



PROCESSES TO MOVE GROUPS AHEAD

Getting
down to
business

3M Meeting Network

Some of our peak experiences as human beings take place in workgroups. So do some of our most miserable.

Synergy, deep feelings of belonging and commitment, the grace of alignment, the efficiency of leveraging diverse skills and an appreciation of our shared humanity are some of the highs to be had in workgroups.

Power jockeying, being stalled or dominated by a coercive individual, suffering Groupthink (when the group as a whole acts a lot less smart than any of the participants) and the Abilene Paradox (when a group commits to a direction that none of the members would choose as individuals) are among the low points.

A workgroup's greatest strength is its ability to combine the best contributions of members into far more. Its greatest drawback is its potential to negate members' desires and contributions and deliver less than individual members could on their own.

Chances are, you're reading this in hopes of producing more of the former and a lot less of the latter. Well, there is hope!

The good news is that we're learning more every day about how to give groups the best chance of achieving synergy, humanity and leverage. And individuals can make a large difference to a group. Think about groups in which you've been a participant: One person can change the entire dynamics of a group. You could be that person. By examining a few simple ideas — and applying them in your groups — you can make an enormous difference in the way your workgroups solve problems.

What happens in groups?

University of Minnesota communication researcher Marshall Scott Poole has commented on the challenges of workgroups:

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“A set of individuals, each with his or her own goals and motivations (only some of which are directed toward task accomplishment), must somehow work together. Moreover, this set of individuals must do so in a sufficiently coordinated manner to act as a group, while encouraging independent thinking.”

If Poole is right, we're caught in a dilemma where individual and group goals often conflict with one another. What is the solution? A strong leader? Not necessarily. "Strong leadership" may be history's oldest prescription for strong group performance, but it's not proven to be the best prescription. Strong leaders can often be the cause of the problem. How many times have you watched strong leaders run groups right off a cliff? Looking to politics and world history gives us many examples where strong leaders have led entire nations into terrible mistakes. Strong leadership is clearly not sufficient to guarantee strong group performance.

Leaders can only improve group performance if they do the things that make groups work. If strong leaders don't know how to help groups or are unaware of their personal impact, they can actually *impair* group performance. Compliance and obedience can accomplish much, but they don't evoke the synergy and group intelligence that breed peak performance, innovation and long-term success.

A more useful prescription for improving group performance is to "structure" communication in meetings. Why? Structure supports group effectiveness and efficiency and amplifies feelings of fairness and satisfaction among members. When fairness and satisfaction run high, synergy, humanity, leverage and alignment escalate. And the potential for Groupthink, the Abilene Paradox and power politics diminishes. Moreover, you don't have to have a dynamic personality to be a master of team-structured communication. It is a skill almost anyone can learn.

Getting better results from groups.

So how do you structure communication in meetings? An easy way is to apply one or more structured group processes to meeting tasks. Structured group processes include a variety of techniques (such as brainstorming) that meet a desired result (such as planning, decision-making, problem-solving) while balancing member participation and protecting the group against its own bad habits.

Five commonly used structured group processes are outlined here. To learn to use them, gather a group and try them out. Like riding a bicycle, you'll need to practice a bit to master these techniques — but the reward is worth it.

1. Brainstorming. Brainstorming is probably the most frequently referenced structured group process. It may also be the process most poorly implemented when used without clear ground rules.

When to use it: For creative generation of diverse ideas or options.

How to use it: The key to brainstorming is that once it begins, the process itself stimulates subsequent ideas among participants as they associate with previous ideas.

1. The meeting leader clearly states a problem or other need for creative ideas and outlines the brainstorming ground rules for the group:
 - No evaluation or discussion.
 - All ideas are recorded until ideas are exhausted.
 - Everybody participates.

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2. Participants are given a few minutes to write down ideas and then share them without evaluation of any kind.

All ideas are recorded on a shared display.

3. This process continues until the “idea stream” slows to a trickle.

See the 3M Meeting Guide *Blasting Barriers with Brainstorming* for a more thorough description of the brainstorming process.

2. Nominal Group Conference. The Nominal Group Conference (NGC) is a five-step process for uncovering and prioritizing ideas relevant to a situation or challenge. It is an expansion on the brainstorming process, which narrows the ideas generated.

When to use it: When a group needs to uncover a lot of information quickly, particularly when that information is already known to the participants. The NGC is an effective way to “level the playing field” in a group while supporting diverse perspectives and assisting the group to reach a consensus.

How to use it: The meeting leader begins the process by stating the challenge or problem clearly.

1. Silent generation: Silently and independently, participants create written responses or ideas to the challenge or problem.
2. Round robin: The leader calls on each participant to provide one of their ideas related to the task statement. Each idea is recorded on a shared display. This continues until all ideas have been recorded or a preset time limit is reached.
3. Group clarification: This step is to clarify, modify and combine similar ideas in order for everyone to have a clear understanding of each idea. The desired outcome is to produce a “cleaned-up” list of ideas.
4. Voting and ranking: Participants individually rank what they think are the seven best ideas, giving the best a score of seven, the next best a score of six, and so on. Then, on the shared display, the leader collects all of the rankings and combines them into a group ranking of the ideas.
5. Discussion of results: The leader then leads a discussion of the results and captures action items for follow-through.

3. Force Field Analysis. Force Field Analysis is a way to render a graphic image of a current situation by relating driving forces for change to the forces restraining change.

When to use it: When a group needs to change an organizational situation.

How to use it: Follow this three-step process.

1. Name the situation being addressed and write the name at the top of a shared display. Divide the space below the title in half vertically. Label one side “Driving Forces” and the other side “Restraining Forces.” See *Figure 1*.
2. Ask participants to suggest short descriptions of forces affecting the situation and classify them as either “driving” or “restraining.” Write descriptions near the outside margins of the display. Between the forces and the center divider, draw arrows of appropriate length and width to represent the magnitude of each force.
3. Compare and discuss the various forces to determine where change is most needed that would enable driving forces to move the force field.

4. SWOT Analysis. SWOT is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats operating in a given situation.

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When to use it: Useful in strategic planning to map the match between a group's internal and external environments.

How to use it: Follow this three-step process.

1. Draw a large 2 x 2 matrix. Label the vertical axis Environment (internal, external) and the horizontal axis Forces (positive, negative). Label cells appropriately as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats. *See Figure 2.*
2. Elicit participants' ideas and post them in appropriate cells.
3. Study and discuss relationships between ideas for clues to planning direction.

5. Multivoting. Multivoting is a method of applying majority rule to decision-making in an evolving consensus environment.

When to use it: When many ideas need to be prioritized by a group.

How to use it: Follow this five-step process.

1. Count and number ideas to be considered on a shared display. (Let's say there are 50.)
2. Assign participants sufficient votes to enable them to vote a certain number of their highest priority ideas. (When there are 50 ideas, give everyone five votes, for example.)
3. Ask each participant to write down his or her five votes silently.
4. Distribute sticky dots or colored markers to all participants and ask them to place one dot next to each idea to signify their vote.
5. Count the votes for each item and prioritize the top contenders in order of the number of votes received.

Dealing with large groups.

Even with large groups, you can be a master at keeping people engaged in all aspects of the meeting. All it takes is courage and practicing one or more procedures that manage participation! Regardless of which structured group process you're using, you can modify it for large-group use by following these steps:

1. Invite participants to consider the topic individually and write down their ideas.
2. Divide participants into groups of five to 10 (depending on meeting size) to report and record their ideas as a subgroup on a flip chart.
3. Reconvene as a large group and have the small groups report on their work, combining the subgroups' ideas as you would those of an individual's.
4. Moderate a large group discussion of the group's reports.

When you follow any of these procedures, even the quietest person's ideas will be represented in a large group discussion and the impact of more assertive personalities will be moderated.

It takes a little creative imagination to apply participation procedures. But once you try them, you'll find they give your group meetings a rhythm and movement that emulate the working of great groups.

Make the meeting.

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