

Understanding why sometimes groups don't work

Introduction

Many voluntary sector groups exist solely because of some outside factor. People from all sorts of backgrounds get thrown together by circumstances. These could range from a medical condition which afflicts them or someone they care for, to a local situation, such as a new motorway passing through a site of natural beauty, or any one of a variety of reasons which originally caused the group to be formed.

It's not like a hobby society where everyone comes to the group because of a shared interest in something and a positive will to co-operate. Single-issue voluntary groups often run into problems, as everyone comes with their own very firm views, different experiences and skills. Everyone has something to bring to the party but very often they don't accept that other people's views are every bit as valid as their own.

Storming, forming and norming

All new groups go through an evolution process described by Dr Bruce Tuckman, an American academic, as **Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing**.

These terms almost explain themselves and the four stages a new group goes through before it, hopefully, becomes effective. There can also be a fifth stage called **Adjourning**, which is when a group has fully accomplished what it set out to do and decides to wind itself up in an orderly manner. This is usually more appropriate to single projects, such as the motorway protest group above, which has successfully got the road re-routed away from their woodland, or whatever.

- **Forming** is when the group comes together and group members start to get to know each other, what their motivation is and what the group is all about.
- **Storming** is the process of trying to resolve differences, decide on a common set of goals



and strategies for the group and move forward. As the name suggests, this can be a stormy process and can create conflict, cause rifts in the group and even resignations. Some groups get themselves stuck in this stage and never move forward, resulting in the inevitable failure of the group as people drop away.

- **Norming** is when the issues are beginning to resolve themselves into clear plans and policies, the members of the group respect each other's contribution and have a shared vision of how to move forward that is beginning to translate into action.
- **Performing** is the group moving forward, delivering the project or service it was set up for, monitoring what it is doing to improve effectiveness, planning for the future, attracting new members and so on.

We're still stuck in the "Storming" stage

Dysfunctional groups often unwittingly bar the door to progress themselves, whether they realise it or not. They handle conflicts badly or try to pretend there is no conflict, which is even worse. They often conduct themselves according to unwritten rules. People say, "You've got to do it this way, because that's the way

it has to be done." – Says who? The group makes its own rules and those should only be the minimum necessary for effective performance.

Imposing unnecessary restrictions simply limits the group's effectiveness and wastes time on "violent

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agreement". This is where arguments break out over how to move forward but when an objective observer strips away the emotional window-dressing, there is really no disagreement about the fundamentals. Members are simply falling out with one another over

differences in approach and style. They refuse to learn from their collective experience for the sake of keeping peace in the group or "feeling safe".

Alternately, everyone speaks their mind but no one

How can we be more effective?

The very nature of group dynamics depends upon effective interaction among its members. Honesty is essential. Group members need to feel free to speak their mind clearly and to support others in doing the same. It also helps if members bring a "whole person" to the group, getting fully involved rather than limiting their participation to a superficial level. One of the most valuable things a group can develop is the capacity to be vulnerable with one another.

They also need to look at:

- **Goals**— what constitutes "success" for us - in this situation and overall?

Teambuilding

Group performance can often be improved through teambuilding - a term that has come to mean everything from outward bound courses to psychological profiling. Groups can gain a great deal from teambuilding exercises - but only if they are truly relevant to the issues and the group's activities. Otherwise, they tend to be a bit like a parlour game... entertaining, but unlikely to change anything.

There are four reasons for teambuilding. Each calls for very different strategies:

- **New group formation** and improved relationships - self-disclosure exercises; team challenges; temperament or style profiles.
- **Problems in group dynamics** - conflict management; listening; communication; teambuilding.
- **Barriers to goal achievement** - role definition, decision-making systems, effective problem-solving and creative thinking.
- **Resolution of goals and strategy** - group philosophy, team target development.

A few key points

- Teams are not built by picking out individual members for coaching. Working one-to-one with individuals is not teambuilding.
- Removing "awkward squad" members, while sometimes long overdue, seldom alters group dynamics. It just creates a vacancy. People

think that just because they're not arguing all the time, everything's been resolved.

- Unless the issues have been addressed, nothing changes.
- Time changes nothing. Groups that have been together for years are often no more effective than when they first started unless they've worked on how they work. Role definition, decision-making skills, collective thinking all need to be addressed.
- Nothing gets better without follow-up. Keep revisiting the issues to make sure the group is on track and everyone's still on board.
- Finally, there is no substitute for emotional maturity. People need to step back from the issue and take a reasoned approach. Too many people use their emotional link to the issue as a weapon rather than tackling the problem of how to make the group more effective in a rational way. An "I care more than you do" competition among group members is a sure-fire recipe for disaster.

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training and with legal issues. We have resources, including a meeting room, computers and OHP for use by groups.

To find out how we can help your group, please contact us on 01663 735 350 or email hello@highpeakcvs.org.uk

