

Chapter 4

GROUP PROCESS

This chapter is about working with groups. A group is more than just a collection of individuals. As people work together in groups they share common experiences, good and bad. They develop special jokes, find out each other's sore spots, and work out special sorts of interpersonal relationships among themselves. People often have a special feeling about a group--a feeling of energy or belonging in the group--that is more than their feelings about a collection of strangers or even unacquainted friends. A group is more than any person or set of persons that belong to it. A group has a life of its own.

As you facilitate in a group, you will be aware of the meeting on two levels: content (the subject that is being dealt with) and process (how group members interact). As you prepare your agenda and define expectations with the group, you will be thinking mainly of content. But once the meeting is underway, you will be just as concerned with the process. Your job as facilitator is to help group members work well together, and you should be careful not to let your interest in the content distract you from being aware of how the group is working. Generally, the more you are in tune with yourself, the better you will be able to facilitate. That is because to facilitate well, you must be able to focus your attention outward to the group and not worry about "proving" yourself or protecting your ego. Below we outline some of the things you should be aware of to help a group function well. We encourage you to pass on these group process skills to the groups you work with: giving members skills they can use themselves is your best opportunity to leave them with something of lasting value.

In this chapter, we include some general information that will be useful to you in understanding what is happening in groups you facilitate--information on communication and group dynamics. We will also be describing techniques for using this information as you facilitate--how to phrase questions, facilitate a discussion, and use exercises. These are techniques you will use at any time in any group. In the next chapter we will describe special techniques that you will use in certain situations.

I. COMMUNICATION

Communication is the essential ingredient of any group--like the cement in a brick wall. Your effectiveness as a facilitator depends on your ability to communicate well with the group and to help the group members communicate well with each other. The ability to communicate effectively is a skill; and like any skill, it is best acquired through practice and self-criticism. Following is a list of rules and strategies that are conducive to effective communication. Like all the material covered in this chapter, these rules

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are not only guidelines for the facilitator, but may also be useful material to present in a workshop. Facilitators aren't the only people who have to communicate.

A. Adapt to your listeners. Something that seems perfectly clear to you may have an entirely different meaning, or may be completely incomprehensible to the person you are talking to. Other people have had different experiences than you. As a result, they may attach different meanings to words, gestures and appearances than you intend. To minimize this possibility, adapt:

1. Your language. Make sure that the terms you use are common usage for the group. Don't use any technical terms, or jargon familiar to a certain profession or area of study, without making sure that all the group agrees on the meaning. A misunderstanding at a recent meeting we attended made the authors realize that the word "intervention" had an entirely different meaning for a person with a background in labor negotiation than it did for other group members who were accustomed to working with collectives. Slang that is common to your peer group may make others of different ages, professions, or even geographical origins, feel uncomfortable, either because it is offensive to them, or because it is unfamiliar.

2. Your style. The way you dress, carry yourself, and interact with others will affect how well you fit in with a group. At a meeting of college students, for instance, you may want to be very informal. You may wear blue jeans, sit on the floor, and laugh a lot. But at a meeting of retired teachers, you may wear "good clothes," stand up, and tell fewer or different kinds of jokes. In general, if you are informal and comfortable with the group, it helps to make them relax as well. But interpret the word "informal" to be consistent with the norms of the group. Don't dress or act in ways that give a false impression, but do try to avoid turning people off by appearing strange or threatening in any way.

B. Listening is important. We have all heard the importance of listening stressed over and over, but listening is much more difficult than most people realize. Much of the time when someone is talking to us, we aren't really listening; we are thinking about what we are going to say in answer. When you are listening to someone, try not to immediately evaluate what is being said in terms of what it means to you; instead, try to understand what it means from the other person's perspective. Ask questions that will help you understand better what the other person is thinking and feeling. Not only will you understand better, but you will be able to give an answer that has meaning to the other, from her or his point of view.

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The following exercise will help you become more aware of listening skills:

List 5 or 6 controversial topics on a piece of paper. You and one other person sit and discuss them. After each person makes a position statement, the other person should try to summarize what the first said. The first person then tells the second whether the summary was accurate. Feedback will indicate how well both parties listen. Often, having a third person observe this exercise and comment afterwards helps. (It is harder than you think!)

- C. Be aware of what is happening in the group. Various verbal and nonverbal cues tip you off as to how the people you are talking to are reacting. You can adjust your style (by speaking faster, slower, on a more or less complicated level, by encouraging more or less group participation) or you can check out your interpretation of these cues with the group and get them to suggest revisions in your method. Some cues to watch for are:
1. Restlessness. Are people shifting around a lot? Are they clearing their throats or having side conversations? If so, you are probably losing them. You may be boring them or talking over their heads, or it may be simple fatigue.
 2. When silences occur, do they seem comfortable or uncomfortable? In a tense group, silences can be agonizing. If this is the case, several things could be happening: people may be bored because you're going too slow or because your material is too simple; people may be uncomfortable with the topic; or people may be shy with each other and too self-conscious to talk in front of the group.
 3. Do people look at you when you talk? If so, they probably feel comfortable with you and are intrigued by what you are saying. If they avoid eye contact, something may be wrong.
 4. Do people look at each other when they talk? Again, if they do not avoid one another's gaze, it is a sign that the group is relaxed and at ease. If two or more people won't look at each other, or if two or more people will not talk to each other, there may be something wrong.
 5. Postures of group members. People often lean forward and shift positions when they want to say something. Posture can also reflect tension or how relaxed a person is in the group. Naturally, posture also reflects how tired or alert people are as well.

None of these cues can tell you absolutely what is going on. You must be aware of the situation in which they are given to even begin to interpret them. Even more importantly, you must know the individuals pretty well before you can interpret their cues with assurance. Not everyone reacts in the ways described above. These cues are listed only to serve as general indicators for you to watch for; check out your interpretation of people's cues with them (see below).

See Chapter Seven for hints on dealing with specific problems that you might detect from participants' cues.

- D. Test assumptions. Communication and interpersonal relationships are based on assumptions that people make about each other and about the relationship. Sometimes these assumptions are correct, but often they are only partly correct, or altogether incorrect. People generally believe that their assumptions are correct until something happens to make them change the assumption. Sooner or later, most mistaken assumptions lead to a misunderstanding of one kind or another. The longer a mistaken assumption has been held, the greater the problems that such a misunderstanding can bring. For instance, I may assume that you consider me a close friend and trust me because every Wednesday afternoon we have beer together and you tell me about your problems. This assumption may be correct, or you may just consider me a pleasant person to kill time with while you are waiting for your ride home. In the latter case, my feelings may be deeply hurt if I find out that you haven't told me about something important that is happening in your life: my assumption that you trust me will be contradicted. The longer the history of our Wednesday-beer-relationship, the more betrayed I will feel.

It is impossible to eliminate assumptions from our relationships. Human beings cannot avoid making assumptions. However, we can minimize the problems that mistaken assumptions can cause. The way to do this is to be aware of the assumptions you are making, and check them out. If you feel like group members are too exhausted to continue a session, don't just break the group up. Ask them if they are tired, or if they want to go on.

One kind of assumption is reflected in words like "always" and "never." When you say "Sara is always late to meetings," or "Bill never disagrees with Ed" you are assuming that these people are inflexible, that they cannot or will not change. Nobody always behaves the same way. When you use such words, you are being unfair to the people you are speaking about (and they will probably resent it) and you are being unfair to yourself by limiting the possibilities that you can conceive of.

- E. Give feedback. A good way to test assumptions is to provide, and ask for, feedback. Ask people what they mean by a certain word, or tell them how you feel about what they just said. This will allow them to explain where they are coming from, and will let them know how you feel. Feedback is best if it is given immediately, since looking back to something that happened two weeks ago is hard for people. Feedback statements are more helpful if they are:
1. Specific rather than general: "You bumped my arm" rather than "You never watch where you are going."
 2. Tentative rather than absolute: "You seem unconcerned about this problem" rather than "You don't care what happens."
 3. Informing rather than commanding: "I haven't finished yet" rather than "Stop interrupting me."
 4. Suggesting rather than directing: "Have you ever considered talking to Tim about the situation?" rather than "Go talk to Tim."
 5. Tied to behavior rather than abstract: "You complain frequently" rather than "You are immature."

Each of these guidelines is designed to allow the other person maximum latitude in the way she or he responds to you. At the same time, they are designed to produce feedback that the other person can respond to, rather than vague judgments that show the other person how you feel, without giving her or him any idea of how that judgment was made.

- F. How you talk patterns how others respond. What you say determines what other people can say back.¹ If you keep your half of a conversation at a superficial level, most people you talk to will respond at a superficial level. If you are open, other people will often respond with openness. Telling people about yourself and your feelings will encourage them to respond in kind.
1. Leave your own statements open to criticism and qualification by members of the group. You can set the stage for this at the beginning of a session by saying something like, "If you think I'm off base at any time during the meeting, don't hesitate to criticize me or call me on it. I certainly won't hesitate to tell you what I feel." This encourages people to give you feedback as well as encouraging the group to criticize itself.

2. Don't make pronouncements on other people. Qualify your opinions as yours. Say "I think . . ." or "It seems to me that . . ." Make sure people realize you are expressing your feelings or opinions and not making final judgments. Even statements like "It appears . . ." carry the subtle implication that it appears that way to everyone. Speak only for yourself.
3. Show your commitment and concern for what the group is doing. Hopefully, you will have real commitment and concern. You can't fake it. If you aren't telling the truth, you are likely to be found out, and then you will have exhibited bad faith in the group. Be what you are.

Everyone develops a personal style of communicating. It is important to add your individual touches to how you interact with people. In many ways, every conversation is an experiment. You can, and do, learn every time you talk to someone else. The trick is becoming aware of what you learn, and learning to use that awareness.

II. PHRASING QUESTIONS

As a facilitator, you will be asking many questions in the group--to stimulate discussion, to analyze an exercise, to evaluate group progress.² Asking questions so that you get useful, constructive answers from an interested group is an art. You will master it mostly through experience, but there are certain things you can do to make your questions clear and stimulating.

- A. Avoid leading questions. The best possible question stimulates the group to draw its own conclusions rather than leading them to yours. "How did you feel about this exercise?" is a question with infinite possible answers. "Did the exercise make you feel uncomfortable?" is a question with two possible answers, "yes" and "no." The first question leaves the group free to discuss whatever ideas occur and seem relevant to the members. The second question traps the discussion into a single theme--discomfort. Eliciting a response from the group to match a conclusion you have already made smacks of (and often is) manipulation. It can lead the group to distrust you. However, if group members are reluctant to volunteer comments, or if you particularly want to discuss the subject of discomfort, then state your conclusion as your own and ask the group to respond. You might say, "I sensed that many of you were uncomfortable during the exercise. Was I right?" If the group confirms your assumption, then you can go on to ask why individuals felt uncomfortable.

- B. It often helps to phrase questions in a positive manner. Instead of asking "Why won't this plan work?" ask "What problems will we have to overcome if we adopt this plan?" Instead of asking "What went wrong at this meeting?" ask "What things might we have done differently to make this meeting more successful?"
- C. Sometimes you may want to prepare questions in advance. This is particularly helpful with exercises since you already have an idea of what to expect and of fruitful areas to ask questions about. In many instances, the questions you ask will be a bridge to a mini-lecture or to a set of concepts you want to draw out of the exercise. In some situations, it is helpful to inform the group what questions you are going to ask in advance. Some hints on preparing questions are:
 - 1. What purpose does the question have? If it doesn't fit in with the purpose of the exercise or the goals of the meeting, you probably shouldn't be asking it. If it does fit in with the purpose, think through what answers you might receive. If the answers you anticipate don't seem very informative or thought-provoking, you are probably asking the wrong question, or asking it in the wrong way. Try again.
 - 2. When you have thought through the question, try it out on your friends. Their reactions (because they aren't planning a meeting) will be a good judge of how valuable your question is.
 - 3. If you know the purpose of your question, ask yourself: Is a general or a very specific type of answer best for this part of the meeting? If you want general answers, or a broad range of responses, phrase the inquiry in general terms, using abstract words and short questions such as "How did you feel about that exercise?" If you want specific answers, ask specific, detailed questions. For example, instead of the above question, you might ask, "What did you think during the part of the role play where Jim told Louise about his dying mother?"

III. FACILITATING DISCUSSIONS

Your role as facilitator in a discussion will vary according to the kind of discussion and the kind of group you are working with. In some situations you will be a contributing member of the group as well as facilitator; in other situations it will be inappropriate for you to do much venting of your own thoughts and feelings. Sometimes you will be a resource person; at other times group members will know more about the subject being discussed than you. In most discussions, however, the facilitator's job includes keeping the discussion focused on the topic, clarifying (or asking for clarification) when something seems confusing, and helping create and maintain a situation where everyone can participate in a cooperative manner.

- A. Getting things rolling. Some discussions don't need stimulating--they happen by themselves. In many cases, however, you will need to help the discussion get started. Following are some principles and techniques that will be helpful.
1. Everyone should know exactly what the discussion is about, and what the reason for having it is. If a discussion is not getting off the ground, if there are awkward silences where everyone looks around the room, waiting for someone else to say something, it could be because members don't know for sure what they are supposed to be talking about, or how to approach the subject.
 2. Give participants room to be involved. Being too directive in your role as facilitator may cause others to hesitate to take responsibility for what happens in the group. They may wait for you to provide all the guidance. If it seems that this is happening, make your style more low key.
 3. Be a model. Your own behavior can demonstrate to members how they can participate. If the discussion is supposed to be one in which participants relate the problem of discrimination to their own lives, it may help if you demonstrate how the members might approach the subject by describing an incident in which you experienced or witnessed discrimination. Other members of the group may follow your example and pick up the discussion from there. You can help to set a relaxed, open, conversational tone for the discussion by being relaxed, open and conversational yourself during the meeting.
 4. Use questions to stimulate discussion. A simple question such as "How do you feel about this problem?" is a good way to start a discussion. See the previous section on phrasing questions for ideas on how to do this.
 5. Listing is a technique to generate ideas or approaches that may be used as the basis for the discussion. At a workshop on drug abuse, for instance, you may begin by having the participants brainstorm a list of reasons why people abuse drugs.
 6. Going around the room and asking each person for a response is a version of listing. We frequently begin conflict resolution workshops by asking each participant to describe a recent conflict experience.

7. Write things down. During any discussion, and especially when listing, have a recorder (yourself, your team facilitator, or a group member) write each item on a blackboard or sheet of newsprint taped to the wall, so everyone can see what material has been generated and refer to it at will. This list can also be used as a basis for further discussion. For instance, once a group has generated a list of problems, they can look at the written list to break these problems down into general categories. Even when the list isn't on the wall for everyone to see it is often useful to have a recorder to provide the group with a written description of what has happened in a meeting. (See p. 41 for a description of the recorder's role.)
 8. Relate the discussion to people's immediate experiences. It is difficult for people to feel very involved in a discussion that is highly abstract or far removed from their own experiences. The more a discussion relates to people's real experiences and concerns, the more enthusiastically they will participate.
 9. Use humor to break tension or boredom. Sometimes if you say something preposterous or do something unexpected you can catch the imaginations of people whose minds have wandered or loosen up a formal situation so that hesitant members will feel more comfortable about contributing. Different groups will react in different ways to various kinds of humor. You should know the group you are working with enough to gauge their reaction before you do anything kooky.
 10. Use your intuition in choosing what techniques to use with any particular group. Each situation will be different. As you gain experience facilitating, you will learn to adapt your style according to the group you are working with.
- B. Facilitating during the discussion. There are many things that a facilitator can do to help along a group discussion. What you do will depend on your abilities, your style, the particular group and the particular situation. Sometimes your concern will be primarily with the content of the discussion, sometimes with the interactions between group members (process), most often both. Following are some general categories of facilitator behavior.
1. Equalizing participation. It is not realistic to assume that participation will be divided equally among all group members. Some will want to participate more or less than others. But you can try to keep one person or a small group of people from dominating the discussion and you can provide opportunities for silent members to contribute if they seem interested but can't break into the discussion.

2. Keeping on the subject. Your role may include reminding the group when the discussion is straying off the subject or when the meeting is violating an agenda that was agreed on at the beginning.
3. Clarifying and interpreting. At times you may rephrase something that has been said to make it clearer, or you may interpret what it means to you, personally, or what you think it means to the group. Do this in a tentative way that leaves room for others' viewpoints. Often, instead of doing the clarifying or interpreting yourself, you will want to suggest that another member give feedback on something that was said.
4. Summarizing. This means pulling together various parts of the discussion and summing them up. It includes stating what progress you think has been made, where you think the group is going.
5. Pacemaking. It may also be your role to keep the group aware of how it is proceeding and when it may be time to move on. This includes saying things like, "Has this subject been thoroughly covered? Perhaps we should start talking about how we are going to use this information," or "It looks like we understand each other's viewpoints well enough. I think we are ready to make a decision."
6. "Processing." This means helping the group members work well together on an interpersonal level. This is often the most important part of the facilitator's role. Depending on the group's norms you may do this in many ways. In a group that is alert to its own internal dynamics, you may give direct feedback to members about their interpersonal behavior, or offer diagnostic comments about the dynamics of the group. This would include remarks like, "I get the feeling that the argument here isn't really about the decisions John has made, but about the fact that he has more authority than some of you feel one person should have."

More often, your function in processing will be to keep communication open between members so that cooperation can occur and conflict can be dealt with constructively. You may do this by providing members with opportunities to express and hear each other's feelings ("Deb, how do you feel about what Gary and Linda have been saying?"), by asking for group feedback ("Does anyone else have an interpretation of what this problem means to the group?"), or by providing suggestions ("It seems to me we're really bogged down. Why don't we break for lunch now and see if we can come back to the question later and get some fresh insights?").

As you engage in any of the behaviors described above, it is important that the group understand that the facilitator's word is not law. Any interpretation or suggestion you make is subject to qualification by other participants. Furthermore, none of these behaviors is restricted to the facilitator. The more accepting the group is of the idea that all members are responsible for what is happening at the session, the more these behaviors will be demonstrated by all group members from time to time.

IV. GROUP DYNAMICS

Group dynamics concerns how people in groups work together. Just as there are certain communication rules that will make you more effective as a facilitator, there are facts and rules about group dynamics that will help you set up a group to work more smoothly and to make your job as facilitator easier. We have already presented some information on group dynamics in Chapter Three (Getting Started) under the headings of Seating Arrangement and Cycles Groups Go Through. In this section we will discuss several other areas of group dynamics that we think will be useful to you.

- A. Size of the group. Many experts say five to seven people is the ideal size for a group. Our experience has shown that this is not necessarily true. The "ideal" group size is whatever number the participants feel comfortable with. When a group discusses highly personal matters, three or four people may be the ideal size. On the other hand, when a group of people comes together for the first time, a larger number may be better. CCR held a series of workshops, open to the public, in which social values were the topic of discussion. We found that participants seemed more comfortable and willing to speak out in larger groups (up to 15 people) than in small groups. The larger groups probably provided more anonymity to people speaking their views in front of strangers, less pressure on individuals to carry on the discussion, and perhaps allowed a wider variety of opinions to be expressed.

If group size is something that you can control, check with the participants in advance to find out what they would prefer. If you are at a meeting where the number of participants seems too large, check with people to see if they are comfortable in the group. Members sometimes feel left out and alienated if the group is too large for them to participate, and alienated participants are not likely to volunteer feedback about the situation. (See p. 64 for suggestions about dealing with groups that are too large or small.)

- B. Cooperation vs. competition. The more that people in a group cooperate with each other in activities, the more commitment they feel to the group. In many educational situations, people are forced to compete with each other for recognition or to solve problems. To a large extent this is counterpro-

ductive to a constructive group experience. In cooperative groups, people are more positive, friendly and trusting. They are also more motivated to participate and feel that the group's work is more their own product than do people in competitive group situations.³ For all of these reasons, it is desirable to help establish an environment of group cooperation. There are several ways in which this can be done.

1. When you are setting up expectations with the group, you can stress the importance of cooperation and how much the success of the experience depends on an atmosphere of mutual respect among group members.
 2. Involving the group in setting its own course is helpful in encouraging cooperation. Groups are usually much more committed to their activities when they decide themselves what those activities will be.
 3. The facilitator's style can do much to encourage a cooperative climate in the group. You can encourage members to take responsibility by refraining from arbitrarily setting things up or making decisions yourself. It is especially important to ask for people's opinions initially, until group members get used to participating.
 4. There are a number of exercises you can use which involve cooperative processes such as consensus decision making. These can get the group thinking about cooperation and consensus. On page 87 you will find references for sources of such exercises.
 5. Placing a high value on cooperation does not mean that conflict should be totally eliminated. Groups in which some conflict exists are often more creative and productive than totally cohesive groups. Ideally a group will have a balance between friendly cooperation (which helps the members trust each other and work well together) and the freedom to speak out and express disagreement (which promotes interest and the development of new ideas).
- C. Leadership. Any time a group engages in difficult or prolonged activities, one or more persons will eventually emerge as informal leaders. (Alternatively, if the group has been established for a long time, formal or informal leaders will probably exist already.) There are several ways that leaders can function:
1. They may serve as a model or example for the group.
 2. They may help the group solve problems.

3. They may provide interpersonal smoothing between members.
4. They may make decisions for the group.

When the leader does not overly dominate the group, her or his leadership may be helpful. In fact, in some cases, the leader's influence may help the facilitator establish a rapport with the group. If the leader seems too dominant, though, you should not challenge her or him, since a power struggle would probably have a negative effect on the group. It is better to ask the group how suitable the leader's decisions or actions are. You can do this tactfully with questions like, "Does that suggestion seem okay to you all?" or "Does anyone else have any other ideas?" Hopefully, expectations will be set up so that group members will feel free to interject their opinions at any time.

To detect who the leaders or central people in a group are, look for the following cues:

1. Who talks the most? Whose suggestions are most often accepted by the group?
 2. Who do group members look at the most when they are talking?
 3. Who are suggestions referred to when they come up? Who is the final arbiter on decisions?
 4. Who takes the most responsibility?
- D. Scapegoating. Sometimes a group will focus on a particular person to blame group problems on. This process is called scapegoating and can be detrimental in several ways.⁵ Scapegoating can be harmful to the individual who is the victim. A great deal of hostility may be directed toward the scapegoat, and it is often more than one person can handle. The scapegoat is often someone who has broken the informal rules or norms of the group. (For instance, in a group where cognitive, logical discussions are emphasized, an individual who talks about feelings may be picked on as a scapegoat.) The punishment meted out to such a person is often unjust and cruel.

As facilitator, it is your responsibility to stress the importance of not punishing someone the group perceives to be out of line. You should stress the importance of treating the matter as a group problem and not focusing on personalities. Get people to discuss why the person did whatever behavior the group is being accusing about, and how the others felt about it.