Changing Cooperative Group Behaviors and Norms in the Classroom[1]

The best way to change norms about cooperative group behaviors, and the behaviors themselves is by doing a *moderately* challenging cooperative group task, and then discussing the experience. Lecture and/or class discourse without the actual experience of accomplishing a group task will be of limited value.

Different group tasks have different behaviors that are required; however, effective learning about new behaviors includes the following five steps:

1. New behaviors must be labeled and discussed.
2. Students must learn to recognize when new behaviors occur.
3. Students must be able to use labels and discuss behavior in an *objective* way.
4. Students must have a chance to practice new behaviors.
5. New behaviors should be reinforced when they occur.

A measure of the success of the students' internalizing of new norms and behaviors is if they are *willing to enforce these new norms on their peers in the group.*

Training

1&2. To train students in labeling and recognizing new behaviors, begin with a class discussion, perhaps using a 'looks like/sounds like' T-chart.
3.   To train students in labeling and discussing new behaviors in an objective way, use role playing and/or suggested statement stems, such as "I wonder if…" or "I would like to hear from…"
4.   To train students in practicing new behaviors, choose moderately challenging group tasks and have some students observe and record the behaviors while the other students accomplish the task (see examples below).
5.   To reinforce new behaviors, recognize them specifically and publicly, and encourage your students to recognize them specifically and publicly.

Examples of Group Behaviors you would like to encourage for high performance:
- Equal participation – No one dominates, no one is silent.
- Active listening – Use body language to show interest, give brief words of encouragement.
- Helping – Everyone has a right to ask for help, everyone has a duty to help.
- Giving – Positively respond to others' needs. Give, don't just take.
- Explaining – Give full explanations, not just the right answer. (Teach to fish, don't just give them a fish).
- Politeness – Kindly ask for help, kindly thank for help given.
- Consensus – Realize that consensus includes a narrowing phase toward a decision.

When new behaviors 'slip', assign an observer for 10 minutes, and have the group work with the observer to determine where they did well, and where they can improve.

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[1] Based on "Designing Groupwork", Elizabeth Cohen, p. (40-52 & appendices)