

Meeting Guidelines and Suggestions

by Jon Colton

It is very difficult and frustrating to work in groups. It is also the way most of business is done.

Respect:

Respect your team member's abilities. They are not you, they are they. They will never do things exactly as you want them to. Don't expect them to. They have different backgrounds, not worse ones. Don't expect everyone to have the same attitude to the class as you do. Everyone comes with different backgrounds, abilities and expectations. It's tough to accept this, but acceptance reduces your (and everyone else's) stress level.

Teams:

You are a team, not four of yourself. The baseball team that singles the other teams to death wins. Use the strengths of your team members. Don't get too upset over the perceived weaknesses of your teammates. Teaching your colleagues is a good way to really learn the material yourself, it's not just a waste of time.

Time limits:

Set limits on team meetings. People come with bad attitudes if they think they'll be there forever. If you need to continue at the end of the meeting, set up another one. Don't get angry if someone leaves when the meeting is supposed to be over. Set up many shorter meetings, rather than a few long ones. Don't get in each other's faces. Take breaks. You're a team, you're not married to each other.

Consensus:

Try to develop consensus: voting creates winners and losers. Don't insist on getting your way every time. You're not always right. Pick your battles wisely. Don't be obstructionist. But don't let patently incorrect things through.

Working Together:

If you have trouble working together, try to talk it out. Be honest about your feelings, but not nasty. Don't just point out difficulties, point out positive things, and try to provide reasonable solutions. Only pointing out problems is not as constructive as you may think. If that doesn't work, go to the professor. Take a chill-pill, this is only a class. You won't die if the project isn't perfect according to your judgment. I'm the only judge of perfection.

Fix the problem, not the blame.

Types of Meetings:

Administrative meetings: reporting on what you did outside of the meetings. This is communication. This can be accomplished by each person or mini-group presenting their results to provide communication/information. When this is going on, the only questions that should be asked are for clarification, not criticism. After presentation, then you can figure out how to put the bits together. If too much criticism results during presentations, then work in groups of two. It's harder to attack two people. Rotate the groups of two. That way you don't get stuck with one person all the time.

Working meetings: doing the project en masse. Not always needed. Sometimes it's better to assign everyone separate tasks and then present the results (more efficient) in administrative meetings. But sometimes it's good to use working meetings: brainstorming, solving systems problems, etc.

Agendas:

Set specific agendas and time limits. This way everyone will come to the meeting with equal expectations and the correct attitude. If you need to, set time limits for each agenda item. If you run out of time, then stop and either make a decision or defer it to the next meeting. Don't drag it out.

Meeting Scheduling:

Not everyone is as flexible or dedicated as you are. You can't expect everyone to show up to a huge number of meetings. If you need to set up a lot of meetings, first set up a set of "core" meetings that fits into everyone's schedules. Everyone agrees to come to those meetings. These will concern the critical things that the group as a whole needs to discuss. If you set up other meetings, set up "sub-group" meetings, with the expectation that NOT everyone will be there. If you are the one that can't make it to one, be sure to make it to others. It is your responsibility to make sure you do your "share" (see below).

Communications:

Be sure everyone understands what you are saying. Be sure to understand what others are saying, before you tell them how to fix their mistakes: maybe they didn't make one.

Responsibility:

If you are going to accept responsibility for a task, then do the task. Only accept a task that you are willing and capable of doing. If you aren't going to do it, then be honest, tell your colleagues and take your lickings in the team evaluations and final grade. You're not fooling anyone, even yourself. Don't leave the other group members hanging by saying you'll do something and then not doing it. They'll still hate you for not doing your part, but if you tell them that you're not going to do your part, then at least they can plan around you.

You are required to do your share. This "share" needs to be defined by the group, not by one person in the group, and needs to be realistic. If you want to work more than average, don't take it out on others if they don't work as hard as you. But do do you part!!!