

Tips for Understanding Groups

Excerpts taken from:

Introduction to Planning and Facilitating Effective Meetings and
Navigating in Rough Seas: Public Issues and Conflict Management, NOAA
Coastal Services Center

Theories of Group Interaction

The following concepts are helpful models for facilitators and meeting leaders. The models enhance insight into group interactions and will help to design the agenda and facilitate discussion.

Stages of a Discussion

Meetings can be viewed as a series of discussions with three phases.

1. Opening – where multiple ideas are generated and clarified, or information is gathered. This phase includes brainstorming, general discussion, and question and answer sessions.
2. Narrowing – where the information gathered is organized by eliminating duplicate ideas, combining similar ideas, or evaluating options.
3. Closing – where decisions are made, priorities are selected, or agreement is reached.

Viewing discussions in this way helps facilitators keep the group focused on specific tasks. For example, during the opening phase of a discussion, a facilitator will encourage participants not to evaluate any ideas but just to generate as many ideas as possible. During the closing phase of a discussion, it can be useful for the group to use specific criteria for deciding on a preferred solution or prioritizing options. For example, if the organization is trying to decide on the best projects to take on over the next year, the criteria for prioritizing may be that the project (a) be feasible given current resources and (b) advance the mission of the organization.

Positions versus Interests

Facilitators need to be adept at knowing the difference between positions and interests.

When a group is having trouble agreeing on a solution to a problem, it is often because participants are focused on their positions instead of their interests or values. A “position” is an opinion about how a problem should be solved or how a group should go about accomplishing an objective. An “interest” is an underlying value or area of importance for an individual or group. Focusing on interests instead of positions increases the chance of forming consensus within a group. An example of a position might be that “the development should be allowed.” The underlying interest, however, is concern about jobs, tax revenue, and community quality of life.

When a group comes to an impasse, a facilitator can attempt to guide the discussion down to the level of underlying interests and values by asking probing questions such as “Why do you think this is the best solution?” and “What makes you feel so strongly about this issue?” Focusing on interests instead of positions can be useful when working with groups with a high degree of conflict.

Team Stages

Stage	Characteristics
Forming	This stage starts when members are first brought together to address a problem or work toward a goal. Optimism and expectations are high, but so is anxiety. Generally, this is the "honeymoon" stage. There is a great deal of dependence on the leader; members want to be given a clear mandate, structure, and parameters. At this stage, a team establishes the rules or norms it will operate under.
Storming	At this stage, "the honeymoon is over." Members begin to see a discrepancy between their initial hopes for the team and the realities of working together. Performance plummets. Storming can be due to several reasons, including interpersonal conflicts, lack of skills (particularly interpersonal skills), ineffective leadership, problems with the task, or problems with organizational barriers. Chances are good that at least one of these factors will cause any group to go through a storming stage. It's not unusual for members to challenge or blame the leader at this stage. To survive this stage, a team leader or facilitator must know that it is a normal stage of team formation; it requires a balance of assertiveness and neutrality to pull a team through this stage. Encourage communication especially active listening!
Norming/ Groan Zone	This is a transitional stage where the group moves from being a group to being a team. They confront and resolve their problems; the resolutions that team members agree to become their new norms. Members face their issues, accept feedback, and act on it. Performance improves. Facilitators or leaders should help the group identify and solve their problems using facilitation and consensus building tools.
Performing	The team enters into a stage of improved performance where everyone shares power by rotating leadership roles, the official leader is a valued member of the team, everyone is supportive, and all members can-and do-facilitate. Productivity and morale increase. Members are committed and have bonded. The team continuously evaluates and corrects, as needed. High-quality decisions are made. Time and resources are used efficiently. Conflicts are approached as healthy debates; they rarely get heated or emotional. The team may reject the leader or facilitator as they begin to function as a true team.
Transforming	At this stage, the team must know "when to say when." If a team's existence was planned to end when a particular project was done, it should disband once all the necessary tasks are completed so that team members can go on to solve other problems. The team should receive recognition for its accomplishments as a tangible milestone that indicates the completion of its duties. Members should review what they learned and take this experience with them into future groups.