GROUP DYNAMICS

"When a team outgrows individual
performance and learns team confidence,
excellence becomes a reality."

— Joe Paterno, Football Coach, Penn State University

INTRODUCTION

Whether a team is seasoned or simply working together on a temporary project, there are concepts and techniques that can improve how the team functions, thus improving the quality of its output.

Two factors that influence a team's success are diversity and self-awareness. Diversity in experience and perspective generates deeper thinking and analysis on teams. Having team members who assume a variety of roles can serve to challenge, stabilize, and facilitate team effectiveness and development. Effective teams are also self-aware. They are conscious of their own effectiveness and they take time to talk about it. The responsibility for dealing with dysfunctional behavior belongs to all team members, not just the leader or facilitator. In all groups, individuals assume roles that allow the group to function.

ROLES

Each role presented below can either have a positive or negative influence on group performance. When individuals fall into roles that are less productive for the team, effective managers will coach the individuals and team away from dysfunctional behavior. For example, if you see your group reaching consensus too quickly on a decision, ask a team member to play the role of devil's advocate

during your discussion. This may be particularly effective when you assign team members roles that are contrary to their typical or natural roles.

During your next meeting, encourage team members to identify the roles they assume in the group. What are the positive roles and what are the negative roles they assume in their interaction with the team? Then discuss the roles as a group. What roles contribute to and what roles detract from the team's effectiveness?

Devil's Advocate. Takes a position contrary to what the group thinks. This can generate deeper thinking on issues but can be frustrating to other group members because this person never seems to agree with the group.

Listener. Listens carefully to the thoughts and opinions of others in the group. Their ideas tend to be well thought out. They often remain quiet so the group cannot benefit from their ideas.

Idea Generator. Generates ideas constantly on a variety of subjects. They are able to help move a group towards creative and meaningful solutions by submitting ideas for the team to build upon. The team may get frustrated when they are ready to move towards a decision and the idea generator is still presenting options.

Helper. Aware of team dynamics and helps the team to improve its overall effectiveness. Helpers may be unwilling to disagree with the facilitator or other team members when they should.

Clarifier. Asks questions or seeks additional information on behalf of the team to make sure assignments, roles, or decisions are clearly understood by everyone.

Mediator. Smooths out conflicts and maintains positive relationships between team members. The mediator may be more relationship-oriented and less task-oriented.

Joker. Is fun and lighthearted but can also be a distraction and cause the team to lose focus.

Sniper. Shoots down ideas. Some ideas need to be shot down while others may deserve further consideration.

Decision Maker. Drives the group to make decisions and act. They are an essential component of a well-functioning team. They may not give enough time for plans to develop or the process to work.

Dominator. Can provide good leadership in a group discussion but can also make it difficult for other team members to participate.

PROBLEMS & SOLUTIONS

Teams experience very similar problems. Chances are that you have experienced most of the problems listed below at some point in your career.

Review the descriptions of the common problems teams face to identify any needs on your current team. Then get your team talking about solutions.

Overemphasizing Process or Productivity. Teams are driven to produce and never consider the process they use. Or, they focus exclusively on interpersonal relationships and team processes and ignore production. Ignoring one over the other will lead to the same result – decreased productivity. Both process and productivity are essential to highly effective teams.

TWO KEY QUESTIONS TO BALANCE PROCESS AND PRODUCTIVITY:

• What keeps this team from being as effective as it needs to be?
• What changes do we need to make in order to be more effective?

Groupthink. Team members won't disagree with each other. They are too "nice" and rarely express disagreement. Discussions and decisions have become too homogeneous. A non-confrontational atmosphere can often be just as crippling as a hostile one. A major advantage of the team

process is the varied input that team members can provide. Less effective teams struggle with the problems of groupthink or indecision. Constructive conflict is important for good teams.

• Constructive conflict occurs when team members feel safe to voice their opinions. Make it safe for people to contribute dissenting opinions. Encourage open participation by asking team members who may be holding back their ideas to speak up.
• Stimulate discussion by assigning a team member to play the role of devil's advocate or idea generator.

Difficult Decisions Deferred to the Leader. When a team struggles with a difficult decision or problem, they rely on the leader to make the final decision. The leader should not feel compelled to make the final decision but should encourage the team to continue with the issue.

• Focus the team on moving forward instead of on their differences by reviewing the goal or points of agreement.
• Pay attention to group dynamics. Are all team members participating in the discussion? Are there any team members that are dominating the discussion?
• Assign people the task of agreeing or disagreeing with a certain position during the discussion.

No Follow Through on Decisions. A team makes decisions that are then forgotten or ignored. Team members may leave meetings unsure about what decisions were made and who is responsible for their execution.

• Assign a team member the role of note keeper during team meetings. They should record all decisions made during the meeting and who is responsible for what and when. Review the list at the end of each meeting and send out meeting minutes with the same summary after the meeting.
• Have a team member play the role of clarifier. After each decision is reached, have the clarifier review the decision with the team to make sure each person understands the task and associated responsibilities.

Unequal Group Partcipation. The same team members dominate the discussion. Others rarely voice their opinions and when they do they are ignored. As a result, some team members may have more influence over decisions than others.

• Assign more dominating team members the roles of listener, helper or clarifier. Assign more

passive team members the roles of devil's advocate, idea generator or mediator.
• Ask team members to write down their idea for a particular problem then present their idea to the team.
• Thank dominators for their participation and then explain how it would also be beneficial to hear from the rest of the team.

TO DO LIST

✓ Spend some time as a team talking about your group dynamics.
✓ Ask yourselves four questions:
    1. What would this team be like if everything went as we wanted it to?
    2. Where do we stand on each item on a scale of 1 to 5?
    3. Why do we rate the items the way that we do?
    4. What are the team's priorities for improvement?

THE BOTTOM LINE

A well-functioning group is interested in continually improving their processes and behaviors. When they get off track they have the ability to self-correct and get back on track.