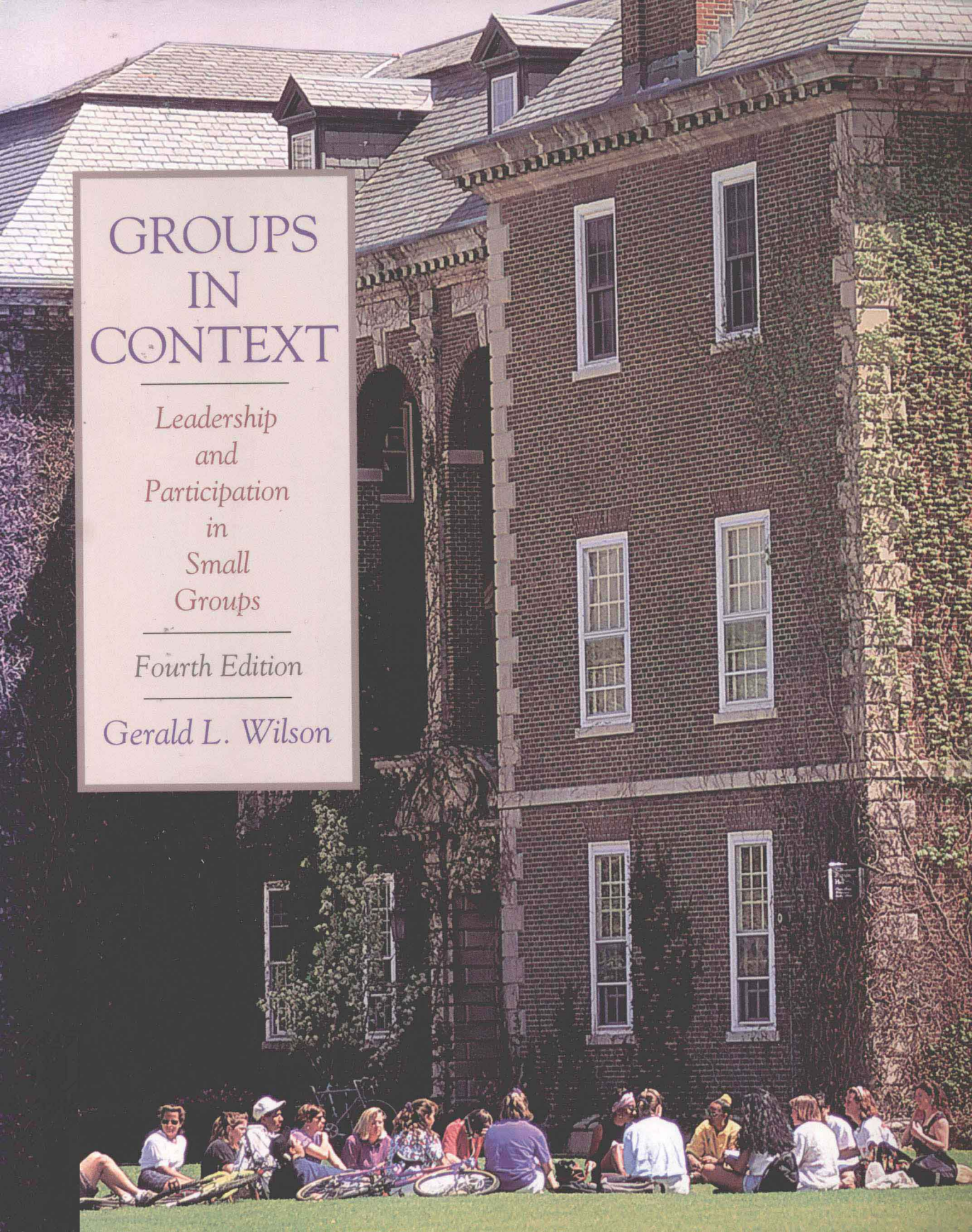
GROUPS
IN
CONTEXT
Leadership
and
Participation
in
Small
Groups
Fourth Edition
Gerald L. Wilson

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GROUPS IN CONTEXT

Leadership and Participation in Small Groups

FOURTH EDITION

GERALD L. WILSON
University of South Alabama

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GROUPS IN CONTEXT: Leadership and Participation in Small Groups

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Professor Wilson has authored five books and numerous essays and articles on communication. He is also a consultant to business and industry. His latest project is a revision of his book *Interpersonal Growth through Communication* (Brown & Benchmark). Other books Wilson has co-authored are *Communicating in Business and Professional Settings* (McGraw-Hill), *Interviewing in Context* (McGraw-Hill), and *Organizational Communication* (Harper & Row).

This book is lovingly dedicated
to my beautiful wife,
Linda Stewart Wilson

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PREFACE

Much of what we do in our lives involves interaction with others in small groups. We find ourselves interacting in family groups, work groups, social groups, church groups, and special-interest groups. Most of us will have two primary goals in these groups. One goal we will have, regardless of the context, is to be and be perceived as a productive, contributing member. A second important goal will be to enjoy our interactions with the members. These two goals can be summed up by the simple statement: We want to be effective. Helping the reader meet these goals leads to the central aim of this book—to provide an understanding of small-group processes that will enable readers to develop high levels of skill in participating in and leading groups.

This book is written for introductory courses in small group communication, group discussion, and group dynamics. It is appropriate for small group–oriented courses in communication, social psychology, education, business communication, and a variety of health-related fields.

APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF SMALL GROUPS

Groups in Context takes a balanced approach, blending current theory and research with practical skills and application. Clearly, there is a relationship between theory and practice. A book that is mostly theoretical does not fully meet the needs of most students. A book that is mostly a listing and discussion of prescribed behaviors does not fully meet the needs of students either. Understanding and skill go hand in hand. To this end, I have carefully presented clear explanations of theory, documented with both classic and current research. I also provide specific suggestions for enhancing individual and group effectiveness. I have worked diligently to richly illustrate important concepts with real-life examples from a broad range of contexts. I am convinced—on the basis of my teaching, research, consulting experience, and the extensive use of the three previous editions of this book—that such an approach is greatly appreciated.

The title *Groups in Context* was selected to reflect my belief that the study of small group communication is best understood when the concepts are presented within specific contexts. We all meet with others to make decision in the workplace, in neighborhoods, in churches, in social groups, and in civic organizations. Thus I have drawn examples and illustrations from these and similar contexts.

My use of context flows out of another concern. I want my students to communicate better in groups and to diagnose and act on decisions made about their group's process. To achieve this goal I believe it is necessary for the student to be able to make the connection between what he or she is studying and real-world groups. My use of contexts to provide illustrations and examples of important principles shows students how to make the transfer.

Group in Context focuses on task-oriented and decision-making groups. I selected this focus for three reasons. First, the decision-making process is one of the most difficult tasks a group might undertake. These groups require systematic analysis of the particular group situation, vigilance in the decision-making process, and well-developed communication and leadership skills. Second, decision making is one of the most prevalent of group activities. We deliberate to plan and set policies for groups in both our private and professional lives. The ability to carry out the group decision-making activity is vital to the life of an educated person. It is an activity that most adults cannot avoid. Third, the decision-making group provides an excellent framework for understanding the many interpersonal and group processes that operate in other task-oriented groups.

The coverage of material and the sequencing of chapters create a model of small groups as an information-processing system. This model is presented in Chapter 1 so that students can understand the perspective of the book. I believe that this sequence fits many courses in small group communication in many disciplines. Since individual teachers may vary in their approach to this course, I have written the chapters to be self-contained and thoroughly cross-referenced. Instructors can present them in any sequence that meets their particular course requirements.

I also carefully reviewed my experience as teacher and consultant to discover what has helped my students function more effectively in groups. The features of this book are designed to respond to student needs on the basis of this careful review.

SPECIAL FEATURES

Certain features of this book make it stand out from among others available for small group communication courses. I believe in a balanced approach that blends theory, research, and practice. I have made every effort to achieve an appropriate blend of *current theory and research with practical explanations, skills, and applications.*

I firmly believe that examples can make the difference between books that are truly useful to students and books that are not. So I have filled this book with *examples from group contexts* to allow the students to see how concepts actually work in real-world groups.

Each chapter encourages students to analyze their own communication behavior and to place that *behavior in a group context.* For example, this book includes exceptionally *thorough coverage of leadership and conflict*—and not merely from the view of a designated leader but from the view of all potential group participants.

I have been especially sensitive to the need to provide comprehensive coverage of *current "hot" topics* in group communication, such as culture, conflict management, gender, and group development.

Michael Hanna and I pioneered the *Troubleshooting Guide* when it appeared in the first edition of our business and professional communication book. Such a guide is included at the end of this book, set off for readers by the bar at the trimmed edge. This

guide is organized around the questions most commonly asked by students and clients. I think students ought to be able to find answers to questions that are couched in the language they use to talk about group problems. To use it, a reader need only identify a general category that a question falls into, turn to the questions in that category to find one close to their own question, then identify the page or pages on which the answer to it may be found. The positive feedback I have received about the Troubleshooting Guide suggests that students find it helpful.

ADDITIONS AND REVISIONS IN THE FOURTH EDITION

I have updated the coverage of theory, research, and practice in this fourth edition. I have also added new topics and clarified others based on my own judgment and that of those who teach small group communication courses. Here are some of the specific changes and additions you will find in this edition:

- Boxes that focus the reader's attention on ethics and responsibility in group communication have been added to each chapter.
- Boxes that focus the reader's attention on a research concern have been added to each chapter.
- New information about the advantages and disadvantages of group work is now part of Chapter 1.
- A section discussing ethical concerns of the group as a whole is included in Chapter 1.
- The model of communication found in Chapter 1 is revised to include information about groups operating within a culture and society.
- Material that helps one to analyze a new group if its members are preselected has been added to Chapter 2.
- The section about critical thinking and discussion in Chapter 2 has been expanded to include standard concerns regarding quality of information.
- A standard agenda for a business meeting has been added to Chapter 3.
- At the request of several reviewers the chapter about public group meetings has been moved to earlier in the book (Chapter 4.)
- A new section about gender differences in language use has been added to Chapter 5.
- Additional information about cultures and language has been added to Chapter 5.
- Additional information about cultures and nonverbal communication has been added to Chapter 6.

- A section about gender differences in listening has been added to Chapter 6.
- The discussion of role conflict in Chapter 8 has been expanded.
- Additional information related to gender and leadership has been added to Chapter 9.
- The relationship between member satisfaction and cohesiveness has been clarified in Chapter 10.
- Material about how gender relates to self-disclosure and empathy has been included in Chapter 11.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Part I: Approaching Communication Group Contexts

This book is organized in deductive fashion. Part I, "Approaching Communication in Group Contexts," clarifies what small group communication means and provides a conceptual foundation for the rest of the book.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Groups and Group Processes In this first chapter I explain what is meant by groups and describe the communication process. The focus is on how groups develop culture and norms as they seek to manage task and relationship concerns. Ethical responsibilities are important, too, if the group is to be effective.

Part II: Preparing for Group Meetings

The chapters in Part II help the reader understand what is involved in and how to prepare for group meetings.

Chapter 2: Preparing for Group Discussions Chapter 2 examines concerns about the need for structure, selecting participants, and securing, preparing, and critically analyzing information for use.

Chapter 3: Preparing for Small Group Meetings Chapter 3 highlights the importance of making choices about and planning for meetings. How should a business meeting be organized? If a decision is to be made, should an individual or group make it? How should the group organize its effort when its task is to make a decision? What special group techniques might facilitate the group's effort?

Chapter 4: Preparing for Public Group Meetings Chapter 4 rounds out the presentation of preparing for meetings by addressing the public group setting. Formats for public discussion are presented, along with specific suggestions for leading groups in this unique setting. A special public setting is a conference, for which a step-by-step guide is provided to aid in planning.

Chapter 5: Communication Processes: Verbal Messages Chapter 5 examines the nature of verbal messages. Recurring problems with these kinds of messages are explored, along with suggestions for handling them.

Chapter 6: Communication Processes: Nonverbal Messages and Listening Chapter 6 addresses the use of nonverbal messages in groups. It also explores problems associated with nonverbal messages and provides suggestions for improving nonverbal communication. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the listening process and strategies for improving listening.

Part III: Participating in Group Meetings

The six chapters in Part III work together to form a thorough treatment of the theories, applications, and skills that help a member participate more effectively in group meetings.

Chapter 7: Encouraging Group Development and Evolution Chapter 7 focuses on the evolutionary processes of groups. It begins with a discussion of the motivations for joining a group. This is followed by an explanation of the development of phases, social tension, and ideas.

Chapter 8: Roles and Role Emergence Chapter 8 presents the concept of roles and how they emerge in small decision-making groups. Group task roles, maintenance roles, and self-centered roles are explained. Conclusions are drawn about critical role functions for groups.

Chapter 9: Leading Group Meetings Chapter 9 focuses specifically on the leadership function in groups. Perspectives on leader behavior are examined, and conclusions are drawn from these regarding effective leadership. Concrete suggestions are provided for improving leadership to meet specific group needs.

Chapter 10: Promoting Group Cohesiveness and Satisfaction Chapter 10 addresses cohesiveness as a central concern of group effectiveness. What can be done to enhance the cohesiveness of a group? How can cohesiveness be promoted? These two central issues are addressed in this chapter. Then, too, participants need to be aware of and guard against the effects of too much cohesiveness.

Chapter 11: Managing Relationships in Groups Chapter 11 takes up relational concerns of groups. Members have needs that must be understood and addressed. Beyond this a group must foster a relationship-building process. Members will want to understand and be able to facilitate appropriate relationships and climate.

Chapter 12: Managing Conflict in the Group Chapter 12 takes the perspective that conflict in groups can be managed so that it is functional. Whether the conflict is sub-

stantive or affective, understanding the source of the conflict and how to manage it effectively allows for a potential beneficial outcome.

Part IV: Analyzing Small Group Decision Making

Members can make greater contributions to their understanding of groups if they are able to analyze the process carefully. Part IV provides the understanding and tools to carry out analysis.

Chapter 13: Observing and Evaluating Groups Chapter 13 provides instructions in the process of observing and analyzing groups. Date-collecting instruments are provided to study interaction, roles, leadership, cohesiveness, and the decision-making process.

The Troubleshooting Guide

This guide is a reference tool designed for quick use by the reader. It covers a wide range of group communication problems discussed in the book and provides page numbers for easy location of solutions presented in the book.

LEARNING AIDS

Effort has been to make the intent of this book, chapter by chapter, as clear as possible to readers. Each chapter begins with a list of *objectives* that highlight the most important themes in the chapter. *Chapter summaries* at the end of each chapter recast the important ideas of the chapters into overview statements that should leave no doubt in the reader's mind about which are key ideas and which are not.

Over the years I have found that an understanding of the material is facilitated by experiences and *exercises*. The first of these for each chapter can be used in an ongoing *journal assignment*. Others may be selected to emphasize particular concepts.

Recommended readings are found at the end of each chapter. These have been carefully selected with the aim of identifying the best, and in some cases the most influential, works available. I think students should be encouraged to be familiar with the benchmark work in a discipline. I also think less well-known works, when they are especially relevant, should be brought to the reader's attention, and so I have mentioned some of them, too. I have also included a *glossary* of terms of small group communication at the end of the book.

Resources for Instructors

An *Instructor's Manual* has been prepared to aid instructors in their teaching. It provides sample syllabi and assignments and cases for problem solving, as well as other teaching

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materials. *Videotaped discussions with written commentary* are available to provide a basis for discussion of the concepts and principles presented throughout the book. This tape also provides a common group experience for individual student analysis assignments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thirty colleagues have helped me refine this book over its four editions. I greatly appreciate their excellent suggestions, which have helped make this book so popular with students and professors. I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks. The fourth edition was ably reviewed by the folowing:

Patricia Comeaux, University of North Carolina

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Edwina Stoll, DeAnza College

Mike Wartman, Normandale Community College

Melinda Womack, Rancho Santiago College

Manuscripts that are turned into successful books are done so with the help of extraordinarily dedicated people. The people at McGraw-Hill are exceptional. I especially want to thank our editors, Fran Marino, Hilary Jackson, and Jim Belser, who contributed their fine expertise and knowledge to this book.

Finally, I thank my wife, Lin, and my children for their patience, understanding, and encouragement during the revision of this book.

GERALD L. WILSON

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