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# Effective Group Meetings and Decision Making

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## AND DECISION MAKING

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Single individuals do much to advance the cause of peace, but much of the work — the decisions, advocacy, planning, and organizing — is handled by groups. In groups we pool our knowledge and abilities, give each other feedback, and tackle problems too overwhelming to face alone. Group members give us emotional and social support and can stimulate us to become more creative, insightful, and committed to our goals. When we work with others who share our values and goals, we often come to understand ourselves, and our objectives, more clearly.

Not every group, however, realizes these positive consequences. Often we dread going to "committee meetings," "council sessions," and "discussion groups." They waste valuable time as discussions get bogged down in side issues. Jokes about drawbacks abound; meetings are "cul-de-sacs to which ideas are lured and then strangled," or sessions where "people keep minutes and waste hours." But groups need not be time-wasting interpersonal traffic jams if members remain mindful of four key processes that can make or break groups: leading, communicating, resolving conflict, and solving problems.

## Leading

Leaders have two basic responsibilities: helping the group accomplish its purpose and satisfying the social and emotional needs of those in the group. Unfortunately, these two duties are often incompatible, particularly during the early stages of a group's life. When the leader must remind members of their responsibilities and push the group to

make difficult choices, members may stop looking to the leader for support. The best leaders, therefore, try to maintain a healthy balance between "getting the job done" and helping members "enjoy themselves." Your leader will have to decide what's most appropriate for your group, but there's one rule of thumb to follow: provide a good deal of task supervision and less emotional support for recently formed groups and more emotional support for older groups (eventually a well-established group will need little if any task structuring).

Obviously leaders can become overburdened if they have to deal with both task supervision and interpersonal needs, especially since they may be incompatible. Leaders, too, if saddled with too many of the group's managerial duties can lose their visionary, planning perspective, and in consequence the group can waste time on unimportant matters. Leaders should therefore share leadership tasks with other group members and members should be willing to take on these duties rather than assume only the leader must lead. For instance, if several members are arguing, others may mediate rather than wait for the regular leader to step in. Similarly, the person who recognizes a communication problem or a point that needs summarizing may temporarily take a leadership role and perform the task. By distributing leadership, everyone can participate more and the leader's responsibilities are reduced.[1]

All group members, but particularly the leader, should prepare for and facilitate collective endeavors:

- *Planning the process:* Leaders should resist the natural impulse to delve into the group's key issues immediately. Instead, they should ask the group to spend time planning how members will work together.

- *Creating an agenda:* Leaders should structure group meetings by developing an agenda and assembling necessary materials (such as handouts and charts), contacting those group members who are supposed to attend, and selecting a decision-making strategy (discussed later in this chapter). Although most meetings are structured so they start with a statement of the meeting's purpose followed by discussion and decision-making, you may decide to modify these procedures. Try to use the time together to make decisions, rather than merely deliver information.

- *Monitoring the discussion:* Keep an eye on both the content of the group's discussion (points raised, ideas offered, questions resolved) and the process (who's talking most, what conflicts are developing, and who's not participating).

- *Guiding the group's discussion:* Improve group communication by summarizing and pulling together information, paraphrasing or restating decisions or action plans upon which you've agreed, and making certain no one person dominates the discussion. Also; keep track of time spent on topics and encourage resolution when necessary. It takes practice to learn the appropriate time for resolution.

In some circumstances, leadership can be distributed another way. When your group accomplishes certain tasks and moves onto other ones, the new focus may lend itself to a change in leadership. If you don't feel the need for a permanent leader for your meetings, a useful attitude toward the role of leadership might be, "Who do we need in this situation to get this particular task done?"[2] Keeping one permanent leader lends stability to the group process and develops at least one experienced leader; sharing leadership encourages new ideas and allows many members to reveal talents otherwise hidden. This sharing approach also assumes that different circumstances create different leadership needs.

## Communicating

Good communication lies at the heart of effective group performance. Active, frequent participation by members, in and of itself, improves performance, but quality counts as well: Speaking frequently when one has little of value to add only slows the group's progress. If discussion shoots off on tangents, if members ignore one another's comments, or if ideas are only sketchily presented, members will go home feeling very little was achieved. Effective communication requires constant attention, but it will become easier if you follow certain guidelines.[3]

- *Preparing.* In some cases you can walk into the meeting room without having given a single thought to what the group will be discussing, but in most cases members should have spent time preparing for the meeting so they can contribute meaningfully to the discussion.

- *Expressing yourself.* In most meetings members communicate orally, and as the air fills with voices the content and intentions of each speaker's ideas can be lost in the noise. Members must therefore be careful to communicate carefully, usually in brief, clear statements. When ideas are particularly complex or novel, ask others if they follow the points you are making.

- *Practicing self-control.* When people note their pet peeves with group discussions many are quick to complain that members often seem to speak to hear their own voices. The group gets too far off the track, and members often speak up well after an issue has been resolved. These problems can be avoided if you speak only when you need to speak and add your own suggestions, statements, and questions at the "right" point in the discussion; timing can be critical.

- *Listening.* Actively listen to what others are saying. Too often people seem to consider meetings a chance to talk endlessly about their pet ideas. Listening is at least as important as talking for a group to work efficiently and effectively. Ask for clarification of statements you don't understand. Follow the discussion carefully, remembering points that have been made while anticipating profitable directions to follow.

- *Drawing in all the group's members.* People meet in groups to capitalize on the talents of skills of the collective, so draw silent participants into the discussion through questioning; be alert to nonverbal signals that someone wants to speak but is holding back or can't seem to get into the conversation.

- *Offering "process remarks."* Members should, as needed, comment on the flow of the group's meeting as well as the content. Acknowledge positive, constructive statements or suggestions that are helping the group accomplish the goal of the discussion. Some of these comments may, as noted below, deal with conflicts emerging in the group.

## Resolving Conflict

Even though your group is working to promote peace in the world, small "wars" may occasionally break out within the group. Conflicts arise from disagreements over basic goals, minor arguments over a particular issue, personality conflicts, and power struggles, but nearly

all can be traced back to competition among the members. Time, resources, and rewards are limited, and in some cases members feel that others' gains are their losses. Conflict therefore becomes less likely when group members adopt a collectivistic orientation that stresses the group's needs over those of the individual.

Even though people are repelled when tensions flair, evidence indicates most groups need some conflict to maintain members' interest. If your group has no conflict, it signals that members are apathetic and that you're examining unintriguing issues. But members shouldn't ignore tensions when they disrupt the group's cohesiveness and productivity. If members gloss over the problem, it may escalate or surface later in a stronger and group-damaging form.

It is not certain, however, that the group's time will be well spent trying to discuss every source of disagreement that arises. When the conflict pertains to matters at hand that must be resolved, discussion is warranted. But when the conflicts arise from clashes of personality or personal dislikes, the group should focus on the work to be done rather than the relationships among members.[4]

## Problem Solving

When you need to make a decision or solve a problem, such as organizing a demonstration or letter-writing campaign, raising funds, or prioritizing goals, your group should make its choice deliberately and mindfully. Although groups reach their decisions in many ways, a functional model recommends moving through four basic stages: Orientation, Discussion, Decision, and Implementation (ODDI).

- *Orientation.* Groups should invest some time in examining the issue itself, being careful to review the fit between the issue and the group's mission. This phase involves exploring the nature of the problem, identifying goals sought, and inventorying the group's talents and available resources. The stage is a good time to consider any ethical concerns that may arise and the solutions to the problem.

- *Discussion.* When groups talk over a problem, they (a) pool the information needed to formulate a decision, (b) identify possible alternatives for action, and (c) debate the relative advantages and

disadvantages of options. If, for example, a group is considering a demonstration, it may be that certain days are bad for members, or that the town won't give permits for certain kinds of demonstrations, or that one member's brother has some loudspeakers the group can borrow, or that there is a celebrity in town who might help out. This information is examined by discussion.

- *Decision.* The group should reach closure on the issue by making a decision. Some methods for making choices are discussed below.
- *Implementation.* After making a decision the group should develop a concrete form of action. Determine who in the group is interested and able to do further planning, implementing, and evaluating of the action. The group may wish to form such a temporary "committee" after the decision step and have it handle 'implementation.

## Making Decisions: Some Techniques

Many groups adopt, without much thought, parliamentary procedures (such as *Robert's Rules of Order*) when making decisions, but efficient groups consider both group and nongroup methods for making choices.

- *Delegation.* Your entire group doesn't have to decide simple routine matters, like where to hold meetings, what kind of stationery to order, or when to mail out a newsletter. Although groups often enjoy discussing such minor issues, face-to-face meetings should be spent discussing larger issues. The leader or a designated group member, after consulting with others, should make decisions when it isn't important for all members to accept a decision, when the issue involved is clear cut, and when an individual member or a committee is competent to make the decision. Delegation is also appropriate when members know little about the issue involved; for example, if you decide to invest in a new computer for the office, seek an expert's advice. Though you might feel you can solve any question through group discussion, your group members may be merely pooling their ignorance and could make a poor decision.
- *Averaging individual inputs.* For some decisions you might have members individually rank a number of available alternatives, and

the leader would then determine the group decision by tallying the rankings for each alternative. If, for example, the group wants to award a community resident for peace efforts, members can individually rank the nominees, and the leader can then total the rankings for each nominee to determine the winner. An averaging approach minimizes interaction, so it should generally be combined with group discussion both before and after the averaging.

- *Voting.* "Let's put it to a vote" is an often-heard comment in groups, with members using a show of hands or a voice signal to indicate approval or disapproval. Although voting can be an appropriate method, when a vote is close some members may feel defeated and alienated, and consequently be less likely to follow through on the decision. Furthermore, voting can lead to internal politicking as members get together before meetings to apply pressures, form coalitions, and trade favors to ensure passage of proposals they favor. Be sensitive to these possibilities, and realize that the voting technique could be the cause. A voting or "averaged inputs" technique becomes more appropriate when the time to decide is limited, when the need for unanimous group acceptance decreases, and when the likelihood for conflict in making the decision increases.

- *Discussion to consensus.* Many groups prefer to discuss matters until a choice gradually emerges so that everyone has a chance to participate and be heard, and no one feels like a loser after the decision is made. Consensus doesn't mean that everyone is unanimous, which would be very difficult much of the time, but that everyone at least goes along with the final decision. Sometimes group members would prefer a different decision but are happy enough if the rest of the group wants something else. Sometimes individuals will even allow the decision of the rest of the group if only their objection is noted in the minutes. Remember, though, that getting all members to agree on a solution is generally time consuming, and if the leader feels a need to rush the discussion, uncertain members may feel their concerns were ignored. Furthermore, unless you stay attuned to the group's processes, decisions can be railroaded through the group by manipulative maneuverings, leader domination, and pressures for

individual members to conform to the general group opinion. Each member has potential veto power over the group's decision and can require the group to listen to uninformed suggestions, irrelevant remarks, and stubbornly held, but rejected viewpoints. Decision making by consensus is most appropriate for matters that require acceptance and support by all (or most all) group members in order to properly implement resulting policy.

- *Brainstorming.* Group members often like to brainstorm to come up with creative solutions to a problem. Brainstorming encourages unrestricted expression of ideas and discourages criticism and evaluation and so is best suited for generating several possible solutions to a problem than to make a final decision. Also, unless your members are highly motivated and practiced in creative decision making, brainstorming may be no more effective in producing good solutions than "averaging inputs" or than the combined output of individuals working alone.

## Group Traps: Pitfalls to Avoid

Group meetings can potentially bring out the best in individuals by helping them work together to produce outputs they never could on their own. Meetings can also stifle the creativity and drive that would otherwise emerge if individuals worked alone. Be wary of problems when working collectively, including polarization, social loafing, and groupthink.

- *Polarization.* Groups don't always extert a moderating effect on members. Instead, groups can trigger a more extreme, or polarized, reaction. If individual members are already leaning a little bit for (or against) a possible solution before a discussion, the group as a whole will move more in that direction during discussion. If at the beginning of a discussion many individual members have lukewarm support for some measure, the arguments presented will generally be in favor of the measure; further positive discussion ensues, and members become more favorable toward the issue. Sometimes this stronger support will reflect members' true beliefs (if the arguments really convinced them) but sometimes it won't (if members felt pressured to conform more in the direction the group seemed to be heading).

The latter possibility is best minimized by the group regularly encouraging open expression of ideas and independence in voting.

- *Social loafing.* When people work in groups they sometimes expend little effort. Knowing others will pick up the slack, or fearing they're working harder than others, people engage in "social loafing."[5] Help group members escape from this trap by letting them know each is making a valuable contribution to the group effort and regularly identifying the inputs of each individual member.

- *Groupthink.* In some cases highly cohesive groups can make very poor decisions as they become increasingly isolated from external pressures and information. This syndrome, known as *groupthink*, is most prevalent in highly cohesive groups working under time pressures to make important decisions where it's frowned upon for anybody to "rock the boat." It involves self-censorship of dissenting ideas, refusal to tolerate disagreement among members, mistaken beliefs that the group cannot fail, belittling of those outside the group, and a tendency to rationalize away problems and shortcomings. To avoid groupthink, a leader should: encourage independent thinking and full discussion of all sides of an issue; appoint a "devil's advocate" whose job is to point out what's wrong with the proposal, a person with the task of seeing how the group may be heading to make a fool of itself; stress that the group is capable of making an unsound decision; and consider breaking the full group into smaller discussion groups, or have independent groups work on the same problem and report back at another meeting.[6]

## Conclusion

Group meetings can potentially bring out the best in individuals by helping them work together to produce outputs they never could on their own. Meetings can also stifle the creativity and drive that would otherwise emerge if individuals worked alone. The ideas presented in this chapter can help you take advantage of a group's strengths while avoiding its weaknesses.

## References

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## Suggested Readings

Forsyth, D. R. (2006). *Group dynamics* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA Wadsworth.
    A comprehensive review of theory and research relevant to group processes. Although empirically focused, it includes chapters dealing with applications to group performance, leadership, and decision making.
Keyton, J. (2002). *Communicating in groups* (2nd ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.
    This book thoroughly examines the interpersonal side of groups, with chapters dealing with communication, experiential learning, increasing awareness, and leadership.
Thompson, L. L. (2004). *Making the team* (2nd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
    A practical guide to creating and using team approaches to enhance productivity.