**Lumen’s Introduction to communication on: Group Roles**

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Take a moment to think about the individuals in a particular group you were in and the role each of them played. You may recall that some people were extremely helpful, organized and made getting the job done easy. Others may have been more difficult to work with, or seemed to disrupt the group process. In each case, the participants were performing roles that manifest themselves in most groups. Early studies on group communication provide an overwhelming number of different types of group roles. To simplify, we provide an overview of some of the more common roles. As you study group roles, remember that we usually play more than one role at a time, and that we do not always play the same roles from group to group.

We organize group roles into four categories—task, social-emotional, procedural, and individual. **Task roles** are those that *help or hinder a group’s ability to accomplish its goals*. **Social-emotional roles** are those that *focus on building and maintaining relationships among individuals in a group* (the focus is on how people feel about being in the group). **Procedural roles** are *concerned with how the group accomplishes its task*. People occupying these roles are interested in following directions, proper procedure, and going through appropriate channels when making decisions or initiating policy. The final category, **individual roles**, includes *any role “that detracts from group goals and emphasizes personal goals*” (Jensen & Chilberg 97). When people come to a group to promote their individual agenda above the group’s agenda, they do not communicate in ways that are beneficial to the group. Let’s take a look at each of these categories in more detail.

* **Task Roles**. While there are many task roles a person can play in a group, we want to emphasize five common ones. The **Task Leader** is *the person that keeps the group focused on the primary goal or task by setting agendas, controlling the participation and communication of the group’s members, and evaluating ideas and contributions of participants*. Your associated students president probably performs the task leader role. **Information Gatherers** are those people who *seek and/or provide the factual information necessary for evaluating ideas, problem solving, and reaching conclusions*. This is the person who serves as the liaison with your professors about what they expect from a group project. **Opinion Gatherers** are those that *seek out and/or provide subjective responses about ideas and suggestions*. They most often take into account the values, beliefs, and attitudes of members. If you have a quiet member of your group, the opinion gatherer may ask, “What do you think?” in order to get that person’s feedback. The **Devil’s Advocate** is the person that*argues a contrary or opposing point of view*. This may be done positively in an effort to ensure that all perspectives are considered, or negatively as the unwillingness of a single person to participate in the group’s ideas. The **Energizer** is the person who *functions as the group’s cheer-leader, providing energy, motivation, and positive encouragement*.
* **Social-Emotional Roles**. Group members play a variety of roles in order to **build and maintain relationships in groups.** The **Social-Emotional Leader**is the person who is *concerned with maintaining and balancing the social and emotional needs of the group members and tends to play many, if not all, of the roles in this category*. The **Encourager** practices good listening skills in order to *create a safe space for others to share ideas and offer suggestions*. **Followers** are group members that do what they are told, *going along with decisions and assignments from the group*. The **Tension Releaser** is the person that *uses humor, or can skillfully change the subject in an attempt to minimize tension and avoid conflict*. The **Compromiser** is the one who *mediates disagreements or conflicts among members by encouraging others to give in on small issues for the sake of meeting the goals of the group*. What role do you find yourself most likely to enact in groups? Or, do you find you switch between these roles depending on the group?
* **Procedural Roles**. Groups cannot function properly without having a system of rules or norms in place. Members are responsible for maintaining the norms of a group and play many roles to accomplish this. The **Facilitator** acts like a traffic director by *managing the flow of information to keep the group on task*. **Gatekeepers** are those group members that attempt to *maintain proper communicative balance*. These people also serve as the points of contact between times of official group meetings. The **Recorder** is the person responsible for *tracking group ideas, decisions, and progress*. Often, a written record is necessary, thus, this person has the responsibility for keeping, maintaining, and sharing group notes. If you’re the person who pulls out a pen and paper in order to track what the group talks about, you’re the recorder.
* **Individual Roles**. Because groups are made of individuals, group members often play various roles in order to achieve individual goals. The **Aggressor** engages in *forceful or dominating communication to put others down or initiate conflict with other members*. This communication style can cause some members to remain silent or passive. The **Blocker** is the person that fusses or *complains about small procedural matters, often blocking the group’s progress by not letting them get to the task*. They worry about small details that, overall, are not important to achieving the group’s desired outcome. The **Self-Confessor** uses the group as a setting to *discuss personal or emotional matters not relevant to the group or its task*. This is the person that views the group as one that is there to perform group therapy. The **Playboy or Playgirl** *shows little interest in the group or the problem at hand*and does not contribute in a meaningful way, or at all. This is the person who does essentially no work, yet still gets credit for the group’s work. The **Joker or Clown**uses *inappropriate humor or remarks that can steer the group from its mission*.

**Case-in-Point**

The popular sitcom Workaholics (2011-present) follows three college drop-outs who work in a telemarketing company and are notoriously terrible workers. Always working as a group in their shared cubicle, the three young men are all prime examples of group members who play Individual Roles: Anders as the Aggressor, Blake as the Self-Confessor, Adam as the Blocker, and all three of them as the joker or clown at one point or another. As you might guess, this group is very unproductive and ineffective.

While we certainly do not have the space to cover every role you might encounter in a group, we’re sure you can point to your own examples of people who have filled the roles we’ve discussed. Perhaps you can point to examples of when you have filled some of these roles yourself. Important for group members to understand, are the various roles they play in groups in order to engage in positive actions that help the group along. One dynamic that these roles contribute to in the process of group communication is leadership in groups. Let’s briefly examine how leadership functions in groups.

[More info on: group leadership](https://courses.lumenlearning.com/introductiontocommunication/chapter/leadership-in-groups/)