

Understanding Group Process

Group process refers to how an organization's members work together to get things done. Typically, organizations spend a great deal of time and energy setting and striving to reach goals but give little consideration to what is happening between and to the group's greatest resource - its members. While working hard to achieve results, it is critical that members' needs be addressed. Membership in an organization is as much an opportunity to develop self confidence, refine skills and make friends as it is to support a cause, fundraise or educate the campus community. All of these can be done simultaneously, but most likely will not just happen on their own.

Effective organizations take a close look at how members work together, which roles they fill and whether members are contributing equally. Through group process, observation and analysis can help identify problems early, thus alleviating the need for a major overhaul as the year progresses. Your vantage point as a group member provides a great opportunity to regularly observe how things are going. Depending on the frequency of meetings and an understanding of what to look for, you can be instrumental in ensuring group and individual success.

Elements of an organization which typically influence group proceedings include communication, participation, decision making and role fulfillment. When observing these specific areas you will likely see several things happening simultaneously. This is to be expected, but it can also be rather confusing. Initially, you may want to isolate a single aspect of the group. As you become more adept at observation you can gradually increase your areas of focus. Listed below are several questions to ask yourself as you begin observing a group.

Observation

One of the easiest aspects of group process to observe is the pattern of communication:

- 1) Who talks? For how long? How often?
- 2) At whom do people look when they speak?
 - a. Single-out individuals, possible potential supporters
 - b. The group
 - c. No one
- 3) Who talks after whom? Who interrupts whom?
- 4) What style of communication is used (assertions, questions, tone of voice, gestures, etc.)?

The kinds of observations we make give us clues to other important things which may be going on in the group (e.g., such as who leads whom or who influences whom). If you are uncomfortable observing the group, a consultant from the center can observe your group's process and share that information with you.

Participation

One indication of involvement is verbal participation. Look for differences in the amount of participation among members:

- 1) Who are the high participants? Who are the low participants?
- 2) Do you see any shift in participation (e.g., highs become quiet; lows suddenly become talkative)? What are possible reasons for this in the group's interaction?

- 3) How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted? Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fear? Etc.?
- 4) Who talks to whom? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
- 5) Who keeps the ball rolling? Why? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?

Decision Making

Many kinds of decisions are made in groups without considering the effects that these decisions will have on other members. Some people try to impose their own decisions on the group, while others want all members to participate or share in the decision making process.

- 1) Does anyone make a decision and carry it out without checking with other group members (self-authorized)? For example, one person decides on the topic to be discussed and immediately begins to talk about it. What effect does this have on other group members?
 - 2) Does the group drift from topic to topic? Who topic-jumps? Do you see any reason for this in the group's interactions?
 - 3) Who supports other members' suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in the two members deciding the topic or activity for the group (handclasp)? How does this effect the other group members?
 - 4) Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a decision through over other members objections? Do they call for a vote (majority support)?
 - 5) Is there any attempt to get all members participating in a decision (consensus)? What effect does this seem to have on the group?
 - 6) Does anyone make any contributions which do not receive any kind of response or recognition? What effect does this have on the member?
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Organizational Roles

A variety of crucial roles need to be filled to ensure group goal accomplishment and success. Roles are distributed among three types:

Task

Primarily expressed through trying to accomplish group tasks. Examples: initiator- contributor, information seeker and giver, elaborator, orientator, energizer, recorder.

Maintenance

Oriented toward improving relationships among members. Examples: encourager, harmonizer, compromiser.

Self-Oriented

Focuses on personal needs regardless of group concerns. Examples: aggressor, recognition seeker, dominator, blocker.

Process observation requires patience and the ability to focus on everyone in the group. Paying attention to these questions and roles can help you to better understand how the group is affecting its member and vice versa.