

Guidelines – Supporting intercultural group work

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Introduction

Many work processes in industry and business today are cross-border, take place in multinational, diverse teams and are often virtual.¹ Intercultural collaboration in groups in a university context prepares students specifically for these challenges. In such multilingual and culturally diverse teams, different perspectives come together – marked by factors such as age, gender, ethnic origin, status, specialism or working style.² This makes it clear that one's own, often unconscious understanding of normal is not naturally shared by everyone else. This can cause uncertainty.³ While some students perceive working in diverse teams as an exciting and enriching experience, others find it challenging and exhausting. When you accompany intercultural group work, it is important to notice these different reactions and deal with them constructively. In this context, guided reflection in a protected environment plays a key role. The following tips are intended to help you to analyse group processes. The following tips are designed and can also be used as prompts to encourage students to reflect on their experiences.

Tip: *When you recognise challenges in group processes, point out key criteria for successful collaboration such as described in the following.. Encourage team members to reflect on their perspectives and formulate constructive requests for change. Refrain from making hasty judgements, but rather give students the opportunity to make up their own minds.*



Phases of teamwork

When thinking about processes in various teams, it can be worthwhile to consider Bruce Tuckmann's phase model of team development⁴. According to Tuckmann, every group of people entrusted with jointly handling a task (Aufgabe) goes through the telling (bezeichnend) phases Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing. While team members are often very polite, cautious, and wait-and-see-ish when starting to work together, it is completely normal for different approaches to be represented more confidently and for solutions to be negotiated constructively at other times before a common flow is achieved and the output of the group exceeds the input invested.

Tip: Encourage your team to see disruptions as an opportunity for necessary negotiation processes. Support this process through constructive communication. Actively support the group in developing a way of working together. Take time at the beginning of a project work phase to create a stable basis for collaboration with the team members. Support them in developing a provisional but flexible common understanding of the tasks (Aufgabe), communication rules and role allocation.



IMAGE FROM FREEPIK

Relationship versus problem orientation⁵

It should be noted that many people first need time to get to know each other and build up trust before they actively participate in the group work. Others, however, need little more than the names of the team members to get straight to the task (Aufgabe).

This is why it is important to consciously incorporate introductions and moments of socialising – and even a bit of fun while working.. This can be a challenge, especially in a virtual context. It pays off, though: A pleasant group atmosphere has a positive effect on motivation and the willingness to make an effort, which ultimately leads to better work results.

Tip: Pay attention to the dynamics in the team. Encourage team members to deal with distractions or digressions that are not directly related to the problem (Aufgabe) at hand in a flexible manner. Help the team to keep their calm and, if necessary, take friendly countermeasures to keep the focus on the joint work.



IMAGE FROM FREEPIK

Indirect versus direct communication⁶

Some people express their thoughts directly and explicitly, while others are more context-oriented and express their opinions more cautiously or indirectly. It is worth asking quieter team members for their opinion or contribution in a friendly yet firm manner. The so-called power sharing as a communicative process not only attends to a positive working atmosphere. It increases team performance too.⁷

Tip: *Using visuals and written summaries of agreements and results can help to ensure a common working basis. Encourage team members to involve more reserved, private, or quiet people in the work process in a friendly yet firm manner. Make sure that all team members regularly check with the others if there is anything that needs clarification.*



IMAGE FROM FREEPIK

Feedback

Feedback loops during teamwork are important. Unfortunately, there is no universal way to give feedback. What was meant to be constructive by one person may be perceived as destructive by another. In many cultural contexts, no clear distinction is made between factual and personal criticism. The different communication styles – direct or indirect – also play a role here. It can be useful to always consider the relationship level, and to plan regular feedforward rounds⁸. This way, you not only react to past conduct, but also shape the best possible future together.

Tip: *Group members should endeavour to create a team culture of encouragement. Lead by example and do as you say when guiding group work..Focus on what works well. General questions (such as: How are you? What do you need? What would you like to discuss at the next meeting?) encourage open dialogue.*

Explain to the group members that criticism needs to be expressed in a clear-headed, factual, and objective way that facilitates sustainable team building. Sweeping attacks on everyone must be avoided, and clear priorities need to be set. Point out that a one-to-one conversation is sometimes the better way to discuss sensitive issues.

Last but not least: Make yourself accessible for objective feedback. This is the only way you can learn.

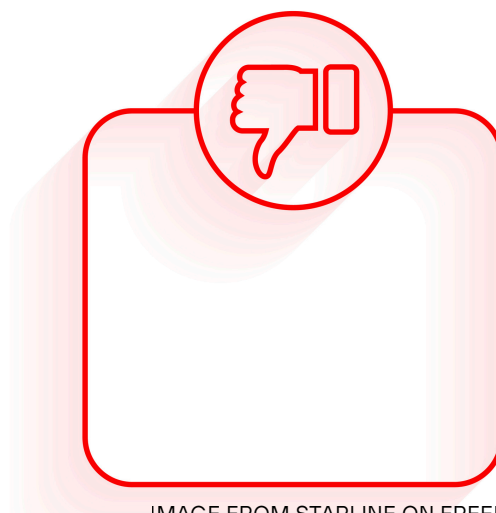
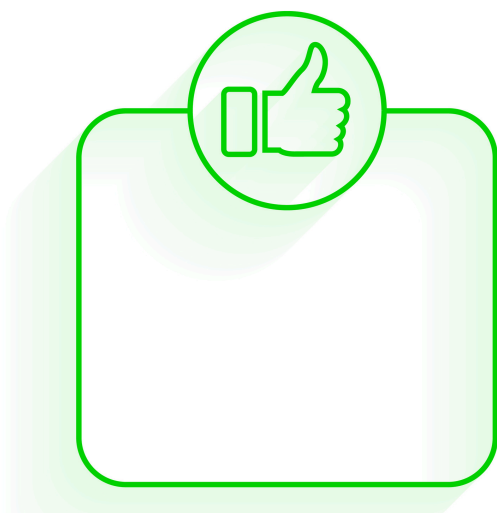


IMAGE FROM STARLINE ON FREEPIK

Differing language proficiency levels

Differing language proficiency levels can lead to an unwanted power imbalance that hinders work processes⁹. Be aware of the challenges that people face when communicating in a foreign language. Encourage group members to recognise these challenges. Whose knowledge of English, French or Chinese is sufficient to spontaneously explain photosynthesis, climate change or Kant's imperative?!? Caution against the widespread prejudice that equates seemingly poor language skills with a lack of professional competence.

Tip: Make sure that all group members understand the importance of language when working together. Ask them to speak more slowly and use plain language that is easily understood if necessary. Do not paraphrase when repeating a sentence that has not been understood. This often leads to comprehension problems. It is important to listen patiently. Team members need to create a respectful working atmosphere. To this end, they need to ensure that everyone is allowed to express themselves and is heard regardless of language barriers. If you or team members feel uncomfortable talking in a foreign language during group work, look at it as an incentive to improve your own foreign language skills.

IMAGE FROM PIKISUPERSTAR ON FREEPIK



An inclusive mindset

The concept of the *Inner Development Goals*¹⁰ also lists an inclusive mindset as an essential skill that helps us to work together in a purposeful, sustainable, and productive way. Every team member is responsible for ensuring that group processes take place in a safe and respectful environment.

Everyone needs to be able to contribute regardless of their ethnicity, origin, religion, gender, age or physical abilities². There are many good reasons in favour of this, such as altruistic interest, solidarity, social justice to name a few, and notably the positive influence on the teams' performance.

After all, successful and innovative teamwork is based on the principle that *the whole is greater than the sum of its parts*. (Aristotle) Listen to the podcast with Lea Belz on the topic of diversity¹¹ in teamwork in the Moodle course HDA – *Studiertechniken* (study techniques).

Tip: Make the group members realise that we never know in advance who will ultimately make a decisive contribution to solving a problem (*Aufgabe*). Ensure that everyone is heard and that all angles and points of view are included and integrated into the process. Encourage a positive attitude towards the unexpected.



IMAGE FROM FREEPIK

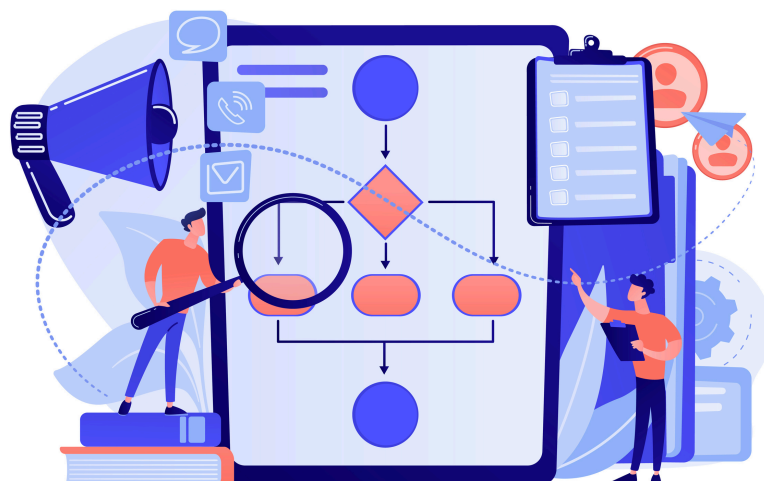
Problem–process relationship: Benefits of a shared mental model^{12,13}

In the course of the work, the team must not only solve the assigned problem (Aufgabe) by themselves. They must create a common understanding of the work processes involved too: How often do we want to meet? Where do we start? Who does what? This requires that positive and trusting relationships be established to work together successfully. Please note that individual ideas must be actively and communicatively brought together in the sense of a shared mental model in order to harmonise expectations.

Tip: *The team needs to pay attention to what the interaction is currently about: the problem (Aufgabe), the work process or the psycho-social well-being of individual persons?*

The group members need to take the time to discuss their concerns. Point out that the process can be steered through constructive communication. Encourage the group members to find compromises together and reach a consensus. Again, visuals and securing results can help to create a common basis. In addition, communication rules such as clear addressing (“Could You, Max, please ...”), confirmations (“YES, let’s do it this way ...”) and the appreciation of objections and fears (“Does everyone agree with the chosen option?”) are useful.¹³

IMAGEFROM VECTORJUICE ON FREPIK



Project management and facilitation (Moderation)

Important roles during teamwork are project management and team facilitation. While project management is primarily concerned with organisational planning and progress monitoring, a facilitator takes on the communicative leadership of the group process. To do so, the team facilitator considers the above-mentioned problem-, process- and relationship-oriented communication without getting directly involved in the process, discussion etc. themselves. It is not required; however, it can be useful to assign people to specific roles in advance. It is better if each team member feels responsible for both the organisation and the presentation of the group process and is prepared to take action if necessary.

Reflective communication that becomes more professional over time, while remaining flexible enough to react to changing circumstances, helps to overcome uncertainties and foster sustainable relationships.

Tip: *Remind group members to note what they think is needed in the team process right now, such as facilitating the start of group work, inviting discussion, reminding people of tasks, summarising, emphasising current consensus, and acknowledging proposed solutions objectively? Group members must intervene communicatively while maintaining a respectful, appreciative, and inclusive attitude.*

IMAGE FROM STORYSET ON FREEPIK



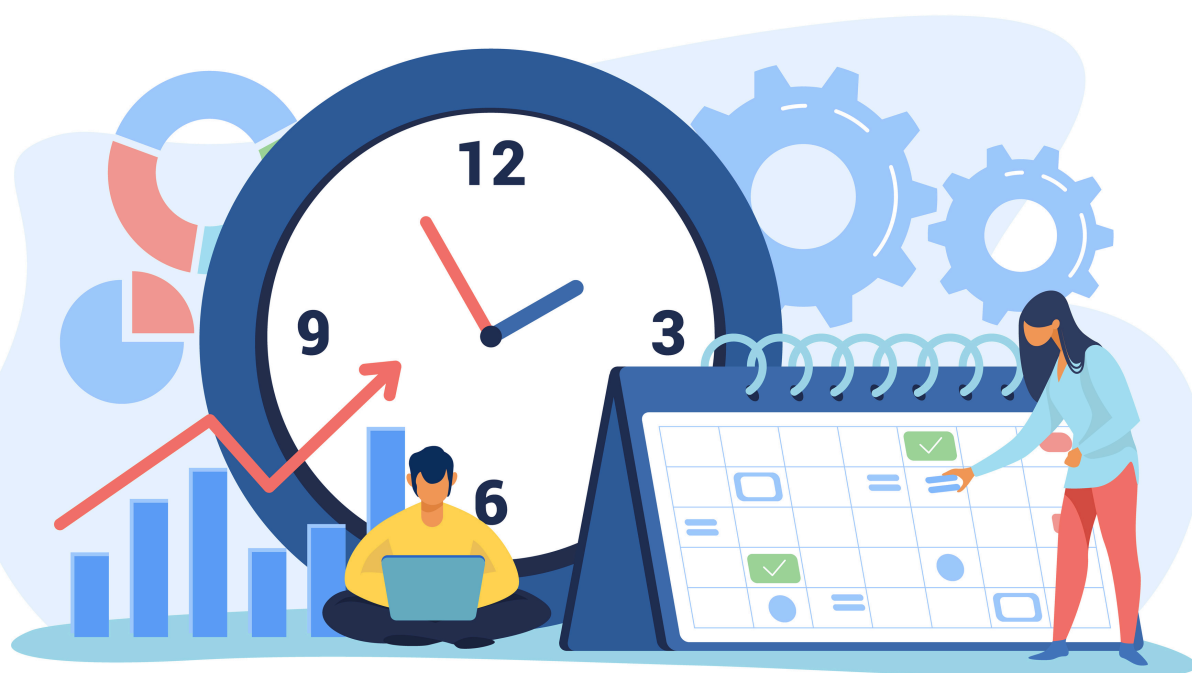
Time management

How work processes are organised depends largely on our understanding of time. Working through a pre-set agenda point by point is not equally suitable for everyone. For teamwork, it is best to work towards a common understanding that also includes time management.

Tip: Ask group members to clarify together how much time they want to set aside in total, including for individual assignments or meetings. Communicate that the team is responsible for keeping an eye on time management.

Gently reminding each other will help. Group members need to record agreements in writing, for example with regard to deadlines and expected results, in order to avoid misunderstandings. Providing opportunities for objections is important and a matter of respect.

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Please note:

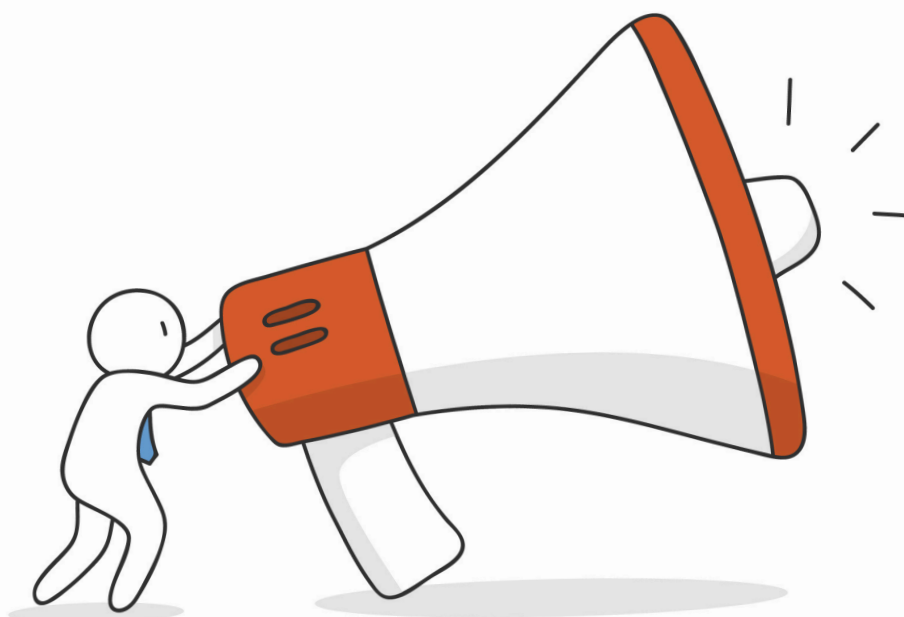
If you have any questions about supporting intercultural group work, please contact [Katrin Koeppl](#) (ZIKK – Centre for Intercultural Competence).

This publication presents tips in a very condensed form. In fact, (supporting) teamwork is about competencies that require not only an openness and a willingness to learn. They require time and a lot of hands-on practice too. To acquire foreign language skills, diversity sensitivity, (intercultural) communicative and personal skills, please note the course programme offered by the [Language Resource Centre \(SPZ\)](#), and the Centre for Intercultural Competence (ZIKK), the [Center for Educational Development and Technology \(HDA\)](#), the [Diversity Education Office \(DEO\)](#), and the [Anti-discrimination Office \(AD-S\)](#).

Material for students

In the Moodle course on [HDA – *Studiertechniken*](#) (study techniques), you will find a series of templates, explainer videos and podcasts aimed at students, which you are welcome to recommend to your students. The basic module on Zeitmanagement (time management) and the specialisation modules on Lernen in Gruppen (learning in groups) and Teamarbeit im Projekt (teamwork in projects) are particularly helpful for the topics mentioned above. If you have any questions or comments, please contact [Polly Oberman](#) (Center for Educational Development and Technology (HDA), Key Competencies unit).

IMAGE FROM DOODER ON FREEPIK



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