

What Is a Group?

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how groups come to exist in the workplace, and the different types of groups that can form. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Defining Groups

We form self-identities through our communication with others, and much of that interaction occurs in **agroup** context. A group may be defined as three or more individuals who affiliate, interact, or cooperate in a familial, social, or work context. Group communication thus involves the exchange of information with those who are alike culturally, linguistically, and/or geographically.

Group members may be known by their symbols, such as patches and insignia on a military uniform, or they be known by their proximity to one another. They may also be known by their use of specialized language or jargon.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Someone in information technology may use the term "server" in reference to the Internet, whereas someone in the food service industry may use "server" to refer to the worker who takes customer orders in a restaurant.

Regardless of how the group defines itself, and regardless of the extent to which its borders are porous or permeable, a group recognizes itself as a group. Humans naturally make groups a part of their context or environment, and these groups then develop norms that contribute to their overall definition.

Group norms are customs, standards, and behavioral expectations that emerge as a group forms.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you post an update every day on your Facebook page and your friends stop by to post on your wall and comment, not posting for a week will violate a group norm. They will wonder if you are sick or in the hospital where you have no access to a computer to keep them updated. If, however, you only post once a week, the group will come to naturally expect your customary post.

Norms involve expectations that are self- and group-imposed and that often arise as groups form and develop.



TERMS TO KNOW

Group

Three or more individuals who affiliate, interact, or cooperate in a familial, social, or work context.

Group Communication

Communication that occurs between a small number of people (typically three to eight).

Group Norms

Customs, standards, and behavioral expectations that emerge as a group forms.

2. Formation of Groups

As a skilled business communicator, learning more about groups, group dynamics, management, and leadership will serve you well. Some groups may be assembled at work to solve problems, and once the challenge has been resolved, they dissolve into previous or yet-to-be-determined groups.

Functional groups like this may be immediately familiar to you.

IN CONTEXT

Let's say you take a class in sociology from a professor of sociology, who is a member of the discipline of sociology. To be a member of a discipline is to be a disciple and adhere to a common framework for viewing the world. Disciplines involve a common set of theories that explain the world around us, as well as terms to explain those theories, and have grown to reflect the advance of human knowledge.

Compared to your sociology instructor, your physics instructor may see the world from a completely different perspective. Still, both may be members of divisions or schools, dedicated to teaching or research, and come together under the large group heading we know as the university.

In business, we may have marketing experts who are members of the marketing department, who perceive their tasks differently from a member of the sales staff or someone in accounting. You may work in the mailroom, and the mailroom staff is a group in itself, both distinct from and interconnected with the larger organization.

Groups and teams are an important part of business communication. Relationships are part of any group, and can be described in terms of status, power, and control, as well as role, function, or viewpoint.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Within a family, the ties that bind you together may be common experiences, collaborative efforts, and even pain and suffering. The birth process may forge a relationship between mother and child, but it also may not. An adoption may transform a family.

Likewise, in a business context, relationships are formed through communication across time, and often share a common history, set of values, and set of beliefs about the world.

➞ **EXAMPLE** An idea may bring professionals together, as they collaborate on a project they have taken from the drawing board and brought into the real world. Work groups or teams may have challenges, rivalries, and even "growing pains" as a product is developed, adjusted, adapted, and transformed.

Struggles are a part of relationships, both in families and business, and form a common history of shared challenges overcome through effort and hard work. In the same way, your family may provide a place for you at the table and meet your basic needs, but they also may not meet other needs.

If you grow to understand yourself and your place in a way that challenges group norms, you will be able to choose which parts of your life to share and to withhold in different groups, and to choose where to seek acceptance, affection, and control.

3. Primary and Secondary Groups

There are fundamentally two types of groups that can be observed in many contexts, from church to school, family to work:

- Primary groups
- Secondary groups



Self and Social Awareness: Skill Reflect

Do you know which primary and secondary groups you belong to? Consider how your groups impact your thoughts and actions. How do you think others view you knowing you are part of these groups?

The hierarchy denotes the degree to which the group(s) meet your interpersonal needs. Primary groups meet most, if not all, of one's needs; secondary groups meet some, but not all, of one's needs. Secondary groups often include work groups, where the goal is to complete a task or solve a problem.

➞ **EXAMPLE** If you are a member of the sales department, your purpose is to sell.

Secondary groups may meet your need for professional acceptance and celebration of your success, but they may not meet your need for understanding and sharing on a personal level. Family members may understand you in ways that your coworkers cannot, and vice versa.

But in terms of problem solving, work groups can accomplish more than individuals can. People, each of whom have specialized skills, talents, experience, or education, come together in new combinations with new challenges and find new perspectives to create unique approaches that they themselves would not have formulated alone.

4. Group Subdivisions

As you just learned, a group, by definition, includes at least three people. However, many groups are larger than that and may encompass additional groups within them. We can thus categorize groups in terms of their size and complexity.

IN CONTEXT

When we discuss demographic groups as part of a market study, we may focus on large numbers of individuals that share common characteristics. If you are the producer of an ecologically innovative car and know your customers have an average of four members in their families, you may discuss developing a new model with additional seats.

While the target audience is a group, car customers don't relate to each other as a unified whole. Even if they form car clubs and have regional gatherings, a newsletter, and competitions at their local race tracks each year, they still subdivide the overall community of car owners into smaller groups.

The larger the group grows, the more likely it is to subdivide into **microgroups**, or small, independent groups that have a link, affiliation, or association with a larger group.



DID YOU KNOW

Analysis of these microgroups is increasingly a point of study as the Internet allows individuals to join people of similar mind or habit to share virtually anything across time and distance.



TERM TO KNOW

Microgroup

A small, independent group that has a link, affiliation, or association with a larger group.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **groups are defined** as three or more people who affiliate, interact, or cooperate with one another according to a set of norms that are developed by the group itself. Understanding how and why **group formation** occurs will make you a more skilled business communicator. You also learned that groups are primarily categorized as **primary or secondary groups**. The categorization depends on the degree to which a group meets its members' interpersonal needs. Larger groups may also contain **subdivisions** known as microgroups, or smaller groups that are affiliated with the larger one.

Best of luck in your learning!

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