People Skills: Launching a Cooperative Learning Team

ROBERT E. LEVASSEUR

FOX Consulting Group, Inc.
76 Summer Street, Suite 1
PO Box 397
Manchester, Massachusetts 01944

In a recent guest column, Fellers [1996] discussed the benefits of using cooperative learning methods to help students acquire people (process) skills while they learn. Reading that educators had discovered, applied, and measured the power of participative group processes to engage the hearts and minds of students made me want to know more. So I spoke to several high school and college teachers about their (very positive) experiences with this new approach and read an excellent book on the subject [Johnson, Johnson, and Smith 1991].

The fundamental building block of the active learning method is the cooperative learning team. Each learning team consists of a small number of students who share responsibility for actively leading and supporting each other in the learning process. Knowing how important the process of forming groups is to team building, I decided to write this article to provide teachers and students with some process guidelines from the discipline of group management and team development [Levasseur 1994] to help them launch their cooperative learning teams as quickly, easily, and effectively as possible.

The First Meeting

This is it. The first official meeting of your cooperative learning team is about to start. As you wait for someone to kick things off, you look anxiously around the room and wonder if everyone else is as uncertain as you are about what is going to happen next.

Sure you've read the handout the instructor gave you on forming a cooperative learning team. You've even taken some of his or her advice: you have resolved to view the whole experience as an opportunity to learn, enjoy, and discover, and

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you've joined up with people you don't know to form a group.

Your group's assignment for today is to begin building yourselves into a team. Thanks to the handout, you know much of what you're expected to do as team members, such as taking interpersonal risks, listening carefully, establishing team goals, and working together to accomplish them.

So what's the problem? Why is everyone so reluctant to start? The answer is simple: while you all have a pretty good idea of what you are supposed to do, you don't know how to do it!

What you need and don't have is knowledge of how people behave in groups and the skill to build the team you need to be to get your work done out of the group you are now.

Take heart. Here are 10 simple guidelines based on proven principles and practices of group management that you can use to energize, engage, and really launch yourselves as a learning team.

(1) Formally Introduce Yourselves

Your very first opportunity to establish a cooperative (that is, participative) atmosphere for your team meetings is at hand. Don't blow it by assuming that introductions are not necessary. Instead, going around the circle, introduce yourselves formally, saying your name (if one or more of the others don't know you), what you hope to gain from the team experience and what you have to offer the team in return, and something personal about yourself the others wouldn't know if you didn't share it with them, like a special skill or interest.

Do this opening activity carefully. Listen attentively to what each person says; take notes if you wish. Ask clarifying questions if you have to, but don't let yourselves get sidetracked into lengthy discussions about anyone or anything. Don't let any member of the group try to force another member to speak until he or she is ready. And when you're finished, give yourselves a hand for a job well done.

(2) Establish Ground Rules

People act differently in church than they do at a football game because they know what behaviors are acceptable in each situation. Imagine the problems that would occur if they didn't. For the same reason, every team needs to establish its own ground rules (its code of conduct) to govern interpersonal behavior during meetings. Defining these rules together is an essential step in the team-building process.

A typical set of ground rules might include these: be on time, communicate openly and honestly, listen attentively, participate fully, stick to the agenda, and work hard but have fun. You decide what rules to include in your code of conduct based on the personalities and needs of the people on the team.

The process of creating ground rules is straightforward. If your instructor has designated someone as the initial team leader, he or she should start by asking for a volunteer to record the ground rules on a flip chart, black board, or other medium in full view of all the team members. (If part of your assignment is to pick a leader for the first meeting, then do so as quickly as possible before defining your ground rules. Keep in mind that you will each have a chance to lead the team effort at some point.) Anyone who has an idea for a ground rule (including the recorder, who is to be treated as a full participant) should

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state it, explain it briefly, and repeat it so that the recorder can write it down accurately. Continue this process until everyone is satisfied the group has an adequate set of ground rules to begin its work. Remember that you can add or modify a ground rule at any time, so don't fret about getting them perfect. Just get them down and try to live by them.

(3) Agree on Roles

People in groups play a variety of roles, such as keeping time and summarizing long or complicated discussions. The three most important roles are leader, recorder, and participant.

Every team needs leadership, but the precise form it takes varies as the group matures into a team. In the formation stage, if a leader has not been assigned, one or two individuals will generally take charge. In the final, high-performance stage of team development, all the members of the team will share the role of leader. The pace and quality of the transition from formation to final stage will depend largely on the degree to which the early leaders follow the spirit and the substance of these 10 guidelines for forming cooperative learning teams.

All team members, including the leader and the recorder, must participate actively in the team's activities for the cooperative effort to succeed. If a team member isn't fully engaged, the other members must find out why and help that person to become an active participant.

To provide everyone an opportunity to perform all the important roles, team members should rotate roles from meeting to meeting. For example, the recorder at one meeting might serve as time keeper or leader at the next meeting.

(4) Establish the Meeting Purpose

In the introductory step, team members stated what they hoped to gain from being on the team. Now it's time to establish what each of you hopes the team will achieve in this crucial first meeting. To do this, start by listing any outcomes your instructor has specified in your assignment for this session. Then take turns adding to the list whatever outcomes you personally desire for the session until you are satisfied that it is complete. (Be sure not to get ahead of the recorder in this process. If necessary, restate a desired outcome so it can be captured accurately.)

These shared outcomes are your work goals for the meeting, just as the ground rules represent your teamwork goals. The closer you come to achieving those that can realistically be attained in this session, the more successful your meeting will be. So refer to the list during the course of your discussions to help you gauge your progress and manage your time.

(5) Agree on the Agenda

In step four, you developed a shared purpose for the meeting. You must now create an agenda that will help you to achieve that purpose. To do this, make a list of the subjects you have to discuss, establish the order that you collectively think will work best, and assign rough starting and ending times to each topic. Be sure to leave some time for short breaks, preferably five minutes for every working hour. And leave about 20 minutes at the end to complete the tasks required to close the meeting properly.

(6) Manage Your Agenda

To achieve your goals for the meeting,

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you need to manage the time you spend on each agenda topic carefully. To help you do this, as a team answer the following questions for each topic on your agenda before you begin discussing it: (1) What is the specific issue to be discussed? (2) What result do we want from our discussion? (3) What process will we use to guide our discussion? (4) How much time do we want to spend discussing the issue?

For example, if you have set aside an hour on your agenda to define your team goals, you might decide that the specific result or outcome you want from the discussion is a prioritized list. You might then agree on a three-part process like this:
(1) In the first 10 minutes, each person will create and prioritize his or her own list;
(2) In the next 30 minutes, each person will discuss briefly his or her top three priorities (the recorder will write them down simultaneously to create a common list); and
(3) In the last 20 minutes, we will decide by consensus on the highest priority goals from the common list. These will become our team goals.

Consensus or win-win decision making is very important to the group process because it supports cooperative effort. It is far superior to an autocratic process (one or a few people decide) or the democratic process (the majority decide), which both tend to promote a win-lose dynamic.

To achieve consensus, each of you must either be in favor of a proposed solution or be able to live with and support it. Note that unanimity, where all parties are in favor of the proposal, is not necessary for reaching consensus.

(7) Manage Conflicts

Differences of opinion are part of the group process. How you deal with such conflicts will significantly affect the quality of your teamwork and your team's output. The best thing to do is to view each conflict as an opportunity to accelerate the process of becoming a team. Instead of ignoring conflicts or ruling them out of order, you should deal with them immediately, positively, and compassionately.

For example, if you have a ground rule against personal attacks and someone insults another team member during the meeting, what do you do? Stick to the agenda and ignore the obvious breach of the code or address the issue directly? If you want to be a team, your only choice is to suggest to the offender that this behavior is inappropriate, ask the others in the group if they agree with you, and if they do, ask the offender to stop. If you need to create additional ground rules or modify your existing ones to deal with the problematic behavior, take the time to do it.

If the disruptive attacks continue despite repeated attempts to help the person see the problems his or her behavior is causing, you must impose whatever sanctions you have available. This includes asking your instructor to help you resolve the problem. Otherwise, you will never achieve the level of team learning you desire and deserve.

(8) Decide on Next Steps

It is time to close the meeting. You have 20 minutes set aside on your agenda to do it. You've gotten this far as a team; don't blow it now by rushing through the steps in the meeting closure process because you're running out of time. Instead, work together calmly and supportively to summarize the meeting outcomes, identify the actions you must accomplish next, and by

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consensus agree on who will take responsibility for doing each of them. Then select the time and place for your next team meeting. Finally, use the remaining time, or more if you need it, to evaluate the outcomes of the meeting.

(9) Evaluate the Meeting

There are a number of useful ways to evaluate what you've accomplished in your first meeting with respect to the ground rules, roles, meeting purpose, and other goals you set for yourselves at the beginning of the meeting.

One quick way is for each of you to rate the meeting on a scale from zero (a waste of time) to 10 (a grand slam home run). The average of your individual ratings is an indicator of how well you did. If you keep track of your average ratings, you can measure the improvement in your meetings.

You may want to spend some time on a second level of evaluation. First make two lists: one of the things that worked well and should be continued and a second one of the things you can do in the future to make the meetings even more productive. Don't dwell on what went wrong when creating the second list; focus instead on what positive actions you can take to improve your team meetings.

When you have finished your formal evaluation of the meeting, take time to share any additional thoughts or feelings you have about the meeting experience. Make sure that everyone on the team (students and instructor) has an opportunity to share his or her thoughts with the group.

Finally, spend a few minutes congratulating yourselves for a job well done.

(10) Follow Through on Commitments

Commitments made during the meeting have to be met in the real world of conflicting time demands and priorities after the meeting is over. So support each other in doing what it takes to follow through on your commitments before the next team meeting. Turn those good intentions into results and you will become a valued member of a high performing team.

Summary

Now you have them: 10 guidelines for launching a cooperative learning team:

(1) Formally introduce yourselves,
(2) Establish ground rules,
(3) Agree on roles,
(4) Establish the meeting purpose,
(5) Agree on the agenda,
(6) Manage your agenda,
(7) Manage conflicts,
(8) Decide on next steps,
(9) Evaluate the meeting, and
(10) Follow through on commitments.

Think of these guidelines as a set of tools to help you maximize your learning. Give them a try. Share them with others. Make up new ones if necessary. Above all, have fun and take care of each other as you learn together.

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