

Individual Behavior and Group Functioning

Adapted from *The Adaptive School: Developing and Facilitating Collaborative Groups*, Garmston and Wellman, 1999

All “group behavior” results from the decisions and actions of individuals. However, working in groups is often difficult – full of conflicts and tensions that may not be easily resolved. Each group member must balance personal goals with collective goals, acquire resources for his or her own work, and share those resources to support the work of others. When individual choices align in productive patterns, the group produces positive results.

To allow fuller and more nonjudgmental participation of everyone in a group, the individual members need to consider the personal frames or lenses that they use to listen, respond, and inquire in a group setting:

- The autobiographical frame leads to several problems. The first is the filtering process that goes on when individuals try to hear another’s story through the lens of their own experiences. Although this can be a source of empathy, it can also lead to distortion and miscommunication. This type of listening and responding is a major source of wasted time in meetings. It can lead to endless storytelling in which everyone in the group shares a related anecdote. This is dinner party conversation, not productive meeting talk.
- The inquisitive frame is sometimes triggered by the autobiographical frame. People inquire to see how others’ stories compare to their own. Pure curiosity also motivates inquisitive listening, responding, and inquiring. A critical question at this juncture is “How much detail do we need to move on this item?” Any member can refocus the group by asking this question → remember that the purpose of the group is to direct attention on critical matters and avoid unnecessary specificity.
- The solution frame is deeply embedded in the psyche. The pressure of time pushes people toward immediate problem-solving actions and away from reflection. The down side of this pattern is that the group members get trapped in situations and action plans before they have time to fully understand the perspective of others. The solution frame also stifles the generation of new possibilities. It pushes groups toward action before creating clear outcomes and gets in the way of developing alternative ways of thinking about issues and problems.

High-performing groups are **adaptive groups** whose members are aware of their personal frames and make an effort to self-regulate their behavior. Members learn from experience and improve the way they work. In supporting the group’s purpose and process, individual group members make a commitment to this shared learning. The following are seven norms that enable adaptive groups.

Seven Norms of Collaborative Work

Put Inquiry at the Center: Inquire to explore perceptions, assumptions, and interpretations, and invite others to inquire into their own thinking. Inquire to uncover the ideas of others’ before advocating for one’s own ideas.

Pause: Pause before responding or asking a question to allow time for thinking and to enhance dialogue, discussion, and decision-making. In western culture, groups often do not pause because when a pause occurs someone else jumps in and makes their

point. This is actually detrimental to thinking and sets group members in a frame to listen to be able to speak rather than to listen to understand.

Paraphrase: When paraphrasing we send a message that implies, “I am listening, I care about you, and I am trying to understand you.” Paraphrasing is respectful and requires full attention. It requires setting aside autobiographical, solution, and inquisitive listening frames. Paraphrases should not use the pronoun “I”. The phrase “What I hear you saying...” signals to many speakers that their thoughts no longer matter and that the paraphraser is going to insert his or her own ideas into the conversation. Using a paraphrase starter that is structured such as: “So you’re thinking...” or “A concern you have...” and following it with a paraphrase assists members of the group to hear and understand each other as they formulate decisions.

Probe for specificity: There are five categories of vagueness that inhabit human speech and inhibit collaboration by not being specific:

1. **Vague nouns and pronouns** – someone named “they” makes most of the decisions in organizations. Unless group members know who “they” are, communication takes longer and we do not always know how to treat information.
2. **Vague action words** – vague action words commonly used by working groups include *improve, enhance, design, modify, and understand*.
3. **Comparators** – Words like *best, larger, slower, more* and *least* leave out the point of comparison and the standard for the comparison. “This meeting was much better than last month’s session.” Unless the group discovers the speaker’s criteria for “better,” the members do not know how to repeat the improvement.
4. **Rule words** – people operate with conscious and unconscious rules about the world and how they are supposed to operate in it. These rules appear in language when people say things like, “We have to, We must, You shouldn’t, We’ve always, We can’t.”
5. **Universal quantifiers** – words and phrases like *everyone, all, no one, never* and *always* are examples of universal quantifiers. Teenagers use these to great effect.

Using gentle open-ended probes or inquiries such as, “Please say more...” or “I’m curious about...” or “I’d like to hear more about...” or “Then, are you saying...?” dispels vagueness and increases the clarity and precision of the group’s thinking.

Place ideas on the table: Ideas are the heart of a meaningful dialogue. Label the intention of your comments. For example, you might say, “Here is one idea...” or “One thought I have is...” or “Here is a possible approach...”

Pay attention to self and others: Meaningful dialogue is facilitated when each group member is conscious of self and of others and is aware of not only what she/he is saying, but also how it is said and how others are responding. This includes paying attention to learning styles when planning for, facilitating and participating in meetings. Responding to others in their own language forms is one manifestation of this norm.

Presume positive intentions: Assuming that others’ intentions are positive promotes and facilitates meaningful dialogue and eliminates unintentional put-downs. When using this norm, you perceive other’s motives as positive and reflect positive intentions in your speech.