Working with Groups

Have you ever struggled to get a group of friends to decide where to go out to eat, or to get your family to decide where to go on vacation? If it’s a challenge to make decisions among a group you know and love, imagine the challenge of working with a group of relative strangers! Most of us have situations where we have to work with others – perhaps with a committee at work, or as a member of a board. Here are a few strategies to make working with groups a bit easier.

First, take time to get to know one another. One of the main factors in working effectively with others is trust. And the better we know each other, the more we develop trust. So at the very least, include time for informal conversations before and after meetings. Or consider holding some get-acquainted activities or ice-breakers as part of the meeting agenda.

Next, understand that people have different values, beliefs, and personality styles. People of a younger generation may look at the world differently from someone who is older. And this may not be entirely because of the number of years they lived, but more a function of world events and societal conditions that they have experienced. Some people are more introverted, while others are more outgoing. And some make their decisions based on fact and logic, while others are more concerned with how that decision will impact the people involved.

Some might think “Wouldn’t it be easier to just work with people who are more like ourselves?” The truth is that it might be easier, but your end result is likely to be poorer because you will have failed to consider a variety of perspectives. For example, if you have a lot of older people in a group, you might forget to utilize social media to promote an upcoming event. The most effective teams have people from a variety of backgrounds represented.

When you have people with different values and personalities working together, you may see some conflict arise. But we should realize that some conflict is actually productive. It means your group is looking at a variety of perspectives before coming to a decision. The trick is to keep conflict from escalating and becoming personal. One way to help with this is to set ground rules for meetings. Ground rules could include things like having only one person talks at a time, treating others with respect, and considering all ideas as valid. Then when things start to get tense, you can remind everyone of the ground rules to get back on track.
Finally, if you are working with an organized group such as a committee or board, be sure you have an agenda for your meetings and share the agenda with the group. This helps keep people focused on the topic being covered and moves the meeting along.