

Group Dynamics and the Role of Group Facilitator

What exactly are group dynamics?

The term 'group dynamics' (or the relationship and power processes of group life) implies that way a person experiences group life is more than just their own personality and choices. There are forces at work which impact the way people relate. i.e. the urge to be accepted by a group and to fit in with what is happening is actually a powerful influencer of what people will do and say. It means that what is happening in a group may shape individual preferences, values, and behaviours leading a person to respond in slightly different ways in a particular group than they would individually or in the context of other groups. At its best, this is a natural, healthy and adaptive process. However in some circumstances, we know groups can become dysfunctional and even toxic, allowing members to behave in destructive ways. Unfortunately this can occur in Christian groups as easily as in other groups. In fact sometimes precisely because members do not anticipate difficulties and naturally extend a high level of trust, they do not attend to group processes and unconsciously let dynamics and interactions become quite damaging.

Group dynamics are the internal (largely unspoken) processes by which people work out and maintain their place and role in the life of a group. As this is happening on both a personal level and also a systemic level, group dynamics also refers to the emerging culture and systemic processes within the group. Understanding these dynamics or systemic processes include exploring the following issues:

- a) Communication patterns - who talks when, how and why? Who remains silent?
- b) Authority, influence and leadership - Who seems to be respected and to exercise some authority in the group? How did this come about? How is this authority expressed?
- c) What roles have emerged in the group? Who fills them? Who does not seem to have a role?
- d) What level of care, support and sharing is evident in the group?
- e) How does the group deal with differences, tension and uncertainty?

Even though we may not be consciously aware of it, we are dealing with these issues all the time. They can be resolved in many different ways in a group, some healthy, inclusive, open and creative; others contrived, controlled, manipulative and consequently unhealthy for the group.

Enter stage left: *the facilitator*

And what exactly is a facilitator?

The role of an intentional group facilitator is quite a unique form of leadership and needs to be explored apart from other roles a person might have in leadership.

The facilitator of a group is a person who tends the group dynamics consciously and intentionally as an act of service, to enable the group to form and then function in healthy, creative, inclusive and collaborative ways. Within the context of Christian community, this is a key leadership ministry although it is not necessarily a high profile, up front function. A facilitator:

- a) Intentionally plans and designs the process of group activity especially in the early stages of group life
- b) Attends to the way individuals connect, participate and share with the group
- c) Shapes the interaction of participants so that everyone is included, valued and involved
- d) Keeps the group on track in terms of its purpose and focus
- e) Assists the group find an appropriate tone of interaction and level of intimacy

Effective facilitation is not overt control or manipulation, it is actually a ministry or act of service

to a community. It is most effective when subtle and behind the scenes. Ideally it rarely become 'noticeable', but is present and ready to if necessary.

Separating Content and Process

It is essential for facilitators to become attuned to separating content and process in group work.

Content: The **subject matter** we are dealing with e.g. a member's conflict with her staff team, a leader's struggle with a dying parent, a minister feeling as if his prayers are hitting the ceiling and getting nowhere.

Process: **How the group is responding** to the content and how are you as a facilitator shaping this response appropriately e.g. is the group providing acceptance through attentive listening, has the group drifted into challenging or questioning or giving advice, how do you respond? Is the group offering to hold the person in prayer? Does this feel OK? Is the group sitting uncomfortably in some tension over what has been shared, do they need space?

Obviously the content being dealt with creates a response. Process is the shaping of this response intentionally and sensitively by the facilitator in the direction of safety, pastoral care, integrity, honesty, covenant keeping, grace and community - it is keeping step with the spirit - asking what God is doing in this situation. A wise and caring response from the group allows the next step in content and then the next response.

Facilitation is also the courage to steady and redirect a conversation which may be heading into unhelpful territory and could be unnecessary for the group. If this occurs as the process, there could well be a shift in the content being shared and an opportunity for growth might be lost.

Clearly separating process and content enables facilitation to be examined and evaluated to see if there are ways that group process could be adjusted for the health of the group.

Note: at the end of the day we all need to trust God for what happens in consulting, the dynamics are complex and often unclear. However a commitment to seek understanding and a willingness to minister as a facilitator does make an important difference to the effectiveness of a consultation process.

Key Facilitation Skills

1. Round the circle: Ensuring that everyone shares by simply posing a question or opportunity for response and letting people respond in order. Great tool to begin and end sessions.
2. Re-directing participation: Intervening in an interaction which has gone off track, to focus the session back onto appropriate ground. This may take weaker forms to just shape the conversation or stronger forms in times of tension or if there is an over talkative participant. (Parking conversations)
3. Re-framing a discussion or even a comment: Sometimes conversations get an edge, contain barbs or inherent criticism. There is value in re-framing what someone says, or asking them to do this, to create a way forward in a discussion.
4. Relationship tending: watching for reactive relationships between group members and tending to these outside of interactive sessions.
5. Recognise constructive and vulnerable contributions through affirmation and encouragement.