

Working in groups

Being business like

Your team may have encountered the challenge of **storming** and tackled it using a SWOT analysis (see ASK handout *Starting to understand team process* from the *Working in groups* series). You now realise that you need to maintain a business-like approach to all your team meetings. This will ensure that everyone is clear about their responsibilities and contribution to overall team success. Your first meeting had an agenda (see ASK handout *Introducing team work*) and you now want to ensure that each subsequent meeting has the same clarity, and has a recorded outcome.

A template agenda for second and subsequent meetings could look like this (although bear in mind you may need to adapt it for your own purpose):

Item	Detail
Meeting date and time:	
Members present:	<i>(Always maintain a record of attendees, see below)</i>
Apologies:	<i>(Must be sent in advance, otherwise a 'non-attendance' should be recorded)</i>
1 Previous minutes/Matters outstanding	<i>(Circulated in advance for discussion)</i>
2 Individual progress reports	Focus on achievements by considering: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Assessment of task % completion and likely completion date (or recommended for sign off as complete!)• What has enabled progress• What has impeded progress and what has been/needs to be done to mitigate that.
3 New agenda items <i>(submitted in advance)</i>	Item description Who leads Time allocated
4 Action planning	What is to be done? How will we measure progress? By who? By when?
5 Any other business	
6 Date and time of next meeting	

Much of the above is self-evident but it relies on **clear and managed communication**. It is important never to underestimate the demand of the roles of team leader, minute taker and the maintenance of good communications between team members, and the contribution they make to the team assignment. It is not all about the glamorous tasks! If the team members allocated these roles are performing them effectively, this will be about 80% of their **overall contribution** to team success.

Here is a list of essentials to support these roles:

- Always agree the next meeting day, time and duration with **all** team members in advance; there are a variety of ways of ensuring this happens. Paper diaries are great as long as everyone is present and everyone keeps them up to date. Shared online diaries and meeting schedulers are helpful, but again individual diaries need to be kept up-to-date. Social media platforms are also useful provided everybody accesses them and responds in a timely way.
- Always discuss, agree and share preferred contact methods such as mobile phone numbers and email addresses. If a team social media presence is to be set up, always give thought to appropriate privacy settings so that the team's work is not subject to unwelcome external intrusion.
- Always agree the deadline for activities that support the meeting itself, for example distribution of previous meeting minutes (see below also) with the forthcoming agenda. And agree the medium by which it will be distributed, for example as email attachments, or via a shared document environment.
- Always ensure that the meeting results in a *written record* (the 'minutes' of the meeting) of agreed next actions along with who, what and when-by, and how sub-task progress will be measured. This avoids later argument, clarifies individual responsibility, and ensures accountability in relation to the team effort.

(Note: Some courses will have specific online environments in which these activities take place because the lecturer/tutor will monitor contributions as part of the ongoing assessment. You need to make sure that you understand and follow any instruction given about this.)

It is important to maintain these formal activities because apart from the edge that such business-like behaviour will give you in your graduate career, occasionally a group will encounter a participant who will not participate despite every effort made to engage them. In order to deal with this fairly and to avoid a counter-allegation of harassment or similar, the rest of the group must be able to show a clear, documented process and procedure, and the attempts made to engage that person. This then allows the group to make representation to the lecturer/tutor with sufficient evidence to allow the tutor to judge what action to take, and to do this is a just and proper way.

Finally, one critique of Tuckman's original model (for example Hare, Borgatta & Bales in their 1965 book *Small groups: studies in social interaction*) is that it suggests a simple linear progression. In reality **groups will typically cycle between norming and performing with occasional 're-storming'** as the task develops and new factors affecting its completion are revealed. **Expect and be prepared for this to happen**, and use the same managed approach to address these challenges (also go back and read the ASK handout *Starting to understand team process* from the *Working in groups* series to review and refresh your understanding of Tuckman's 'stages'.)

References

Hare, A.P., Borgatta, E.F., & Bales, R.F. (1965). *Small groups: studies in social interaction* (2nd.ed). Oxford: Alfred A. Knopf.

Tuckman, B. W. (1965). Developmental Sequence in Small Group, *Psychological Bulletin*, (63)6, 384-399. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cmedm&AN=14314073&site=eds-live>

For further guidance, contact the Academic Skills Unit (ASK).