

## Social Groups, Workgroups, and Teams

The kinds of issues **and** problems we face as a society have become increasingly complex. Issues **and** problems such as health care, global warming, terrorism, energy, education, **and** economic innovation cannot be addressed by the actions of a single individual; rather, they require the coordinated action of people working together to craft plans **and** take action when working through these complex concerns. There is a growing recognition that collaborative effort is required to manage these kinds of issues as the depth **and** breadth of knowledge required to handle them far exceeds the capacity of a single individual.

The past 25 years has witnessed a dramatic growth in the use of groups, teams, **and** collaboration to address pressing personal, organizational, **and** social problems. *Collaboration* may be defined as "people with different views **and** perspectives coming together, putting aside their narrow self-interests, **and** discussing issues openly **and** supportively in an attempt to solve a larger problem or achieve a broader goal" (LaFasto & Larson, 2001, p. xvii). Persons participate in a variety of support groups for personal **and** professional development, such as groups that help manage addictions (e.g., eating disorders, substance abuse, **and** gambling); groups that manage issues associated with grief **and** bereavement due to the death or suicide of a child, parent, or friend; or groups that develop a person's skills **and** abilities (e.g., theatrical groups, professional networks, **and** educational groups). Organizations such as Apple **and** Facebook routinely use teams to develop new products **and** services, including the iPhone **and** social-networking sites. Nonprofit **and** governmental agencies employ teams to work with issues regarding poverty, drug abuse, affordable housing, **and** the location of landfills **and** hazardous waste facilities. Collaboration within groups **and** teams has become critical as groups typically make better decisions than do individuals; the wealth of knowledge **and** insight is greater within groups as many individuals bring their unique backgrounds **and** knowledge to the task at hand.

How can group members create **and** sustain effective collaboration? The short answer to this question is "Communication," but this answer is deceptively simple as it leaves open what kinds of communication are needed **and** what counts as high-quality communication. This chapter focuses on the kinds of communication that are required to foster high-quality collaboration within groups. I begin by exploring what counts as a group **and** how its unique qualities may drive the kinds of communication that are required.

### The Embeddedness of Groups

A *small group* has typically been defined as three or more people who interact with one another toward the accomplishment of a shared goal **and** who perceive themselves as members of a particular group. This definition carries with it three important assumptions. First, the lower bound for a small group is set at three people, but no upper bound is set. Most definitions of small groups use three as a lower bound because three individuals allow for the possibility of coalitions to emerge where two people can form an alliance against one person. The upper bound for a small group is typically determined by the degree to which people perceive themselves as part of a group or the degree to which people carry with them an impression of other group members. Second, small groups emphasize interaction. This is what a communication approach to the study of small groups brings to the table—a focus on the pattern of signs, symbols, **and** messages that group members use to accomplish their task. Third, small-group members have behavioral **and** goal interdependence. *Behavioral interdependence* refers to the way a group member's messages affect **and** are affected by other

group members' messages. *Goal interdependence* refers to the primary goal that group members share. For example, the members of local community boards of directors for organizations such as the Red Cross, the American Heart Association, or the American Cancer Association all share an interest in promoting their respective organization.

A recent approach to the study of small groups has emphasized the importance of recognizing that groups exist in a flow of preexisting understandings **and** structures that influences how the group **and** its members coordinate activities. This is so even for zero-history groups—groups of individuals who did not know each other previously; for example, trial jury members are influenced by their preconceptions of what it means to serve on a jury (Sunwolf & Seibold, 1998). The importance of recognizing that groups are embedded in context has been called the *bona fide group perspective* (Stohl & Putnam, 2003). There are at least three important ways in which we can say that groups are embedded within context.

1. *Group **and** team members bring their own distinct personal, professional, **and** cultural backgrounds to their present group experience.* Individuals do not enter groups *tabula rasa*, as blank slates. They do not check their knowledge, beliefs, **and** attitudes at the door **and** start their group experience from scratch. Rather, they base their interactions, in part, on their identity **and** their previous experiences with groups. For example, individuals from collectivist cultures that emphasize consensus **and** egalitarian relationships tend to perceive consensus decision making **and** shared leadership as important to high-quality group experiences. Similarly, if individuals have a high degree of group hate—an intense dislike for participating in groups, they will be less likely to actively participate in groups **and** take leadership positions.

The way the personal experiences of individuals enter into group life has recently been talked about in terms of diversity. Diversity within small groups has been conceptualized in terms of a variety of general social characteristics (e.g., national identity, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, **and** values) as well as organizational characteristics (e.g., membership within a particular department or division, length of tenure within an organization, **and** technical expertise). Sometimes *fault lines* or coalitions or subgroups may emerge within groups **and** teams due to these demographic characteristics **and** may frustrate collaboration. These fault lines may hurt the ability of the group members to collaborate with one another **and** lead to conflict. Group members may hold radically different assumptions about the best way to approach the task given their unique set of background experiences.

Yet diversity may be more profitably viewed as a resource, not a constraint. Groups that are more diverse tend to make better decisions **and** are more creative. The challenge for groups **and** teams, then, is how to effectively manage fault lines within groups. Effective leadership includes anticipating the emergence of fault lines, using task-oriented behavior when initially conducting the group, **and** knowing when to make the shift toward relationship-oriented leadership (Gratton, Voigt, & Erickson, 2007).

2. *Groups exist in time.* Time is an important marker for a group's activities (Arrow, Henry, Poole, Wheelan, & Moreland, 2005). Group life does not exist in a vacuum; it exists within a particular time period, **and** this time period is associated with particular cultural ideas that people bring to the group experience that influences how they act toward each other. It also includes the agreements they negotiate throughout their group experience that influence how they respond to the task.

As I have already highlighted, the cultural ideas people hold about groups **and** teams influence how they make sense of **and** act in groups. For example, organizations have always used groups to perform tasks. Manufacturing organizations in the early 1900s used groups of individuals to manufacture various goods **and** products. In fact, Ford Motor Company pioneered the use of the assembly line to manufacture cars. Workers on the assembly line met the definition of a group as interdependent people organized to accomplish a shared goal. However, the group was organized according to values associated with scientific **and** classical management (see Chapter 37, this volume). The group was organized hierarchically with a single manager guiding the employees

making up the group. Decision making was centralized with the manager, not the group as a whole, **and** communication, in the form of directives, flowed from the manager downward to the employees. The employees had little voice in the way their work was to be organized.

Compare the early-19th-century notion of groups with the 21st-century notion of teams. Groups have become teams within contemporary organizational life, which emphasizes all team members working together collaboratively **and** sharing decision making. James Barker (1999) conducted an important study in the creation **and** maintenance of self-directed or self-managed work teams within a high-tech computer-manufacturing organization. Self-managed work teams are groups of individuals who engage in collective decision making about the best way to organize their work. The structure based on groups in the workplace has been complemented, **and** sometimes supplanted, with a structure that shifts the decision making from the hierarchically superior manager to the collective team. The historical **and** cultural time period of the group informs people's understandings **and** expectations of group life, **and** an appreciation of a group's experience must take the cultural notions associated with group life at a particular moment in history into consideration.

Groups **and** teams exist over time **and**, as part of their history, create understandings **and** agreements about the way they will engage with the group task **and** manage their relationships with each other. Most models of group **and** team development assume that groups start with an orientation phase where members orient themselves to the parameters of the work they are to accomplish **and** to each other. For example, Tuckman **and** Jensen (1977) offer a classic model of group development. In their model, groups start with a phase called *joining*, where group members get to know each other **and** determine the scope of their work. This is usually followed by a phase called *storming*, where group members may disagree over the nature of the task, which member is to act in what role, **and** what procedures should be used to perform the task. Ultimately, groups move from storming to *norming* **and** then onto *performing*. During the norming phase, group members come to agreement on the rules they will follow as they perform their task **and** what tasks **and** values are important. This agreement then allows them to perform or to accomplish their task.

The challenge for groups is to change or alter the habitual patterns they have created during the norming **and** performing stages. Once norms have been set, they are very difficult to change unless the group has some type of pressure or crisis that moves it to change. For example, a common pattern that has emerged across groups is that groups will maintain their normative structure until about halfway through the life of the group. Whether the group is working on a project that only lasts a few months or will last years, around the midpoint of the life of the group, group members experience pressure to re-examine their ways of working **and** the assumptions they make (Gersick, 1989). They then reset their strategies **and** operating norms **and** work differently as they continue to engage their task.

The notion of time also suggests that group members need to pay attention to the location of the group in time. This means paying attention to the societal, organizational, **and** group stories that might influence how group members should act in groups as well as the informal norms that the group has created among its members.

3. *Groups **and** teams are embedded in networks of other groups **and** teams.* To extend John Donne, no group or team is an island. Groups are embedded within networks of other groups **and** teams. At an individual level, the connectedness may include overlapping group **and** team memberships **and** relationships among group **and** team members in other contexts. For example, consider an individual who simultaneously is a member of Lambda Pi Eta, a communication honor society, **and** a member of Phi Beta Kappa, a national undergraduate honor society. We could say that there is a connection between these two groups as one individual has membership in both. Similarly, we could say that when individuals who belong to separate groups interact with members of other groups, these groups are connected as well. When a member of Lambda Pi Eta interacts with members of other honor societies on campus, each becomes aware of the other groups **and** the possible connections they may have with one another.

At a group level, groups **and** teams are also connected to each other given their unique function or purpose. For example, in university settings, the information technology group is always connected to the registrar's office—the office that records grades. For the registrar to do his or her job well, the technology must be configured in a way that permits instructors **and** teachers to record their final grades in a secure environment, **and** this requires coordinating with the information technology department. Many tasks in organizations require coordination among groups. Consider the process of digital filmmaking. Digital filmmakers, such as Pixar, the company that has produced movies including *Toy Story* **and** *Finding Nemo*, have groups of animators, software engineers, marketers, **and** writers who must coordinate their activities to produce **and** market a film.

The notion of embeddedness highlights the importance of groups **and** group members learning to manage boundaries. At an individual level, group members need to learn how to manage potentially conflicting loyalties among the multiple groups in which they participate. Consider what happens when a person of color participates on a task force designed to create a diverse working environment. The task force does something objectionable to the racial community of which the individual is a member. Should such individuals resign from the task force to affirm their identity with their racial group, do they affirm the work of the task force, or do they find a way to manage the competing obligations to the two groups?

In terms of groups' connections with other groups, the key issue is how loosely or tightly connected the group is to other groups. The looser the connection, the level of influence that one group has on another is relatively weaker. For example, one of the chief frustrations of attempting to dismantle terrorist organizations, such as al-Qaeda, are that the individual terrorist cells are loosely coupled. While the activities of each cell share a common goal, the elimination of one cell has minimal impact on the activity of another cell. On the other hand, if groups are tightly connected, the actions taken by one group can directly influence the other. For example, action taken by the United Way regarding funding can directly influence local arts groups, if the United Way is their primary source of income. This suggests that groups need to learn how to manage their boundaries by probing the environment to see how other groups could affect their behavior, forging key agreements with those other groups, placing members of their group with other groups to act as liaisons or boundary spanners, **and** developing the strength of the existing tie (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992).

## **Group Communication Activities**

The idea of embeddedness suggests that we act from context **and** into context. The actions we take as we engage with the group are informed by the context of our previous experiences, the group's history, **and** the larger cultural stories about what it means to participate in groups. However, our actions are not totally constrained by the context; we can make wise choices about how we want to change our group **and** team **and** create a different context, which we will have to respond to in the future. For example, the leading group at Duke Energy, a South-Midwest utility company, wants to change the context in which the company exists (Pierce, 2008). Historically, utility **and** energy companies have been based on treating energy as a commodity with the idea that the more electricity you sell, the more money you make. Duke Energy is considering ways to “de-carbonize” their supply, to use more solar **and** wind power, **and** to shift to a “save-a-watt” plan. They would still make money from selling energy, but their new plan would also allow them to make money by selling **and** installing energy-saving features, such as computer monitors to cycle air conditioners on **and** off. Rather than be constrained by the context of the “commodity model,” the leading group is trying to take actions that will reconceptualize how the organization will be in the future, **and** this re-visioning of the organization will serve as a context for groups to respond to in the future.

What this suggests is that we need to foster communication activities that help us make sense of context **and** make wise choices about how we want our group to work in the future. These four important communication activities are (1) information management, (2) decision making, (3) learning, **and** (4) relating.

### **Information Management**

Information is the lifeblood of small groups. Useful **and** timely information is critical for small groups **and** teams to make smart choices about how to organize their activities **and** execute their tasks. First, groups need to have access to **and** be able to disseminate information quickly. Integrated information databases **and** file-sharing systems as well as communication technologies such as telephony or e-mail are important not only to capture needed information about the group **and** its environment but also to make it widely available to other group members.

Second, groups need to develop systems for monitoring their environments. While it is important to have the needed systems **and** procedures in place for collecting **and** disseminating information, the burning issue is *what kinds* of information need to be collected in the first place. Richard Hackman (2002) has argued that there are five important conditions that lead to group or team effectiveness:

1. Clear engaging direction
2. Facilitative group structure
3. Supportive organizational context
4. Available expert coaching
5. Adequate material resources

Developing successful teams, therefore, means that team members need to construct patterns of communication that help them monitor these key functions both in their diagnosis of the group's current state of affairs **and** in their forecast of what the group's future needs may be.

These key functions focus attention on both the internal mechanics of group members as well as their larger environment. Take, as an example, the board of directors for a community theater company. The managing director would need to ask questions that focus on the internal dynamics of the board of directors, such as "Do we have a clear direction?" (Function #1) **and** "Does our group structure align with the work we need to accomplish?" (Function #2). If the board's passion for their work is not high **and** the group structures slow down or inhibit work on their task, then the board will have difficulty directing its energy to do the work. The managing director would also need to pay attention to the board's larger group environment by asking questions such as "How supportive are our external stakeholders to the theatre?" (Function #3), "Do we have or need expert coaching to help us work through our challenges?" (Function #4), **and** "Are the needed material resources available to do our work?" The managing director could also offer opinions on the current state of the group or make proposals for what the group may need in the future, such as offering a reflection on the group's current level of material resources or forecasting what the group might need in the future.

### ***Decision Making***

One primary activity for any group is making decisions. Groups make a variety of practical decisions regarding their experience, such as when to meet **and** how often, as well as instrumental decisions, such as determining what their task is **and** how they would know if they had completed their task **and** deciding on evaluation criteria for determining how well they have performed on their task. Making good decisions depends on performing certain communication functions during discussion:

1. *Developing an understanding of the problem*, including talking about the nature of the problem, its scope, its symptoms, **and** its possible causes
2. *Identifying criteria for solving the problem*, including discussing what standards must be met that would qualify a proposed solution or decision as "good" or "high quality"
3. *Generating a range of realistic alternatives* by brainstorming a variety of possible solutions to a problem that cover the range of acceptable choices
4. *Evaluating the negative **and** positive consequences associated with particular alternatives*: People are particularly good at identifying the positive consequences or benefits of particular alternative solutions. However, group members typically underestimate the risks or downsides associated with decisions. Good

decision making evolves a balanced, accurate, **and** thorough examination of the benefits **and** risks associated with various decision alternatives (Hollingshead et al., 2004)

The above has been called a *functional approach* to group decision making. It involves group members either asking questions or offering comments **and** reflections regarding the problem, evaluative criteria, possible solutions, **and** solution evaluation.

To illustrate the importance of these communication functions, assume that you are a member of a city task force that has been assigned to address the "traffic congestion problem" the city faces. The first task for the group is to define the problem. At first glance, you might say that the problem is "traffic congestion," which you interpret as too many cars for the existing roadways. On the other hand, what changes if you define the problem as "the need for environmentally sustainable public transportation"? Framing the problem as "traffic congestion" foregrounds the importance of building new roads to address the bottlenecks created by too many cars. However, framing the problem in terms of "environmentally sustainable public transportation" foregrounds two different pieces to the puzzle: the importance of environmental sustainability **and** the role of public transportation, such as light rail systems, subways, buses, **and** carpooling. Framing the problem or issue is not simple, **and** it becomes important to play with different ways to frame the situation **and** the problem because different problem frames move you to see situations in different ways.

The way you initially frame problems will inform how you determine what counts as appropriate criteria for making decisions. For example, there are several criteria that you could use to evaluate possible traffic plans, including cost, efficiency, environmental impact, public satisfaction, **and** political support. Framing the problem as "traffic congestion" highlights that a good solution should decrease the average trip time **and** number of traffic slowdowns. The frame of "environmentally sustainable public transportation" highlights solution criteria that include minimizing the environmental impact **and** creating a plan that provides public transportation alternatives to citizens. Both frames may use political criteria to assess the viability of plans. What will the local politicians be willing to pay for? Would citizens be willing to pay for toll roads to ease traffic congestion? Would politicians **and** citizens be willing to invest in different public transportation alternatives, particularly in the United States, which is dominated by a car culture? Effective decision making requires groups **and** teams to articulate the criteria they will use to assess various decision proposals.

Finally, the group will need to generate different alternatives **and** assess their possible consequences. Groups may need to brainstorm **and** assess different ideas according to time (What solutions would be possible **and** viable in the short term? The long term?), stakeholder (What solutions would be possible **and** viable from the perspective of car owners? Politicians? Environment activists?), **and** costs **and** benefits (What are the solution's relative costs **and** benefits?).

### **Learning**

Many groups **and** teams are specifically designed to enhance the learning of their members. Sometimes, *skills training groups* are created by nonprofit community organizations to enhance a person's basic life skills, such as assertiveness, conflict management, financial management, parenting, **and** job competencies. *Learning groups* are frequently used by schools **and** universities to enhance the comprehension **and** mastery of content by having students work in small groups. Work teams frequently engage in *team development* **and** *training* to ensure that they have the knowledge, skills, **and** abilities to meet their performance goals. Such activities are designed to help team members develop shared mental models, mutual trust, **and** a team orientation **and** learn to monitor their performance (Johnson & Johnson, 2005). Whether group members are learning life skills, mastering conceptual material from their classes, or sorting out what they need to know to perform well on their team, the kind of communication that is needed to foster learning depends on whether people simply need to learn **and** follow particular rules **and** operating procedures that inform the group's activities or whether they need to make wise **and** informed choices about how the group is to operate **and** what needs to happen for it to

move forward.

Sometimes people simply need to learn **and** master the rules that guide **and** inform the group's activity. For example, what does an individual need to know to participate in a support group such as Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)? To fit in **and** participate in AA, an individual needs to know the rules that guide the way AA meetings are structured, such as how to introduce oneself to the group, vocalize a concern, **and** give support to others. As is the case with AA, the goals are very clear **and** the steps that are involved to achieve them explicit. Senior participants who have a longer affiliation with the organization, such as AA sponsors, understand the rules that govern the group **and** are able to tell newcomers what those rules are **and** help them follow them. Learning that emphasizes mastering the rules **and** following them has been called first-order learning (Bateson, 1972). First-order learning occurs not only in groups such as AA but in a variety of other kinds of groups as well.

If the nature of the group's task is fixed **and** highly structured **and** all that is required is first-order learning, the type of group communication that is needed is typically informative **and** persuasive. Some member or members in the group simply need to inform others what the goal is **and** what steps need to be taken to accomplish the goal, **and** persuade them to comply with the rules. For example, if a patient goes to a doctor with a broken bone, the goal **and** the way to achieve the goal are very clear—the bone must be set using a hard or soft cast or a splint. Given that the doctor is presumed to have more expertise than does the patient, communication tends to be more one way, with the doctor informing the patient as to what needs to be accomplished. In groups, there may be certain protocols **and** procedures that are set **and** not open to discussion, **and** group members need to be informed of their existence **and** persuaded to follow them. In such instances, appropriate **and** effective communication that fosters learning needs to be clear **and** persuasive.

On the other hand, many times the group's goals **and** purposes are unclear, **and** the ways the group can accomplish them are ill-defined. For example, say a patient is diagnosed with terminal cancer by a doctor. What is the goal or task that the doctor **and** patient need to pursue? How do they accomplish it? There are numerous things a doctor **and** a patient could discuss to help the patient move forward, such as how to die with dignity, how to manage one's relationships with family **and** friends, the role of hospice in medical care, **and** managing one's finances. What makes this kind of learning conversation unique is that each party brings a different expertise to the conversation **and** the focus of the conversation needs to be jointly determined. The communication that is required in such an instance must include finding a way to pool the mutual expertise that each brings to the conversation **and** jointly determining the direction **and** focus of the conversation. Such a conversation may be termed dialogue.

*Dialogue* can be viewed as a form of communication that allows people to think collectively **and** examine each other's assumptions about situations. Dialogue involves the following kinds of activities:

- Seeing the whole among the parts
- Seeing the connections between the parts
- Inquiring into assumptions
- Learning through inquiry **and** disclosure
- Creating shared meaning among many people (Barge, 2002, p. 168)

Dialogue is about “seeing the big picture,” how things connect with each other, **and** taking into account the assumptions, values, **and** beliefs that lead people to make sense of situations in particular ways **and** then act.

Dialogue involves keeping advocacy **and** inquiry in a constructive tension with each other. In dialogue, we learn about each other's positions through the processes of inquiry **and** disclosure. We try to remain open to each other's positions **and** beliefs **and** try to learn as much as we can about them. This does not mean that we give up our own positions **and** interests. Rather, we also have a responsibility to explain our views in ways that help others make sense of our positions **and** to advocate our position. By balancing inquiry with advocacy, being open to the views of others while advocating our own positions, **and** by respecting the perspectives of others

while not taking them (or ourselves) too seriously, we hope to build the group's resources for understanding the situation **and** creating new possible actions.

This form of communication called dialogue can be created **and** sustained in groups through a variety of methods. Perhaps one of the most important ways for fostering dialogue is the creation of discussion rules. Group **and** team meetings frequently use discussion rules to make sure that all opinions **and** perspectives are heard in a safe **and** respectful manner. Discussion rules that foster dialogue focus on creating a safe space for all group members to vocalize their opinions **and** to inquire into them deeply. Examples of discussion rules that may foster dialogue include the following:

- Asking questions is as important as making statements.
- Ask curious questions.
- Respect others' opinions even if they are different from your own.
- Share talk time.

Such ground rules help balance people's levels of advocacy **and** inquiry **and** help them inquire into the positions of others with a respect for one another. A second way that we can foster dialogue is to invite patterns of communication that emphasize affirmation. It is through the process of affirmation **and** the role that it plays in fostering high-quality relationships that learning can occur.

### ***Relating***

Effective relationships are built on the power of affirmative communication. When we affirm something about another person, we recognize the value of that person's ideas, values, actions, or beliefs. We convey to the other person that who they are, what they have said, or what they have done has value for us **and** is appreciated. Affirmative forms of communication simultaneously affirm our own sense of self **and** self-esteem as well as the other person's. When we feel that we are affirmed, we feel closer to the other members of the group **and** have a stronger sense of identity with the group.

There are several different communication practices that emphasize the power of communication **and** its ability to construct high-quality relationships. A classic essay by Jack Gibb (1961) argued that communication that emphasizes empathy, spontaneity, provisionalism, equality, description, **and** problem orientation can create a supportive group environment. Supportive communication invites people to participate in the group **and** to feel more a part of the group. This early finding regarding the power of affirmation can also be seen in more recent work on group conflict management. Integrative styles of conflict management emphasize the importance of creating win-win outcomes where both parties are satisfied. These styles involve an affirmative approach that facilitates the flow of communication among parties, by acknowledging that they have heard the other person **and** reflecting statements that recognize the emotions of the other person; attempts to understand the needs **and** desires of the other; inquiries into the commonalities that bring the two parties together, as opposed to the differences that separate them; **and** invents options from which both can benefit. Integrative styles of conflict management in groups have been demonstrated to foster higher-quality decision making.

When we use communication that is affirmative (i.e., that tries to find ways to integrate the needs **and** desires of the other person with our own) **and** supportive, we are likely to not only develop better working relationships with one another but also make better decisions. In some ways, this is intuitively true, as affirmative styles of communication create a supportive group environment where individuals are willing to share information **and** challenge one another's ideas. When we are able to pool our knowledge of the area **and** subject our ideas to a rigorous test, it is not surprising that we will be more likely to accomplish the important decision-making prerequisites.

What goes unnoticed many times, however, is the close connection between affirmation **and** challenge. One of the reasons why affirmation facilitates decision making **and** learning is that it creates the space for people to



challenge each other regarding their thinking. If people are already defensive, challenging their thinking can be viewed as a personal attack or as a negative evaluation, which moves them to respond in kind. As a result, people are not able to share information **and** reason together. However, if they feel that they are being affirmed, they feel supported, **and** they have the space to be challenged **and** to grow **and** develop. Csikszentmihalyi (1996) refers to this as "flow," where there is a balance between support **and** challenge. People feel that they have the needed support to do their job **and** work **and** at the same time are stimulated through challenge to grow **and** develop. For example, members of championship sports teams typically talk about the tight bonds they have with their teammates **and** also how their teammates challenged them to become better. They feel simultaneously supported **and** challenged in their relationships with their team.

Creating positive relationships that foster learning within groups requires keeping a balance between affirmation **and** challenge. Too much affirmation **and** not enough challenge don't generate learning, because people feel that their current way of relating to one another **and** the group is fine. Too much challenge **and** too little affirmation, **and** people feel defensive **and** are not open to learning. Keeping the tension between affirmation **and** challenge is key to developing healthy relationships **and** fostering learning.

## Discussion

Groups **and** teams play an important role in our personal, social, **and** professional lives. The challenge that group **and** team members face is to create groups that allow them to fulfill their individual as well as the group's or team's needs, goals, **and** desires. This means that group members must recognize that their group experience is complex because it is embedded in a set of ongoing identities **and** relationships. Group members bring their life experience, which informs their participation in the group. Groups also exist in specific cultural times that carry with them expectations for what it means to belong to **and** participate in a group. Groups are connected to other groups **and** teams, which means that they must address **and** respond to the expectations that these groups **and** teams have for the group.

Kurt Lewin once said that there is nothing as practical as a good theory, which meant that the theories **and** ideas about how communication works in groups **and** teams should have practical implications. Theories **and** ideas should help us make judgments about how well the group is doing **and** what kinds of messages we may need to perform to make the experience better. So how can the ideas associated with embeddedness **and** the communication activities of information management, decision making, learning, **and** relating help us recognize how well a group is working **and** what needs to be done when the group is not working well?

First, the idea of embeddedness suggests that groups are performing well when they manage their relationships with group members, as well as individuals **and** other groups external to the group, in ways that allow them to accomplish their task. Simply put, effective groups **and** teams create productive working relationships. For example, when people feel that they are being supported by other group members, they are more motivated to share information openly **and** to participate in the activities of information management, which, in turn, allow them to make better decisions. They are more relaxed **and** open to learning. Similarly, effective groups are able to identify key external stakeholders outside the group—important individuals **and** groups—who can influence their ability to perform the task. When groups have cultivated strong working relationships with key stakeholders, they are more likely to acquire the needed information **and** resources that allow them to do their job.

Judging your group's level of performance involves asking two kinds of questions. As you participate in a group or team, it is certainly important to ask *task-oriented questions*: What is our task? What are the standards we can use to assess our performance? How well are we performing our task? Such questions generate important information about your group's level of performance **and** standards for its assessment. But if we take seriously the idea that the quality of relationships directly influences our ability to perform our task, we also need to be asking a set of *questions about our relationships*: Do we have supportive working relationships within our

group? Who are the important stakeholders—either individuals or groups—outside our group that can influence our ability to perform our task? What is the quality of relationship we have with these external stakeholders? The challenge is to develop a set of internal **and** external working relationships that allow the group to coordinate its activity **and** to perform its task.

Second, the idea of embeddedness **and** the communication activities of information management, decision making, learning, **and** relating provides us with a set of tools for making choices about how to intervene when our group is not performing at a high level. Is the group having difficulty performing its task because it does not have access to relevant information in a timely fashion? If so, group members need to engage in communication that helps them acquire the needed information **and** build useful information systems. Is the group having difficulty because it does not know how to transform the information into well-thought-out decisions or has framed the problem in a poor way? If so, group members can use ideas from the functional approach to determine what decision-making function needs to be improved **and** perform more communication that addresses that function. Is the group having difficulty clarifying the task **and** identifying appropriate means for accomplishing the task? If so, the group may need to engage in dialogue—listening **and** asking questions—in order to foster learning. Is the group having difficulty because it does not use supportive **and** affirmative types of communication? If so, group members may need to learn how to be spontaneous, empathetic, **and** provisional in their communication.

Groups are interconnected sets of people **and** communication activities. Therefore, as you think about your group experience, it is important to make sure that the communication activities of information management, decision making, learning, **and** relating align in a synergistic way so that they reinforce each other. It makes little sense to say that a group is effective if it has good decision-making processes but is poor at information management. Bad or limited information will lead inevitably to poor decisions. It is difficult to engage in dialogue if people do not trust each other or dislike one another because they will not be able to openly express their ideas **and** be genuinely curious about another group member's thinking. What this means is that you need to assess not only the quality of individual communication activities, such as information management, but also how these individual communication activities reinforce **and** support each other.

Communication plays an important role in managing the challenges **and** opportunities arising from embeddedness. When group members pay attention to the way they manage information, make decisions, learn, **and** construct relationships, they will be better able to manage the tasks their group must perform. While one can never identify the exact set of causal factors that will perfectly predict a group's experience, it is more likely that your group experience will be positive when the individual activities of information management, decision making, learning, **and** relating are performed competently **and** in such a way that they mutually reinforce each other.

—J. Kevin Barge

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