Organizational Consultation XXIII: Empowerment (Part Three)

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I have already proposed and described the nature of an empowerment pyramid that I believe provides a foundation for effectively operating groups. I further propose that groups move through four stages of development—and that they focus primarily on one of the four empowerment pyramid functions at each of these four stages. The forming stage is expedited by effective communication, just as a group successfully addresses the storming stage by means of effective conflict-management. The norming stage relates directly to the processes of effective problem solving, while the fourth stage is intimately connected with the processes of group decision-making. Each of these four functions builds on the function that was the focus of the previous stages of group development. Together, these four functions form an empowerment pyramid: each function serves as a foundation for the previously established functions.

The Nature of Effective Group Meetings

You and I Have Simply Got to Stop Meeting This Way is the name of a once popular, and now classic, book on how to improve meetings. This title contains some depressing truth for most of us as well as a touch of whimsy. We are not very skillful in either planning for or conducting meetings; hence, we usually do not look forward to being assigned a leadership role in a group. Typically, we do not relish the role of group member either, preferring instead to spend our time doing tasks that are more enjoyable and productive. When we do attend meetings, the yield is often not something of which we can be proud. This seems to be particularly the case in our contemporary world, where the tasks often seem to be complex and elusive, and the processes of review and approval are sometimes quite complicated.

One distraught manager at an East Coast organization reports that:

> According to my "logical" calculations, we are now ready to have a group
> reaction to the individual reactions to the interim reports so that the original
> committees can prepare final reports based on the group reactions to the
> individual reactions to the interim reports to give to the new committees so that
> they can make new interim reports based on the old final reports by the original

committees based on the group reactions to the individual reactions to the interim reports.

While sympathy and empathy for this distraught manager may be warranted, it is not particularly helpful. What we need is an appreciation of the ways in which meetings can be effectively. We need to acknowledge that much can be done in a tangible manner to improve our meetings. We are not powerless. This is the central message of an appreciative perspective regarding empowerment. More than thirty years ago, an experienced corporate training director I knew suggested that six steps are typically taken by effective group leaders when they empower other members of their group. His appreciative wisdom still holds true:

Prepare carefully for the meeting. Capitalize on the natural, inherent influence of your position as leader.

1. Act so as to encourage expression of ideas and protect and preserve the ideas and feelings of each individual member.

2. Assure from the outset that there are clearly conceived and announced objectives.

3. Check from time to time for understanding.

4. Conclude the meeting with a restatement of the major points brought out during the session and state clearly any actions to be taken.

5. Thank the group for its participation and urge the members to put their new learning skills to use.

A similar set of suggestions has been proposed as "The Ten Commandments for Successful Meetings"

1. Always provide an agenda in advance
2. Prepare the meeting place
3. Always start on time
4. Set a time limit
5. State the purpose at the beginning
6. Include only the appropriate people
7. Call meetings only when necessary
8. Use meetings only when involvement of other people is essential
9. Practice good group dynamics; and

10. Use stand-up meetings whenever necessary

Both sets of guidelines talk about the need for careful pre-meeting planning, clarity about the purpose of the meeting, and the use of effective group process skills. The Ten Commandments speak, in addition, to the basic consideration of whether a meeting is actually needed, and, if it is needed, how to keep it short. Stand-up meetings are being used with increasing frequency to reduce the time needed not only to set up the room, but also to provide an inducement for the group members to keep their comments short and the meeting brief. They are faced with the fatiguing prospect of standing in one place for an extended period of time!

The Ten Commandments also speaks to the basic consideration of group size. A smaller group is usually a more efficient and effective group, provided the group is large enough to encompass all or most of the required areas of information and expertise. The Ten Commandments suggest that careful consideration be given to whether or not each person should be invited to the meeting. Group members are more likely to feel appreciated if they have been specifically invited to the meeting and if the reason for their invitation can be clearly articulated by the person convening the meeting.

The basic considerations being offered in the Ten Commandments are particularly important in many American organizations, where the norms of democracy and accessibility dominate. It is hard in this day and age to declare that a meeting is not needed, for this usually implies that one person will be taking a unilateral course of action on a particular matter. It is also difficult to not invite someone to the meeting, for this usually implies that this person's opinions are not worth consideration by the group. Thus, while these basic considerations are important, they do not yield easily to solution in contemporary organizational environments. George Huber offers several suggestions concerning ways to get around these difficulties. He offers a detailed set of guidelines, as well as providing specific suggestions regarding how these guidelines might be made operational.

Huber begins with a set of guidelines that should be used in deciding if a group should be used, and, more basically, if other people should be involved in the consideration of a specific issue. He suggests that others should be brought in if: (1) "increased availability or processing of information would increase the quality of the decision;" (2) "acceptance or understanding of the decision might be an issue;" or (3) "developmentally useful information or skills would result from involvement in the decision process." Other individuals should not be brought into the

process if "it appears that the time necessary to involve certain individuals or groups is not justified given the advantages." Furthermore, others shouldn't be brought in if "it appears that the final decision will be an unpopular one, and if it appears that the consequent damage to a subordinate's relationship with his or her peers would not be justified by the advantages to be gained from his or her involvement."

Huber offers five suggestions to the leader or staff member who is preparing for a meeting. First, he suggests that *key information must be available*—and preferably given out to group members prior to the meeting. The domain of ideas is always closely related to the domain of information. Second, Huber suggests that the leader make sure that *those who will be affected get to participate*—this is critical if the group is to be appreciative in its functioning. Third, *past practices must not dictate group membership*. As noted in the Ten Commandments, each participant should be asked to attend for a specific reason. Fourth, Huber suggests that a group leader should be appointed who is *group-oriented yet willing and able to exert appropriate levels of control*. Finally, the group leader should consider having *different members participate in different parts of the overall assignment*.

Huber offers five additional guidelines regarding ways to direct the meeting once the group has been convened. First, *help the group members get acquainted.* This can be done by sending each member of the group a brief biographical sketch of other members before the first meeting, perhaps in conjunction with a description of group assignments or schedules of meetings. Alternatively, a social time might be arranged before the first meeting enabling group members to meet informally. Introductions can be made at the first meeting, and break periods can be used during long meetings to further the acquaintance process.

Huber offers a second guideline: *help the group follow the plan.* This is done by reviewing the progress of the group to date at the start of each meeting and by soliciting pre-assigned reports from all group members at an early point in the meeting. The plan is also likely to be followed if the leader frequently summarizing what has been accomplished, where this puts the group on its schedule, and what the group's task will be at the end of each meeting.

Finally, Huber suggests that the assignment to be completed by the next meeting should be make both public and clear at the end of each meeting. Huber's suggestions seem quite obvious, yet they are often ignored in poorly functioning groups. These guidelines can be seen in operation in effectively functioning groups. They should be acknowledged when used in an

appropriate manner, so that the group will continue to make use of these simple but powerful procedures. In some cases, these procedures are introduced in a very informal way—often with a bit of whimsy or gentle encouragement. In other instances, they are employed in a more formal manner, especially when group members represent opposing constituencies. Frequently, the legitimate conflicts that arise in these politically charged groups can be successfully addressed and managed through the formal use of the innovative parliamentary procedures that I describe later in this essay. Appreciation is not reserved for friends. It can operate even when group members disagree with one another. We can appreciate another person's perspective, and can respect the right of this person to voice their opinion, without having to agree with this perspective or opinion.

Huber's third guideline concerns *use of information displays*. In the past this often meant the use of chalkboards, flip charts, newsprint hung on walls, overhead projectors, and handouts. Today, this usually means a computer screen and perhaps a projection of the screen on a nearby wall via the use of VGS cables. These projected computer-based images are terrific when used to display ongoing note taking by someone using a computer. They are a bit limiting, as were overhead projectors in the old days, in that it is hard to display multiple pages of material at any one time. It is particularly important that a group not get too enamored with Power point or other software programs as a group facilitation tool. In most cases, Power point and other digital tools that are now available lack the flexibility of other group recording modes. In the case of both VGS and overhead projection systems, be sure not to turn down the lights. Nothing dims the energy and direction of group meetings more than dim lighting!

The fourth guideline concerns *helping the group achieve equitable participation by managing the discussion.* Huber believes that one can effectively manage group discussion by establishing fairness as a standard. A group leader can enforce fairness by discouraging verbosity, redundancy or irrelevance, and by encouraging participation from among the quieter members. Leaders also enforce fairness by making use of the round robin technique, whereby each member of the group gets an opportunity, in turn, to make a comment or "pass".

Huber's fifth guideline concerns *a focus on agreement in the group about the reasonableness of the reasoning rather than on agreement about the choice itself.* He suggests three tactics. From the start, have the group agree on how it will ultimately make its choice. Second, have the group agree to be satisfied with the situation where all members understand the reasoning that

leads to the group choice. Third, according to Huber, the leader or facilitator of an effectively functioning group should obtain an explicit indication that each group member understands the prevailing reasoning.

This final guideline is particularly important for a group that wishes to be appreciative and arrive at consensus. Consensus decision-making does not require that there is agreement among all group members that a specific decision is the best that can be made—this is unanimity. Rather, consensus decision-making requires that each member of the group feels comfortable that her opinion has been heard and understood by other group members and that her opinion was taken into account when the final decision was made. Consensus decision-making also requires that each member of the group be aware of and understand the factors that were taken into consideration when the final decision was made—even if some members do not accept all of these factors as valid.

The basic guidelines that have been offered by Huber provide an entry into the more detailed descriptions of empowerment that I have offered in this series of essays. I turn now to a consideration of the group development stages that necessarily modify the general guidelines just been offered. Group development stages define ways in which members of a group can come to fully appreciate the complex dynamics of their group and appreciative ways in which they can effectively share leadership in directing their group toward successful completion of its assigned task.

Stages of Group Development

As anyone who has worked within groups knows, these dynamic systems change over time. The behavior of a group, and of the individuals who compose the group, are different at different stages of the group's existence. We behave differently in groups that have just been formed than we do in groups that have been in existence for several weeks or months; groups function differently when they are just getting started than they do when and if they settle into a smooth routine. The engagement of appreciation in a group context begins with an understanding and acceptance of the inevitable shifts that occur in the thoughts and processes of group members.

The developmental sequence of small groups, as identified by Bruce Tuckman, concerns two distinct areas of behavior.[i] First, almost all groups are convened to accomplish some specific task. Groups have agendas that must be followed, as well as problems to solve, and decisions to

make. Behaviors related to getting the job done are called *task behaviors.* Second, since groups are made up of people, members of a group will establish interpersonal relations with each other, whether they wish to or not, over the course of the group's development. Behaviors related to this interpersonal dimension of the group's life are called *interpersonal behaviors.* Tuckman proposes that groups follow a predictable pattern of development over time in the areas of both task behavior and relationship behavior.

Stage 1: Forming

When a group is first established, it will inevitably go through a period of organization and orientation. This is a period of orientation to the task. During this stage the group will be concerned with identifying the task at hand and deciding what information and experience will be relevant to that task. In essence, the forming stage will be devoted to establishing the ground rules under which the work of the group will be conducted. In the area of interpersonal behavior, the forming stage is concerned with testing and dependence. *Testing* refers to attempts by group members to discover what kind of interpersonal behavior will be acceptable to other group members and to the formal leader of the group.

   Dependence refers to the tendency of group members in this early stage to rely on the formal or informal leaders of the group to provide structures and guidelines for interpersonal behavior. In the realm of task behavior, group members during the forming stage seek to answer the question: "What is the task of this group, and how will I be able to contribute to that task?" In the realm of interpersonal behavior, group members during the forming stage attempt to answer the question: "What kind of behavior is acceptable in this group, and how am I to behave in this group?"

Stage 2: Storming

The second stage of group development is characterized by some degree of emotional response. In the area of task behavior, the storming stage typically involves an *emotional response* to the demands of the task. Group members will experience some resistance to the demands the task places on them. If the task is relatively easy and if the experience and expertise of the group members seem adequate to the task, this resistance will be relatively minor and may even go

unnoticed. This resistance may be quite intense, however, if the task appears extremely difficult or if members of the group are uncertain about their abilities to accomplish this task.

In the area of interpersonal behavior, the second stage of group development is characterized by *interpersonal conflict*. Hostility may be directed by group members toward one another or toward the formal leader of the group, perhaps as a way of expressing individual differences or resisting the continued imposition of structure on individual behavior. A sense of unity will not be present, and conflict may polarize around certain key issues. Essentially, the group will be experiencing a conflict between wishing to remain in the relative security of stage one or move into the unknown of perhaps closer interpersonal relations that may lie in the future. In the realm of task behavior, group members during the storming stage seek to answer the question: "Am I emotionally ready to deal with this task?" In the realm of interpersonal behavior, group members in the storming stage attempt to answer the question: "Do I really want to work with these people!"

Stage 3: Norming

The third stage of group development is characterized in both the task and interpersonal areas by increased openness and communication. In the area of task behavior, the third stage will involve the *open exchange of relevant interpretations*. Information, ideas, and opinions relevant to the task will begin to be exchanged by group members as they settle down in earnest to getting the task done.

In the area of interpersonal behavior, the third stage of development is defined by the development of *group cohesion*. During this stage, group members accept the group and one another; and, as a consequence, develop an important sense of group unity. Group harmony becomes important during this stage, and interpersonal conflict may be avoided to ensure harmony. In the realm of task behavior, group members during the norming stage seek to answer the question: "What relevant ideas and opinions do I have that will help us accomplish this task?" In the realm of interpersonal behavior, group members attempt to answer the question: "How can I help contribute to continued group unity and harmony?"

Stage 4: Performing

During the fourth stage, emphasis is placed on constructive action directed at the successful completion of the task. The distinction between task and interpersonal behavior fades here, for the energy that was previously invested in interpersonal issues now will be devoted to the task. In the area of task behavior, the final stage of group development may be identified as the *emergence of solutions*. It is at this stage that genuine attempts are made toward the successful completion of the task.

In the area of interpersonal behavior, the fourth stage can be described as *functional*. Because the subjective issues of interpersonal relationships have been dealt with during the first three stages, group members can now function objectively as instruments of effective problem solving. In the realm of task behavior, group members in the performing stage attempt to answer the question: "How can we successfully complete this task?" In the realm of interpersonal behavior, group members attempt to answer the question: "What can each of us contribute to the successful completion of this task?"

Implications of Group Development Model

If groups develop through predictable stages over time, as Tuckman's model suggests, then three consequences for group leaders and members become apparent. First, *a developmental sequence in the behavior of groups is in some sense inevitable*, and group members would be well advised to appreciate this inevitability and provide time for this multi-stage development. A high level of task performance cannot be expected from groups at early stages in their development. Second, *leaders can help groups move smoothly from stage to stage*. If a conscious effort is made to help group members answer the appropriate questions at each stage of the group's development, the transition to the performance of stage four can be made more quickly and directly. Third, this four-stage model of group development can *help group leaders and members diagnose current problems the group may be having as a function of a particular stage of the group's development.* This appreciation of the stages through which groups inevitably move is key in the creation of an appreciative organization.

Forming, storming, norming, and performing. These four predictable stages of group development can provide a powerful insight for group members into what is happening to them and what they can do about it. Group members can appreciate, and thereby better cope with, the

stress and apprehension that accompany any shift in the functioning of the group or leadership roles over time. This stage theory can also help a group decide which guidelines are most appropriate at particular times in the life of the group. Guidelines concerned with group membership, acquaintance, and the availability of information are obviously more important at the forming stage of a group, whereas guidelines concerned with agendas, group decision-making operations, and clarity about actions taken are more important for groups at the performing stage. Some of these latter guidelines might also be appropriate at early stages of group development—not to enhance group productivity, but rather to provide structures that help reduce anxiety and accelerate movement toward the performing stage of the group.

Types Of Meetings

Meetings are conducted for many different reasons. The specific purpose for which a meeting is being conducted will often determine the most appropriate procedures for conducting the meeting, as well as appropriate leadership roles and the roles to be played by other group members. We must learn how to appreciate, and then respond in an appropriate way, to the diverse purposes being served by any group. Form should follow function in an effectively run group meeting. It is essential, therefore, to identify the different types of meetings one might encounter before discussing alternative ways of conducting these meetings.

Several different taxonomies have been offered in the identification of meeting types. They share many common properties. Jack Reith proposes six different types of meetings as defined by their primary goal:

1. Meetings that inform
2. Meetings that instruct
3. Meetings that define or plan
4. Meetings that clarify
5. Meetings that create
6. Meetings that resolve or decide

McDougle offers a list of five meeting types that partially overlaps Reith:

Information Flow: As organizations become more complex, specialization increases; and the dissemination of information becomes more difficult. Meetings

are often designed to facilitate the flow of information and bring various units of the organization together.

Decision-Making: Meetings are often called for the purpose of making decisions. People are more inclined to be enthusiastic about carrying out directives and implementing decisions if they have been involved in the planning and/or decision-making process.

Two-Way Communication: Meetings provide supervisors with an opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification with regard to announcements from higher levels of management. They also provide supervisors with an opportunity to present their own ideas and suggestions regarding matters under consideration.

Introduction of Change: Meetings provide an excellent forum for introducing changes. Meetings can bring the principal actors affected by the change together to ensure that all the implications are considered and analyzed. Necessary revisions and modifications can be discussed and finalized before the changes are implemented. Follow-up meetings can serve as effective evaluation instruments to make certain desired results are being achieved.

Team Spirit: Meetings can be a valuable tool in developing a spirit of teamwork. No organization can be successful and expect to show a profit if its employees are not pulling together. Successful organizations are seldom the ones with the strongest supervisor; they are the ones where supervisor and employee pull together to achieve a common goal. Any meeting that succeeds in developing a greater sense of teamwork is worth every minute it takes.

Both writers identify information dissemination and decision-making as central functions of a meeting, with Reith placing additional emphasis on the type of meeting that is used to introduce, create, or clarify ideas. McDougle offers the notion of meetings as a place to introduce change that has already taken place, as well as being a forum for building team cohesiveness. When these lists are pulled together, along with other comparable lists, four primary types are

repeatedly identified: (1) soliciting and/or disseminating information, (2) conflict-management, (3) problem solving and (4) decision-making. These four types, in turn, relate directly to the four primarily functions being served by groups: communication, conflict-management, problem solving and decision-making.

Concluding Comments

The multi-dimension approach to empowerment that I have described in this set of essays is appreciative in at least five different ways. First, this multi-dimensional approach to empowerment brings out the latent strengths and resources of all group members. Using this approach, one begins with the assumption that each group member has skills, knowledge and aptitudes that can be of great benefit to the group. Given this assumption, it is imperative that group members appreciate these talents and that the environment of the group is conducive to the display and nurturing of these talents.

In their own guide to empowerment, Scott and Jaffe offer the following insightful observation about non-appreciative perspectives on group members:[ii]

> Many managers [in contemporary organizations] spend much of their time
> disqualifying people, making up reasons why their people won't do what the
> organization wants them to. . . . They expect the worst from people. . . . . No
> surprisingly, the manager usually finds that these negative beliefs turn out to be
> correct. He or she is right, but for the wrong reasons. The manager doesn't see
> that he or she has created a self-fulfilling prophecy. By acting in such a way that
> the team did not achieve the desired results, the manager proved his or her
> negative assumptions to be correct.

Just as negative assumptions can be self-fulfilling, so can positive assumptions regarding strengths and competencies. Effective and empowering group leaders discover and foster talents in all members of the group—including themselves!

Second, the approach presented in these essays recognizes the multiple leadership roles that make a group effective and empowered. Everyone can be a leader in certain areas of group functioning, at a certain time and in a certain place. Andy Warhol once suggested that each of us are famous for fifteen minutes. While this may be a bit of an overstatement mixed with profound cynicism, it is possible, from an appreciative perspective, for each member of a group to find

herself in a leadership role at some point in the group's life. The group members have only to acknowledge this leadership role and to allow it to emerge and be honored by the group. As Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe propose:[iii]

> In the empowered work team, everyone has the responsibility that was traditionally given the leader. If anyone sees a problem or has an idea, they are responsible for bringing it to the group. The idea must be respected, and everyone should be engaged in looking for ways to grow and develop. It's not enough for just the [the people in formal leadership roles] to do this.

Third, an appreciative approach to empowerment recognizes not just the multiple leadership roles in the group but also the many other contributions to be made by group members. As Ken Blanchard and his colleagues suggest: "*The real essence of empowerment comes from releasing the knowledge, experience, and motivational power that is already in people but is being severely underutilized.*"[iv] In recent years, we have come to recognize that people possess "multiple intelligences" and that these many different competencies are often unacknowledged in our society.[v] One of these forms of intelligence, often called emotional intelligence, has been acknowledged as particularly important in all organizational settings and, in particular, in group settings.[vi] Members of a group must be appreciated for all of the talents "they bring to the party," not just those that are most visible and commonly honored in our society, such as technical and analytic skills, decisiveness, and perseverance.

Fourth, an appreciative approach is embedded in the emphasis being placed in this series of essays on not just generating ideas but also moving these ideas to action. Empowered groups are always leaning into the future and seeking ways to translate items of discussion and dialogue into steps toward realization of clearly articulated intentions, based on shared information. Effective empowerment *means business*. Empowered employees who are appreciated by their organization are expected to influence their own individual future and the collective future of their organization. As a result, appreciative empowerment tends to add pressure to group members rather than reduce pressure. As Blanchard and his associates have noted: "Leaders who empower people are placing additional responsibilities for results on the team members. That is right: *empowerment is not soft management*. But even though it places high expectations on people, team members embrace empowerment because it leads to the joys of involvement, ownership and growth."[vii]

Finally, the information I have presented regarding the empowerment of groups is appreciative in that it enables the reader to better understand and appreciate the subtle and often complex dynamics of groups in which they participate. Contemporary group dynamics researchers and experienced group facilitators have provided us with many valuable insights and suggestions regarding effective and empowering group structures and processes. As we gain a fuller appreciation of the group dynamics literature, we can more readily embrace the complex drama of group life, while also learning how better to influence the outcomes of groups in which we participate.

[i] Bruce Tuchman, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, 1965, 63, pp. 384-399.

[ii] Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 42.

[iii] Cynthia Scott and Dennis Jaffe. *Empowerment: A Practical Guide For Success*. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, 1991, p. 32.

[iv] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 6.

[v] Howard Gardner. *Frames of Mind.* New York: Basic Books, 1993; Howard Garnder. *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

[vi] Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence.* New York: Bantam, 1995.

[vii] Ken Blanchard, John Carlos and Alan Randolph. *The Three Keys To Empowerment*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 1999, p. 6.