

GROUP DYNAMICS

INTRODUCTION:

A synergistic approach to team decision making will create an environment conducive to excellence and good morale in an organization. Members of effective teams who share their talents and recognize the value of each individual will view their differences as benefits rather than threats.

Class participation in a group exercise will demonstrate how differing styles and personalities of each person in the group can contribute to a complementary team. Pitfalls in team decision making will be reviewed.

GOAL:

The goal of this module is for you to:

- gain ideas about incorporating individual strengths into spouse organizations and other activities
- use principles of group dynamics to enhance group interaction

READINGS:

- Characteristics of Effective Groups, page 5
- Realities of Group Dynamics, page 7
- Effective Meetings, page 12

***“If a man does not keep pace with his companions,
perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer.
Let him step to the music which he hears,
however measured or far away.”***

Henry David Thoreau

TOPIC OUTLINE

1. Introduction
2. Farmer's Exercise
 - debrief of Farmer's Exercise
 - lessons learned
3. Concept of Synergy
4. Define Groupthink
5. Characteristics of Effective Groups
6. Realities of Group Dynamics
7. Steps for Effective Meetings

SYNERGY

What is synergy? As Covey states in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Habit 6, “Simply defined, it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

When synergy is in action, group members often come up with ideas and solutions that none would have thought of independently.

Keys to Synergy:

- A common purpose
- Accepting differences
- Understanding differences
- Valuing differences
- Celebrating differences
- Trust

Blocks to Synergy:

- Power
- Egos
- Fear
- Cliques
- Resistance to change

GROUPTHINK

“Groupthink”, the term coined by Irving L. Janis, is defined as “a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment that results from in-group pressures.” Groupthink is a potential result of over-conformity and high levels of cohesion within decision-making groups.

The eight symptoms of the groupthink syndrome are:

- An illusion of invulnerability, shared by most or all of the members, which creates excessive optimism and encourages taking extreme risks.
- Collective efforts to rationalize in order to discount warnings which might lead the members to reconsider their assumptions before they recommit themselves to their past policy decisions.
- An unquestioned belief in the group’s inherent morality, inclining the members to ignore the ethical or moral consequences of their decisions.
- Stereotyped views of enemy leaders as too evil to warrant genuine attempts to negotiate, or as too weak or stupid to counter whatever risky attempts are made to defeat their purposes.
- Direct pressure on any member who expresses strong arguments against any or the group’s stereotypes, illusion, or commitments, making clear that this type of dissent is contrary to what is expected of all loyal members.
- Self-censorship of deviations from the apparent group consensus, reflecting each member’s inclination to minimize to himself the importance of his doubts and counter-arguments.
- A shared illusion of unanimity concerning judgments conforming to the majority view (partly resulting from self-censorship of deviations, and further supported by the false assumption that silence means consent).
- The emergence of self-appointed mind guards-members who protect the group from adverse information that might shatter their shared complacency about the effectiveness and morality of their decisions.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE GROUPS

1. The “atmosphere,” which can be sensed in a few minutes of observation, tends to be informal, comfortable, relaxed. There are no obvious tensions. It is a working atmosphere in which people are involved and interested. There are no signs of boredom.
2. There is a lot of discussion in which virtually everyone participates, but it remains pertinent to the task of the group. If the discussion gets off the subject someone will bring it back in short order.
3. The task or the objective of the group is well understood and accepted by the members. There will have been free discussion of the objective at some point until it was formulated in such a way that the members of the group could commit themselves to it.
4. The members listen to each other! The discussion does not have the quality of jumping from one idea to another unrelated one. Every idea is given a hearing. People do not appear to be afraid of being foolish by putting forth a creative thought even if it seems fairly extreme.
5. There is a disagreement. The group is comfortable with this and shows no signs of having to avoid conflict or to keep everything on a plane of sweetness and light. Disagreements are not suppressed or overridden by premature group action. The reasons are carefully examined, and the group seeks to resolve them rather than dominate the dissenter.

On the other hand, there is no “tyranny of the minority.” Individuals who disagree do not appear to be trying to dominate the group or to express hostility. Their disagreement is an expression of a genuine difference of opinion, and they expect a hearing in order that a solution may be found.

Sometimes there are basic disagreements, which cannot be resolved. The group finds it possible to live with them, accepting them but not permitting them to block its efforts. Under some conditions, action will be deferred to permit further study of an issue between members. On other occasions, where the disagreement cannot be resolved and action is necessary, it will be taken but with open caution and recognition that the action may be subject to later reconsideration.

6. Most decisions are reached by a kind of consensus in which it is clear that everybody is in agreement and willing to go along. However, there is little tendency for individuals who oppose the action to keep their opposition private and thus let an apparent consensus mask real disagreement. Formal voting is at a minimum; the group does not accept a simple majority as a proper basis for action.

7. Criticism is frequent, frank, and relatively comfortable. There is little evidence of personal attack, either openly or in a hidden fashion. The criticism has a constructive flavor in that it is oriented toward removing any obstacle that faces the group and prevents it from accomplishing its goals.

8. People are free in expressing their feelings as well as their ideas both on the problem and on the group's operation. There is little pussyfooting, there are few "hidden agendas." Everybody appears to know quite well how everybody else feels about any matter under discussion.

9. When action is taken, clear assignments are made and accepted.

10. The chairman of the group does not dominate it, nor on the contrary, does the group defer unduly to him/her. In fact, as one observes the activity, it is clear that the leadership shifts from time to time, depending on the circumstances. Different members, because of their knowledge and experience, are in a position at various times to act as "resources" for the group. The members utilize them in this fashion and they occupy leadership roles while they are thus utilized.

There is little evidence of a struggle for power as the group operates. The issue is not who controls but how to get the job done.

11. The group is self-conscious about its own operations. Frequently, it will stop to examine how well it is doing or what may be interfering with its operation. The problem may be a matter of procedure, or it may be an individual whose behavior is interfering with the accomplishment of the group's objectives. Whatever it is, it gets open discussion until a solution is found.

REALITIES OF GROUP DYNAMICS

Floundering:

Teams often have trouble getting started, moving from step to step, and finishing. They flounder, wondering what to do next.

Possible causes of a team floundering:

- People with little or no prior team experience.
- A team charter that lacked a lot of specifics (intentional or unintentional).
- An overly optimistic assessment of the team's ability and willingness.

These are some ways to help a team stop floundering:

- Get the group to look critically at how the project is being run.
- Refocus on the objective.
- Evaluate the plan to ensure it will meet the objective.
- Reserve time at the next meeting to tackle a review of the plan.
- Evaluate the problems. Prioritize them, and define assignments for their resolution.

Overbearing Participants:

Some members wield a disproportionate amount of influence in a group, either through a position of authority, or by their expertise.

Some of the reasons team members may be overbearing:

- Insecure about team recommendations that may affect control over a personal domain or empire.
- Concerned about loss of expert power as team gains experience and knowledge in his or her area of expertise.

Some ways to handle overbearing participants:

- Reinforce the agreement that no area or opinion is sacred; the team may explore any alternatives.
- Get all members, including authority figures, to agree to defined methods of process and decision making in advance.
- Talk to the offending participant off-line and ask for cooperation and patience.

Dominating Participants:

Some members simply talk too much. They have something to say about everything and would rather listen to themselves than learn from others.

Possible negative effects of a dominating team member:

- Innovative ideas may be lost if others do not get an opportunity to participate.
- Some team members may get discouraged and stop actively participating by making excuses for missing meetings.
- Meetings go too long and accomplish too little.

Some ways to limit the effects of dominating participants include the following:

- Structure the discussion process to encourage equal participation. (e.g., Pass the buck (any object) around the table so that each member speaks in turn on a subject. They may “pass” if they like, but at least they have the opportunity. A time limit can be added.)
- List “balance of participation” as a general concern to critique during meeting evaluation and let the team provide ideas to resolve it.
- Practice gate-keeping: “At this point, I’d like to receive some input from someone that we haven’t heard from yet.”

Silent Participants:

Many times teams have one or two members who seldom speak at all. They may have good ideas, but they are not being brought out.

How to draw out silent participants:

- Lay down ground rules for meetings and discussion participation.
- Make it a habit to go around the room to ensure participation.
- Have everyone bring written suggestions to each meeting.

The following are some ways to bring reluctant members into fuller participation:

- Divide the task into individual assignments and have everyone report on their issue.
- Assign the reluctant member to an active role in team or project leadership.

Unquestioned Acceptance of Opinions:

Some team members present ideas forcefully, and sometimes teams base their confidence in “assumptions” that might have little basis in fact.

To handle this type of situation, the following are possible methods:

- There is an old standing rule of debate that says if a speaker presents something as fact without legitimate supporting evidence, the listener need not have evidence to respond with skepticism.
- Ask: “Do you have data? How do you know that is true?”
- Suggest the issue be accepted temporarily, but that data be collected or provided. Or, suggest that the issue or opinion be tabled until data can be provided.

Rush to Accomplishment:

Our “can do” attitude often drives a “do something” mentality bent on action before analysis. Too much of this pressure can lead a group in a series of random, unsystematic efforts to make improvements. Acting too quickly on invalid data leaves little hope for a good solution to a problem.

Here are some ways you can moderate this tendency:

- Work off-line with the “rusher,” using the techniques of constructive feedback.
- Discuss the issue as a team problem for resolution.

Attributions:

Sometimes people tend to attribute negative motives to others when they disagree or do not understand their opinion or behavior. This can lead to hostility and resentment.

The following are some ways to moderate this tendency:

- Seek real explanations for disagreement. Use methods of conflict resolution.
- “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (Stephen Covey)

Do not let it continue. If necessary during the meeting, but certainly after the meeting, investigate and begin resolution.

Discounts and Plops:

Sometimes an idea important to a team member is presented, but is discounted by others, or just “plops” with no one bothering to even acknowledge it. This can cause the member to feel discounted and can even generate hostility.

The following are some methods to counter a discounting, or a “plop” situation:

- Support the discounted person. Every member’s ideas are important and must be treated with respect.
- Include team training in active listening and other constructive behaviors early in the team’s life.
- Address every idea. Perhaps the rest of the team did not hear it clearly or missed the meaning.
- Ask for a rephrasing. Help the member identify and articulate what is important. Even if the presented concept does not fit the current context, there may be an important concept or need behind it.

- Talk off-line with anyone who frequently discounts others. Use constructive feedback techniques.

Tangents and Digressing:

Often meetings get off track. They begin by pursuing the main objective, but get sidetracked quickly and waste tremendous amounts of time and energy on other issues.

- Deal with it after the meeting or shelve it until the next meeting.
- Ask the presenting person to help you look into it before the next meeting.
- Look for some team consensus as to what to do when the team wanders off the topic at hand:

The following are some things to do when the team wanders off the topic at hand:

- Use a written agenda with a time estimate for each item. Have a timekeeper responsible for reminding the group of time.
- The team leader should maintain the focus on the current objective. Either deal with side issues quickly, or record them for analysis and later resolution
- After the meeting, the team leader can deal with or delegate the issue off-line, or schedule team time with proper data and personnel to deal with it.

Feuding Team Members:

Sometimes team members bring their negative baggage with them to meetings. Members who have other conflicts may destroy the team's potential with their personal feuds.

The following are some ways to handle feuding members:

- When confrontation occurs during the meeting, halt the confrontation as diplomatically as possible.
- Discuss the issue off-line as appropriate to the situation.

STEPS FOR EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

Plan:

Purpose _____

Attendees (responsibilities) _____

Location _____

Time _____

Preparation _____

Seating/Room Arrangement _____

Develop Agenda _____

Conduct Using Ground Rules:

Attendance _____

Promptness _____

Meeting Place and Time _____

Participation from All _____

Basic Conversational Courtesies _____

Assignments for Group _____

Breaks _____

Interruptions _____

Rotation of Routine Chores _____

Agendas, Minutes, Record/Documentation _____

Roles _____

EFFECTIVE DISCUSSION SKILLS

Clarification – if you don't understand the logic in a person's arguments, ask someone to define the purpose, focus, or limits of the discussion.

Encourage/Discourage – equal participation among attendees by slowing down dominating members of the group and creating openings for less aggressive members by directly asking their opinions or requesting input.

Listening – actively explore one another's ideas rather than debating or defending each idea that comes up.

Summarize – occasionally compile what's been said and restate it to the group in summary form. Follow a summary with a question to check for agreement.

Contain Digression – do not permit overlong examples or irrelevant discussion.

Manage Time – if portions of the agenda run over on time, remind the attendees of deadlines and time allotments so work can be either accelerated or postponed, or time re-budgeted appropriately.

Close Discussion – learn to tell when there is nothing to be gained from further discussion. Bring the discussion to closure and decide on the issue.

Test for Consensus – summarize the group's position on an issue, state the decision that seems to have been made, and check whether or not the team agrees with the summary.

Evaluate Discussion/Meeting Process – throughout the discussion, ask, "Are we getting what we want from this discussion? If not, what can we do differently in the remaining time?"

Identify Follow-Up Activities – identify action items and assign each item to a person or group with a deadline for completing the action. Draft the agenda for the next meeting at the end of the current meeting.

SAMPLE AGENDA

USS Underway Family Readiness Group Meeting Agenda Start at 7:00 p.m. Moorings Housing Community Center		
Item	Responsible	Time
Opening Remarks	FRG President	5 min
Meet & Greet New Members - Icebreaker	Membership Chairperson	10 min
Old Business - Review & approve last month's minutes	FRG Secretary	7 min
Treasurer Report - Status of accounts	FRG Treasurer	5 min
News from the Command	USS Underway Command Family Ombudsman	10 min
Fundraising Committee Report - Status of deployment t-shirt sale - Solicitations for single sailor barracks	Fundraising Committee Chairperson	7 min
Social Committee Report - Plans for Homecoming - Sign painting party - Sign up for cookie committee - Single Sailor "adoption"	Social Committee Chairperson	30 min
Guest Speaker – How to deal with Media on the Pier	Public Affairs Officer	15 min
End at 8:30 We're Over the Hump!		

SAMPLE MEETING RECORD

Meeting Number _____ Location _____ Date _____

1. Purpose

2. Attendees

3. Short summary of action items, decisions, or conclusions and next steps: (Also see attached "Action Item Sheet.")

4. Evaluation:
Good Points

Needs Improvement

5. Next Meeting:

Date _____

Time _____

Location _____

6. Attachments: Agenda and Action Item Sheet

Recorder's Printed Name and Signature

ACTION ITEM SHEET

Next Steps:

Item:

Action/Person Responsible/Due Date:

Next Steps:

Item:

Action/Person Responsible/Due Date:

Next Steps:

Item:

Action/Person Responsible/Due Date:

Next Steps:

Item:

Action/Person Responsible/Due Date:

Next Steps:

Item:

Action/Person Responsible/Due Date: