

Helpful Hints for Small Group Participation

written and compiled for PCM with appreciation by
Holly Jimison, Ph.D.; Katherine Riley, Ed.D.; Ruth Ann Tsukuda, M.P.H.

Group Process

A considerable amount of literature describing the stages that groups go through. Here is one way of describing them.

Stages of a group (supportive)

1. *Forming*: getting to know each other. Initial exploration of personalities and issues. Characterized by high anxiety and negativism — testing of ideas
2. *Storming*: discussion of conflicting ideas. Confrontation regarding limits and norms at appropriate times. Pressure on deviants. Conflict management.
3. *Norming*: cohesion, trust, cooperation. Cohesion and internalization. Leveling or minimizing of the importance of differences.
4. *Performing*: productivity, problem solving. Caring and mutual respect. Celebrations and sharing. Respect for differences. Interdependence.

Communication—things to remember:

1. Body language: This component is 80% of communication.
2. Cultural framework: Personal space, gestures, etc. vary by group. For example, some groups are more comfortable speaking closer than 20 inches apart (the U.S. norm).
3. Verbal Fouls *:
 - name calling
 - blaming
 - bossing
 - not listening
 - sarcasm
 - pushing
 - threats
 - insults
 - getting even
 - bringing up the past
 - not taking responsibility
 - making excuses

Principles of interacting in a group and being a good group member

- Confidentiality – “What is said here, stays here.”
- Speaking up
- Effective groups (see following pages)
- Conflict management * (* Abrams, G., *WinWin!*, Miami: Peace Education Foundation, Inc., 1994.)
- Identify the problem
- Focus on the problem

- Attack the problem, not the person
- Listen with an open mind
- Treat a person's feelings with respect
- Take responsibility for your actions

Hints for having a successful group**

- Test assumptions and inferences
- Share all relevant information
- Focus on interests, not positions
- Be specific—use examples
- Agree on what important words mean
- Explain the reasons behind one's statements, questions, and actions
- Disagree openly with any member of the group
- Make statements, then invite questions and comments
- Jointly design ways to test disagreements and solutions
- Discuss undiscussable issues
- Keep the discussion focused
- Do not take cheap shots or otherwise distract the group
- All members are expected to participate in all phases of the process
- Exchange relevant information with non-group members
- Make decisions by consensus
- Do self-critiques

Hints for facilitators**

Beginning the meeting

Make introductions
 Check for outcomes and concerns
 Agree on the agenda and time allocations
 Agree on the process, including ground rules
 Define roles

Ending the meeting

Review decisions and plans for action
 Schedule the next meeting and agenda
 Do a self-critique

Types of interventions (during a meeting)**

- Exploring
- Seeking specifics
- Emphasizing process
- Diagnosing
- Confronting and other feedback
- Managing group process and structure
- Making content suggestions
- Teaching concepts and methods
- Reframing

** from Schwarz, Roger M., *The Skilled Facilitator*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1994.

Characteristics of Effective Groups

Adapted from Gmelch & Miskin, Productivity Teams: Beyond Quality Circles, New York: Wiley Press, 1984, 13

Climate

- Open and supportive communication
- Concern for individuals
- Commitment to group performance

Participation

- Distributed among all team members
- All members listen to one another
- No one afraid of putting forth a creative thought
- All ideas given a fair hearing

Conflict Management

- Conflict and controversy are viewed as positive and essential to the problem-solving process
- Disagreements may be frequent and candid, but are also relatively comfortable
- There is little evidence of personal attack; criticism is constructive and even supportive in nature
- Conflict is not competitively directed but creatively turned to discovering new alternatives

Leadership

- A shared responsibility
- All members feel responsible for contributing to the group
- Different members, because of their knowledge or abilities, act as "resource expert" at different times, thus the leadership roles change as team tasks and needs change

Individual

- Time and effort is directed to developing strong interpersonal relationships and building individual problem-solving skills

Development

- Self-actualization is encouraged through achievement of group goals

Questions to Address in Processing Group Experience

1. How do we handle leadership/facilitation in the group?
2. How do we finalize decisions? (majority vote, consensus, power block, etc.)?
3. Do we use each other's expertise and resources as well as possible?
4. Are conflicts identified? Have there been major sources of disagreement?
5. How do we resolve conflicts/disagreements
6. What factors have helped us?
7. What improvements can we make in our small group?
8. What other observations and experiences of our small group behavior are important for us to recognize?