



COURTESY MSU

Members of the Caribbean Students Organization at Midwestern State University in Texas build group unity by performing together in the Caribfest Cultural Extravaganza.

United We Grow

How to make your group get along

By Risa G. Merl

Your group may not be able to build unity in a day or even a year. It takes more than time to achieve trust, respect, friendship, and the other important factors that make up a group dynamic. "If a group isn't unified, they'll never realize their full potential, and the members will never be satisfied," says Bren Romney, president of the Caribbean Students Organization at **Midwestern State University** in Texas.

Sounds like intimidating news for a new group that's struggling with the process of unification, but veteran leaders say groups can attain unity if they're willing to work at it. "Group unity is something that can be achieved in any situation, but sometimes it's more or less difficult depending on how dedicated the individual members are," says Jayme Rubright, 2002 Dance Marathon overall chair at **Pennsylvania State University**.

Though achieving unity may be hard, surviving without it may be even more challenging. "When groups don't work together, the meaning of what they're trying to accomplish becomes lost. If the group does work as a team, getting to that final goal is much easier, less stressful, and more fun," says Joe McKenna, Residence Hall Association representative at the **University of Idaho**. Whether it's with common goals or fun

activities, there are many different ways to build unity; it's just a matter of finding what's right for your group.

Goals and Gains

When trying to bring a true sense of togetherness to your group, it helps if everyone is working in unison to achieve a common goal. "If you have common goals, there's a sense that everyone's moving in a similar direction," says Chris Vaughn, former editor-in-chief of *The Valencia Source* newspaper at **Valencia Community College** in Florida. Short- and long-term goals create a sense of purpose for current members and a feeling of belonging for new members.

Participation and Possession

For members to feel unified, student leaders recommend encouraging participation at every level. "I always tried to remind everybody that what they were doing was important. Even if [their task] seemed individual or isolated, it attributed to the success of DM year after year," Rubright says.

Each member having a voice also contributes to everyone feeling essential. "I like to hear what everyone has to say," says Jennifer Camacho, rush coordinator for the new sorority Omega Beta Phi at **Florida Atlantic University**.

Leadership Styles

The group leader's style can dictate much about the success and unity of the group. Vaughn subscribes to the technique of "servant leadership," which states that the best way for a leader to achieve his goals is to

let others achieve their goals. Another way to avoid a dictatorship is to act as a counselor to your group. "I never considered myself a director," Rubright says. "I always called myself a facilitator, meaning my purpose in DM was to provide suggestions, feedback, and availability to all my members."

Communication and Credit

"Communication is the one element that if you don't have it, you can't build unity," Vaughn says. To have open communication between group members, it's important that members feel free to express their views without being attacked or judged.

A valuable part of members feeling needed is recognition. Whether a note of thanks or a certificate at an awards ceremony, as long as recognition is personalized, members will appreciate it. "If your group doesn't feel appreciated, the motivation, dedication, and unity of your group may break down," McKenna says.

Merriment and Reflective Musings

Fun activities let group members learn about each other's likes, dislikes, strengths, and weaknesses. There should be a balance within a group between everyone getting down to business and blowing off some steam. Vaughn suggests eating together because it gets everyone talking. Romney suggests that playing sports together can build competitive camaraderie. Socializing with your group is an easy way to build friendships that will strengthen your group in the long run.

Bringing It Together

There isn't just one surefire way to build group unity; a group should start with the basics, such as common goals, then experiment with different techniques to find the ones that work best for them. If you persist, the greatest benefit is knowing that you possess a shared experience that no one else can touch. **SL**

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5 Obstacles to Group Unity

- 1. Becoming too self-involved.** Some members may become too focused on themselves and forget the group's purpose. "Keep asking essential questions and reminding everyone of the common goal," Rubright says.
- 2. Negative people and ideas.** "A few negative people can disrupt group unity," Camacho says. "We have a rule: If you're going to bring something negative, you also have to bring a solution."
- 3. Not knowing or listening to your members.** "That can be very easily repaired if you just take the time to hear what each of your members has to say," Camacho says.
- 4. Cliques.** When friendships lead to smaller groups that splinter the organization, those gaps can tear a group apart. "Bridge those gaps early to retain group unity," McKenna says.
- 5. Inactive members.** "Making people realize qualities they have in themselves gets them involved and adds to overall unity," Camacho says.

Learn more about group unity at www.studentleader.com