

Implementing a Group Work Requirement in Class

By Don Sutherland

Each semester, I assign my BBA 407 Strategic Management students a group research paper. This paper accounts for 25% of the course grade. The learning objectives related to the paper include (1) providing students with an opportunity to apply course concepts to an actual company; (2) providing students with a group work opportunity; and, (3) improving students' written communications skills.

The group nature of the paper is essential. Therefore, the paper's grade is strictly an evaluation of the finished product in its entirety. No individual grades are assigned. The entire group receives a single grade, much as a team such as the New York Giants and all of its players either make the playoffs or don't strictly on the team's wins and losses.

Group or team effort is an integral part of the corporate landscape. Groups, whether they are comprised of executives or staff or both, play important roles in the development of corporate strategy, implementation of functional responsibilities, administration of the organization, and special problem solving e.g., evaluation of a possible acquisition target.

Occasionally, some students are dissatisfied with the grade given to their paper. As a result, they appeal to be judged on an individual basis. While student contributions and efforts can vary widely within a group, I reject such appeals. Accommodating them would undercut the paper's emphasis on group work.

This semester saw yet another request for an individual critique. The paper in question had some significant flaws. Two required elements were missing. Its proposed solutions were discussed in a superficial fashion. The rationale for the paper's recommendation was all but evaded with the declaration that "the rationale is self-explanatory." The paper's grade reflected those deficiencies.

Although I empathize with the students who seek individual grading, the reality is that group or team work is not easy. It can be highly complex and very demanding. Nevertheless, groups are an inescapable reality in the corporate setting. Abilities to work effectively within groups and lead them are essential skills for those who aspire to reach mid- or senior management positions during their careers.

In a group setting, members come in with different knowledge, skills, interests, experiences, and insights. Such diversity can create some significant initial challenges in advancing the group process. However, such heterogeneity can also be leveraged to produce superior outcomes, especially on projects that require responding to ambiguous change or those that demand a lot of creativity. Capable managers need to be able to direct and lead diverse teams, difficult as those challenges are. In global companies, where cultural and linguistic differences exist among employees and managers, there is even greater complexity.

Effective group management requires members to evaluate tasks, divide the tasks into manageable pieces, formulate a process for proceeding, delegate work, reconcile differences, and

cultivate synergies in transforming the individual contributions into a coherent whole that achieves a desired outcome or result. In effect, what goes on within a group offers students an experience to gain exposure to the kind of tasks they would be expected to undertake as managers.

Clearly, effective group work is not easy. It is more demanding than one's own working on a project independent of others. But that's not how companies operate. Organizations bring people together toward some common purpose. Groups do the same.

In the end, as has been the case with prior requests for individual grading, I turned down the request. I provided a detailed explanation for that decision.