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A Plan for Small Group Discussion

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Participation Training for Adult Education, written by Indiana University professors Paul Burgevin and John McKinley, describes in detail a unique small group discussion model. Certain aspects of this discussion technique have been found to be quite applicable to community problems that require thorough discussion by citizen groups before decisions are made and action is taken. The procedure allows for a certain amount of flexibility but demands logical thinking and orderly consideration of the items chosen for discussion. In this way, less time is wasted on extraneous matters and the group can better focus on the major issues at hand. Such an adaptation might resemble the following example.

Structure

Let us assume that in the community of Miltonville a group of concerned citizens is convened to consider the depressed economy and its effect on the town. This is a broad and complex subject for discussion. It would be easy to talk all evening and get nowhere, so the group decides to approach the issue in a logical fashion — a bit at a time. From the list of three possible topics dealing with the economy in general, the group chooses the one dealing with the "local" economic situation. The members then set a goal toward which they will work during that particular session — to decide on and pursue a first course of action. In this way they try not to "bite off more than they can chew." As a result of this goal selection, they decide to organize an informal survey to determine the extent of unemployment in Miltonville and the skills now unused in their community.

To conduct this survey, the citizens must further break down the project into logical steps. They must decide what territory to cover, what questions to ask, who will do the leg work, when the survey should be taken, and who will gather and synthesize the data. It soon becomes obvious that carrying out the survey itself will require several meetings and considerable time. However, its successful execution will be an important first step in dealing intelligently with the local economic situation. The group will have acquired some useful and timely information.

Simply, the structure consisted of an agreed upon topic (the local economic situation); a goal to work toward during that session (a first course of action); and an outline (consisting of the steps necessary to reach the goal).

In contrast, a typical approach to this problem has been for the citizens to kill the time in the first meeting with small talk about the economy, to assume that the issue was beyond their capacity to deal with, to give up, and to go home and do nothing about it.

Participation training

In a training situation, more attention is given to "group process" than in the example above. In conducting discussion, authors Burgevin and McKinley recommend the accepted principles of group dynamics: That the group should strive for balance in participation; that members should build on others' suggestions; that all should try to improve their listening habits; and that the rules of common courtesy should be observed.

Selecting a single topic for discussion constitutes a challenge to the group. It requires cooperation and tolerance on the part of the members and ingenuity on the part of the discussion leader.

Roles and leadership

If a group is holding several sessions, it is possible to experiment and practice with the rotation of roles and leadership. Using the Indiana plan, a discussion leader, a recorder and an observer are needed for each session. These roles are taken first by volunteers. Then the duties are rotated through all other members of the group in the subsequent sessions. Then, over a series of meetings, every member will have had the experience of serving in each of these capacities.

The **discussion leader** uses the non-directive method in guiding the interaction. He or she should fade into the background when the group members are obviously working well together without assistance. However, if members hesitate to participate, if one or more dominate the discussion, or if (in the judgment of the discussion leader) the group wanders too far from the chosen topic, the leader must subtly stimulate participation, gently restrain "over participants," or remind the group that the discussion has gone astray. The discussion leader should refrain from offering an opinion on questions about the topic. His or her primary mission is to help the group deal with the topic in a way that draws maximum participation from group members. To a considerable degree, however, this responsibility is also shared by the members themselves.

The **observer** has a unique opportunity for a learning experience. First, he or she must resist the temptation to express an opinion during the discussion period. Second, he or she must not become engrossed in the content of the discussion. Finally, he or she must watch for subtle actions and reactions that affect the group process: sharing in the participation, support (or lack of it) for ideas contributed, indicators of enthusiasm or repression, the quality of listening, and the general emotional atmosphere. When the observer offers a critique, the group must bear in mind that these are reactions of but one individual who is not necessarily infallible. However, the observer is obliged to report sincerely "as he or she saw it." The observer should not impute hidden motives beyond the obvious. The restraint necessary on the one hand, and the need to be alert to the many group process indicators on the other, make the observer's role one of considerable challenge.

The **recorder** is concerned with the content of the discussion. His or her record can be kept in the form of brief highlights (specific points made) or by noting the contributions in following the outline, which was designed to reach the goal. Ordinarily names are not used. The record is kept merely to facilitate logical discussion of the subject. As such it is secondary to the process used in the group. It is entirely in order for the discussion leader or any one of the participants to call for a brief report from the recorder at any time on material covered up to that point or for clarification of an item previously mentioned. If the recorder works at a blackboard or on large sheets of newsprint, there is the advantage of immediate visual review by the group. When using this method, the recorder should be seated (when not actually writing) to minimize distraction from the group discussion. Ordinarily, the recorder is not expected to contribute to the discussion. However, this matter can be left to the judgment of the group. Usually, the larger the group, the more exacting is the task of recording.

Not the least of these important roles is that of **participants**. Burgevin and McKinley place great emphasis on their responsibility. In fact, ultimate control of the conduct of the discussion is actually in the hands of the participants. Consequently, a high degree of dedication to group maturity on the part of the members will greatly assist the discussion leader and recorder and will help to stimulate productive discussion.

Following are more specific directions for those assuming the various helping roles.

Role of the discussion leader

- Guide group along lines of the discussion procedure.
- Help group make necessary decisions.
- Help to obtain balanced participation.
- Make sure that each suggestion is heard and considered.
- Maintain friendly and informal atmosphere.
- Assist group members with any difficulty in communication.
- Keep group working toward stated goal.
- Help members accept criticism of their ideas.
- Help members build on others' ideas.
- Encourage cooperative, over individual, effort.

The discussion leader should not:

- Presume that he or she knows more about the topic than other members.
- Attempt to get the group to accept a particular idea.
- Teach or preach.
- Dominate the discussion.

Role of the observer

Observe and be prepared to comment on:

- Spontaneity of participation.
- Balance of participation.
- Emotional atmosphere.
- Communication difficulties.
- Decision-making procedures.
- Dependency on discussion leader or on other group members.
- Examples of good group process.
- Breaches of good group conduct.
- Quality of listening.
- Presence of conflict and how it is handled.

The observer is concerned primarily with the group process — how the group works — and not what was said in the discussion. The observer often finds it helpful to make a simple sociogram to show frequency and direction of communication.

Role of the recorder

- Help discussion leader interpret and synthesize ideas for quick and brief recording.
- Record topics and ideas in an orderly fashion.
- Record with as little distraction as possible. Help group follow logical procedure.
- Record only main points or highlights of group discussion.
- Be prepared to comment on content of discussion and its progress toward the group's stated goal.
- Refrain from guiding discussion.

Additional sources of information

For further information on this discussion model, contact your local MU Extension community development specialist, or refer to the paper back edition — Burgevin and McKinley, *Participation Training for Adult Education*, Bethany Press, St. Louis.

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- DM403, Developing Effective Study Committees
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