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## Effective Group Meetings and Decision Making

Donelson R. Forsyth

An extraordinary amount of work and many types of decisions are handled by groups of people, for in group meetings we can pool our knowledge and abilities, give each other feedback about our ideas, and tackle problems that would overcome us if we faced them alone. Group members not only give us emotional and social support when meeting together, but they can stimulate us to become more creative, more insightful, and more committed to our goals.

Not every group, however, realizes all these positive consequences. Often we dread going to "committee meetings," "council sessions," and "discussion groups" because they take up too much valuable time as discussions get bogged down in side issues. Jokes about the drawbacks of group meetings abound; meetings are characterized as "cul-de-sacs to which ideas are lured and then strangled," or sessions where "men and women keep minutes and waste hours." Certainly there can be negative as well as positive aspects to group meetings; my hope is that this chapter can help you draw on the advantages and avoid as many of the disadvantages as possible.

During the course of any group meeting a whole host of fascinating processes unfolds. I want to focus here on four of the most critical: *leadership*, *communication*, *conflict*, and *problem solving*.

### *Leadership*

Research indicates that leaders have two basic responsibilities:

helping the group accomplish the purpose of the meeting, and satisfying the social and emotional needs of those participating. [1] Unfortunately, evidence also indicates that these two duties are sometimes incompatible. For example, if you must constantly remind participants about their tasks during the meeting, then they may stop looking to you 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 is most appropriate for your group, but there is 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. One solution to this problem is distributive leadership. 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.

All group members, then, but particularly the leader, should take steps to prepare for and facilitate meetings:

- Establish a timetable for moving through the phases of group projects, while also determining how often the group needs to hold meetings (the group should meet only when necessary).

- 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.

- Monitor group discussions, noting both content (points raised, ideas offered, questions resolved) and process (who is talking most, what conflicts are developing, and who is not participating).

- Improve group communication by summarizing and pulling

together information, paraphrasing or restating decisions or action plans upon which you have agreed, and making certain that no one person dominates the discussion. Also, keep track of time spent on topics, and encourage resolution when necessary (it takes practice to learn what is the appropriate time for resolution).

In some circumstances, leadership can be distributed in an additional 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.

### *Communication*

Good communication lies at the heart of effective group performance. While active, frequent participation by members, in and of itself, improves performance, members should also strive to maintain clarity in their communications. If discussion shoots off on tangents, if members ignore one another's comments, and if ideas are only sketchily presented, then your 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]

- Make your statements brief and clear.
- Try to add your own suggestions, statements, and questions at the "right" point in the discussion; timing can be critical.
- Make long and more formal presentations interesting by using imaginative phrasings, colorful analogies, and eye-catching visual aids.
- 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 that you do not understand.

- 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.

- Sensitively explore sources of disagreement and tension, rather than avoiding them.

- Acknowledge positive, constructive statements or suggestions which are helping the group accomplish the goal of the discussion.

- Follow the discussion carefully, remembering points that have been made while anticipating profitable directions to follow.

### *Conflict*

Even though your group is working for peace, small "wars" may occasionally break out within the group. Conflicts arise from many sources; disagreements over basic goals, minor arguments over a particular issue, personality conflicts, and power struggles between leaders seem to be inevitable for groups.

However, for most groups conflict becomes a major problem only if you try to ignore it. As researchers have found, conflict tends to "clear the air" and leaves members more united once its source is dealt with. If, however, your members try to gloss over the problem, then it merely escalates and may surface later in a stronger and group-damaging form. [4] Indeed, evidence indicates that most groups need some conflict to maintain members' interest; if your group has no conflict, it signals that members are apathetic, and that you are examining unintriguing issues. Overall, conflict is a healthy group process that enlivens group interactions. The chapters in Section IV of this book will be particularly useful to you if conflict is becoming more destructive than constructive.

### *Problem-solving*

When you need to plan a course of action — organizing a demonstration, correcting a financial difficulty, increasing your membership — there are some basic steps you can take to plan what to do. [5] (1) Define the problem: what is the situation now and what do you want to happen? (2) Take an inventory of talents and resources already available to your group. (3) Search for relevant facts and/or possible external resources: if you're planning 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 that the group can borrow, or that there is a celebrity in town who might help out. (4) Generate possible alternatives for action. (5) Discuss and debate the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative. (6) Decide on the best alternative. (7) Develop a concrete form of action. (8) Determine who in the group is interested and able to do further planning, implementing and evaluating of the action (depending on the nature of the action, you may wish to form such a temporary "committee" after step 3 and have it do the remaining steps on its own). A more detailed outline of a strategy for planning direct political action is described in Chapter 19.

### *Making Decisions: Some Techniques*

Some of the most important products your group creates will be decisions: judgments about what goals to most actively pursue, choices about group leadership, and the plans that are determined by the problem-solving method just discussed. Here are several different decision-making methods, along with a discussion of some of their advantages and disadvantages.

*Delegating decisions.* 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 delegation takes some responsibility away from members, it leaves them more time to spend discussing larger issues. Use delegation when it isn't important for all members to accept a decision, when the issue(s) involved is (are) clear-cut, and when an individual member (or a committee) is competent to make the decision. [6] Delegation is also appropriate when members know little about the issue involved; for example, if you decide to invest in a word processing computer, first 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 on a subject 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. Chapter 11 describes one particular averaging method, the Nominal Group Technique, and how it can be applied to deciding on a group's basic goals. An averaging approach minimizes interaction, so it should generally be combined with group discussion both before and after the averaging.

*Voting.* Many groups follow parliamentary procedure (such as *Robert's Rules of Order*) for voting. 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.

*Brainstorming.* You might try brainstorming to come up with creative solutions to a problem. Brainstorming can generate a wide range of solutions by encouraging unrestricted expression of ideas, while discouraging criticism and evaluation. Brainstorming is better used to generate several possible solutions to a problem than to make a final decision. Also, unless your members are really motivated to come up with good ideas and are 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. [7]

*Discussion to consensus.* Discussion to consensus — the unanimous agreement of all members — is in some respects an ideal procedure: everyone has a chance to participate and be heard, and no one feels like a loser after the vote is taken. However, discussion to consensus does have its drawbacks. 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. For instance, there is a tendency for consensus decisions to become more "polarized" after a discussion: 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. [3] 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 will not (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.

Finally, with a consensus technique, each individual member wields much power and can radically affect the progress of discussion. Although this can be positive, it can also work against the group. 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 resultant policy. 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. [6]

#### *Avoid Groupthink in Decision-Making*

No matter what method of decision-making you choose, stay attuned to the phenomenon known as groupthink — a deterioration of decision-making quality that results from strong ingroup pressures to conform. [8] Groupthink is most prevalent in highly cohesive groups working under time pressures to make important decisions. It involves self-censorship of dissenting ideas, refusal to tolerate disagreement among members, mistaken beliefs that the group cannot fail, derogation 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 "devil's advocates"; 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).

### 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, in part, help you take advantage of a group's strengths, while averting its weaknesses.

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### Suggested Readings

Zander, A. (1982). *Making groups effective*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Written by one of the leading researchers and theorists in group dynamics, this book offers a series of useful suggestions for improving groups.

Forsyth, D.R. (1983). *An introduction to group dynamics*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole. This book reviews theory and research

relevant to group processes. Although empirically focused, it includes chapters dealing with applications to group performance, leadership, and decision-making.

Luft, J. (1984). *Group process*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield. This is an examination of the interpersonal side of groups, with chapters dealing with group development, experiential learning, increasing awareness, and leadership.