

Working in Groups: Facilitating Positive Group Interactions¹

Bryan D. Terry²



Great discoveries and improvements invariably involve the cooperation of many minds.

– Alexander Graham Bell

Overview

Working together in groups can be a great experience or one filled with stress and anxiety. The goal of facilitating positive group interaction is for every group member to contribute in a more positive and productive manner. This article will review several methods that can facilitate positive group interactions, which will also enhance communication and overall group work.

Facilitating Group Interactions

Some people may be quiet during a meeting, whereas others may be very vocal. A spirit of trust and cooperation develops when every person has an equal opportunity to participate.

Early in the group's development, a facilitator can assist in the successful interaction of members. Group facilitation is a complex skill of empowering and enabling a group of individuals to complete a task or generate ideas (Vivacqua, Marques, Ferreira, and de Souza 2008). A facilitator takes responsibility for communicating guidelines and boundaries. A facilitator can provide structure for group activity, establish time limits, maintain group order, ensure that everyone is heard, encourage creativity, answer questions, and collect reports as needed.

Three techniques that can help facilitate group interaction and active involvement include: brainstorming, round robin, small group discussion, and nominal group technique.

Brainstorming

The brainstorming technique is the process of collecting as many ideas as possible in a short time. The word "brainstorming" essentially means "using the brain to storm a problem." There are four important factors when using brainstorming (Kavadias and Sommer 2009):

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2. Bryan D. Terry, assistant professor and volunteer management specialist; Department of Family, Youth and Community Sciences; UF/IFAS Extension, Gainesville, FL 32611.

1. Criticism and judgment are *not* allowed
2. “Free-wheeling” or spontaneity are encouraged. Creativity is a good; ideas do not have to be practical.
3. Quantity is key.
4. Combinations and improvements are sought; it is okay to expand upon an idea that has already been mentioned.

Facilitators often find it effective to set a maximum time limit (example: five minutes for a group of five to fifteen) and write down each idea on a list that everyone can see. The process can be stopped when no new ideas are added over a ten-second period.

This technique encourages participation from individuals who have diverse styles. A group may choose to use this list to make decisions at future meetings, or committees may be assigned to examine several ideas for future discussion.

Round Robin

The Round Robin is a structural technique that provides an opportunity for everyone in the group to respond to one specific question or to make a comment about an issue. When using the Round Robin technique, the group typically begins with a period of “no-talk” in which individuals engage in silent “self-brainstorming.” Once the group has been given time to generate ideas, each individual is given time to present his/her ideas (Beasley and Jenkins 2003). This technique ensures that everyone will speak, even if it is to say, “pass.” Another way to present everyone’s ideas is to have each person post their lists on a wall or bulletin board, which may be more comfortable for people reluctant to speak in front of a group (Beasley and Jenkins 2003).

This technique works best with a minimum of four people and a maximum of twenty people. Each person should be allowed at least one minute to respond to a question. Round Robin typically eliminates problems related to group domination because everyone is given an equal chance to speak (Beasley and Jenkins 2003).

Small Group Discussion

Individuals may be more willing to participate and share concerns in smaller groups of four to eight people. To facilitate smaller group discussions, the leader can divide the larger group into several smaller groups. Once the groups are situated, suggestions for continued facilitation include:

1. Have each small group discuss one question for a specific amount of time (10 minutes, for example).
2. Following discussion, one representative from each group reports to the larger group with a summary of their discussion. (Reports often require five to seven minutes per group.)
3. Each small group could submit a written summary or list, for future consideration.

A variation of this technique is for each small group to discuss a different perspective on the same topic, or perhaps even a different topic. A facilitator is responsible for establishing and communicating the structure.

“Leadership is based on inspiration, not domination; on cooperation, not intimidation.” – William Arthur Ward

Nominal Group

Nominal Group Technique (NGT) is a structured decision-making process that typically begins with brainstorming. NGT is essentially a four-step process (Totikidis 2010):

1. **Generating Ideas:** This step usually involves individually brainstorming and then coming together as a group with everyone’s ideas.
2. **Recording Ideas:** Once ideas are generated, the group makes a master list of all of the ideas (Round Robin technique can be used if necessary) and writes them all down so they are visible to the entire group.
3. **Discussing Ideas:** After all group members have presented their ideas, the group must clarify and evaluate each item on the list. Following clarification, the group must begin to narrow the list down and come to agreement about which idea(s) to discard and why (example, cost, space, time, practicality). Allow enough time to make good group decisions during this discussion.
4. **Voting on Ideas:** The meeting concludes with a voting process in which individuals either rank order their choices or cast votes for their favorite ideas. The “group decision” is then determined by the pooled outcome of individual votes.

The open discussion between steps in this process encourages people to participate and cooperate. Although this technique takes time (30–60 minutes), it is an effective means of group interaction and shared decision-making.

Conclusion

Positive group interactions do not happen automatically: instead they should be facilitated. Every leader and member of a group is responsible for creating and maintaining positive group dynamics. Some methods to facilitate group interactions include: Round Robin, Small Group Discussion, Brainstorming and the Nominal Group. When groups are facilitated properly and group members interact in a positive manner, communication, individuals, committees, organizations, and communities benefit. Refer to the publication, [Working in Groups: The Importance of Communication in Developing Trust and Cooperation](#) for tips about how to increase general communication among group members.

References

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