

Group Dynamics

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

Margaret Mead

The social process by which people interact and behave in a group environment is called *group dynamics*. Group dynamics involves the influence of personality, power, and behaviour on the group process. Is the relationship between individuals conducive to achieving the groups goals? Is the structure and size of the group an asset in pursuing both the task and maintenance functions of the group? How is formal and informal power used to build consensus or reach decisions? Does the combination of individuals produce the right culture? How these individuals, cultures, and internal forces interact allows us to analyze and better understand group effectiveness.

There are two types of groups: 1) formal groups who are structured to pursue a specific task, and 2) informal groups who emerge naturally in response to organizational or member interests. These interests may include anything from a research group charged with the responsibility to develop a new product to a group of workers who spontaneously come together to improve social or member activities. While we can learn a lot from informal groups in terms of leadership and motivation, we will concentrate mostly on formal groups, characterized by member appointment and delegated authority and responsibility.

Group Structure and Size

Effective group performance depends to a large extent, on the size and composition of the group. A group may consist of as few as two people (giving credibility to the statement that “two heads are better than one”), or as many as three or four hundred. In order to be effective, group size should be kept to a minimum without jeopardizing workload and goal achievement. Larger groups increase the possibility of conflict due to the variety of viewpoints, few opportunities for the development of social relationships, a decrease in participation levels, and lack of opportunity for individual recognition.

Individual skills and performance must be a consideration in forming a group. How many people will be required to ensure that all the skill sets necessary for the performance of the task are included? Will the task be slowed by a poor performer as may happen with assembly line production? Does the group contain the combination of leaders and followers that will lessen the potential for member rivalries and conflicts?

Diversification is a factor in both group development and skill requirement. A group of predominately white males may develop more quickly than an ethnically and racially diverse group of men and women. But while the former group may be better able to communicate, set standards and grow as a cohesive unit, it may not be diverse enough to meet all the community or organizational needs. A more diverse group may take longer to reach peak performance due to the number of cultures, language differences, and interpretation of the task to be completed, but once they do develop, diverse groups are equally productive and may even be more creative in problem-solving because members have access to a broader base of ideas for solutions.

Group Development

The appointment of individuals to a group based on their compatibility, diversity, or expertise does not assure effectiveness in achieving group goals. A group is initially a collection of personalities with different characteristics, needs, and influences. To be effective, these individuals must spend time acclimatizing themselves to their environment, the task, and to each other.

Organizational experts and practitioners have observed that new groups go through a number of stages before they achieve maximum performance. Each stage presents the members with different challenges that must be overcome before they can move on to the next stage. These stages have been identified as *forming*, *storming*, *norming*, *performing*, and *adjourning*.

1. *Forming*: At this first stage of development, members are preoccupied with familiarizing themselves with the task and to other members of the group.

This is sometimes referred to as the dependent stage, as members tend to depend on outside expertise for guidance, job definition, and task analysis.

2. *Storming*: At this stage, the group encounters conflict as members confront and criticize each other and the approach the group is taking to their task. Issues that arise include identification of roles and responsibilities, operational rules and procedures, and the individual need for recognition of his or her skills and abilities. This stage is also referred to as the *counterdependent stage* where members tend to “flex their muscles” in search of identity. In some cases, the group may have problems getting through this stage. This may occur if the group encounters difficulty clarifying their task, agreeing on their mission or mandate, or deciding how they will proceed. Lack of skills, ability or aptitude can also contribute to their inability to get beyond this stage.
3. *Norming*: At this point, members start to resolve the issues that are creating the conflict and begin to develop their social agreements. The members begin to recognize their interdependence, develop cohesion, and agree on the group norms that will help them function effectively in the future.
4. *Performing*: When the group has sorted out its social structure and understands its goals and individual roles, it will move toward accomplishing its task. Mutual assistance and creativity become prominent themes at this stage. The group, sensing its growth and maturity, becomes independent, relying on its own resources.
5. *Adjourning*: During this phase, the group will resort to some form of closure that includes rites and rituals suitable to the event. These may include socials and parties, or ceremonies that exhibit emotional support or celebration of their success.

Group Functions

Three functions that influence the effectiveness and productivity of groups are *task functions*, *maintenance functions*, and *self-interest functions*.

Task Functions

This is the primary reason for the establishment of a group. To achieve the task, they must have members that fulfill some or all of the following roles:

- a) *Initiating*: by proposing tasks or goals, defining problems and suggesting procedures for a solution;
- b) *Information seeking*: by requesting facts, seeking relevant information, and asking for suggestions or ideas;
- c) *Information giving*: by offering facts, providing information, stating beliefs, and giving suggestions or ideas;
- d) *Clarifying ideas*: by interpreting and clarifying input, indicating alternatives and giving examples;
- e) *Bringing closure*: by summarizing, restating, and offering solutions;
- f) *Consensus testing*: by checking for agreements and sending up ‘trial balloons’.

Maintenance Behaviour

Each group needs social-emotional support to be effective. Some members of the group will take the lead in providing this support which consists of the following:

- a) *Encouraging*: by showing regard for other members and providing positive response to their contributions;
- b) *Improving group atmosphere*: by expressing group feelings, sensing moods and relationships, and sharing feelings;
- c) *Harmonizing*: by reconciling differences and reducing group tension;
- d) *Compromising*: by admitting errors and looking for alternatives;
- e) *Gate-keeping*: by attempting to keep communications flowing, facilitating the participation of others, and suggesting procedures for sharing discussion;
- f) *Standard setting*: by reminding members of group norms, rules, and roles.

Self-interest Behaviour

This third function displayed by some individuals, members generally takes away from group performance and affects task achievement at the expense of the group. Activities that identify self-interest behaviour are as follows:

- a) *Dominating and controlling:* by displaying lack of respect for others, cutting them off, not listening, and restating other members' suggestions with a different meaning;
- b) *Blocking:* by stifling a line of thought, and changing the topic either away from the point of view or back to his or her own interest;
- c) *Manipulating:* by providing self-serving information, or a single point of view designed to achieve a decision that is consistent with their position;
- d) *Belittling:* through put-downs, sneering at other's point of view, or making jokes about another member's contribution;
- e) *Splitting hairs:* by nit-picking, searching for insignificant details that delay a solution, or undermining another person's point of view.

Group Norms

In the early stages of group development, a substantial amount of time is spent on setting social standards and acceptable group behaviour. These standards are referred to as *group norms* and can be both formal and informal. Norms are not individual behaviours, but are collectively held expectations of how a group will function. For example, a new member who joins a group may initially search for clues about what type of behaviour is acceptable. What are the dress codes?

How do I address my supervisors? What is proper etiquette? What topics or discussions are acceptable or avoided?

Recognition of these norms is important, since they provide regularity and predictability to individual and group behaviour. Bosses are more likely to insist on norms regarding work performance or attendance, whereas other norms might address the acceptability of rearranging personal space or assisting co-workers.

Group norms may include *loyalty norms* such as the belief that managers have to work on weekends and holidays or accept transfers to prove their loyalty to the company. *Dress norms*

may include anything from uniforms to shirt and ties to bikinis, depending on the establishment or business. *Reward norms* includes perks or benefits that come as a result of individual or group performance. Criteria may include productivity levels, loyalty, equality (everyone gets the same reward), or social responsibility (those who need it most).

Roles

There are two kinds of roles present in groups. The first is *assigned roles*. These include titles such as chairperson, secretary, manager, treasurer, etc. The second kind is *emergent roles* and arise as a result of group social or emotional needs. They include confidant, group clown, gossip, mentor, or scapegoat. Two factors that impact the effectiveness of organizational roles are role ambiguity and role conflict. *Role ambiguity* occurs when a person is unclear of what is expected of him or her, instructions about performance are not clear, tasks are assigned without context or if a supervisor's actions and instructions send contradictory messages. *Role Conflict* occurs when a group member feels his or her job overlaps with others, or if the job description is unclear.

Status

Most organizations have ways of giving status or rank to members depending on any number of factors. In many cases, these status symbols reinforce the authority, hierarchy and reward system within the group. Obvious examples include the move from a cubicle to an inner office to a window office, and finally, to a corner office, and as an individual moves through this progression, authority, decision-making, and prestige also increases. These symbols are meant to increase motivation (Maslow's esteem needs), as a reward for loyal and productive service, and as an acknowledgment of the level of decision-making accorded the individual.

Cohesiveness

One of the primary factors in group performance involves group cohesion. The ultimate role of groups is to come together as a unit and perform with professionalism and dedication. A group that can work as a unit, share tasks and recognize the contributions of its members will meet with more success than a group mired in conflict, role ambiguity, and lack of motivation. Group cohesion makes it attractive for members to belong, attracts high performers, and provides opportunities for individual recognition within a group setting. Cohesion may result from internal successes, high social-emotional support, or external threats.

Group size can also affect cohesion. A group that is too large may find that members cannot get the recognition they are looking for. This can lead to the formation of subgroups or cliques which further causes members to withdraw or withhold input. It is an act of protest because he or she may feel that their achievement is being used to raise the credibility of the whole group, or

because there is a feeling that members are not pulling their weight. As we have seen earlier, this self-interest approach distracts from group performance and cohesion.

Support

Any team or group will need support if it is to be effective. While the successful sports team requires training camps, coaching, and team discipline, other work teams have the same needs. First, there must be a recognition of the need for training. Members bring individual skills to the group that may need to be adapted to maximize their contribution to the group task. How are the skills complimenting each other? Is there an overlap and duplication? Is there a skills gap that must be addressed? Second, there may be a need for team-building skills. Is there a need for adaptation from a former environment? For example, a nurse who enters a new institution will need to become familiar with new procedures being used in that environment and the members of the unit that he or she will interact with.

All groups need to be able to identify their successes. This usually takes the form of rewards that recognize accomplishments. Group members should know what is expected and what the rewards are. Are there opportunities for individual recognition? What are the group rewards, what are their performance requirements for achieving these rewards and how will performance be measured?

Management plays a major role in group performance. Is the group self-managed and what is the impact on formal managers? Attempts at new and innovative approaches may threaten “old school” managers and their comfort levels with more traditional approaches. Managers should approach their roles as coaches who ensure that all necessary skills are included, systems and procedures are outlined and that goals and visions are clearly understood, rather than play the role of “boss knows best”.

There is often a tendency to have people with similar skill sets on the same team. There is an argument that teams may perform better if people from all parts of the organization are in the group. This brings diversity and allows the group to take into account all aspects of the job and to include the needs of other parts of the organization which may be affected by the work of the group. It also helps members to identify the need for, and importance of other organizational functions in achieving the overall organizational goals.

Transactional Analysis

Participation in groups is a social transaction between individuals and is called *transactional analysis*. These interactions were identified by Eric Berne in the 1950s as *ego states*. There are three ego states which Berne identified, they are *parent*, *adult* and *child*.

1. *Parent:* Individuals who operate from a parent state may display a protective, nurturing, controlling, critical, or guiding role. They may refer to policies or standards by stating “You know the rules, now follow them”.
2. *Adult:* Individuals displaying this approach will appear to be rational, calculating, factual, and unemotional. Decision-making relies on research, facts, data processing, and estimating probabilities.
3. *Child:* Individuals displaying this behaviour reflect emotions similar to those of childhood. It may be rebellious, spontaneous, dependant, or creative and is often recognized by its emotional tone. Like a child, this state looks for approval and immediate rewards.

We can usually recognize the behaviour not only by the tone, but by postures, gestures, and facial expressions. We can also see that conversations can be complimentary or contradictory. A conversation between two individuals using an adult-to-adult state will be very rational and reasonable. Both see themselves as equals, and therefore, will try and find the best solutions to problems.

Interactions may be contradictory or complimentary. Contradictory behaviours may be a parent-to-child, adult-to-child, or adult-to-parent interaction. In a conversation between a supervisor and an employee displaying a parent-to-child pattern, the employee may assume the behaviour of a child and thus respond to the reward and punishment systems that exemplifies such behaviour. On the other hand, a parent-to-adult interaction can result in conflict and dissension due to the unacceptable approach of each participant.

While complimentary interactions such as adult-to-adult, child-to-child or parent-to-parent are the most desirable, other interactions can be positive. Should both parties accept the parent-to-child or adult-to-child relationships, there may be good relationships without conflict. If, for example, the supervisor and employee are comfortable with the parent-to-child arrangement, they may continue to work together in harmony. Unfortunately, the employee fails to grow and mature, and may learn only to contribute to the extent that will meet with the supervisor’s approval.

These behaviours have led to the following statements about individual interactions. Aggressive people may view a relationship as “I’m OK - you’re not OK”, while a passive person may view the relationship as “ I’m not OK- you’re OK”, or “I’m not OK - you’re not OK”. In both cases, the passive person starts from the assumption that “I’m not OK”. The most desirable and the one that presents the greatest possibility for adult-to-adult relationships is “I’m OK - you’re OK. It shows a healthy acceptance of both yourself and others.

Whether a person is passive, assertive, or aggressive affects the performance of individuals in a group. The passive person is compliant, submissive and non-resistant. He/she may appear to be comfortable with the situation that they find themselves in, but may be building up stress and anxiety as a result of being “pushed around”. The aggressive person on the other hand, may be hostile, forceful and may find him/herself in conflict because they either push ahead without regard for others, or “blow-up” at the first sign of control. The assertive person is self-assured, positive and will protect his or her own rights, respect the rights of others, and act with confidence and honesty.

Effective Teams

Effective teams do not just happen, they are meticulously put together consisting of a group of highly skilled, highly motivated individuals who have a clear picture of their goals and can receive clear and tangible evidence of their achievements. A highly charged environment will attract high performers who are looking for success. Success builds on success, therefore, a group’s reputation is also a major selling point. There must be an opportunity for individual success within the framework of the group’s goals. There must be recognition of professionalism from co-workers, peers and the outside world. These are the factors that contribute to winning sports teams and there is no reason to think that other groups will respond any differently.

Bibliography

Johns, Gary. Concordia University. "Social Behaviour and Organizational Processes".
Organizational Behaviour: Understanding and Managing Life at Work. Harper Collins
College Publishers, 1996.