Nature of Small Groups

It is the lunch hour at the Midland Chemical Company, a medium sized corporation. In the cafeteria, eight people sitting at the same table begin to talk among themselves and discover that in the past week each one has lost at least a dollar in the soft drink and snack vending machines on their floor. They decide something needs to be done about the problem.

At another table four secretaries are playing bridge, just as they do every noon hour.

At yet another table, four people have their notes and books in front of them as they prepare to take an exam in an in-service course. This is a course offered by the company to help employees improve their skills and knowledge in job-related ways.

In the infirmary, six people recently identified as drug users, are talking about ways to kick their habits.

In the recreation area, representatives from the various divisions and levels are meeting with the newly hired corporate fitness instructor about the best way to set up a company-wide program.

Four people, representatives of different divisions in the company, are meeting to go over final plans for presenting their report on competing accident insurance plans.

The workers' contract negotiation team is holding a quick session to set up a time for a meeting after work in response to the latest offer from management. The management team is meeting to decide what possible responses they may have to meet from the employees' negotiating team.

Small groups are a natural activity of human beings. Even in primitive conditions, humans join themselves to others to fulfill two of our most basic needs: the need for mutual help and the need for socialization. By banding together, people accomplish, or accomplish more efficiently, tasks they could not accomplish alone whether that be finding food, fighting off enemies, raising structures, or other activities necessary for simple survival. Beyond survival, people also band together for the pleasure they derive from contact with others through talk, games, rituals, stories, and affection. Whether we call them committees, bridge foursomes, task forces, ad hoc committees, boards, commissions, car pools, families, clubs, fact-finders, gangs, or patrols, small groups are a major feature of our communication landscape.

Knowing something of the nature of small groups, what they are, how they function, and how we contribute to their success or failure, better prepares us for dealing with life's problems. Whether the situation be professional or private, if we can function well in small group settings, we will find both our problem solving skills and our social skills enhanced.

What is a Small Group?
A small group is obviously a collection of people, but it is more than people thrown together by coincidence. People sitting at one of the lunch tables at the Midland Chemical Company would not constitute a small group unless they exhibit other characteristics as well.

One characteristic would be the number of people. As the term is usually used in communication, a small group is a collection of people larger than a dyad yet small enough that all members can interact readily with other members. The maximum for a small group is usually about twelve to fifteen people. Beyond this size, the group tends to fracture into subdivisions, small groups within a larger group, so that the element of direct interaction is lost or sorely hampered.

To be a small group, the three to twelve people must also share some common goal toward which they are willing to work. The goal must be one which they cannot accomplish individually. The eight people sitting at the same lunch table can all eat their meals by themselves. If the same eight people decide that they are all fed up with the malfunctioning soft drink and food machines and want the situation remedied, they have taken their first step as a small group.

Finally, a small group is a collection of people who share a common goal which they attempt to articulate and accomplish through the process of communication. If the people at the lunch table continue talking among themselves about the concession situation at the company, then formulate a plan of action to correct the situation, they have become a functioning small group.

To summarize, then, a small group is a collection of people, usually three to twelve, who attempt through communication to accomplish a common goal.

Types of Small Groups

[B] Problem Solving Groups

The people at the lunch collecting themselves into a group represent one type of group, the problem-solving group. Other problem solving groups would be the committee meeting to create a fitness program and the four discussing how best to make their presentation. A problem-solving group is one whose chief reason for existence is the removal or lessening of a difficult situation.

Problem solving groups may be short-lived or ongoing. An ad hoc (Latin for "to this") group is one created to respond to a specific problem and nothing beyond that problem. Once the problem is solved, the group disbands. A rash of accidents in the parking lot might call forth an ad hoc committee charged with investigating the situation and making recommendations to the physical plant. After its report is submitted, the committee breaks up. More permanent problem solving groups would be those with an ongoing task or mission such as the Medical Benefits Committee, the Affirmative Action Committee, or the Sales Directors. Committees such as these deal with ongoing problems, and the group continues despite changes in its membership.

[B] Therapy Groups

The former drug users meeting in the infirmary for mutual help constitute a therapy group. A therapy group is one whose primary aim is to assist the members in overcoming their personal problems. Usually, the members have the same problem in common, be it drug addiction, eating disorders, grief, or marital problems. The group may be lead by a professional counselor or the leadership may be provided by one of the group members. When the group members talk among
themselves without the guidance of a professional, it is often called a support group, that is one in which the members offer each other empathic understanding and encouragement.

[B] Study groups

The people reviewing for their exam constitute a study group. Here the emphasis is on assisting each other to learn material. Members help each other by posing questions, sharing notes and readings, offering corrections, and clarifying concepts for each other. Together they can create a more comprehensive view of material than each could singly.

[B] Social Groups

The bridge foursome that plays every lunch hour would be a social group. Their primary goal is the enjoyment of each other's company which they achieve by sharing in an activity they all find entertaining. Other social groups might include softball and bowling teams, golf foursomes, after-work beer drinkers, various clubs, or even people who make point of taking their coffee break together every afternoon.

[B] Bargaining groups

Bargaining groups are those groups which negotiate with another group or a person to arrive at an settlement acceptable by both parties. Both sides in a bargaining situation are represented by a small group. Bargaining groups, however, differ significantly from the other groups listed above. Bargaining groups arise out of conflict and are created in opposition to pressures from another group. Each group arrives at the negotiating situation with its own set of demands and wishes. The negotiation is characterized by communication which attempts to convey the wishes of the party together with an attempt to influence the other party (Putnam and Jones 263).

What begins in opposition, though, must end in agreement if the negotiating process is to be a success. To achieve this success, the two sides must find common interests which form the basis for agreement. If at Midwest Chemical the two sides of the contract negotiation cannot discover enough commonality to reach accord, the discussions will fail (Putnam and Jones 275). The successful negotiating situation begins with two separate groups and ends with a blending of the groups' viewpoints.

Groups and Context

As individuals do not exist untouched by other influences, neither do small groups exist in isolation. Even though a small group constitutes a unit of relationships, the relationships in a small group are influenced by forces both within the group and outside the group such as the history of the group and members' loyalties to other relationships.

[B] Group History

One of the most important factors in determining how a group will function is the history of the group. Is the group newly formed or has it been in existence for a long time? The distinction is an important one.
When a group is newly constituted, it is a "zero history group" (Bormann and Bormann 98). A zero history group is one that must move through all the stages of group formation. It must select leaders, develop norms, and define its task. It must work out the relationships among its members and relationships between the group and entities outside the group. It is a group that must begin at "square one" as its members bring with them little or no knowledge of each other or of how they will function in the work of the group.

At Midwest Chemical, the people who discover they are all upset about the same thing, the faulty drink machine, could well be a zero history group. Similarly, the drug therapy group might also be a zero history group if the members do not know each other beforehand. In both these cases, the groups would have to make basic decisions about how they are to function, and those decisions would shape the nature of the group as it progress.

A person joining a zero history group might experience the same atmosphere as one the workers at Midwest Chemical: Phil Homais has had a drinking problem and has finally acknowledged it. He has decided to take advantage of the therapy program offered at Midwest Chemical and has responded to the flier distributed by the therapist. At the announced day, he goes to the infirmary for the first session. As he enters, he notices about ten people sitting around the room. He finds an empty seat and sits down. He thinks he may know one person from production, but the others are strangers. They sit uncomfortably, nobody speaking. Homais debates whether or not to say anything. Finally, the therapist enters.

At the other end of the spectrum from zero history groups are ongoing small groups which have been in existence for a some time and thus take on a life of their own. A new member arriving to participate in the group would soon discover a number of factors have already been decided. Norms may be well developed and firmly established, and new members must adjust to the existing situation.

For a new member, the first meeting of an established group might be like this: Jane Keppler, an accounting executive, has been assigned to the safety committee, a committee that has been in existence for years at Midwest Chemical. It is charged with reviewing accident reports and making recommendations. She enters the first meeting, and finds an empty chair. "That's Charlie's place," another member tells her. Keppler elects to move to a different seat. Even after the group is fully assembled, they carry on conversations for several minutes before beginning the business of the day. Once the business begins, Kepler notices that the group is reviewing the reports according to the date when they were filed, not by the date of the accidents. When she asks about the procedure, she is told, "That's the way we've always done it."

Another important factor influencing the functioning of small groups is the context of relationships, both internal and external, that the group must deal with. Small groups usually exist within the context of a larger organization. All the groups at Midwest Chemical are part of the corporation and will be influenced by the atmosphere of that corporation. In a university, a departmental committee charged with directing the undergraduate education will, naturally, exist within a department, but the department is also part of a greater whole. It exists within a school which exists within a university. The committee will be influenced by its place in the department, the department's place in the school, and the school's place in the university, and even the school's place in the state system of universities.
The influence of the group's context can be shown by a decision made by the Midwest Chemical accident insurance committee: In discussing the personal accident insurance, the committee has reviewed a variety of plans and is satisfied that four offer good coverage at acceptable cost. The first three plans, however, allow Midwest Chemical workers to buy coverage for the families in addition to themselves. The fourth plan, that of Acme Insurance, is the cheapest. While its coverage is for workers is as good as the first three plans, it does not allow Midwest Chemical workers to purchase coverage for their families. Coverage is extended only to those employed by Midwest Chemical.

In discussion, the committee recalls that Midwest Chemical has long had a policy of supporting family activities and that a major portion of the company's health care plan is devoted to the care of family members. Further, when the workers last voted on accidental insurance plans, they overwhelmingly turned down a plan similar to that of Acme Insurance.

Because of the influence of company policy and worker sentiments--forces from outside the committee--the committee places Acme's plan at the bottom of their list of four companies.

Besides relations with outside entities, small groups will also be affected by the relationships of its members to other people, both inside and outside of the group. If group members are answerable to those outside the group, that relationship will exert influence on their activities. If in addition to their relationships within the group, members also sustain relationships with each other outside of the group, those outside relationships will influence what transpires within the group as well.

The study group at Midwest Chemical is about to break up early, but John Torres suggests one final review of the material. The other members go along. "You really must want to pass this test," one of the members says. "You're right," Torres responds. "If we pass the test, it means a higher rating, and that means we have a better chance of promotion and a raise in pay. My kids are both going to need braces, and we could use the money."

In the group making the presentation about the personal accident insurance, one of the members is Rosalie Lindowski, a senior accountant in the company. She supplies most of the financial information about the Midwest Chemical. Another member is Harold Mishima a junior executive from production. He suspects that Lindowski's information does not always reflect the total picture but is biased toward efficiency over human concerns. Lindowski, though, is also on the company grievance committee, a committee that investigates complaints. Mishima has had a grievance filed against him, a grievance which he sees as totally unfounded but which, nevertheless, will be heard by the grievance committee. Mishima is careful when choosing his words and is reluctant to create conflict with Lindowski as she will sit in judgment on him later.

While a group will create an identity of its own, the nature of a given small group will be strongly influenced by how that group fits into its context and how members balance their relationships both within and without the group.

**Group Climate**

As group members interact with each other, they create a "climate" for the group. Just as "climate" indicates the nature of our geographic environment--cold, rainy, sunny, cloudy with a thirty percent chance of precipitation--so "climate" in the context of small groups indicate the group's environment.
Some groups seem to be characterized by ill will and tension. No leadership arises. The members dislike each other, and they more they attempt to communicate, the more angry, hateful, and upset they become. In other groups, members are congenial, supportive, and creative, and the group is highly successful in accomplishing its goals.

The creation of group climate is not the work of one person. It is the work of all group members, even the person who says nothing and does little or nothing. The various ingredients of the group, the members and their actions, create something that is greater than simply the sum of the individual group members.

Group climate is pervasive. It is not the matter of a few minutes or a few interactions. Climate is something that characterizes the group for a relatively long period of time. Two group members may become upset and argue loudly. The climate of the group is not determined by that one argument but by the interaction which preceded it and the interaction which follows it. If the group climate is one of distrust and antagonism, the argument will be another black cloud on the group's horizon. If the group constructively handles conflict, the argument can be a plus for the group.

Group climate is also pervasive in that the climate is perceive by more than or two group members. Climate characterizes the group as a whole. All members experience the tension, the cooperation, the distrust, or the mutual support of the group.

Bringing these two main ideas together, we can define "climate" as "the relatively enduring quality of the group situation that (a) is experienced in common by group members, and (b) arises from and influences their interaction and behavior" (Folger and Poole 84).

**Tasks and Relationships**

Every group must balance two sets demands if the group is to survive. Whether the group be formal or informal, professional or recreational, problem solving or therapeutic, the group must effectively manage the relationships between its members and it must do the work necessary for the group to accomplish its purpose. These two aspects are often called the relational side and the task side of small group processes.

One can imagine a group in which the members do not see each other outside of the group meetings, a group in which the total focus appears to be on accomplishing a given piece of work. The members address each other coolly, and it is clear little affection exists between the members. Relationships would appear to be of little import in this group. Yet, upon closer inspection it is clear that the group has answered a number of questions such as "How will we talk to each other?" "What is the reason we are here?" "How can we accomplish our task with a minimum of socializing?" In short, the group has defined the style of relationships that will exist between its members. Had the group not been able to create patterns for relationships, the group could not function.

At the other end of the scale, one can picture a group that has little work to accomplish and exists strictly for the enjoyment of its members. The lunch time bridge foursome would appear to be such a group as would a tailgate party, a wine tasting club, or four people who regularly attend the theatre together.
Despite its strong emphasis on socializing, such a group still has tasks which it must perform if it is to exist. The bridge foursome must decide who is to bring the cards, when they will meet, where they will meet, how much talking is allowed, and what topics are acceptable. The theatre foursome still has work to do. The four must decide on what nights to attend, how to purchase and pay for the tickets, how to handle transportation and parking.

**Groups as Self-Sustaining and Self-Directing Units**

In accomplishing their tasks, small groups display an interesting pattern of creation and self-regulation. For a group to function, its members must work out a pattern of interaction acceptable to the group. Having worked out a pattern that allows them to interact, they are then able to change that pattern through the very interaction it allows. Thus groups define themselves and, by their defining, open the way to changes in that definition.

The bridge foursome at Midwest Chemical has met now for two years. As only four can play the same game of bridge at a time, they have closely defined the borders of their group. The pattern that has emerged is that any changes in the regular procedures--an absence, a change in the time to play--are to be discussed openly. A new person appears at work, someone who has the same lunch hour as the foursome, is a pleasant person, and is an excellent bridge player. The newcomer asks about finding a game.

Since the four have constituted themselves as a group, they are able to discuss what to do about the newcomer. They have three choices. They can exclude the person and maintain the tight boundaries of their group. They can ask the person to join them on a regular basis so that one of the group would sit out every game. They could partially include the newcomer by, say, asking the person to be available as a substitute when one of the regular players is unable to play.

Whatever the decision, the bridge foursome will be a different group than it was before the decision was made. The group will have redefined itself to some extent, and the members' new vision of the group will influence its future action. If, for example, they elect to exclude such a likely candidate as the newcomer, the group will probably be even more strongly opposed to new members in the future.

**Creative Activities of Groups**

The decision of whether or not to admit a newcomer is only one of the many activities in which groups must engage in (Putnam and Stohl 258; Poole, Seibold, and McPhee 84). Whatever its main goal, in the course of its existence, a group will need to do a number of things if it is to continue.

A group will engage in *problem solving*. It will confront difficulties and discover effective ways to deal with them.

While planning its first session with the management negotiating team, the workers' team discovered that it lacked recent data about inflation rates. The statistics were necessary because they would provide a basis for the workers' wage demands. Until the figures were available, the work was at a standstill. One member volunteered to find the information and bring it to the next meeting. The group took up the next topic on the agenda.
Groups will engage in decision making. They will discover or create ways to choose courses of action. Groups must confront a wide range of issues. Some of these might be procedural such as how best to arrange the meeting. Other decisions may concern what information is acceptable and what is not. Still other decisions may address which issues to take up, what stances to take, and even such seemingly trivial matters as whether or not to have refreshments and who is to supply them.

Groups will also practice boundary maintenance. Boundaries separate members from nonmembers. Groups must have some way of telling who is a member and who is not. If it is impossible to tell who is a member of a given group, then the group has no identity. If it does not define itself, create a sense of purpose for itself and find a way to distinguish those who share that purpose, it will fade away rapidly.

The eight upset about the faulty food and drink machines decide that they want to band together to attack the problem. Then they pick a name for their committee. They decide on "The Snack Pack." Having given themselves an identity, they now have a way of determining who is part of the project and who is not.

Similar to boundary maintenance is another group activity, inclusion and exclusion. The group must decide who is to be admitted and who is not, who is to continue working with the group and who is to be expelled. In some groups, the process is done by appointment and membership is for a fixed term. The appointment may be made by an administrator, a nominating committee, or a legislative body. With other groups, it is the group members themselves who decide who will be recruited or admitted. Selection is done by such methods as self-selection, screening, and elections.

Self-selection takes place when people volunteer for positions or roles. Screening is when candidates for a position are evaluated by interviews, tests, or other means, and selections are based on the evaluations. Elections are when people are selected by voting.

To exist, small groups must also provide support for their members. The support may come in a variety of ways. The accomplishments of the group may provide a sense of accomplishment for members, and they will find their goals reinforced. The social climate of the group--how positive or negative the group's relationships seem--may be a major factor in members' willingness to participate. Group members must provide each other with enough positive responses that the members are willing to respond and interact so that the group can accomplish its business.

At Midwest Chemical Paula Krupskaya has been appointed to the corporate fitness planning committee. She is overweight, out of condition, and out of her element. She is on the committee not by any personal choice but because her position in the company as supervisor of services demands it. She approaches the first meeting with trepidation. Sure enough, everyone else in the group looks healthy and fit. She sits down at the edge of the group.

The meeting starts, but she says nothing. As the members talk of those who are overweight with bad diet habits and those who need exercise, she feels the group looking at her from the corner of their eyes. Finally, the fitness coordinator says to her, "You have been very quiet. What observations do you have?"

Krupskaya says, "I'm just here to help the program fit into our range of services."
"I know that you and I have talked about that," the coordinator says, "But why don't you describe that process for the rest of the group."

Krupskaya begins explaining her role as supervisor of services. As she explains the organization of her division, she sees members nodding their heads. Later in the discussion, they ask her for more information and for her advice on making the program successful.

She leaves the meeting chatting with one of the members. She returns to the second meeting feeling more comfortable and participates more.

As groups come into existence and begin their work, it is important that they create a sense of themselves as a group. The group must also create places for its members. Members establish identities for themselves based on their relationships to others in the group, the task of the group, and their relationships outside of the group. One of the activities of a group is the creation of identities. What roles will the group members play?

The study group at Midwest Chemical has come into existence informally. After the first class, four of the class members began talking over coffee. As they discussed their concerns and hopes for the class, they decided that they would meet before each class to review materials. Darlene Jensen suggested a time and place for the next meeting. The others agreed. At the second meeting, she suggested that they agree to guidelines; each reads all the assigned material and each writes four questions on the material. The other three agree.

By the third meeting, it is obvious that Jensen is the group's leader in decisions concerning the group's goals and approaches to those goals. Her identity in the group has been established. Other group members will also take on identities within the group. John Torres establishes himself as the persistent one who wants to continue working until all the material is mastered. The other two will take on roles that allow them to fit in as well.

It should be noted, though, that the manner in which Jensen and Torres behave in this group does not mean that they will take on the same identities in other groups. Their roles in other groups will depend on the dynamics of those groups, and hence, their places in those groups may be entirely different than they are in their study group. Should Torres not believe in the group's goal or see little reward in the group's activities, he might become a detractor rather than a strong supporter. If Jensen is in a group in which she does not know how best to approach a problem, she may defer to someone else as an agenda setter for the group. Should she try to play the same leadership role in a second group as she does in her study group, the second group may not accept her in the position, and she would find it impossible to perform in the same way in both groups.

Finally, groups must also engage in self-regulation if they are to be successful. Groups must create ways of accomplishing their goals that are compatible with their purposes and that are accepted by group members. Each group will decide how it will do business and what are acceptable standards for behavior in the group. These in-group standards are called "norms": norms measure and determine what is correct and incorrect for the group. Written or unwritten, they belong to the group as the "property of a social system that is created and sustained by practice" (Poole, Seibold, and McPhee 87). Behavior according to the norms helps group processes go smoothly; behaving contrary to norms introduces disturbance and conflict into the group.
Norms may regulate a number of things. They may deal with details of behavior such as dress, who cleans up after the meeting, and how members are to be addressed: by first name, by last name, by title and last name, or by nickname. Norms will also determine how the work of the group is accomplished, for example, how proposals are made, how punctual members are expected to be, how tasks are to be divided, and how expenses are to be met.

When Jane Keppler arrives at the accident investigation committee and discovers that members all have their specified seats and that they begin each meeting with small talk, she is encountering the norms of that group. As she continues to meet with them, she will contribute to the evolution of the group's norms. Some, such as the seating patterns, she accepts. Others she might attempt to change. She might suggest, for instance, that preliminary investigation of the reports be done by individuals or sub-committees. If the group accepts her suggestion for ways of acting, the new pattern will become the norm.

**Group Tensions**

As we have noted above, groups are collections of individuals and exist within the context of members' relationships. We also noted that groups also often exist within the context of a larger organization. This relationship indicates that group members may be pulled in several directions by their loyalties to themselves, to others in their lives, to the group, and to the organization. Every group will thus find itself having to deal with some tensions created by the pull of these different loyalties. To function, groups must find effective means of dealing with the various tensions and different levels of commitment among individual members.

One of the tensions may be between the personal desires of a group member and the desires of the group. A group member's actions will, to some extent, be determined by how compatible the member feels with the goal, norms, or directions of the group.

A group member's incompatibility with the sentiments of the group may even lead to the members pushing a "hidden agenda." A hidden agenda is a plan for action pursued by one or more group members but is never openly acknowledged in the group. Usually the hidden agenda works against the goals of the group. The group's charge may be "find the best person for this job" while a group member's hidden agenda may be "hire my friend." The articulated purpose of the group may be to achieve a high grade on its small group presentation in class, but one member's hidden agenda may be, "I want to spend the least possible time on this project."

In the drug therapy group, a hidden agenda is at work. The six state in the opening meeting that they have a problem with drugs and want to quit using the drugs. Five want to put their habits behind them because of the problems their drug usage is causing in their families and on their jobs. The goal of the sixth group member, Roy Frank, is to obtain a letter certifying that he has been through the program. With the letter he can keep his probated sentence and avoid jail time. Frank just wants to find enough of the right things to say in the meetings to get him through.

Another pressure of tension that groups must deal with is that between the internal demands the group places on its members and the external demands placed on members by their relationships outside of the group.

Paul Li is on the negotiating team for the workers and is caught between internal and external demands. Besides the meetings during work time, the group also has to meet in the evenings to plan. Besides his commitment to his fellow workers, Li is also strongly committed to his family.
He tries to bring meetings to an end in time for him to be home before his children go to bed. He also skips the post-meeting sessions when the group stops in at a local tavern for drinks and misses out on some of the social aspects of the group.

Groups are collections of individuals, yet they are more than the sum of their parts. Group members must also maintain a balance between their individuality and their conformity to group norms and pressures from other group members. If people assigned to a group strictly maintain their individuality, the group will never become a group in the true sense. It will remain a collection of people arguing their separate viewpoints. On the other hand, if group members are too eager to agree with each other, the group process will still be thwarted. If all agree upon every suggestion, they will find themselves settling for untested and contradictory courses of action. Also the group misses out on the unique contributions individuals can make.

Groups must also maintain a balance between concentration and relaxation. Studies of small groups have discovered that group work is not a matter of unwavering attention to a task with relaxation then following the accomplishment of the task (Poole, "Decision Development II . . ." 222). Rather, groups move toward their goals by an oscillation between concentration and relaxation. They will give full attention to a phase of the task, such as defining a key term or settling a conflict, then they will release some of tension by emotional expression such as jokes and comments. Following that, they will then pick up another aspect of the task.

The accident insurance committee has finished its report. The meeting has been tiring. The last part of the meeting is devoted to planning the presentation. The group decides on how to organize the presentation, who is responsible for which parts, and how visual aids are to be handled. "What should we wear?" one member asks.

"How about a leg cast?" another responds.

"I think I'll go for an eye patch," another says.

The group chuckles and then resumes the discussion. The pace picks up and they finalize their plans.

Small groups have their own histories as they begin, exist, and disband. Each group will face its challenges and respond to the various influences, both internal and external, that shape the group and create its distinct character. That process of coming into being and the continued activity constitute what we call small group development.

It is customary to think of group development as a continuous process that always moves forward. As humans, for example, we begin as small helpless infants and increase in size and mental capacity. Upon closer inspection, however, we find that development may not be the straightforward, unwavering progression it appears at first glance. Economies swing between recessions and expansions. Diseases are stopped or arrested. Buildings are not simply built but are also maintained, remodeled, refurbished, and razed. Emotionally, we have our good days and our bad days. In our education, we do not master a topic for all time; we are either learning or forgetting.
Development in groups follows along the lines of our development in other areas. In some cases, it is a straightforward progression; in other cases, groups develop in a circular pattern of looping back to earlier stages then resuming forward motion.

The groups that will usually show the most straightforward motion are the zero history leaderless groups. Beginning at the initial point of group formation and with no roles assigned, members of zero history leaderless groups must accomplish all the tasks facing groups. Since they are beginning at the most basic starting point, these groups have no place to go but forward.

People joining groups already which are already formed and functioning will discover that much of the group work has been accomplished. That does not mean, however, that the group has little left to accomplish. The group will need to engage in a number of activities to sustain itself. Some of these will be the same as those done by a zero history group just starting. Instead of being a straightforward progression, though, these groups may find themselves returning to tasks accomplished earlier.

With zero history leaderless groups, the first step in group development is orientation. In travel, "orientation" means getting our bearings or figuring out where we are in relation to the points of the compass. In small groups, orientation means much the same thing in that the group has to figure out some primary way of organizing itself and discovering a direction for itself.

In this stage, the relationship aspect of the group will be foremost. Finding themselves in a strange, unknown set of relationships, group members will try to sort out how they will behave in the group environment. Once members find their places in the group, the group can begin to move on to other tasks.

It is in this early stage that the group's first leader or leaders will emerge. The process of leadership selection is two fold. The group's first task is to select those people unsuited to the job. Once the untalented or unwilling are removed from consideration, the group accepts the remaining person or goes through the throes of conflict as it tries to decide between two or more contenders for leadership (Bormann and Bormann 100).

As the "Snack Pack" discusses how to go about solving its decided problem, a conflict develops between three members who want to start with a letter to the concession company and two who want to confront the manager of concessions. Sara Colvino and James Rutledge begin to summarize what is being said and to mediate between the two factions. It is apparent that the five arguing are not interested in mediating and that Colvino and Rutledge are putting themselves forward as mediators. The group is already, at this first meeting, discovering to whom it can turn to work through conflicts and who is not likely to play that role well.

With established groups, orientation will not be as obvious as it is in the beginning stages of zero history leaderless groups, but it will still be a necessary function. Changes in the pattern of the group will necessitate adjustments in its operation. The introduction of new members, the exit of old members, a change in purpose, the introduction of a specific problem, even a change of meeting room may necessitate members turning inward to establish new relationships or re-establish old patterns.

The second stage is the sorting out. Here members have some feel for how they will relate to each other, and their task now is to decide how they will do business. In this phase, the group places primary importance on task. It is in the process of sorting out that groups create norms for
themselves by setting up written or unwritten guidelines for how they will behave and function within the group.

Zero history groups will probably have to devote more effort to the sorting out stage than will established groups. Established groups will still have to go through sorting out periodically as relationships and tasks change within the group. Decisions made earlier will not always fit the present situation.

The next stage is to settle down to work. While relational aspects were foremost in the orientation stage, here task aspects are foremost. The group has decided, for the most part, questions of who is to do what and how it is to be done. What remains now is for the group to attack its assigned problem and to marshall its forces in working toward a solution.

Whether groups accomplish the work of orientation, sorting out, and settling down to work in a straightforward or a circular way, the stages must be accomplished if the group is to exist. Like individuals, if groups do not solve basic problems such as orientation, the later problems of the group will be that much harder to solve. Also, like individuals, groups often operate by moving "two steps forward and one step back." What appears at first glance to be regression is often a necessary step to forward progress.

The workers' negotiating team is almost finished with its work when Patricia Desmond, one of its key members, suffers an attack of appendicitis. Hospitalized, she is unable to continue her committee work. The first alternate, Hank Souder, is asked to fill in for her. He has not attended previous meetings, and the first time he meets with the team, Souder is critical of the list of demands and the committee's plan for presentation. He wants the matter reconsidered. The group has a lengthy meeting arguing with Souder. Rachel Hempstead takes the lead in arguing for the group's present position. Souder gradually backs down. The group has reoriented its relationships and moves back to its original task, polishing the fine points of the presentation.

**Conclusion**

We form ourselves into groups to accomplish those things which would be difficult or impossible to accomplish on our own. In doing so, we play out two long term needs of people: the need for assistance and cooperation and the need for socialization. Every small group will need to meet these needs though in varying ways.

Small groups exist in numerous forms: therapy groups, social groups, study groups, and problem solving groups. Whether groups are at their beginning points as zero history leaderless groups or are existing groups with a long history, they will still be self-creating and self-sustaining. They will create the framework for their communication and with that communication alter that framework as they see necessary.

Groups will engage in an number of creative activities as they go about their business. Some of the activities small groups will engage in are problem solving, decision making, boundary maintenance, inclusion and exclusion, support, the creation of identities, and self-regulation.

Groups will also need to find ways to balance the tensions and pressure upon them. These tensions arise from the divided loyalties group members may have. Some of these relationships are the personal desires versus group desires, internal loyalties versus outside loyalties, task emphasis as opposed to relational emphasis, and concentration versus relaxation.
To exist, groups will also need to accomplish the work of group development. Groups must work through orientation, sorting out, and settling down to work as they start up and as they continue their existence.

Groups are a fascinating and useful part of human communication. Knowing something of their nature and function will be an aid to us in the range of collective activities in which we find ourselves.

### Group Decision Making

We have now examined a number of aspects of small group communication. We have seen how groups work and the contributions members may make in their various roles. All of these factors come together and contribute to the success or failure of the group to discover a workable solution to the problem it addresses.

[A] Effective Problem Solving

When a problem solving group sets to work, it has several courses of action available to it. Solutions to the problem at hand may be pursued in a number of ways, both ineffective and effective.

[B] Ineffective Problem Solving

Effective problem solving depends on a full consideration of information and possibilities offered to the group. Ineffective problem solving uses decision making processes that fail to consider available information and that thwart the group process.

*Autocratic* decision making is one approach to problem solving. In this style, group leaders decide which solution best benefits them and then announce the decision to the group. In these cases, the group members have no option but go along with the decision or to resign.

Another inferior method of decision making is *rushing to judgment*. Here the group disregards or severely limits investigation and discussion and picks the first solution offered. Groups may make these kinds of decisions because of limited time or fatigue. Because they fail to investigate possibilities, the group's solution often fails to remedy the problem situation.

*Mob rule* is another method of group decision making but a poor one. It is a rush to judgment coupled with strong emotions. Caught up in their feelings and seeking a way to vent their anger, the group picks a solution which appears to offer a quick fix while providing a way for the group to express its anger. Usually, these decisions create more problems than they solve.

[B] The Rational Model of Problem Solving

A better way to solve problems is for the group to adopt procedures that encourage investigation and definition of the problem, generation of possible solutions, and sound judgment in reaching decisions. Such a method was outlined in the early part of this century by John Dewey and further refined in the thirties by James H. McBurney and Kenneth G. Hance. The method is widely used
and taught and has undergone continual refining. The method describes the steps that groups should go through to reach the best possible solution.

- Define the Problem

The first task sounds simple enough but is not always used. The group must first decide what is its task: it must define the problem. The decision is an important one as it will shape much of the group's subsequent activity. Discussing solutions and courses of action is pointless unless the group knows for what it is searching. Failure to articulate the problem to be attacked will result in lost time and duplicated efforts.

Sometimes, the decision is a simple one: the group is given an assignment. The Undergraduate Committee is told to pick the "Outstanding Senior;" the design committee is charged with the creation of a logo; the entertainment committee of a club has the responsibility to plan the spring banquet.

At other times, the task is not so easy. Group members may have a general sense of uneasiness about a situation but that sense does not articulate the problem to be approached. In their search for the problem, groups may light on a symptom of the problem rather than the problem itself. Different group members may define the problem in different ways. The group must find agreement on what is the goal of the group.

For example, in response to complaints, the student senate may create a committee on tuition charges at the school. Designating the committee does not, however, create a purpose for the group. Is the group to investigate and report information to the senate? Is the group to lobby legislators during the debate on the state's educational budget? Is the committee to seek student opinions? Is the group to propose ways to avoid tuition hikes? Without a clear statement of purpose, the group will be without direction.

- Investigate the Problem

Once the group has articulated the problem to be solved, the next step is to investigate the problem situation. The goal in this stage is to find out as much as possible about the problem to be solved and what surrounds the problem. This allows the group to work from knowledge rather than ignorance. At this stage, a number of questions need to be asked and answered:

What is the origin of the problem? Why did this problem develop? What circumstances led to the creation of this problem? What people led to the creation of this problem? What perpetuates this problem? What solutions to this problem have already been tried? What resources do we have available to solve this problem? How much money do we have available? How much time do we have available? What people and talents are available? What materials are available? To whom do we report our conclusions? Who puts the solution into effect?

At this point in the problem solving sequence, the group needs to be as open as possible. The research step should utilize as many types of information as necessary. Relevant information may be found in print sources, in electronic media, and in people. In short, wherever the group needs to look, it should look. The job of information gathering is well suited to small group work. Members can divide up the research work, pool their resources, and accomplish the task much more quickly than could an individual.
Set Criteria for a Solution

Once the group has gathered information and provided itself with the basis for informed judgments, it moves on to the next step in the process, setting criteria for the solution. Here the group creates and agrees on a set of "goals" for the solution with the best solution accomplishing the greatest number of goals. Considerations in creating the criteria would be such aspects as available time, money, space, resources, and feasibility.

The criteria act as a measuring stick for all proposed solutions. Formulating the criteria provides the group with an accepted basis for evaluating and making decisions. The final standard is not one group member's idiosyncratic preference for a given solution. The final standard is the set of criteria accepted by all group members.

A family trying to decide where to go on vacation might list as criteria: a beach, nice campground, good shopping, pretty scenery, and within one day's drive from home. The undergraduate committee selecting the outstanding senior might generate criteria such as: senior standing, high grade point average, rigorous plan of study, service activities, and professional plans. The entertainment committee looking for a banquet site would probably have criteria such as: good food, comfortable banquet room, reasonable price, availability on desired date, and easily reached from campus.

Formulate Possible Solutions

With a solid base of knowledge from which to work and with consensus reached on the criteria for judging possible solutions, the group should next formulate possible solutions. Decisions will usually be better if groups debate the strengths and weaknesses of several possibilities rather than immediately settling on one solution.

The family will propose several sites that might meet the criteria. The undergraduate committee will select a group of finalists. The entertainment committee will discuss the three restaurants or catering services available.

Select the Best Alternative

Once a list of possible solutions is on the table for discussion, the group then moves forward to select the solution it deems best. The decisive factor should be which solution comes closest to meeting the criteria created earlier. Sometimes, one solution will emerge clearly as superior to the others. In other cases, the group may agonize over the relative merits of two solutions, each with strengths and weaknesses that balance the other.

In choosing a solution, the group must remember that "best" does not mean "perfect" and that "consensus" does not mean "everyone thinks it is perfect." Most solutions will have both positive and negative aspects. In some situations, the key question will be which option offers the fewest negatives, and the group will be forced to decide which of two bad alternatives it wants. This kind of decision will be a difficult one, but the final choice would be the option that offers the best combination of characteristics.

Put the Chosen Solution Into Effect
After selecting the best possible solution, the group needs to change its focus yet again and take up the task of *putting the chosen solution into effect*. In some cases, the group will report its findings to an administrative officer, a client, or to yet another group such as the board of trustees or the city commissioners. In other cases, the group will itself be the unit enacting its decisions. The scheduling committee for a social group, for example, after deciding on the best course of action, would issue the schedule of meetings to the members and possibly start looking for speakers or entertainment.

- **Decide What Happens to the Group**

Once the solution is put into effect, the major work of the group is over, but it still has one task left to accomplish. That task is to *decide what happens to the group once the solution has been put into effect*. The group may disband, refine the solution, find another solution, or take up another problem.

Many groups break up once their work is done. Once a recipient is found and the award made, an award committee has little else to do. An *ad hoc* committee commissioned to study a particular problem, disbands once its work is through. No more *hoc*, no more committee.

Other groups stay in touch with the problem and monitor how well the solution is working. A curriculum committee in a university may create a new core of class. Following that work, the committee would watch the core to see how well it was working and to make necessary changes if it were discovered that classes were not available, students' degree progress was unduly hampered, or classes were not accomplishing their intended purpose in the core.

The last possibility is that the group continues functioning but leaves behind the problem just completed and takes up a new problem. This is the course of action followed by standing committees. Once an issue is decided, the committee moves on to another issue and another issue after that and another after that, *ad infinitum*.

**Methods of Decision Making**

The major work of a problem solving group is the decision of which solution to adopt. Along the way to that major decision will be a history of other decisions, small and large, ranging from setting meeting times to how to handle issues to who pays for refreshments. Groups may make their decisions in a variety of ways. The appropriate method of decision making will depend on the nature of the decision and the nature of the group. An understanding of the different ways in which groups may make decisions will help us function better in groups.

[B] Decision Making by the Group Leader

In authoritarian groups, often the decision is made by the leader, with or without discussion with group members. When the leader is knowledgeable or time is short, this method may be the best method. With only thirty seconds for a huddle, the quarterback on a football team will simply announce the next play. He will not stop the game for a thirty minute group meeting. In a business meeting, the leader may have a series of cases to be investigated, and she simply tells the committee members who is to take which case.

Leaders may also consult with group members, then make decisions. In the assignment of cases, one member may say why he would be particularly good at working with a given case or may
give reasons why he would prefer not to have a case. After listening to the comments, the leader would then make the final decision.

[B] Majority Rule

A simple way of making decisions is to take a vote and the option receiving the largest number of votes becomes the committee's course of action. This method works best if the issue is one that can be decided by a "yes" or "no" reaction. The majority rule method of decision making is the one employed by appeals courts and supreme courts. A decision must be made and total agreement may be impossible. Majority rule is a quick and efficient way to settle the matter.

Majority rule may also have its drawbacks. Majority rule works best when group members are on an equal footing as in the Supreme Court. When members are divided by various means--economic, ethnically, status, age, etc.--majority rule can be a way of shutting off the influence of the minority group.

A committee investigating parking problems on campus might be made up of students, faculty, and administrators. If the parking committee consists of four faculty members, four administrators and two students, one would expect the group's solutions to reflect strongly the point of view of the older members. Similarly, if the ratio were switched and the committee composed of eight students, one administrator, and one faculty member, students would hold the power in the group and decisions would likely reflect their views.

[B] Parliamentary Procedure

Similar to majority rule but bound by more regulations is parliamentary procedure. Here the group adopts a set of rules which spell out exactly how proposals are to be made, how they are to be amended, and what kind of votes is necessary for the proposals to pass. The final decision is made by the group voting.

At first glance, parliamentary procedure may seem like a complicated and fussy way to do business, but it offers a number of advantages to a group. When it is impossible for the entire group to agree on a measure, some way has to be found to make the final decision. Parliamentary decision sets the guidelines for an orderly discussion and disposition of measures. One of its foremost virtues is that it keeps the attention of the group focused on the matter at hand. Once a motion is made, discussion must be pertinent to that motion. Parliamentary procedure is also useful in that it ensures that all members of a group are subject to the same set of uniform rules. Disputes about procedures can be solved by referring to the rules of order.

[B] Consensus

Perhaps the best way for small groups to reach decisions is by consensus. Consensus is achieved when all agree on the decision. Consensus does not mean that all have the same level of positive feelings about the decision, but it means that all concur in the decision. Consensus is sometimes difficult to achieve because contested issues demand a great deal of mediation, negotiation, and discussion. If accomplished, however, consensus unifies the group both in the decision and in support of the decision. When all have a hand in the decision, the members will be more supportive of the decision than if it were made by another method.
In the process of their work, groups make a number of decisions. The best method of making these decisions will depend on the group and its circumstances.

**Dealing with Difficulties**

Group work can be highly rewarding, but it can also be highly frustrating. Learning how to handle difficult situations can, however, make the process more productive and more enjoyable.

[B] Conflict

As noted earlier, conflict arises from incompatibilities between people. The incompatibilities may be in viewpoints, ideas, or behavior. As with interpersonal relationships, conflict is not in itself the sign of a faulty relationship and may instead be the sign of a very healthy relationship. As some have observed, "conflict is productive to the extent that it helps a group discover and examine its options as completely as possible" (Wall and Galanes 63). In group work, we can expect conflicts to arise. The important thing is not whether or not conflict exists in a group but rather how productively does the group handle the conflict.

[C] Minimizing Conflict

One way to handle conflict is to cultivate the best possible group climate. When group members respect each other and the group has a positive climate, members are less likely to create conflict and more likely to settle conflict productively than when a negative group climate exists.

As part of the climate, the group can create norms that discourage unnecessary conflicts. The group can set limits on what kind of language is acceptable in the group, for example. If some members find a particular phrase offensive, the group can find another way of referring to the subject. Simply by group members being sensitive to each other's feelings and viewpoints, the group can avoid a great deal of problems.

When group members contribute positively conflict will be minimized. The fault finder's role is an easy one to assume, but constant negative reactions from a member or members becomes in itself an impetus to conflict. Members may disagree but comments and ideas should be phrased in a way that attempts to help the group in its work, not simply to point out its problems.

The group can also establish norms relating to how it will handle conflict. Group members can decide how disagreements are to be stated, how the parties in a conflict are to address each other, and when mediation is to be introduced. With consensus reached on the ways in which conflict will be handled, the group can feel more secure about conflict when it arises.

[C] Dealing With Conflict

Once conflict becomes open, the group members can use a number of approaches and techniques to deal with the problem. One of the first things a group member should do in the presence of conflict is to gauge the import of the conflict. Conflicts range from small nuisances to major upheavals. Not all require strenuous effort or even recognition on the part of the group. Some of the seriousness of a conflict will be decided by the group and the norms it sets. In one group gum chewing or snuff dipping may get on members' nerves so much that the matter becomes of concern to the whole group. In other groups, these practices would be accepted without question.
To gauge the importance of a conflict we can ask ourselves several questions. One of these is, "How much does this conflict impair our ability to function as a group?" If the matter is extraneous to the group's work, we should probably leave the matter alone. For instance, people may work for different political parties and oppose each other in local elections while at the same time cooperating as members of the board of the local symphony orchestra. The political issues are extraneous to the function of the symphony board and are ignored in that context.

Another question is, "How much does this conflict interfere with my ability to function as a group member?" If we find ourselves increasingly reluctant to participate because of the actions of another, we should probably address the conflict.

We can also ask, "How long will I have to work under these conditions?" We may find ourselves having to deal with an obnoxious person, but if we have only one meeting with the group and it lasts only an hour, we would do better to put up with the person instead of trying to eliminate the boor's grating habits.

Another important question is, "Is the conflict whether or not I like this person?" (Bormann and Bormann 152). Working relationships in groups do not necessarily mean warm, personal relationships between the members.

If one decides that a conflict is impairing the group process and needs to be faced, the way in which the conflict is addressed can have positive or negative results for the group. The best way to talk about conflicts in a group is to speak to the issue, not the person. Again, this principle echoes earlier advice about dealing with interpersonal conflict.

If a person objects to the statement of another, the response should focus on the statement and not the person who made it. To say, "How stupid can you be to make a statement like that?" is to put the other person on the defensive on a personal level. To say, "I think the solution you suggest will cause other problems" is to focus discussion on the issue at hand. The second approach is the more productive of the two since it downplays personalities yet still addresses the difference of opinion.

Coupled with the idea of speaking to the issue and not the person is the need to respect the feelings of others. People invest themselves in their ideas and their work, and do not like to see their efforts fail. Group members can disagree over issues but still compliment each other on the amount of time and effort and thought they have invested in the project.

Similarly, group members can focus on the group and do much to solve conflicts. To function well in a group, the individual members must be willing to make sacrifices, to some degree, of their personal preferences. Keeping in mind the advancement of the group will help members maintain a helpful perspective on matters.

One approach to conflict is to flee from it. Another is to announce positions and dig in to defend them. If a conflict is a major, these techniques will only hamper the group in accomplishing its goals. Group members should be willing to explore the conflict. Acknowledging differences is one way to start. The next step is trying to determine what the reasons are for the disagreement. A battle over meeting times may, in truth, not be a problem of meeting times but a problem in finding child care, finding transportation to meetings, or a one time conflict with an exam. By probing what is the interest of the parties in the conflict, the group will resolve conflicts effectively.
Members should also be willing to negotiate. One does not have to give up all one's preferences to function in a group, but flexibility is necessary to perform well as a group member. If the proposed solution does not satisfy several members, the most troublesome aspect might be eliminated while keeping the bulk of the idea intact. The answer to conflicts over meeting times may be to vary the times so that no one member is inconvenienced more than the others. If a group wishes to solve a conflict rather than suppress it, negotiation is the way to resolution.

Conflict will be a part of group procedures, but by building a positive group climate and following productive communication patterns, conflict can be minimized in a group and its resolution speeded.

[B] Dealing With Difficult Group Members

All groups will need to deal with conflict in some way. In addition to expected patterns of conflict, groups will find themselves faced with an additional source of conflict. One or more members will act in ways that put them at odds with the rest of the group and will display some of the negative characteristics noted above such as withdrawing, fighting, or dominating. While these individuals can make life difficult for their groups, some methods may be useful in resolving the problems they create.

Groups will need to recognize the problem. For a short time, it may be useful to overlook the problems caused by one member. Again, the question is, "What is best for the group?" If the problem becomes long term and is hampering the work of the group, group members should recognize the person's behavior as one of the problems to be dealt with on the group's way to finding a solution for its stated problem.

One way to address the problem is simply to ask the person or persons why they are acting as they are. The offensive or obnoxious behavior may have its base in a larger problem, and addressing the larger problem may make the person more cooperative.

The planning committee for the Civic Theatre annual fundraiser traditionally meets at Kelly's Bar and Grill for a late lunch and discussion. One of the new members, Paul Johnson, arrives late and makes few contributions. When the group finally confronts him, it discovers that his work takes him out of town. It is an inconvenience for him to break off his appointments to make it to the meetings. The group decides to shift the meetings to breakfast meetings. Johnson can meet with the group, then have the rest of the day undisturbed.

In dealing with difficult people, group members should also look for problem areas and sensitivities. These are areas where group members are likely to take strong stands. Discussion in these areas may turn into what one calls "battles of the will" in which the only way to resolution is for one party to back down (Fisher and Ury 85). A simple way around these difficulties is to avoid the inflammatory issues if they are peripheral to the functioning of the group. Two group members may have equally strong but opposing feelings about a local environmental situation. If the situation has nothing to do with the work of the committee, then the topic should be left out of the group discussions.

Another way to deal with "battles of the will" is to hold the group to objective standards in making decisions (Fisher and Ury 84-86). As noted, an important step in group problem solving is the creation of criteria for selecting a solution. All relevant factors should be discussed and all members participate in the creation of the criteria. The criteria then become the measuring
standard which determines the acceptability of all possible solutions. A group member may feel strongly about a pet solution, but if that solution does not meet the criteria, however, the group can reject it, not from personal whim but from a reasoned standard.

Because of dwindling enrollments, a school board must revamp its use of buildings. A committee is created. One of the standards the committee decides upon is that school buildings may be closed if they are operating below seventy per cent capacity, require extensive repairs, or both. In the discussion, it becomes clear that Earhart Elementary is operating below the recommended capacity and is in need of extensive and expensive repairs.

One of the committee members attended the school and has fond memories of it. He argues strongly against its closing because of the sentimental value it has to its neighborhood. He threatens to resign from the committee if Earhart Elementary is marked for closing. The committee chair reminds him that while the group can empathize with his feelings about the school, the final decision is to be based on the objective criteria generated by the committee. The committee moves ahead with its business.

Another way to deal with difficult people in small groups is to look for common ground between the person and the group. Here the group would try to find a way in which its desires and the desires of the troublesome group member might be perceived as one. In the case of the school closing, the committee might remind the reluctant member that they all share the common goal of doing what is best for the education of the town's children. The sentiments about the school might be echoed by other members. Members might reflect upon the difficulty of the decisions that they all face. The more group members feel akin to other group members, the easier it will be for them to deal with each other.

Finally, a group may be able to deal with difficult members by finding ways to provide difficult members with a safety valve. By "safety valve," we mean some means by which the member's feelings may be expressed or recognition given to the person's views. Sometimes, this may be accomplished by letting the person talk freely about her views. At other times, a more formal outlet may be provided. If the group members do not all concur in a decision, the dissenting parties may submit a "minority report" along with the report of the committee.

Creative ways may be found to recognize the feelings of the dissenting minority. In the case of the school closing, part of the proposed plan might be to put an historical display of the closed school in the library of an existing, nearby school. Sale of the building might be limited to those who would continue to use it as an educational facility, thus retaining its image and function. Sometimes, small concessions to dissenters can result in major gains for the group.

[A] Avoiding Groupthink

We have dealt at length with conflict and resolving conflicts in small groups and stressed that unresolved conflicts may be detrimental to a group. One might think, then, that the ideal small group would be the one that exhibited the maximum amount of group harmony. That is not necessarily the case. Too much solidarity in a group can be as disastrous as too much discord. When a group becomes so unified and cohesive that it entertains no conflict, no real disagreements, the usual result is a bad decision. When a group develops in this manner, it is exhibiting "groupthink" which is defined as "a deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing, and moral judgments that results from in-group pressures" (Janis, Groupthink 9).
The term "groupthink" was coined by Irving L. Janis and is based on his examination of major foreign policy decisions both good and bad. The Kennedy administration, for example, made a disastrous decision to support the ill-planned and ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. The invading forces were poorly prepared. The landing site offered no "fall back" position. The invading forces were easily defeated, and the project was a total fiasco. Later, though, the same administration responded well to the Cuban Missile Crisis and gained world wide respect for its actions. In this incident, Kennedy and his advisors faced the threat of war with Russia and made decisions that averted armed conflict and defused the situation. Janis' main question was, "How could intelligent, well-meaning people make decisions so different in outcomes?"

The answer was that the good decisions arose from groups following the guidelines of openness and give-and-take we have discussed. The bad decisions resulted from groups that put such a high premium on their unity that they ignored information they did not like, failed to examine ideas critically, and in short, spelled the doom of their own plans. Groupthink is a kind of negative consensus. The group agrees to agree so strongly that the problem solving process is thwarted before a good solution is found. Rather than examining all possibilities, the group may discuss only one or two courses of action. In-group criticism of plans is discouraged and dissenters are ostracized. Little attempt is made to obtain relevant information. Outside criticism is regarded as the work of fools or scoundrels attempting to sabotage the group. Therefore, the group fails to consider carefully information and alternatives by employing effective decision making practices.

When groupthink prevails, the situation is similar to a preventable auto accident. Everyone in the car is pleased with how the trip is progressing and the good spirit in the car, but nobody pays attention to where they are going, and they drive happily over a cliff.

If a group seems closed to outside opinion and keeps internal criticism to a minimum, the group may be developing groupthink. If the group is congenial within itself and hostile to outsiders, again the group may be displaying groupthink. If the group seizes rapidly on a solution to a problem but has not investigated or discussed the problem fully, it is again showing signs of groupthink.

To avoid groupthink, the group should make provisions for full discussion of ideas and policies. Issues should be thoroughly researched. The group should discuss proposals from all sides. One member may even be designated the idea tester to see how well the group's proposals stand up against criticism. A climate of openness and honesty will also do much to prevent groupthink.

[A] Vigilance in Problem Solving

The preceding chapters have outlined how groups can function best. If we lived in an ideal world, all small groups would approach problem solving with an open mind, sufficient time to effect the optimum solution, and would follow fully the guidelines provided here. As more than one person has observed, however, we do not live in an ideal world.

In the multitude of our activities--both professional and personal--we must deal with problems, pressures, and limitations on our abilities to deal with them. A person may be appointed to a committee at work only to discover that the committee cannot find the time, resources, or people necessary for the committee to do its job fully. In addition, not all decisions merit the time and expense of group meetings. Deciding how to staff an office will probably require the efforts of a group whereas the number of small daily decisions--ordering supplies, sorting mail, forwarding calls--will not.
Faced with the limitations we often find in our decision making situations, we should still practice vigilance in problem solving (Janis, Decisions). In the hurly-burly of life, it is often impossible to carry out the step-by-step problem solving procedures that we have described. The fact that not all problems can be approached in a textbook manner does not mean, though, that the process should be abandoned if conditions are less than perfect. Instead, the process should be preserved as completely as possible. Whenever possible, the step-by-step method should be followed because it allows for the best possible solutions and the best consequences arise from the best decisions. "The quality of procedures used to arrive at a fundamental policy decision is one of the major determinants of a successful outcome" (Janis, Decisions 20.) If it is impossible to work through the recommended procedures, they should still be approximated as closely as possible.

Practicing vigilant problem solving means that people follow two principles, both of which require awareness and sensitivity. The first is deciding how important an issue is and how much attention it demands. Routine matters are handled in routine ways. Ordering paperclips is probably an insignificant decision in most offices. Not all small decisions, though, are created equal. If the paperclip order is seen by a staff member as usurping his authority or questioning his abilities, then the issue involves more than simple judgment. Sensitivity to the ramifications of decisions will lead to better analyses of problems and better decisions about solutions.

The second main point of vigilant problem solving is that we must do the best we can in the circumstances in which we find ourselves. The procedures of people who make good decisions "involve working to the best of their limited abilities, within the confines of available . . . resources, to exercise all the caution they can to avoid mistakes in the essential tasks of information search, deliberation, and planning" (Janis, Decisions 29).

In short, vigilant problem solving is doing the best we can with what we have. One may not have the time necessary to assemble all the available information on a problem. One response would be to say, "Since we cannot obtain all the necessary information, we will not gather any." Though the group may have to rely on brief summaries by knowledgeable people or may be able to look at only a fraction of relevant material, the group should still gather as much information as it can. Some information in the problem solving process is better than none.

A group may have to deal with members whose personalities clash and who have difficulty discussing what course of action to take. The group's leader may be tempted to duck the issue and make the decision unilaterally. If the leader were practicing vigilant problem solving, the leader would try to foster as much creative discussion as possible even though the discussion might be limited by the clashing personalities.

Vigilant problem solving is an approach to decision making that takes into account the limitations we face as a part of life. Exercising vigilance in our problem solving procedures--doing the best we can in our circumstances--will help us find good solutions. While vigilant problem solving will not eliminate all the pitfalls of making decision, vigilance will ensure that the pitfalls are kept to a minimum.

[A] Conclusion

Functioning in a small group is not an easy matter. It demands effort from leaders and members alike. Effective problem solving groups will move through stages in their searches for solutions. Beginning with the task of defining the problem, they will search for possible solution, evaluate them, and finally choose the best alternative. Each of these steps requires discussion, give-and-
take, and decision making. Decisions may be made by several means: by the leader, by majority vote, by parliamentary procedure, and by consensus. Conflicts may arise in the group process, but by appropriate measures, conflict can be handled productively. Alertness and diligence will avoid the problem of groupthink and contribute to the best decision making possible. Good small group work allows us to address problems we encounter, discover solutions, and create positive relationships.

Sources and References


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