

Making groups work

Tips and techniques for managing more assertively

(Adapted from : Moon, J. (2009) *Making groups work: improving group work through the principles of academic assertiveness in higher education and professional development*, ESCALATE, Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Education)

The tips and techniques presented here are all based on the idea that you can be more successful in your teamwork if you act assertively. They are designed to help you manage difficult situations better. It is important to remember that these techniques are not intended as ways of manipulating people so that that you get what you want regardless of others. They are intended as ways of protecting or asserting your rights as a team member in situations where those rights might be threatened though the behaviour of others.

1. Broken record and the principle of persistence

In a confrontation there is often one person who feels that they are (always) right or who tends to be naturally aggressive. This person might want to dominate others very early on in the team work. Here is an example:

A group of three students have been given a problem to investigate. They have to do this in two hours. Karen in this group is notorious for dominating groups in which she works. Others feel frustrated because they don't want their work done for them. Karen, as usual, takes the lead but James has a different way of seeing the issues. Karen sweeps his ideas aside and ploughs on. James decides to confront Karen.

James "Karen, I have a point to make. I would like to say what I think about this problem. You are just pushing your own ideas. "

Karen "We have only got twenty minutes to get this done. Let's just get on with it....As I was saying..."

James "No, Karen. I have a point to make and I want to make it now."

(calmly)

Karen "Oh shut up, James. We don't need anything else. Are you not wanting to get this done in time?"

James " I would like to make a point and I have a right to make it." *He sits back, gives himself and the situation a moment to settle and then makes his point.*

(As calmly as possible, leaning forward.)

This technique is called 'broken record' because you persist in your effort to make yourself heard. It involves working out what you need to say and staying with that, using more or less the same set of words, regardless of what the other says and regardless of how the other tries to knock you off course. The aim of 'broken record' is to achieve that the team respects your right to speak and/ or reach a point of negotiation. Here are some tips:

- Be persistent even it feels a bit odd. Do not let abuse or put-downs from the other person knock you off track. Your use of the technique will frustrate aggressive people and they may react more strongly but eventually, in their own frustration, they will give in and listen to you.
- Broken record only works if you keep calm, with your voice firm but slow. You need to be in control.
- When you feel unsteady in this situation, the easiest thing is to stick to the same set of words.
- Do not be surprised if people get angry at you. Just stay calm and keep going. Sometimes the other person will ask you questions to shift you from your message. You do not need to answer them.

2. Making empathetic statements

Showing empathy is a good way of improving communication, particularly in a situation where one person criticises the other. To show empathy is to show that you have some understanding for the other person's situation. Statements that indicate empathy are:

"I realize that you are not feeling too well / have a lot to do / are very busy / are very fed up today."

"I understand why you should have got that impression."

"That must have been a bad/ stressful experience for you and I am not surprised that you are anxious/ stressed now."

"I know that what I am saying might be upsetting for you but ..."

3. Shifting into process talk

This technique involves making a deliberate shift from talking about the contents of your conversation to talking about the process. You might have given a team member some constructive criticism but they don't receive it well and come up with lots of defensive comments. You can say:

“ It seems that everything I suggest you have an answer for and we go round and round in circles. It is not helping us and I feel useless and frustrated. Let’s take some time out and talk about it later.”

4. Accepting legitimate criticism

We are all fallible, make mistakes and we all do work that is less than that of which we are capable. If you are assertive you know that you make errors and why should you not acknowledge them? People who criticise others often expect defensiveness in response to the criticism and not the simple acceptance of error. If you acknowledge that your work could be better, the atmosphere often changes. It leads to a reasonable, calm discussion of the issues.

5. Signposting statements, clarifying and summarising

This technique means that you can take over the power in the interaction by summarising it ; i.e. signposting. You can clarify the situation by suggesting what should happen, laying out what you are going to do and what you expect from the others. Here is an example:

The standard of your written work has been criticised by the others. It is sloppy and incorrectly referenced. You are not very sure how to write in an academic manner. You missed an introductory course at the beginning of the semester because you didn’t consider it important at the time and you thought you knew how to do it. You have not dared to ask for further support since then because you are embarrassed and didn’t want to admit a weakness. You could say:

“Your are right to say that my written work needs attention. I know that I can do better than that – I guess I need to be more thorough in checking it and find out how a report like this should be written. I will go to one of the workshops on academic writing that are offered by Effective Learning Services in the Saltire Centre. I hear they are very good. How did you learn how to do it right?”

The others feel now that they can actually help you with your work and that you are committed to improving your contribution to the team effort.

For more tips and guidance on assertive behaviour in teamwork, consult Jenny Moon’s book: (2009) *Achieving Success through Academic Assertiveness: Real-life Strategies for Today’s Higher Education Students*, Routledge, New York and Abingdon.

