Thought Experiments on Group Work

1. Marie becomes ill during the semester and misses several classes. How can your group use this obstacle as an occasion to realize the values of responsibility and justice? What, in these circumstances, are Maria’s responsibilities to the group? The group’s to Maria? The group to the teacher?

2. Two members of your group with especially strong personalities develop an immediate and strong dislike for one another. In preparing for a class assignment, one individual insists on several group meetings outside of class. The other member says he is unable to attend these because he has other commitments. On the day of the presentation, both have an argument and seem unable to focus for the presentation. What values are at stake here? What can the group and its members do to bring about a value-realizing solution?

3. A group of four individuals turns in an essay. Two worked on the first part which is well prepared. The other two postponed the assignment until the last minute and plagiarized a large portion. The professor identifies the plagiarized part and holds the whole group responsible. The first two individuals who did their share disclaim responsibility? What do you think?

4. The biggest two value challenges to group work are free riders and crowded schedules.

Free riders seek to reap the benefits of a cooperative, collective activity without bearing any of the burdens or without, themselves, contributing to the work.

A group is unable to get together outside of class because of conflicting work schedules. When one member goes to class and gets an assignment, he is unable to contact the others by phone or email. (They never respond.) Group members frequently miss class so they fail to coordinate during this time. (Other classes and activities, apparently, take priority.) They grow resentful of one another and of the teacher who holds them responsible in spite of their problems coordinating. What is the problem? What can be done to resolve it?

5. A group consists four members from business administration. They all know one another and two are even dating. A fifth member comes from political science. The political science student was, essentially, an outlier. He went to a couple of group meetings outside of class but then stopped. He relayed to the professor that nothing was done at these meetings. They seemed more an occasion for the other members to socialize. He felt that his time would be better spent receiving an assignment from the group and doing it on his own. The other members resented his not going to meetings but did acknowledge that he carried out his commitments and did good work.

6. Marta Malasobras is unreliable. She has arrived late to work almost every day. Her co-workers are quite angry about this and discuss their frustrations with the supervisor. They claim that she is affecting the work environment. Because she is not doing her share, everyone else in the work team is overloaded.

Marta’s group carries out a process that requires cooperative group work. Four operators must work as one coordinated production unit. If one team member is absent, the rest of the team works less efficiently. Company policy mandates that hourly employees must begin everyday at 6:00 a.m.

The supervisor talked with Marta and has asked her why she is so often late. She burst into tears. She had to drive her six-year old boy to school every morning. The school gates do not open until 6:30 and she has to wait until this time to drop off her son safely. This particular morning, bowing to the pressure she felt from her work team, she dropped her boy off before the gates opened. She worried about him the entire morning. She knew that she had to get to work on time. She understood the effect that her habitual lateness was having on her group’s effectiveness. Yet there was no one she could find to take her boy to work in the morning.

7. A team leader has received complaints that a member under his supervision takes overly long lunch breaks, often as long as two hours. He confronts this employee. It turns out that he takes advantage of this time to work out at a local gym. He is aware that this sometimes results in overly long lunch breaks. When this happens, he says extra time to make sure he gets his work done. He tells the team leader that a bit of flexibility in his schedule could support him in his physical exercise. He also points out that, being in better shape, he has drastically reduced time lost due to health-related absences.