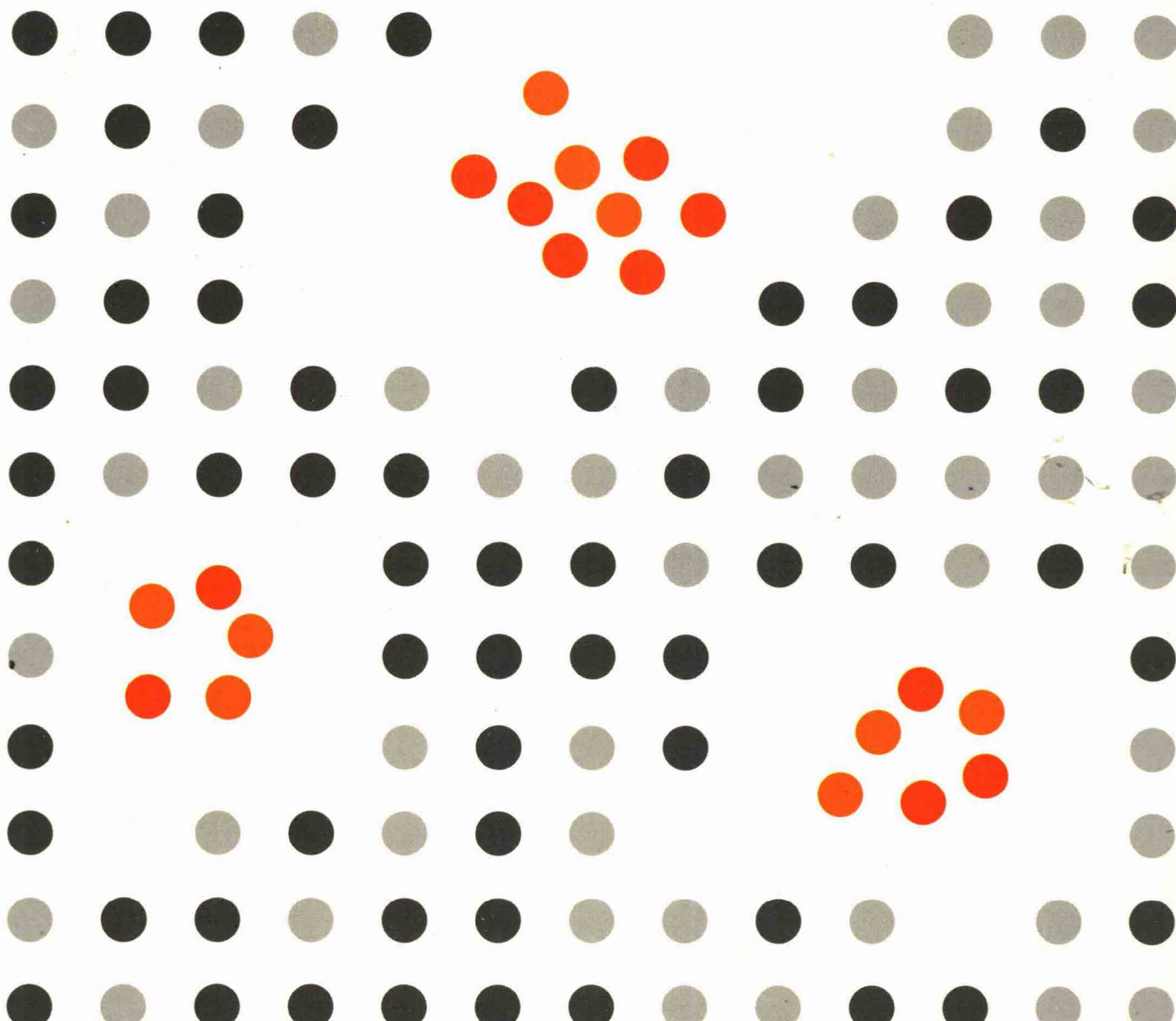


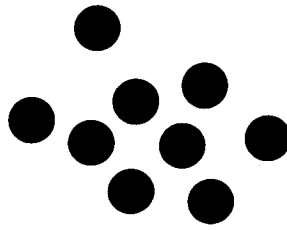
Small Group Communication in Organizations

H. Lloyd Goodall, Jr.



Second Edition

Small Group Communication in Organizations



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Dedication

—For—Gerald M. Phillips, friend and mentor, whose generous influence on my thinking and writing about small groups presents a rewarding challenge.

Small Group Communication in Organizations is written for persons planning to pursue successful and productive careers in American organizations and agencies. It is a book written during a time of rapid change in the way American free enterprise is managed, when the values and goals of American citizens are beginning to stabilize. In what were once characterized as “top-down, inside-out” American organizations, we have witnessed a radical, but gradual, shift over the past twenty years, as the patterns of American business and industry evolved into group-centered, community-conscious, communication-valuing systems. Within this newer framework, built by the work of individuals in small groups responsible for carrying out tasks, making decisions, and resolving dilemmas, we observe that the values attributable to effective and efficient communication between and among group members emerge as those skills most likely to determine an individual’s worth, character, and promise.

This book was written because group communication skills can be learned. Purposeful speaking, active listening, creative participation in group work, effective leadership of group activities, the tools of reasoning, data-collecting, and analysis are processes that can be taught. While there are always some individuals who work well in small groups without any special preparation or training, the great majority of people who work in groups must be trained and educated to do so. *The premise of this text is that students can become skilled in and knowledgeable about the work of small groups and develop responsible communication to carry out the work while still in school. Moreover, those students who demonstrate competency in college or university courses devoted to small group communication will be better prepared to demonstrate these skills on the job.*

The research for this project capitalized on three interrelated and important sources of information. First, the traditions of scholarship related to communication, and particularly communicating in group settings, provided a rich basis for understanding what skills are important and how group processes are used in American business and industry. Second, the testimonies of individuals who work in American organizations provided a pragmatic basis for determining how group work is actually accomplished, how individuals who do the work view the problems, paradoxes, and promises of group activity. And third, the experiences of the author as an organizational consultant and trainer provided the ways and

means of translating the theories and practices of small group communication into a workable plan for instruction. Throughout this text you will find these three sources of information used to convey ideas, procedures, and ways of resolving difficulties commonly encountered in a variety of group settings and tasks.

The book is divided into eleven chapters. The first five chapters are devoted to explanations of the skills and knowledge necessary for productive communication in small groups. Within these chapters you will find guidelines for effective entry into the group, participation and leadership skills, and the roles of communication used to carry out organizational tasks. Chapters 6 and 7 investigate decision-making and the implementation of decisions made by small groups. Chapters 8 through 10 propose ways and means of improving communication in groups, indicating how knowledge of group communication may be used to obtain and maintain jobs in American businesses and industries. Chapter 11 details the processes and tools of observing and evaluating the work of small groups, and reveals how communication is central to any appraisal of the quality and quantity of work done by group members. In each chapter you will also find exercises designed to sharpen your communication skills, as well as references you may want to consult to deepen your understanding of the concepts and skills related to small group communication.

The Second Edition

The second edition of *Small Group Communication in Organizations* capitalizes on several subtle, but important, changes that have occurred since the introduction of the original edition in 1985. Chief among these changes are the updating of research sources and the inclusion of recent findings in the areas of leadership, participation, and agenda-management in groups. This second edition also profits from the advice of users of the text who have contributed their ideas about resources and pedagogy, and who, collectively, have convinced me to move the chapter on observation and evaluation of groups toward the end of the book to more closely align with syllabi.

The place of small groups in organizations—both as a practical aspect of organizational life and as a prominent feature of the research literature—has expanded significantly since the publication of the first edition. Fresh insights provided by organizational theorists, such as Gareth Morgan, Linda Smircich, and Linda Putnam, combined with a better understanding of the role played by small groups in the development, maintenance, and change of organizational cultures as found in the work of Michael Pacanowsky, Nick Trujillo, Anne Swidler, and others have also found their way into this second edition. Finally, my own research into the meaning of small groups in high technology firms has evolved sufficiently to be occasionally included in this volume.

Hence, this second edition should offer colleagues more and better material. I have not, however, fiddled very much with what users found useful in their classes. I continue to be enthusiastic about the support this book has received and look forward to continuing the dialogue with those interested in seeing it evolve with the discipline.

No book is ever written alone. I wish to express my sincere appreciation to the many individuals and organizations who cooperated with me while I completed this project. I am especially grateful to the persons whose words are reprinted within these pages, whose experiences and insights greatly contributed to what is presented here. While their names have been changed to guard their identities, I wish to take this opportunity to convey my gratitude to them and their parent organizations: United Technologies, Division of United Space Boosters, Inc.; Pittsburgh Paint & Glass, Division of Aircraft Windshields; Huntsville Utilities; the United States Army, Divisions of the Missile Command and the Army Corps of Engineers; Rockwell International; Computer Sciences Corporation; Sperry Systems, Inc.; IBM; Intergraph; and Chrysler Corporation. I would also like to acknowledge the reviewers of the original manuscript: Jack L. Whitehead, University of Texas at Austin; Gerald L. Wilson, University of South Alabama; Olaf E. Rankes, University of Miami; Lawrence W. Hugenberg, Youngstown State University; and Sue De Wine, Ohio University. I also want to thank the reviewers for the second edition: Judith Hoover, Western Kentucky University; Alan Shiller, Lindenwood College; and Julie Zink, Spring Hill College. I am also indebted to my research assistant from The University of Alabama in Huntsville, Beth Gonsewski, whose contributions to this volume are numerous, and without whose help this project would not have been completed on time.

To the Instructor

Using Small Groups in the Course

Small Group Communication in Organizations is designed to be a flexible text, adaptable to your individual needs and pedagogical methods. The chapters are intended to be complete instructional units; and every chapter ends with an exercise, or series of exercises, developed and tested for classroom use. I wish to explain some alternatives for using small group exercises to facilitate classroom instruction.

Traditionally, small group communication courses use a lecture/discussion format. The text is used to aid students' comprehension of the lecture material, and to provide interesting points for classroom discussion or debate. In-class exercises from the text, or prepared by the instructor, are used to "test out" ideas from the lectures and to provide each student with the opportunity to develop group communication skills. Should you prefer this traditional method of instruction, *Small Group Communication in Organizations* provides detailed in-class exercises you may want to use. I have found, however, the use of this lecture/discussion/exercise format is enhanced by:

1. *Organizing small groups for the whole term or semester:* Because small groups mature with age, and since one of the basic communication skills for group members is the ability to adapt to other group members over a period of time, I recommend making *permanent* group assignments at the beginning of the term. Students should be told these assignments will not change (you may want to have a "bail out" mechanism for serious disturbances). Use of permanent in-class groups facilitates appreciation of the human relationships, social and task goals, and adaptive skills. It also provides the groups with a sense of shared identity.
2. *Selecting group members based on an equitable distribution of basic skills:* As every small group communication instructor knows, there is no "ideal" method for assigning individuals to groups. However, I have found that students respond favorably if the instructor makes the assignments based on skills they can claim. For example, on the second or third class meeting I ask students to select one of the

following skills: (a) speaking in public, (b) experience leading a small group, (c) researching a subject in the library, (d) conducting surveys or informational interviews, (e) typing, and (f) writing clear technical reports. I explain that claiming a skill does *not* mean the student will be responsible for *performing* the skill for the group! It is only a way to apportion useful resources equitably among the in-class groups.

3. *Rotating the leadership and recorder functions among group members on a weekly/bi-weekly basis:* To gain communicative competencies in small groups requires the opportunity to practice them. After the groups are assembled, ask them to decide on a leader/recorder rotation for the *first half* of the term/semester. Leaders will be responsible for preparing agendas, calling the meetings to order, and directing the group's work on a task or through the prescribed exercises. Recorders will be responsible for taking minutes of the meeting and keeping a formal record of what the group has accomplished (it is advisable to ask the group to use *one* common group notebook for the term/semester). After the first half of the term the groups should be free to decide how they want to handle the leadership role for the remainder of the course. Some groups may prefer keeping the original rotation, others may vest the leadership role in one person who demonstrates competency while the recorder role may continue to rotate among the other members, and still other groups may prefer to share the leadership role among themselves without designating a formal leader.
4. *Assigning a regular meeting time for all in-class groups:* Groups tend to work best when they establish a routine. Instructors can help groups establish a routine by allotting group meeting time at the end (or beginning) of each class, or every other class meeting. This schedule will help leaders prepare agendas for the allotted time, and will simulate real organizational meetings.
5. *Asking the groups to formally evaluate their own performance at the end of the term/semester:* Using the material in Chapter 10, ask each group to design and implement an evaluative procedure capable of assessing (a) the individual contributions of the group members, and (b) the overall performance of the group.

The above guidelines should prove useful to instructors who plan to use the exercises at the ends of the chapters, combined with a lecture/discussion format.

A second method for organizing small group work in courses is to develop an organizational simulation.¹ The goal of this format is to promote an organizational environment within the classroom capable of inducing students to treat each other as working professionals while learning small group communication

1. See H. Lloyd Goodall, Jr., "Organizational Communication Competence: The Development of an Industrial Simulation to Teach Adaptive Skills," *COMMUNICATION QUARTERLY* 30 (Fall 1982), 282-295, for a comprehensive account of how to design a simulation course.

skills. *Small Group Communication in Organizations* is amenable to the simulation format because the chapters are organized for systematic skill development, using Standard Agenda, Delphi Technique, and a combination of the two methods to make group decisions. Your syllabus can be designed according to the following guidelines:

1. *Make permanent group assignments, rotate leader/recorder roles, and base group member selections on an equitable apportioning of basic skills:* As in the traditional format, the simulation-based course should require students to develop working group histories, productive relationships with other group members, and learn to synthesize task and social goals. Use the guidelines for the traditional format (see previous page) to organize the in-class small groups.
2. *Use Standard Agenda to organize the first half of the term/semester:* Students can solve organizational problems/case studies using Standard Agenda. Standard Agenda is also a fundamental way to organize group work systematically within a classroom. Allow one group meeting per phase of Standard Agenda, two or three meetings for fact-finding. This schedule will help group leaders learn the requirements of agendas, and will demonstrate the importance of the effective communication principles found in the first five chapters of the text. At the end of the first half of the term/semester, ask the groups to prepare a final report (oral or written) and present it to the class for critique.

The second half of the term/semester provides creative alternatives for organizing the student groups. For example, new group assignments can be made, new decision-making techniques can be used (e.g. Delphi Technique, or a combination of Standard Agenda and Delphi Technique), and new ways to organize leadership/recorder roles can be developed. Or, you may prefer to keep the original groups and Standard Agenda, but allow the groups to determine how leader/recorder roles should be enacted. Regardless of the method you prefer, the goal of the second half of the term should be to ask each group to accomplish *one major project*. In complex simulations these projects overlap, hence requiring student groups to integrate their work and share information among the groups. For example, you may want to use the following broad topics to design specific organizational problems for group decision-making assignments: (a) a financial planning problem, (b) a strategic forecasting problem, (c) a marketing/advertising problem, (d) a public relations problem, (e) a personnel policies problem, (f) a hiring/firing/grievance problem, and (g) an evaluation problem. (Note: The evaluation group should be responsible for designing the organization's group communication evaluation instrument.) For each group problem, the group members *must be made responsible* for all work leading to the final group report. The instructor(s) should serve only in liaison/consulting capacities.

3. *Lecture a little, encourage productive time in groups:* The role of the instructor in a simulation-based course is analogous to the CEO in an organization. You provide the overall objectives, monitor the work of the groups, and encourage useful expenditures of time and effort. When I use the simulation format I limit my lectures to 15–20 minutes per class session, and use the rest of the time to observe and monitor the groups.
4. *Make the demonstration of communication competencies a major basis for grading decisions:* The simulation format is not a traditional classroom. Unlike the familiar setting, the simulation format values systematic acquisition of the performance skills necessary for communication competence. Therefore, I advise you to rely less heavily on traditional methods of measuring individual progress (e.g. exams, term papers), and to place more emphasis on the acquisition of communication skills. How will you evaluate the individuals and the groups? I suggest making the group assessment instrument count for at least 50% of the final grade—the group members know who has contributed to their effort, who has learned the skills, and who has demonstrated them. The other 50% or so you can use to include an exam or two, a term paper, or perhaps your own assessment of student's progress. But a major objective for the course should be to encourage students to see the relationship between their *communication competencies* and *evaluations made of and about them* by other group/organization members.
5. *Make the simulation setting as "real" as possible:* One major purpose of any organizational simulation using small groups to organize the in-class work is actually to *simulate* real organizational conditions. Of course this goal must be tempered with an appreciation of the need to establish a learning environment in which mistakes can be made and deficiencies may be overcome. But the tone of the classroom should be kept professional. To accomplish this objective I recommend using formal memos to group leaders as the basis to distribute necessary information. I also encourage group members to go to the group leaders for advice rather than to me, the instructor, (unless they have a personal problem or a genuine grievance). Furthermore, I collect all group records at the end of the term and pass them on to the next class—the simulated organization actually develops a real history!

For large classes (simulations tend to work best when relative anonymity is guaranteed) I use students who have received an "A" in the course previously as mid-level managers and supervisors. This addition to the class encourages a sense of hierarchy, and allows the student/managers to help the groups. These student/managers serve a vital function in the simulation because they convey information between the groups and the instructor, and serve as mediators of information and disputes. I also use the student/manager evaluations of individual and group performances in my final assessment of term grades.

The above guidelines can help you design an organizational simulation using small groups and this text. Should you choose to use a simulation-based format, I hope you find it as creative and rewarding as I have. Whatever format you choose, I hope the second edition of *Small Group Communication in Organizations* proves to be useful and adaptable. If you have any questions about using this text or the formats I have just outlined, please call or write me and I will be happy to help you.

H. Lloyd Goodall, Jr.
Salt Lake City, Utah
July, 1989

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