit is usually between one and fifteen. (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 321.)

Brainstorm has many benefits, like it reduces dependency on a one dominant person and encourages sharing the ideas. Brainstorming can lead greater participation in the group. It usually provides maximum output in really short time period. Brainstorming is usually enjoyable and stimulating. Brainstorm is nowadays widely, probably too widely, used method but it has also another down-side's like some people feel discomfort in brainstorming. (Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 322–323.)

In deciding our group topic it would have been good idea to use brainstorming in our second meeting when we were narrowing down our topic. One got really hurt when one's idea for was rapidly and massively shot down, if we would have used brainstorming, one's idea wouldn't be shot down. We just haven't picked it.

6. Conclusion

Conflicts should not to be afraid because brief but frequent conflicts may improve groups' performance and results (Lovaglia, Mannix, Samuelson, Sell & Wilson 2005, 142; Napier & Gershenfeld 2004, 296).

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