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Why Study Group Communication Pitfalls?



Some basketball teams play confused. Inefficient on defense and inept on offense, players get in each others' way, even give the ball up to the other team. There is no conformity to a unified game plan. Any tactics they try to use result in fruitless arguments about what is going wrong and who is to blame. Team members become frustrated and disillusioned. Attitude affects performance and play goes from bad to worse. Team members worry about their own playing time and about who is taking the most shots. Some shouting may occur, but mostly players are quiet and tense around each other, eager to get out of the locker room and away from basketball after a game. After several weeks, if they cannot find a way to make their play together improve, players will learn that "this team is going nowhere" and begin to believe that "this is just a bad team!" The team fails worse than anyone thought possible given the individual talents of its members.

Some basketball teams play with an excellence that defies prescription. Players know their roles, playing them well and creatively. Everyone sticks to the game plan except when they seamlessly work together to improvise an improvement in the plan. They take the initiative to help

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out if teammates struggle. They find opportunities to succeed as a group. Their play looks more like that of one entity than five individuals. Mistakes are made but quickly, even sharply, corrected, and nobody pouts because his or her feelings are hurt. Arguments about tactics result in improvements and even greater success. Players are at ease, even boisterous, in communicating with each other. They are proud of their team and they work harder than they expected when they started with the team because they do not want to let their teammates down. The team succeeds beyond what could be expected given the talent of its members.

We can learn a lesson from these basketball teams. Most day-to-day groups have a combination of effective and ineffective practices. Many achieve some modicum of success, though most group work involves some degree of struggle. Typical group experiences fit somewhere between the extremes described for the two basketball teams. Without the light that the competition with another team shines on the problems a group is having, the pitfalls faced by a group can be hard to see, even by group members. Indeed, it may be difficult to determine whether things are actually going well or poorly in some groups. Most of us have had a range of experiences with groups, from the effective to the not so effective; some are actually even awful. The differences between effective and ineffective groups may be small as they begin to manifest, but they can become very large when measured by final group outcomes. It is important to be aware of the signs that a group is not doing well and to know how to help a group begin to do better. Why? Because it enhances the likelihood that you will help create desirable group outcomes and reduces the chances that you will be involved in unpleasant groups with poor group outcomes.

Effective group communication, coupled with an orientation that *expects* and *detects* group pitfalls as they arise, gives you the foundation for overcoming barriers to effective group experiences. This book provides you with a map of the group pitfall terrain. People working well together can use the struggle against such pitfalls to improve their groups. We make use of your personal experiences in groups as well as published research findings to help you understand groups and to improve your group communication skills.

❖ OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Group experiences are co-constructed by group members as they talk and work together on their task. Groups can be intentionally

co-constructed in ways that increase the likelihood that they will be effective and that decrease the chances of poor group experiences. The first unit in this book (chapters 1 and 2) introduces terms for understanding how we co-construct our groups by communicating with each other. The second unit identifies common and recurring pitfalls we face in our groups. The third unit describes potential group outcomes and how to make choices about your own group work. Throughout the book, but primarily in the second and third units, we provide advice (using italics) on how you can avoid group pitfalls and how to work your way through the pitfalls you do encounter.

We address three questions in this first chapter: What is group communication? Why does it matter? and Why focus on group communication pitfalls in order to study groups? The first and third questions are irrelevant if the answer to the second question is not satisfactory, so we start with that question:

❖ **WHY DO GROUPS MATTER
ENOUGH TO MAKE A STUDY OF THEM?**

Like it or not, groups are involved in most facets of your life, and every one of these groups has to struggle to overcome common pitfalls, or you may personally bear some of the brunt of the consequences. Let's begin by looking at your life in particular. There is a plethora of groups, many in number as well as in type, with both direct and indirect connections to your daily life. Let's be explicit about how many groups there are that are important to you.

Groups Are Important to Happiness and Success

Start by thinking about your family and your work. Some families are healthy groups; others are not. Can you help your family become a healthier group? What are your goals for the future of your family? Can you help them work together to achieve those goals? Remember the childhood groups you got involved in like Girl Scouts or 4-H, youth sports teams, or study groups. Will you be able to help improve the groups that affect your own children? Think of your family and friends and their religious, professional, and social groups. Your access to your family and friends is affected by their obligations to their groups. If someone you are close to is worried because one of their groups is

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Table 1.1 Reasons to Study and Understand Groups

<i>Purpose</i>	<i>Individual Rationale</i>
Happiness and Success	Personal and economic: Individual success is tied to groups.
Groups Are Ubiquitous	Inevitability: Individuals can't escape groups.
Groups Are Formative	Socialization: Individuals are inevitably shaped by groups.
Dynamics Change Communication	Competence: Individuals have to adapt to groups.
Groups Co-construct Our World	Political life: Community values are established by groups.
Better Work	Utility: Effective groups can do more or superior work.

struggling, you will feel the effects of that struggle. Can you help counsel them through difficult group experiences? The desire to answer "yes" to any of these questions provides you with a personal reason for learning how to work well in groups.

Does your job require you to work as part of a team? Are there any groups of people at work that you sometimes have to deal with? Are you a victim of whatever dynamics prevail in such work groups or can you play a productive role in helping to improve them? If you can help improve the dynamics at work, chances are that you will be rewarded for your skills. Employers regularly list "people with effective group skills" as an important consideration when they make hiring choices because of the central role effective group work plays in every strong organization. This book can help you be able to say: "I know how to be an effective member of a team. That means I personally can work well when I am part of a team. It also means that I know how to help others on the team in their attempts to do their work well." The desire to be able to make those claims provides an economic reason for learning how to work well in groups.

Groups Are Ubiquitous

Groups are ubiquitous, which means that you will find them everywhere humans are at work or play, and your life will be affected by them in a never-ending variety of ways. Groups are involved in every organization in which you are a member. All kinds of businesses

and complex organizations use groups to sort through difficult tasks. Managers typically spend more than half of each day in group meetings, and the majority of work groups meet at least once a week with others meeting at least once a month (Mintzberg, 1973; Volkema & Niederman, 1995). As you attain more and more success in life, the chances are that groups of other people and meetings with teams of people will become more and more important to that success.

Once you start thinking about groups that affect you even though you are not a member, the list becomes almost endless. Think about groups beyond family and work. The curriculum you had to complete to get your education was developed by a group of individuals. The menu in public restaurants is sorted out and prepared by a group. Any time you ask someone in a bureaucracy to do something for you and are told in response, "that is against policy" or "I'm sorry, but that's not my job," you are probably dealing with a person representing the will of a group. A cockpit crew in the jet that flies you across the country is a group. How important is it to you that they work well together? The doctors, anesthesiologist, and nurses who operate on you need effective group communication. Do you know how to protect yourself against the possibility that they do not work well together? For example, when you are in the hospital, do you talk to medical professionals as though they are just one part of a team that is caring for you? You should. Groups are everywhere, helping to make organizations either stronger or weaker.

Groups Are Formative

Our experiences in groups help to shape who we are and what we believe. Some group experiences last longer than the groups themselves. Bad experiences in a group can make us not want to trust a group with any work that is important to us. Good experiences can make us feel as though our best work is done in groups. Symbolic interaction theory explains part of this formative process (Mead, 1964). It argues that we learn about ourselves, about who we are and what we are able to do well, by experiencing how others treat us as they interact with us. The self-concept that results, coupled with our implicit theories about how people in groups ought to behave, combine to form a forceful orientation for our future activities in groups. So, being in groups helps to shape who we are as individuals and it also helps to shape who we are as potential group members.

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We are also affected by the value-expressive attitudes we have about the groups to which we belong. Why do you join one group and not another? Such choices are made in part based on ideas about what being a member of a particular group “says” about one as a person. Indeed, sometimes we think of ourselves in terms of the groups we belong to. “I’m a union member.” “I’m a Republican.” “I’m on a bowling team.” “I work at Z-bar.” If you make reference to a group you belong to when introducing yourself to someone, it is because you think that helps them to understand something important about you. Membership in some groups suggests how I ought to think and how I ought to behave: in a manner consistent with the values of that group. This creates a sort of mental shorthand through which we can refer to ourselves and to what we believe. The company and associations we keep help define and shape us. The groups we identify ourselves with help to tell us and others who we are and what we value.

Group Dynamics Change Communication

The communication dynamics involved in a group context are different than those that are important in other contexts. Just because you are an effective communicator in one context does not mean that you will be in another. If you are good at selling shoes, does that mean you are a good public speaker? The type of communication that is appropriate changes as the context changes in which the communication is attempted. People who write well are not necessarily good at polite chitchat during a party. People who are effective radio broadcasters might be challenged by a group context in which they must pay attention to feedback from each of the other group members. For centuries in Western culture, group communication was not treated as a particularly special and important type of communicating. During the twentieth century, that changed as research started to document the important role that informal work groups play in complex organizations and the role that effective group interaction plays in human development. Now, management theory fully integrates team-building skills with broader organizational concerns, and psychotherapists concern themselves with the nature of the groups to which their clients belong in addition to the mental health of their patients. To learn to adapt your communication to be effective in groups, you must learn how the dynamics of human interaction are affected by the group context.

We Use Group Communication to Co-construct Our World

Are there any groups where you live that make decisions affecting your home, your transportation, or your access to food, water, or energy? City commissions or county councils regulate many aspects of your life after discussing the issues in open or closed group meetings. There are political groups and all sorts of advocacy and service groups. Is there a community church or temple or mosque? Is there a local school? Do any of these community groups need your help in order to better serve your community? If so, you have a political reason for understanding groups.

To get a sense of the skills involved in shaping corporate or community values (political activity), look at the problems faced in societies with no history of democratic participation. Effective group work can be hard where people have long been punished for expressing their opinions. Krips (1992) found that people in Russia experienced difficulty working together after the dissolution of the former Soviet Union because of a history in which they were discouraged from the free exchange of ideas. The assumption was missing that group members ought to have equal opportunities to participate, and misconceptions were frequent about whether input was to be valued by group members. These are substantial pitfalls to effective group communication.

Demos, the root for the word *democracy*, means a self-governing group. We cannot self-govern; we cannot have effective democracy or effective groups if people do not learn how to work well in groups. Groups are more likely to serve useful purposes when everyone in them takes responsibility for what the group decides. There is nothing more fundamental to citizenship than learning how to work well with others. Having a political reason for learning how to work well in groups does not mean that everyone needs to be a politician, but everyone does need to be able to understand and engage in the processes that shape how values will be represented in the policies and the laws that govern the places where we live and work.

Effective Groups Do More or Better Work

The final reasons for making a study of groups are found in the various utilities to be served by working in groups. Groups can help us to do stuff. Groups can be powerful, because they are the way that we harness the efforts, energies, and intelligence of several people in service of a common task. In simplest form, some groups have tasks to do

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that are enhanced by having more people doing the work. Pulling a heavy load is made easier the more people you have pulling it. Picking dandelions is done faster the more people you have picking them. "The more the merrier" represents such additive tasks. The kind of group work we focus on in this book is different. It does not involve additive tasks; it involves conjunctive tasks that require coordinated interaction. Some groups have tasks where a greater and greater number of members is not better and better. Conjunctive tasks require integration of thought and action and become more difficult as the group gets larger. "Too many cooks spoil the stew" represents such tasks. Even with conjunctive tasks, though, there should be a utility served by having a group do the work.

Throughout this book, we refer to such utilities as the process prizes a group might attain if its members work well together. When a group of people is effective, it is more powerful than individuals working alone, and its effectiveness means that better work gets done. The better work is "value added" to the task by having it done in a group rather than by individuals working alone. We call these prizes because they are especially desirable outcomes and we call them process prizes because the desirable nature of the outcome results from the interaction of the individuals working together, not from the individuals themselves. Process prizes from effective group interactions are (a) the group does better creative thinking or work than the individuals alone would do, (b) the group does better critical thinking or work than the individuals alone would do, or (c) group members accept group outcomes more because they played a part in the group. The first two process prizes are measured in enhanced quality outcomes. The third is measured by how well those outcomes are treated by group members when their work is done. The three process prizes manifest as the value added to the work because it was done in a group.

Can you get a group to help you? Groups can help you to do more work than you could ever do on your own. Can you turn group utility into personal utility? Some entrepreneurs find the transition to be difficult from their single-proprietor new business to one that employs several people because they do not know how to work well with others. Successful professionals often find that their success increases the number of times that they have to work in groups of people (e.g., a successful accountant becomes a partner in the firm and then has to start helping manage the other accountants in the firm, which requires being able to work well in a group). Groups can help you become more

creative in developing options or to better test ideas critically before you adopt them. Groups can create acceptance of and support for a plan of action by employing the efforts of others in the process of developing the plan. Knowing about these important process prizes can help you to get more done in groups, because you understand the purposes that are supposed to be served by groups.

In sum, for all the above reasons, it is wise to make a study of groups. In your daily life, you can practice the study of groups by observing the groups you are in at work and play, by observing the groups that are depicted in the movies you watch and the books you read, and by trying to determine why people behave as they do. Whenever the action involves a group, try to determine how that fact might be affecting what you observe. Becoming a student of how groups work can actually be fun. It is exciting to begin to have insight into why people behave as they do and also to learn ways to help increase your own effectiveness.

Every business, organization, and community enterprise depends on groups. When you were very young, others had already set up the groups that nurtured you and that provided you with protection. Groups make possible all sorts of wonderful things. For instance, you do not have to organize the food production process that allows you to do your job instead of spending your own time every day hunting for or gathering the food you need to survive. The ability of any society to perpetuate itself comes down to the health of its groups. As people mature, they need to help shoulder their share of that work. Every worthwhile group needs people to do its work in order for it to stay healthy. As human beings, we each either help or hurt (even if only through benign neglect) the groups that are necessary for the survival of us all. Groups live, grow, and evolve either into stronger or into weaker entities over time as a direct consequence of how we choose to involve ourselves in them. If too many people choose not to be active, society and cultural advances stop. Over time, any organization or culture can fade away.

❖ DEFINITIONS OF *GROUP* AND *COMMUNICATION AND PITFALLS*

This book is focused on group communication pitfalls. Defining the three components of this subject matter, *group* and *communication* and

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pitfalls, provides the organization for the remainder of this chapter. Because it takes communication to cocreate a group as well as to cocreate and/or to address group pitfalls, we start with this question:

What Constitutes Communication?

We use a combination of two quite different and yet basic definitions of communication (Burtis, 1989). The combination of the two covers the realm of what is important for defining communication in a group. First, communication is the *transfer of information from one source to another*. The quality of this aspect of communication is judged by a fidelity criterion: effective messages are clear in that the receiver of the message learns exactly what the source intends. The necessity in any effective group for members to share information accurately is represented by this definition. Second, communication is *making and sharing meanings*. This implies an ambiguous process affected by the personal perceptual filters and frames the people involved bring to each communicative episode. Communication in this sense is not outcome (accurate or otherwise) but process. Effective communication evolves only as sources and receivers work together to co-construct an understanding of what matters with regard to the issue at hand.

Group communication involves the transfer of information among members and also the co-construction of meanings that will enhance or bedevil the group. In a very real sense, a group is a co-construction of the communication among its members: the attempts people make to form and to maintain an effective group through their talk. Both the information transferred and the meanings that are co-constructed during any attempt to communicate are affected by a group's communication network: who speaks to whom. Lines of communication must be open to all group members in order to increase the chances that the people involved will be able to serve the purpose for doing their work in a group: attaining a process prize from their work together. Open and active talk among all of the group members cocreates an all-channel network, which is characteristic of effective group communication. In the ideal, everyone must be able to talk with, listen to, and give feedback to everyone else in the group in order for the communication to be "group communication." Our definition of a group gives a primary role to communication; group communication is the co-construction of the group.

What Constitutes a Group?

A group is people who co-construct both a common purpose (task or goal) and shared perceptual membership boundaries through regular communicative interaction that allows them to work interdependently to serve desired task, relational, and individual functions.¹

Purpose. A common purpose is a shared desire to achieve an agreed-on goal. If group members are working toward different ends, they will only appear to be a group until their desire for different things results in efforts by them to separate their activities. Group members can have many different purposes, but there must be at least one common goal (e.g., accomplishing a particular job, keeping each other company) from being together in order for there to be a group. The group's task is usually where we find a sense of joint purpose, so it is appropriate to say that groups share a common task, though sometimes there are different exigencies that motivate group members to the same task.

Interdependence. Interdependence is when the actions of each individual member affect and are affected by the others in the group. Although people may be working on a common task, they may or may not be influencing each other as they do so. Influencing each other requires a common process; group members must be involved in a manner that affects each other. One cannot succeed or fail without the other succeeding or failing, too. In the ideal form, a group's interdependence means that the success of the group depends on the contributions of each member and that the members rely on each other to reach their shared goals. For example, three strangers riding an elevator at the same time are not a group. They are just an aggregate of individuals because they lack a shared goal and an interdependent process. Three people working together to fix a broken elevator are a group. Consider a more complicated example. Three telemarketers sit next to each other at a table with a bank of phones. Each tries to make sales. This is a *nominal group*, or group in name only, because it lacks the interdependent process though they all share a common task—talking on the phone trying to make sales. They can fail or succeed alone. The distinctions among aggregates of people, nominal groups, and groups turn out to be quite important when we get to a discussion of how interaction can help and also hurt group performance. Groups with members who fail to realize and to capitalize on their interdependence are more likely to underperform or to fail as a group. Reliance on one another is a part of

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interdependence as is the need for each member to contribute to the group, and both are directly related to the ability of a group effort to attain the process prizes intended from doing work as a group.

Perceived Boundaries. Perceived boundaries are perceptions of who is and who is not a member of the group. *Boundary* is a metaphor representing the need for members to identify themselves as part of the group. The ability to do this depends on the presence of shared characteristics that help participants identify themselves as members of the group. Shared characteristics allow members to differentiate themselves from those outside the group. That means that members know who is *not* a member. A perceived boundary works like a virtual fence you have between your property and your neighbor's. You use a fence to make clear what is on your side and to separate that from what is on the other side, the side that is not yours. You can describe your property according to its characteristics, and you can describe your group according to its characteristics. Often, that means describing the signs of group membership—the signs there are that someone is a member of the group. These characteristics of your group help you understand and enforce the group's perceptual boundary. Does your favorite team have a mascot, special colors, inside jokes, or stories about their history? A dress code in a private school or a uniform in the military provide common examples. Fraternities and sororities use Greek letters to designate themselves and conduct rituals of membership that may even involve hazing to let new members know how special they are. "The curse of the Bambino" was part of the folklore for fans of the Boston Red Sox who blamed their failure to win a world series on having been the team that traded a youthful Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees long ago. The point is to find ways to distinguish between those who are in and outside the group, clarifying perceptual boundaries.

Interaction. Interaction involves communication and is required to co-construct each of the first three elements of a group. We have already described how communication involves the co-construction of meaning. Communication is used to co-construct groups and what is meaningful to a group. Members of a group need to talk and to share their ideas with each other. They must work together, coordinating their efforts in order to do the work of the group. Have you ever started to work in a group only to find that the rest of the potential members of the group want immediately to divide up the work and then to proceed

to work on it alone? Perhaps that is a good idea. Perhaps it is not. It depends on whether there is a process prize to be desired from interacting as a group on the particular task at hand. When people divide up a project so that they no longer have to work together in any way to accomplish an assignment, they are not working as a group on the project. When they cut off interaction, it means that they will not be able to attain the process prizes that can only be achieved from the process of working as a group.

Our description of these four elements, which are necessary to comprise a group, begins our description of what a group must be and do in order to accomplish the purposes people have for groups. Working alone is one alternative to working in a group. There are also other ways for people to accomplish tasks without interaction or interdependence or shared boundaries or shared goals. Alternative entities to groups may share one or more but not all of the above elements (e.g., a nominal group that lacks shared process and interaction but uses several people to work on the same job). In some cases, those entities are preferable to groups. In other cases, they are not. A goal you should set for yourself is to learn when it is appropriate to employ a group to accomplish a task and when it would be better to use an alternative entity. A decision about what entity to employ for a given project should be informed by the nature of the task as well as by the relationships among those involved and their individual needs.

All groups serve task, relational, and individual functions (Benne & Sheats, 1948; Mudrack & Farrell, 1995). Every group must serve these three functions in order to be judged an effective group. Task functions are the reason a group is called together or put to work on a subject in the first place. A task involves the group's mission, goals, and outcomes. When a group does its work, it does so in ways that manifest in task outcomes. The work gets done as the group structures its experiences together. Even recreational or social groups have a task. People in a bowling league have bowling as their task. People in self-help groups have sharing their experiences and making therapeutic gains as their task. People in a family have the work of feeding, clothing, sheltering, and nurturing each other as a task. People in a business group have the jobs assigned them by the organization as their task. Every group should be assessed in part by how well it has served its task function.

The relational function is served by the ability of group members to work well together as they approach their task. If group members do

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not get along, if they do not learn to relate well with each other, they will struggle. Consider three synonyms for *relational*: maintenance, socioemotional, and people-orientation. Maintenance means the group's ability to keep the necessary processes in place (to maintain them) as it works on group tasks. Effective relationships among group members help maintain the group's ability to do its work. The maintenance staff that care for a building are not doing the task the building was designed to do. Instead, they maintain lighting and equipment and an environment that is clean and free of hazards so that the task that the space is designed for can be done. The socioemotional metaphor describes the fact that people feel good or bad about the social aspects of their relationships as they work with others. The emotional aspects of life in a group can enhance or diminish your desire to get to meetings and to do well when you are there. A group that is people oriented is one that cares about the relationships among its members and also about how each individual member is doing. How well a group serves its relational and individual functions are parts of an assessment of the group's effectiveness.

A group serves its individual function well when group members grow and benefit as individuals from the process of being involved in the group. We are concerned with the individual function because group membership comes at a cost to the individual. Consequently, members should anticipate some individual satisfaction or positive outcome from their work in addition to strong task and maintenance outcomes. Bormann (1996) claims that "each individual ought to have the opportunity to grow and develop his or her potential within the group. . . . The praiseworthy group . . . is one in which the member's potential for achievement and self-transcendence is realized" (p. 280). That individual functions ought to be served by a group seems to us to be self-evident.

Contrary to our orientation, some group scholars argue that when individual functions are served by a group, they distract or detract from the group's task and maintenance functions. Yes, some selfish acts are quite clearly pitfalls to effective group communication, such as the withdrawing, blocking, and status- and recognition-seeking activities that Brillhart, Galanes, and Adams (2001) identify as well as the aggressor, blocker, and dominator roles Mudrack and Farrell (1995) identify. Poor personal behavior certainly has pitfall potential when individual purposes are served at the expense of the group. But the obverse may be true as well. Sometimes individual group members are hurt by their

Table 1.2 Summary of Group Functions

<i>Type</i>	<i>Outcome Type</i>	<i>Examples of desirable outcomes</i>
Task	Work outcomes	Complete a report; finish a job; develop a solution; win a game.
Relational	Maintenance, social-emotional, or climate building	Ability to work or play together well; group solidarity; cohesion.
Individual	Person-oriented or self-serving outcomes	Sense of accomplishment; increased group skills; friendship.

service to a group; sometimes individuals are even sacrificed for the good of the group. We believe that a healthy, sustainable balance is attainable only when a group serves all three functions well: its individual function as well as its task and social functions. The disagreement about the role individual functions should play in groups provides a transition to the final question addressed in this chapter:

What Constitutes Group Communication Pitfalls?

Group Pitfall. A *group pitfall* is defined as anything that might reduce the effectiveness of a group; anything that might diminish its desired outcomes. Whether a pitfall is anticipated or unforeseen, whether it is a problem created by the group or a problem that the group is just unfortunate enough to have to face, a group pitfall must be addressed during the group process in order for the group, in the end, to improve its performance. Common group pitfalls tend to recur. Every group must face at least some of them. If, by the end of a project, your group has failed to address the common group pitfalls it has faced, the effectiveness of your group will have been diminished. That is when group breakdown has occurred.

Group Breakdown. A *group breakdown* is defined as a diminished group outcome. A breakdown occurred if, by the end of its work on a project, a group failed to accomplish its ideal potential performance given the resources that were available to it. Breakdown is indicated by the group's failure to attain a process prize while serving all three functions a group is intended to serve. In practice, this means that group

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breakdown has occurred when a group produced less than it should have in terms of the group's task (task function), in terms of the ability of the group's members to maintain their capacity to get along well while working with one another (relational function), or in terms of the group's service to its membership (individual function).

Pitfalls and breakdown are closely related but different. We mentioned at the start of this chapter that it is sometimes very difficult to tell how well a group is doing while they are still in the process of working together. Group members may not even be fully aware of how well their group is doing, regardless of their optimism or pessimism. The difficulty can be explained as part of the nature of a dynamic and unfolding process. For example, individual group activities may not appear to be much of a problem, but small pitfalls can sometimes lead to quite negative outcomes. Further, an activity that helped create a pitfall for the group at one meeting can end up getting corrected by group members at a later meeting, turning out not to be a problem after all. And it is possible that the members co-construct a stronger group when they have to work together as a team to address a pitfall. In that case, what appears at one point to be a problem for the group actually leads to improved outcomes for the group over time. These are reasons to separate the conception of potential pitfalls to group communication (from the actuality of group breakdown). Every group has a variety of possible ways to achieve a potential outcome. Every group faces pitfalls in group processes that have the potential for diminishing group outcomes. How the group responds to these pitfalls shapes whether there is actual diminution or reduction in final group outcomes: breakdown.

Both pitfalls and breakdown manifest in a variety of shapes, colors, and sizes. Pitfalls range in intensity and importance from the slightly inconvenient, to the addlepatting, to the completely discombobulating (sounds pretty bad, doesn't it?). Group breakdowns also range from a minor reduction in how well a group function was served, to a failure on one or more of a group's functions, to a catastrophic outcome of some sort. Gouran and Hirokawa (2003) indicate that "the reasons for faulty performance in decision-making and problem-solving groups are many and varied, and not fully identified or completely understood" (p. 27). Our approach to these pitfalls and the uncertainty surrounding them is to cast the widest possible net with our definitions of what constitute group pitfalls and group breakdown so that we can be certain to have oriented you to the potential problems you may face when working in a group.

❖ CASTING A WIDE NET TO INCLUDE
ALL PITFALLS AND BREAKDOWN

Casting as wide a net as possible means we need to consider two forms of group breakdown. First, when a group fails, it has broken down. That form is easy to understand and to accept as breakdown. Second, when a group succeeds to some extent but underperforms given the resources it had available to it, that, too, is a group breakdown. This second form of breakdown requires some justification. Why should underperformance be called breakdown? The reason is that the underperforming group wasted available resources, especially the time and talent of its membership, on a mediocre outcome. In addition, if a smaller number of people could accomplish the same outcome as an underperforming group has, a smaller number of people should have done the work. That is because less energy would then have been used, lowering the costs of the group to match the outcome attained. (The exception to this rule is when the need to attain the process prize of group member acceptance justifies tying up additional member resources in the group's work.) Finally, underperforming groups risk setting individual or group norms for performance at substandard levels for future work by that individual or group: they learn to expect to underperform. These reasons justify setting the standard for effective group performance at optimum levels and also for including underperforming groups among the ranks of groups that have broken down.

The potential for group productivity should be assessed by whether an optimum or ideal standard has been met. Our definition of group breakdown is based on the premise that potential productivity in a group equals actual productivity plus whatever losses there were due to faulty group processes (Steiner, 1972). *Potential productivity* is defined as the most a group could be expected to accomplish under good circumstances, given the resources available. That implies the use of an ideal as the criterion to measure how well a group actually does. Using the ideal to measure functional outcomes (task, relational, or individual) suggests the possibility of finding a number of ways for a group to improve its performance. Put another way, it suggests that there are all sorts of group pitfalls that could result in diminution of group outcomes. Potential productivity is a useful ideal for a group to seek as part of their goals and also a useful criterion for assessing group outcomes.

❖ GROUP COMMUNICATION PITFALLS BY COMMISSION OR BY OMISSION

Potential communication is a second aspect of group work where some assessment can be made regarding optimum quality. Gouran and Hirokawa (2003) argue, in their functional theory, that the "performance level of decision-making and problem-solving groups can be traced to the extent to which communication among group members contributes to the fulfillment of particular requirements of their task" (p. 27). In this sense, communication pitfalls can manifest in two ways: by commission and by omission. First, if the communicative interaction among group members actually diminishes their capacity to serve the group's functional outcomes, they have used their communication to co-construct a barrier to an effective group experience. Consequently, their communication has not contributed as it should to their attempts to serve their group's functional needs. This is a pitfall by communication commission. Second, if problems that are not created by the group must, nonetheless, be faced by the group in order for them to succeed, and if those problems are not identified and talked through by group members in a manner that enhances their ability to get past the problems, then the absence of such necessary communication has become a pitfall to the group's work. Again, the consequence is that the group's communication has not helped them to serve their group functions. This is a pitfall by communication omission. Again, an ideal, in the form of optimum group communication, becomes the standard for assessing how well a group addresses the pitfalls it faces.

Our position is that all groups are ripe with possibilities: for effective group actions and for potential group pitfalls. In fact, group work is conducive to pitfalls. *Conducive* means "contributing to the possibility of" or "providing the circumstances necessary for" something to occur: in this case, group pitfalls and breakdown. That means that group work involves circumstances that can naturally lead to some problems for the people in the group as they attempt to work together. Their actions can cocreate both effective group work and group pitfalls. Communication is the only process for avoiding or for working through group pitfalls. But communication can also be involved in the co-construction of group pitfalls (pitfall by communication commission), or groups can fail to communicate about important problems facing them (pitfall by communication omission). In addition, the three functions groups are intended to serve make groups conducive to pitfalls because it is difficult to achieve each of the three functions

and because it is difficult to balance all of the three functions. These observations form the basis for what we call the Breakdown-Conductive Group Framework.

❖ THE BREAKDOWN-CONDUCTIVE GROUP FRAMEWORK

The Breakdown-Conductive Group Framework justifies treating group pitfalls and group breakdown as normal, recurring, to-be-expected-and-dealt-with phenomena. In part, the Breakdown-Conductive Group Framework argues: (a) every group is subject to recurring types of pitfalls that can lead to the diminished success (breakdown) of the group, and (b) a focus on recurring forms of potential group pitfalls can help a group member *expect, detect, and correct* the pitfalls. The Breakdown-Conductive Group Framework is the basis for this book; it justifies the heavy focus we place on group pitfalls. Because all groups face potential pitfalls, all groups are breakdown-conductive, even ones that manage, eventually, to successfully navigate the pitfalls and do not, in the end, suffer any diminution of performance (group breakdown).

Some groups co-construct improved outcomes on their task, relational, or individual functions as a consequence of their efforts to deal successfully with the obstacles they faced. That they were breakdown-conductive, in effect, helped them become a stronger group because they had to work together as a group to avoid or to overcome the pitfalls they faced. Salazar (1995) postulates that the number of obstacles encountered by a group is positively related to the number of attempts made by group members to facilitate effective group work (in addition to the increase in potential for those pitfalls to be disruptive). So, the more pitfalls faced by a group, the greater the possibility that overcoming those pitfalls can lead to a stronger group (though the possibility also exists that the pitfalls may overcome the group). Having to work through pitfalls can help strengthen your group, and understanding pitfalls can help you in your efforts to work through them. This provides the beginning of the answer to one final question:

❖ WHY SHOULD WE FOCUS OUR STUDY OF GROUPS ON GROUP COMMUNICATION PITFALLS?

Focusing your study of groups on group pitfalls and breakdown can help you overcome barriers to effective group experiences. For

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example, a focus on aspects of diminished group performance helps encourage setting higher standards for effective group action: a standard, which suggests that a group should raise its performance goals to achieve an optimum outcome unless they have a good reason not to. In addition, the focus on pitfalls in the Breakdown-Conducive Group Framework makes it very evident, from the onset of group work, how common it is to experience group pitfalls; they should certainly be expected whenever one works in a group. Understanding the breakdown-conducive nature of groups helps create realistic expectations regarding work in a group. Properly framed, group pitfalls and breakdowns are viewed as natural phenomena whenever people work together.

If pitfalls are natural in any group, we should learn to expect them. That expectation encourages us to develop both a prepared stance and a humble approach to recurring group pitfalls. Preparation allows us to hone the skills necessary to avoid some pitfalls and to work through other pitfalls. Most of us develop our own personal strategies for avoiding group pitfalls and tactics for working through the problems that our groups do end up having to face. But, to do those important things well, we need to understand the nature of and potential for common group pitfalls. Humility allows us to keep our own potential culpability for the co-construction of the group's pitfalls in mind when dealing with a group problem. Humility gives us perspective when struggling with a group. It allows a more levelheaded approach to the group's problems. Greater effort can be directed at avoiding or working through pitfalls than toward becoming defensive and attacking other group members because of the role they played in helping to co-construct the problem. You can teach yourself to shift your focus away from just your own experiences in a group. Try to include also a consideration of the difficulties that the group is facing and the experiences other group members are having. Then, your knowledge of the nature of pitfalls can improve the quality of the strategies you develop to help you avoid pitfalls. This knowledge also helps you to develop reasonably intelligent tactics for correcting pitfalls that are encountered: in short, to overcome barriers to effective group experiences.

Figuring out how to overcome a problem is made easier by understanding the problem. Your group communication skills can be enhanced once you decide to (a) accept that pitfalls and breakdown in your group efforts are inevitable; (b) expect pitfalls and be prepared to detect and to understand them as they unfold; (c) be humble in such

circumstances, anticipating and accepting your own possible complicity in co-constructing the pitfall and the group's ensuing response; (d) when you must, work your way through pitfalls trying to minimize the natural human tendencies to be ego-defensive and to scapegoat someone else for the problem; and (e) try to anticipate how you might better deal with such problems the next time you face them. Learning to expect and detect common group communication pitfalls during any group project begins the process of getting you ready to be a more effective group member.

❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this book, we provide you a map of the group communication pitfall terrain. We also describe how groups of people working well together can use the struggle against such pitfalls to improve their groups. Effective groups are very important to us all. Knowing how communication is supposed to work, what a group is supposed to be and to do, and the intended functions for a group can all help you to figure out where pitfalls may manifest. Unfortunately, there are many aspects of group communication that diminish the group's capacity for serving its three intended functions and attaining a process prize.

We use an orientating framework that includes the idea that you ought to *expect* group pitfalls in order to develop an enhanced ability to *detect* such pitfalls in order to discover or create ways to *correct* such pitfalls. Our emphasis is on the first two parts, expect and detect, because those are the primary ingredients for overcoming barriers to effective group experiences. Any group will suffer if its members do not know to expect and to detect the problems that reduce group effectiveness. Learning ways to correct these problems is important too, but the details of an individual group situation can vary so much that a technique, which may work in one group to correct a problem, may fail to work at all in a second group and may work to create new problems in a third. Consequently, our advice in this book is oriented toward helping you co-construct effective group practices through your communication with other group members rather than toward providing specific answers for fixing each new problem you encounter. Effective group communication processes, coupled with an orientation that expects and detects pitfalls as they arise, gives you the foundation for overcoming barriers to effective group experiences.