

Group Dynamics and the Art of Facilitation

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The five critical concepts to be review in this small dose learning article are as follows:

1. What is group dynamics?
2. How is facilitation defined ?
3. What are the Roles and Critical Success Factors for Facilitators
4. How do groups get started and evolve?
5. What helps and hinders interpersonal communication?

The term group dynamics implies that individual behaviors differ depending on individuals' current or prospective connections to a group. **Group dynamics is the field of study within the social sciences that focuses on the nature and functions of groups.**

Urges to belong or to identify may make for a powerful force that overrides individual personalities and goals; the influence of a group may rapidly replace individual preferences, values, beliefs and lead to different actions. The group dynamics may also include changes in behavior of a person when he works in a group or depending on the task or length of time group will be together.

What critical success factors are important for facilitators to be successful in working with groups or building teams. The research done since the 1940's is clear on the cometenencies needed : A clear understanding of how teams are formed, how people work together and what it takes interpersonally to be effective and produce results. Some of the aspects of group process that a *process consultant or facilitator* would look at include:

- Patterns of communication feedback and coordintion of information for decision making
- Struture of teams including goals, roles, norms, procedures/methods and relationships
- Patterns of authority, influence and power
- Elements of motivation for individuals and group
- Patterns of dominance; who talks to whom, who leads and who follows, subgroup partnerships, balance of task focus and social maintance of group
- Level of group understanding and competence in problem solving, idea finding and implementation of solutions
- Psychological differences and styles of communicating
- Understanding conflict and how to resolve it and still be effective.
- Differences between individual decisions and group decision making

Facilitation: is defined as to make things easy...making it easier for people to work together, to get more done, in less time, creating creative and practical solutions to the challenges and opportunities a group faces.

The basic skills of a facilitator are about following good meeting practices: timekeeping, following an agreed-upon agenda, and keeping a clear record of suggestions and recommendations. The higher-order skills involve observing the group, its individuals, and their communication, decision making and conflict resolution process, and knowing the art of intervening in a way that adds to the group's creativity rather than taking away from it.

Role of a facilitator:Role of Facilitator is someone who skilfully helps a group of people understand their common objectives and plan to achieve them without personally taking any side of the argument. The facilitator will try to assist the group in achieving a consensus on any disagreements that preexist or emerge in the meeting so that it has a strong basis for future action. It is also important to note that these three functions take place in three distinct organizational areas. People are required to manage task, process and maintenance for themselves as individuals, with work groups when working interdependently, and within the context of the functioning of the entire organization.

In order for people to reach their individual and group potential and to perform effectively, certain kinds of functions must be performed. The essential functions fall into three areas;

- **Task or Content Functions.** The content is the work to be done, the product, the discussion elements, or the service rendered. The content is the 'what,' that is, the subject, problem to be solved, decision to be made, the goal, the objective. The process, or 'how,' includes the approaches, procedures, rules, group dynamics, and styles of interaction. The content can be viewed as the words; the process, as the music.
- **Process Functions** The process task function is the 'how' focused on getting the group work accomplished. It includes the following;
 - decision-making and problem solving techniques,
 - clarifying roles and interdependencies,
 - priority setting,
 - idea-generation methods,
 - meeting format (agendas, facilitation, time keeping, etc),
 - and evaluation (individual and organizational learning)
 - determining a set of Core Values,
 - developing a Mission Statement,
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- **Maintenance Functions** Maintenance Function is focused on getting the group's psychosocial needs met and the development of satisfying interpersonal relationships

A successful facilitator embodies respect for others and a watchful awareness of the many layers of reality in a human group. They create a safe environment for open and honest communication. In the event that a consensus cannot be reached then the facilitator would assist the group in understanding the differences that divide it.

Don'ts of Effective Facilitators

- Try not to pressure them against time limits—Group use the time available. Just remind them of time left.
- Let the group avoid dealing with issues and conflict; encourage them to work toward consensus rather than voting.
- Offer your own view point unless you tell the group you are playing devil's advocate.
- Try to steer the group toward what you think is the right decision; trust them to find their own way
- Side with a particular point of view or opinion in the group

Do's of Effective Facilitators

- Observe behavior and provide feedback
- Facilitate team setting time limits that you enforce unless the group changes operating guidelines.
- Helping the team to set ground rules they will use when meeting and reminding them of the rules when they are not being followed
- Help team members to develop respect by listening to each other.
- Reminding the group of the meeting objectives
- Setup comfortable and safe ways for members to openly communicate and contribute ideas
- Help them to recognize their problem solving style and asking questions about how they feel or what progress they are making to achieve the mission and goals of the meeting
- Asking open-ended questions that stimulate thinking
- Encouraging shy or introverted members to come forward with their ideas
- Ensure that actions agreed to have action plans for implementation and assignments for team members
- Model good active listening skills –such as clarifying confusing concepts or inarticulate ideas; use paraphrasing and mirroring to check understanding
- Encourage group to have a recorder who can summarize issues, agreements and unfinished business
- Provide support and coaching as team develops their presentation to the total group
- Point out subgrouping or disinterest on some members part and check group feelings about this behavior
- Encourage group to brainstorm and look for creative solutions not just the first solution they can agree on

Maintaining the Right Balance

The team leader moves back and forth between process and maintenance as the group and the team leader work on the task or content. He or she intervenes while the group is working. The content is set aside while the members deal with the process issues at hand. After an issue or concern has been worked through, the group returns to content discussions. It is a dynamic multi-leveled process constantly shifting and moving. It often takes time for inexperienced groups members and their team leaders to adapt to the process. Results- and task-orientated group members have difficulty with the maintenance and process interventions. The dynamic-orientated members lose patience with the task focus. In time, as the process and maintenance norms develop, the group becomes fluid. The group is more effective and moves faster when members create a mission, that is, a statement of values and behaviors that will drive their efforts

How do groups get started and evolve?

Research by Tuckman (1965), about working groups and teams, focused on group development over time. In general, they found groups go through the following four sequential developmental stages:

- **Forming Stage:**

Group members are not yet performing like a team and their main concerns are "where do I fit in?" Many members are being polite and communication is surface level, and there are no clear leaders or many attempting to provide the leadership role. This is a time for people to feel each other out and determine if they like others. It is important at this point to setup guidelines and mission for working together.

- **Storming Stage:**

The politeness façade is replaced by members trying to determine who would make a good leader given the task required. Many times at this stage conflict will dominate the team's activity. There is usually a power struggle around four issues: "Who is the leader?"; "What is the real task?"; "Differences in personality preferences"; and "A difficulty with someone's style or behavior." (See behaviors that hinder group interaction and effective communication on page 4 of this paper)

- **Consolidate or Norming Stage:**

Team members have shifted their concerns to how they will behave in the group. The operational rules, task and behaviors have been consolidated into a working consensus and the performance is ready to take off. The group moves through this stage when members begin to trust and care for each other.

- **Performing or Maturity Stage:**

- The conflict is resolved, the individuals and the team have agreed upon new ways of relating together, and the team has good relations between members. Communication is open, honest and direct and the team is operating at a high level of performance. Implementation, action and execution become the goals of the group. This is the time you see the group working to achieve common goals on a highly efficient and cooperative basis. Productivity and optimal use of resources and recognition for contributions become the norm for the team. "One for all and all for one" becomes the motto. Group members volunteer for roles that fit their skills and talent. Open and authentic communication and feedback is high and so is task accomplishment.

Conclusion:

- Groups go through stages before they perform well
- Conflict is part of the group formation process
- Maintain your awareness that you are seeing a natural event
- Remember people are people with great diversity in their personalities and communication styles
- Facilitators need to observe and point out patterns of interaction, conflict and success while being committed to let group member's work through and with differences and overcome dependence on the facilitator for direction and leadership. Shared leadership becomes the norm depending on the task at hand.

Internal Group structures and Methods for Operating

Goals—What does the group want to accomplish or your mission as a group

Roles—What part will you play on the team; everyone understands their own job and responsibilities

Norms--In group dynamics a **norm**, is a social rule of how team members need to behave in order to be accepted by the group. If norms are broken conflict will develop and consequences can be poor group productivity or individual isolation or shunning.that is socially enforced.

Methods or procedures-How is the work going to get done? Who is going to record the group recommendations. Procedures and methods for discussing issues are clear to everyone. The procedures are flexible and easily adapted to different situations The methods are consistent and viewed as fair so that everyone can carry out roles and achieve group goals.

In summary, studies would indicate that groups that have successfully achieved goals over an extended period of time are the groups that have members perform task, process and maintenance functions. Here, the group effort is not only directed by its immediate work objectives (task,) but it is also building its own resources and stability for members working together (process and maintenance.) Such a group is able to observe its own process, modify its procedures, and take immediate action to provide relationship or task functions as needed. A group that limits itself only to task functions, however, is often found to be high producing for a short period of time. Such groups, if they fail to deal with the "people" value and concerns, as well as the task itself, soon lose their commitment to achieving the work goals.

Behaviors that Hinder Group Interaction and Communication

1. **JUDGING** – evaluating or judging the other person or his/her ideas. This involves not listening for reasons or explanations, but instead putting the ideas down or implying the other person is wrong.
2. **CONTROLLING** – trying to change or restrict someone's behavior or attitude by imposing a set of values or beliefs on them. A person who engages in this behavior has a high need to be in control of others and the situation.
3. **SUPERIORITY** – communicating a feeling of superiority in position, power, or ability that implies the other person can't be right because of his/her inadequacies. There tends to be a sense of one-upmanship to this approach.
4. **CERTAINTY** – communicating in a manner that implies the person knows all the answers and doesn't need or desire any additional information. There is a high need to be right, even to the point of winning an argument rather than solving a problem.
5. **INDIFFERENCE** – showing a lack of interest or concern for the feelings or welfare of the other person that implies what the other person is saying is unimportant.
6. **MANIPULATING** – communicating with hidden motives in a way that uses others to meet one's own needs. This type of communication has a real "gotcha" feel to it.

Summary Insights:

The way in which a leader or member communicates has a major influence on the climate that exists in the group. It is important to understand how these behaviors contribute to a climate in, which there is increased or reduced willingness to communicate with others. Theoretically, there needs to be a balance between content discussion and task and maintenance focus, with about 80 percent content, 10 percent task process, and 10 percent maintenance process over the life of the group.

