

A Model for “Outside Consultation” for Under-functioning Project Teams

This two-part model for team consultation was developed by staff at WPI’s Student Development & Counseling Center (SDCC) as a resource for faculty who are concerned about under-functioning project teams. Faculty refer (often mandate) students to arrange these consultations with SDCC staff when they observe significant tension and/or persistent problems within the group dynamic which are negatively affecting outcomes.

Part One – Individual Meetings (1 hour)

Faculty contact the SDCC to share concerns about a particular project team then inform the team of their expectation that they seek consultation from the SDCC.

The team schedules an initial assessment meeting at the SDCC where all group members attend an initial, one-hour consultation meeting together. The consultant meets initially with the whole team together to explain the process, first assuring the team that he/she is working for the team and not conducting an investigation on behalf of the professor. They are told a single report, reflecting the two-part consultation (see example) will be provided to all group members and the faculty.

The consultant then meets individually with each group member for ten to fifteen minutes. Each individual is told this is their time to succinctly “air out” their perceptions of the group’s functioning as a whole and the individuals contributions within. Individual group members are assured what they say in this session will remain between each individual and the consultant, so name names and try to be as open and honest about thoughts, feelings and perceptions as they can.

Facilitating questions may include:

- How has the group been functioning together since your work began?
- What different roles have individual members of the group assumed?
- Does everyone appear to be contributing equally to the effort?
- Have you noticed any tension between group members?
- What would you like to see done differently within the group?
- Is this concern something you think you could share with the group as a whole?

The consultant’s role at this point is to be an active listener and gather information.

All group members remain together in the waiting room while each individual meets with the consultant and after individual meetings are concluded the group schedules a follow-up meeting for the group to meet together as a whole with the consultant sometime within the next week.

Part Two – Group Meeting (1/2 – 1 hour)

The group meets as a whole to talk together with the consultant about observations and concerns about their group functioning. The group is also asked to develop an agreed upon plan to address concerns and therefore improve overall group functioning.

The consultant role is to keep the group on task and to skillfully mediate escalating tensions which may emerge within the conversation. This can be accomplished by ensuring that each group member is able to demonstrate understanding of others observations and concerns before expressing their own opinions. Additionally the consultant ensures that each group member has ample time and opportunity to contribute to the group discussion. The consultant holds faithfully to their promise to each individual not to share information gain from the initial meeting, but does attempt to direct the conversation towards critical issues if the group is not doing so on its own.

Finally, the consultant writes a report which goes to all group members and the faculty summarizing the consultation. (see example).