Building Work Communities and Professional Networks

Inquire: Working in Groups

Overview

It’s almost impossible to avoid working in a small group at some point during your professional career. Knowing how best to work in a group will make you a valuable asset to any group you are part of. As you begin your professional career, knowing how to develop and maintain a professional network is also a skill that will make you valuable to a company. This lesson will teach you about small group communication, professional networking, how to develop a network, the benefits of professional networking, and what ethical obligations you have toward people in your network.

Big Question: Do you have a professional network of people you can rely on when you have questions?

Watch: Networking in the Real World

Think of time when you had to work in a group of about five people to complete a project. Was it at school? In the workplace? At home planning a family reunion? Now, reflect on the interactions within that group. Do you remember feeling stressed? Or do you remember feeling accomplished, knowing everyone had their roles?

Within any job or group, you will probably have to implement a tool called small group communication. Small group communication is the communication that occurs in a group between three and seven people. You will probably have to implement this type of communication at your workplace, and when you do, you begin professionally networking. Professional networking is just as it sounds: developing and maintaining relationships within a professional setting. While you may feel that it isn’t important to build relationships with people in your professional life, this lesson will illustrate how important it is.

Let’s follow Margie on her work day and see how she uses her small group communication skills and her professional networking skills. Margie works at the Admissions Department at a local community college. She helps students apply and get accepted into the college. First, Margie makes small talk with colleagues at the coffee machine while everyone gets their morning coffee. She makes sure to ask Kathy about her new grandson, notices Taylor’s new haircut, and even laughs at Brandon’s cheesy jokes. All of those things may sound mundane, but really, Margie is genuinely building strong relationships with her colleagues. After the small talk, Margie gets a call from a student about some trouble filling out the mandatory paperwork. Because Margie isn’t sure what to do, she calls Taylor over to help. Taylor is able
to address the problem, but needs to call on April from another department to help. Margie explains the problem, and after discussing the situation, Taylor and April are able to fix it together.

Because Margie focuses on her professional networking skills, she knew the person to call on for help. Then, when April had to get involved, all three employees had to use their small group communication skills to work together to solve a problem. Have you had to call on other people to help solve an issue? How did it work out? How could it have gone better?

Read: Networks in the Workplace

Overview
In any work environment, it is almost inevitable that you will have to work in a small group setting. Understanding small group communication is valuable in making the most of that group work. This lesson will cover small group communication and how to use it. Then, it will take a look at professional networking: what it is, its benefits, and the obligations of the networking process.

What is Small Group Communication?

Small group communication is communication between three to seven people. Oftentimes in a workplace setting, there will be problems that you cannot solve on your own. When this happens, you will have to work in a small group. Working efficiently with others is an indispensable skill to have. The first thing to keep in mind when building this skill is that everyone needs a role and every role is important. Sometimes your boss will appoint people into a certain role, and sometimes it will be up to the members of the group to decide roles. Once roles have been assigned, it is important that you do the work that has been assigned to you based on your role. Everyone doing their job is the key to success. If you have problems with your role, or if you are unable to accomplish everything you need to, it is important that you reach out to your group and tell them. Open communication between group members is the most important tool you have to make sure you accomplish your team’s goal.

What is Professional Networking?

Professional networking is the development and maintenance of relationships within a professional setting. These networks can provide many benefits. Those benefits will be outlined in the next section. Before you can know what benefits a network provides, it’s important to learn how to establish these networks in the first place. First, making small talk with a large number of people is important. People need to know your name and your face before they can help you with anything. Making small talk with a large amount of people is a great way to get to know a large amount of people. Second, similar to small talk, you need to be willing to talk to new people. A network is only as good as the people in it, and by talking to new people you can constantly add new people to make your network stronger. Finally, be friendly. People will be much more likely to work with you if they like you, and being friendly to others is a great way to get other people to like you. This doesn’t mean be fake, it just means being polite and open with others.

What are Benefits of Workplace Networks?

Now that you have established your network, what do you do with it? There are three primary benefits that come with having a large, effective professional network: opportunity, security, and resources. Opportunity comes more easily with a professional network. Having friends in many businesses, companies, or departments will help you learn about opportunities for new jobs, advancement in your job,
or unique opportunities like travel or pay raises. Talking with people regularly lets you learn information regularly, which is one of the primary benefits of networking.

Second, good networking skills offer job security. If you have many people within a business that know you are willing to talk about your skills, you are safer if the worst happens and a company has to lay people off. Having people willing to vouch for your skills and usefulness is invaluable in a modern work environment.

Finally, a large network provides many resources. If you are asked to put together a presentation at work, you can reach out to members of your network and ask for help, or ask for tips, or ask for experiences that others have while doing the task you have been assigned. It cannot be overstated how helpful it is having a large number of people that will help you when you ask for it.

**Ethical Responsibilities of Networking**

Just because you have people willing to help you out when you ask doesn’t mean you get to abuse it. When you have a professional network behind you, it’s important that you treat the people in it well. That means you shouldn’t abuse asking for favors, always return favors that you do ask for, and don’t be mean to people from whom you’ve asked for help.

First, don’t abuse asking for favors. Don’t ask for so many favors that the people helping you end up doing more work than you. Not only is this rude to the people helping you, but it also motivates people to stop helping you in the future. Second, return favors. When you ask someone for a favor, know that it goes both ways. When they ask for help in return, be ready and willing to help them. Finally, don’t be mean to the people helping you. When you are talking to someone else, don’t gossip about the people that have helped you in the past. Treat them with respect. If you don’t, it erodes the trust that people have in you and reduces their likelihood of helping you in the future.

**Reflect Poll: The Payoff of Networking**

Is a professional network something worth the time and effort it takes to maintain?
- Yes
- No

**Expand: Groupthink**

**Overview**

Group work can get a complicated task done quickly and efficiently. But, sometimes groups can fall into a pattern where they think they can do no wrong. This is known as groupthink. This lesson will cover what groupthink is and provide some ways to avoid it.

**What is Groupthink?**

Groupthink is a phenomenon where a group thinks it does things perfectly and that it can make no mistakes. Groupthink can happen when a leader of a group convinces others that what they are doing is the best way already. It also requires the group to work well together, and to have a strong amount of pressure from outside of the group to perform well.
Symptoms of groupthink are: rationalization, peer pressure, complacency, an illusion of unanimity, and censorship. Rationalization happens when someone outside of the group points to a problem but members inside of the group dismiss it by saying the group is too good at what they do to suffer from that problem. Peer pressure happens when members of the group pressure other members to agree with the way things have always been done. Complacency is when groups have been successful many times in the past so they feel they can’t fail in the future. An illusion of unanimity happens when everyone assumes that everyone else is on the same page. No one asks what the others are thinking; everyone assumes they know. Censorship is when members of the group prevent other members from saying things that are contrary to what the group as a whole says or believes. This censorship might not be explicit (for example, “You can’t say that”), but might happen in the form of treating people that say negative things as outcasts.

Avoiding Groupthink

There are a few ways to avoid groupthink: entertain outside opinions, encourage new ideas, and have alternative plans. Because groups suffering groupthink assume they are perfect, letting outside voices be heard is a great way to avoid groupthink. If your group doesn’t want outside involvement, or can’t have outside involvement, a great alternative is to encourage members of the group to submit new ideas. If members feel comfortable sharing different approaches to problems, then you avoid falling into the traps of groupthink. Finally, coming up with several plans to approach an issue helps to avoid groupthink by admitting some solutions might not be perfect and by developing strategies to account for those possible mistakes.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings

A short video explaining an easy way to avoid groupthink

- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2p-uY_i-wvc

A short video explaining who you need to find for your professional network

- Link to resource: https://www.workinentertainment.com/blog/the-type-people-you-need-in-your-professional-network/

An article providing tips on how to establish a professional network using LinkedIn

- Link to resource: https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamarruda/2017/02/05/linkedin-201-how-to-cultivate-a-powerful-network/#333ee7055422

Lesson Glossary

**small group communication**: communication between three to seven people

**professional networking**: the development and maintenance of relationships within a professional setting

**groupthink**: a phenomenon where a group thinks it does things perfectly and that it can make no mistakes
Check Your Knowledge

1. Professional networks have no benefits.
   a. True
   b. False

2. Groupthink is good for a group.
   a. True
   b. False

3. You can develop a professional network without ever talking to anyone.
   a. True
   b. False

Answer Key:

Citations

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