

Group Presentations

In many professions, you will find yourself working in teams, and often those teams will be asked to deliver their findings or project results to an audience. When this happens, it is as part of a group, not as an individual. These types of presentations may be informative, as in a corporate board report, or they may be persuasive, such as sales teams trying to persuade a client to purchase a particular product. Regardless of the type or topic of the presentation, there are certain elements of a group presentation that differ from individual performances.

In this final chapter, we will explain the requirements and expectations of group presentations. First, we will cover the two types of formats for group presentations. Second, we will explore different roles for individuals in groups. Finally, we will provide some guidelines for being a good group member.

Group Presentation Formats

A common mistake that novice group speakers make is not seeing the presentation as one speech. Instead, they see a group presentation as a loose connection between multiple individual performances. For instance, if there are five speakers in the group, they often make the mistake of seeing the group presentation as five distinct speeches, rather than one whole performance. This error is often made early in the development of a presentation, and comes from not clearly establishing the most appropriate format for the presentation. To better equip you in making this determination early, and thus avoiding the error of a loose connection between participants, we will explain the two effective formats for group presentations: the bookend approach and the panel approach.

In the **bookend group presentation** approach, the first speaker is also the last speaker. This speaker's responsibility in this role is to introduce the topic and provide an overview which group members will explain each component and why they will do so. The "why" helps explain each individual's credibility on their topic. For example, suppose Kris, Jarrod, Liz, and Brian are giving a presentation proposing a parking shuttle system to and from campus. They are going to use the problem-cause-solution organizational pattern for the body of the presentation. Kris will introduce the topic and the qualifications of each group member and then conclude by introducing Jarrod, who will speak next. Jarrod will detail the problem, and when he is finished, he will introduce Liz, noting that she will discuss the cause of the problem. When she finishes discussing the cause, Liz will transition Brian by explaining that he will provide a solution that addresses the cause of the problem. After Brian presents the solution, Kris will deliver a conclusion that summarizes the group's talk.

There are several benefits to the bookend approach for a group presentation. The bookend approach gives a nice sense of closure by having the same person begin and end the presentation. It also gives the performance continuity by having each speaker connect his or her topic with the next. Additionally, the bookend approach allows for a degree of individuality in performances by giving each person a specific focus to develop on his or her own and then connect to the other parts developed by the group. It is important, however, that the individual aspects of each presenter do not overshadow the need to have a fluid presentation. Be sure to have clear transitions between speakers and have all speakers work together as they develop their individual components of the presentation. Keep in mind that in a group presentation every speaker is still required to provide evidence, cite sources, and use logic, just as they would in an individual speech.

The **panel group presentation** approach is another common approach for giving a group presentation, and it is structured differently from the bookend model. Panel presentations occur in both formal and informal settings and are most appropriate when audience interaction is expected or encouraged. Panel presentations are individual performances, but all cover the same topic in different ways. Each member of a panel may present his or her ideas on a single topic, or each may have a specific subset of a topic. Panel speakers may agree or disagree with one another, and sometimes even challenge other speakers on their content or positions. To handle transitions between speakers, panels need to have a person play the role of moderator.

Moderators are unique participants in a group presentation using the panel approach. First, they should be objective and should not present their own opinions, ideas, or thoughts on the topic or speaker presentations. Second, they introduce the entire panel at the start, establish the order of speakers, and transition between speakers when each individual completes his or her remarks. It is important that panelists and the moderator talk before the panel convenes so there is no miscommunication when the performance is delivered to the actual audience. Moderators also serve the important role of handling interactions between speakers and the audience. They indicate when individuals may ask questions and let the speakers know when they reach the end of their allotted time to talk. Ultimately, their task is to maintain an orderly presentation and keep the interaction on topic. It should be obvious that the panel approach does not have as much structure as the bookend approach, but it has the advantage of being more interactive and covering more material than the bookend model.

Group Roles

In covering the two forms of group or team presentations we explained the two speaking roles used in each approach: moderator and speaker. Good team presentations begin well before they are convened to address the audience. Members of a team need to be aware of the different roles and responsibilities that occur in the development process. In this section, we will cover the three broad types of roles that people fill in small groups when developing a team presentation.

Task Roles

Task roles refer to the parts people play that move a group toward a goal, and these are performed by all members of the group at one time or another in the development process. When developing a presentation, a group needs to accomplish several important tasks, and although everyone may not be involved in each task, every person will help in some way with some tasks. For people to accomplish important tasks to the best of their ability, it is important for the group to identify the strengths and expertise of all members before proceeding. This allows the group to assign members to develop the parts of the presentation with which they are most qualified to help. Table 20.1 gives some examples of group task roles.

TABLE 20.1

Examples of Group Task Roles
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Meeting facilitator: organizes the information and tasks during the meeting, keeps group members on track during meetings, makes sure that everyone gets to contribute during meetings
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Logistics coordinator: schedules meeting times and locations, sends out reminder e-mails
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Note taker: takes notes during meetings, sends minutes to group after meetings, keeps records that the group can refer to when needed
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Compiler: takes all of the components prepared by individual group members and compiles those components into an initial draft of the group presentation

There are multiple tasks a group needs to accomplish when preparing a presentation. The first is identifying the information they plan to present, and then assigning people to gather relevant research and information. Once the data has been collected, the presentation needs to be outlined and organized. This should not be done individually, unless the format will be in a panel, and so several members of the group should review, edit, and revise the presentation outline. When this is done, the speaking roles should be assigned and practice should commence. Each of these stages involves tasks for people to perform, from research to revision, but task roles are not the only roles necessary for a successful group presentation.

Maintenance Roles

In the United States, task roles receive the highest degree of emphasis, but relational dimensions of the group also are important, and maintaining functioning relationships between group members is essential. Without good working relationships between group members, tasks may not be completed well, or at all, because time will be spent dealing with disputes and conflicts between members instead of achieving the group's goal of developing a presentation. To succeed, a group needs to take a collaborative approach, not create a combative or competitive environment where people constantly angle to do what they want regardless of the needs of the group.

Maintenance of good relationships involves having people who help the group stay loose and supportive. This can sometimes involve joking, attending social events together, or participating in other activities that help group members bond and get to know each other's personalities. If all a group does is focus on the task, then stress will mount and potentially become an obstacle to developing a successful presentation. On the other hand, too much joking and emphasis on relationships also can contribute to an atmosphere in which constructive criticism is never delivered and the presentation suffers just as much as when no emphasis is placed on maintenance roles. The responsibility to balance these needs of the group falls to the leader.

Leadership Roles and Styles

Every group has a leader, the person who keeps the group focused, motivated, and on task. Every leader also needs followers, and those followers need to buy into the vision and plan advocated by the leader. It is important to know that different groups call for different leadership approaches, and group members also need to learn and appreciate how leaders go about fulfilling their responsibilities.

At a minimum, all leaders need to do three things. First and foremost, they must demonstrate competence on the issue or task the group is setting out to accomplish. When it comes to developing presentations, the person putting together the remarks may not be the person with the highest position in the organization, but rather the person who knows the issue or how to prepare a presentation best. Knowing the topic or task is one key part of a well-functioning group, and a core characteristic of a good leader.

Secondly, leaders need to accept responsibility for both their actions and those of their group. As President Harry Truman once said, "The buck stops here" when it comes to leadership. It is the leader's duty to identify things that are not going well and provide a way to fix problems. If things do not go well, leaders must understand they played a role in that poor performance, but if things go well, they participated in the success as well. A leader knows and accepts the fact that a group succeeds or fails as a team.

Finally, leaders must satisfy the expectations of the group. These expectations should be clear at the outset of the project. Group members often have both task and maintenance expectations of their leaders, and it is important for leaders to fulfill both responsibilities. The manner in which group leaders go about this can vary.

Leadership Styles

Typically speaking, leadership styles can be broken down into three different categories, each of which is effective depending on the group. The first style is **autocratic leadership**, in which a leader tells group members what they should do. There is little emphasis on maintenance tasks and relationships between group members with an autocratic leader, and more of a focus on accomplishing the task at hand. When projects are under a deadline and there is not much time, this style can be very effective, but if used in all group situations, then group members sour on the leader and do not end up working well together. This can have a serious and negative impact on a presentation by a group.

On the other end of the spectrum of leadership styles is **laissez-faire leadership**, in which the leader provides little direction on the task and makes little effort to develop or maintain relationships between group members. This approach would potentially work in a panel format for a group presentation, but it would not be nearly as effective for a group that needed to develop a coherent presentation for a bookend-style talk.

The third style is **democratic leadership**, and in this model you find a balanced emphasis on task and maintenance dimensions in a group. When there is time for collaboration and discussion in planning the presentation, a democratic style can be very effective at allowing members to feel part of the project, but the leader must also reserve some degree of freedom in making decisions. Additionally, when there is a firm deadline and time is limited, the democratic style may not be very effective as the group can spend too much time deliberating and not enough working.

Leadership Tasks

Some people often wish to be a group's leader to control their own contributions to the group, but this is not a viable or successful approach to selecting a leader for a group. There are, however, two visions for what tasks leaders are responsible for in groups: vital functions and leader-as-completer.

The **vital functions approach** to leadership calls upon group leaders to perform tasks others in the group either cannot or are not qualified to perform. Sometimes these responsibilities involve a person's access to certain information or skills they have that others do not. In this approach, the leader fulfills a gap that the group needs but cannot fill without the leader.

The **leader-as-completer approach** functions somewhat differently than the vital functions model. In this model, a leader is the person who is responsible for completing tasks that are not finished or even undertaken by other group members. For instance, in academic departments, many chairpersons decide to teach the required courses the other faculty did not volunteer to teach, thus completing the offering of necessary courses in a given semester. In this approach, leaders are often somewhat experienced with a variety of different tasks the group needs to perform so they can step in when needed.

No matter which approach leaders take or what type of leadership style they use, good leadership is necessary for a group to function well. However, a leader cannot be successful without good group members. In the next section, we will discuss how you can be a good team member.

Being a Good Team Member

Being a good team member has several characteristics. The first of these involves the ability to listen to several messages at the same time. To be an effective member of any group, you need to be able to listen to the leader of that group and offer feedback and ideas whenever appropriate. Additionally, you have a responsibility to listen to other group members when they offer ideas and comments related to the task or group as a whole. Finally, you need to listen to the audience at the presentation to make sure you can help the group adapt to feedback during and after the performance. Remember that listening means paying attention to these other people, because only in doing that will they do the same for you when it is your turn to offer ideas to the group.

Listening can be hard because often it means suppressing our desire to comment in favor of hearing out someone else. Therefore, remember that one of the strengths of any group is that there is a multiplicity of ideas and opinions, and only through hearing them out completely can you identify the best way to accomplish the task and still maintain positive relationships between members. Be patient with others, even if you disagree with them, and give their thoughts fair and unbiased attention. Realize that just because someone might not want to do something in the same way you would doesn't mean that it is not a viable approach; there are usually several ways to accomplish something. A good idea for facilitating and developing good listening skills is to take detailed and accurate notes to which you may refer at a later time. Even if the group has an assigned note-taker, take notes anyway for your own reference.

Just as you have the group obligation to listen attentively and in an unbiased manner to the ideas and opinions of others, group members also have the obligation to extend that same courtesy to you. Group sessions usually have brainstorming sessions, so if you have an idea, present it to the rest of the group members. Good groups function on the principle of civility, which means all have a responsibility both to pay attention to each other and assert their own ideas about the task at hand (see Table 20.2 for examples of productive and disruptive behaviors).

A second characteristic of high-performing groups is the ability to identify the skill sets for each member and assign tasks that take advantage of those skills. People come to groups with differing talents and abilities, which is often what makes groups stronger than individuals. Some people are good analysts, some are better at researching, some better at organizing presentations, some at keeping records, and others at actually delivering the remarks. Determine your best set of skills and offer to work on tasks that fit your talents. Beware, however, that asking for the assignment does not mean that you will get it, so don't be afraid to go out of your comfort zone and try something new. After all, you may discover that you have strengths you did not know you had!

TABLE 20.2

Productive vs. Disruptive Behaviors	
Productive Behaviors	Disruptive Behaviors
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Listen carefully to others▪ Ask for clarification when needed▪ Make connections between others' ideas▪ Provide constructive feedback▪ Arrive at meetings on time▪ Distribute agendas and meeting minutes▪ Identify and utilize individual strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Attack others or their ideas▪ Bring up unrelated topics▪ Arrive late or miss meetings▪ Dominate the conversation during meetings▪ Fail to complete your components of the project▪ Be inflexible and unavailable▪ Speak rudely to others

A third characteristic of a good group member involves helping facilitate efficient and productive meetings. As group members work on their tasks, it is important to stay in contact with each other. These meetings can occur via conference calls, in-person, or even through Skype, but each group member should be aware of what is going on elsewhere in the group. This allows people to offer assistance if necessary, and also to get feedback on their part of the project to help make the presentation more seamless. That is why frequent meetings are often necessary; each group member needs to know what the others are doing to avoid redundancy and wasted effort, as well as to ensure that the material is consistent.

These meetings are run best when there is an agenda provided to group members in advance. This allows everyone to bring information relevant to what will be discussed, and to know roughly how long the meeting will take. Agendas serve important task functions, and are often the responsibility of a group leader to both produce and disseminate among the group members.

Another obligation for group members is to meet deadlines. Group tasks often rely and depend upon one another so when one is delayed, all are delayed. It is both unprofessional and unethical to have others waiting on you. This behavior also is rude and can cause tension and feelings of resentment and distrust, ultimately damaging the harmony of the entire group. If you do fall behind and do not believe you will make a deadline, be sure to let your group know immediately so they can see if they can assist you in completing it on time.

All group members also are expected to be present for all meetings. Anyone can have a conflict that requires their absence, but this should be avoided if possible. Missing meetings is rude and can result in negative feelings as someone else may have to do your job in addition to his or her own.

Attendance is also essential when the group plans to practice the presentation, and being a good group member means being there for the practice sessions, even if you do not have a speaking role. Groups must practice together to ensure a smooth delivery, because if any one speaker does something different or unexpected, the whole presentation will become disjointed. Remember, a group presentation is not a set of individual speeches, but rather one speech with several speakers. Speakers should polish their individual portions of the address before meeting with other group members, but also be open to changes and adjustments when the group practices together. A group presentation is more than just a sum of its parts.

During the practice sessions, group members should critique one another's performance, assessing all aspects of content and delivery, and provide helpful feedback to make the presentation more successful. If possible, implement the feedback immediately. Also realize that if you provide feedback others may disagree, and ultimately it is each speaker's decision what to cover. Feedback can be very useful if given in the right manner. Never criticize the person, but rather note how the project or presentation can be improved.

Group presentations require more effort because of the need for multiple people with divergent skills, abilities, ideas, and opinions to work together. Many hands, when it comes to group presentations, do not make light work. In many instances when you might deliver a group presentation it will be followed by a question and answer, or Q&A, session in which the audience becomes involved. We will cover this part of the presentation in the next section of the chapter.

Group Discussion and Q&A Sessions

After all the information has been presented to the audience they may be given the opportunity to offer feedback and ask questions. This practice is most common in the panel format of group presentations, but it is not unrealistic for it to happen in bookend-style talks as well. This part of the presentation can be stressful for members of the group, so think about it as a conversation rather than an interrogation and it will help reduce your anxiety. Here are some other tips for handling Q&A sessions.

First, you should always allow audience members sufficient time to ask their question or offer their comment. In doing so, you should never interrupt people when they are making their point, as this will only irritate them. If the person's points are not easily discerned and his or her statements seem unclear, ask for clarification. Whatever you do or say, remain polite. Even if an audience member becomes agitated, you should "keep your cool," as you have the obligation to the rest of the audience and to your group to do so. Just because an audience member is emotional does not mean that you have to behave in the same manner.

It is also a good idea to take notes when a person asks a question or makes a comment, especially if the comments are somewhat long. You may learn some things from the audience and might want to consider those points in a later presentation. Taking notes also signifies that you value the feedback that you get from the audience and that you paid careful attention to them when they spoke.

It is also important to be comfortable with the fact that you do not know everything and may even get stumped by a question from the audience. This is not a bad thing, as delivering a presentation is not a quiz show, and you will not be eliminated for not knowing the answer. In fact, it is far worse to lie or make up an answer than to state the honest truth. The audience does not even expect you to always know everything. There is nothing wrong with saying, "I do not know the answer to that question, but I will find out and get back with you. Make sure I have your contact information before we leave here." Audiences usually respect this answer.

