

**GROUP
INTERACTION**

IX. GROUP INTERACTION TECHNIQUES

A. KEY POINTS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

In this section you'll find some key points, directions and suggested ways to handle typical problems which occur in group discussions.

A well-run discussion involves all group members, keeps to the main point, and reaches some kind of conclusion or resolution. Some key points to keep in mind when guiding a group discussion include:

- **involve all group members**
- **keep to the point**
- **cool off heated discussions**
- **maintain a good pace and clarity**
- **stay impartial**

INVOLVE ALL GROUP MEMBERS

- Listen to each person's contribution with attention. If other group members discredit or ignore what one person says, point out that everyone can learn from listening to all points of view.
- As a general rule, let each person speak once before hearing a person who wants to speak a second time.
- Don't let the discussion turn into a two-person argument. Bring in others by asking for their comments.
- People who express unpopular or minority points of view should not be silenced by the majority or made to feel personally rejected. Their continued participation should be encouraged.
- Minority points of view can be useful to the group. For example, by debating with members who hold majority views, the minority may learn to express its thoughts on the subject more strongly. Minority points of view within the group may represent opinions held by a majority of people outside of the group. Group members may have to deal with people who hold these opinions later so they might as well begin now. Also, minority

views can win acceptance. A view initially held by only a few group members may become accepted by the majority after a discussion of the issue.

KEEP TO THE POINT

- Ask questions that will guide the discussion back toward the subject.
- Pull together some of the points made which seem slightly irrelevant and tie them to the main subject.

COOL OFF HEATED DISCUSSIONS

Discussions usually only get heated when everyone needs to agree on some action to take together.

- If a discussion gets too intense, call a break to give people time to calm down.
- Try to reach general agreement before calling for a decision or a vote. The group will be less hostile and more open to sharing all ideas.

MAINTAIN CLARITY AND A GOOD PACE

- Discuss each idea or suggestion long enough for everyone to have time to think it over and understand it.
- Be aware of the pace of discussion so that it does not become too fast for some people to follow.
- Make sure all ideas are stated clearly. The words used can sometimes prevent understanding of the points being expressed. Language problems are obvious areas to watch out for. Also, remember the problem of over-educated jargon which may sound intelligent but may be a sloppy way of expressing a thought. For example, you can "finalize and implement a system", or "decide how to do the work".

STAY IMPARTIAL

- Set aside your feelings of how the group members should discuss the topic. If the group adopts your point of view anyway, state your feelings and make it clear others should express their feelings also.

Don't judge comments as irrelevant or off the subject too quickly. People approach a subject in different, but equally useful, ways.

Be careful. You have the power to influence the direction of a discussion and its outcome by choosing who speaks, summarizing points of view, introducing ideas, and formulating conclusions based on the discussion.

B. DIRECTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSIONS

Adapt these directions to your personal style and to each specific discussion topic:

Seat People in a Circle--so that you do not dominate.

Stimulate Discussion--Ask a provocative question about the topic, describe a problem or case study or show pictures, slides or photos to kick off the discussion. Ask each group member to give ideas, opinions or similar experiences briefly.

Brain Storm and Pool Ideas--Instead of talking "at" the group, involve everyone in pooling what they know about the topic. Then ask them to brainstorm possible suggestions or problem solutions. When everyone has contributed, the group may have come up with more ideas than any one lecturer would have given--and each person may have had more fun finding out about the topic from each other. You can fill in with facts or areas which were left out.

Give equal weight to each statement, even if you personally disagree with some more than others, let the group decide. Stop anyone who jeers at a comment letting them see how one idea often triggers a better one.

Let the Group Set its Own Rules--Discuss what rules the people in the group think they need in order to give everyone a chance to be heard and respected.

Use Silence--Sometimes a discussion lags or is hard to start and keep going. Don't get nervous or jump in with another question or your own answer. Let the group think it over for a moment or wait calmly until someone has something to say.

Referee--Draw out the shy people. Help the talkers listen to others and respond to other people's comments--not merely hold their breath and wait to talk again. Some people prefer to listen and observe. Respect their choice.

Let People Think for Themselves--If you follow someone's comments with a nodding or shaking head, mutter "right" or "good" and ignore "wrong" comments, they will stop thinking for themselves. They will either tune you out or try to come up with what you want to hear. You can turn comments back to the group. For example: "What do others think about that?" or "Can anyone give other examples?"

Keep the Group on Track--When everyone talks at once, call a halt and go around the circle, letting each person have a say in the same amount of time. When group members talk without any relationship to the topic or to each other's comments, try to find some common interest or point out that everyone is talking to you about a different topic and people aren't tuning into each other. And make sure you or members of the group state the topic clearly at the beginning of the discussion.

Clarify Statements--When someone gets tangled up in a complicated idea or becomes vague or rambling, you can clarify without taking over or sounding critical. Say something like, "Do you mean...?" or "Let me see if I've got you right. You're saying that..."

Use Impromptu Role Play--Instead of only talking about experiences and ideas, group members can act out experiences or role play how they would try to solve a problem mentioned. Let one person describe an experience or problem. Ask students to play the roles of those involved. Have them act out the situation the way the first person described it. Then ask them to act out different ways it could be handled. Video tape and view the replay if possible, giving a critique of behavior patterns.

Summarize the Discussion--Help people see what has been accomplished by the discussion. Highlight points made, opinions, decisions or suggestions. If you are going to meet with the same group again, point out what hasn't yet been considered.

C. TYPICAL PROBLEMS

Read over the following suggestions for handling typical problems in group discussions. You may want to meet with other facilitators to talk over practical ways to handle these and other problems you are encountering.

Rambling Discussions...Summarize the main points. Suggest that everyone discuss what actions the group might take on the topic. Ask the group to restate the topic you're talking about. Write the topic or purpose of the discussion on a flip chart.

A Few Dominate...Involve other group members by asking their opinions and encouraging them to ask questions. Keep the pace of the meeting slow

enough so that everyone can participate, not just those who have special knowledge or experience. Avoid calling on the same people by saying something like, "Let's hear from those who haven't spoken yet" or "Let's go around and hear from everyone before we hear others for a second time."

Arguments and Overly Critical Comments... Summarize the points of view. This depersonalizes the argument; it isn't a fight between José and Rosa, but rather a disagreement about two ways of looking at a problem. Summarizing also helps people to focus on the issues being discussed.

Point out areas of agreement so the discussion can focus on the differences, and try to resolve them. Draw other members in by asking them to point out other options or other aspects of the problem.

Appoint a committee to explore the problem and bring more information back to the group at the next session or lead a discussion of each possible action until everyone has had a chance to offer suggestions. This will bring in many more opinions and result in a good "brain storming" session rather than a fight among a few people.

Off the Topic... Some poor listeners "step on the speaker's sentences", starting to talk before the other person finishes...and often they start talking on a different topic. This makes it difficult to develop an idea in depth. It is also irritating to the rest of the group.

When one person interrupts a discussion of a topic to bring up another subject, let him or her know you recognize the importance of the new topic but don't allow the interruption to distract everyone from the original discussion. If the new topic is urgent, plan to discuss it later in the same session. Otherwise, ask the person to present his ideas at the next session. Sometimes you can use humor with poor listeners. "Hey slow down--you're off on a new topic before we get a sentence out of our mouth!"

Personal Experiences... Parents have had personal experiences with their children and schools that they can share. These experiences can be very helpful to the group if you use them to focus attention on the problems which the group is trying to solve.

Overwhelming Problems... When there are so many problems that it seems impossible to take even a first step toward handling any of them, ask the group to list all the problem areas that they think are important. Decide which problems are most important and then rank the problems to show which have the best chance of short term achievement. Start discussing one of the important problems that can be solved easily. The group will then be building its skills and confidence in preparation for more difficult problems.

D. PROBLEM-SOLVING TECHNIQUES

Problems and questions will often come up in group discussions. In this section, you'll find summaries of a few problem-solving techniques, including:

- **Buzz Groups**
- **Brainstorming**
- **Decision--Making Exercises**
- **Panel Debates**
- **Field Observations & Interviews**

The **buzz group** technique is described in detail as an example of how to think through each of these techniques.

BUZZ GROUPS

What are They? Large groups of people divide into smaller "buzz" groups to talk about a discussion topic in greater detail and then report their discussion back to the full group. The size of the buzz group depends on your situation. If you are meeting with 20 people, your buzz groups can be made up of 4 or 5 people. If you are meeting with only 6 or 10, your buzz groups can be as small as 2 people. You can video tape the buzz groups (or record them on audio tape) and replay the tape to help you develop people's awareness of their interpersonal skills and the decision making process.

Buzz groups give people a chance to discuss questions in depth. They create a small group atmosphere within a large group and shorten the time needed to discuss all options. The buzz group technique encourages more independent thinking than is sometimes possible in a large group or in the presence of dominant people in the group.

Buzz groups give you an opportunity to :

• **increase participation**--in a large group, your more talkative group members may dominate, but in a smaller buzz group more people may feel comfortable about contributing their ideas.

For example: you can start a large group discussion on a topic like, "How can we use our APEX training to help build our community?", then break up the group into buzz groups to think up specific ideas and report back.

· give people more time to participate--in the buzz group, they can describe in more detail how their experiences relate to the topic.

· referee disagreements--when group members have strong arguments in a large group discussion, you can divide them into buzz groups--each buzz group is on one side of the argument. The buzz groups talk over the pros and cons and any proof or persuasion points. They report back to the full group and a vote can be held.

For example, in a large group discussion on how to assist their children shopping around for different colleges, parents might disagree over the value of colleges with few Latino students. You can set up one buzz group to draw up reasons why Puerto Rican students might want to apply to colleges with few Latino students. Another buzz group could draw up reasons for considering colleges where there already is a large Latino/Puerto Rican student population. Depending on the specific disagreement, you might assign another buzz group the question of why some student might benefit from attending a college which is mostly Spanish-speaking.

How to use Buzz Groups: Several key steps are described below. Adapt them to your specific situation:

1. Describe a case study or use an experience someone in the group has had;
2. Present several different questions or aspects of the problem;
3. Ask the group to divide into teams or pairs--in small groups, people can work individually;
4. Assign a different problem-solving exercise to each group or person and set a time for them to try to find ways to handle the question or problem. Ask them to choose a buzz group "rep" (representative);
5. Ask the buzz rep to report what they discussed--they can list ideas, suggestions or experiences, or act out possible solutions through role play;
6. Discuss similarities and differences and point out how each of the separate reports sheds light on the overall problem;
7. Follow-up--depending on the purpose of the buzz groups:
 - Vote on the various suggestions;
 - Assign groups to research or try out alternatives;
 - Interview more people for their opinions of each suggestion;
 - Act out on video tape some of the suggestions in role play

situations;

Solve problems--if a problem or question comes up in a large group discussion which no one is sure how to handle, you can divide the group members into buzz groups to come up with one or more recommendations.

BRAINSTORMING

What is it? When there's a problem to be solved, everyone suggests solutions, no matter how unusual or impractical. No comments are made on the suggestions until all ideas have been heard. Then the suggestions are discussed in terms of what would be possible or practical in the situation.

Why use it? Brainstorming helps people think beyond the usual solutions and develop creative plans. By thinking freely, for a short time, without fear of criticism, people often come up with ideas which can be developed into practical solutions and which no one would have thought of in a structured discussion setting.

DECISION - MAKING EXERCISE

What is it? Select the question which the group will try to answer in the session.

For example, you have just started a parent group concerned about improving their children's education. "What issues do we want to address as a group first?"

Each person lists their responses with no discussion. If more than five responses, tell group members to eliminate all but the most important ones. Combine the individual or group lists by writing all responses on a black board or on large newsprint. The entire group then discusses the list--not the pros and cons of each item, but simply clarifying the meaning of the items and combining similar ideas. Next, each person selects the five items he or she considers to be most important, writing each one on a small slip of paper. Then, group members participate in a **WEIGHTED VOTE** with each person ranking five items, giving 5 points to the most important, 4 points to the next most important, etc. Finally, votes are tallied to determine which items the group as a whole feels are most important. (Allow two to three hours for this session)

Why use it? Setting priorities is a vitally important step in planning the group's actions. This is often difficult to do in a general group discussion. This exercise establishes the structure for accomplishing the task efficiently and with the maximum possible participation of all members. It can be used to establish the group's priorities, goals, activities and problems the group must deal with.

PANEL DEBATES

What are They? Before group members decide how to solve a problem, they may want to hold a joint panel discussion or seminar with people who have special knowledge about the problem.

For example, they may feel there's no point in becoming active in roles or organizations, or groups where there are few Latinos in leadership positions. They may doubt that more than a few token Latinos will be able to succeed, or they may have no confidence that people from poor families where no one has ever been to college can make it. You can hold a joint panel discussion with:

- Latino representatives from PTA's, school boards, and Parent Unions
- People who want to be active in this way
- People who doubt success in these groups or organizations is possible, except for a few exceptions

The participants should not act as experts, both should explore the problem together. If agreement is difficult, you can invite outside consultants from related areas who may have a broader view of your problem.

Plan the session carefully, with a clear understanding by each participant of the purpose of the session, time allotted to each participant, and time allowed for informal discussion. Video tape it for use in later sessions, if possible.

Why use Them? Joint workshops bring people together in an atmosphere of common need for the exploration of possible solutions to common problems. They can bridge many political gaps and lessen the chance of confrontations or misunderstandings.

FIELD OBSERVATIONS AND INTERVIEWS

What are They? Often the best way to solve a problem is to go out and make observations or conduct interviews.

For example, if parents are having difficulty getting involved because they don't have a clear idea of how schools are run, the best way to solve them problem is to get some exposure and experience--either everyone can go, or someone can video tape or develop slide films of these visits.

You should first discuss this with the school you are planning to observe. Tell them about your group, why you would like to visit, what you would like to see, and whom you would like to visit.

Prepare with your group for the observation visit by developing a list of questions, key observations to make, people to interview, and problems to look for. Plan for each person to record his or her observations on a checklist or in written comments. Follow up the visit with a discussion of these observations, including both ideas for possible solutions to problems in other facilities and possible solution to problems seen at the facility visited.

Why use Them? Observation visits give people a sense of reality. Visits also give group members a chance to make contacts with people in schools.

E. RESOLVING CONFLICTS

You will not be able to avoid the fact that discussions will lead to disagreements between members of your group. In groups such as these, conflicts cannot be avoided. Conflicts are often part of the process. Different people have different personalities and different roles to play.



*In situations where disagreements occur,
we make a distinction in Spanish between
a "desacuerdo" and a "conflicto"
--with one being more serious than the other.*

Often, what we call a conflict in the course of our discussions is just a "desacuerdo". Resolving a desacuerdo requires explaining the issues which provoked it and agreeing on the meaning of the words used between the parties involved.

Does this sound familiar? It is a consensus model, which Latinos have been using for a long time. When we call conflict desacuerdo, it becomes a productive way to get to solutions. Therefore, we call conflict resolution "llegar a un acuerdo". Seen this way, conflict can be productive for the group.

But there are also negative sides to conflict, what we call "discordia." Discordias may involve only a few people in the entire group. But discordias are non-productive, take away from the group meeting, and take energy away from group members.

Conflicts must not occur too often. But when they do occur, resolving them and going on with your meeting involves building group cohesiveness. There are two ways you may approach this task--"A Hands Off Approach" and "A Hands On Approach".

Strategy #1 A Hands Off Approach

The facilitator's task is to turn discord into disagreement, and then go on to build a consensus.

To do this, you have to encourage the opposing sides to define the problem they are having. How do they see the problem?

Encourage the group to explore areas in which they agree on the problem's nature. Then look at areas where they differ from each other.

The opposing sides must then review the problem, and analyze it.

Allow the participants to state the facts and information related to the topic.

Allow the participants to take sides and defend their positions, based on the evidence presented to them.

Now, the participants must be encouraged to find other ways around the problem, to take action to solve it.

Have the group present alternative solutions, then select the solution they are most comfortable with.

These steps will allow members of the group to own the problem, and to commit to a solution. That might not be the best solution as you see it, but it is the group's alternative. Better solutions will emerge as the group achieves cohesiveness.

Strategy #2 A Hands On Approach

There will be times when the "hands off approach" will stall. You must have an intervention strategy to cope with this.

Before the process begins, those involved must be willing to help you to listen to all sides, clarify positions, and resolve the conflict.

Your role, and the role of the individuals involved in the conflict, must be clear. You must become a mediator or "arbitrator", and actively resolve the conflict.

The group allows you to play the role of arbitrator. Therefore, you have the ability to set the necessary ground rules. Encourage the group to begin to talk to one another, to listen more, and adopt a specific course of action.

Your primary concern is to make clear communication between conflicting individuals. Never make decisions for the group.

Even when you are the arbitrator, responsibility for resolving the conflict and taking action rests on the conflicting parties as well as the group.

Nevertheless, you need to have some control over the discussion. You should:

- **Control the voice level of the people involved;**
- **Make it clear to those involved you will clarify communications at any time;**
- **Be able to determine who speaks at a given time.**

Some other helpful hints for this process:

- Be a good listener; try to see the problem from each individual's point of view.
- If you must reject an idea or behavior, make it clear it is not a personal rejection.
- Do not complete anyone's thoughts other than your own.
- Do not jump to conclusions; ask for clarification if something is not clear to you.
- Take no sides, even if you agree with one of the parties.
- Be careful of non-verbal signals that hint you agree with a given position.
- To avoid shouting matches, decide who will present their position first. (The opposing side must listen and not interrupt while the presentation is being made.)

- Review the conflict and the events that lead to it.
- Clarify the situation by defining the problem as each party perceives it.
- Restate the problem situation based on the facts as presented. Ask the parties if you present the problem correctly.
- Explore alternatives in resolving the conflict by drawing suggestions from the disputants and weigh these based on their appropriateness, their usefulness to the entire group and the likelihood of their successful implementation.
- Review the process upon completing the mediation.
- Detail what took place during the discussion of the issues, i.e., the results obtained as well as the results that could not be achieved.

Some closing thoughts:

*Never doubt that a small group of
thoughtful committed citizens
can change the world:
Indeed it's the only thing that ever has.*

Margaret Mead

**GOOD LUCK!
¡BUENA SUERTE!**