

Self-Administered 10,000 Mile Checkup for Student Project Groups

This exercise is designed to help project groups do a quick review of their aspirations, to identify impediments that may be slowing their progress in achieving those aspirations, and to consider any midcourse corrections that may be called for.

The exercise is self-administering: Groups can follow the nine steps without outside assistance. Before beginning work on each of the steps, take a minute to read through the instructions for that step. The only materials needed are: (1) five sheets of easel pad paper (hereafter called "newsprint"), (2) marking pens, (3) a means for attaching newsprint sheets to the wall, and (4) paper and pencil for each group member. The exercise takes about 75 minutes.

STEP ONE: Selecting a Timekeeper/Recorder

Select one group member to keep track of time, and to let everyone know when it is time to move on to the next step. This person also will record items on newsprint at various stages in the process. (The timekeeper/recorder also should be a full participant in the session.)

STEP TWO: Individual Contemplation

Time required: 5 minutes. The purpose of this step is to generate the materials that will provide the basis for subsequent discussion. Each individual should write down on a pad of paper:

1. His or her *main* hopes and aspirations for the project group.
2. The factors that presently are contributing to the achievement of those hopes and aspirations--that is, the strengths the group has shown itself to have.
3. The factors that presently are impeding the achievement of those hopes and aspirations--that is, weaknesses the group has exhibited, or roadblocks it has encountered.

In thinking about the strengths and weaknesses the group has shown thus far, consider the following three domains:

The task domain: Which task activities you do together (and which you have decided *not* to do as a group), how you allocate your group time, how you organize and manage your meetings, and so on.

The interpersonal domain: How you draw out and use for learning the special perspectives, experience, and expertise of individual members, how you deal with conflict and disagreement among members, how you share leadership of the group, and so on.

The external relations domain: How you handle your relationships with the instructors, your client group, and others in the client organization.

STEP THREE: Reviewing Objectives and Identifying Issues

Time required: 15 minutes. The purpose of this step is to begin discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of your project group as a site for learning. Pairs of members will review their hopes and aspirations for the group, and then discuss (1) things that are helping the group achieve those aspirations, and (2) things that are hindering or compromising their accomplishment. (The main points that are generated by the pairs subsequently will be shared with the group as a whole.)

1. Form pairs of group members. If the group has an odd number of members, include one triad.
2. Members of each pair compare (a) their hopes and aspirations for the group, and (b) their assessments of the factors that have contributed to (and detracted from) the achievement of those hopes and aspirations thus far. Use as a point of departure the notes each member of the pair wrote down in Step Two.
3. Toward the end of discussion time, write down the conclusions you have reached as a pair about (a) hopes and aspirations, and (b) strengths and weaknesses. Finally, decide which one of you will report your conclusions to the rest of the group.

STEP FOUR: Pairs Report to the Group as a Whole

Time required: 15 minutes. In this step, one person in each pair reports to the group as a whole the major conclusions the pair reached. Discussion at this point should focus on *understanding*. Defer discussion of disagreements or differing interpretations until later in the session.

1. The timekeeper/recorder puts three sheets of newsprint on the wall, and labels them: (1) Aspirations, (2) Strengths, and (3) Weaknesses.
2. Each pair, in turn, gives its view of members' main hopes and aspirations for the project group. The timekeeper/recorder writes down the main points, quickly and in abbreviated phrases, to provide a visible record of the points made.
3. Next, each pair gives its views of the main strengths that the group has shown thus far and these are recorded on the second sheet of newsprint. Then each pair gives its views of the main hindrances the group has encountered or the weaknesses it has shown; these are recorded on the third newsprint sheet.
4. In the time remaining for this step, the group as a whole may wish to discuss any patterns that are evident in the pairs' reports. How much consensus does there seem to be about members' hopes and aspirations? How similar or different are members' views about strengths and weaknesses? Which domains (that is, task activities, interpersonal relations, or external relations) received the most attention in the reports from the pairs?

Keep in mind that the present purpose is to get a good descriptive "feel" for the data. At this point, you should *not* evaluate what was said, seek to resolve disagreements, or make suggestions about the action implications of the pairs' reports.

STEP FIVE: Individual Assessments of the Importance of Issues

Time required: 5 minutes. At this point, discussion ceases for a few minutes, to allow individual members time to assess and reflect privately on what the group has generated so far.

Each person, after studying what has been recorded on the three sheets of newsprint, should generate, and write down on his or her own pad of paper, a response to the following question:

All things considered, what is the single most important issue that our group needs to address if we want to improve our project group as a site for learning?

Note: This is an opportunity for individual insight and creativity, for each person to come up with the best idea he or she can generate about what the group needs to attend to right now--whether or not the issue is already on one of the newsprint sheets.

STEP SIX: Collecting and Clarifying Individual Responses

Time required: 10 minutes. Each individual reads his or her response to the above question, and the timekeeper/recorder summarize it in brief phrases on a fourth sheet of newsprint. Questions of clarification are dealt with, but discussion is deferred until the ideas of all group members have been presented and recorded.

STEP SEVEN: Prioritizing Suggestions

Time required: 10 minutes. The group now discusses the ideas that are summarized on the fourth newsprint sheet, and prioritizes them.

In considering the ideas that have been proposed, assess both their *importance* to the group and their *feasibility* (that is, the likelihood that real improvements could be achieved if the group took them on). Sometimes even very important issues are beyond a group's control--or would require great expenditures of time and energy to realize only small gains. It usually is a good idea to defer work on such issues until more tractable ones have been dealt with successfully.

After a period of discussion, the group should select *two or three* (or, at most, four) issues that seem both worth addressing and tractable. The idea is to make real progress on a few issues, rather than to take on everything at once and thus run an excessive risk of failure or frustration. In the time remaining, work can begin on those two to four items.

STEP EIGHT: Action Planning for the Highest Priority Items

Time required: Open, but allow at least 15 minutes. In this step, you will develop a plan of attack for making progress on your highest priority items.

1. At the top of a fifth piece of newsprint, the timekeeper/recorder should write "Specific Actions We Should Take." About halfway down the sheet, he or she should write "Norms About How We Should Operate."
2. Consider the first item that the group settled on in the previous step. Decide whether progress on that item requires the group to take some specific action, or whether it involves a change in the group norms--that is, the way members want the group to operate. Once that decision is made, write the item in the appropriate category on the fifth piece of newsprint.
3. Take a few minutes to discuss how you will actually implement action on that item.

If it is an action, who will be responsible for making sure it is done? When will he or she report back to the group about the results?

If it is a change in how the group operates, how will the group monitor itself to see if behavior actually changes as planned? How will the group deal with occasions when behavior occurs that is at variance with the new or revised norm?

4. When the group is finished with the first item (or, perhaps, when it becomes clear that real progress on that item is not going to be made today), move on to the second item and repeat Steps 2 and 3 above.

STEP NINE: Wrap Up

Time required: 10 minutes. Take the last few minutes to review what has happened in this session. Questions you might ask yourselves include:

1. What did we accomplish today? Was it worth the time we spent on it?
2. Reflect on how we behaved as we were proceeding with this exercise. If someone had been observing us, what would that person have to say to us about how we operate as a group? Are there things we can learn from how we functioned today that could be applied to other times that we are together?
3. What, if anything, might we want to tell the instructors about how this session could have been more helpful? Can this kind of activity really be done on a self-administering basis? If we do have something to tell the instructors, who will take responsibility for doing it?
4. Is there any unfinished business from today's session? Are there things that any of us have to say to other people or to the group as a whole that remain unsaid?