

STANDING IN THE FIRE: HELPFUL INTERVENTIONS FOR COMPLEX GROUP DYNAMICS

written by Myriam Laberge, May 2009

You've been hired to facilitate a meeting involving a diverse group of people whose ideas, specialized knowledge, expertise, alignment and/or support are needed for an important outcome. Yet the diversity inherent in that cross-functional group, inter-disciplinary project team, organization-wide planning session, or multi-stakeholder meeting is a potential source of complex group dynamics. *What can you do to minimize the possibility of group dynamics disrupting productive work? And what helpful interventions can you rely on with confidence "in the moment", if you've done your level best, and SHIFT still happens?*



BEFORE THE MEETING

Here's the really great news – 98% of group problems and complex group dynamics simply will not arise with an investment in good scoping and pro-active meeting design on your part. Carefully designed facilitated processes *before the meeting* pay huge dividends in harmonious and productive group interactions.

Scoping

Always do your homework before a facilitated meeting, ensuring you've fully scoped out the needs, roles, and expected outcomes of the group. This pre-work includes assessing the purpose and need for the meeting; understanding the history, context, and participants invited; clarifying the desired meeting goals and products; and determining all aspects of logistics. Dynamics usually arise from poorly scoped out agendas and designs that fail to anticipate the realities, expectations, and constraints of a meeting (e.g., overly ambitious agendas; attempting to gain consensus before common ground is discerned; wrong people in the room for the work, etc.)

Pro-Active Meeting Design

Start Off Right

In chaos theory, the butterfly effect is a phrase suggesting that small variations in the initial condition of a system may produce large variations in its long-term behaviour. Similarly the beginning of a meeting is critically important in setting the stage and minimizing unproductive group dynamics. Plan to start every meeting off right, with due attention to: 1) the creation of hospitable space, ensuring the right set-up for the work; 2) clarifying and gaining agreement on the meeting journey – the goals, agenda, roles, norms, and decisional power; 3) helping folks get present and connected through appropriate community building; and 4) answering the questions people have on their minds as they walk in, to reduce anxiety, increase trust, and minimize confusion.

Shared Norms

Agreements on the expected norms (ground rules) for working together build in shared responsibility for respectful and productive group interactions. Write norms out at the onset of a meeting, and ensure the group is clear on correct behaviour and structure. Targeted norms can cover the group's behaviour (e.g., treat each other with respect; no side conversations); guide how the meeting will proceed (e.g., no interruptions; start on time); and/or delineate substantive issues (e.g., confidentiality; no substitutes).

Learning Style/Processing Time

All of us have dominant learning and processing styles, and prefer to receive our information and integrate it in a certain way. Individuals often act out because their preferences as learners (visual, auditory, kinesthetic) and the time they need to analyze and integrate are not met. Ensure dominant participant styles are satisfied some of the time (e.g., images and graphics, buzz groups, movements, etc.) to encourage fuller participation, by actively varying the type of facilitation method used during the meeting.

In any room, the Thinking, Strategizing, Conscientious styles require some quiet reflection time before they can contribute their full piece of the puzzle in any group activity. Deliberately structure a short period for everyone to gather their thoughts, inviting participants to jot down notes as useful *before* inviting larger group work, to ensure full participation. Also, structure large group reflection time at the end of an activity to meet the need of these styles for deeper understanding and closure.

Small group work gives the Intuitive, Presenting, Mediating (verbal) styles time to interact. Design activities involving pairs/trios and small groups following a period of individual reflection, to tap diverse collective knowledge and experience, and meet the needs of these styles to process information through conversation. Small group work is also a safer space for reserved individuals to make their voice heard than large group conversations.

High Involvement

Some facilitation methods are inherently more democratic and participative than others, and have a built-in defense against unequal status and power dynamics. For example, the Affinity Card Process (generation of ideas and silent grouping), and the Technology of Participation (Institute for Cultural Affairs) put everyone on a level playing field through equal participation regardless of rank, ensuring the same value of input, and also offer partial anonymity. The focus in these methods is on ideas and not on personalities, and are often time-efficient since key contributions are first written, then discussed.

WHEN SHIFT HAPPENS: HELPFUL "O-I-R" FRAMEWORK

Despite doing your level best at pro-actively scoping, planning, and designing to minimize potential group problems, and no matter how skilled you are, there will likely still be occasions that are simply not predictable or preventable. When individuals act out with inappropriate or unhelpful behaviours, or the group resists or reacts in some unconstructive way, *what are the most helpful things to do?* Rule #1: The thing is not to panic! Rule #2: Don't assume you know what is going on. Rule #3: Don't take it personally. Rule #4: Remember and use the O-I-R Framework, where "O-I-R" stands for "Observation – Implication – Resolution".

Neutral Observation

Actively intervene in the group process and simply state in objective terms, what you see, hear, and/or notice. Resist offering any interpretation of 'why' something is occurring, or of projecting any blame or criticism on anyone, e.g., "I'm hearing several people talking at once." (*As opposed to, "There are many side conversations going on because there is a lot of disagreement with the recommendation."*)

Implication for Group Effectiveness

Indicate the effect that the observed behaviour is having on you, other participants, and/or on the meeting outcomes. Base this statement on actual observations, e.g., "Jane is trying to speak on the topic, and I'm having difficulty hearing her." (*Resist ascribing motives or feelings to others, e.g., "Jane is not feeling valued or heard, because of these side conversations."*)

Resolution of Behaviour

Depending on whether the group is sufficiently self-regulating, cohesive, and functional:

- *Invite* participants to offer their solutions, "What can we do to ensure everyone can speak and be heard?" This creates group ownership and creative solutions from the group about the most effective ways of addressing the dynamic.
- *Direct* participants of the process to follow, "Let's have a show of hands of who would like to speak. Jane – you go first since you had the floor." When groups are immature or dysfunctional, it is often more helpful for you as a facilitator to directly advise on the desired behaviour.

A final word - in situations where an individual is acting out in certain ways (e.g., dominating, interrupting, non-participation, etc.) look for an opportunity first to use the O-I-R framework in a private one-on-one conversation, say during a break. Individuals are often unconscious of their comportment and will respond well to a helpful neutral observation, implication, and invitation from you about how to resolve to more productive behaviour.

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