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In Mixed Company: Small Group Communication, 4th ed.



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J. Dan Rothwell
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This textbook departs from the usual approach to small group communication by interweaving the central theme of cooperation/collaboration, rather than the more typical approaches of power and competition. While the latter are certainly addressed, cooperation is stressed as more valuable to successful group processes. In doing so, the author challenges the norm in this content area and creates a learning arena long minimized in North American culture. Competition has typically been the norm, from sports, to business, to interpersonal relations, and a male-focused environment. Students entering the workforce at any level are required to become involved in a variety of group settings. Our usual model has been to train students from a competitive perspective, how to become leaders, how to best wield power and influence, and how to recognize and manipulate emergent group roles and processes. While each of these perspectives is examined thoroughly, the current text attempts to construct a more collaborative model for the learning and application of group dynamics. To that end, it succeeds admirably.

Three primary cognate perspectives complete the tapestry of the text. These are the communication competence model, systems theory, and the dynamics of power, all within the small group setting. Bringing these three perspectives into primary conceptual roles, coupled with the central theme of cooperation, provides a unique avenue of insight and study of group dynamics and the complex, varied roles that emerge as a result.

The success of this approach is seen in a variety of conceptual components designed to engage students at both the theoretical and applied levels. Included in these components are: Focus on..., Closer Look, and Second Look. The "Focus on...." (e.g., Culture) allows for a separation of the more theoretical material from the general discussion/instructional information. This encourages student comprehension because the distraction of interweaving complex research design and results does not interfere with the flow and cohesiveness of ideas. "Focus on...." information is set aside but located appropriately in the conceptual area under discussion.

"Closer Look" relates examples of both common and uncommon group interactions to the definitional and theoretical material. The "Closer Look" segments make it seamless for the reader to envision him/herself in the situation described and gain insight and clarity from the coupling of theory and commonplace.

"Second Look" sections are separated from the main body of text to allow students a quick review and application of concepts and definitions. This section takes an abridged "How To" approach. This makes for

easy and efficient reference of the material covered thus far in a given chapter. All three components employ modern and appropriate examples for students to review.

Another strength of this text is the integration of gender and diversity issues into each chapter as appropriate to the theoretical and conceptual concerns under investigation. This process encourages student realization of the enormously complex issues inherent in any small group setting. Gender and diversity issues are treated with a depth of understanding apropos of current social standards. Examples used in "Closer Look" and "Second Look" areas are both poignant and revealing.

While this text has many positive attributes, it under emphasizes at least one key component (although this oversight does not disqualify the text as a viable resource for students and faculty). The key component is the employment of technology in group settings, both as a facilitative means to conduct intragroup interactions, but also as an integrative method to research supportive information via the internet. An additional component to this text could very well suggest technologically supported group interactions as opportunities to engage the very technologies that students can expect to find upon entering the private and professional sectors after graduation. For example, [GDSS](#) (Group Decision Support Systems) are technology driven brainstorming sessions that usually arrive at exceptionally insightful decisions regarding some posed problem or course of action (example 1, example 2). The influence of technology in group settings on group processes, as well as on individuals themselves, cannot be ignored. Technology is certainly not going to go away; if anything, it will become more pervasive in every area of human interaction.

Overall, the Rothwell text is very well designed and thoughtfully applied.

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