Organizational Consultation XXII: Empowerment (Part Two)

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I propose that *individuals and groups move toward empowerment and organizations move toward appreciation by addressing these four functional building blocks in a systematic and sequential fashion*. This is another key to the creation of an appreciative organization. Each of these four building blocks rests on satisfactory resolution of issues associated with the previous building block. The second building block (conflict-management) can't be addressed until the first (communications) is satisfactorily faced, just as the second must be resolved before the third (problem solving) and the third before the fourth (decision-making). Successful conflict-management requires effective communication. Successful problem solving, in turn, requires effective management of conflict and effective communication. Finally, successful decision-making requires that a group already be masterful in communicating, managing conflict and solving problem. One might think of this model of group empowerment as a pyramid, each domain resting on the foundation of the previous domain and providing a foundation for the subsequent building blocks.

The Empowerment Pyramid

The first building block is *communication*. Individuals and groups must be able to openly and accurately communicate with one another. Ideas must freely flow without major distortion or misuse. The second building block involves the capacity to *manage conflict*. Once individuals and groups begin to communicate openly and accurately with one another, they begin to recognize more fully their different opinions, perspectives and values. This, in turn, tends to create conflict. Thus, when conflict begins to emerge among individuals or within a group, this is not necessarily a negative outcome nor is it necessarily a condition from which one should escape. It may instead be a positive sign that the individuals or groups are maturing and communicating with one another. In order for individuals and groups to handle this second set of challenges, they must develop the capacities and procedures to effectively manage this conflict.

The third building block of group empowerment concerns the capacity to *solve problems.* After underlying conflicts are addressed, an individual or group is ready to establish its unique mode of operation and, in particular, its way of addressing the problems that the organization faces. The tools and procedures of problem solving must be mastered if an individual or group is to act in an empowered manner. The fourth and final building block concerns *decision-making*. Once an individual or group has identified ways in which to effectively address problems, the time has come for the individual or group to make decisions. This is the ultimate goal of any empowerment process. It should enable individuals and groups to make decisions regarding the ideas that have been generated in the organization. Furthermore, these decisions should be aligned with the clear intentions of the organization and should be based on the ample information that is made available to the individual or group.

As I have frequently noted in this series of essays, empowerment requires that ideas be closely linked to information and intentions. I now turn to each of these four building blocks of group empowerment and suggest ways in which group members can master each of these four fundamental functions.

Communications

Information is critical to empowerment. As Blanchard and his associates have recently noted:[i]

> If we want people on the front lines of companies to be responsible for making good business decisions, they must have the same information that managers use to make good business decisions. People without information cannot make good business decisions, nor are they motivated to risk making decisions in such a void. On the other hand, people with information are almost compelled to take the risk of making business decisions to the best of their abilities.

The key to effective transmission of information is, in turn, effective communication. We must first seek to empower group members by promoting effective communication and the sharing of information, particularly in the meetings that these members regularly attend. This seems to be an obvious statement: we all know that communication is a good thing and that information should be shared. However, the real message regarding communication and information is not obvious. For one thing, information-sharing meetings are rarely discussed in the literature on group functioning. Yet, most meetings are convened primarily for this purpose. Many staff meetings, general organizational meetings, advisory group meetings, and administrative cabinet meetings are devoted primarily to the sharing of information. This function, however, is rarely acknowledged. Group members are led to believe that decisions will be made or problems solved at the meeting—the sharing of information is considered to be of secondary importance.

What about when the meeting is called solely for the sharing of information, rather than for either instruction or inspiration? While meetings are often called primarily for the purpose of sharing information, this purpose is not formally acknowledged, perhaps because most people envision their role as listener to be passive and rather unimportant. Unfortunately, many people do not adequately value the role of listener and do not realize that effective listening is a highly active role, requiring skillful performance on the part of both sender and receiver. Group members also fail to recognize the need for frequent shifting in roles between speaking and listening if information-sharing transactions are to be successful.

While it is true that other modes of information dissemination often are more effective than face-to-face communication, there are occasions when a meeting should be called for information sharing. Reasons for calling such a meeting include:

1. A specific body of information must be communicated to a specific group of people in a short period of time or must be simultaneously communicated to several individuals (to avoid rumors, distortions, or animosity).
2. A specific body of information that is particularly complex or subject to misinterpretation (because of its subtlety, emotional tone, or potential impact) must be conveyed to and clearly understood by a group of people.
3. All of the pertinent information that is available regarding a specific problem or decision has not yet been collected, but can be accessed through a specific group of people. This information is needed in a short period of time and/or is readily misunderstood, given its complexity or emotional tone.
4. A specific group of people must feel a sense of owner-ship for a specific decision that is to be made or a specific problem that is to be solved, based on information that they now possess or could readily receive.

Perhaps because communication is rarely acknowledged as an explicit purpose for meetings, little has been written about procedures and techniques for making information-sharing meetings more effective. Joan North has suggested that actually there are three purposes subsumed under this one category: (1) communicating information to a group, (2) obtaining group feedback on an idea, and (3) exchanging information among group members. Each of these purposes requires different interpersonal skills and strategies. They all require pre-meeting planning, however, with reference to (1) what information needs to be communicated (or generated), (2) who needs to receive this information, (3) who needs to or should communicate this information, and (4) how should the information be conveyed. We will consider each of these four issues with reference to each of the three types of information-sharing meetings.

Communicating Information to a Group

Often, the most serious problem in the communication of information to a group concerns *selection.* We live in a world of information overload. Each of us is confronted on a daily basis with a wealth of memoranda, reports, statistics, and news. We often come to a meeting in dread of assimilating a large chunk of new information. An informational meeting should be designed to convey essential ideas, statistics, plans, procedures, etc. in a clear and concise manner. Meeting leaders must screen out the peripheral and extraneous material before the meeting; otherwise, participants are likely to retain the unimportant information and forget that which is important.

Decisions regarding participation in the meeting also require some soul-searching and establishment of priorities. Considerable research has shown that accurate information-transfer tends to decrease as a function of group size. The larger the group, the more likely will be miscommunication. The reasons for this effect are rather obvious. In a small group, members can ask questions, comment on the information, or ask the speaker to repeat a particular point or state it in another way. This type of receiver involvement is less likely to occur or be acceptable in large groups. In selecting members for the group, therefore, it is usually preferable to invite a few people who will accurately receive the message than to invite many people who are likely to walk away from the meeting with inaccurate information. A few well-informed group members can, in turn, inform other people in other small groups, thereby enabling the message to spread accurately and more personably.

Accuracy in information transmission also can be improved by attending to the sender of the information. The conveyer of information should have credibility with specific reference to this body of information, should be minimally distracting (in terms of other roles and relationships with those attending the meeting) and should have command of the information to be conveyed. These characteristics sometimes come into conflict. The boss may be most authoritative and knowledgeable about the information but will elicit an emotional block that prevents subordinates from hearing the message accurately. Conversely, a more neutral party may have neither the credibility nor the knowledge to be an effective communicator. Under such circumstances, both the boss and neutral party might be present, with the boss making an initial presentation and the neutral party leading discussions, attempting to clarify and mediate between the boss and subordinates to ensure accurate communication in both directions.

The way in which information is conveyed also increases (or decreases) accuracy. If information is complex, emotionally laden or unusual, then it should be conveyed in a *redundant* manner; i.e., it should be conveyed several different times in several different ways. Preferably, this information should be communicated through at least two different media, for example, speech and the written word, or speech and a visual diagram. If questions arise, they should be answered, if possible, by shifting to a different medium. If information is being conveyed verbally, for example, then questions might be addressed by constructing a visual model or demonstration, or by telling an illustrative story.

Unfortunately, some communicators simply repeat the same words they used before when asked to clarify a point or they simply speak louder. Some communicators only make use of one medium, usually verbal, when many of the people with whom they work exhibit a strong preference for other media when receiving complex and disturbing information. Group members who are often described as "thick-headed" or inattentive may prefer communication in a medium with which we don't feel comfortable. In order to improve their own communication skills, group leaders should learn how to communicate in several different media: speaking, writing, visualizing (diagramming) and enacting (physically walking through a process or procedure).

Obtaining Group Feedback on an Idea

In most meetings, information is expected to flow in both directions. Participants are expected to react to the ideas being presented by the person who is convening the meeting. These expectations often hide the fact that the convener does not really want this feedback but is only soliciting it so that the participants feel good and, as a result, listen to the presentation being made by the convener.

Unfortunately, this hypocrisy will soon get most group leaders in trouble. Participants soon learn that their suggestions are being ignored, hence build up even more resentment than if they were never asked for their feedback in the first place. Unless the meeting is being convened on a one-time basis, with people who will never work together again, it is better to be honest about a lack of interest in feedback than to fake it. In planning for a meeting, therefore, it is essential that one think at least briefly about the kind of feedback, if any, that is desired and about the best time for this feedback to be solicited. There are at least five different kinds of feedback that can be given:

1. **Corrective Feedback:** Information suggesting that a specific course of action is not desirable because of a specific undesirable outcome that can be anticipated, for example: "I don't think you should hire John. This would alienate the entire department."
2. **Diagnostic Feedback:** Information suggesting why a specific course of action has been or will be successful or unsuccessful, for example: "I think Susan is frustrated with your work because you keep promising things that you can't deliver!"
3. **Corroborative Feedback:** Information that confirms and at times expands upon a specific suggestion that has been offered, for example: "I think this idea is good for the following three reasons. . . "
4. **Descriptive Feedback:** Information that conveys to another person the nature of their specific behavior in some setting as observed by another person, for example: "You have been less active in this group's discussion during the past half hour than you were during the first hour."
5. **Judgmental Feedback:** Information concerning a group member's own opinion of a suggestion that has been made, including, at times, a rationale for this opinion, for example: "I don't think this is a good idea for it will prevent us from reaching our affirmative action goal."

Corrective and judgmental forms of feedback are often confused in meetings. They differ from one another in that corrective feedback provides information about how a specific course of action would adversely affect the achievement or the course of action as well as typically, the other members of the group. Conversely, judgmental feedback usually is based on a difference in goal priorities. The person providing the feedback is letting the person who made the suggestion know that the suggestion will not be supported because it works against or is at least not responsive to one or more goals that the feedback-giver values. The first of these two forms of feedback operates in the domain of information, whereas the second form operates in the domain of intentions.

All five forms of feedback can be appreciative in nature, though corrective and judgmental feedback must be carefully crafted if it is to be appreciative. Corroborative, diagnostic, and descriptive forms of feedback all help a group progress toward its assigned task. Corroborative feedback encourages group members to build on each other's ideas. The problem solving process called Synectics relies heavily on corroborative feedback. Diagnostic feedback is of great value as well in problem- solving settings, while descriptive feedback helps members of a group monitor their own behavior and improve their effectiveness as group members. Descriptive feedback, unlike judgmental (and sometimes corrective) feedback tends not to elicit defensive responses from the recipient. She can decide whether or not the behavior being identified is what she intended to enact. With some additional diagnostic or corrective feedback, the recipient can determine the probable consequences of his behavior.

A group leader significantly increases the probability that feedback will be offered in a helpful manner if she plans for a specific time when feedback is to be solicited. Frequently, when feedback is offered in a spontaneous manner, it has not been carefully prepared by the sender, hence is confusing, contradictory or incomplete. Furthermore, off the cuff feedback often occurs when the sender is particularly frustrated or feeling angry, hence it tends to be emotionally laden and judgmental. If members of a group are told that the presenter would like to take ten minutes to present her ideas before feedback is solicited, then group members will usually comply with the request. They will not comply, however, if they have been told the same thing at previous meetings and never given an adequate opportunity to give feedback.

Given a credible timetable, group members typically will take notes during the presentation, carefully prepare their comments, and provide their feedback after the presentation. This model will be particularly successful if the initial presentation is short, or if it is broken into five- or ten-minute chunks with feedback after each chunk. It will also be successful if group members, at some early point, learn about and are given an opportunity to practice, observe, or read about the specific type of feedback that is desired.

Whatever the feedback process being employed, it is particularly important that an appreciative norm be established regarding the purpose of the feedback. Appreciative feedback is oriented primarily to the needs and interests of the person requesting the feedback, not those of the person conveying the feedback. Rarely will feedback that is unsolicited and unwanted be effective in changing the opinions, ideas, or behavior of another person. The person who is requesting the feedback needs to receive it directly, not via a secondary source. Whenever possible, the feedback should be given by someone who will be affected directly by the suggestion being made, behavior being emitted, etc. Secondary speculation about possible impact is much less desirable than direct testimony.

Appreciative feedback is conveyed in a sensitive and careful manner, with the sender checking frequently to be sure that the message is being received accurately. Even feedback that affirms a recipient's values or self-perceptions should be checked for accuracy. The recipient is likely to overestimate the degree of affirmation being offered by the sender or is likely to discount what is being said. This reflects the pervasive inability in our contemporary society to accept compliments or support from others. Informational meetings that incorporate appreciative feedback not only make the participants feel good, they also enable the group to do a better job of receiving, interpreting, distilling, and making use of the information that is held by its members.

Exchanging Information among Group Members

In the busy lives of contemporary men and women who work in complex and changing organizations, there is rarely sufficient time to keep abreast of the activities, let alone the ideas, of colleagues. This inability to keep up with informational demands is one of the primary challenges to contemporary organizations and a primary inducement for organizations to change their structure and/ or processes.

Certainly, one of the key elements in this transformation is the informational meeting where all parties exchange pertinent ideas, knowledge, and opinions. How can such an exchange take place in an efficient manner? As in the case of the previous two types of communication, planning is required prior to the meeting. Those who are doing this planning must first decide precisely what type of information should be exchanged. An information-exchange meeting can easily become flooded with extraneous material if not tightly controlled. What needs to be conveyed? Why does this need to be conveyed?

Obviously, in some instances information needs to be conveyed that is not directly relevant to the issue at hand. This information is needed to establish a context, to bring some participants up to date, or to help participants better understand the relationship of this issue to future trends or conditions in the organization. Such information should be kept to a minimum, particularly that which is historical in nature and therefore provocative of time-consuming reminiscence.

Who should be invited to this meeting? I suggest that only those who have or directly need pertinent information should be invited. Anyone who comes to such a meeting can be expected to use up some valuable airtime, whether or not they have pertinent information. For this reason, boundaries should be tightly drawn and random invitations discouraged.

Preferably, someone who is not immediately involved in the information being exchanged should facilitate any meeting intended primarily for exchange of information. This person acts as a *gatekeeper*, making sure that everyone has an opportunity to convey their information and gain clarification about the information being conveyed by others. The gatekeeper should help to clarify information that is being presented and identify broad themes and redundancies that reduce the amount of information that must be retained.

Several different meeting designs can be used to get information out and about in an efficient manner. First, a traditional *round robin* method can be employed. Going around the table, each group member shares his pertinent information in turn. While this method is widely used and accepted, it tends to be inefficient unless tight time lines are established with each presenter. Some time should be set aside after each presentation or after several presentations for questions and answers, clarification or comments. Questions and clarification regarding early presentations will be lost and forgotten if left to the end, unless it is a very small group.

A second method involves *exchange of printed information*. Each member of the group summarizes his pertinent information in a memorandum prior to the meeting or on a piece of newsprint at the start of the meeting. The memoranda are exchanged at the start of the meeting or the newsprint pages are posted and reviewed by all group members after being completed at the start of the meeting. Members of the group can then ask questions, make comments, or request clarification when appropriate. This method takes less time than the round robin but does not allow for the personal contact and subtle nonverbal shaping of ideas and opinions that accompany oral presentations. Furthermore, each written presentation is prepared in isolation from the others, thereby reducing the capacity of later presenters to recognize redundancies of information and thereby delete portions of their report.

A third model combines *written and verbal communication*. Each presenter circulates an outline of the pertinent facts to be presented, then makes a brief oral presentation, and answers questions, clarifies points being made, and so forth. This procedure tends to insure that other participants receive the information, since it is being presented in two modes. However, this model is generally inefficient in terms of time required.

A *building block* model is much more efficient than the previous three, but provides the leader with less control over the nature, extent, and accuracy of information that is taken from the meeting. Members of the group meet with two, three, or four other participants to exchange all pertinent information. One member of this group then synthesizes the information exchanged in this group and communicates this synthesis to the whole group or a larger subgroup, from which a synthesized report is generated that is conveyed to an even larger group. This method is particularly appropriate when a large number of people with pertinent information have been assembled.

This method is efficient not only because it enables the small group to consolidate redundant information, but also because it takes care of each group member's need for airtime and interpersonal recognition without absorbing total group time and attention. Unfortunately, one runs the risk of losing vital or unique information from a particular individual when the synthesis takes place. Group reporters must be encouraged to identify not only common themes but also particularly insightful and provocative information that a single person has conveyed. This idiosyncratic information can be preserved even through several iterations of the synthesizing process, if the group reporters are trained and encouraged to look for differences as well as similarities.

The potential loss of significant information can be reduced even further by carefully planning for the composition of each subgroup. Optimally each subgroup should represent a diagonal slice of the organization, being composed of members from several different levels of and departments in the organization. At the very least, members of the group should be encouraged to work in the subgroups with people with whom they rarely work.

A few people, usually staff, find the fifth model to be highly time-consuming; however, this model is minimally time-consuming for most members of the group. Before the group is assembled, several members (or staff to the meeting) serve as *reporters*. They interview each member, review pertinent documents, and observe relevant events, then distill this information in a report that is presented to the group orally or in written form before or at the start of the meeting. Members of the group can then ask for greater clarification or expansion of an idea from either the reporter or (preferably) the original source of the information.

This model of information-exchange is typically found in an in-house newsletter or other printed circular that keeps the general population or management of an organization informed about what is going on.. Unfortunately, most of these publications are primarily intended for public relations purposes, are rarely restricted to important information, and usually are not accompanied by a meeting where this information can be further clarified and discussed.

Increasingly, we are likely to find this sort of specialized information-exchange and reportage role being assumed by one or more staff members in an organization. If this type of homework is done before the meeting begins, then many of the other models described above become even more efficient and effective. We are already finding that digital technologies, notably the computer, are very helpful in this regard. Any machine or process that aids the difficult and essential task of communication will be of significant value to contemporary organizations.

Communication and Appreciation

I return to a fundamental question regarding this first group functioin: why are meetings used for the sharing of information? More effective and efficient procedures and technological tools are available for disseminating information to multiple destinations. Before calling an information-sharing meeting, shouldn't we consider the reason why a group is needed to convey this information? Does the meeting provide a forum for exchanging ideas? Does it stimulate minds? Is this an efficient means for presenting information? Is this a support and appreciative setting in which to generate and make use of information in order to hammer out decisions, arrive at consensus, and reach agreements?

Before initiating an informational meeting, it is important to acknowledge that most of these four functions can be served without the potential participants gathering together in the same room. Routing schedules are the simplest form of information transfer. Instead of meeting to pass out information, send the information by e-mail to relevant people. Reply comments can come back in the same way. This method serves three of the four functions: exchanging ideas, providing and receiving stimulating ideas, and presenting information. Only the fourth function, hammering out decisions, consensus, and agreements, may require a face-to-face meeting.

In many instances, a meeting that is called for information-sharing purposes is actually being used to *instruct* and *convince*, rather than just inform. Meetings can be effective when used for these two purposes—provided all members in attendance know that these are the intentions of those convening the meeting. An appreciative meeting can provide a forum for immediate, two-way communication, thereby building team spirit and group acceptance of changes that have been made in the organization. An appreciative informational meeting can also include avenues for dissemination of information, for group member's feedback on this information, for exchange of pertinent information among all members of the group, and for further definition, planning and clarification in all three domains: information, intentions and ideas.

Managing Conflict

Once members of a group begin to communicate with one another and provide each other with feedback regarding the accuracy of information being conveyed, the validity of an underlying belief or assumption, or the quality of an idea being presented, then conflict will inevitably arise. I have consulted with many groups that shy away from their continuing maturation precisely at the point that they encounter conflict. As Tuckman has noted (and I will describe in the next essay in this series), the stage of storming is likely to occur in any group. It is not a sign of failure—but is rather a sign of group maturation.

There are several ways in which to manage the conflict that inevitably occurs in group settings. One can focus on the individual conflicts that arise among members of the group and make use of the many mediation tools that are available to manage these interpersonal conflicts. Given that we are focusing in this set of essays on group-level empowerment, I will address the issue of conflict-management primarily from the perspective of group management of conflict-filled issued. Even more specifically, I will focus on the attitudes, structures, procedures and processes that group members use in managing inevitable differences of opinion and priorities among group members.

Appreciative Perspectives on Conflict

Even with effective communication, members of a group will create or become involved in conflicts that disrupt group functioning. Members of a group begin to recognize their differences of opinion and differing styles and values precisely because members of the group have communicated successfully with one another. Difference of opinion and perspective are now apparent. Pandora's box has been opened. It can never again be closed without disrupting the preliminary trust that has been built in the group.

As the leader or a member of the group, one can take several courses of action to mediate a group conflict. First, the leader or facilitating member can help each party to the conflict communicate their version of the conflict in a systematic manner. In this way, other members of the group can assist in managing or even resolving the conflict. Second, the leader or other members of the group can call on a third person in the group to mediate between the two parties. This assumes that the third party is neutral, respected by both parties, and open to this difficult role. Third, the leader or other group members can identify the person in the group with the lowest stake in the outcome of the issue and ask their opinion. This is a dangerous step to take in that this person may suddenly and inappropriately take on the burden of the conflict. As a last recourse, the group may choose to bring in an outsider to consult on the issue or even mediate the conflict.

There is another strategy that can be employed. It is more appreciate in nature. Members of the group can exhibit a little patience and courage. They can exhibit *patience* by giving each party sufficient airtime to present his grievance or perception of the problem. Frequently, conflicts erupt primarily because one or more members of the group have not found space in which to talk and react to other ideas that have been presented. Conversely, the conflict might be based on one member's overuse of group time. The leader or other members of the group might exhibit *courage* by testing out group opinion about the excessive use of time by this member of the group: "I think we've spent a lot of time on what's really a minor point. Do you agree?"

Paraphrasing

This appreciative approach to the resolution or management of a conflict often requires extensive use of a specific communication tool: paraphrasing. Neither party to the conflict may have heard the other side of the argument clearly. A paraphrase by a neutral party or leader will often be heard long before comparable words are heard from the adversary. While a group leader and other members of a group can evoke effective group discussion through the use of questioning strategies, they will be most successful in the resolution of conflict if they make use of paraphrasing. This technique requires that one state in one's own words that which another person's remarks convey. Rather than asking a question, “What do you mean?” or asking for more information, “Tell me more”, one paraphrases the other person's statement so that the other person can begin to determine whether his message is coming through as he intended. Then, if he thinks you have misunderstood, he can speak directly to the specific misunderstanding you have revealed. To paraphrase, therefore, is to *show the other person what his idea or suggestion means to you.* It is a way of revealing your understanding of his comment in order to test that understanding.

Paraphrasing has two additional benefits. First, it lets the other person know that you are interested in him it is clear evidence that you do want to understand what he means. Second, if you can satisfy the other person that you really do understand *his* point, he will probably be more willing to attempt to understand your views. These functions are particularly important for a group leader. Paraphrasing is crucial in attempting to bridge the gap that often separates people. It increases the accuracy of communication and, thus, the degree of mutual or shared understanding. The act of paraphrasing itself conveys feeling: your interest in the other person, your concern to see how he views things.

People sometimes think of paraphrasing as merely putting the other person's ideas in another way. They try to say the same thing with different words. Such word-swapping may merely result in the illusion of mutual understanding, as in the following example.

Sarah: “Jim should never have become a manager.”

Fred: “You mean managing isn't the right job for him?”

Sarah: “Exactly! Managing is not the right job for him.”

Instead of trying to reword Sarah's statement, Fred might have asked himself, “What does this statement mean to me?” In that case the interchange might have sounded like this:

Sarah: “Jim should never have become a manager.”

Fred: “You mean he is too harsh on his subordinates Maybe even cruel?”

Sarah: “Oh, no. I meant that he has such an abundance of creative talent that his efforts are wasted as a manager.”

Fred: “Oh, I see. You think he should have gone into a field that would have insured him greater creative expression?”

Sarah: “Exactly! Managing is not the right job for him.”

Effective paraphrasing is not a trick or a verbal gimmick. It comes from an attitude, a desire to know what the other person means. To satisfy this desire, you reveal the meaning his comment had for you so that he can check whether it matches the meaning he intended to convey. If the other person's statement was general, it may convey something *specific to* you:

Larry: "I think this is a very poor training manual."

You: "Poor? You mean it has too many inaccuracies?"

Larry: "No, the text is accurate, but the manual comes apart too easily."

Possibly the other person's comment suggests an *example* to you:

Laura: "This training manual has too many omissions; we shouldn't adopt it."

You: "Do you mean, for example, that it contains nothing about the role of managers in the developed of business plans?"

Laura: "Yes, that's one example. It also lacks any discussion of the development of personnel policies."

If the speaker's comment was very specific, it may convey a *more general* idea to you:

Ralph: "Do you have 25 training manuals I can borrow for my class?"

You: "Do you just want the basic manual or should I get you the annotated version?"

Ralph: "Just the basic manual will do. Thanks"

Sometimes the other person's idea will suggest its *inverse or opposite* to you.

Clare: "I think the Union acts so irresponsibly because the Administration has ignored them so long."

You: "Do you mean that the Union would be less militant now if the Administration had consulted them in the past?"

Clare: "Certainly. I think the Union is being forced to more and more desperate measures."

Some persons have difficulty learning to paraphrase because they view the task as a kind of mind reading. They believe they are expected to say what the other person is thinking. Of course, they feel inadequate to such a task. However, the task is a simple one if you remember that you are trying to reveal what the other's comment means *to you.* Your paraphrase is not an attempt to prove that you can read the other's thoughts but to let him know what meaning you get from his statements. As a matter of fact, if your paraphrase turns out to be quite different from what he intended, you may often find that it elicits important additional information. Sometimes it is helpful to make a paraphrase that you anticipate will almost certainly be wide of what your colleague intended. As the speaker gives additional clarification, both of you may get a clearer conception of his point. Your wide paraphrase can help the speaker clarify his own understanding of his point.

Although most people paraphrase far too little, it is possible to do it too much. If you paraphrase almost everything a speaker says, she may become annoyed at your unwillingness to assume that you understand even simple, obvious points. Or she may begin to suspect that you are trying to put words in her mouth, trying to suggest what she *should* mean. If you paraphrase continually, the other person may see it as your way of avoiding revealing your own opinions. She is the only one sharing ideas and exposing her opinions. You only paraphrase. At first, the other person may interpret your responses as indicating attentive listening, and she may respond favorably to your interest. Gradually, however, she becomes aware that while you are learning much about her, she is learning nothing about you; and she begins to feel vulnerable, then distrusting and resentful of you.

Frequent paraphrasing seems especially appropriate to two general group conditions. First, when mistakes might be costly, accuracy of communication becomes more important. To assume understanding rather than checking it out under such a condition is to risk grave consequences. Second, strong feelings in the sender or the receiver increase the probability that comments will be misunderstood. Strong feelings have the effect on human communication that static has on electronic communication. They distort or obscure parts of the message. In such cases, paraphrasing becomes crucial as a way of insuring that the message comes through as intended.

Avoiding Conflict

The best way to manage conflict may be by trying to avoid it, through use of appreciative strategies at each stage in the group's development. While most groups can't avoid the storming stage in its development, the group can ensure that this stage is constructive and relatively short-lived. This rapid and productive movement through the storming stage can be done by avoiding the dominance of personal agenda during meetings and by giving each person ample, but not excessive, time to voice her opinion. It can also be done in an appreciative manner by focusing on those moments when the group is working effectively, and by seeking to replicate these dynamic processes when the group encounters conflict. Let me offer more specifically advice, particularly with regard to preparation for and conducting successful and appreciative meetings.

Setting the Agenda. Among an almost infinite number of reasons for the failure of groups to be more effective in addressing conflict, the lack of a clear agenda for meetings must rank among the most prevalent. Virtually, all group process experts who have written about the improvement of meetings and managing conflict begin with an emphasis on explicit, clear agendas. The lack of focus and progress demonstrated by many groups often can be traced to an unclear or even nonexistent agenda. Several steps should be kept in mind when preparing an agenda and several procedures might be considered in the improvement of existing agenda setting processes.

First, a decision must be made as to whether or not a group is the appropriate vehicle for dealing with the conflict at hand. Is there a less costly way, in term of time, money and raised expectations, to obtain the desired results than convening a group? Second, if a meeting is warranted, then a specific assessment must be made concerning the status of the issue with which the group must deal. What are the responsibilities of the group with reference to this issue? This assessment and an answer to this question regarding group responsibility will further clarify the function of the group meeting.

Where is the group right now with regard to resolution of this issue? The answer to this question should tell one whether the meeting is primarily concerned with the management of a conflict or if it is primarily concerned with information sharing, problem solving or decision-making. Can the issue be resolved through the sharing of more information? Then an information-sharing meeting should be convened. If sufficient information is available, but the central issue is not clear, then the group should be conflict-focused. If the issue is clear and the group has effectively addressed the underlying conflict, then the group should focus on an appropriate and feasible solution to the problem embedded in this issue. If the solution has already been found, then the group is ready to come to a decision regarding how action will be taken to implement this solution

The agenda is now ready to be prepared. The group should first outline the tasks to be accomplished and determine how much time is available to accomplish these tasks. Can the group's overall assignment be divided into parts? How much time should be allocated to each task? Is this sufficient time? Do expectations concerning group accomplishment need to be modified given the time constraints and requirements? What other resources will be needed to accomplish the tasks? Will they be available at the appropriate time? Does the schedule need to be modified in accordance with the availability of these resources?

Preparing for Meeting. With answers to these questions, one is ready to make decisions concerning the sequencing of tasks and the allocation of time to each task. This is where an appreciative and empowering strategy is particularly important. Group member involvement is critical at this juncture. Leadership styles come into play, as does the primary function of the group. How involved should group members be in setting up the agenda? Who arbitrates disputes about the agenda? In general, informational and problem solving agendas can be set up with less group member participation than can decision-making agendas. The more mature the group and the longer the group will be in existence, the more advisable it is to include group members in agenda decisions. The greater the role which group members will take in the actual implementation of decisions that are made or solutions that are generated, the more actively involved should be these members in the formulation of an agenda.

Agendas often are set up at the end of one meeting for the next meeting of the group. Group members are asked: Given the available information and our understanding of the primary functions of this group, what are the issues we need to address at our next meeting? A limited discussion of five to ten minutes ensues or the group breaks into several small "caucus" teams to generate a short list of issues that are, in turn, discussed by the whole group after three to five minutes. Alternatively, a group can select two or three members to serve as an agenda committee for the next meeting. These members solicit ideas from their colleagues before meeting together to establish the agenda. Under conditions of parliamentary procedure (see discussion below), a standard format will usually dictate the tasks and ordering of tasks at a meeting that involves issues that may or inevitably will evoke conflict. Group members, however, still have the right to order new items of business and new motions, or simply choose to address these items as they are offered from the floor by the membership.

An agenda is usually prepared and circulated to all group members at least two to three days before the meeting. A group leader should also review the needs, interests, and resources of people who will be participating in the meeting. What do the participants know? What are their specific interests with reference to the issues that will be addressed? What questions are they likely to ask? What information do they need? What information do I need from them? Do the tasks that this group will confront challenge group members? How? What should members of this group do or be able to do as a result of this meeting?

Recording Group Actions. In planning for a meeting, it is critical that provision be made for the recording of the group's actions. Often, minutes are not taken at meetings, or the assignment of secretary is made arbitrarily. Someone who is neither interested nor skilled will be assigned the job. Furthermore, most recording procedures are private. No one knows what the recording secretary has written down; hence corrections are not made until the next meeting, when the minutes are reviewed. The corrections often are too late, actions having already been taken or misunderstandings have already built up. Frequently, the corrections are never made, for minutes are never taken seriously!

This problem can be solved in part by asking a regular secretary to sit in on the meeting and take notes. Unfortunately, most secretaries are not fully conversant with the topics being discussed by the group; hence are unaware of the nuances in statements that are being made and are unprepared to identify priorities. Typically, a secretary who is brought in from outside a group to record minutes will be over-inclusive or under-inclusive. This solution will be satisfactory only if the same secretary is used at each meeting and is kept fully informed of group activities.

Alternatively, the group leader (or task leader, to use Dr. North’s distinction) can record the actions of the group on a flip chart, newsprint pad or overhead projector. By displaying the minutes of the meeting in a public manner, one gains immediate feedback from other group members concerning accuracy of the recording. *Wall minutes* of this sort are being used with increasing frequency as group leaders realize they can record all major group decisions and statements without having to record all the minutia of the meeting. They also soon realize that by making minutes public at the time they are written, there is little need for a time- consuming review of minutes at the next meeting. There are also less likely to be time-consuming disputes concerning the wording of a motion at some later point in a meeting.

Flip charts and newsprint hold the advantage of being more portable than a computer screen. Furthermore, one can pull a completed page of newsprint off the pad and post it on the wall for future reference during the meeting, whereas with a computer (or even the projection of a computer screen on a large TV monitor), one can only keep one page of minutes visible at any one time. Conversely, the computer and projection of the computer screen holds the advantage of being less obtrusive, unless the lights in the room must be turned down for the group members to see the words on the screen. Furthermore, one can write more rapidly on a computer than on a flip chart. The latter requires large printing. Two other major advantages specifically apply to the computer. First, the minutes or meeting notes can be automatically made available by e-mail, web board or printed document, since this information is stored on the computer. Second, powerful graphics and organizing programs (often connected to power point) are now available to make the note-taking process easier and more visually compelling.

Public wall minutes are particularly appropriate in a decision-making or problem- solving group. By dividing the group leadership task into two or three roles, as Joan North has suggested, a group frees one leader to perform the extremely important task of recording a group's decisions. Even without the use of public minutes, a group should consider the recording function to be a form of leadership. This role is important. Hence, it should not be arbitrarily assigned to an unwilling group member.

Conflict-Management and Leadership

The key concept in all forms of appreciative group facilitation is freeing the communication of group members. As a group leader, one should attempt to increase the autonomy of all group members and increase their sense of equality. One does this as a leader by encouraging group members to increase their understanding of the ideas of other group members and to share this understanding with these group members. To accomplish this, an appreciative group leader should make extensive use of paraphrase and encourage active attentive listening, which involves responsive listening, not just silence. In addition, the appreciative leader will seek out information to help her better understand other members of the group. She will primarily ask questions that are directly relevant to what the other person has said, rather then asking many questions that introduce new topics. The appreciative leader should also show her desire to relate to and understand other group members by checking out her own perception of the thoughts and feelings of these members and by showing acceptance of these feelings.

The appreciative leader should complement this concern for other group members by sharing personal thoughts and feelings about the issues facing the group. An effective group leader also will encourage members to understand each other’s thoughts and feelings by asking them to share information that has influenced their feelings and viewpoints. They also encourage group members to directly report on rather than just express their own feelings, and to offer alternative solutions to the issues being addressed. In an appreciative group, action proposals are hypotheses to be tested, rather than being fragile treasures to be protected against the competitive and insensitive assault of other group members.

Problem Solving

When an effective group is confronted with a problem to solve, members of the group typically take a deficit stance. They first ask: "Who is responsible. Who do we blame?" According to Scott and Jaffe: [ii]

> When a group or even a pair of people encounters a problem, the first instinct is to find out who is to blame. Somebody or something is blamed, and everyone feels less uncomfortable—except, of course, the person blamed. Bust what does blame accomplish? Not very much.

The second set of questions a group poses, once the blaming is done, typically are more constructive: "What do we want to see changed?" and "How did things get the way they are now?" The first of these questions concerns *targets and intentions*. Members of the group want to know about the desired state. What will make them and other members of the organization happy? The second question concerns *situation and information.* The group members want to know about the current conditions: What's now going on and what are the reasons for it? Before any problem can be solved, we must know about both the current situation and the desired target; for any problem involves a discrepancy between the way things are now (current situation) and the way someone would like them to be (desired target). When we analyze a problem, we have determined the extent and nature of this discrepancy. When we solve a problem, we have identified one or more proposals that will significantly reduce, if not eliminate, this discrepancy.

Problem analysis and problem solving are complex processes that always involve the interplay between information, intentions, and ideas. Problem analysis involves three components: (1) identification of the target, (2) assessment of the current situation (generation of valid and useful information), and (3) determination of the causes of the problem being confronted, based on a comparison between the situation and target. Problem solving similarly involves three components: (1) generation of proposals, (2) evaluation and selection of alternative proposals, based on the situational analysis, and (3) monitoring of the selected proposals based on the identified target.

Effective problem analysis and problem solving require repeated recycling through situational assessment, target identification, and proposal generation. This process never comes formally to an end but rather moves the person or group confronting a problem toward increasingly better ideas to meet increasingly accepted values, based on increasingly valid and useful information.

Background

Usually when confronted with a pressing problem, we attempt almost immediately to generate solutions to the problem. This is the classic deficit-based model of problem solving: discover the deficit and immediately try to reduce or eliminate it. While at times we have all experienced the gratifying feeling of rapidly producing a solution, we have also all undoubtedly experienced the frustration of repeated failure. At times we think we have developed a sound solution, yet soon find it to be inadequate or unacceptable. At other times, we appear to have solved the immediate pressing problem only to discover that in the long range, our “solution” has created other unexpected problems that are even more difficult to solve.

One approach to problem analysis and solution that seems to avoid these pitfalls is to emphasize the concrete *specification of desired outcomes.* The management-by-objectives (MBO) approach to administrative problem solving, for instance, places great emphasis on the specification of outcomes or objectives. The assumption is that problems are often not fully understood, analyzed, or solved because they have not been formulated in terms of goals, objectives, or outcomes. Without such guidelines, proponents of MBO would argue: We have neither a direction for solution of the problem nor a basis for evaluating our actions.

While the specification of a desired state is essential for effective problem management, it is still a deficit-based model. We determine where we are falling short or the distance we still must travel to arrive at a specific destination—much as we do when engaging a deficit-based model of benchmarking (see earlier essay). However, this approach still lacks a full appreciation of the problem. It is also essential that a clear picture be gained of the current state in which the problem is being experienced. Any objective we might establish runs the risk of being unrealistic. Or, when achieved, the solution selected is the cause of yet another, unexpected problem. Furthermore, it is often difficult to establish a realistic objective without first understanding the resources and resistance inherent in the current situation. Objectives identified without adequate knowledge of existing conditions may look good on paper but be useless or even destructive when achieved.

In solving a problem, we must do more than just prevent the recurrence of the undesirable symptoms. The nature and scope of a problem are not fully appreciated until two distinct, but related, sets of information have been made explicit: (1) the relevant characteristics of the current condition, and (2) the key characteristics of the desired condition. The solution of a problem involves taking action that will change the current conditions into the more desired alternative.

The Situation-Target-Proposal (STP) Model

The STP Model is a method of organizing information to define a problem and to resolve or manage conflict that occurs in creating a solution. Information is organized into three interrelated dimensions.

> **The Situation (S) Dimension:** Information about the essential features of the current state.

> **The Target (T) Dimension:** The desired state. What we want to accomplish and to avoid. Targets are chosen because those working on the problem value and desire them.

> **The Proposal (P) Dimension:** Specific action proposals aimed at changing the current state into the desired state.

Situation, target, and proposal not only define the three elements of effective problem solving but also link directly with the three domains that provide the conceptual basis for this book: information, intentions, and ideas.

Problem analyzing and problem solving may at times move from target to situation to proposal. Because these three dimensions are not independent of one another, however, problem analysis and problem solving are best thought of not as a movement from one dimension to another but rather as an interaction among all three (see Chart).

Chart: Interdependence Between STP

Interrelationships	Type of Interdependence
Situation/Target	Dissatisfaction with the situation implies a particular target as a standard of comparison Any suggested target implies by comparison what is unsatisfactory about the current situation
Target/Proposal	A target defines the results desired from any proposal Any proposal embodies assumptions about the nature of the desired target
Proposal/Situation	A proposal embodies assumptions about the causes of the unsatisfactory situation and implies resources and requirements for change The situation places limits on the effectiveness and feasibility of acceptable proposals

Because these three dimensions are so clearly interrelated, it is helpful to think of them as a single interacting unit rather than as three separate factors related to one another in a linear sequence. This interrelationship also suggests that all three dimensions should be addressed at the same time rather than one at a time. One should be free to address the problem openly and spontaneously, to generate and develop information about each dimension as appropriate. In other words, the form in which the information will be organized need not dictate the form of the inquiry itself. Exploration of the problem can be spontaneous although the information that is generated should be recorded in three separate columns if working alone or on three separate sheets of newsprint if working in a group. Entries can be made in the appropriate category as they occur and are accepted.

Since each dimension is related to the others, it is possible to translate statements about one dimension into information about other dimensions. When information is generated about the situation, target information can be elicited by such questions as:

"If you could change the present situation, what would you want to accomplish?"

"What's missing in the present situation that you want?"

"What would be your goal in improving the situation?"

Proposal information can be generated from that same situational statement by such questions as:

"What might be done to improve that?"

"What kind of action does that seem to require?"

"What plan would use that resource?"

When a target is identified, situational information can be elicited by questions as:

"In what ways does the present situation fall short of that goal?"

"Why does the present situation fall short of that goal?"

"What forces for improvement are there for reaching that goal?"

"What obstacles stand in the way of reaching that goal?"

Proposals can be elicited from the same target statement by asking:

"What might be a possible way to accomplish that?"

"What steps might lead toward that goal?"

In a similar manner, when a proposal presents itself, situational information can be elicited by asking:

"What might that improve in the present situation?"

"What part of the problem do you see that dealing with?"

"What resources are there for doing that?"

And, finally, target information can be elicited from that proposal by asking:

"To accomplish what?"

"In order to do what?"

"What objective does that proposal aim at?"

Problem solving often seems to wander aimlessly from topic to topic without ever actually coming to grips with the problem at hand. By categorizing statements according to situation, target, or proposal and by using statements in one dimension to bring forth information in other dimensions, an appreciative leader can become more effective and efficient in her group problem solving efforts.

Alternative Approaches to Problem Solving

A problem-solving meeting is often difficult to manage. While this can be a particularly effective use of group resources, the problem-solving meeting is rarely successful—perhaps because of the difficulty inherent in its management and the failure to use systematic problem-solving processes such as I have introduced in this set of essays. Knowledge about group-based problem solving abounds, but it is rarely employed in actual group meetings. The concepts and tools I have just presented are not new; yet they are rarely used to empower groups. The clear message to be gained from this discussion is that problem-solving tools should be used. They work!

If an organization is unwilling to embrace systematic problem-solving processes and tools, then the group should not be used for this purpose. A multi-round questionnaire procedure can be used instead to clarify the problem and/or solicit alternative solutions to the problem. Known as the *Delphi Technique*, this procedure is particularly effective when used with people who are busy or have incompatible work schedules.

A *circulating notebook* has also been suggested as an alternative to the problem-solving meeting. Instead of meeting to brainstorm or solve a problem, a statement can be sent around indicating what needs to be accomplished. A notebook is set up to which everyone can contribute. This notebook may be located in physical space or in digital space (web board or chat room). This freely accessible notebook becomes a repository for thoughts, ideas, and idle speculations—the same comments that might be made at a meeting. Participants in the problem-solving venture are encouraged to look through the notebook to see what others have contributed. They are then instructed to respond directly or contribute a new idea or approach. If the notebook is a paper-and-pencil affair the new contents of the notebook should be routed to everyone in on the project and, thereby, present a new, sharper focus to keep the group moving forward. These notebooks are valuable resources for problem solving, brainstorming, exchanging ideas, and gaining consensus or agreement

Decision-Making

Once a group has become proficient in communication, managing conflict and solving problems, it is ready to tackle the task of becoming more effective in making decisions. Actually, as both Ken Blanchard and Scott and Jaffe have noted, this is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Typically, the authority to make decisions and the accompanying responsibility are slowly phased in. First, little decisions. Later, there will be big decisions. The phase-in should be gradual because this is often the most demanding and important process in which any group will engage. Without this careful preparation, groups often are ineffective in making decisions. The meeting often becomes a waste of time when the group flounders in making a decision. The meeting soon becomes even more wasteful, because the decision is now being made prior to the start of the meeting: "since the group can't make a decision to save its soul, someone else will!" The meeting becomes nothing more than "window dressing" and tends to produce alienation and resentment, rather than any feeling of ownership for a decision that has already been made.

To make group decision-making successful and empowering, Blanchard and his colleagues propose a multi-stage process of increasing responsibility. They suggest that initially the team should address such issues as "how to improve operations in ways that cut costs, reduce defects/errors, enhance quality, reduce down-time, and so on."[iii] At this initial stage the team should "not be asked to decide on new markets to enter, new products to introduce, or new production techniques with large budgetary implications."[iv] These latter issues are strategic in nature, whereas the issues the team should first address are short-term and tactical.

In many ways this first stage is closely aligned with the problem-solving phase that I described earlier. Provided with sufficient training in problem solving (as well as communication and conflict-management) an empowered team should be able to readily make decisions regarding tactical issues:[v]

> Team training is critical to helping teams learn to make team decisions and begin dealing with some of the smaller decisions that managers have traditionally made in hierarchical organizations. It can be beneficial to start with nonbusiness problems, which avoid the emotional element of the decision making and that are also fun.

Blanchard suggests that further group empowerment involves the progressive movement toward decisions that are complex, difficult and consequential:[vi] At each stage, Blanchard and his associates suggest that it is helpful to draw upon those decision-making skills that have been previously taught. I would specifically propose that this training focus on communication, conflict-management, and problem-solving skills. Each of these skills gives the teams greater decision-making responsibility. “By allowing [team members] to make more complex decisions that previously were restricted to learners, the teams will solidify their skills and be encouraged by seeing their abilities in action.”[vii] When team members have earned greater responsibility and exhibit increasingly skillful group functioning, they will feel appreciated and therefore will be even more motivated to address these complex, difficult and consequential decisions.

This gradual movement toward increasing group responsibility for making decisions relates not just to the needs for new skills, knowledge and perspectives. It also relates to a deeper issue concerning the appropriate balance between freedom and control in the organization. The manager can’t just abandon control, given that ultimate responsibility usually resides with this person. Furthermore, is it fair to ask employees to assume responsibility when they are not being paid as managers or do not have the staff support of those in management positions. On the other hand, the granting of freedom to employees so that they can create, learn, and influence the operations of their organization is a very generous and appreciative act.

Scott and Jaffe suggest that this is always a critical balancing act in any empowerment process:[viii]

> The new workplace is one where people are empowered to make their own decisions and manage themselves. Empowerment is quite different from the traditional notion of control. It is an environment where people want to be responsible and are free to take action. But too much personal freedom would lead to chaos. You, as a manager or supervisor, probably feel that you are caught between imposing control and allowing personal freedom. . . . You want to keep tight control over quality and resources. But you want to enhance individual creativity, make people responsible for results, and invite them to develop high commitment to their work. Empowerment is finding the right balance.

Thus, the real challenge during this last stage of the appreciative empowerment process is finding this right balance. Blanchard and his associates suggest that one will strike this right balance by slowly phasing in increasingly demanding decision-making tasks. I would suggest that this right balance is also struck by helping group members master the subtle art of decision-making through the creation of appropriate group structures, processes and attitudes.

The Art of Decision-Making

Effective team empowerment also includes the introduction of new knowledge and skills with specific regard to the complex processes of decision-making. Effective communications, conflict-management and problem solving sets the stage for the most challenging of all group functions: the art of decision-making. Once a team is effective in making decisions then it can be truly identified as “empowered.” Yet, as both Blanchard and Scott and Jaffe note, this is not an easy stage of group development. Unfortunately, the meetings in most organizations have never been noted for efficiency of decision-making procedures. Numerous committees, with shifting memberships and often vaguely defined areas of responsibility, meet seemingly endlessly; decisions appear somehow to be made, either to be overturned by other committees or to be re-decided all over again at subsequent meetings.

Three models of decision-making are offered in this section in order to provide some guidance in fully appreciating the complex and difficult arena of group decision-making. The first of these models is based on a belief that consensus decision-making is of value in any group setting. The second model concerns the three different levels at which groups work when they are making decisions, while the third model concerns different types of decisions that are made by groups.

Consensus Decision-Making

In a group decision-making situation, two major concerns are present. First, there is the concern for the *adequacy of the decision* to be made. Second, there is a concern about *degree of commitment* once the decision is made. “How good is this decision?” “How many members of this group are behind this decision?” These are the two basic concerns of an effective decision-making group. Moreover, the degree of emphasis that an individual or a group gives to the issues of adequacy and commitment can effectively describe their orientation toward decision-making and toward the kind of decisions they are likely to reach.

The Decision-Making Grid: Let’s first assume, as do many group members, that the concern for adequacy of a decision and concern for commitment of the group to the decision are independent of each other. A high degree of concern for one does not necessarily indicate a high degree of concern for the other. Given this assumption, we can provide a conceptual framework for dealing with particular approaches to decision-making by projecting these concerns as the horizontal (adequacy) and vertical (commitment) axes of a decision-making grid.

Each axis of this grid is scaled from 1 to 9 to indicate the degree of emphasis placed on that particular concern. Thus, as in the case of the leadership grid, a 9 on the horizontal axis would indicate a maximum degree of concern for the commitment of the group to that decision. Within this decision-making grid, it is possible to identify five major approaches to decision-making. Four of the five approaches will be familiar to many people who have served on committees. In various degrees they are based on power, conflict, manipulation, and numbers; none is based on a belief in consensus.

The self-sufficient or 9/1 decision-maker expresses a maximum concern for adequacy and a minimum concern for commitment. She is confident in her own ability as a decision-maker, and it is always the facts, as she sees them, that dictate the nature of the decision. For her, a group is simply not a good place to make a decision; if the decision is an excellent one, she reasons, the group will probably go along with it; but, in any event, it is the quality of the decision that is most important. The 9/1 decision-maker functions as if the final responsibility for the decision were hers and hers alone. Her operation in the group is based on power; to the extent that she has formal or informal power, her ideas will be reflected in the final decision. If she is without power, she may soon become frustrated and withdraw, either physically or psychologically, from the group.

At the opposite pole from the 9/1 position is the *1/9 or good neighbor decision-maker,* the person who expresses a minimum concern for the adequacy of the decision and a maximum concern for the commitment of the group to the decision. The primary value for the good neighbor is harmony and understanding within the group. Underneath this apparent assumption of openness and trust, however, there is often an actual mistrust by the good neighbor of her personal powers in a decision-making situation and, most significantly, a fear of conflict. For these reasons, the 1/9 decision-maker emphasizes a superficial sort of togetherness that avoids the confrontation and conflict necessary for adequate decision-making. If this conflict nevertheless does break out, the good neighbor, like the frustrated 9/1, may physically or psychologically withdraw from the decision-making process.

Essentially, *default or 1/1 decision-makers* avoid making decisions. Often this position is a reaction to the stress of group decision-making. The powerless 9/1 and the frightened 1/9 are often found here. The 1/1 decision-maker is not interested in either the adequacy of the decision or in the commitment of the group to the decision. Most frequently he is operating out of conformity, self-protection, or both.

The traditional or 5/5 decision-maker expresses an equal concern for adequacy and commitment. However, he usually sees these concerns not as complementary but as standing in opposition to each other; in other words, he does not believe that a group can make an excellent decision that will at the same time produce a high level of commitment. Essentially the traditional decision-maker is more concerned with the adequacy of the decision than with the group's commitment to it; but he realizes he may need to trade off and compromise to get enough support within the group. Usually that support takes the form of a numerical majority; the decision is most often made by a vote. Consequently, the 5/5 decision maker spends much of his effort to build that support which, of course, reduces the time he can spend on the adequacy of the decision itself.

The *consensus decision-maker* (9/9) expresses a maximum concern for both adequacy and commitment. Each of the four approaches to decision-making described above assumes that adequacy and commitment are irreconcilable and that a group cannot produce a decision that is at the same time a good one with a high degree of group support. The consensus or 9/9 decision maker, by contrast, believes that the best decision can be reached if all the resources of a group can be used. Consequently, she strives for a high level of involvement from all members of the group and sees the group as a good place to make decisions. She sees conflict as a source of new ideas and not something to be avoided. If everyone can be involved in the decision, she believes then not only will the decision be the best one possible—but it will also have the greatest degree of support. Genuine consensus will produce the best possible decisions.

Consensus decision-making has a number of advantages over other approaches. The time necessary to reach a decision by consensus will be greater than the time a self-sufficient decision-maker will take. However, over the long run the consensus approach will save time. The 9/1 decision maker finds herself making the same decisions over and over while a decision made by consensus will tend to stand up over time. Moreover, once a group has established a pattern of consensus decision- making, its members often find that decisions made later come quicker and easier. Once a decision is made by consensus, of course, its implementation is assured, while decisions reached on a 9/1 basis have no such group commitment behind them. Even decisions reached by a majority vote may be difficult to implement, for the assumption that the minority, once voted down, will cheerfully support the majority position is often dubious. Finally, because a group that uses consensus to make decisions is one that is aware of its own process, only it can learn from experience. 9/1 decision-makers are constantly engaged in power struggles, 5/5 decision-makers in developing majority support; each new decision is a new power struggle, a new vote.

Consensus decision-making is difficult and, initially, time consuming; but its results, in the long run, are worth the effort. Moreover, it can be learned. This is a critical, appreciative assumption regarding the skills and motives of group members. If decision-makers and decision-making groups genuinely wish to become more effective, they can become aware of their own processes and can find in consensus decision-making a viable alternative to other patterns.

The Task-Method-Relationship (TMR) Model

A group of individuals convened to accomplish a specific task must fully appreciative the complexity of their own dynamics. In addition to completing the task, group members must successfully address themselves to issues in the group that at first may seem unrelated to the task or decision at hand. These concerns may be seen as internal to the group's functioning, as distinct from those associated with accomplishing the task, which may seem unrelated to the task. Two kinds of issues may develop in a task group: those which focus on the method the group uses to work at the task and those which emerge from and are related to group process and interpersonal relations. To function effectively at performing the demands of the convening task and to reach effective decisions concerning that task, a group also must also come to appreciate and deal successfully on a continuing basis with the method and process issues associated with the task.

Task, Method, and Relationship

Task issues are directly related to accomplishing the goals mutually and explicitly defined by the group as its reason for being. Examples of task issues include:

1. Which of these proposals solves the problem most effectively?
2. Shall we approve this new course?

3. What will be our criteria for judging whether this project is successful?

Method issues focus specifically on the means by which the group will work at the task. Examples of method issues include:

1. How are we going to make decisions in this group?
2. How do we ensure that the opinions of each member of the group are given an adequate hearing?
3. How long should this meeting last?

Relationship issues related to both the relationships developed through working on the convening task and relationships between members of the group and the total group itself, which members may have brought to the group or developed during its meetings. Examples of relationship issues include:

1. I feel isolated from the group and hurt by the apparent lack of concern of other members.
2. I really enjoy working with members of this group.
3. Jim and Susan never seem to be paying attention to me when I express an opinion they don't agree with.

Task, method, and relationship issues are closely interrelated and tend to stimulate one another. For example, a group may be having a great deal of trouble arriving at a satisfactory decision-making procedure; this looks like a method issue. However, if what is blocking the group is a contest for leadership and influence between two members of the group, the group is faced with a relationship issue and no amount of work at the method level will resolve the difficulty. Both method and relationship concerns may be disguised as task work, with the group struggling to reach a decision on a task issue while process difficulties build up and multiply.

Mechanistic Analogy

In many ways, the functioning of a decision-making group is comparable to the functioning of any other task-oriented system. A mechanical system, for instance, exhibits dynamics in many ways similar to those of task, method, and relationship. A machine is designed initially to accomplish a specified task; for example, producing an automatic transmission. This design stage is similar to the state of group development in which methods are considered. The group must be designed to accomplish the assigned task.

Once a machine is designed and built, it must be able to accomplish its mission successfully: produce the transmission. This corresponds to task work in the group. But a machine, when it functions, should generate a minimum amount of friction- for in the short run, friction will reduce efficiency and in the long run, excessive friction will require considerable maintenance to keep the system operating. Similarly, a group must be designed in such a way as to accomplish its task with a minimum amount of disruptive inter-personal friction. Negative relationship issues, such as hurt feelings, anger, fear, mistrust, or poor communication, have been shown to reduce the immediate efficiency and, eventually, to necessitate costly, time-consuming maintenance.

A group, like any human system, differs in some significant respects from a mechanical system. A human system incorporates emotional components, memory, and the capacity to learn. These factors combine to make the specific functioning of task group significantly less predictable than that of a well-designed machine. In practice, this means that the method or design issues must be approached in a tentative and experimental manner. What appears to be a satisfactory decision-making procedure at the first meeting may turn out by the third meeting to be inappropriate to the task.

For instance, the group members may decide initially to make all decisions by consensus—but discover as they work on their task that the task is just too large and the time too short to permit effective consensus decision-making. The group may use that information to revise its decision, subdivide the task, and form small task forces. Or, the initial method decision may generate process problems, like feelings of exclusion or not being heard; and the procedure may have to be adjusted to a more equitable one. The spirit of tentativeness that is recommended in dealing with method issues is less appropriate for task and relationship concerns; however, the effort of the group in task and relationship areas is always to move toward final resolution of problems.

Interrelationship among Task, Method, and Relationship

The issues surrounding method discussions are central to the task and relationship dimension of group functioning. Effective methods allow for both satisfactory performance of the task and creation of high group morale. A decision, for instance, which after careful deliberation about alternative choices has the support of all or most members of the group, usually will be a good decision, as well as one that all member of the group are committed to implementing.

Similarly, the task and relationship dimensions of group functioning are closely interrelated. If the group does not succeed in solving task problems and moves toward implementing good decisions, its members either develop negative feelings about the group, thus further impeding success at the task, or begin to distort reality by creating scapegoats, denying failure, and so forth. A group with serious and unresolved relationship problems rarely performs effectively at the task level. Disaffected members sabotage the group's task. They engage in this destructive behavior as a way of dealing indirectly with their neglected process needs.

Use of the T-M-R Model in a Decision-Making Group

An empowered decision-making group usually will begin its work at the method level. It will decide how it wants to decide. Consideration, in this appreciative context, also will be given to immediate relationship issues. The group may wish to deal with personal goals related to the task, with interpersonal difficulties some members bring into the group from previous contact with the same people, and with issues of inclusion and influence. If method decisions are appropriate to the group and task; and if the relationship issues are dealt with the group will spend most of its time working effectively at making decisions. Most decision-making groups, however, tend to begin their work at the task level and to remain there.

As they emerge, method and relationship concerns are viewed as disagreements over the decision, to which the response is frequently to push harder at trying to make the decision. As the group continues to beat its head against the task wall, process issues emerge in more or less undisguised form: "That's what you said the last time and look what happened!" *"You* male chauvinists just won't accept any idea from a woman, will you?" At this point, without rapid group attention to the neglected process and method issues, the group is dangerously near dissolution.

An effectively operating group will tend to work at all three levels at different times. They will learn to appreciate the need for work at each of the three levels. When issues cannot be resolved easily at the task level, the group will move rapidly to consideration of its methods, to determine if those methods and procedures are impeding making a decision. Inadequate problem resolution at this level may indicate a need for the group to shift its attention to the feelings, personal goals, and relationships in the group

This moving through task, method, and relationship issues occurs during a period of several hours, days, or even years. Initially, this appreciative process is a self-conscious one and feels artificial to group members. Over time, as the group develops, the process becomes more natural and efficient; members acquire skills at diagnosing the level of group difficulty and in directing the group attention to their perceptions. In a decision-making group with a very long life, like a project team working together over several months or years, effective group methods become fairly stable so that unless the composition of the task or the group changes radically, there is less need for constant reexamination.

Similarly, relationships stabilize, and there are fewer process problems arising from the need to negotiate satisfactory relationships within the group. A group can work most effectively therefore if it can learn to appreciate the value associated with each of these three sets of group issues and if it can remain flexible so that members of the group can move easily from task to method to relationship issues. It can also work effectively if it comes to believe that the observation and analysis of the group process is of value so that the group can move to the appropriate level with a minimum of failures and trial-and-error learning.

How Groups Make Decisions

Decisions can be made and identified in several ways. It is essential that an empowered group come to appreciate the benefits and difficulties inherent in each type of decision. There is no one right way to make decisions, though several commonly used decision-making processes are often detrimental to group empowerment, and to the creation of an appreciative climate in the group. What then are the different ways groups make decisions, be they minority or majority forms of decision-making? I offer eight kinds of decisions as a starting point:

Self-Authorization: One Person/Decision To Do Something

This occurs when a group member suggests a course of action and immediately proceeds upon that course, assuming that since no one disagreed, the group has given its approval. Such action can lead a group down blind alleys. Even if the rest of the group agrees with the decision, they may resent the way it was made;

and no one knows how much support the decision will receive from the other members of the group.

Handclasp: Two Person/Decision To Do Something

A suggestion made by one member elicits a reaction of support and permission to proceed from another. The group is launched into action without adequate testing as to whether the proposal is acceptable to the group as a whole. The handclasp between two or three is evident in cliques that form within the group and is a powerful method of control of the group. It often results from the failure of some members to meet their responsibility to the group by speaking up, voicing their opinions, keeping the group on target, and insuring that alternatives are considered.

Plop: One Person/Decision Not To Do Something

A plop results when a group member makes a suggestion that meets with no response from the group as a whole. It falls plop. Not only is there no recognition or evaluation of the suggestion by the group, but the individual who offered the suggestion feels he has been ignored and possibly rejected. He feels that no one will listen to him.

Kill: Two Person/Decision Not To Do Something

A suggestion offered by one member of the group is rejected at once, either by one or more of the powerful members of the group as a whole.

Oligarchy: Multiple Person/Decision To Do Or Not To Do Something

A minority of the group ramrods a decision or suggestion into group action that the majority does not support. This leads to little future support by the group as a whole for the action taken.

Simple Majority

A common method of determining a majority support decision is by voting. Many groups make the mistake of assuming that simply because a, majority support the decision, the minority will come along *willingly*. Often they may appear to do so, but frequently they resent the action and give no more than token support.

Near Consensus

Groups that really try to avoid the pitfalls associated with the plop, self-authorized, handclasp, kill, minority, and simple majority decisions often try to include every member in the final decision. All members may agree, but some may have serious reservations regarding the decision; and, although promising support, often withdraw support at crucial times.

True Consensus

All members have contributed to the decision or feel that their contributions have been given a fair hearing and are more satisfied with it than with any of the other alternatives that were considered. Under this procedure, the probability is greater that a decision will emerge which has given proper weight to the significant conditions affecting the decision and as such gains greater combined support from all members of the group.

Conclusions

What I have offered in this essay is a rather simplistic portrait of how a group functions. The four elements of an empowerment pyramid are obviously interweaving with one another in a real-life dynamically-evolving group—as I will note in the next essay that focuses (in part) on stages of group development.

Furthermore, there is ultimately only one kind of decision being made in a group—for at a fundamental level all group decisions are unanimous. At the simplest level, we can look at decisions to see if they are made by the minority or by the majority. In each case, though a differing proportion of the group membership participate in the formal decision-making process, all members of the group have in some sense participated in the decision as to how the formal decision will be made. Even when only one person is making the formal decision, all members of the group have implicitly agreed or chose not to disagree about how the decision is to be made. Group dynamics researchers suggest that these processes represent the *collusion* of all group members regarding how a decision is to be made. In many instances, this collusion is quite understandable given the cost associated with speak up against the way a group is making the decision. In other cases, the collusion may be a product of indifference, alienation or distorted communication. In yet other instances, everyone is aware of and fully committed to the process of decision-making being used. In this latter case, the group is not colluding. It is instead consciously and explicitly deciding how to decide.

It seems that groups are indeed quite complex and often convoluted entities. Perhaps this is why they are often both frustrating when one is a member and fascinating to observe from the outside. As we will see in the next essay, they are also changing and evolving in ways that add even more to their complex nature.

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[i] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, pp. 47-48.
[ii] Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p.65.
[iii] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 95.
[iv] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, pp. 47-48.
[v] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 117.
[vi] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 187.
[vii] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 187.
[viii] Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 7.