

Portland State University

PDXScholar

Physics Faculty Publications and Presentations

Physics

9-2005

Communicating in a Group

Jack C. Straton

Portland State University, straton@pdx.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phy_fac



Part of the Educational Methods Commons

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Citation Details

Straton, Jack C., "Communicating in a Group" (2005). *Physics Faculty Publications and Presentations*. 381.

https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/phy_fac/381

This Post-Print is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Physics Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. Please contact us if we can make this document more accessible: pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

Communicating in a Group

Jack C. Straton

Portland State University

Student-centered learning requires teachers to provide students with opportunities to learn from and with each other, but most students come to group-work ill-equipped to handle the responsibility of cleanly communicating with each other. This paper provides one set of group-communication tools that helps students to become conscious molders of their own communication styles in relation to those of their peers.

Group work has come to be a central tool in education, but students are seldom given more than the most basic instruction in how to work with others. It is generally assumed that “we just know” how to communicate because we’ve each survived thus far. Interactions become particularly difficult when the group includes members from both sides of a historically oppressive divide, e.g., one based on social class, gender, or ethnicity. The difficulties can range from unexamined presumptions (e.g., males monopolizing speaking time and physical space) to re-triggered experiences (sitting in a group containing European-Americans after having been racially targeted as a student of color earlier that day) to naïve assumptions (the meaning of a lack of eye contact) to being stuck in guilt for what one’s group has done.

After several years of helping students clean up interpersonal messes, I decided to start the year by giving them practical tools for this endeavor, set in a rather whimsical style. Each year since then this communication tool-set has forestalled the worst group melt-downs, and individual examples of communication successes are often remarked upon in students’ year-end portfolios.

The following material has been adopted by many of my colleagues in the University Studies Program at Portland State University over the past nine years, so I offer it to this broader community in the hope that these

tools will serve others as well as they have our teams. The publisher and author hereby grant permission for duplication of this article for use in individual classes and non-commercial workshops provided students and participants are charged only for the cost of reproduction and that this notification and contact information are included.

Why Should I Care?

How many times have you been in a group and witnessed two aggressive people intent on harming each other? How many times have you been one of those aggressors? Has someone ever spoken to you in seemingly innocent way, yet you felt uncomfortable anyway? Have you ever had to choose between interrupting someone or never getting a word in edgewise? How much work was actually accomplished by these groups? I would guess not much.

Many of us have never thought consciously about how we interact in a work-group. We may have internalized the ethical code of our family or culture of origin, such as the variations on the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) that many cultures have. But nobody ever gave us an instruction manual of practical suggestions. This article is an attempt at just such a practical guide.

Levels of Communication

Communication Nugget #1: Interpersonal communication always occurs on at least two levels. The top-most level conveys the content, the meaning of the words. The underlying level conveys feelings through both tone of voice and nonverbal communication. Whenever you are in a group that does not seem to be getting anywhere, there is probably unresolved conflict on the feeling level that is blocking progress on the content level. Once the group makes time to air out the feeling-level conflicts, they can return to productive content-level discussions.

If I feel personally attacked by something you said to me, I will be spending half of my attention chewing on my hurt and the other half analyzing your new statements for verbal barbs, leaving no attention on what you are saying. I probably will be tuning-out the other group members as well.

Communication Nugget #2: Telling your detractor in the group about your feelings may actually be the safest thing you can do. It is certainly more productive for the group than sitting on your feelings. The *Group Process Guidelines* presented at the end of this article give you the details about how to give feedback to other people for their behavior. The short-form is to say “When you [*name the behavior*], I felt [*name the emotion*]. In the future I would appreciate it if you would instead [*new behavior*], and that will help me to feel [*new emotion*].”

Talking from a place of feelings is appropriate because it gets away from “who is right.” The other person cannot have “the truth” on what it is that you are feeling. Feelings are also the source of your distraction, so talking about them is helpful. Notice also that “I feel” statements are less confrontational than “You did” or “You are” statements. Please be aware, however, that “I feel that you are a jerk” is not at all a statement about feelings, nor is most any sentence in which the word “that” appears after the word “feel.” Feeling sentences are about emotions: “I’m mad, glad, sad, scared, . . .” Note that men are often socialized to avoid analyzing or expressing any feeling other than anger, so this will be a learning process for most of you who are men.

The reason expressing your feelings in a respectful way may increase your emotional safety is that by doing so you are speaking to the other person’s humanity, the part of him that is most caring of others. One

occasionally encounters people who choose to close themselves off from their humanity, such as someone who would rather *be* a “manly act” than *be* a complete person. In my experience, even these folks are eventually moved by courageous directness on the feeling level.

Even less frequently you will encounter someone who is skilled at manipulating feelings to tear others apart. With these folks it may be necessary to drop down to the third layer of communication and talk about how their manipulation of feelings affects you.

Communication Nugget #3: The third layer of communication is the door to what makes us human. The movie *Gandhi* contains a scene¹ in which Mohandas Gandhi is walking with Rev. Charles Freer Andrews along a street in South Africa when they see three young men down the street poised to confront them. Rev. Andrews suggests that they take a different route, but Gandhi walks on saying, “Doesn’t the New Testament say if an enemy strikes you on the right cheek you should offer him the left?” Andrews hedges, “I think perhaps the phrase is used metaphorically.” Gandhi responds, “I have thought a great deal about it and I suspect it means you must show courage, be willing to take a blow – several blows – to show you will not strike back nor will you be turned aside. And when you do, it calls on something in human nature, something that makes his hatred for you decrease and his respect for you increase.”

This encounter vividly points to a truth that we can see in less extreme settings if we know to reach for it. What happens in an encounter when you show what you are feeling — when you become emotionally vulnerable? When the person you are interacting with sees you openly display grief over loss of connection or joy in newfound connection, horror over a friends’ trauma or hope for a new day dawning, this engages that person on a visceral level that calls out to his or her humanity. “Like calls to like” in human relations, and you may find yourself engaged with a person who is finally present in heart as well as mind.

Many of us have found ourselves at an impasse with someone with whom we have had a long-term relationship. To break the impasse, you can say something like, “I want you to know that my love for you [or my ongoing relationship with you] is *way* more important than the outcome of this issue.” In doing so you

¹(Columbia Pictures, 1982, 190 min.) at 18:10.

are stepping outside of the conventional rules of personal infighting, thereby creating an opening for one or both of you to shake loose from where you are stuck. In saying this, *you may even find to your amazement that it is true, that you actually do love her or him*, and that your disagreement has been hiding this truth from you.

On the other hand you may find that the disagreement is symptomatic of an overall loss of trust between the two of you. You may find that by focusing on this issue or, more generally, by trying to stay in this relationship, that you have lost sight of your love for *yourself*. If that is the case, you had better address *that* reality rather than the issue of the moment. You will need to save your energies for the turmoil of fundamental change.

Now it may be hard to imagine talking on this level with someone with whom you have a time-limited or new relationship. But I have long since decided to wear my humanity, my innermost self, as my exterior surface or role. And I have gotten in the habit of treating people as if they were as real as I am. As my Dad would say, “Life’s too short” for playing mind games.

Communication Nugget #4: A group that sets aside time for processing feelings, saves time overall. If I know we will have some time at the end of the hour to “process” whatever feelings arise, I am usually able to jot a reminder to myself and refocus my attention on the content-level discussion. Sometimes the feelings will not wait, so asking for a few minutes of time when they surface to deal with them is appropriate.

“You Are Not Listening to Me!”

Communication Nugget #5: “Mirroring,” is useful if someone complains that you are not listening to her, or if her statement contains no meaning to which you can relate. In mirroring you tell the speaker *in your own words* what you heard her say to you. Ask her if what you just said is another way to say what she meant. She will probably respond with something that will clarify her meaning and give you something to build upon. She will also *feel* listened to.

Communication Nugget #6: “Active Listening.” We are generally very poor listeners even when group dynamics are free of attacks. The trouble is that we are often so busy trying to figure out how we will respond to the speaker that we only listen with half of

our attention. In active listening you listen with full attention to the story without thinking about how you might respond to it. As you do this you will inevitably hear something to which you want to respond. Rather than churning over the phrasing of your response, jot down a few keywords on a notepad and then return to active listening. When it comes time for you to speak, the keywords will guide you in expressing the response without the need for rehearsal.

Building Rather Than Competing

Communication Nugget #7: When you don’t understand someone’s ideas, instead of simply dismissing him, try to imagine what it is he could be getting at. If some piece of what he said seems useful to you, acknowledge that and show how it fits into your scheme of things. This will give him something more to build upon, which will help you clarify your ideas in turn.

Communication Nugget #8: If you find yourself misunderstood, saying it louder is seldom helpful. Try saying it in words as different from the original as possible that still convey what you mean.

Communication Nugget #9: Stories from personal experience are often the most effective means to get a point across.

Communication Nugget #10: Communication is a process, not a product. Put another way, the product is highly dependent upon the process used to achieve it. Even if your discussion does not ultimately change your conclusions on an issue, your subsequent writing on that issue will reflect a deeper understanding of what you know, what you think others don’t understand about what you know, and the possibility that other viewpoints exist.

What is Reality?

Communication Nugget #11: When you want to communicate, it is important to acknowledge the limits of what you can know. We have been examining ways in which we can stretch beyond our current limitations to interpersonal communication. Ironically, another way to improve communication is to acknowledge that we can’t get beyond some limitations.

Communication Nugget #12: The map is not the territory. When we are trying to communicate, most of us forget that the world you and I “see” (“hear,” “taste,” “smell,” “touch”) is not the true world. After light bouncing off a tree is absorbed on the retina of your eye, your mind constructs a representation of a “tree” and it is this representation that you say you see. Our perceptions are limited to those elements of the world for which we are able (have had the training) to construct a reasonably accurate representation.

What we perceive as reality is also influenced by our prior experiences. A concrete example of this is the different perceptions of forested areas a friend of mine and I have. In wilderness areas at night, my friend “sees” trees that could be harboring dangerous men, whereas I “see” trees with beautiful patterns of moonlight on their trunks. But in forests accessible to cars, I am the one who “sees” trees that could be harboring dangerous men and my friend “sees” trees not too far from help. Of course, none of those four “forests” is the real forest.

Communication Nugget #13: Your words describing your internal map are only approximations of that map (which is, in turn, an approximation of “reality”). In order to transmit your representation of “forest” to another person, you have to encode it in a sequence of words or images that only partially characterize your internal representation of that “forest.” Then the other person has to create a representation of “forest” from this sequence of words or images, but her definition (reality map) of the words is likely to be different from yours. (Even if our full experience of “forest” *could* be expressed in words, each of us learned *our* definitions of words by their context in different sentences rather than by looking up a “standard” meaning in a dictionary.) So the “forest” your listener experiences is two translations removed from your “forest,” and three giant steps away from the real forest.

Communication Nugget #14: No one can tell you what another person thinks. In the Lakota Sioux language it is not even possible to decompose the verb “To think” into the second or third person. More translations of an already approximate “reality” further degrade the communication.

Communication Nugget #15: Abstract ideas do not refer to an external reality at all. Given the difficulty in perceiving and describing “forest,” imagine what happens when one tries to communicate the

meaning of an abstract term like “justice,” “art,” or “love.” We are right to wonder how well our words convey the term “love” to another person.

Communication Nugget #16: The more you talk with another person on a broad range of topics, and the more you share experiences, the more synchronized your world-maps will become. An abstract concept like “red” can be shared with another sighted person by pointing to “red” objects, although each of you may see a different shade. If we have never experienced “injustice,” our caring for another human being who has experienced it can help us to *imagine* how “injustice” feels.

Communication Nugget #17: Stereoscopic vision is useful. Someone who continues to draw a very different reality map from yours is doing you a favor. If two radically different maps of reality *can* be constructed, the chances are very good that each of you is viewing it through too small a lens. Sometimes the territory is so convoluted that no single view can come close to representing it. Two views may provide the depth perception you need to better know the world, although even two might not be adequate.

Bridging the Oppressions

The modern work-force is no longer mostly made up of straight, “white,” males, so if you only know how to get along with that group, you will be at a disadvantage in your career. Not only do you need to become multiculturally literate, you also need to be aware that however much we might desire it, we are not all equally accorded power. If a power difference existed historically between any two groups of people, you can expect that it did not magically disappear from society.

Communication Nugget #18: Be aware of the dynamics of social hierarchies. Some special consideration needs to be given to communicating across social hierarchies such as illustrated in Figure 1.

María Luisa “Papusa” Molina notes that sorting these hierarchies can get complicated at times.² As a Latina with a Ph.D., she may find herself one step up in relationship to a European-American male construc-

²Former coordinator, Women’s Resource and Action Center (WRAC) at the University of Iowa (personal communication, 1994).

tion worker in that she has a higher educational level (class) and two-steps down in relationship to the same man in that she is a woman of color.

Communication Nugget #1 introduced the idea that below the content level of communication there are other communication modes. One of the sublevels in communication across social hierarchies is an emotional dance around the power differences inherent in the hierarchy. If the person in the “one up” position acknowledges those differences of power and privilege to himself or herself, it is more likely that he or she will be able to set the other person at ease, which leads to better communication at the content level. It may be helpful to actually verbalize an acknowledgment of power and privilege differences.

Communication Nugget #19: Understand what “oppression” is. Mathematically speaking, oppression equals power times prejudice. If either power or prejudice is zero (missing), there can be no oppression since zero times anything is zero. A man may experience the prejudice of a woman, but because that prejudice is not backed up by societal power, he cannot be said to be oppressed *as a man*. No matter how poorly he is treated, both he and she know that she is the one who faces the daily fear of rape by a member of the opposite sex. He may, however, experience class oppression

inflicted on him by wealthy women. He may also be subjected to race oppression if he is a man of color.

As a European-American male, I may not feel at all powerful. But, I can influence those European-American males who hold most of the institutional and economic power in this society, to make decisions that benefit me, more easily than can my darker-skinned brothers and sisters. Thus any prejudice on my part is reinforced by social power.

Communication Nugget #20: My lack of acknowledging my “male-privilege,” “white-privilege,” and so on, can be a major irritant to oppressed peoples. What is “privilege?” Those in any “one-up” position are privileged to act in blissful ignorance of the power-structure that backs them up. On a day-to-day level, European-Americans have the privilege of walking through a clothing store without having the clerk following them to prevent them from stealing. They have the privilege of buying a house in the neighborhood of their choice without their race being a factor in the sale. They have the privilege of not being roughed up by police simply because a “white man” was seen committing a robbery in the neighborhood.

Likewise, a man has the privilege of not having his parental status be a factor in his career. Hetero-

European-American People	over	People of Color
Men	over	Women
Straight People	over	Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgender People
White-collar workers	over	Blue-collar and Pink-collar workers
Adults	over	Children
Young Adults	over	Elders
Able-Bodied People	over	Physically-Impaired People
. . . and so on.		

Figure 1. Be aware of the dynamics of social hierarchies.

sexual couples have the privilege of kissing in public and on TV without being accosted for “flaunting their lifestyle.” Christians have the privilege of having other Christians in the majority at all levels of government.

Communication Nugget #21: Feeling guilty about my privilege never helps me nor those in a “one-down” position from me. Guilt is destructive in that it often blocks our willingness to become informed about the issue we feel guilty about and leads to feelings of helplessness or resentment. Tess Wiseheart, a Portland, Oregon, advocate for abused women, characterizes (1995) this reaction with the mnemonic shown in Figure 2.

In fact displays of guilty feelings actually reinforce privilege because they shift the attention from the oppressed person back onto the privileged person. Guilt translates as “I’m going to feel so crummy about my privilege that you are going to take care of me.”³ Cherie Brown, Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute, says that “Guilt is the glue that holds prejudice in place.”⁴

What helps communication is to simply throw away the guilt, accept the realities of oppression, and do whatever is within our power to eliminate the various “-isms”: racism, sexism, ablism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, looksism, adultism, . . .

Anger and Friendship

Anger is a subject on which whole classes are taught. Some of us, typically men, are socialized so

G	U	I	L	T	
o	n	n	i	i	o
i	d	t	f	m	r
n	e	o	e	i	
g	r	a	t	d	T
		i	i	y	
		m	t	r	
		e	y	a	
		o		n	
		f		n	
				y	

Figure 2. Feeling Guilty.

that anger is the only emotion (other than pride) we are allowed to express, while others, typically women, are taught never to get angry. We need to first distinguish “anger as a tool of power and control,” and “anger as a means to dump” our bad feelings onto someone else, from “righteous indignation,” which is anger used to focus one’s words, to make them more effective tools of communication.

Communication Nugget #22: Using anger to control others and engaging in emotional dumping are not appropriate forms of interaction. Righteous indignation, perhaps best modeled by Dr. Martin Luther King, has its place.

Communication Nugget #23: Be open to hearing another person’s indignant anger. I have found that if I am unwilling to hear another person’s anger, I block the development of a bond of potential friendship across the lines that divide us. There are times when my male privilege or “white” privilege blocks me from truly hearing what women or men of color are trying to say to me, and anger can help them to cut through my blockage. Knowing that the friendship can survive the anger, and even thrive from it, builds trust.

Communication Nugget #24: Don’t take others’ anger too personally. Being defensive when errors are brought to your attention is not helpful. If you had some part in the problem, simply fix your behavior. If you didn’t, you can let the anger pass right through you.

Communication Nugget #25: Be aware of when your anger at someone is compounded by offenses against you that were committed by other people. To those in the position of expressing righteous indignation, I would like to pass on a technique taught to me by Wayne Morris and Phyllis Frank:⁵ Whenever appropriate, name the behavior as representative of the slights and offenses you have experienced on a daily basis. Explain that the transgressor need not take this personally but must simply listen, without providing feedback or apology, to how it makes you feel. This provides the transgressor with a lesson in privilege — that they did not know, nor need to know, that the action

³Paraphrased from Tess Wiseheart, former Executive Director of the Portland Women’s Crisis Line (personal communication, 1995).

⁴Cherie R. Brown, Executive Director of the National Coalition Building Institute (personal communication, 1999).

was oppressive — and provides them with a level of depersonalization that makes it easier to hear and assimilate.

Communication Nugget #26: You should expect to continue making errors whenever you risk being a friend. We tend to compartmentalize our learning, so that when we bridge the lines that divide us, the learning is not uniform. For instance, you may learn that stereotyping Native Americans as “stoic” is oppressive, but go right on believing without question the stereotype that Asian-Americans are “the model minority.”

Communication Nugget #27: If you don’t understand what you did, don’t expect those you have offended to explain it to you. They have enough to deal with without the added burden of always teaching members of the oppressor group how their actions are oppressive. Try to *imagine* how they could be right; read a book; and ask others in your own group to help you figure it out.

Communication Nugget #28: ’Fess up when you mess up.⁶ The sooner you catch yourself and apologize before someone else has to point out your mistake the easier relationships will become for you.

Group Structure

Communication Nugget #29: Defining roles for group members often facilitates good work. For a given session, the group can name a Facilitator (to keep the discussion focused and make sure all members get heard), a Scribe (to keep notes of the important points), a Process Monitor (who pays especial attention to the undercurrent feelings and may need to interrupt a content discussion), and a Time Cur (who holds the group to its agreed-upon schedule). When setting up a meeting, the participants should “contract” for the discussion of each topic to run for a specific number of minutes. If some want to extend the discussion, the agreement to do so should be unanimous. Allotted “process periods” should not be squeezed out of existence in this extension.

⁵VCS Batters Intervention Program, Nyack, NY (personal communication, 1994).

⁶A song from *Saffire: The Uppity Blues Women* (1990). Chicago: Alligator Records.

Communication Nugget #30: If you build some “mistake time” into your schedule, you will seldom offend other people by being late. If you notice that you are consistently 15 minutes late to meetings, always try to get to the meeting 25 minutes early. If you are always “on time,” you probably already build in 10 or more minutes of mistake time. The time you “waste” in getting there 10 minutes early is well spent on your peers’ goodwill, and you can always read a book.

Conclusion

Did you get all of that on first reading? Interactions that seemed easy to you before may now feel more complicated. And did I have to bring up the “O” word (oppression)? In answer to these concerns, let me say that our communication abilities are said to set us apart from non-human animals. It would be more accurate to say our “potential” rather than our “abilities,” since society teaches us very little about how to communicate effectively. If communication potential really *is* what distinguishes us from non-human animals, we should expect to have to practice communicating skills before we can realize that potential.

If the reality map I have drawn above does not mesh well with your own belief system, you should seek out other descriptions of effective communication. If the above map does work for you, seek out other descriptions anyway.⁷ Your success in your career may well hinge on how well you communicate. Watch the people around you who seem to communicate well and analyze what it is that they are doing. Talk about communication techniques with others. Send me your suggestions. And practice, practice, practice.

Process Guidelines for Group Meetings⁸

1. It is almost always inappropriate and disrespectful to interrupt a person who has not finished speaking. We agree to be especially careful not to begin speaking until the previous speaker has finished. Con-

⁷See, for instance, Rabow, J., Charness, M., Kipperman, J., & Radcliffe-Vasile, S. (2000) *William Fawcett Hill’s Learning Through Discussion* (3rd ed). Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press; Stone, D., Patton, B., Heen, S., & Fisher R. (2000). *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss what Matters Most*. New York: Penguin; and Elgin, S. (1993). *Genderspeak: Men, Women, and the Gentle Art of Verbal Self-Defense*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

⁸The guidelines are derived from those of the National Organization for Men Against Sexism (NOMAS).

versely, we agree to remember when we are speaking that others in the group are waiting, and not to extend our comments unnecessarily.

2. Care should be taken that all members of the group have an equal opportunity to be heard. While it is inevitable that some people will speak more than others, the group should be alert to efforts to speak by anyone who has not done so. In the event that several members wish to address an issue, those who have previously spoken less should be recognized before those who have spoken more. Members who are naturally “talkative” should not feel apologetic about this, but should monitor their own speaking behavior during meetings in order to give others an opportunity.

3. We agree that constructive criticism is an essential part of the process of discussion. Restrained politeness is as oppressive as unrestrained criticism.

4. We agree to criticize the act or idea, and not the person. Personal attacks are worse than useless; they are oppressive and unfair.

5. We agree to freely give, and to accept, positive appreciations. This is important in breaking competitiveness and in building trust. We agree to listen fully to appreciations, refusing them if they don’t feel right, but letting them in and enjoying them if they feel appropriate.

6. We agree to avoid criticisms that use generalities without referring to specifics. Criticisms should be as concrete and specific as possible.

7. We agree to avoid criticism which says only what not to do, rather than saying what to start doing. Criticism should point to specific ways the person or group could change, if they agree that the criticism is valid.

8. We agree to try to hear criticisms as statements about the criticizer’s experience, not as the whole truth. It is as important for people not to devalue themselves when hearing criticism as it is for them not to devalue someone else when giving a criticism.

9. People are encouraged to ask for appreciation and support when they want it. Rather than being stoic, people should try to take care of each other, and also of themselves.

10. People are encouraged to check out assumptions or hunches that they may have made about other people. For example: “I have a hunch that you’re hurt and angry because I spoke against your point, am I right about that?” Private processing thus becomes public, so people can respond to real issues and real feelings. We agree to recognize and validate “grains of

truth,” when someone checks out their hunches with us.

11. If we have played any part in a problem we are criticizing, we agree to give self-criticism along with criticism.

*Roles for Supporting a Group*⁹

In order for a group to function effectively, these group task roles need to be filled. Sometimes, people can take on more than one role.

Initiator: makes ideas and suggestions about solutions and decisions; proposes goals and objectives.

Information Seeker: asks for clarification.

Information Giver: offers facts or personal explanations that relate to topic.

Opinion Seeker: asks for expression of feelings; seeks opinions.

Opinion Giver: states belief about a matter.

Coordinator: clarifies the relationships among information, opinions, and ideas.

Diagnostician: figures out what the problems are.

Summarizer: pulls together related ideas and suggestions.

Energizer: prods group into action.

Procedure Developer: handles routine tasks.

Secretary: keeps notes.

Evaluator: critically analyzes according to set of standards; checks on consensus.

Supporter: encourages others to speak.

Harmonizer: works to mediate tense situations.

Tension Reliever: gives others a break from constricting emotions.

Compromiser: looks for ways to bridge differences.

Gatekeeper: makes sure everyone is heard.

*Roles for Sabotaging a Group*¹⁰

Blocker: interferes with progress by rejecting ideas or taking a negative stand on any and all issues; refuses to cooperate.

Aggressor: struggles for status by deflating the status of others; boasts; criticizes.

Deserter: withdraws; remains indifferent; engages in irrelevant side conversations.

Dominator: interrupts and embarks on long monologues; authoritative; monopolizes the group’s time.

⁹From Tess Wiseheart (personal communication, 1994).

¹⁰From Tess Wiseheart (personal communication, 1994), with the last three roles added by the author.

Historian: refuses to consider changing the way things are done; what was good enough before is good enough now.

Recognition Seeker: attempts to gain attention in an exaggerated manner; boasts about past accomplishments; relates irrelevant personal experiences.

Confessor: irrelevant personal catharsis; uses group to work out own mistakes and feelings.

Playboy: lack of involvement through sense of humor.

Special Interest Player: representative of another group/philosophy; different, sometimes hidden agenda.

Distracter: attempts to divert attention from the group's real task by making inflammatory statements or bringing up side issues.

Frog: a type of distracter who provokes the group to immediately jump into a debate on the conclusions of an issue, bypassing any analysis of the data that might lead to *informed* debate and *subsequent* conclusions.

Pontificator: refuses to believe that anyone else's experience could have meaning for him or herself.

Good saboteurs will often take on more than one of these roles in order to get their self-centered needs met. But even those of us without a drive to gain attention by destroying group functioning find ourselves occasionally engaging in some of these roles. It is therefore helpful to have a name to apply to the behavior so that you can recognize it, shut it down, and eventually come back to seek the motivation for the behavior. A good way to counter this tendency is to ask "Is what I want to say important for me to say, or important for the group to hear?" The answer is sometimes "both." It is OK too if the answer is sometimes "for me," but if it is most often that answer, there is a need to examine why.

Jack C. Straton is an assistant professor in the University Studies Program, Portland State University, Portland, OR.