

Group Dynamics

Group Discussion is a goal-oriented form of communication. It is the face-to-face communication of a small number of people who meet for a specific purpose, such as to arrive at a decision, to brainstorm ideas, to share information, or to solve a problem.

In planning a group discussion, it is important to consider the *who*, *where*, and *when* of the meeting. Five to seven people are enough to stir up a lively discussion but not so many that members will feel uncomfortable. Also, an odd number of members prevents tied votes, or deadlocks.

Planning a Group Discussion

Planning an effective discussion means thinking about and dealing with several parts of the discussion:

- **Purposes for a discussion** may include:
 - to arrive at a solution to a problem
 - to brainstorm ideas
 - to make a decision
 - to make plans
 - to negotiate agreements
 - to resolve conflicts
 - to stimulate thought or action
- **Common “formats” for discussion**
 - A free-form format is used when members discuss a topic at will in no particular order.
 - A moderated free-form format is used when a moderator (leader) introduces the topic to be discussed and recognizes individuals to speak.
 - An ad hoc committee format is used when a group is formed to study a single issue or to accomplish a single task.
 - A round-table format is used when each member of a group discussion gives a brief report on some aspect of a topic and then the group as a whole discusses the separate reports
- **Choosing a Discussion topic** – Without a topic, there is nothing to discuss.
 - Choose an interesting topic. The topic should be interesting to all or most members of the discussion group.
 - Choose a topic about which group members are informed. The members of the discussion group should know enough about the topic to be able to make a valuable contribution to the discussion.
 - Choose a significant topic. Members should feel that time spent discussing the topic is time well spent.
 - Choose a properly limited topic. The topic should be narrow enough to be dealt with effectively in the time available.
- **Wording a Discussion Question**—Once you have chosen the topic for your group discussion, you will need to phrase, or word, the topic as a question. A well-phrased question should meet the following requirements:
 - The question’s wording should be clear and concise. If the wording is vague, the group will not know what it is trying to achieve or how to proceed.
 - The question’s wording should promote objective discussion. If the wording is subjective, it could sway the group to reach the answer or solution implied by the question.
 - The question’s wording should allow for more than a yes or no answer. If the wording requires only a yes or no answer, the group may not fully discuss all the issues of the topic.
- **Types of Discussion Questions**
 - A **question of fact** asks for evidence that can be gathered from observation, experimentation, or authoritative sources to determine what is true.

- A **question of value** asks for an evaluation of one or more persons, places, things, or ideas and often contains words such as *effective*, *good*, *worthy*, *better*, or their opposites. To answer a question of value, a group must make a judgment.
- A **question of policy** asks what action, if any, should be taken and often includes the word *should*. By far the greatest number of questions examined by discussion groups in everyday situations are questions of policy.
- **Preparing an Outline**—A discussion outline usually consists of questions about the topic that the group members should address. Following the main points of the outline will help group members avoid straying from the topic and their purpose.
 - **Outline for questions of fact** should ask group members:
 1. to define key words
 2. to find information that supports the definitions
 3. to determine what circumstances might affect the answer
 - **Outline for questions of value** should ask group members:
 1. to determine the criteria, or standards of value, for making the judgment
 2. to determine the information relevant to the discussion question
 3. to match the information with the criteria
 4. to determine what circumstances might affect the decision
 - **Outline for questions of policy**—These steps are particularly useful if the group purpose is to solve a problem. Group members should
 1. define the problem
 2. analyze the problem
 3. suggest possible solutions
 4. select the best solution
 5. suggest ways of carrying out the solution

Because no two discussion questions are the same, no two outlines will follow exactly the same format. Every outline should help the discussion group to:

- ✓ define key terms
- ✓ present relevant information
- ✓ address all relevant facets of the question
- ✓ allow for opposing views
- ✓ conclude with a tangible outcome

Styles of Leadership

Laissez-faire (nondirective) leadership—

Description—responsibilities are shared by all members of the group

Advantages—works well if several members assume the leadership role

Disadvantages—may not provide sufficient guidance

Authoritarian (directive) leadership—

Description—responsibilities are given to one leader

Advantages—works well if time is short and all members want or need total direction

Disadvantages—can be oppressive, create resentments, and hinder communication

Democratic (supportive) leadership—

Description—leader suggests procedures, asks other members for ideas

Advantages—works well if members are willing to contribute

Disadvantages—may take too long; can be ineffective if members do not contribute

A Leader's Role

A Leader's Role usually includes some or all of the following:

- Introduces the discussion question and reviews the tentative outline. The leader presents any essential background information and moderates a brief discussion of key terms related to the discussion question.
- Keeps the discussion moving by having a prepared list of questions that are related to the group's outline and encourages others to contribute their own ideas, facts, and opinions. The leader also summarizes when the group reaches a decision or agreement.
- Moderates the discussion by making sure that everyone has an equal chance to participate. The leader recognizes speakers, draws out reactions from members who have not contributed, and moderates exchanges between members. This may mean calming tensions that arise, sometimes even breaking in before individuals become angry.
- Keeps the discussion on track when a group discussion veers off course by steering the conversation back to questions and issues at hand.
- Concludes the discussion by summarizing what has been said or taking a final vote (if that is required). It is the leader's responsibility to summarize the major points made during the entire discussion then give members a chance to comment on the summary. It may then be necessary to modify the summary.

A Participant's Guidelines in Group Discussions

- Be Prepared
- Listen carefully
- Keep an open mind
- Share information objectively
- Ask questions
- Try to help the group stay on track
- Evaluate information that is presented
- Respect others' views
- Cooperate
- Speak loudly and clearly enough for everyone to understand
- Understand and carry out the responsibilities of leadership
- Identify and help manage conflict

Consider this as a Participant:

Encourage members to react to your ideas.

Questions like "Was I clear?" "What do you think about what I just said?" and "Do you have any questions?" indicate that you want feedback.

Offer reasons for what you say. Make sure you take into account what other people are thinking Aristotle said, "The fool tells me his reasons—the wise man persuades me with my own."

There are many different roles that exist and they seem to fall into three major categories:

- **Task roles** are those that help the group accomplish a specific task.
 - ❑ Initiator—suggests new ideas and proposes solutions
 - ❑ Opinion Seeker—looks for options; seeks ideas and suggestions from others
 - ❑ Coordinator—organizes the various activities of team members and shows relationships between ideas
 - ❑ Energizer—stimulates the group to a higher level of activity
 - ❑ Recorder/Secretary—keeps a record of group actions

- ❑ Information Giver—offers facts or generalizations to the group
- ❑ Information Seeker—asks for information about the task; seeks data
- ❑ Evaluator—measures decisions against group goals
- ❑ Spokesperson—speaks on behalf of the group
- ❑ Planner—prepares timelines, schedules, and organizes group logistics
- **Social roles** are those more concerned with team growth and cohesiveness.
 - ❑ Encourager—praises the ideas of others; warmly receptive to other points of view and contributions
 - ❑ Volunteer—offers whatever is needed
 - ❑ Group Observer—keeps records of group activities and uses this information to offer feedback to the group
 - ❑ Compromiser—moves the group to another position that is favored by all group members by coming “halfway”
 - ❑ Gatekeeper—keeps communication channels open by encouraging or facilitating the participation of others or by proposing regulation of the flow of communication
 - ❑ Standard Setter—suggests standards or criteria for the group to achieve. Standards may apply to the quality of the group process or limitations on acceptable individual behavior within the group.
 - ❑ Summarizer—raises questions about the direction which the group discussion is taking by summarizing what has been discussed and showing where it deviates from group objectives
 - ❑ Reality Tester—subjects group accomplishments to a set of standards for the group. This role examines the “practicality,” or the “logic” behind a suggestion of group discussion.
 - ❑ Mediator—mediates the differences between group members. Attempts to reconcile disagreements, and relieves tension in conflict situations.
- **Dysfunctional roles** block effective group communication
 - ❑ Aggressor—attacks other group members, deflates the status of others and shows aggressive behaviors
 - ❑ Blocker—resists movement by the group
 - ❑ Recognition Seeker—calls attention to him or herself
 - ❑ Self confessor—seeks to disclose non-group related feelings or opinions
 - ❑ Dominator—asserts control over the group by manipulating other group members
 - ❑ Help seeker—tries to gain the sympathy of the group
 - ❑ Non-participator—chooses not to participate in group discussions
 - ❑

The role a person plays largely depends on their personality, preferences, and abilities. A person may fill more than one role at a time. In other cases a person may share roles with other members of the group. Within group communications, the qualities that members bring to a group affect their ability to accept influence uncritically, increase cohesiveness, mediate conflicts, and solve problems.

Disruptive Behaviors

- **Nitpickers** want everything spelled out and will quibble until they get what they want. Nitpickers need to have a say, but not get their way. Be sure these group members get opportunities to speak, but insist that they keep their comments brief.
- **Eager beavers** want to offer a solution whether or not they have given it any thought. In their eagerness, they may distract the group’s attention from ideas that have been more carefully considered.
- **Fence sitters** don’t dare take a position until they’re sure what the “key people” will say. If the group can make it clear, however, that their opinions really matter, they may slowly gather courage and begin to say what they think, not what they think they should say.

- **Wisecrackers** are the group clowns, people who seek attention in any way possible. Wisecrackers appear more often in groups where members are bored and looking for diversion. In a more serious group, members quickly become impatient with such antics. If you find a wisecracker or two in your group, pick up the pace of the discussion—your group may have too much time on its hands.
- **Superior beings** look down their noses at the whole business. The group's best course with these members is to make them feel needed. The group must show it values their opinions, regardless of how superior and indifferent these people appear.
- **Dominators** don't know when to quit talking. Once aware that they're preventing others from contributing, however, they can become top members. Assign these members roles where they are silent and become aware of who is talking and who isn't during the group process and they may be more receptive to other people's ideas.

FACTORS FOR SUCCESS—two physical factors

- **Group Size...** Face-to-face communication makes a group a group. The size of a group affects how comfortable people are in sharing their ideas. Some say five to seven is the best size for a group, because people participate better in small, informal settings. Even the least talkative person will talk in a small group. Groups of four or fewer are probably too small because they lack diversity needed to give the discussion some spark.
Groups of more than seven people are too big. In these groups, quiet people rarely talk and then only to people with high status. (People gain status in a group by virtue of their age, expertise, experience, or personality.) In groups of more than ten, a few people do most of the talking while the rest listen.
- **Seating Arrangements...** The way people are seated can have a good deal to do with its success or failure. If someone in the group takes a central position—at the head of a U-shaped group of chairs, for example, or in front of a row of desks—talk appears to flow through him or her. That person dominates the discussion.
On the other hand, if the group sits, in a circle, all participants can easily look at one another, and talk tends to flow from member to member or from member to the entire group without being channeled through one person.
Class discussions sometimes fail to come to life because of their unfortunate physical arrangement. Studies show that people who participate in groups with circular seating feel more satisfied with their contributions, more pleased with the group's work, and more confident that they have done well in solving problems than those who participate in leader-oriented groups.
People in groups also need breathing space. Studies show that close confinement produces high levels of stress. Cramped quarters seem to increase conflict and aggression. If members of your group don't know each other well, have them sit several feet apart. As they get to know each other, they will probably move closer together.
- **Cohesion...** the intangible quality found when members have respect for each other, share some of the same values, and look to each other for support.
Generally, cohesive groups are those in which people are pulling in the same direction. In contrast, members in a non-cohesive group seem to care less about what the group does than about their own personal goals.

Packet # 11 Group Dynamics Questions

1. What is a group discussion?
2. What are some purposes that a discussion can serve? (Name at least four.)
3. What is the difference between a free-form discussion format and a moderated free-form format?
4. One type of discussion question is a question of fact. What are two other types?
5. One style of leadership is laissez-faire. Name two other styles of leadership. What are the responsibilities of a group leader using each of these styles?
6. One major responsibility of a participant is to share information. What are three other responsibilities of a participant in a group discussion?
7. Conflict is likely to arise in group discussions. What are some ways to recognize conflict before it becomes a serious disagreement. How can a good leader manage the conflict?
8. Think about this school. List 5 issues facing this school that would be suitable for group discussion?
9. Turn each of the topics you listed in question 8 into a discussion question then identify each question as a question of fact, of value, or of policy.

Understanding the Effect of Seating Arrangements

A group's seating arrangement can affect both the interaction among group members and the kind of leadership that is appropriate for the group.

A. Working with a group of your classmates, answer the following questions. Then compare your answers to those of others in the class.

1. In your experience, how does where a person sits affect the way he or she acts in a group?
2. Which of the seating arrangements shown below is best suited to a private group discussion?
To a public group discussion?
3. The seating arrangements shown below are just a few of the many arrangements that are possible. Think of some other arrangements and the situations in which they might be used, such as panel discussion with two opposing factions. Or a pep talk before a football game. Draw a simple diagram of each arrangement you think of.

B. With your group, answer the following questions. You may want to rearrange your own chairs in order to experiment with some different seating arrangements.

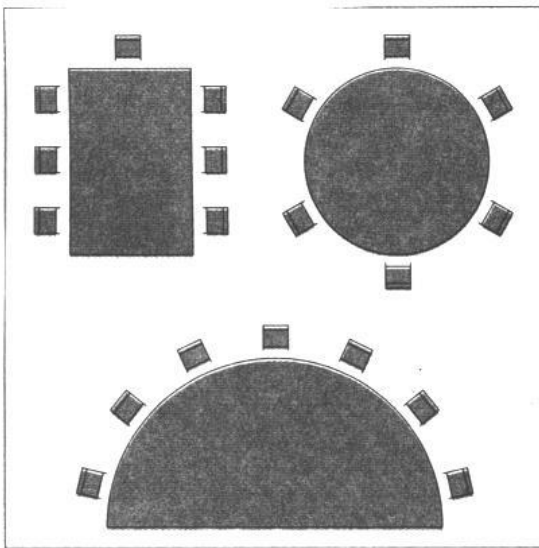
1. In each of the seating arrangements shown in the diagram on this page, where would the discussion leader most likely sit?
2. How important is it for the leader to be in a position where he or she can be seen by all of the group members?
3. One of the discussion leader's responsibilities is to arrange the meeting space. If you were leading a discussion group, which of the seating arrangements shown here would you choose to encourage active participation from all group members? Explain your choice.

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