

Group Dynamics

If you've ever wondered about your group's morale, membership participation, how decisions are made and by whom, or how people get along, then you've been affected by "group process." Group process refers to how an organization's members work together and get things done. Typically, organizations spend a great deal of time and energy setting and striving to reach goals but give little consideration to what is happening between and to the group's greatest resource, it's members. While working hard to achieve results, it is critical that member's needs be addressed. Membership in an organization is as much an opportunity to develop self confidence, refine skills and make friends as it is to back a cause, to entertain, raise some money or educate the campus community. All of these can be done simultaneously but most likely won't just happen on their own.

In order to be the most effective leader, you must be aware of what is happening in your group. Not everyone in your group has the same expectations, does the same thing or has the same commitment level. Knowledge about how your group members interact, share common goals and work with one another can help you to integrate newcomers and prepare them or the roles, norms, and cohesiveness of the group.

Roles

Depending on the task, group members will occupy formal and informal roles. With formal roles, a title is helpful in establishing the member's specific duties to the group. Formal roles include:

- President
- Treasurer
- Secretary
- Vice President
- Parliamentarian
- Director

However, there are informal roles such as:

- Worker
- Social leader
- Expert in certain area

It is in these informal roles where a newcomer will need special help in understanding their tasks.

Norms

Norms are the rules of the group. They may be explicit (outwardly stated) or implicit (known only by observation). They tell the group members how to behave or how not to behave in different situations. Newcomers who do not follow these rules may be excluded from the group.

Examples of norms may include:

- How much socializing occurs at meetings?
- How members dress at meetings.
- Whether group members go out together and when.
- Whether meetings start on time or are always 15 minutes late.

Norms may be positive by exerting a sense of order, but they can be negative or cause uncomfortable exclusion from the group. It is your job as a leader to try and change some of the negative group norms and to help newcomers understand positive ones.

Cohesiveness

This refers to all of the forces that cause individuals to remain in groups. High cohesiveness, such as strong liking and close match between individual needs and goals may help the group. It can interfere, however, if the group spends so much time in social interaction that they cannot get any work done. Generally, a sense of esprit de corps helps group performance. A newcomer may have more difficulty fitting in a group that has a very high cohesion level. As leader of the group, you can provide the extra help the newcomer may need in adjusting to the group as well as help established members welcome their newest member.

As a group or team forms, it goes through certain predictable and observable stages, progressing from a loose collection of individuals to a cohesive group working together more or less effectively for a common cause. Each stage poses a challenge to group members and their respective leaders causing certain behaviors to appear. Mastering the behaviors that surface in one stage will allow the group or team to progress to the next stage.

Five Stages of Group/Team Development

Stage 1 – To be or not to Be: the Forming, Orientation, or Familiarity Stage - characterized by group awareness and relationship building. This stage involves the practical and psychological start-up of the team. The challenge of this group stage is to create team identity and make the team important to the group members.

1. Personal relations within the group are characterized by dependency on the leader to provide structure, set goals, clarify values, and develop the group vision/mission.
2. Major task functions concern the orientation of group members to the work they are being asked to do. The issues have to be specified.
3. Common group member behavior at this point is questioning why we are here, what we are supposed to do, how are we going to get it done, and what are our goals?

Appropriate Leadership Style - Leader Directed

Since groups in this phase require definitions of their roles and goals they will need information from the leader about the group's agenda, deadlines, etc. The leader should provide as much structure as possible and become the emotional center of the team.

Specific Leader Actions

You should listen carefully, be visible, maintain open communication/feedback channels for the team, offer support and reassurance, keep group members accountable for day-to-day results, and create team traditions.

Specific Group Member Responsibilities

Group members can help the team building process by accepting the new team identity, by learning the group's mission, and by getting to know one another.

Stage 2 – Here We Stay or Here We Go: The Storming, Confrontive, or Power Stage - characterized by resistance, negativity, ambiguity, and confusion within the group. The varieties of organizational concerns that emerge reflect conflict over leadership structure, power, and authority. The challenge of this group stage is to let everyone be heard and express their feelings

productively, to prevent factions from developing, and to foster creative communication within the team.

1. Personal relations consist of conflict and confrontation among group members and/or the group leader because team members feel comfortable enough to disagree and express their feelings as they get in touch with their own power.
2. It is important that strategies are implemented to help members move constructively from conflict toward renewed commitment to the group. If this does not happen, members may isolate or even remove themselves from the group during this phase.

Appropriate Leadership Style - Leader Directed with a Coaching Leadership Style

Groups in this stage still require a high level of directive supervision, but also need considerable support. The leader must not only serve as mediator, but also as a teacher of group norms and values. The leader also needs to listen to group problems, manage conflicts, encourage participation, provide recognition, and build alliances.

Specific Leader Actions

You need to stay approachable; provide answers, answers, and more answers; repeat key information often; set short-term goals; restate mission, objectives, and priorities; and create opportunities for participation.

Specific Group Member Responsibilities

Group members must focus on the commonalities of the group and not the differences.

Stage 3 – Close to You: The Norming, Constructive, or Resolution Stage - characterized by cooperation and integration within the group. The challenge of this group stage is to channel the skills, energy, and independent spirit of the team members into coordinated work.

1. Personal relations are marked by cohesion; people begin to experience a feeling of groupness. They begin sharing ideas, feelings, giving feedback to each other, soliciting feedback, exploring actions and sharing information related to the task.
2. This stage becomes a period during which people feel good about being a part of a group, and there is a brief abandonment of the task and a period of play --the enjoyment of the cohesion that is being experienced.

Appropriate Leadership Style - Follower Directed with Motivating Leadership Style

Groups in this stage understand the goals and tasks more thoroughly and are willing to work hard to achieve these goals. The leader should work to make the members less dependent on his/her own leadership, but still focus on providing the support people need to mesh their activities productively.

Specific Leader Actions

You must continue to keep members focused and communication channels open, solicit participation, and encourage creative thinking. Be prepared to translate organizational goals into team goals.

Specific Group Member Responsibilities

At this point group members need to master the team skills and become interdependent by removing the leader from the center of everything.

Stage 4 – I've Gotta be Me: The Performing, Production, or Synergy Stage - characterized by productivity, autonomy, unity, and commitment within the group. A collective, interdependent organism is the final outcome of the group development process where the whole of the team is greater than the sum of its respective parts.

1. Personal relations are characterized by interdependence where members can work alone, in any sub-group, or as a total unit. Group members are energetic, enthusiastic, and will often sacrifice for the sake of the team's performance.
2. Group tasks are well defined with a high level of commitment to common activity and support for experimentation with solving problems.

Appropriate Leadership Style - Follower Directed with a Mentoring Leadership Style

Groups in this phase have worked through their adjustments and have become energized by the prospect of achievement. The leader can serve as ambassador/philosopher and take a less active role by allowing the group members to run the day to day business of the group.

Specific Leader Actions

You need to provide resources, remove obstacles, reward high performance, stimulate interaction, emphasize teamwork, and celebrate successes.

Specific Group Member Responsibilities

Group members can help by taking on more of the team's business and letting the team leader operate at the boundaries of the team.

Stage 5 – It's Hard to Say Good-Bye: The Adjourning Stage - characterized by closure of the group/team process. When the team project has been completed or when turnover in an organization occurs due to elections or new member recruitment the group process will end and a new group/team building process will begin.

1. Personal relations will be disengaged.
2. Job tasks will be terminated.

Elements of an organization which typically influence group proceedings include communication, participation, decision making and fulfillment of organizational roles. When observing these specific areas you will likely see several things happening simultaneously. This is to be expected but can also be rather confusing. Initially, you may want to isolate a single aspect of the group. As you become more adept at observation you can gradually increase your areas of focus. Below are listed several questions to ask yourself as you begin observing a group.

Communication

One of the easiest aspects of the group process to observe is the communication pattern. For instance:

- Who talks? For how long? How often?
- At whom do people look at when they speak?
 1. Single-out individuals, possible potential supporters
 2. The group
 3. No one
- Who talks after whom, or who interrupts whom?
- What style of communication is used (assertions, questions, tone of voice, gestures, etc.)?

The kinds of observations we make give us clues to other important things which may be going on in the group, such as who leads whom or who influences whom.

Participation

One indication of involvement is verbal participation and body language. Look for differences not only in the amount of participation among members; but also the manner, style or tone in which they participate. For example:

- Who are the high participators? Who are the low participators?

- Do you see any shift in participation (e.g., highs become quiet; lows suddenly become talkative)? What are possible reasons for this in the group's interactions?
- How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted (e.g., consent, disagreement, disinterest, fear, etc.)?
- Who talks to whom? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
- Who keeps the ball rolling? Why? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?

Decision Making

Many kinds of decisions are made in groups without considering the effects of these decisions on the other 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. For instance:

- Does anyone make a decision and carry it out without checking with other group members (self-authorized)? Does s/he decide on the topic to be discussed and immediately begin to talk about it? What affect does this have on other group members?
- Does the group drift from topic to topic, and if so who topic-jumps? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
- Who supports other members' suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in the two members deciding the topic or activity for the group? How does this affect the other group members?
- Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a decision through over other members' objections? Do they often call for a vote (majority support)?
- Is there any attempt to get all members participating in a decision (consensus)? By whom?
- Does anyone make any contributions which do not receive any kind of response or recognition? Why?

Organization Roles

A variety of crucial roles need to be filled to ensure group goal accomplishment and success.

There are three basic types of group roles in an organization:

Task Roles- are primarily expressed or emerge when members are trying to accomplish the group tasks. Examples: initiator-contributor, information seeker and giver, elaborator, orientator, energizer, recorder.

- **Maintenance Roles-** emerge or are oriented toward improving the relationships among group members. Examples: encourager, harmonized, compromiser.
- **Self Oriented Roles-** when an individual group member has a specific need these roles emerge and focus on that personal need regardless of group concerns. Examples: aggressor, recognition or power seeker, dominator, blocker, distracter.

Group leaders should be aware that sometimes these various organization roles may be dysfunctional in nature, especially if they emerge at inappropriate times during the group process. Your leadership role is to help the group members effectively make the transition from dysfunctional group member to supporting or functional group member. Process observation requires patience and the ability to focus on everyone in the group. Attention to these questions and roles can help you to better understand how the group is affecting its members and vice versa.

Dysfunctional Behaviors in Groups

- Cutting off others
- Attacking people rather than issues
- Topic jumping
- Withholding reactions, feelings or information
- Dominating
- Attending to side issues -nitpicking
- Side grouping –side conversations
- Avoiding responsibility
- Operating on assumptions – “not checking it out ”

Helpful Behaviors in Groups

- Seek to make each person welcome
- Ask or comments from those reacting nonverbally
- Encourage each to listen to others
- Request that all state their feelings
- Give positive feedback or support
- Involve everyone – ask for everyone’s reactions
- Keep relationships honest and supportive
- Maintain a sense of freedom and mutual responsibility
- Listen to those who speak
- Encourage group members to state their opinions
- Avoid direct argument with a group member
- Ask individuals to try something –never insist
- Use inclusive language (i.e. “we ”)
- Exhibit “Sharing Behavior ” (offer rides, bring snacks)

Duties of a Leader within a Group

- As a student leader, it is your job to stimulate and promote goal-oriented thinking and behavior. Make people feel strong (help them feel that have the ability to influence their future and their environment).
- Structure cooperative relationships rather than competitive.
- Build members’ trust in the leader (lack of mutual trust means lack of faith in the system).
- Resolve conflicts by mutual confrontation of issues rather than avoidance or forcing a particular solution.

What to Look for in Groups

- Who are the high participators?
- Who are the low participators?
- What are the greeting behaviors? Do they serve to bond the group?
- Who talks to whom?
- Early arrival and late departure phenomenon –do people want to spend time together?
- Who keeps the ball rolling? And why?
- How are the silent people treated? And how is their silence interpreted?

Effective organizations take a close look at how members work together, which roles they fill and whether members are contributing equally. Group process observation and analysis can help identify problems early thus hopefully alleviating the need for a major overhaul as the year progresses. Your vantage point as a group member provides a great opportunity to regularly observe how things are going. Depending on the frequency of meetings and an understanding of what to look for, you can be instrumental in ensuring group and individual success.