

Communication in Small Group Discussion

1. Remember that you are taking part in a discussion to learn, to help other people learn, to examine issues, to share ideas, and to listen to the ideas and points of view of others. A discussion involves interaction among group members, a willingness to share ideas, and a willingness to respect others' points of view.
2. Thoroughly prepare. Do what you are supposed to do. Lack of preparation creates questions about your commitment to the group, and it is a source of member dissatisfaction, which can become extreme. It results in lopsided participation, and it often increases your anxiety.
3. Stay within the ethical and topical boundaries of group discussion. Make a commitment to do your best to work for the good of the group, to deliberate fairly, and to be a fair player.
4. Contribute. Propose new ideas, activities, and procedures. Share your knowledge. You must take part, even if you are shy. Do not censor yourself because you think you might sound unintelligent. Creative ideas often emerge from things we almost did not say.
5. Encourage others to participate. If someone hogs the floor, help out the quieter people by gate-keeping; give the quiet persons opening to talk. Do not put down the contributions of others. Make the group a safe place to contribute and to try out new ideas.
6. Ask questions. If you do not understand what someone means, ask for clarification. Seek information. Seek other questions. Seek opinions. Always have a paper and pencil handy, and use them. Write down important points and decisions the group makes. Note what the rationale is for the decision. If you do not know, bring it up and ask for clarification.
7. Listen. Always let other people have their say even if you are bursting to say something. If you tend to talk a lot, force yourself to listen to others for awhile. Do not turn off what others say because you do not agree with them.
8. Give credit where credit is due. If someone has said something you think is important, remind the group about it. If you bring the group back to an idea originally contributed by another group member, give that person credit. Use each other's names.
9. Encourage everyone to do well. Take pride in the work of the group, and make a point to give each other pats on the back. At the same time, do not fool yourselves into thinking you are doing good work if you are not.
10. Speak up if you feel strongly about something. If something bothers you, bring it up; do not let it fester. If five people in a group of five are all afraid of speaking up about the little things, those mole hills easily become mountains.
11. Manage interpersonal conflict. Be prepared to change your mind if you have been proved wrong. If two people misunderstand each other, help them out. Conflict is necessary and important in a group, but needs to be kept within manageable boundaries. It is important to take breaks to let tension cool at times; other times, it is important to forge ahead and work through the disagreements. If the group is genuinely close to crossing its boundary of

acceptable conflict, take a break. Then focus on the ISSUES in conflict. Be willing to help those in conflict focus on the issues rather than the personalities.

12. Support the task leader. Perform leadership communication behaviors when needed, such as clarifying, synthesizing, summarizing, verbalizing, consensus, gate-keeping, attending to procedures, and initiating interaction.
13. Recognize and appreciate individual differences. Enjoy the differences that people bring to the group, and view them as resources that are valuable. Make individual differences into group strengths.
14. Allow yourself time to enjoy your work. Tangents often result in productive ideas. Every group needs short rest periods, time to tell jokes and to make reference to group history, periods of catharsis, and just plain unproductive meetings every once in awhile. Realize that what appears unproductive may not be. Understand your group phases, and develop a tolerance for some of the mucking around that every group needs to do when coming to grips with its task.

To Summarize: Successful discussion involves leading and following, agreeing and disagreeing, contributing and questioning, exploring, expanding and focusing, evaluating, linking, responding, crediting, appreciating, and enjoying. Note that certain behaviors will hinder: dominating, attacking, sarcasm about group members or their ideas, ridiculing, excluding, non-participation, lack of preparation, and often (ironically) single-minded focus on task.

Information adapted from *Communication in Small Group Discussion*, Hamline University (with input from Ernest Bormann, *Discussion and Group Methods*, 1976; Michael Marland, *Language Across the Curriculum*, 1977; and John Cragan and David Wright, *Communication in Small Group Discussion*, 1986).