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A brief guide to group dynamics and team building

This section of the *Notes* provides training materials for participatory learning, exploring a different theme in each issue[1]. This issue explores how groups work. One of the key components of participatory methods is the emphasis on multidisciplinary teams of participants. By working as a group, the team members can approach a situation from different perspectives, carefully monitor each other's work, and carry out several tasks simultaneously. The training required for good participation is based on a thorough understanding of how groups perform.

Groups can be powerful and productive when they function well. The performance and output of the team is likely to be greater than the sum of its individual members, or as expressed in an African proverb: "Cross a river in a crowd and the crocodile won't eat you."

The life cycle of groups

When several people come together to work on a single initiative or project, they are not necessarily a productive team. Before a group of people can function well together, they have to pass through a series of stages (see Box 1). The challenge of every good trainer is to help their trainees move through the various phases of group formation until they reach the final stage.

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[1] Taken from a *Trainers Guide for Participatory Learning and Action*. Published by IIED. Price £14.95 + postage and packing (25% UK & Europe, 35% airmail).

BOX 1

THE FOUR STAGES OF GROUP DEVELOPMENT

In the early ***forming*** stage, the group is a collection of individuals, each with her/his own agenda and expertise and little or no shared experience.

As these individuals become more familiar with one another, they will almost certainly enter a ***storming*** phase where personal values and principles are challenged, roles and responsibilities are taken on and/or rejected, and the group's objectives and way of working together are defined.

At the ***norming*** stage, the group has settled down and developed a clear identity. The members have begun to understand their roles in relation to one another and establish a shared vision or goal. People know each other better, they have accepted the rules and probably developed little sub-groups.

Once these norms have been established, the group will be ready to focus on output and will enter the ***performing*** phase. It is in this phase that they will work most effectively as a team. The confidence level of the team will have reached the point where they are willing to take significant risks and try out new ideas on their own.

Groups generally produce fewer ideas than individuals working separately. However, they do produce better ideas as they are discussed more carefully and thought through more deeply.

Dealing with group conflict

Conflict is an inevitable part of working with groups of people who have different interests, backgrounds and experiences. Conflict need not be destructive if it is used constructively.

Even small conflicts should not be ignored by trainers as they may grow out of proportion and affect the entire group. There is no prescription for dealing with group conflict. It will depend on the people involved, culturally bound ways of expressing dissent and disagreement, and your own style as a trainer.

It is important to get a sense of the nature of the conflict. It may simply be a function of the group life cycle. A storming phase (which commonly occurs on the second or third day of a training programme) may have little to do with course content or you as a trainer, and much more to do with group dynamics. It may be that individuals have hidden agendas outside the workshop theme that may conflict with declared group objectives. In group work, there are always trade-offs between individual and group objectives. Accepting such trade-offs can only happen if participants trust one another to agree on common objectives.

Conflicts between groups or individuals in the training may be due to institutional affiliations, ideological or political alliances, religious or ethnic identification, professional relations or personality differences, about which you may know little. Raised voices, tense faces and nervous body language are all clear expressions of anger and conflict. Silence can also convey conflict, whether it is shown by the group, sub-group or an individual. While these symptoms may be relatively easy to observe, the root cause of the conflict may be harder to discover.

Box 2 suggests some ways of reducing or reconciling conflicts that may arise during training. Another way to help diffuse conflicts is to reply to negative statements using positive terms such as 'I respect ... and ...' or 'I agree ... and ...'. This tells the trainee that you acknowledge and appreciate their perspective. You are showing that there is room for multiple opinions, and that each person's contribution is valued and encouraged.

Words such as 'but' or 'however' are negative and can convey feelings of condescension. By saying 'I agree with you, but ...', you are actually implying that you really do not agree with the person and will soon show them why they are wrong. Remember that as a trainer you are in a powerful position. By making a

statement that appears to undervalue or belittle a comment made by a participant, you can create anxiety and resentment, and alienate people in the process.

BOX 2

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT INDIVIDUALS

- As soon as you see problems arise, take the opportunity to talk to the person individually. Sometimes disruptive people just want more individual attention.
- If there is somebody in the group who can act as an intermediary, ask that person to discuss the disruptive behaviour sympathetically with the person in question.
- Give the person a particular responsibility in the training that will focus their energies.
- Do an activity, such as a 'Suggestion Box', that allows complaints to be voiced and discussed anonymously.
- You can encourage participants to develop self-critical awareness about the quality and length of contributions to discussions, e.g. *Would anyone like to comment on that? What do other people think? Some of you have a special knowledge on this subject, would any of you like to say something on this?*
- Only deal with difficult individuals publicly in exceptional circumstances.

Group composition

Once the group is working together, it can achieve its common purpose. To do this it must have members with the necessary range of skills and abilities. The larger the size, the greater the diversity of talent, skills and knowledge likely to be present. Small groups may be less effective due to a limited range of knowledge. Yet if you make a group too large, then new learning constraints arise (see Box 3). Individuals are more likely to be inhibited in discussions and the more active group members may strongly influence the group. It takes far more courage to speak up in a large group than in a small one. A group of 5 - 7 team members usually works best for achieving optimum productivity and participation. There is, of course, no single ideal group because other factors, such as leadership, cohesiveness, and desire for consensus play an important role.

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│   BOX 3   │
│   │
│   **GROUP SIZE AND PARTICIPATION**   │
│   │
│   • 3 - 6 people. Everyone speaks   │
│   • 7 - 10 people. Almost everyone   │
│   speaks. Quieter people say less. One │
│   or two may not speak at all.   │
│   • 11 - 18 people. 5 or 6 people speak │
│   a lot, 3 or 4 others join in   │
│   occasionally.   │
│   • 19 - 30 people. 3 or 4 people   │
│   dominate.   │
│   • 30 + people. Little participation   │
│   possible.   │
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During training, you will need to form groups of different sizes and composition - for workshop sessions, for fieldwork, for discussion, and evaluation. You need to be aware of group dynamics when helping to form groups. The mix of participants will have an important bearing on how well the groups work together.

It is important to have a sense of existing hierarchies: putting junior staff with their seniors may mean that they never have a chance to speak. Gender and age may also influence the degree to which participants feel free to join in group work. There may be existing personality clashes. If possible, check with the organisers or other trusted participants whether they know of any particular problems.

Ranges of roles in groups

Management training research has shown that teams composed of the brightest individuals do not necessarily turn out to be the most productive. Specific functions are needed if a group is to realise its objectives. Trainers should be familiar with the range of roles required to make a group perform well enough to achieve its goals. These involve both task roles, those that help to achieve the goals of the group, and maintenance roles, those that help in the process of achieving these tasks.

Although formal job titles will have influenced the selection of participants for a team, the roles that individuals play within the team are more crucial to its success. For example, there may be individuals good at listening, others who are skilled at seeking information, or clarifying, organising, relieving tension,

setting standards, groups diplomacy or setting standards.

Nobody is perfect, and therefore each role or function is accompanied by an allowable weakness. Acknowledging these allowable weaknesses creates openness in the team. Individual team members feel more comfortable about not having to be perfect and feel free to concentrate on their strengths. The best teams are those which have a wide mix of roles and functions represented.

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│   BOX 4   │
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│   **TRAINERS' CHECKLIST**   │
│   │
│   • Are you clear about whether your own │
│   leadership style is laissez-faire,   │
│   authoritarian or democratic?   │
│   • Does it need to be changed in anyway? │
│   • Are you alert to the probable life   │
│   cycle of your group: forming-   │
│   storming-norming-performing?   │
│   • Which potential conflicts have you   │
│   anticipated and how will you deal   │
│   with them?   │
│   • Are the groups the optimum size for   │
│   their various tasks?   │
│   • Is everyone participating actively in │
│   each session?   │
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Next issue: Using exercises and games to enhance group dynamics.

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