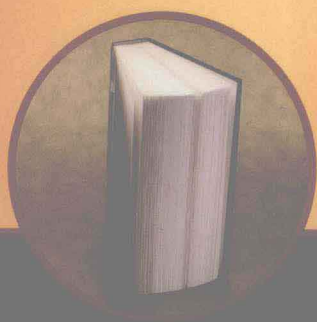


Human Communication: Motivation, Knowledge, & Skills

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CUSTOM PUBLISHING

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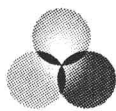
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CHAPTER 1

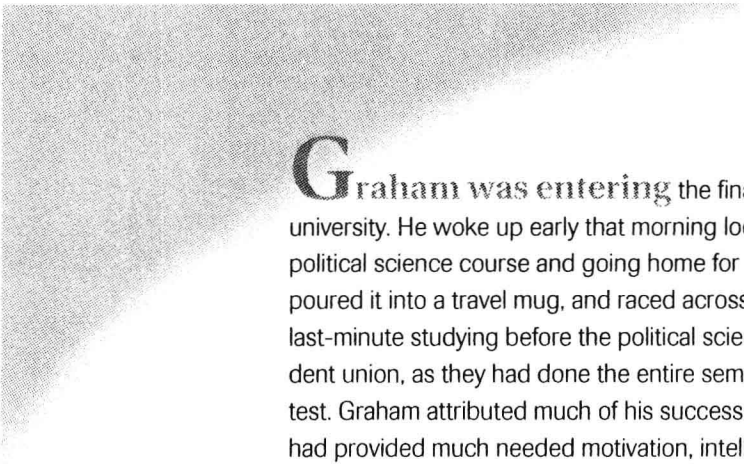


LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After studying this chapter, you should be able to:

1. Define small group communication and explain how perception, interdependence, and communication relate to groups of three or more people.
2. Outline the four assumptions underlying small group communication.
3. Discuss why communicating in small groups is important.
4. Explain how motivation, knowledge, skills, and context influence competence in small group communication.
5. Understand how people, task, needs, and personal traits influence an individual's motivation to join and participate in small groups.
6. Recognize challenges to competence in small groups arising from coordination issues and multiple motivations among group members.
7. Propose strategies to overcome challenges to competence in small groups arising from coordination issues and multiple motivations.
8. Outline how the concepts of people, objectives, environment, and time can be used to develop ethical behavior within small groups.
9. Understand the need to communicate ethically in small groups and develop methods to foster ethical behavior.

Small Group Communication: Getting Motivated



Graham was entering the final day of examinations for the fall semester at his university. He woke up early that morning looking forward to completing his last exam for his political science course and going home for the holidays. He quickly brewed a cup of coffee, poured it into a travel mug, and raced across campus to meet some classmates for some last-minute studying before the political science final. They met in a quiet corner in the student union, as they had done the entire semester before each class, and reviewed for the test. Graham attributed much of his success in political science to his study partners—they had provided much needed motivation, intellectual stimulation, and emotional support.

After reviewing for the examination, Graham and his study partners walked over to their classroom to take the test. The test was given in a large auditorium because the class had over 250 enrolled students. In fact, the class was so large the professor had changed the class to lecture rather than discussion format. The size of the class not only influenced how the professor taught the class, it also influenced how Graham interacted with other students. Outside of his study partners, Graham didn't know anyone else from class. Every day throughout the semester, Graham had simply walked into class, taken his seat, and written notes on the professor's lecture without talking to anyone else. Graham was not alone—the pattern was the same for almost all of the students in the class.

After the final, Graham went to the computer lab and logged on to the computer to relax. He was a regular participant in a university listserv that discussed the relationship between church and state. He downloaded his email and found a couple of new postings that looked interesting. One was made by a close friend whom he had known since high school. The other was from someone he did not know; in fact, Graham thought this might be the first time this particular person had posted to the listserv. He responded quickly to both, wished them a happy holiday, logged off, and went to his campus job.

Graham had a work study position in the library where he worked behind the reference desk. He worked regularly with two other students who had the same shift. They had

nicknamed themselves the “Elders” because they felt they had wisdom and knowledge about the library that other students did not. Because it was the last day of examinations, few students needed help with their library research. The Elders mostly talked about their plans for the holiday, complained about how the library policies sometimes hindered their ability to help students effectively, and made plans for approaching their supervisor regarding some possible changes in existing policies.

When the library closed, Graham went to catch a bus home. On the way to the bus stop, Graham ran into Kennedy, a close friend. They quickly talked about how their finals had gone and made a promise to get together for lunch the next semester. When he arrived at the bus stop, five other people were also waiting. Graham didn't know any of them; nevertheless, he said “hello” as he walked up. They made small talk with each other for about five minutes until the bus pulled up. Once he got on the bus and sat down, Graham began thinking about his family. He was looking forward to this holiday in particular, as this would be the first time in five years that all his brothers and sisters would be home for the holidays. ♦♦●

In our daily lives, we constantly move in and out of relationships with people. We move in and out of deeply personal relationships with individuals we care about such as friends and loved ones. We move in and out of somewhat superficial relationships with people such as the clerk at the corner store or the server at a frequented coffee shop or café. The kinds of relationships we move in and out of during our daily lives are not restricted to single individuals. We also move in and out of relationships with collections of people such as bands, gatherings, and crowds. In the vignette, Graham moved in and out of relationship with a several collections of people including his study partners, his political science class, his listserv, and his work team.

Do all of these collections of people have the same relationships? Probably not. Graham's study circle had met the entire semester, whereas the people at the bus stop met for the first and probably last time. The political science class that Graham was enrolled in was so large that people didn't know one another, whereas the Elders knew each other quite well and talked to each other often during work as well as outside the library. Graham's study partners met face-to-face during the semester whereas his contact with members of the listserv was mediated through the internet. The Elders were a group of people with the purpose of achieving specific work-related tasks, running the library reference desk; Graham's family was primarily concerned with cultivating good relationships and having fun. As you can see, how long or short collections of people last, how well they know one another, what channel they use to communicate, and the purpose for the collection's existence vary greatly.

This chapter focuses on a specific collection of people known as a small group. Small groups have a set of distinctive qualities that separate them from other collections of people. In this chapter, we explore what makes a small group. Using the competence model, we look at the steps you can take to become a motivated and competent small group communicator.

What Is a Small Group?

In the chapter-opening vignette, Graham encountered and engaged with several collections of people throughout his day. Which of these collections of people would you characterize as a small group? Do you view Graham's family as a group? Do you consider the people at the bus stop a group? List the criteria you used to decide which collections of people qualified as a group and which did not. How many criteria did you generate? Although a great many criteria exist for classifying a collection of people as a group, four criteria determine a small group: (1) the collection must be made up of three or more people, (2) every group member must have the perception of belonging to this particular group, (3) each group member's behaviors and goals must be interdependent and the group must be interdependent with its larger context, and (4) there must be communication between group members. Using these four criteria, a **small group** can be defined as three or more people who perceive themselves to be a group, who are interdependent, and communicate with one another.

INVOLVES THREE OR MORE PEOPLE

Using the criterion that small groups must consist of at least three people, Graham's study partners, his political science class, the Elders, the five people waiting for the bus, and his family would be considered groups, and his relationship with his friend Kennedy would not. What is so important about the number three for small groups? When you move from a dyad to a group of three or more people, possibilities for majority rule, minority opinion, coalitions, and voting emerge. For example, consider a committee of faculty members that is deciding whether to increase or decrease enrollment at their university. Once you have more than three people, several committee members can formulate a majority opinion by agreeing on the need for an enrollment increase. It is also possible that a few committee members may hold a minority opinion that enrollment should be decreased and actively try to build a coalition with undecided members to overturn the majority opinion. However, if you have a dyad where each member has equal power and one member wants to increase enrollment and the other does not, there is not a possibility for majority rule, minority opinion, or coalition building.

If the lower bound for any small group is three people you may wonder, "How large can a group be and still be called a *small* group?" Do you consider Graham's large lecture class of 250 people a small group? You'll find that most people would respond "no," but what is the criterion we use to distinguish small groups from large groups? One way that has been used historically to distinguish a small group from a large group is the possibility for group members to have some reaction about each of the others as an individual person even if only to recall that the other was present (Bales, 1950, p. 33). This suggests that the ability to be aware of all the other people in a group and to recall what a particular group member was like or what he or she did sets the upper limit for people in a small group. It is highly unlikely that all the members of Graham's political science class made an impression on him, and even less likely that he would recognize them as members of the



Being physically present in the same space is not enough for a collection of people to be called a group. Belonging to a group involves communicating with three or more people who perceive themselves as a group, who possess a common goal, and who are interdependent.

class if he ran into them elsewhere on campus. Therefore, his political science class would not be considered a small group.

INCLUDES SHARED PERCEPTION

If you asked the collection of people standing with Graham at the bus stop if they thought they belonged to a group, how do you think they would answer? You might assume correctly that their answer would probably be “no.” This was a random group of people assembled at a bus stop to get transportation to go home, to work, or to some other location. They didn’t know one another because they had never met before. If you asked Graham’s circle of study partners if they were a group, they would probably answer “yes.” They had been together for a semester united in a common purpose—to master the material in the political science course.

People can be said to belong to a group if they perceive themselves as belonging to a group. If they label themselves as group members, then they have met the second criterion. Using this perception criterion, it is likely that Graham’s study partners, the members of the listserv, the Elders, and Graham’s family would consider themselves a small group. Why is someone’s perception of membership in a group important for determining whether the small group exists? It is crucial to the definition of a small group because people can be gathered and interacting but not be members of a group. The people at the bus stop are waiting together and they interact with one another, but they would not perceive themselves as belonging to a small group. It is even possible for people who have worked together over a long period of time to not view themselves as members of a small group. For example, suppose one of the members of Graham’s work team, the Elders, did not perceive herself as a member of the team. Can we then classify the Elders as a group if some members do not perceive themselves as members of this group? Given the difference of opinion, we would have to say that the majority of people in the work team classify themselves as a group and that a minority does not. The criterion of perception is important for defining small groups because it cautions us to avoid the mistake of thinking that people who interact with each other necessarily form a group.

EMPHASIZES INTERDEPENDENCE

The third criterion for a small group is interdependence. Three or more people who are interdependent make up a small group. **Interdependence** means that two elements are related to and mutually affect one another. Small group interdependence can appear in three ways: (1) goal interdependence, (2) behavioral interdependence, and (3) context interdependence. The forms of interdependence are not mutually exclusive; they can be simultaneously present within a small group.

The first way in which group members can be interdependent, **goal interdependence**, is accomplished by sharing goals. Goals are the ends to which effort is directed. For example, consider the goals of Graham’s study partners. What about the people participating in the listserv? The Elders? The goal of the circle of study partners is to master political science course work. The goal of those individuals participating in the listserv is to discuss issues regarding the separation of church and state. The goal of the Elders is to help keep the library running smoothly by assisting students with their research. Although the goals of each group is different, each group has a primary goal that all members share. When individuals share a common goal, they can be said to be interdependent.

A second form of interdependence is **behavioral interdependence**, which means that an individual's messages affect and are affected by other people's messages. Consider the following conversation from a small group:

- RASHEED: What do you think we should do for our class project?
- MEI: That's a good question. I think we should do something that the professor would like.
- AL: I agree. It's best to choose a topic that Professor Barge would like. When he lectured on small group decision making, he became much more animated and passionate. I think he really loves that topic. What about doing something on small group decision making?
- MEI: That's an excellent idea! I also noticed that he cited a lot of his own research when he discussed decision making. Let's do something on decision making for the project.

In the conversation, you can see how each message incorporates some piece of information from the message immediately preceding it. Behavioral interdependence is characterized by a flow of messages where each message is influenced by the messages preceding it and affects the messages following it.

Finally, group members can be interdependent through context. **Context interdependence** occurs when a group's environment affects and is, in turn, affected by a group's actions. Groups and group members do not exist in a vacuum; they exist in a web of relationships with other stakeholder groups in a larger environment. In the chapter-opening vignette, the group known as the Elders is also affected by an environmental influence—the library's preexisting policies. These library policies affect how each group member interacts with each other and the students. At the same time, it may be possible for the work team to influence the environment, in this case by recommending new procedures or strategies to help deliver better service to the students.

Knowledge Link

What are the differences among goal, behavioral, and context interdependencies?

REQUIRES COMMUNICATION

As you saw earlier, communication is a process of managing messages and meaning in ways that build community. The last criterion for a small group to exist is that three or more people need to communicate with one another. All the collections of people in the opening vignette would be considered groups using this criterion because they all communicate with one another. Recall, however, that the channels they use to communicate with one another vary. Graham's study circle met face-to-face whereas Graham's participation in the listserv on church and state issues was through email. As you know, communication may occur through a nonmediated channel such as face-to-face communication or through a variety of mediated channels such as audioconferencing, teleconferencing, and email. The influx of communication technologies has opened up a wide variety of ways for group members to communicate with each other. Group members no longer need to be face-to-face to collaborate; they can be physically located in different geographic regions or on different floors in an office building and be linked by communication technologies. Regardless of what channel of communication they use, in order to be considered a group, members need to communicate with one another.

To summarize, a collection of people can be classified as a small group if (1) it includes three or more people; (2) the people perceive themselves as belonging to a group; (3) the people share a set of goals and their actions are interdependent with one another; and (4) they communicate with one another. These criterion help distinguish small group

CloseUp ON TECHNOLOGY

Technology & Small Group Communication

MOST DEFINITIONS OF small group communication during the 1950s and 1960s typically included the criterion of face-to-face communication. However, most contemporary definitions of small group communication no longer emphasize face-to-face communication. Why? The simple answer is that the explosion of communication technologies through which people exchange messages has altered the ways in which group members communicate. They no longer have to be physically present in the same room to communicate in a small group context. Think of the various ways communication technology can be used to connect group members. You can now use the intranet, the internet, desktop videoconferencing, computer-based messaging, and teleconferencing to exchange messages. You can also employ computer software that helps group members keep track of communication such as Lotus Notes or assists them in making decisions such as VisionQuest.

How does communication technology influence how group members communicate? To answer this question, let's examine one of the most heavily researched areas regarding communication technology—computer-mediated communication (CMC). As you may recall from Chapter 7, CMC represents a wide range of communication technologies that serve as a medium through which people exchange messages by computer. In small groups, members communicate through computers to perform key decision-making tasks such as analyzing the problem, generating solutions, and evaluating solutions. Several researchers investigating group CMC have focused on how technology influences communication among group members (see Scott, 1999; McLeod, 1996). The results suggest there are several misperceptions of technology's influence on group communication:

Misperception 1: Computer-mediated communication increases task-oriented communication while decreasing relational communication.

Misperception 2: Computer-mediated communication always increases group member participation.

Misperception 3: Communication technology allows the equal participation of all group members.

Misperception 4: More information is exchanged by groups using computer-mediated communication than face-to-face.

The research in these areas has been equivocal. Some research shows that CMC increases group member communication, and other studies demonstrate that it decreases communication. Similarly, some studies suggest that CMC can equalize participation among group members, and other research suggests that it creates unequal participation.

What are the consequences for the competent group communicator? Competent small group communicators need to pay attention to four issues when they use technology to coordinate group activities. First, they need to determine whether they are achieving an appropriate balance between working on the task at hand and maintaining relationships. Second, they need to consider whether they have enough participation from group members to accomplish the task. Third, are all group members participating equally or are some dominating the discussion? Fourth, they need to assess whether the group is exchanging all the relevant information in order to accomplish the task at hand. The solutions to these issues depend on the unique circumstances of the group situation. For example, when decisions need to be made quickly, task communication may be more important than communication that maintains group member relationships. When certain group members have more expertise in a particular topic area, they may need to dominate the discussion. When using technology, competent group communicators need to assess the context they are operating in and make informed judgments about the kind of communication that is required, how much group member participation is needed, whether it's effective for group members to participate equally, and whether the necessary information is made available during discussion.

communication from interpersonal and public communication as well as collections of three or more people who are randomly put together. Given these four criterion for small groups, how many of the collections of people in the chapter-opening vignette are small groups? The answer is four: Graham's study circle, the church and state listserv, the Elders, and his family.

Assumptions About Small Group Communication

Small group communication occupies a complex terrain comprised of multiple stakeholders, people both inside and outside the group who are concerned about the group's activities and who may have conflicting motivations and expectations. The terrain is complex also because a wide variety of communication channels and strategies are available to the small group communicator. Navigating group life requires an awareness of some of the central landmarks that characterize the terrain. When using an actual map, individuals can begin to orient themselves by understanding what important sites dot the landscape. The landmarks in the terrain of small group communication are the core assumptions most, if not all, researchers make about small group communication. What are some common assumptions that most researchers make about small group communication? Take a minute or two and complete the self-test here.

Now that you have finished the self-test, note your responses and let's examine which small group assumptions are true and which are false.

SMALL GROUPS FACILITATE TASK ACCOMPLISHMENT

Is making decisions the primary work that groups perform? The correct answer to statement 2 is false. Groups perform a wide variety of task activities. A **task activity** is an assigned piece of work that prescribes certain duties and responsibilities that group members should perform. Table 11.1 shows the variety of groups that we may belong to. Each group is distinguished by a task activity that needs to be performed. For example, familial groups typically perform tasks such as caring for and supporting children, socializing children into the larger community, and nurturing one another's development. Recreational groups focus on playing games, competing against other teams, and providing fellowship. Occupational groups perform work. Each of these groups may make decisions, but they also perform a wide variety of other functions such as providing social support, performing work, providing leisure outlets, and so on. Earlier literature on small group communication tended to focus on decision making as the key function in groups, although recently researchers have begun focusing on a variety of other group functions (Frey, 1996a).

SMALL GROUPS INVOLVE RESPONSIBILITIES & ROLES

When people enter a small group, they begin to negotiate with the other members about the roles they will assume in a group. What kinds of roles have you played in groups? Have you been the person who keeps the group on track? Have you been the person who plays

Test your assumptions

INSTRUCTIONS: Please read each of the following statements. Circle the answer that you think best reflects each statement.

- | | | |
|------|-------|---|
| TRUE | FALSE | 1. Groups are more productive when the roles and responsibilities of group members are clearly defined. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 2. Making decisions is the only kind of work that small groups do. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 3. Dissenting opinions in small groups should be encouraged. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 4. Leadership in small groups should be centralized in one or two people. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 5. Effective groups are highly cohesive. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 6. Good group members should conform to the wishes of the group even if it goes against their personal code of ethics. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 7. Effective groups follow an orderly set of stages when developing. |
| TRUE | FALSE | 8. To make an effective group decision, a group must first define the problem, then create criteria for selecting among solutions to the problem, evaluate possible solutions, and finally select a solution. |

Answers: 1: T 2: F 3: T 4: F 5: F 6: F 7: F 8: F

TABLE 11.1

*** Type of Groups by Activity ***

Groups can be categorized according to the task or activity they perform. A person can belong to more than one of the groups. How many do you belong to?

ACTIVITY	SMALL GROUPS
Commercial	Consumer groups, food cooperatives, investment groups, real estate boards
Educational	Work groups in preschool, ability-level groups in elementary and secondary school, study groups in college and graduate school, occupational-training groups
Familial	Immediate family, extended family, orphanages, foster-care groups, day-care groups, communal-living groups, assisted living home groups, senior residential-facility groups, convents, rectories, abbeys
Health and welfare	Therapy groups, support groups, rehabilitation groups, residential-care facility groups
Occupational	Quality circles, management teams, research-and-development teams, committees, corporate boards of directors, work teams
Political/civic	Zoning boards, planning boards, political party committees, protest groups, boards of directors for charities, civic leagues
Recreational	Sports teams, fraternal associations, lodges, scout troops, musical bands, choirs
Social	Friendship groups, groups of acquaintances, gangs, clubs
Spiritual	Church groups, Sunday school classes, synagogues, mosque congregations, cults, covens

SOURCE: Socha (1996), p. 14.

devil's advocate? Are you the person who leads the group? Are you first to tell a joke to relieve tension in the group? Although many possible roles may be created in small groups, it is important for small group members to define their roles clearly. Defining roles and responsibilities clearly allows groups to coordinate their activity more successfully. The answer to statement 1 therefore is true.

An important role within small groups that helps coordinate a group's activity is that of the leader. Whether leadership is best performed by one or two people in a group is open to debate. Robert Bales (1950) argued that the function of leadership in small groups is so complex, it should be performed by two people in a group. One person's role should be that of the task leader with a focus on keeping the group on track in accomplishing its task. The second leader would act as the socioemotional leader and help construct and maintain a positive group climate. Bales argues that because each task is complex and time consuming, separate leaders should perform these roles.

However, recent research shows that leadership may not be limited to two people. In fact, the nature of the task determines who acts as a leader. If the task is fairly simple, one or two leaders may be all a group requires. However, if the task is complex, all members of the group may need to share leadership responsibilities. Leadership may become shared as various people perform the leadership role in the group over time (Barge, 1996). More

people may need to assume leadership positions within the group as the task becomes more complex. Therefore, the answer to statement 4 is false.

SMALL GROUPS DEVELOP A CULTURE

Group culture is the values, norms, and beliefs that guide a group. Revisiting the opening vignette, Graham's study circle group culture included the values of hard work, the norms of showing up to study at prearranged times, and the belief that this hard work would lead to good grades. The creation of a group culture tells group members what is important to the group and offers rules that define how they should act and respond to each other. Groups with strong cultures have members who accept and maintain the existing group culture. As a result, such groups tend to be highly cohesive; their members feel psychologically close to one another.

Does a high level of cohesion make for more effective groups? The answer to statement 5 is false. Effective groups are those that have a productive level of cohesion. If a group's cohesion level is too low, the group exhibits scarce agreement about how members should act together and little consensus around what is important. As a result, the group is disorganized and, at times, may fall into conflict. This conflict emerges because group members struggle over which values are important and how the group should be organized. When groups become too cohesive, however, members may fail to voice dissenting opinions from the majority as well as fail to vigorously question and debate the group's decision and the assumptions that led to the decision (Janis & Mann, 1977). This means that groups need to have enough cohesion to reach consensus on the group's goals and tasks but not so much cohesion as to prevent a rigorous examination and evaluation of alternatives that could be taken to solve a group problem or achieve a task.

When groups have too much cohesion, group members may fail to voice dissenting opinions even if the group's decision goes against their better judgment and personal code of ethics. Although it may be difficult, group members need to voice their concerns even if they don't conform to the wishes of the group, especially if they feel the group has not adequately explored all alternatives. Bringing up different viewpoints and perspectives can improve group decision making. At the same time, group members need to be aware that by voicing unpopular views and challenging the majority group opinion, they run the risk of being ostracized from the group. Therefore, the answer to statement 6 is false.

SMALL GROUPS MUST MANAGE THEIR DEVELOPMENT

No matter what their purpose, all groups must make choices. These choices involve the kinds of task activities the group wishes to pursue, the types of roles and responsibilities members will assume, and the values, norms, and beliefs that will drive the group interaction. Groups also make choices about how the group will develop and how it will accomplish decision making. As you saw in the opening vignette, Graham's study group made choices about how often to meet to study for their political science class. The Elders made decisions about how they would provide service to library users—when to pay attention to library policies and when to conveniently ignore them.

You might think that group development and decision making are orderly, rational processes, yet the answer to statements 7 and 8 are false. It seems intuitive that groups should go through an orderly set of stages. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) suggest that all groups go through the following phases as they develop: (1) forming, (2) storming, (3) norming, and (4) performing. During the forming stage, group members meet each other, often for the first time, and orient themselves toward each other and the task they must

perform. During the storming phase, group members argue and debate the nature of the task at hand and fall into conflict over their role relationships and ways to organize the group. The norming phase signals the end of the storming phase as group members forge a consensus on the nature of the task and how best to achieve it as well as their respective roles. The last phase is the performing phase when the group performs the work it was assigned.

Do all groups go through these phases in a precise order? Some groups do and they are able to develop in an orderly fashion and make high-quality decisions. However, an increasing amount of evidence suggests that groups do not develop as neatly as Tuckman and Jensen (1977) and other similar models suggest. M. Scott Poole and his associates (1996) argue that groups can go through this process in a variety of different combinations of phases and even experience each phase any number of times. It is possible that a group may start off with the forming stage but cycle repeatedly between storming and norming without ever getting to the performing stage. In this case, endless heated discussions about how to organize the group may prevent the group from performing. The differences between Tuckman & Jensen and Poole's Model can be seen in Figure 11.1. Given that groups may cycle through any number of any phases in any given order, does this mean that good group development and quality decision making are rare? As we explore in Chapter 12, the key to quality decision making is in fulfilling basic functions such as defining the nature of the task, setting criteria, generating alternatives, and evaluating alternatives. The performance of these particular functions rather than the order in which they are performed is critical to quality decision making.

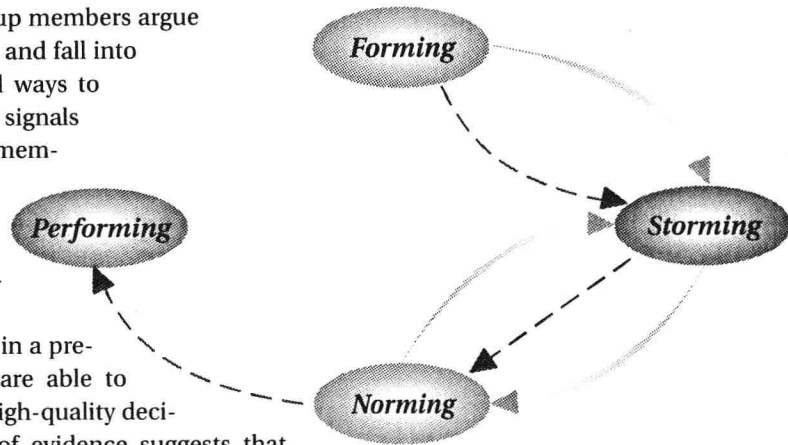


FIGURE 11.1
Group Phases

To see the order of phases in Tuckman and Jensen's Model, start with the forming phase and follow the dashed red lines. To see an example of the phases and sequences in Poole's model, start with the performing phase and follow the solid blue lines.

Why Small Group Communication Is Important

Mastering small group communication is important for several reasons: (1) we find ourselves communicating in many small groups and cannot help but communicate in small groups in every aspect of our lives, (2) constructive small group environments can generate higher creativity and push people to surpass their individual performance, and (3) small groups can also negatively influence people. Given the prevalence of small groups and the positive and negative effects they can have on your life, sharpening one's small group communication skills is central to becoming a competent communicator.

WE FIND OURSELVES COMMUNICATING IN MANY SMALL GROUPS

Take a moment and list all the groups you belong to—social clubs, sports teams, study groups, work groups, and so on. You will probably find that you have created a fairly long list. This is not surprising because we are increasingly creating groups to help us manage our work and personal lives. The use of small groups or work teams in business organizations is on the rise. Given the complexities of organizational life, business strategies such as dispersing decision making and increasing flexibility have emphasized the use of teams (Scott, 1999). Because small groups play an increasing role in business and per-