Small Group Roles

Everybody knows that a group needs a leader (or leaders), but there are other roles that can help the group function effectively and be comfortable for group members. Look at the group roles listed below and decide which are needed for your purposes, then assign the roles to group members.

Group Task Roles

Initiating- Takes the initiative at any time such as convening the group, suggesting procedures, changing direction, providing new energy or ideas. (How would it work if… ? What would happen if…?)

Information Seeking- Requests facts, preferences, suggestions or ideas. (Could you say a little more about….? What other facts do we have to consider?)

Information Giver- Provides facts, data, information from research or experience. (In my experience I have seen… May I tell you what I found out about…?)

Questioning- Steps back from what is happening and challenges the group ideas or asks specific questions about the task. (Are we assuming that….? Would the consequence of this be?)

Clarifying- Interpretis ideas or suggestions, clears up confusion, defines terms or asks others to clarify. This role can integrate ideas from different members or link ideas that seem unconnected. (It seems that you are saying….
Doesn't this relate to what (name) was saying earlier?)

Summarizing- Puts contributions into a pattern without adding any information. This role is particularly important if the group gets stuck. (If we take all these pieces and put them together… Here are our areas of disagreement….Here's what we have agreed upon thus far…)

Group Environment Roles

Supporting- Remember others' remarks, is encouraging and responsive to others.. People can gesture, smile, and make eye-contact without saying a word. Some silence can be supportive for people who are not native speakers of English by allowing them a chance to get into discussion. *(I understand what you are getting at...As [name] was just saying...)*

Observing - Notices the dynamics of the group and comments. Asks if others agree or if they see things differently. This approach can help identify problems as they arise rather than later after things get out of control. *(We seem to be*

stuck...Maybe we are done for now, we are all worn out...As I see it, what happened just a minute ago..Do you agree?)

Mediating - Recognizes disagreements and figures out what is behind the differences. When people focus on real differences, that may lead to striking a balance or devising ways to accomodate different values, views, and approaches. *(I think the two of you are coming at this from completely different points of view...Wait a minute. This is how [name/ sees the problem. Can you see why she may see it differently?)*

Reconciling – Reconciles disagreements. Emphasiziesshared views among members can reduce tension. *(The goal of these two strategies is the same, only the means are different… Is there anything that these positions have in common?)*

Compromising - Yields a position or modifies opinions. This can help move the group forward. *(Everyone else seems to agree on this, so I'll go along with... I think if I give in on this, we could reach a decision.)*

Making a personal comment - occasional personal comments, especially as they relate to the work. (Statements about one's life are often discouraged in professional settings; this may be a mistake since personal comments can strengthen a group by making people feel human with a lot in common.)

Humor – Offers funny remarks or good-natured comments. (Humor, if it is genuinely good-natured and not cutting, can be very effective in relieving tension or dealing with participants who dominate or put down others. Humor can be used constructively to make the work more acceptable by providing a welcome break from concentration. It may also bring people closer together, and make the work more fun.)

Adapted from Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning- Handout, Harvard University