

GROUP DYNAMICS*

In all human interaction there are three major ingredients – content, process and people. The first deals with the subject matter or the task upon which the group is working. In most interactions, the focus of attention of all persons is on the content. The second ingredient, process, is concerned with what is happening between group members while the group is working. The third ingredient involves what is happening to group members as the process is carried out.

Group process deals with such items as morale, atmosphere, influence, participation, styles of influence, leadership struggles, conflict, competition, cooperation, etc. In most interactions, very little attention is paid to process and its effect on the group members, even when it is the major cause of ineffective group action. Sensitivity to group process will better enable one to diagnose group problems early and deal with them more effectively. Since these processes are present in all groups, awareness of them will enhance a person's worth to a group and enable him to be a more effective group participant or leader.

In terms of outcomes, not accomplishing the task would be a problem. It may also be a problem if the task is completed at the cost of stifling morale, not achieving a consensus, or causing division within the group.

A. Participation

One indication of involvement is verbal participation. Observe the differences in the amount of participation among members of your group. A good group leader will draw all members of the group into the problem solving/decision making process.

1. Is there any noticeable difference between some who are high participants and some who were low?
2. Is there any shift in participation, e.g., highs become quiet; lows suddenly become talkative. Do you see any reason for this?
3. How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted? Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fear? Etc.
4. Are there differences in how people communicate with each other? Do some only talk with particular people?

*What possibilities does lack of participation indicate?
What can a group leader do about lack of participation?*

B. Influence

Influence and participation are not the same. Some people may speak very little, yet they capture the attention of the whole group. Others may talk a lot but are generally not listened to by other members.

1. Are there differences in the influence of members on one another?
 - Did others listen when some speak?
 - Are others not listened to?
2. Is there any rivalry in the group? Is there a struggle for leadership? What effect does it have on other group members?

Is it ok that some have more influence than others?

C. Decision-Making Procedures

Many decisions are made in groups without considering the effects of these decisions on their members. Some people try to impose their own decisions on the group, while others want all members to participate or share in the decisions that are made.

1. Are decisions made by individuals and carried out without checking with other group members? For example, someone decides on the topic to be discussed and immediately begins to talk about it. What effect does this have on other group members?
2. Does the group drift from topic to topic? Any reason for this?
3. Do members support other's suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in a few members deciding the topic or activity for the group? How does this effect the group?
4. Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a decision through over other members objections?
5. Is there any attempt to get all members participating in a decision? How is this done? What effect does it have on the group?
6. Do some participants make contributions which do not receive any kind of response or recognition? What effect does this have on the individuals?

*Is the majority opinion always right? Give examples, yes or no
How can a group overcome chaotic behavior and decisions by a forceful majority?*

D. Task Functions

These functions illustrate behaviors that are concerned with getting the job done, or accomplishing the task that the group has before them.

1. Does anyone ask for or make suggestions as to the best way to proceed or to tackle a problem?
2. Does anyone attempt to summarize what has been covered or what has been going on in the group?
3. Is there any giving or asking for facts, ideas, opinions, feelings feedback, or searching for alternatives?

What keeps the group on target?

E. Maintenance Functions

These functions are important to the morale of the group. They maintain good and harmonious working relationships among the members and create a group atmosphere which enables each member to contribute maximally. They insure smooth and effective teamwork within the group.

1. What or who helps others get into the discussions?
2. What hinders everyone from getting involved?
3. How well are members getting their ideas across? How well do members listen to each other? Are there any attempts by group members to help others clarify their ideas?
4. How are ideas rejected? How do members react when their ideas are not accepted? Do members attempt to support others when they reject their ideas?

*What personal characteristics enable groups to function their best?
What personal characteristics prevent groups from functioning well?*

F. Membership

A major concern for group members is the degree of acceptance or inclusion in the group. Different patterns of interaction may develop in the group which give clues to the degree and kind of membership.

1. Is there any sub-grouping? Sometimes two or three members may consistently agree and support each other or consistently disagree and oppose one another.
2. Do some people seem to be “outside” the group? Do some members seem to be “in”? How are those “outside” treated?
3. Do some members move in and out of the group, e.g., lean forward or backward in their chairs or move their chairs in and out? Under what conditions do they come in or move out?

*Why are sub-groups a concern in a working group?
How should sub-groups be dealt with?*

G. Feelings

During any group discussion, feelings are frequently generated by the interactions between members. These feelings, however, are seldom talked about. Observers may have to make guesses based on tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and many other forms of nonverbal cues.

1. What signs of feelings do you observe in group members: anger, irritation, frustration, warmth, affection, excitement, boredom, defensiveness, competitiveness, etc.?
2. Do you see any attempts by group members to block the expression of feelings particularly negative feelings? How is this done? Does anyone do this consistently?

When and how should feelings be dealt with during group discussion?

H. Norms

Standards or ground rules may develop in a group that control the behavior of its members. Norms usually express the beliefs or desires of the majority of the group members as to what behaviors should or should not take place in the group. These norms may be clear to all members (explicit), known or sensed by only a few (implicit), or operating completely below the level of awareness of any group members. Some norms facilitate group progress and some hinder it.

1. What kinds of assumptions are made about what is acceptable or non-acceptable behaviors?
2. What rules exist about how differences will be handled?
3. Are group members overly nice and polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily? What happens when members disagree?
4. Do you see any norms operating about participation? About the decision making process? About leadership?

Should group ground rules be formally established or assumed?

QUESTIONS TO ASK ABOUT A GROUP'S INTERPERSONAL PROCESS

1. Do seriously intended contributions plop without response?

A speaker needs to know the effect of his remarks so that he can compare it with what he intended. When others do not respond the speaker cannot know whether they (a) did not hear him, (b) did not understand him, (c) understood and agreed, (d) understood and disagreed, (e) understood but thought it irrelevant, (f) felt uncomfortable because of the issue raised, etc., etc.

2. When a complicated, unclear, or controversial comment is made does the group check to make sure it understands what the speaker means before agreeing or disagreeing?

3. Does each member state his personal reactions as his own rather than giving the impression he is speaking for the group?

4. Are all contributions viewed as belonging to the group to be used or not as the group decides?

5. When the group has trouble getting work done does it try to find out why?

Symptoms of difficulty are excessive hair-splitting, points repeated over and over, suggestions plop and are not considered, private conversations in subgroups, two or three members dominating the discussion, members take sides and refuse to compromise, ideas are attacked before they are completely expressed, participation is apathetic. When such symptoms occur the group should shift from working on the task to discussing the interactions and feelings of members about what is going on.

6. Does the group blame its difficulties on "problem members"?

A group should look upon behavior that hinders its work as happening because the group wants it rather than blaming it on one or two "problem members". The group should discuss what these symptoms indicate about the nature of the group problem – what is each of us not doing that perpetuates this condition?

7. Does the group bring conflict into the open and deal with it?

Because of the difference between individuals conflict is inevitable. The group can choose whether the conflict will be open (and subject to group control) or disguised (and out of control).

8. Is conflict approached as a topic for joint inquiry into "what is best for us to do in this situation?" rather than as a competitive struggle to prove "Who is right and who is wrong"?

9. Does the group make important decisions by open agreement or by default?

When a group views each decision as a provisional trial which can be carried out evaluated and revised in the light of actual experience it is easier to make decisions than when each decision is required to be so perfect that it can stand forever without change.

When the group agrees on a decision which it does not carry out, it should recognize that the real decision was one not to act although the apparent decision was to act. The group should openly discuss why the apparent and the real decisions were not the same.

10. Does the group use different ways to make decisions depending upon the time available the kind of issue, and the importance of the outcome?

A group may vote, delegate the decision to a certain person or subgroup, flip a coin, or discuss until they reach complete consensus. The crucial factor is that the group has complete consensus on the way used to make the decision in each case.

APPENDIX

Participation

What possibilities does lack of participation indicate?

Without verbal and non-verbal clues it's not possible to know why a group member is not participating. In of the following may apply to the situation:

- Not interested
- Distracted by personal matters
- Afraid to speak
- Nothing to contribute
- In agreement with direction of conversation
- Disagree with direction of conversation

What can a group leader do about lack of participation?

The group leader needs to be observant of each member's participation or lack thereof. The only way to know the cause of non-participation is by asking questions such as:

- Do you agree or disagree with what is being discussed?
- Do you have anything to add to the conversation?
- Is something distracting you from contributing to the conversation?

Influence

Is it ok that some have more influence than others?

There will always be those who have more influence than others, particularly if their influence is in areas where they have specialized knowledge or training that makes their input more valuable than others who lack the same background. Such individuals should always be sought to express themselves in their areas of expertise. If their influence is based on other factors it should be restricted by seeking the input from others who may not be as vocal. The group leader must evaluate those contributions based on the merit of what is said, not on the personality involved.

Decision-Making Procedures

Is the majority opinion always right? Give examples, yes or no

No, the majority is not always right, particularly when decisions are emotionally based. The majority opinion of a lynch mob is not necessarily right. The majority of the Council wanted to kill the apostles but the minority opinion of Gamaliel was ultimately followed due to the logic of his appeal ([Acts 5:33-40](#)).

How can a group overcome chaotic behavior and decisions by a forceful majority?

The group leader is responsible to keep the group focused on the decision to be made preventing the conversation from being hijacked to some other discussion. It is also important for the group leader to question those in the minority opinion as to their reasons for disagreement.

Task Functions

What keeps the group on target?

The Group Leader should remind participants to stay on target. The participants themselves should speak up when the group is distracted.

Maintenance Functions

What personal characteristics enable groups to function their best?

Humility, honesty, mutual trust and respect all help groups function at their best.

What personal characteristics prevent groups from functioning well?

Negative characteristics such as pride, deceit (hidden agendas), mistrust and anger prevent groups from function well.

Membership

Why are sub-groups a concern in a working group?

Sub-groups have the potential to hijack the group to the direction of it's choosing. It's reasonable to expect that some group members may have a better relationship with some than others which is fine. But, when group members team up to control the group there is a problem. The group leader must be aware of such possibilities.

How should sub-groups be dealt with?

The group leader must take a strong position allowing input from everyone in the group, not just a few. It may also be necessary to call out those who have banded together reminding them that the entire group must make any decisions. Ground rules may need to be established.

Feelings

When and how should feelings be dealt with during group discussion?

Some issues can become emotional when group members are both passionate and yet divided. When emotions become the issue they must be dealt with directly. The group leader must stop the heated discussion, acknowledge the rising temperature of debate, and calm things down reminding them that disagreements are resolved by cooler heads that care about each other.

Norms

Should group ground rules be formally established or assumed?

Typically, ground rules are assumed, however, it's a good idea for the leader of a group that is just forming to establish simple ground rules to prevent future issues. If problems do arise the group leader should remind everyone of what behavior is considered normal and acceptable.

* Adapted from Vickers Inc. training program, 1977