

Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University | ONLINE DOCUMENT
WORKING IN GROUPS: A QUICK GUIDE FOR STUDENTS #6
Some Common Problems (And Some Solutions)

Floundering - While people are still figuring out the work and their role in the group, the group may experience false starts and circular discussions, and decisions may be postponed.

1. Examples of what to say:

Here's my understanding of what we are trying to accomplish... Do we all agree?

What would help us move forward: data? resources?

Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.

Dominating participants and reluctant participants - Some people might take more than their share of the discussion by talking too often, asserting superiority, telling lengthy stories, or not letting others finish. Sometimes humor can be used to discourage people from dominating. Others may rarely speak because they have difficulty getting in the conversation. Sometimes looking at people who don't speak can be a non-verbal way to include them. Asking quiet participants for their thoughts outside the group may lead to their participation within the group.

1. Examples of what to say:

How would we state the general problem? Could we leave out the details for a moment? Could we structure this part of the discussion by taking turns and hearing what everyone has to say?

Let's check in with each other about how the process is working: Is everyone contributing to discussions? Can discussions be managed differently so we can all participate? Are we all listening to each other?

Digressions and tangents - Too many interesting side stories can be obstacles to group progress. It may be time to take another look at the agenda and assign time estimates to items. Try to summarize where the discussion was before the digression. Or, consider whether there is something making the topic easy to avoid.

1. Examples of what to say:

Can we go back to where we were a few minutes ago and see what we were trying to do ?

Is there something about the topic itself that makes it difficult to stick to?

Getting Stuck - Too little progress can get a group down. It may be time for a short break or a change in focus. However, occasionally when a group feels that it is not making progress, a solution emerges if people simply stay with the issue.

1. Examples of what to say:

What are the things that are helping us solve this problem? What's preventing us from solving this problem?

Let's take a few minutes to hear everyone's suggestions about how this process might work better and what we should do next.

I understand that some of you doubt whether anything new will happen if we work on this problem. Are we willing to give it a try for the next fifteen minutes?

Rush to work - Usually one person in the group is less patient and more action-oriented than the others. This person may reach a decision more quickly than the others and then pressure the group to move on before others are ready.

1. Examples of what to say:

Are we all ready-to make a decision on this?

What needs to be done before we can move ahead?

Let's go around and see where everyone stands on this.

Feuds - Occasionally a conflict (having nothing to do with the subject of the group) carries over into the group and impedes its work. It may be that feuding parties will not be able to focus until the viewpoint of each is heard. Then they must be encouraged to lay the issue aside.

1. Examples of what to say:

So, what you are saying is... And what you are saying is... How is that related to the work here?

*If we continue too long on this, we won't be able to get our work done.
Can we agree on a time limit and then go on?*

Ignoring or ridiculing others - When someone consistently ignores or ridicules what others say, criticizing their experience or knowledge, good-natured humor or a private conversation outside the group can be effective.

Parts adapted and quoted from the following training materials:
Heller Hunt and Cunningham. "Advanced Facilitator" Brookline, MA 1992
Interaction Associates. "Collaborative Problem Solving" Cambridge, MA 1987
J. Sketchley, A. Mejia, I. Aitken et al. Work Improvement in Health Services.
Geneva: World Health Organization, 1986

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