

GEORGE P. BURDELL THE MISSING TEAM MEMBER

Crucial Conversations and Effective Communication

One of Georgia Tech's most famous alumni was a notoriously terrible teammate. During his time enrolled as an undergraduate, George P. Burdell never once completed his own projects. He attended zero meetings. He did not communicate with his peers. He never lifted a finger to make his projects successful. By relying entirely on the hard work of his friends, Burdell managed to become an illustrious and celebrated graduate without doing a thing.

»» A Long Running Practical Joke

Of course, Burdell was not an actual student, but rather a practical joke begun in 1927 by William Edgar Smith, a Bachelor of Science in Ceramic Engineering. By completing Burdell's homework and tests, Smith and his friends managed to help their freeloading friend receive his degree. Burdell's reputation for incompetence and absenteeism has been an enduring part of the gag. In fact, when former President Barack Obama spoke at Tech in 2015 he made light of Burdell's inability to be counted on, complaining "Now, I understand George P. Burdell was supposed to introduce me today. But nobody could find him." Although Burdell's inability to participate makes him beloved among Yellow Jackets, Tech's famous fictional alumni also represents every group's worst nightmare: the absentee teammate.

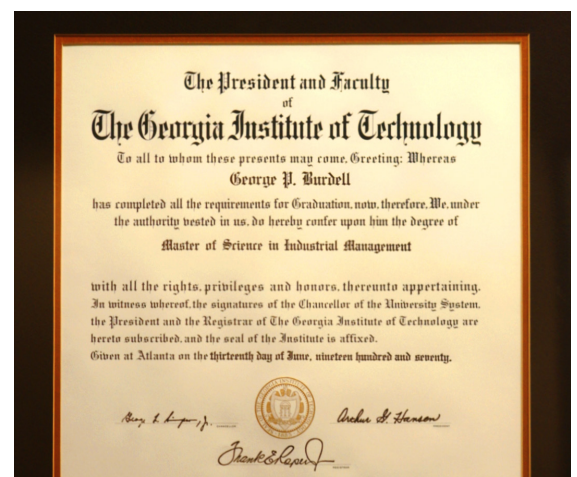
»» Missing Team Members Aren't Funny

Managing group members that miss meetings, don't respond to emails, and/or do not complete tasks, is among the most frustrating challenges of working in teams. With so much at stake, some team members may feel compelled to go above and beyond their assigned role to pick up the slack for an uncooperative teammate. Others may want to give up entirely until a project manager or instructor intervenes. It is this scenario--with its promise of uncomfortable conversations and unfair work distribution--that causes some to dislike team projects outright. Distrusting one or several team members has the potential to generate discord, however planning ahead and communicating regularly can alleviate many of the stressors associated with the dreaded missing or underperforming team member.

»» Well Managed Teams

The best managed teams are those which

1. State expectations clearly,
2. Identify and employ each team member's strengths, and
3. Determine a plan of action ahead of time in the form of a written group contract (see Mini 500 unit).

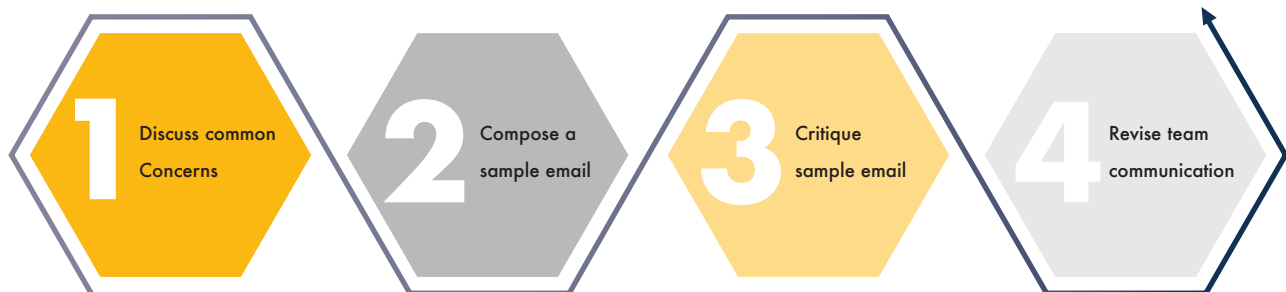


Left: The best existing photo of George P. Burdell. Right: George P. Burdell's diploma. Diploma photo by Nicole Cappello

Participants hold one another accountable in well-run teams, making it vital to articulate parameters and assumptions about conduct. Teams should identify each member's strengths as well as areas where they feel they lack knowledge and skills and see the opportunity for growth. Teams should also decide early in the project how best to ensure that the work is completed well and on time. Because the shortcomings and successes of individuals affect teams collectively, if a member fails to complete their tasks or communicate with their teammates, next steps for answerability and project completion should be transparent and mutual. With adequate check-ins and clearly stated expectations no one needs to feel awkward, antagonistic, or ganged up on.

»» Communicating with Burdell

Despite well laid plans and mutual good intentions, sometimes individuals in teams don't hold up their end of the bargain. Reasons for absenteeism could be mundane or potentially serious so be sure to give team members the benefit of the doubt and never berate your peers. There are better solutions to this common issue than succumbing to harsh words, despair or overwork. Regular communication and team contracts offer the best means for ensuring that if George P. Burdell is assigned to your next group your team can manage him in a considerate but firm and professional manner.



🗨️ Expanded Discussion: Scheduling On Strengths

»» Step 1: Discuss Common Group Dynamic Concerns

1. What mechanisms might your group put into place to ensure that all team members complete their tasks and responsibilities by the deadline?
2. At what stage in a project's timeline is it appropriate to involve the manager or instructor if a team suspects that one or several members has not, is no longer, or is not adequately contributing to a project?
3. What forms of communication (Email; Facebook Messenger; SnapChat; In-Person Meeting; Skype; Twitter; SMS; GroupMe, etcetera) are best for including all team members? Do some of these forms and technologies exclude members? Are any methods of communication inappropriate? How might your team ensure that communication is equitable among all participants?
4. Based on the "I hate" activity and your CliftonStrengths Assessment, how might your team mediate the task of ensuring that all team members stay on track by adhering to the contract, and submitting quality work.
5. How many meetings, emails, and other points of contact are necessary to accomplish the goal? At what point does excessive communication hinder effective project outcomes?
6. Sometimes, and often for reasons beyond their control, students who are normally strong team members find themselves on the verge of becoming Burdell. How should a team member tell their group if circumstances arise that shift their priorities or if they find they need more help than originally planned?

Activity: Writing Effective Communications

»» Step 2: Compose a Sample Email

As a team, write a formal email to George P. Burdell communicating concerns regarding Burdell's absence or unsatisfactory participation. How would you introduce the subject? What evidence is appropriate to cite in this type of document? What tone should you use?

»» Step 3: Critique this email to Burdell.

As a team, discuss what makes this email problematic? How can it be improved? How can you avoid these same issues in your team communications? Revise your email based on your discussion.

From: jgrey@gatech.edu
To: gburdell@gatech.edu

Subject: So you know

Hey,

This is Jean, your teammate for your English class. Just wanted to let you know that we are contacting Dr. Xavier to ask him to kick you off of the team. We haven't seen you in any meetings, and it isn't fair for you to get the same grade as Anna, Henry, Warren, and I.

»» Step 4: Critique these sample emails

As a team, discuss what makes these sample emails more successful than the previous example. How do these emails address the situation? Are there additional improvements you can make? Revise your email to Burdell based on your discussion and consider drafting a similar email from "Burdell" for group members to use if they encounter personal challenges during the team project.



Sample Emails

NOTES

From: jgrey@gatech.edu
To: gburdell@gatech.edu
CC: amarie@gatech.edu; hmccoy@gatech.edu; wworthingtonIII@gatech.edu

Subject: Concerns Regarding Absences for ENG 1102 Team Project

Dear George,

I know that when we discussed this course and our project, each of us expressed a desire to turn in a project that reflects our abilities. I'm reaching out to you to express the concerns of Anna, Warren, and myself in terms of achieving that goal.

We have noticed that you accepted the meeting invitations for our team meetings that took place on January 24th, January 28th, and February 3rd, but you did not attend those meetings. We have also reached out to you on four occasions to discuss how the team can work together effectively. Henry spoke with you before class on January 27th, and I emailed you on January 25th, 27th, and February 2nd. During those interactions, you indicated that you would attend the future meetings; however, you did not.

We were wondering how we can help you to contribute to the team in a meaningful way moving forward. As the project is due on February 9th, we are anxious about your performance. Perhaps your priorities have changed since the beginning of the semester. We ask that you email us within the next 24 hours to understand why you have been absent and how we might move forward.

Sincerely,
Jean

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From: gburdell@gatech.edu
To: amarie@gatech.edu; cxavier@gatech.edu; hmccoy@gatech.edu; jgrey@gatech.edu; wworthingtonIII@gatech.edu

Subject: Team Project Issues

Dear Team and Dr. Xavier:

I wanted to make you aware of some personal challenges that I have encountered lately. Although I do not feel comfortable discussing details, the Dean of Students is aware of my situation. I ask for your help and understanding during the next week or two.

Our team contract and timeline stipulates that I should proofread and find secondary sources for the project this week, but I will not be able to complete these tasks. I will be out of communication and unable to do any schoolwork until at least February 1st. Afterwards, I should be able to contribute again.

I appreciate your patience and assistance at this time.

Best,
George

