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Chapter 13 : Working in teams and groups

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CHAPTER 13: WORKING IN TEAMS AND GROUPS

Quotable quotes

“Groups solve tasks in a rational or irrational way depending on the rules and processes they have for being conscious of objectives, gaining information, evaluating alternatives and managing emotional and personality differences of group members”. (Littlejohn, 1996)

“Hell is other people”. (Jean–Paul Sartre)

“For all individuals, group life creates conflict between seeking the satisfaction of belonging and a sense of frustration at having to conform” (W. R. Bion)

Introduction: Can groups make better decisions than individuals?

The answer to this question is, “It depends”. It depends on the knowledge that the group possesses collectively. In a group there will usually be more knowledge than any one individual possesses. However, if the group does not possess effective interpersonal skills such as listening–eliciting, clarifying, behaving non–judgementally and being supportive of others in such ways as acceptance, friendliness, making opportunities for others to express their thoughts and feelings and building on the ideas of others, this knowledge will not be produced by the group. In addition, groups need to have skills in rational problem solving such as an ability to analyse the situation thoroughly, to explore expectations and to develop and prioritise options while recognising possible obstacles. Finally, tentative plans need to be critically examined without threatening the self–esteem of group members.

Key issues in the area

Task Roles –information giving, summarising.

Social, Maintenance or Group Relationship roles:

- Leadership
- Autocratic
- Democratic
- Laissez faire

Discussion exercise

“Members are expected to conform to group norms in such things as clothing, grooming, level of formality/informality in language, non–verbal behaviour, and (as students) even sometimes in achievement levels through to the allowable level of expression of emotions and feelings, the level of trust among group members and the way in which criticism is given and received.”

Form groups of four. Discuss the accuracy of the above statement. All group members are to tell a story from their experience to illustrate the accuracy of the statement in relation to one of the following groups they have belonged to. Give details to illustrate each of the group norms mentioned at the beginning of the statement:

- (a) A group of employees from a hamburger fast–food chain.
- (b) Your family.
- (c) The group of friends that you belonged to when at school.
- (d) Members of a bowls club. (Go along and observe.)
- (e) Academics.
- (f) Surfers.
- (g) Patrons at your local pub, club or night club.
- (h) Students in lectures.

Journal

After doing the exercise above consciously violate one of the norms of a group you belong to and describe its effect. Choose a norm that is not central to the beliefs of the group or its members or they may feel threatened, and perhaps become angry at you. I once gave this exercise to a group of students and at the next lecture Janice came out the front of the class and started giving a lecture. In her journal she described how she felt that it was a norm for students to sit in class and answer questions, not to go out and give lectures. She described how difficult it was for her to do this and how she felt when the students looked at her oddly.

Not all norms enhance relationships, some are destructive not only of relationships but of the group's productivity. It may be a norm that new employees do not talk in a friendly manner to the boss. One who violates this norm may find that he or she is looked on favourably by the boss who has formed the opinion that his or her workforce is totally lacking in personality and human qualities.

Individual tasks

Groupthink is "the collective striving for unanimity that overrides group members' motivation realistically to appraise alternative courses of action and, thereby, leads to

- (a) deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgment, and
- (b) ignoring external information inconsistent with the favored alternative course of action" (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 255).

Groupthink leads to group members inhibiting discussion "in order to avoid any disagreement or arguments". Groupthink develops groups which are "highly cohesive, insulated from outside criticism, with directive and dynamic leaders". Because of groupthink members do not search for and critically evaluate alternatives to courses of action or modes of thought.

Write a paragraph using the model on p. 69 on the topic "groupthink", using an example of groupthink which you have either observed or been involved in.

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, F.P. (1994). *Joining together: Group theory and group skills*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon (pp. 561–569) provide a discussion of theories that explain group behaviour.

Team tasks

Group

Exercises like the one below may help clarify some of your ideas about ways of working in a group. Form into groups of three.

Your luxury cruise liner has sunk in an interstellar war and you have no hope of getting home. Your lifeboat contains details of two cultures which you can get to. Whichever one you choose will be your home for ten years as these societies only accept refugees willing to stay that long.

Equality Island

On this island everyone old/young, energetic/lazy, creative/dull, gets an exact share of everything. If you go fishing and catch something, you share it with others. If they grow mangoes they expect to share them with you.

Equity Island

This island was founded by Homans in 1961. Rewards are distributed among individuals in proportion to their contributions. Those who do the most or work the hardest get the most rewards.

Which is your choice – Equality or Equity Island?

Once on the island of your choice your group is given the task of setting up a vegetable garden. You are asked how you will go about it and what kind of leadership and organisation your group wants.

The choices are below. Please tick those you want and put a cross against those you don't want. Do the task individually and then compare and discuss results.

Trust:

Trust one another to pitch in and do whatever is necessary without too much planning or detailing of things.

Competition:

Task to be cut in three. Set a competition to see who can get their bit done first.

Concurrence-seeking:

Group members avoid disagreement or arguments and emphasise agreement. Compromise is sought to avoid disagreement. Members avoid questioning decisions.

Critical Path Method:

“Identify the final goal and work backward to sort out the tasks and subgoals that must happen before it is achieved, what resources must be allocated, and what the timetable for accomplishing each subgoal should be and who should have the responsibilities”. (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 562).

Leadership Choices:

You also have to choose a leader. Which of these styles would best suit your group?

“Machiavellian” leadership –based on the beliefs that (1) people are basically weak, fallible, gullible and not particularly trustworthy, others are impersonal objects and (3) one should manipulate others whenever it is necessary in order to achieve one’s ends”(Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 566).

“Democratic leadership –leader sets policies through group discussion and decision, encouraging and helping group members to interact, requesting the co-operation of others, and being considerate of members’ feelings and needs” (Johnson & Johnson, 1994, p. 563).

Laissez-faire leadership – leader allows people to do their own thing–just get on with it.

Speaking Opportunity

Present your group’s decisions on the above task in an interesting way in four minutes or less.

Lost in central Australia

You are in a group of six students who have hired a four wheel drive vehicle to take you out into the trackless desert north-west of Ayers Rock. You expected to be away ten days visiting remote aboriginal camps reputed to be in the area. Unfortunately five days out there was a fire in the electrical system of your vehicle which also destroyed your emergency radio. You are now stranded on a flat plain with no landmarks in sight – especially no signs of the waterholes where Aboriginal groups were reputed to live a hunter-gatherer existence.

The group is beginning to bicker and the temperature is higher than you have ever experienced during the day and freezing at night. Two of you were injured in the fire and cannot walk. The bushflies attack everyone unmercifully.

Individual Task

Write a paragraph (format on p. 69) explaining what you would do in this situation.

Team task

Read through the introduction section “Can groups make better decisions than individuals?” on p. 106. As a group come up with a plan of action for the Lost in Central Australia scenario.

Individual task

Compare your individual solution to the group plan of action and write another paragraph answer to, “Can groups make better decisions than individuals?” using your experience in this exercise to provide evidence for your answer.

Individual task–Group involvement

Prepare a description of the characteristics of two people your age who you regard as leaders: one male and one female. In class, place the list of characteristics on the whiteboard. In groups of three list these in order of importance, negotiating your differences. Label these characteristics as “Task” or “Maintenance” depending upon whether they get the job done (Task) or keep the people in the group happy, motivated and cohesive (Maintenance). Were there any differences between characteristics most noted in women and characteristics noted in men?

Writing tasks

Solving problems in groups requires attention to both task and group maintenance issues. What do you need to know in order to participate fruitfully in groups? Write a paragraph using the format on p. 69 to answer this.

Groups have both advantages and disadvantages. Use what you know of group dynamics to explain how you can use work groups effectively to capitalise on the advantages. Write a paragraph using the format on p. ****

Individual and team tasks

- (1) Individually rate the following list of problems that are experienced by groups on a scale of 1–5 with (1) being the most annoying and (5) being least annoying.
 - (i) Sally never said a word in group meetings.
 - (ii) I had to do all the work; the others wouldn’t produce anything.
 - (iii) Everyone in our group wanted to be in charge.
 - (iv) I had to do all the organising.
 - (v) James made all the decisions and we had to fit in.
 - (vi) Our group had no leader.
 - (vii) Lisa got off the point all the time.
 - (viii) Lisa was always late or “forgot” the meeting.
 - (ix) No-one kept any records of our discussions.
 - (x) James had no telephone and we couldn’t contact him.
 - (xi) I don’t think the others should get the same mark as I do because I did all the work.
 - (xii) The lecturer shouldn’t insist on students working in multi-cultural groups.
 - (xiv) Naomi’s English expression is weak, but she felt that the others didn’t give her a chance to make contributions to the project.
 - (xv) Lisa doesn’t like the people in this group–she’d prefer to work with her friends.
 - (xvi) I think people argue too much in groups.

- (2) Find a person in your group who has ranked three items at the same level as you have. This will give you an opportunity to see what other people view as the major difficulties encountered in working with groups.
- (3) As a group, work out a rule to combat each of the problems reported by students working in groups. Include your list of rules with your group assignment.

Groups

The least preferred group member.

Make a list of the behaviours you dislike in someone you have to work with in a group. On the opposite side of the page put the opposite quality.

Example: Tardy, can't keep on topic	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	Example Always on time, focused
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____
_____	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	_____

Compare your list with those of two other people and make up a list which suits all three of you. Show the new rating scale to the two other people you were planning to ask to join your group. Tell them that if their score on this list is like that of the present members they may be happy working in your group.

Write a paragraph: "The kind of person I like to work," with using the format on p. 69.