Member Roles: Participating Effectively in Your Group

5

LEARNING OUTCOMES

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define the terms "goal" and "role."
- Define the terms "task goal" and "social goal."
- Describe the difference between a task goal and a social goal.
- Define the terms "task roles" and "social roles."
- Name the six helpful task roles that promote task completion.
- Describe the task skills that define each of the six task roles.
- Name the six helpful social roles that promote social cohesion.
- Describe the social skills that define each of the six social roles.
- Name and describe six harmful group member roles.

"The way a team plays as a whole determines its success. You may have the greatest bunch of individual stars in the world, but if they don't play together, the club won't be worth a dime."

—Babe Ruth, baseball Hall of Famer

Introduction

In previous chapters, we explored specific team and individual roles as part of Bjorkquist's experiential model. In this chapter and the next, we will explore general team roles and leadership roles. To begin our study of the roles that members of small groups play within their teams in a general sense, consider Hollywood actors for a moment. As you know, an actor is a person who portrays a particular character in a story. You also know that some actors are better than others, and that great actors often capture the hearts of millions of people with their outstanding performances. Each year in Hollywood, the best actors are rewarded with an Oscar, the top prize for performance in cinema.

Now, those of us who aren't Hollywood actors also play roles, but not the kinds associated with movies, television, or plays. We play various roles in our families and in society. However, we don't really *play* the roles the way an actor does. Rather, we *live* or *fulfill* the roles that family and society require of us. Within our families, for example, we live the role of son or daughter, husband or wife, brother or sister. Beyond our families, we fulfill other roles that are often work-related. For example, we are technicians, nurses, office managers, etc.

Like Hollywood actors, we can do a good job or a poor job in the many roles that we play in society. This book is designed to help you do a better job in the roles that you will fulfill in college, and within the workgroups in your professional life. This chapter, in particular, focuses on the roles associated with effective participation as a member of your team. While winning an Oscar is out of the question here, contributing to the success of your team, earning the respect of your teammates, and enjoying a sense of personal achievement are not.

We will first discuss the relationship between your team's goals and the roles that members must play in order to achieve those goals. We'll then discuss task roles and social roles—the member roles that help a small group get its work done and build relationships among members. We'll conclude with a look at certain actions that are harmful to both team productivity and team unity.

Group Goals and Member Roles

To get a clear understanding of the relationship between goals and roles, let's use the example of a heart transplant operation. The goal of the operation is to remove an unhealthy heart and replace it with a healthy one. To accomplish this goal, several individuals must successfully fulfill very different roles. The surgeon fulfills one role, the anesthesiologist fulfills

another, and a nurse fulfills yet another. Together they must play their respective roles in order to achieve a successful transplant operation.

All teams, large or small, set goals and assign members to fulfill roles that will achieve their goals. A **role** is a set of expectations associated with particular responsibilities within a society or group. For instance, society has a different set of expectations for each of the heart transplant team members in our example above. Society also has sets of expectations for parents, teachers, students, and others as they fulfill their roles.

The expectations that society has for a particular role amount to a set of rules for properly fulfilling that role. Nurses, for example, are expected to live up to the standards that their profession has set for the benefit of society. Because roles are really sets of rules for behaviour, it's natural for us to judge the performance of other people in their roles.

When someone successfully performs a particular role, we commend that person. In contrast, when people fail to live up to the expectations of a role, we find fault with their performance. In the first case, the individual met society's expectations. In the second case, the individual did not.

In our society, then, we have good nurses, parents, teachers, and students who meet the expectations associated with their roles. Unfortunately, we also have bad nurses, parents, teachers, and students who don't fulfill our expectations. As we will see in the following sections, there are roles that help small groups achieve their goals, and there are roles that hinder, or prevent, team success. In other words, small-group members—just like doctors, nurses, parents, and Hollywood actors—can be good or bad at what they do.
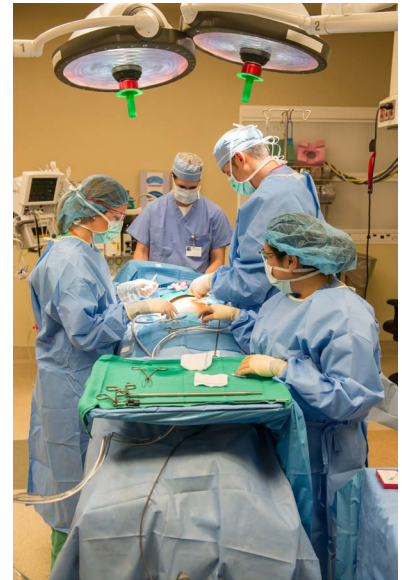
role
a set of expectations associated with a particular responsibility

Helpful and Harmful Roles

There are a number of helpful roles that you as a member of a small group should fulfill within your team, and there are some harmful roles that you should avoid. In the rest of this chapter, we'll describe regular *member roles* that you should fulfill within your team to help make it functional and successful. In Chapter 6, we'll focus on special *leadership roles* that are essential for your team's success. In both chapters, we'll describe specific skills that you can and should develop to help your team reach its goals.

Task and Social Goals

Every small group or team has two basic goals. The first is the **task goal**, the goal of getting the job done. The second is the **social goal**, the goal of building good relationships among group members. When a group functions as a team, members are productive. They get the job done. In addition, members respect one another and they develop a sense of unity or cohesion. For example, the team of nurses who not only get the job done but also respect one another is a team that functions effectively. They are a successful team because they are both productive and cohesive.

task goal
the goal of getting the job done

social goal
the goal of building good relationships among group members

Task and Social Roles

task roles
member roles that enable a group to get a task done

social roles
member roles that help build and maintain a cohesive team

task skills
the distinctive skills that characterize each of the six task roles

social skills
the distinctive skills that characterize each of the six social roles

Task roles are roles that you can play on your team to help your group achieve its task goals. The successful use of these roles within your group will make your team productive. Similarly, **social roles** are roles that you can play within your group to help your team achieve its social goals. As you will see shortly, each role is characterized by a distinctive skill that defines that role. The skills directed at task completion are called **task skills**, and those directed at social development are called **social skills**. The key to becoming an excellent team player is to fulfill your task and social roles by skillfully taking the appropriate actions at the appropriate time.[1]

To help you become an excellent team player, we'll first look at the six helpful roles that you can play to assist your team with task completion. After that, we'll examine the six roles that you can play within your team to build and maintain good relationships among members. Lastly, we'll look at six harmful roles that excellent team players manage to avoid.

Six Helpful Task Roles

The helpful task skills associated with the six task roles of an effective group member include sharing your ideas, asking others for their thoughts, checking to see that everyone understands an issue, summarizing the progress of your group, suggesting directions that your group might take, and motivating members to get the job done. Let's look at each of the six roles that employ these skills to promote task completion. To help you remember these roles, we've given each one a memory-friendly name.

1. The Idea Sharer

Idea Sharer
member who is skilled at sharing ideas about team tasks with other team members

Effective group members contribute constructively to group discussions. The **Idea Sharer** is the member who is skilled at sharing ideas about team tasks with other team members and does so regularly. In doing so, this member helps the team achieve its task goals. The Idea Sharer is essential for team success, and the most successful teams are those in which all members are Idea Sharers. When a group has many ideas, it has more possibilities for task success. To help your team succeed, share your ideas regularly with your group.

2. The Idea Seeker

Idea Seeker
member who is skilled at asking others what they think about a given task

Effective group members want to hear what others have to say about an issue, and they seek the opinions and views of their teammates. The **Idea Seeker** is the member who is skilled at asking others what they think about a given task. Idea

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1 The concepts of task roles and social roles have a long history. Benne and Sheats (1948, pp. 41–49) were among the first to discuss them, identifying 13 task roles, 8 social roles, and 8 harmful roles.

Seekers are effective group members because they consciously seek information and opinions from other members of the group. If you want your team to succeed, then regularly ask others for their ideas.

3. The Comprehension Checker

Effective group members take the necessary steps to check that all members understand one another regarding group tasks. If group members are interpreting things differently, communication will fail and the team will waste time in confusion and misunderstanding. The **Comprehension Checker** is the team member who is skilled at ensuring that the group has a common understanding of an issue or task. To ensure that members of your team are on the same page, check comprehension regularly. In Chapter 9, we'll examine several communication skills that will assist you when you serve as the Comprehension Checker on your team.

Comprehension Checker
member who is skilled at ensuring that the group has a common understanding of an issue or task

4. The Progress Summarizer

Often when groups work on their tasks, members get confused and head in different directions. This, of course, can be frustrating and counterproductive. It is the **Progress Summarizer** who gets the group to stop and reflect on the progress being made. This member is skilled at compiling the various ideas and decisions of the group into a brief and clear summary. Summarizing progress is a useful way of getting everyone back on track. If you regularly help your team to summarize its progress, you will make a valuable contribution to its success.

Progress Summarizer
member who gets the group to stop and reflect on the progress being made

5. The Direction Suggester

When trying to achieve their task goals, teams often find themselves wondering what to do. They just don't know how to proceed. The **Direction Suggester** is the team member who is skilled at making constructive suggestions about the options that the team has at a given time. This member helps the team by suggesting a course of action to take. You can contribute to your team's success by suggesting that it proceed in one way instead of another to achieve its task goals. By doing so, you'll help give direction to your team as it pursues its goals.

Direction Suggester
member who is skilled at making constructive suggestions about the options that the team has at a given time

6. The Group Motivator

Among other things, effective group members are motivators. They are the "movers and shakers" within the team. When undertaking a task, group members often have different levels of interest with respect to that task. In addition, it's not unusual for team members to get sidetracked. The **Group Motivator** is the member who is skilled at encouraging others to direct their energy to completing the task at hand. Groups form in order to complete tasks, and you can make a major contribution to your team's success by constructively motivating others to complete your team's tasks.

Group Motivator
member who is skilled at encouraging others to direct their energy to completing the task at hand

When members of your team regularly fulfill all six task roles described in this section and outlined in Table 5.1, your team will be well on its way to success. As an individual, you may feel more comfortable in some roles than in others. This experience is quite common. To become a better team player, however, you should regularly do all of the following: share your ideas, seek the opinions of others, check comprehension, summarize progress, suggest directions, and motivate teammates.

TABLE 5.1   Six Helpful Task Roles: Getting the Job Done

The Role	The Skill
Idea Sharer	Offering own point of view to teammates
Idea Seeker	Asking teammates for their views
Comprehension Checker	Ensuring that everyone understands an issue
Progress Summarizer	Giving summaries of team accomplishments
Direction Suggester	Offering ideas on how the team should proceed
Group Motivator	Encouraging teammates to finish team tasks

Six Helpful Social Roles

Just as there are six roles that help a group accomplish its task goals, so too are there six roles that help a team to achieve its social goals. The social skills that define each of these social roles include encouraging others to participate, supporting them when they do, facilitating communication, observing the group's emotional climate, relieving stress in the group, and mediating conflict when it arises. We'll now examine the six social roles that help a group reach its social goals. Once again, we've used memory-friendly names to label each role.

1.   The Participation Encourager

Participation Encourager
member who is skilled at encouraging all members of the group to contribute to the group's effort

Effective group members encourage others to participate in group discussions and activities. The **Participation Encourager** is the team member who is skilled at encouraging all members of the group to contribute to the group's effort. Frequently, more assertive members of a group take the lead and make decisions for the group. When this happens, less assertive members may feel left out or ignored, and the team's sense of cohesion will suffer. If you encourage all members to participate in a discussion, you will be a powerful influence in your group. Others will understand that you value their opinions and that they have a part to play within your group.

2.   The Participant Supporter

Participant Supporter
member who is skilled at showing support for others when they make a contribution to the work of the team

The best team players support those who make contributions to the team's life. The **Participant Supporter** is the team member who is skilled at showing support for others when they make a contribution to the work of the team. A little praise,

for example, can go a long way in motivating members to share their ideas and opinions. It enhances self-esteem, strengthens the sense of belonging, and adds to the team's cohesiveness. By supporting others when they share their thoughts, you contribute to the achievement of your team's social goals.

3.   The Communication Facilitator

Effective group members facilitate the communication of feelings within the team. Earlier, we saw that the Comprehension Checker works to ensure that members understand their jobs. In that case, communication skills are directed at task accomplishment. Here, we see communication skills being directed toward the group's social dimension. The **Communication Facilitator** is the member who uses communication skills to build good relationships among members of the team. Communication Facilitators focus on the emotions and mood of the group in order to foster positive feelings among members. In so doing, they promote their team's social goals. You will contribute to a positive team spirit in your group when you facilitate the communication of feelings.

Communication Facilitator
member who uses communication skills to build good relationships among members of the team

4.   The Process Observer

Effective group members regularly observe the dynamics within their group with a view to strengthening relationships among members. The **Process Observer** is the team member who is skilled at noting the emotional interactions among members as the group goes about its work. When hostility is observed, for example, this member can help to defuse a potentially harmful situation. When good vibes are observed, the Process Observer will reinforce them with appropriate words and actions. By being attentive to your team's emotional dynamics, you can be a strong influence in the creation of a supportive, trusting environment.

Process Observer
member who is skilled at noting the emotional interactions among members as the group goes about its work

5.   The Stress Reliever

Excellent team players have, among other things, a calming effect on their teams. It's inevitable that people working together will experience stress and tension. Team success or failure depends, to a large degree, on the team's ability to manage this stress effectively. The **Stress Reliever** is the team member who is skilled at taking steps to reduce the emotional tensions that groups inevitably experience. A reminder to lighten up, an appropriate joke, or a call for a time-out are often enough to relieve stress. When your team gets stressed, you will make a valuable contribution to team spirit by being a Stress Reliever.

Stress Reliever
member who is skilled at taking steps to reduce the emotional tensions that groups inevitably experience

6.   The Conflict Mediator

Effective group members are ready and willing to help manage interpersonal conflict in constructive ways. The **Conflict Mediator** is the group member who is skilled at using the best conflict management strategies to assist members in dealing with the inevitable conflicts that arise among members of a group. The Conflict Mediator may, for example, use tactful private conversations with individuals

Conflict Mediator
member who is skilled at using the best conflict management strategies to assist members in dealing with inevitable conflicts that arise between and among members of a group

to deal with interpersonal conflicts. Or, this member may employ confrontation strategies with the whole group present to achieve a healthy resolution of a dispute. One of the most important things that you can do for your group is help mediate conflict when it arises. Conflict resolution is the subject of Chapter 10. There, among other things, we'll describe both peer and professional mediation strategies in detail.

Each of the six roles described above and outlined in Table 5.2 promotes a positive emotional environment within a team. As with task roles, you may feel more comfortable playing one role than another. However, good team players are ready and willing to use all the skills associated with the six social roles whenever needed. Always encourage others to participate, support them when they do, facilitate the communication of feelings, consciously observe the dynamics of your group, contribute to stress relief, and assist in mediating conflicts.

> *"Good teams become great ones when the members trust each other enough to surrender the me for the we."*
> —Phil Jackson, former basketball coach and player

Six Harmful Group Member Roles

Successful teams have members who fulfill their task roles and their social roles by skillfully using the six task skills and the six social skills that we described above. Unfortunately, in many groups this is not the case. All too often, group members engage in counterproductive behaviours that result in poor group performance and strained relationships. These counterproductive actions are harmful because they prevent a group from functioning effectively. A number of harmful group member roles have been identified. Let's take a look at six that occur fairly frequently.[2]

TABLE 5.2   Six Helpful Social Roles: Building the Team

The Role	The Skill
Participation Encourager	Inviting teammates to be socially involved
Participant Supporter	Showing appreciation for the efforts of others
Communication Facilitator	Encouraging teammates to share their feelings
Process Observer	Noting the social interactions among teammates
Stress Reliever	Taking steps to reduce emotional tension
Conflict Mediator	Using conflict management strategies

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2   As noted in footnote 1, Benne and Sheats identified eight dysfunctional roles. We discuss six harmful roles, using popular labels for each.

1.   The Free Rider

Free Riders don't contribute to the group's effort but expect to benefit from the group's work. They take a "free ride" on the work of others in the group. In school, for example, Free Riders will not do their share of the group project, but they will expect to get the same grade as everyone else on the project team. This is unfair, of course, and often leads to hard feelings, which affect the team's cohesiveness. If Free Riders succeed, other members will be less likely to work hard on the group's next project. Consequently, group productivity declines. Effective team members carry their fair share of the load and avoid free riding. Free Riders may try to take a free ride on the work of others because of laziness, lack of commitment, overwork in other areas of life, or personal problems.

Healthy teams reduce the chances of free riding by establishing rules of conduct for the group, by stating clearly the penalties for violating those rules, and by enforcing the rules within the team. These expectations and penalties are often included in the team's written record, although they don't have to be. The key to preventing free riding lies in thorough and early discussion of the subject among all members of the group.

2.   The Dominator

Dominators are at the opposite end of the contribution scale from the Free Rider. They take on excessive amounts of work, denying other members the opportunity to make their own contributions. Dominators often assume authority and make decisions independently. They may behave this way out of a need to control others or to prove themselves in the group. Unfortunately, they may offend others, who feel they are not respected for what they can and want to do on the team. In contrast to other members, Free Riders are happy to have a Dominator in the group.

3.   The Rescuer

Rescuers are similar to Dominators in that they do an excessive amount of work, offer solutions prematurely, and make decisions independently. They do this particularly when the group is experiencing difficulties. They want to rescue the group from perceived disaster. The Rescuer is different from the Dominator in that the Rescuer is genuinely interested in the group. The Rescuer wants the team to be successful and tries to rescue the team out of concern for it. In other words, the Rescuer's motivation is not self-interest but group interest. Rescuers may, however, believe that they are more competent than others and that it is up to them to save the team. Again, such behaviour can damage team cohesiveness and, ultimately, be counterproductive.

Rescuers, like Dominators, must be confronted. While they have the group's best interests at heart, their actions are not consistent with healthy group dynamics. The energy of the Rescuer needs to be directed toward cooperative solutions to problems that the group faces. If the group is experiencing difficulties, everyone on the team needs to be involved in solving the problems. The group can't leave it

Free Rider
member who does not contribute to the group's effort but expects to benefit from the group's work

Dominator
member who takes on excessive amounts of work to satisfy personal needs, denying other members the opportunity to make their own contributions

Rescuer
member who does an excessive amount of work, offers solutions prematurely, and makes decisions independently in order to save the group from failure

to just one person to save the day. Once again, effective teams reduce or eliminate the need for Rescuers by ensuring that group norms (rules) foster accountability, cooperation, and mutual respect.

4. The Distracter

Distracter
member who takes the group away from its task using a variety of techniques such as excessive talking about unrelated topics

Distracters take the group away from its task using a variety of techniques. For example, the Distracter may talk excessively, especially on irrelevant topics (the talker), or may use humour to distract, incessantly cracking jokes (the clown). While an appropriate use of humour can be beneficial in helping to relieve stress in a group, it can also be harmful when used excessively and for other purposes. The Distracter may be trying to satisfy personal needs, or may have a need for attention, but their attempts to fulfill those needs diminish the team's effectiveness.

Healthy groups confront Distracters to ensure that the group gets its work done efficiently. As with other problem behaviours, the solution lies in group members discussing their expectations, agreeing on what behaviours are acceptable, and insisting on adherence to established norms. In order for a team to succeed, the Distracter has to give up the penchant for attention just as others have to give up things that they would like to do. Group success almost always requires some individual self-sacrifice.

5. The Cynic

Cynic
member who is pessimistic and does not trust others, individually or in groups

Cynics may not trust others, individually or in groups. They may believe that the group's plans won't work, that some members of the group will not carry their weight, or that group work in general is a waste of time. For the Cynic, nothing holds promise of success. Full of pessimism, Cynics regularly project their negativity onto new experiences, including those of the group. This negativity can affect other members and lead to the general view that the team's efforts are not worth it. Cynicism is detrimental, both to a team's task accomplishment and to its social development.

Because the Cynic's pessimism may derive from negative life experiences that have impacted their outlook on life, it may be particularly difficult to alter the Cynic's behaviour. With other dysfunctional behaviours, one can confront, establish rules and penalties for, and attempt to alter counterproductive behaviour through rewards and punishments. With the Cynic, these strategies may be less effective. Nevertheless, they should be employed with the hope of positive change. In addition, group members should counter the negativity of the Cynic with optimistic attitudes and actions. Just as pessimism can be infectious, so too can optimism. It is the positive attitudes of the members of the team and the larger group that will help to counterbalance the negativity of the Cynic.

6. The Aggressor

Aggressor
member who intimidates other group members, makes negative judgments about them, and seeks unhealthy confrontation

Aggressors intimidate other group members, make negative judgments about them, and seek unhealthy confrontation. In some cases, the Aggressor may have a real or imagined grievance against other members of the group and behave aggressively as

a result. In other instances, the anger this member feels for people outside the group may be directed toward group members. Aggressors run the range from the more subtle passive-aggressive type to the less subtle active-aggressive type. Regardless of the degree of aggression and the reason for it, the intimidation experienced by group members will reduce productivity and overall cohesion. Members may bond in a united defence against the Aggressor, but such cohesiveness is based on an unhealthy social situation that needs to be corrected.

The Aggressor is probably the most difficult person to deal with in group life. If one appears in your group, this member may have to be removed. Very few of us will tolerate this type of presence. If the member doesn't leave, it is very likely the group will not be able to function. The passive-aggressive approach from this type of member is more common in groups. With this type of aggression, constructive confrontation is in order. In Chapter 10, we will examine strategies, such as confrontation, that will help you deal with members who try to intimidate others. It's unfortunate, but the reality is that there are difficult people in small groups just as there are such people in virtually all other areas of our lives. Fortunately, there are some helpful strategies available for dealing with difficult people.

In the previous section, we described six harmful roles that some people play within small groups (also outlined below in Table 5.3). The roles of the Free Rider, the Dominator, the Rescuer, the Distracter, the Cynic, and the Aggressor are, obviously, roles that team players avoid. In contrast, effective team members use the six task skills and the six social skills described earlier to contribute to the success of their groups. Team players avoid the harmful roles and cooperate with others to eliminate the dysfunctional behaviours associated with those roles. Eliminating dysfunctional behaviour is one of the most challenging aspects of working with people in groups. Since group work is essential in our world, we need to learn how to function effectively within groups.

> *"Every individual matters. Every individual has a role to play. Every individual makes a difference."*
> —Jane Goodall, researcher and primatologist

TABLE 5.3   Six Harmful Group Member Roles: Harming Team Performance

The Role	The Action
Free Rider	Contributes little but wants team benefits
Dominator	Takes over to satisfy personal needs
Rescuer	Takes over to save the team from perceived disaster
Distracter	Does things that get the team off-track
Cynic	Makes negative comments that discourage others
Aggressor	Acts aggressively toward teammates

CHAPTER SUMMARY

We opened this chapter by noting the importance of goals and roles within society. In order to achieve its goals, society expects its members to fulfill their respective roles. We also saw that small groups succeed at achieving their task goals and social goals when members fulfill their respective roles. Within both societies and small groups, people can fulfill their roles effectively or not. We noted that there are both helpful and harmful roles within society and within small groups.

Next, we described the six helpful roles that contribute to the achievement of a group's task goals. These roles are those of the Idea Sharer, the Idea Seeker, the Comprehension Checker, the Progress Summarizer, the Direction Suggester, and the Group Motivator. With respect to the achievement of social goals, we described the roles of the Participation Encourager, the Participant Supporter, the Communication Facilitator, the Process Observer, the Stress Reliever, and the Conflict Mediator. We emphasized the fact that excellent team players are ready to use all the skills associated with these roles as circumstances require.

Finally, we described six harmful roles that can cause groups to be less productive and less cohesive. The roles of the Free Rider, the Dominator, the Rescuer, the Distracter, the Cynic, and the Aggressor are to be avoided. In each case, we offered some preliminary thoughts on how group members can deal with these dysfunctional behaviours when they occur. One way to deal with and address dysfunctional behaviours is to be an effective leader. In the next chapter, we will examine what it takes to be a good leader.

KEY TERMS

Aggressor, 70
Communication Facilitator, 67
Comprehension Checker, 65
Conflict Mediator, 67
Cynic, 70
Direction Suggester, 65
Distracter, 70
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social skills, 64
Stress Reliever, 67
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task roles, 64
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MASTERING THE MATERIAL

Now that you have read the chapter, use the following guides to ensure that you have mastered the material.

Chapter Questions

1. Define "goal" and "role."

2. Name and define the two basic goals of every group.

   a. The first basic goal is _____.
   Definition:

   b. The second basic goal is _____.
   Definition:

3. The six roles that help a group get the job done are called _____ roles, and the six roles that help a group build good relationships are called _____ roles.

4. List and describe the six helpful task roles.

5. List and describe the six helpful social roles.

6. List and describe the six harmful roles.

Application Questions

1. Create a chart, diagram, or other visual tool identifying each of your team members' contributions to the team by choosing the best role (or roles) to describe them. Then, label the role as either helpful or harmful.

2. Referring to the visual tool you created in Question 1, describe any harmful roles or behaviours that already exist or are starting to appear within your team. This information will assist you later in the program.

Reflection Questions

1. Of all the roles, which one(s) do you tend to play? Identify at least one of each:
   a. one helpful task role
   b. one helpful social role
   c. one harmful role
2. Reflect on a time in the past when you dealt with a team member who played one or more of the harmful roles. What could you do differently this time if you started to see the same behaviours within your current school or work team?

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