

Group Discussions

A group discussion involves a particular group of people who meet face to face and develop, discuss and share ideas through free oral interaction. Group discussions are used as personality tests to evaluate several candidates simultaneously to select personnel for positions of responsibility, especially in the service sector and also to select students for admission to professional institutes. This mode was first employed by the Indian defence forces to discern the potential and eligibility of candidates to be recruited as officers.

Speaking in Group Discussions

- Seize the first opportunity to speak if you have a good understanding of the topic of discussion.
- Listen patiently to others and then react to their viewpoints.
- Speak clearly and audibly so that everyone hears and understands.
- Be concise in your expressions. Do not repeat ideas just for the sake of speaking something.
- Ask for clarification, if necessary.
- Facilitate contribution from others.
- Use statistics and examples to justify a view point.
- Avoid talking to only one or two persons in the group.
- Assume an impersonal tone. Treat all members as fellow participants; none in the group is either a friend or a foe.
- Be assertive without being aggressive; be humble without being submissive. Raise your voice (just enough to be heard) and speak out a strong point in case of a fishmarket-like situation in a GD.
- Conclude objectively by briefly presenting the important points of the discussion and any decisions taken.

Discussing Problems and Solutions

In a discussion, identifying the problem can sometimes be a little difficult. The problem can be related to a personal, social, physical, or mental aspect, or it might be organizational–technical, managerial, or business related. The problems related to an organization are easier to analyse and solve, because in an organization the number of possibilities of the cause of a problem and the consequences of the solution are relatively simpler to analyse than the problems related to a society. Problems must be discussed in detail so that each participant of the team understands it. When beginning a discussion on a problem encountered, try to define the problem first.

Defining a problem helps to understand what the problem is and also the nature of the problem, which in turn is crucial to solving the problem. For example, if a department is not working satisfactorily, then we should try to define the problem exactly, i.e., whether the problem is with the efficiency of the department or the output of the department.

Once the problem is identified, get into the discussion about finding a solution. Talking about problems in terms of systems makes the discussion easier. What are systems? Any mechanism put in place, which takes inputs from various factors and produces outputs, is a system. The management of a company or a pipeline for manufacturing a product can be regarded as a system. Having identified the problem means we have identified the system that is causing or facing the problem. Now all that needs to be done in order to find a solution to the problem is to identify the various inputs or factors that affect the system. Discuss elaborately the factors of the system. The problem should be discussed with participants who are experienced in the field so as to identify what factors are most likely to cause the problem. Each factor can then be individually checked to determine the root cause of the problem, which can then be directly addressed.

Once the root of the problem has been identified, there may be the problem of multiple solutions. Choosing the optimal one is essential because the solution should not only fix the problem within the system but also ensure that its consequences do not cause further problems in other systems. Discuss the pros and cons of the various solutions and take inputs from each member. Taking into account the consequences of the particular action taken for solving the problem helps obtain an optimal solution.

Creating a Cordial and Cooperative Atmosphere

It is said that ideas flow free in an atmosphere conducive to the participants. By creating a friendly and cooperative environment during a GD, we may be able to derive better solutions to our problems or create more ideas as the members' contributions are maximized. However, creating such an atmosphere is the responsibility of each member of the group. In an atmosphere that promotes friendliness and cooperation, we feel positive, optimistic, confident, and assertive and hence will voluntarily contribute to the discussion. The following strategies might help us understand how to create such an atmosphere in GDs:

- Listen to others' viewpoints with an open mind and interest.
- Respect others' ideas and try to understand the speaker's perspective.
- Develop mutual trust among each other.
- Avoid being too formal with others (e.g., knowing the names of others will help in

addressing them by first names rather than using Mr/Ms; using I/you/we and active voice rather than impersonal passive voice—‘Reena, I am unable to get your point. Could you please give some statistics and elaborate further?’).

- Adopt a friendly attitude so that others put forth their ideas freely.
- Use body language effectively to convey interest and sincerity in the discussion.
- Avoid being friendly with only one or two participants in the group.
- Be objective and unbiased in the discussion.
- Allow others to speak.
- Recognize significant contributions by others and appreciate them.

Using Persuasive Techniques

Our ability to make others believe in what we say is important in GDs. In other words, mastering the art of persuasion or convincing others is crucial for GDs and the following tips may be helpful in this regard:

- Do your homework and be knowledgeable about the topic of discussion.
- Show maturity while reacting to others (by exhibiting appropriate body language and a firm tone of voice; by not interrupting somebody abruptly).
- Listen carefully and then react.
- Always use evidence (statistics/examples/testimonies) to justify your views.
- Establish mutual respect.
- Win the confidence of others.
- Be considerate. We may have a strong view on some issue. However, if others give evidences against these views, be willing to listen.
- Always be friendly and respectful during GDs.

Being Polite and Firm

As already mentioned, we need to be assertive but not aggressive in a GD and by being firm and polite we satisfy this requirement. When we feel that a particular idea suggested by another

member may not go well with the organization, we need to express our view firmly, but politely.

There are various expressions that can be used to express politeness with firmness. See the following sample expressions:

I understand that this idea may be liked by everybody. But, I am afraid it will not gel with our organizational environment.

I'm afraid this idea may not work in our system. (when we have to tell somebody something they may not like)

Has this idea failed? I am afraid so.

I wonder if I could have one more example on this point. (when asking somebody for a clarification)

Could you repeat that please?

Well, I am not convinced that the implementation of this idea is that urgent. / I am not sure about how urgent the implementation is.

I do not agree completely. Perhaps we should have more discussion on implementing this idea.

Turn Taking Strategies

The term 'turntaking' refers to a speaker giving a chance to others to comment on or question the point raised by him/her during a discussion. This process is repeated by the members of a group and if it does not go smoothly, the discussion will not be useful, and can end up in an unpleasant argument. It is often noticed in GDs that there are members who are quick thinkers, and hence would grab a turn to speak as soon as one of the others completes speaking. There are others, generally ineffective listeners, who may not allow anyone else to speak. On the other hand, there are members who give verbal/non-verbal signals to others for taking their turn. The following three events occur in turn-taking:

Taking a turn Being ready to speak when one finishes is taking one's turn. For instance, if you respond to some member by agreeing, disagreeing, posing a query, or by paraphrasing what was said, you are taking a turn.

Holding the turn There may be members in a group who do not wish to give turns to others to speak. They may like to keep the turn to themselves and continue further. Hence, they may suppress their verbal and non-verbal cues that are used to tell others to take their turn. Though they think that being able to dominate the discussion earns them points, they in fact lose by coming across as bad listeners.

Yielding the turn When we give cues to indicate that we are concluding our remarks and

others can take up the discussion further, we are yielding the turn.

Assume that a group is discussing the details of a project it is going to take up during next month. Given below are the statements spoken by some members during the course of this discussion. Read them carefully to understand the turn-taking strategies explained above:

Speaker 1: I don't think we need to use the project management software for cost control of our Mobile

Medics project. The software is quite expensive and instead of procuring and using that we can think

of some other alternative. Do you agree? (By asking a question this speaker gives a verbal cue to others to

take their turn; he is yielding a turn. He may also use non-verbal cues such as stretching his hand to someone

particularly.)

Speaker 2: I agree with you, but we should at least study the software available for project management. I've

heard about them. They are efficient, no doubt, but... (This speaker takes the turn but later on by pausing or

by uttering an incomplete statement, the speaker gives the turn to others.)

Speaker 3: You mean to say they are expensive? I don't think so. Some of my friends in other companies are

using XYZ software for managing most of their projects. They are able to manage their projects very well

in terms of planning, scheduling, resource allocation, cost control, issue tracking, etc. Such software may

be economical and hence we should also go for them. (In the beginning, even though the speaker asks a

question, he wants to hold the turn for himself and hence continues.)

The turn-taking process will yield good results when members have time to think before the discussion as they may have gathered many ideas about the various issues related to the topic of discussion. At times, groups are asked to go for an on-the-spot discussion of a topic. In such cases, participants who can think fast can take turns while others may not be able to do so and hence there may not be a well-balanced participation. These strategies can be used effectively by responding to questions, by making a suggestion, initiating interaction, paraphrasing, requesting the speaker to repeat, etc.

Effective Intervention

Interventions or interferences are necessary in a GD for reasons such as correcting an error, controlling unruly behaviour, adding some detail, or asking a question for clarification.

Generally members do not like intervention during their speaking turn. So, we should interrupt somebody only when there is a valid reason and also using appropriate phrases while doing so. If we do not use polite expressions while interrupting a member, the person might get annoyed. It is always better to use expressions such as *excuse me*, *sorry to interrupt*, *may I say something*, *can I add something*, etc., before interrupting in order to avoid confusion and also to exhibit a decorum during a GD. The following are some sample expressions for effective intervention:

Excuse me for interrupting you, but it is of two months' duration, not one month.
May I interrupt? Let me correct the time frame. It is two months and not one month.
I would like to say something, if I may. The duration is two months and not one month.
Can I just say that the duration is two months and not one?
Sorry to barge in... but this idea has already been discussed.
Can I add here that the duration also needs to be considered along with other factors?
May I ask you a question at this point?

Reaching a Decision

Most of the GDs end with a decision—either final or interim. Whatever the type of decision, it can be arrived at only when members participate actively to explore the topic, contribute significantly

to the discussion, and reach a consensus or an agreement. After thoroughly discussing various points involved in a problem by analysing their pros and cons, the group finally arrives at a few solutions. After ranking the solutions by considering their feasibility or practicability in their organizational environment, the members will accept one solution. When they decide on this, it will be presented by the leader of the group to everybody. However, before presenting the solution,

the speaker will summarize the main points of discussion keeping in mind the goal of the GD.

At times, because of various constraints such as time, inadequate participation, preparation, etc., the group may not be able to decide upon the given issue and it may decide to meet again. In such

cases, some interim or tentative decisions may be taken. For instance, if the administrative heads of a college discuss a revamping of the curriculum, they may not arrive at a final decision, but may

be able to take decisions on certain courses. They may continue their discussion later.

There are two main categories of GDs, namely organizational GDs and GDs as a part of a

selection process. We will discuss these two formats in the following sections. Also, go through the PowerPoint presentation on group discussions in the CD to understand the various issues involved in a GD.

ORGANIZATIONAL GD

In organizations, GDs are mainly used for group decision-making. Members of the interacting group take the responsibility of explaining their ideas and arriving at a consensus. GDs can help reduce many problems inherent to traditional interactive groups. The word ‘traditional’ here refers to an organizational set-up wherein hierarchy is given considerable importance. In such organizations, the group decision-making process may involve groupthink. A team suffering from groupthink will place so much value on maintaining loyalty, unity, and agreement that critical thinking and open enquiry are prevented. The participants may censor themselves and pressurize other group members into agreement. In order to minimize this, the following techniques may be used:

- Brainstorming
- Delphi technique
- Nominal group technique

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a method for generating a variety of ideas and perspectives. It is as uncritical as possible because criticism inhibits the free flow of ideas. The people involved in brainstorming should ideally come from a wide range of disciplines and have divergent social and cultural backgrounds. The more diverse the group, the more likely it is to generate unexpected insights, ideas, and connections, and hence even unthought-of and novel solutions to problems. A typical brainstorming session follows the steps given below:

- A group of six to twelve people sit around a table.
- The group leader states the problem in a clear manner so that all participants understand it.
- Members then suggest as many alternatives as they can in a given length of time and write them down on a blackboard, whiteboard, flip chart, or a piece of paper.
- No criticism is allowed, and all the alternatives are recorded for later discussion and analysis.

There are two types of brainstorming techniques:

1. Storyboarding 2. Lotus blossom

In storyboarding, participants identify major issues and brainstorm on each of them. It is often used to solve complex problems. In the lotus blossom technique, a core thought is presented and participants provide eight ideas surrounding it like the petals of a lotus blossom. Then each of these ideas becomes a core thought to be surrounded by a further set of eight ideas

and so forth, until participants can no longer generate ideas or until decision-makers feel that they have a good grasp of the problem and potential creative solutions.

However, brainstorming is mainly a process for generating ideas. The other two techniques—the nominal group technique and the Delphi technique—go further by offering methods to actually arrive at a suitable solution.

Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique restricts discussion or interpersonal communication during the decision-making process and hence the term ‘nominal group’. In other words, in this technique, although group members are all physically present as in a traditional committee meeting, they operate independently, as described below. The problem is presented and then the following steps take place:

- Members meet as a group, but before any discussion takes place, each member independently and silently writes down his/her ideas on the problem.
- Each member takes his/her, going around the table and presenting a single idea until all ideas have been presented and recorded (typically on a flip chart or chalkboard). No discussion takes place until all ideas have been recorded.
- The group now discusses the ideas for clarity and evaluates them.
- Each group member silently and independently rank-orders the ideas.

The final decision is determined by the idea with the highest aggregate ranking. The chief advantage of the nominal group technique is that it permits the group to meet formally but does not restrict independent thinking, which an interacting group might do.

Delphi Technique

The Delphi technique is a more complex and time-consuming alternative in group decisionmaking.

It is similar to the nominal group technique except that it does not require the physical presence of the group members. In fact, this technique never allows the group members to meet face to face. The following steps characterize the Delphi technique:

1. The problem is identified and members are asked to provide potential solutions through a series of carefully designed questionnaires.
2. Each member anonymously and independently completes the first questionnaire.
3. The results of the first questionnaire are compiled at a central location, transcribed, and reproduced.
4. Each member receives a copy of the results.
5. Based on the results, another questionnaire is prepared, and the members are again

asked for their solutions, as the compiled results typically trigger new solutions or cause changes in the original opinion.

6. Steps 4 and 5 are repeated as often as necessary until consensus is reached.

Like the nominal group technique, the Delphi technique insulates group members from the undue influence of others. As it does not require the physical presence of the participants, the Delphi technique can be used for decision-making in geographically scattered groups. For instance, a company having branches in Tokyo, Brussels, Paris, London, New York, Toronto, Rio de Janeiro, and Melbourne can use the technique effectively to query its managers on the best global price for one of its products. By following this technique, business enterprises can avoid the cost of bringing their executives together at a central location.

The Delphi technique also has its drawbacks. As the method is extremely time consuming, it is frequently not applicable when a speedy decision is required. Additionally, the method may not develop the rich array of alternatives that the brainstorming or the nominal group technique does. Ideas that might be inspired by face-to-face interactions may never come up. An organization can decide upon the type of GD required mainly on the basis of availability of time, urgency of the situation, location of the group members, and the complexity of the decision to be made.

Group Discussion based on a Topic

Topic-based GDs are generally more difficult to handle than case study-based ones as there is no starting point for a candidate's thought process, particularly when the topic is unfamiliar. The panel may or may not allow time for thinking. The dynamics in the first couple of minutes are generally chaotic. Ideally, to start with, some ideas have to be generated on the topic. These ideas must then be prioritized so that the presentation is coherent. At this point, there may not be much time to fully develop the ideas.

In order to pre-empt the possibility of other participants starting off first on the same ideas that we have thought of, we have to start speaking as early as possible. Not only must we develop the idea as we speak, but also think ahead for subsequent ideas. A weakness in any of these steps will lead to poor presentation.

As a rule of thumb, we should not speak unless we have content for a speech of at least one minute. Second, listening carefully to what the other participants have to say will trigger fresh ideas. A healthy discussion can take place only when there is an exchange of ideas and these ideas are subjected to analysis. Therefore, it is not necessary to keep on generating new ideas for the entire duration. It is also important to carefully examine each word of the topic, noting it down if possible, and checking that there are no words that can have different interpretations. If some ambiguity exists, it makes sense to define the terms first. GD Situation 8 in the CD

demonstrates how one can deal with an unfamiliar topic.

Group Discussion based on a Case Study

If an individual's analytical skills are good, then case studies are easier to handle than topic based GDs, because there is a starting point in the form of a particular situation. Cases are discussions of situations (in business or other organizations) calling for an appraisal of past action, a decision on future action, or both. Virtually every case calls for both analysis and decision-making. Logical analysis and a firm grasp of the facts are crucial. Judgement is needed to sift through available information and find the relevant facts, and so is imagination for developing an action plan.

The following is a list of tips for handling a GD successfully.

- Be thorough with current issues.
- Always enter the room with a piece of paper and a pen.
- Listen to the topic carefully.
- Jot down as many ideas as possible in the first few minutes.
- Try to dissect the topic and explore the underlying causes or consequences.
- Organize the ideas before speaking.
- Speaking first is a high-risk, high-return strategy. Hence, speak first only if there is something sensible and substantial to say.
- Try to contribute meaningfully and significantly every time you speak. Do not speak just for the sake of saying something.
- Identify supporters and opponents and allow the supporters to augment your ideas.
- Keep track of time and share time fairly.
- Have an open mind and listen to others' views.
- Maintain eye contact while speaking and listening.
- Do not indulge in parallel conversations.
- Use tact and wit. If you must use humour, do so judiciously so as not to hurt others or deviate from the topic.

- Display a spirit of cooperation and an accommodative nature.
- Draw out the silent members and encourage them to speak.
- If things get chaotic, take the initiative to restore order by providing a fresh direction to the discussion.
- Attempt to arrive at a consensus although the ultimate aim is to reach a conclusion. Within the specified time, the group may not be able to arrive at a consensus. However, working towards consensus will reveal the individual's capability and inclination towards being a good team player. GD Situation 10 in the CD demonstrates how to effectively conclude a group discussion.