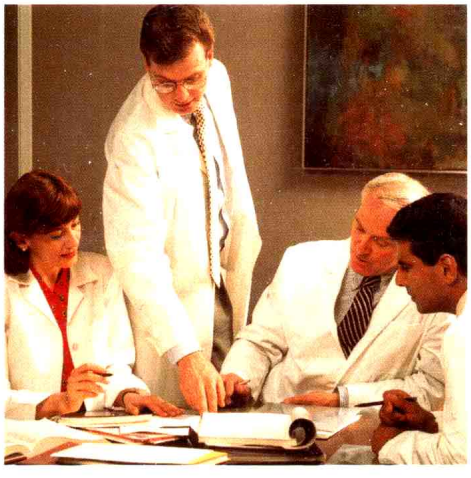
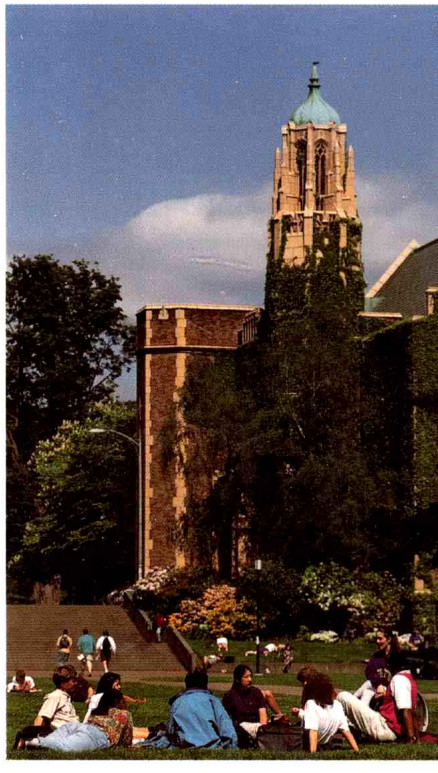
Gerald L. Wilson

Groups In Context





Leadership and Participation in Small Groups

5th Edition

GROUPS IN CONTEXT

Leadership and Participation in Small Groups

FIFTH 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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This book is lovingly dedicated
to my wonderful daughter,
Hannah Beth Wilson

about the author

Gerald L. Wilson is professor of communication and chair of the Department of Communication at the University of South Alabama, where he teaches courses in organizational communication. He received his B.S from Bowling Green State University, his M.A. from Miami University of Ohio, and his Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Wilson has also taught and conducted research at Northern Illinois University and Indiana University-Indianapolis.

Professor Wilson has authored five books and numerous essays and articles on communication. He is also a consultant to various organizations in the community. His latest project is a revision of the book *Communicating in Business and Professional Settings*, with Michael S. Hanna (McGraw-Hill). Other books Wilson has coauthored are *Interpersonal Growth through Communication* (Brown & Benchmark), *Interviewing in Context* (McGraw-Hill), and *Organizational Communication* (Harper & Row).

preface

We find ourselves interacting in family groups, work groups, social groups, church groups, and many special interest groups. Much of what we do in our lives involves interacting with others in small groups. Most of us will have two primary goals in these groups. One goal, regardless of the context, is to be and be perceived as a productive, contributing member. A second important goal is to enjoy our group interactions. These two goals can be summed up by the simple statement: We want to be effective. Helping the reader achieve 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 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 applications. 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 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 four previous editions of this book—that such an approach is greatly appreciated.

The title *Groups in Context* reflects 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 decisions 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 the student must 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.

Groups in Context focuses on task-oriented and decision-making groups. I selected this focus for three reasons. First, decision making is one of the most difficult tasks a group can undertake. These groups require systematic analysis of the particular group situation,

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vigilance in the decision-making process, and well-developed communication and leadership skills. Second, decision making is one of the most prevalent 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, the chapters are 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, group development, and technology.

Michael Hanna and I pioneered the "troubleshooting guide" when it appeared in the first edition of our business and professional communication book. A similar 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 the guide, a reader need only identify a general category, turn to the questions in that category to find one close to their own question, and then identify the page or pages on which the appropriate answer can be found. The positive feedback I have received about the troubleshooting guide suggests that students find it helpful.

ADDITIONS AND REVISIONS IN THE FIFTH EDITION

I have updated the coverage of theory, research, practice, and all exercises found at the end of each chapter in this new edition Here are some of the specific changes and additions you will find in this addition:

- New material on teams in Chapter 1.
- Greatly expanded discussion of systems and the small group as an information processing system in Chapter 1.
- Expanded and clarified section on discussion issues and the wording of questions in Chapter 2.
- New material on securing information through interviews, surveys, and electronic searches in Chapter 2.
- At the request of several reviewers, the material on listening has been moved to the end of Chapter 2.
- New topics in Chapter 3—social facilitation, vigilant interaction theory, and technological aids to group interaction.
- The material on conference planning has been eliminated.
- The section on public discussions is now at the end of Chapter 3.
- At the suggestion of several reviewers, all the material on communication processes, verbal and nonverbal, has been combined into Chapter 4.
- The section on how people know what words mean, from the old Chapter 5, is condensed and now part of Chapter 4.
- Greatly expanded material on leadership in Chapter 7, which includes these new or expanded topics: leadership and power, leadership emergence, gender and leadership emergence, Hersey and Blanchard's situational model, leader as medium, transformational leadership, social loafing, and leading public discussions.
- The section on William Schutz's ideas about needs, Chapter 8, is rewritten to provide greater clarity.
- The relationship that storytelling, fantasy themes, and symbolic convergence have with emotional commitment and cohesiveness is identified in Chapter 8.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Part I: Approaching Communication in Group Contexts

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

Chapter 1: Introduction to Groups and Group Processes Chapter 1 explains the terms *groups* and *teams* and describes 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 groups are to be effective, so that topic is addressed also.

Part II: Preparing for Group Meetings

Part II helps 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. Listening skills are also important in preparing for group discussion, so they are addressed here, too.

Chapter 3: Preparing for 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? How should a group prepare for a public discussion?

Chapter 4: Communication Processes Chapter 4 examines the nature of verbal and nonverbal messages. Recurring problems with these kinds of messages are explored, along with suggestions for handling them.

Part III: Participating in Group Meetings

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

Chapter 5: Encouraging Group Development and Evolution Chapter 5 focuses on the evolutionary processes of groups. It begins with a discussion of the motivations for joining a group. This discussion is followed by an explanation of the development phases, social tension, and ideas.

Chapter 6: Roles and Role Emergence Chapter 6 presents the concepts of roles and how they emerge in a small decision-making group. Group task roles, maintenance roles, and self-centered roles are explained. Conclusions are drawn about critical role functions for groups.

Chapter 7: Leading Group Meetings Chapter 7 focuses specifically on the leadership function in groups. The connection between power and leadership is explored, along with perspectives on leader behavior, and conclusions are drawn regarding effective leadership. Concrete suggestions are provided for improving leadership to meet specific group goals.

Chapter 8: Improving Group Climate Chapter 8 looks at relational issues that can help a leader or member manage the group climate. 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 an appropriate relational climate for achieving group goals.

Chapter 9: Promoting Group Cohesiveness and Satisfaction Chapter 9 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 10: Managing Conflict in Groups Chapter 10 takes the perspective that conflict in groups can be managed so that it is functional. Whether the conflict is substantive 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 11: Observing and Evaluating Groups Chapter 11 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.

Troubleshooting the Small Group

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

LEARNING AIDS

Effort has been made to make the key concepts, 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 *exercises*. Some of these can be used in an ongoing *journal assignment*. Others may be selected to emphasize particular concepts.

Recommended readings at the end of each chapter have been carefully selected to reflect 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

The companion *Instructor's Manual* provides sample syllabi, assignments, and cases for problem solving, as well as other teaching 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-six colleagues have helped me refine this book over the five editions. I greatly appreciate their excellent suggestions, which have helped me make this book so popular with students and professors. I take this opportunity to express my sincere thanks. The fifth edition was ably reviewed by the following people:

Judith K. Litterst, St. Cloud State University

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

GERALD L. WILSON

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