

# What to Observe in a Group

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One way to learn in a training laboratory is to observe and analyze what is happening in one's T Group. All of us have spent our lives in groups of various sorts –the family, gang, team, workgroup, platoon, and so on but rarely have we taken the time to observe, discuss, and try to understand what was going on in the group. One of our main goals here is to become better observers, which may help us become more effective group participants.

But what do we look for? What is there to see in a group?

## Content and Process

When we observe what the group is talking about we are focusing on the *content*. When we try to observe how the group is handling its communication, (i.e., who talks how much or who talks to whom) we are focusing on group *process*.

Most discussion topics about the back-home situation emphasize the *content*: "What is good leadership?" "How can I motivate my subordinate?" "How can we make meetings more effective?" They concern issues, which are "there-and-then" in the sense of being abstract, future- or past-oriented, and not involving us directly. In focusing on group *process*, we are looking at what our group is doing in the "here-and-now," how it is working in the sense of its present behaviors.

In fact, the content of the conversation is often the best clue as to what process issue may be on people's minds when they find it difficult to confront the issue directly.

For example:

<i>Content</i>	<i>Process</i>
Talking about problems of authority back home may mean ...	that there is a leadership struggle going on in the T Group.
Talking about how bad group meetings usually are at the plant may mean...	that members are dissatisfied with the meeting of their own T Group.
Talking about staff men who don't really help anybody may mean ...	Dissatisfaction with the way the trainer in the T-Group is behaving.

At a simpler level, looking at process really means to focus on what is going on in the group and to try to understand it in terms of other things that have gone on in the group.

## Communication

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

Who talks? For how long? How often?

Whom do people look at when they talk:

Others who may support them? The group as a whole? The trainer? No one? Who talks after whom? Who interrupts whom?

What style of communication is used -assertions, questions, tone of voice, gestures, support or negation?

The kinds of observations we make give us clues to other important things which may be going on in the group, such as who leads whom or who influences whom.

## Decision-Making Procedures

Whether we are aware of it or not, groups are making decisions all the time, some of them consciously and in reference to the major tasks at hand, some of them without much awareness and in reference to group procedures or standards of operation. It is important to observe how decisions are made in a group in order to assess the appropriateness of the method to the matter being decided on, and in order to assess whether the consequences of given methods are really what the group members bargained for.

Group decisions are notoriously hard to undo. When someone says, "Well, we decided to do it, didn't we?" any budding opposition is quickly immobilized. Often we can undo the decision only if we reconstruct it and understand how we made it and test whether this method was appropriate or not.

Some methods by which groups make decisions follow:

*The Plop:* "I think we should introduce ourselves"... silence. (Group decision by emission)

*The Self-Authorized Agenda:* "I think we should introduce ourselves, my name is Joe Smith..." (Decision by one)

*The Handclasp:* "I wonder if it would be helpful if we introduced ourselves?" "I think it would, my name is Pete Jones. . . ." (Decision by two)

"Does Anyone Object?" or "We all agree." (Decision by a minority—one or more)

*Majority -Minority Voting.* (Decision by majority)

*Polling.* "Let's see where everyone stands; what do you think?"

*Consensus Testing* - Exploration to test for opposition and to determine whether opposition feels strongly enough to be unwilling to implement decision; not necessarily unanimity but essential agreement by all

The procedure can be tricky. For example, it sometimes happens that a decision to poll—which looks very democratic, because polling is considered democratic—can be made by self-authorization or by

handclasp. At such a point, the alert group member will realize what is going on and insist that the group be clear on its decision-making style. Actually, the decision a group makes about how it will make decisions can be the most important single element with respect to how it works as a group.

### **Task or Maintenance Behavior vs. Self-Oriented Behavior**

Behavior in the group can be seen from the point of view of what its purpose or function seems to be. When a member says something is he primarily trying to get the group task accomplished (task), to improve or patch up some relationships among members (maintenance), or to meet some personal need or goal without regard to the group's problems (self-oriented)?

The types of behavior relevant to the group's fulfillment of its *task* are these:

*Initiating:* Proposing tasks or goals; defining a group problem; suggesting a procedure or ideas for solving a problem....

*Seeking Information or Opinions:* Requesting facts; seeking relevant information about group concern; requesting a statement or estimate; soliciting expressions of value; seeking suggestions and ideas....

*Giving Information or Opinion:* Offering facts; providing relevant information about group concern; stating a belief about a matter before the group; giving suggestions and ideas...

*Clarifying and Elaborating:* Interpreting ideas or suggestions; clearing up confusions; defining terms; indicating alternatives and issues before the group....

*Summarizing.* Pulling together related ideas; restating suggestions after the group has discussed them; offering a decision or conclusion for the group to accept or reject....

*Consensus Testing.-* Asking to see whether the group is nearing a decision; sending up a trial balloon to test a possible conclusion....

Types of behavior relevant to the group's remaining in good working order, having a good climate for task work, and good relationships which permit maximum use of member resources, i.e., *group maintenance*, are as follows:

*Harmonizing:* - Attempting to reconcile disagreement; reducing tension; getting people to explore differences....

*Gate Keeping:* Helping to keep communication channels open; facilitating the participation of others; suggesting procedures that permit sharing remarks....

*Encouraging:* - Being friendly, warm and responsive to others; indicating by facial expression or remark the acceptance of others' contributions....

*Compromising:* - When own idea or status is involved in a conflict, offering a compromise which yields status; admitting error; modifying in interest of group cohesion or growth....

*Standard Setting and Testing.* Testing whether the group is satisfied with its procedures or suggesting procedures; pointing out explicit or implicit norms, which have been set to make them available for testing....

Every group needs both kinds of behavior and needs to work out an adequate balance of tasks and maintenance activities.

**Emotional Issues:  
Causes of Self-Oriented, Emotional Behavior**

The processes described so far deal with the group's attempts to *work*, to solve problems of task and maintenance; but there are many forces active in groups which disturb work, which represent a kind of emotional underworld or undercurrent in the stream of group life. The underlying emotional issues produce a variety of behaviors, which interfere with or are destructive of effective group functioning. Groups often ignore such an issue or wish it away, an action that can be detrimental to their task-accomplishment as well as to the growth of the individuals whose behavior is based on self-oriented needs. The effective group will recognize what is going on, try to identify the issue, and then work with it in ways, which permit these same emotional energies to be channeled in the direction of the group's effort.

What are these emotional issues or basic problems?

*Identity.* Who am I in this group? Where do I fit in? What kind of behavior is acceptable here?

*Goals and Needs:* What do I want from the group? Can the group goals be made consistent with my goals? What have I to offer to the group?

*Power, Control, and Influence.* Who will control what we do? How much power and influence do I have?

*Intimacy.* How close will we get to each other? How personal? How much can we trust each other? Can we achieve a greater level of trust?

What kinds of behaviors are produced in response to these problems?

*Dependency-Counterdependency:* Opposing or resisting anyone in the group who represents authority.

*Fighting and Controlling.* Asserting personal dominance, attempting to get own way regardless of others.

*Withdrawing.* Trying to remove the sources of uncomfortable feelings by psychologically leaving the group.

*Pairing Up:* Seeking out one or two supporters and forming a kind of emotional subgroup in which members protect and support one another.

These are not the only phenomena, which can be observed in a group. What is important to observe will vary with what the group is doing, the needs and purposes of the observer, and many other factors. The main point, however, is that improving our skills in observing what is going on in the group will provide us with important data for understanding groups and increasing our effectiveness within them. Often, the most effective and useful group member will be the one who can function as "participant/observer." They will be able to contribute to the group's task accomplishment, yet still able to use a "third eye" to observe how the group is working — information. This they can share with the group at appropriate times in an effort to help it deal with maintenance issues and blockages arising out of self-oriented needs.