

## Small Group Communication

A small group uses elements of interpersonal communication and public speaking to create working relationships as well as a forum for formal messages. A small group is usually defined as three (3) or more people who can interact easily with each other while working to some common purpose. For example, 35 people might be considered a group, but it wouldn't be considered a "small" group for our purposes because allowing all 35 people equal time to talk and begin forging relationships or alliances would paralyze the possibility of completing any task. Eight people, however, can talk in dyads, groups of three or four, or

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even listen to one another in rotation while moving toward task completion in a timely manner.

Members of small groups need the same skills in message construction, audience analysis, and self-awareness that the public speaker needs. In addition, the interpersonal skills necessary for relationship building (what we would call “collegiality” among professionals) are equally important in participating as a member of a small group. The analyst or critic will observe a small group in action, looking for verbal and nonverbal messages as well as how the group works as a system. Just like the study of interpersonal communication, group members go through a process of self-disclosure where they look for similarities and differences among them and find ways to manage diversity and conflict. The critic would be most interested in analyzing groups in which conflict became unmanageable or the group members were unable to complete a task. How well do the members listen to one another? How did leadership occur and does the group acknowledge the leader? Is the group thinking creatively or simply going through some motions?

There are a variety of approaches to making a group work more effectively such as *The Procedural Model of Problem Solving* (P-MOPS), *Program Evaluation and Review Technique* (PERT), and *The Functional Theory*

which is designed to determine how communication can either help or hinder problem solving and decision making.<sup>8</sup> The Functional Theory, for example, is relatively simple with five major criteria: group members must understand the problem they've been called upon to discuss or solve; all members must know the constraints on any possible solutions; all possible alternatives should be open for discussion; all of those alternatives must be open to evaluation; and the solution that best solves the problem should be chosen. Notice that all of these steps require effective communication between and among members.

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<sup>8</sup> Gouran, D.S. and Hirokawa, R. Y. "Effective decision making and problem solving in groups" in *Small group communication: Theory and practice*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Eds. Hirokawa, R. Y. et al. Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing Company. 2003. Pp. 27-38.