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Creative facilitation

Working on group decision making: the role of the facilitator

Peter Condliffe

In an extract from his new manual, *Creative Facilitation: A Manual for Group Leadership and Conflict Management*,¹ Peter Condliffe describes the role of the group facilitator in helping with decision making.

There is a vast literature on group development. Generally it describes how groups change over time by means of phases or stages. Perhaps the best known of these is Tuchman's five-stage model developed in 1965, which may be so popular because of its rhyming qualities!²

Tuchman's model (see Figure 1 below) describes group development using a developmental model. He sees this development as dependent upon the ways in which group members interact with each other. These various stages are outlined in the box below.

Figure 1: Tuchman's five-stage model of group development

Forming: Attempts to identify task and testing of relationships. Energy input from the facilitator is high as they help the task negotiation process and define content issues with the parties. Effective control builds confidence in the process and the facilitator.

Storming: Development of internal conflict and raising of emotions as task demands grow. Parties' input increases as they question the process, the task or the content; or as they air strong feelings about issues of concern. The facilitator controls the flow of communication.

Norming: Group members feel free to express their views and there is further development of group cohesion. As conflict is defused (or managed), the group becomes actively involved in problem solving and planning to implement agreements. The facilitators' role is to maintain focus and ensure decisions are made and recorded.

Performing: The group begins to achieve the objectives and find solutions whilst members function better together. The facilitator 'steps back' from the exchanges as the group takes more responsibility for its own decision making.

Adjourning: Separation anxiety begins whilst the group leader is regarded more positively. The group may be disbanded and previewed or it may have to move onto another task or do without the services of the facilitator. Input from the facilitator is needed to ensure agreements are recorded and parties are clear about future actions.

Decision making: the stepping stones of group life

Another approach to understanding groups is to look at the way they make decisions. In every group decisions have to be made. They are often important indicators of how an organisation works and how it processes conflict. These decisions can vary from who is to take notes, to the time to be spent on a particular issue, to deciding what policy to adopt in a particular context. Decisions are the stepping stones of a group's ongoing life. Therefore good decision making is crucial to both the success and ongoing health of most groups. Most decisions in groups are made without undue effort and relatively efficiently. However, problems can occur at a number of levels. First, they can occur around the process of decision making. Second, they can occur when the context or issue at hand is so new or

contentious for the group that it needs to learn fresh and different ways of dealing with it. I call these 'first order' and 'second order' problems respectively.

First order problems: the process of decision making

There are many ways in which decisions are made in groups and it is around these processes that conflict often occurs. I call these 'first order problems'. There is no 'right way' to make decisions. How we make a decision will depend upon the nature of the decision to be made and the context in which it will operate. However, certain types of decision making can be identified and then evaluated as to their efficacy in a particular situation. In other words, changing the way in which decisions are made can often help the way in which a group works. Figure 2 below summarises a variety of decision making styles.³

A 'framework' or 'culture' for a particular style of decision making in groups is often well established even if it is not well understood or articulated by members of that group. For example, if, in an organisation, a manager who relies on a consensus approach replaces an authoritarian 'bulldozer' type, the former will have to spend some time preparing members of the organisation for this change. It is unrealistic to expect people to be able to change their mode of operating overnight. The manager may have to set up new structures, forums and processes so that the new style can become part of the organisational framework. Likewise, workers often have to 'train' or teach their 'managers' appropriate styles of decision making and consultation.

A useful exercise for any group is to look at the way in which it makes decisions. A list like the one in Figure 2 may be useful as a starting point for this discussion. As noted earlier, decisions are

**Figure 2: Typical decision making styles**

- 1 Authoritarian** The decision is made upon the basis of formal or informal power, for example, the manager makes a decision before the work group has discussed the matter.
- 2 Bulldozing** This is where decisions are made by a minority of those eligible to be involved. This may occur even when there may be strong objections. Bulldozing is often contingent upon the non-assertiveness of others. An example of bulldozing is where several people come up with a plan of action and present it to others as the only course to follow.
- 3 Vote** This is decision making by the majority, for example, show of hands after a matter has been discussed.
- 4 Vacuum** Sometimes in meetings an idea or suggested action is put forward and either ignored or greeted with absolute silence. If this happens, the idea or action may be taken to have been 'agreed to'. This sometimes happens in groups where there is a lack of trust, or insufficient information available for people to make a decision, for example, where a complex budgetary formula is put before a group to discuss and agree upon and members do not feel confident enough to indicate their ignorance and seek further information.
- 5 Unanimity** This is where everyone genuinely agrees on the decision to be made and are unanimous in their consent, for example, where every member of a group participates and indicates their acceptance of a course of action.
- 6 Consensus** The decision is made upon the basis of a majority opinion but with the crucial extra ingredient that everyone will unanimously support the action to be taken.
- 7 Deflection** This is where a decision is 'made' by raising other peripheral or side issues to distract from or avoid the main or real issue to be decided. For example, where a departmental restructuring is required by management this may be delayed by concentration upon an 'emergency' which would preclude any such moves.

more likely to be implemented if group members are able to participate in and have ownership of them to some extent. Balancing this against other contextual constraints upon the group (usually associated with time, expense and hierarchy) is always a challenge. Also, there are often entrenched beliefs and assumptions, what I earlier referred to as a 'culture', which favour one particular way of making decisions. Evaluating and challenging these beliefs and assumptions can be a useful way of moving the group forward if they are experiencing difficulties, want to improve their performance or maximise the potential of group members or the group as a whole. Further, the inadequacies of the existing decision-making system may be highlighted by 'second order' problems.

Second order problems: dealing with new or contentious issues

When dealing with new or contentious issues which are outside normal experience, groups usually have to go through a period of disagreement or what was earlier referred to as 'storming'. I call it 'divergent

conversation'. The biggest challenge for facilitators is encouraging and enabling groups to have this divergent conversation before bringing it back to a convergent or agreement making conversation. Many groups want to have the convergent conversation before they have dealt with the divergent one! By doing this they will often miss important ideas and contributions from various members of the group. In other words, the decisions made will be premature and ill-formed with little chance of adequate implementation.

When faced with a second order problem the group tends to look for solutions within the boundaries formed by the group's culture. Although many problems can be managed through the group's traditional ways of decision making in a proportion of cases, where decisions are difficult, the traditional ways are sometimes no longer adequate. In those situations the group will have to move beyond simple solutions, based upon past experiences, to looking at a wider range of possibilities. That is, the group needs to move into a divergent conversation. Unfortunately many groups cannot do this – at least not by themselves.

It is in divergent conversation where tensions rise, people become irritable, impatient and even disoriented. It is for these reasons that individuals within the group, or often the whole group itself, look for an ending and a quick and usually premature decision or solution. Sometimes the person with authority comes in and makes a decision for the group which can further exacerbate distrust and tension. Sometimes the group tries to focus upon 'process issues' (*how* to make the decision).

These attempts at trying a new process often get lost because groups generally find it difficult to stay focused upon process. To move through a divergent conversation and into a convergent conversation requires a range of different skills and sometimes a challenge to the existing culture. Consequently, this will not happen automatically.

To get to the convergent conversation will mean that the group will need to overcome some resistance before better

decisions can be made. Resistance can be manifested in a number of ways but its salient features are risk aversion (people do not want to take risks) and self-censorship (people do not want to disclose what they are really thinking). This is particularly evident in those groups where 'groupthink' has gone too far, as described below.

Groupthink

Groupthink happens when too much emphasis is placed on group harmony so that individual views and values are subordinated to group loyalty and consensus. Often these sorts of groups have strong charismatic leaders who have a tendency to dominate. It also happens to groups that are isolated, under threat or surveillance. These tendencies happen in most groups. There are a number of symptoms of groups that experience groupthink.⁴ These include:

1. A sense of overconfidence where unnecessary risks may be taken
2. A tendency to over-rationalise, particularly when unwelcome information is disclosed that may cut across the group's objectives
3. Ethical and moral issues are sometimes downplayed
4. Enemies or adversaries are often stereotyped and their negative characteristics emphasised
5. Internal pressures are such that individual members are often under considerable pressure to keep quiet
6. There is a high degree of self-censorship
7. Divergent views tend to be screened out and dissent stifled.

In certain situations groupthink can cause problems. The way to manage groupthink when it becomes a problem is to encourage self-criticism and self-evaluation. The introduction of new and external ideas and the broadening of authority within the group may also be helpful. In these ways the group will hopefully open up its boundaries to outside influences. The role of the facilitator can be crucial in this process. ●

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Figure 3: Working on possibilities

The group needs to look not only at solutions but possibilities in a divergent conversation. New solutions can then come out of this new type of analysis. They often only make sense in hindsight.

Many things can prevent the group from moving in this direction including:

- **Oversimplification or either/or thinking** – the issue is reduced to a simple cause and effect analysis not realising that many problems cannot be analysed in such simple terms. Another characteristic is to conceive of issues in simple binary terms; that is, the solution can be reduced to one of two alternatives.
- **Denial** – the group refuses to acknowledge that there may be a problem and spends a lot of its energy on presenting a façade of normality. Naming what is going on may be seen as a betrayal.
- **Working at the wrong level** – attempted processes and solutions are pitched at the wrong level. For example, instead of working on attitudes, emphasis is placed on behaviour. Often this creates a paradox for the group which in turn leads to confusion. Another common example is that sometimes there are no solutions to a problem for a variety of reasons. Working on a solution creates frustration and confusion. Sometimes, there may be no problem or the group is working on the wrong problems. This may be for a number of reasons but the results will be the same as already mentioned.
- **Stuck in the past** – some groups cannot escape or do not want to escape their past because 'it was better then'. Alternatively, the group can use this to avoid what is going on in the present.
- **Utopian visions** – the group has an overly idealistic view of what may be possible when faced with a difficult issue. This can result in one of three typical reactions: introjection – the group blames itself; procrastination – the issue is regarded as so difficult that nothing is done; and projection – others are blamed for the failure to deal with the issue.
- **Stuck in routines** – the group has certain ways of doing things and to change this routine would represent some threat to the status quo. Thereby change is resisted.
- **Diabolical solutions or more of the same** – where the attempted solutions to the issue causes it to get worse. When confronted by this reality the group can be immobilised out of fear of trying anything else.
- **The continuity syndrome** – somewhat like being stuck in routines this syndrome is characterised by the saying, "...if it ain't broke don't fix it..." This is an attitude that permeates some groups and is based upon a sense of overconfidence or complacency that what is being done cannot really be improved upon. The problem is that it often can be improved.
- **Entrapment** – this occurs when the group devotes some considerable resources to some issues but it cannot resolve it in terms that it seeks. Some groups respond by continuing to commit resources and not evaluating this expenditure despite the fact that the situation continues to get worse or stagnates. The group becomes stuck in certain unproductive processes, pursues unobtainable objectives and/or creates unnecessary enemies.

These impediments to group decision making can lead to impasse and resistance.



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Endnotes

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