

# Working in teams

After reading this section you should be better able to

- draw up the ground-rules by which your team will operate
- generate ideas about ways of tackling a group project
- divide up a task into its component parts
- review your team's performance.

No study guide can really prepare you fully for team projects, because with these, perhaps more than any other aspect of your work at university, **DIRECT EXPERIENCE IS THE KEY TO LEARNING.**

## What is a Team?

A team is a group of people who **share a common objective** and **need to work together** in order to achieve it. For example, a group of drama students putting on a play, a group of physicists working on a group research project, or a group of music students putting on a concert share the same common objective. However, they cannot achieve this unless they pool their talents and expertise in a team effort.

## What can be Expected of a Team?

Teams can help you to approach problems in new ways. They can also help you to learn, as fellow team members may raise ideas which you would never have thought of if you were working on your own. When they are successful, teams are often said to achieve something which is greater than the sum of their individual parts.

## Establishing a Team

Working as a team can be very frustrating. You have to compromise, negotiate and to trust that others will do a task to the high standard that you set for yourself. Teams can take a while to form as you get to know each other and find out how each other works.

**The following ideas may help you to form your team:**

### ***Get to Know Your Fellow Team Members***

It may be that you don't know everybody (or even anybody) in your team. Nobody much likes being addressed as, 'Erm...' or 'You in the blue shirt' so it's best to make sure that everybody gets to know everybody else's name right at the start. Why not spend your first meeting getting to know each other.

## **Set Ground-Rules**

Before you begin working together your team may wish to develop its own set of rules (often called ground-rules) under which it will operate. You can of course modify these later on.

These ground-rules may cover topics such as

- how group decisions will be made. Will you act on the majority opinion or will everybody have to be in agreement before you decide to do something ?
- how to ensure that everyone has a chance to voice their opinion (if they wish to do so)
- punctuality for group meetings
- how everyone in the team is to be kept aware of progress. Regular group meetings can be valuable but it can be difficult to find times convenient to all team members. One way (you can probably think of others) of ensuring good communication between team members is to agree that everyone will check either their departmental pigeon-hole or e-mail every day (or even at certain times every day) throughout the duration of the project.

## **Agreeing the Objective for Your Team Project**

The first thing that a team should do when set a project is to define their objectives clearly and also to make sure that everyone is aware of the deadline by which these objectives need to have been achieved.

## **Generating Ideas**

Once the objectives have been defined, it is necessary to generate some ideas as to how to tackle the project.

**Brainstorming** is one method of generating a large number of ideas. Its most important feature is that no-one passes judgement on any idea, however good or bad (or downright ridiculous!). The reason for this is that if someone laughs at your idea or describes it in uncomplimentary terms, you are unlikely to risk putting forward any others. As a result the whole team may lose out, because maybe your next idea would have been the best of the lot.

The steps involved in a brainstorm are :

1. Write down the problem to be solved.
2. Team members put forward ideas and these are written down. No-one comments as to whether the ideas are good or bad.
3. After an agreed period of time (or once the supply of ideas has dried up) the team decides which of the ideas suggested it will use in tackling the project.

## Planning how your Team will Tackle the Project

It may be easier to manage the co-ordination of the team if the project is divided into smaller tasks and group members work on these either individually or in pairs. For example, if you have been asked to research a topic and produce a poster on it, the stages of production might involve the following tasks.

1. Gathering information.
2. Selecting from this what will be used on the poster.
3. Designing the poster's layout.
4. Writing text.
5. Preparing illustrations.
6. Putting the poster together.
7. Handing it in for marking.

When you are deciding who should do what, it is worth finding out the particular skills or interests that team members have. For example, one individual might be particularly good at researching information in the library, another may be fully conversant with the use of computer graphics packages whilst another person's particular skills may lie in organising and co-ordinating the group effort.

It is commonly recognised that individuals need to take on many different roles if the team is to be successful. Some roles relate to getting the task done (e.g. gathering information; putting the poster together) and other roles relate to making sure that the team operates smoothly and effectively. In a small team it is likely that you will take on many different roles relating to both the task and the team. However, it is important to realise that no-one's role is better than another. All of the roles are **essential** if the team is to succeed. A successful team will make the most of the strengths of its individual members.

## Thinking about how you Work as a Team

Reviewing your team's performance is an important part of any team project and is particularly valuable if you are going to work again as a team. Questions you might want to ask are

- What did the team do well? (and why?)
- Were all members of the team clear about the team's objective?
- Was everyone clear about what they individually should be doing?

- Was it easy to contact other members of the team when necessary?
- Did everyone contribute equally ?
- What did you do as a team if one member did not pull their weight?

Whatever questions you ask, don't dwell on what went badly (or on who was to blame), but concentrate on how the task could be performed better next time.

### **Allocating Marks**

In some modules, once you have completed your team project you may receive a group mark which you are asked to distribute fairly between the group members. This gives the team the opportunity to penalise team members who have not contributed equally to the team project.

Your lecturer will almost certainly give you guidance on how to allocate the marks. However, one situation that you may also like to consider (and perhaps discuss in your team even if it doesn't arise) is what you would do if a member of your team had **the** brilliant idea which was the key to the successful completion of your team's task but then did nothing else to help in any way; or they dominated the team and did not allow anyone else to do anything.