

## Dreaded Group Work: The Day Social Workers Learned about Building Relationships from Engineers

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Oh those dreaded words, “*And for your next assignment, a group project*”. Whether in class or field, many of us feel dread and anxiety at the thought of group work. Ironically, as social workers, we are in the business of building relationships and engaging with other people.

Whether in field, MSW courses, or your career, collaboration is how some of the most successful work gets done. Just ask James Goebel, a founder of Menlo Innovations in Ann Arbor. Menlo Innovations is a software engineering firm that has taken group work to a whole new level, building their foundation on relationships and collaborative practices.

As you walk through the glass doors of Menlo Innovations, you are struck with the radically cooperative working environment. Menlo’s office is one big open room, even the outside walls are made of glass. There are no cubicles, dividers, or separate offices that segregate staff from each other. In fact, no one at Menlo is allowed to work alone. Collaboration is the golden standard. At one computer, two people are hashing out a project while across the table four others gesture wildly and discuss their project together. Individual workers fade into these dynamic working groups that accomplish effective solutions for their clients.

James points out that “A group is the sum of the individual relationships with the team.” Building those relationships requires the vulnerability to open up to

group members which can be one of the most difficult tasks. Brene Brown describes vulnerability as “the birthplace of innovation, creativity, and change” and requires “courage (that) starts with showing up and letting ourselves be seen”. (Brown, B.) Not only does vulnerability foster effective work in groups, it is practicing what we preach. We ask our clients to open up all the time and in groups. It is our time to step up to be courageous and vulnerable to effectively work in groups, as vulnerability leads to trust and trust leads to accountability.

### **What to do if your team is not functioning?**

James gives some insight on how to rebuild broken groups that he learned through 5 Dysfunctions of a team, and years of experience consulting and starting his own collaborative company. First he says, “If your team is broken, the team will fight the wrong fight.” First, tell your story and become vulnerable with each other. If not, each of us will apply our own assumptions and biases about our group members. In interpersonal practice, social workers are encouraged to let the client tell their story. How can social workers do this better in group work?

### **How to Repair a Broken Group**

If a project is not going well, look first at how to bolster those relationships and increase vulnerability. Enjoy a fun activity that encourages the team to get to know one another. Ask them to tell their own story so that you do not assume it.

Second, diversity of all types is necessary in a group. By “diversity” I am not only referring to ethnicity or gender. I am referring to the diversity of people from different experiences, personality, and skills. As SW we are often the same Meyers Briggs or have the same skills. We have to try to fill the other roles. For one meeting, assign people to be the time keeper, keep the conversation on track, research data, or any other role that is lacking in your group.

Third, “When furious, get curious.” When groups are malformed and dysfunctioning, our first response is to get angry. Instead, find out what is behind the problem and what makes that other person tick.

Forth, let go of the sacred cow of harmony. In social work, many fear confrontation and hurting one another’s feelings.





This self surveillance has little place in group work. Have an “Elephant in the Room” agenda item at each meeting. Provide the space to discuss all the things that the team is holding back in the name of harmony. Great teams hold each other accountable and on the very best teams, this happens peer-to-peer.

Last, do not assume that a group contract will prevent all your groups woes. Group contracts are a simple artifact if the relationships are not built in the group. Vulnerability, Commitment, Accountability, and of course, Collaboration are more likely to see your group through.

Sources:

<https://www.menloinnovations.com/>

Daring Greatly: How the Courage to Be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead.

