

3.3 Group Dynamics



What is a Group?

The process of forming a group is to have a common goal, a sense of cooperation and coordination, and to establish common procedures to reach the goal.

Why a Group?

Groups are particularly good at combining talents and providing creative solutions to problems. This is especially true in situations where there is no previously established approach, the group has a significant advantage over an individual with a diverse background and varied perspective.

Even when a problem could be decided by a single person, there are two benefits to have the people who will carry out the decision involved in the group process.

1. Participating in the decision will enhance the motivation to implement the project.
2. As members of the MEPS become more informed through the group process, they will have a better understanding of the goals and objectives at a higher level.

Group Development

It is common to view the development of a group as having four stages:

Forming → **Storming** → **Norming** → **Performing**

Forming is when the group first comes together. Generally, the members of the group will be very polite and guarded in expressing opinions. During this stage, the more nervous or introverted members begin to defer to emerging as leaders.

Storming follows and is a clear transition from the forming stage. This is when the group members become very verbal and express opinions. The leaders become targets, personalities clash, and compromise is difficult to achieve. Most importantly, very little communication occurs since no one is listening and some are still unwilling to talk openly.

During the **Norming** stage, a transition begins within the group. Members show signs of cooperating and viewpoints are discussed more openly. The most significant improvement is that people start to listen to each other. The group also establishes “ground rules” for how the group will function.

Following the Norming stage, the group as a whole begins to **Perform**. There is a high level of cooperation and focus to achieve the goal. The ideas are generated by individuals and blossom into more developed concepts through synergy.

Group Skills

The group process is a series of changes which occur as members of a group form into a single unit. This process can be accelerated with two main skills:

Managerial Skills

Interpersonal Skills

The following are recommendations to help form a group:

Focus - If something is to be decided, then the group as a whole decides it. If there is a problem, then the group solves it. If a member is not performing to the group's expectations, then it is the group that asks for change.

When conflicts arise, have the group review the task. It is possible that there is still a lack of structure and purpose in the deliberations, so the group will need to address those before moving to the next stage.

Clarification – It is strongly recommended that the group understand the task and then document the task. This will allow the group to stay focused on the goal. The goal (or mission statement) may need to be modified as the group continues discussions, but it should always serve as the primary focus.

The Mouse - In every group there is at least one member who speaks rarely. It is to the group's benefit to encourage that member to express ideas or opinions. Recognize that the member will need to feel that it is safe to express themselves with the group's support. This rarely happens during the Storming stage, so make a point to identify "The Mouse" during the Norming stage. Involving this member should be considered one of the best resources to the group and represents the "best return for minimal effort" by the group as a whole.

The Know-it-all - Every group also has a member who considers themselves to be the most knowledgeable person on every topic. They will dominate the discussions and tend to bully the group into submission. It is the responsibility of each member to determine if they fit this example and for the group to guide "The Know-it-all". In many cases, this person can be asked to summarize their points and then ask other members for their input.

The Written Record - Frequently during discussions, points will be made that need to be reevaluated at a later time. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that

conversations be recorded so members have a working memory of the group discussions. Large erase boards, easels and paper, or computer with a projector are frequently used.

Feedback (negative) - Throughout all the phases of group development, there will be moments when feedback needs to be offered. Efforts should be made not to criticize a person or judge them when you disagree. Instead, feedback should be offered as “constructive”. If a person is stating something that isn’t true, then offer information that is factual and would provide clarification. If a person states an opinion that you disagree with, then offer a different point of view, but do not judge that person. In other words, all feedback should be neutral: focus on the task and not the personality. Every feedback must be accompanied by a positive suggestion for improvement.

Feedback (positive) - Remember that the group development relies on people having different opinions and actively participating in the group process to reach the goal. When a member does something well, then positive feedback should be offered. This will reinforce the likelihood that this member will continue to contribute to the group. Again, keep the group focused on achieving the goal.

Deadlocks – There is the possibility that at some point in the group process, that at least two opposing points of view are held in the group and compromise doesn’t seem to be an option. There are a couple of recommendations to consider:

- Have each sub-group debate the other sub-group's viewpoint. This will give each sub-group an opportunity to better understand the issues and potentially see commonality.
- Have each sub-group present their arguments and then have all members of the group vote and determine a consensus. (i.e. you might not completely agree, but you can live with the majority’s decision).
- Determine if the issue is critical to the goal. If not, then put it on a “back burner” until later.



The Initial Stage of Group Development

Questions Members Frequently Ask Themselves

- Will I be accepted or rejected here?
- How will this group be different from my daily interactions?

- What exactly will these sessions be like?
- What risks will I take in here?
- How am I like other people here? Different?
- Will I feel pressured and pushed to perform in some way?
- How important will I be?
- Who will be the real leaders here? What can be achieved here?

Concerns and Fears

- I'm afraid I'll look stupid.
- Will I tell too much about myself?
- Will others like me?
- What if I find out what I'm really like?
- What if everyone rejects me?
- What if the group attacks me?
- I'm afraid I'll be withdrawn and passive.
- What will happen if I really open up my feeling?
- Will I embarrass myself?
- What if I'm asked to do something I don't want to do?
- What if others can tell I'm afraid and nervous?
- What if I find out things about myself that I can't cope with?

Characteristics of Initial Stage

- Silence and awkwardness.
- High anxiety.
- Impatience to "get the ball rolling".
- Confusion about what everybody is supposed to be doing.
- Storytelling, a tendency to talk about others and focus on people and situations outside of the group.
- Central issue is trust vs. mistrust.
- Testing of each other and the leaders.
- Requests for greater leader involvement.
- Cocktail conversations, safe levels of conversation.
- Vying for informal leadership.

Some Ways to Start a Group Sessions

1. Go around the room and have each member state what he/she wants from the upcoming session.
2. As leaders, share your thoughts about where the group is at, how it is progressing, ways the group might be getting stuck, etc.
3. Ask members if they have any unresolved feelings or thoughts about the previous session: "Did anyone have any after thoughts or leftover feelings about last week's session?"
4. Ask, "How is each of you feeling about being here today?"

5. Have each member complete the sentence, "Today I'd like to get actively involved by"
6. Announce, "As a way of beginning tonight, let's have a brief go-around and have each of you say what you'd most like to be able to say by the end of this session."
7. Inquire of each member: "what were you thinking and feeling before coming to the group today?" or "Whom (or what) are you most aware of in this room right now, and why?"

Some Ways to End a Group Session

1. Ask members to tell the group briefly what they learned about themselves through their relationships with other members in that particular session.
2. Ask, "What was it like for you to be in this group tonight?"
3. Instruct, "Let's do a quick go-around and have everyone say a few words on how the group is progressing so far and make any suggestions for change."
4. Indicate, "Before we close tonight, I'd like to share with you some of my reactions and observations of this session."
5. Ask if anybody has any feedback that they would like to give another member or the leaders.
6. Determine if there are any issues that members would like to return to or explore in the next session.

Planning a group - Practical Considerations

- What is the purpose of the group?
- What are the specific goals of the group?
- What type of group will this be?
- What theory will guide the group?
- What specific techniques and strategies will be used?
 - Can I develop a session-by-session plan?
- What therapeutic factors will be emphasized?
- To what degree will sessions be structured?
- How will I market the group? Obtain referrals?
- What will be the cost of the group?
- How will I screen/evaluate potential members?
- What are the criteria for inclusion/exclusion?
- Where will the group meet? What props do I need?
- What will be the duration and frequency of meetings?
- How many people will participate in the group?
- Will the group be open or closed?
- How many sessions will the group meet?
- Will I use a co-leader? Who?
- What will be the group rules? How will these be conveyed?
- How will I prepare participants for the group?
- What problems can I expect to run into, and how will I deal with those?
- How will I handle dropouts?

- Under what circumstances will I remove a member from the group?
- What paperwork/documentation will be required?
- How will I assess outcomes of the group?

Group Dynamics Exercise

Answer the following questions:

1. Think back to a time you participated in a successful group. What made that group function so well?

2. List an example of the group process stage of Storming:

3. Think back to a time when you participated in a group that was not successful. What made it difficult to function as a group?

4. What is your “weakness” in a group? (i.e. Are you the mouse or the know-it-all? Do you work well in groups or prefer to work on projects independently?)

Resources Used:
Gerard M. Blair
www.see.ed.ac.uk

George Mason University
Center for Service and Leadership
www.gmu.edu