MEMBERS IN SMALL GROUP COMMUNICATION

Each of us serves many roles, patterns of behaviors that we customarily perform and that we’re expected by others to perform. Javier, for example, is a part-time college student, father, bookkeeper, bowling team captain, and sometime poet. That is, he acts as a student—attends class, reads textbooks, takes exams, and does the things we expect of college students. He also performs those behaviors associated with fathers, bookkeepers, and so on. In a similar way, you develop ways of behaving when participating in small groups.

Member Roles

Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats (1948) proposed a classification of members’ roles in small group communication that still provides the best overview of this important topic (Lumsden & Lumsden, 1993; Beebe & Masterson, 2000). They divide members’ roles into three general classes: group task roles, group building and maintenance roles, and individual roles. Leaders, of course, often perform these roles as well.

Group Task Roles

Group task roles help the group focus on achieving its goals. Effective group members serve several roles. Some people do lock into a few specific roles, but this single focus is usually counterproductive—it’s better for the roles to be spread more evenly among the members and for the roles to be alternated frequently. Here are some examples of group task roles.

- The information seeker or giver and the opinion seeker or giver asks for or gives facts and opinions, seeks clarification of issues being discussed, and presents facts and opinions to group members.
- The evaluator-critic evaluates the group’s decisions, questions the logic or practicality of the suggestions, and provides the group with both positive and negative feedback.
- The procedural technician or recorder takes care of various mechanical duties, such as distributing group materials and arranging the seating; writes down the group’s activities, suggestions, and decisions, and/or serves as the group’s memory.

Group Building and Maintenance Roles

No group can be task-oriented at all times. Group members have varied interpersonal relationships, and these need to be nourished if the group is to function effectively. Group members need to be satisfied if they are to be productive. Group building and maintenance roles serve these relationship needs. Here are some examples of these roles.

- The encourager or harmonizer provides members with positive reinforcement through social approval or praise for their ideas and mediates the various differences between group members.
- The compromiser tries to resolve conflict between his or her ideas and those of others and offers compromises.
- The follower goes along with members, passively accepts the ideas of others, and functions more as an audience than as an active member.

Individual Roles

Group task roles and group building and maintenance roles are productive. They help the group achieve its goal and are group-oriented. Individual roles, on the other hand, are counterproductive. They hinder the group from achieving its goal and are individual-rather than group-oriented. Such roles, often termed dysfunctional, hinder the group’s effectiveness in terms of both productivity and personal satisfaction. Here are some examples of individual roles.

- The aggressor or blocker expresses negative evaluation of members and attacks the group, is generally disagreeable, and opposes other members or their suggestions regardless of their merit.
- The recognition seeker and self-confessor try to focus attention on themselves, boast about their accomplishments rather than the task at hand, and express their own feelings rather than focus on the group.
- The dominator tries to run the group or members by pulling rank, flattering members, or acting the role of boss.

What is the overall purpose of “group task roles”?

What are some examples of group task roles?

What is the overall purpose of group building and maint. roles?

What are some examples?

What is the overall purpose of individual roles?

How do they differ from the other two types?

What are some examples?