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# APPENDIX 3

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## *A Guide for Creating Effective Study Groups*

Most students enrolled in MBA programs must work in groups to complete important projects and requirements en route to obtaining their degrees. Some students work with the same group throughout their program; other students work with several groups each semester. This is a guide for helping these groups be as effective as possible.

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### VERY EARLY ON

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In the beginning, when the group is forming, it is helpful to do some kind of structured exercise that moves beyond chit-chat. For this reason, it is helpful to have a somewhat structured but fun exercise that moves people beyond superficial pleasantries and encourages them to talk about their expectations for the team, work styles, and so on. For great resources on team exercises, the following resources and books are very useful:

- The Kellogg Teams and Groups (KTAG) Center's cases on the Dispute Resolution Research Center's CD-ROM of cases and exercises<sup>1</sup>
- *Experiences in Management and Organizational Behavior* (4th edition)<sup>2</sup>
- *Leadership Games*;<sup>3</sup> *Principles of Human Relations*<sup>4</sup>
- *The Role-Play Technique: A Handbook for Management and Leadership Practice*<sup>5</sup>
- *A Handbook of Structured Experiences for Human Relations Training*<sup>6</sup>
- *A Handbook of Structured Experiences*<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Kellogg Teams and Groups (KTAG) center cases and exercises cited in this appendix are available through the Dispute Resolution Research Center (DRRC), Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, 2001 Sheridan Road, Evanston, IL 60208. Phone: (847) 491-8068; e-mail: [drcc@kellogg.northwestern.edu](mailto:drcc@kellogg.northwestern.edu); order form is available online at [www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/research/drcc/documents/cd\\_orderform.pdf](http://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/research/drcc/documents/cd_orderform.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>Bowen, D. D., Lewicki, R. J., Hall, D. T., & Hall, F. S. (1997). *Experiences in management and organizational behavior* (4th ed.). New York: Wiley.

<sup>3</sup>Kaagan, S. S. (1999). *Leadership games: Experiential learning for organizational development*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

<sup>4</sup>Maier, N. R. F. (1952). *Principles of human relations, applications to management*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

<sup>5</sup>Maier, N. R. F., Solem, A. R., & Maier A. A. (1975). *The role-play technique: A handbook for management and leadership practice*. LaJolla, CA: University Associates.

<sup>6</sup>Pfeiffer, J. W. (1974). *A handbook of structured experiences for human relations training* (Vol. 1-10). LaJolla, CA: University Associates.

<sup>7</sup>Pfeiffer, J. W., & Jones, J. E. (1994). *A handbook of structured experiences* (Vol. 1-10). San Diego: Pfeiffer & Company.

- *The Big Book of Team Building Games*<sup>8</sup>
- *More Team Games for Trainers*<sup>9</sup>
- Hay Group<sup>10</sup>
- Human Synergistics<sup>11</sup>

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## SOMETIME DURING THE FIRST WEEK OR TWO

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A host of tensions and dilemmas can threaten the effectiveness of any study group. We suggest the team meet and complete a “team contract.”

We also suggest that groups that will work together for long periods discuss the following issues in the first week or two:

### Team Goals

- **Learning:** “Are we here to learn and to help others learn or are we here to get a good grade?” There is not a right answer to this question, but differing goals in the group can hurt later performance.
- **Standards:** “Is perfectionism more important than being on time, or vice versa?”
- **Performance:** “Are we a high-pass (dean’s list) group or a pass (survival) group?”

### Thought Questions

- What happens if the project leader has lower standards than some other members about writing a paper or report?
- What happens if one group member is not very skilled at some topic area (i.e., how do you use that member’s input on group projects and incorporate ideas that do not appear to be adding value)?

### Person-Task Mapping

- Is it best to capitalize on the existing strengths of team members or to play to people’s weaknesses?
- Suppose your team has a quantitative guru. Do you want to assign the “quant jock” to do all the math and econometrics problems, or use this as an opportunity to let other team members learn?

### Additional Questions

- **Member skills:** Do you want to use your study group meeting time to bring all group members up to speed, or should those who need help get it on their own time?
- **Person-task focus:** Are people the group’s first priority or is working the first priority?
- **Structure:** Should the team meeting be structured (e.g., agenda, timekeeper, assigned roles) or should it be free-form?
- **Interloper:** Are other people (outside the group) allowed to attend group meetings and have access to group notes, outlines, homework, and so on, or is group work considered confidential?

<sup>8</sup>Newstrom, J., & Scannell, E. (1997). *The big book of team building games*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

<sup>9</sup>Nilson, C. D. (1997). *More team games for trainers*. New York: McGraw Hill.

<sup>10</sup>Available at <http://www.haygroup.com>.

<sup>11</sup>Available at <http://www.humansyn.com/site/default.aspx>.

- **Communication standards:** Are group members expected to adapt to the most advanced methods of communication, or does group work happen at the lowest common denominator?
- **Project leader pacing:** There would seem to be an advantage for group members who volunteer early on for group projects because commitments and pressures build up later in the semester. How will the group meeting process adapt to increasing workloads?

## AFTER THE GROUP IS WELL UNDER WAY

After the group is well under way, it is a good idea to take stock of how the group is working together. We suggest the “team assessment,” ideally administered by a coach, facilitator, or instructor acquainted with the study group (see the KTAG cases and exercises).

Another useful idea is to do some version of a peer-feedback performance review, wherein individuals receive confidential feedback and ratings about how they are viewed by other team members. This can often be completely computerized (see Appendix 4).

### EXHIBIT A3–I Advice for Long-Term Study Groups

- An agenda should be distributed before each group meeting date so everyone can prepare properly. Decide upon the agenda for the next meeting before adjourning the current meeting.
- Define who is expected to do what for each project.
- A written outline or “straw man” is needed to focus the group discussion on any particular project. Several alternatives should be evaluated during the outline stage before selecting which alternative will be taken for any project.
- Each major group project has a project leader responsible for doing most of the writing (in some cases, all of the writing). Other group members provide input early in the project and after a draft has been written. Assignments can be done in parallel by using this method, which helps to meet deadlines.
- Some groups summarize class readings for the project leader during the weeks that they are busy completing the project.
- The workload is not divided equally on every project. Over a two-year period, everyone will get the chance to contribute.
- Rotate responsibilities with each module or semester. For example, one person in the group may be the agenda captain for an entire module. The agenda captain organizes the meeting agendas and runs the meetings for that entire module. Rotating responsibilities every week wastes time deciding who does what.
- Try to meet on the same day and time each week. This makes it easier to plan travel schedules in advance.
- At the end of each major assignment, review the effectiveness of the process used to fulfill requirements. Adjust the process to improve effectiveness.
- Improve communication within the group by using e-mail and standardized software.
- Focus on the goals of the meeting first, then socialize.
- Maintain a sense of humor!

SOURCE: Taken from compiled lists from the Executive Masters Program, Kellogg School of Management, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. Lists compiled by R. Weeks (1996) and K. Murnighan (1998). Reprinted with the permission of the author.

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### **ON A REGULAR BASIS**

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It is important that study groups revisit the team contract. Are the expectations being met? What issues and topics that are not in the contract should be talked about? What issues in the contract do not seem relevant?

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### **SPECIAL TIPS FOR LONG-TERM STUDY GROUPS**

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Consider the actual advice from MBA students who were enrolled in an intensive two-year program. Their study groups were assigned to them and maintained throughout the two-year program. During the time they worked together, members were asked for their input on what did and did not work in their study groups in regard to maximizing learning and using time effectively. Exhibit A3-1 summarizes the students' responses.