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WHAT TO LOOK FOR IN GROUPS:
THE TOOLS OF OBSERVING PROCESS

Introduction

Embedded within every interaction we have, organizational or otherwise, is a set of human dynamics. Just like a play we watch on the stage, or a movie we see on the big screen, these dynamics are present across many levels. Most obvious is the dialogue and behavior of the main characters. But there is also the positioning of the actors on the stage or set, their non-verbal expressions, their communications, their personal styles and characteristics, and their emotions. All of these elements contribute to the story as it unfolds. So, too, it is for group dynamics.

When referring to groups or teams,[1] the terminology employed is *content* and *process*. These two components are fundamental to our interpersonal interactions within teams. Content deals with the task, specifically what the group does in pursuit of its goals. In the recent task force commissioned to investigate the Shuttle Columbia disaster over Texas, for example, the content of that group included such activities as collecting data from a variety of sources, interviewing engineers and experts, examining debris for clues, and performing tests and experiments to substantiate hypotheses. All these content tasks had one goal: determine the probable cause of the Shuttle breakup. Without these tasks, this group could not complete its mission.

However, a group is more than its content, that is, what it does. A group is also about process. Process is the dimension that focuses on the interactions between group members. Process concerns not the task of the group, but the direct and subtle methods used through and among group members to accomplish their tasks. Process deals with "such items as morale, feeling, tone, atmosphere, influence, participation, styles of leadership, leadership struggles, conflicts, competition, cooperation, to suggest a few.[2] In the recent Shuttle disaster report, issues

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[1]For purposes of this note, the words team and group will be used interchangeably.
[2]P. Hanson, What to Look For in Groups: An Observation Guide. In J. Pfeiffer and J. Jones (Ed), *The 1972 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators* (San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer, 1972), 21–24.

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of process (i.e., how NASA engineers and managers worked together) was cited as one of the primary reasons for the disaster.

There are two common mistakes we make in our group interactions. The first mistake is that we pay much more attention to what we do (the content) but don't pay a proportionate amount of attention to the process (how we work together as a team). Process is often considered an afterthought, something the group will get to if there is time. Too often we believe attending to process stands in the way of getting the job done rather than making the job easier.

Ignoring process means reducing a group's effectiveness. Many times, the group is effective not because of what it does, but *how it does it*. Sensitivity to group process can enable group members to see problems early, develop corrective actions, and in general, improve the quality of their interactions and thus their decision-making. Strong process is not a luxury. Without strong process, groups make poorer decisions over a longer time as members become more and more dissatisfied. More broadly, process observation helps observers identify problems in a group and understand how groups are effective or ineffective. With an understanding of the group process, observers may be in a position to help the group become more productive.

Even if we believed that process was critically important, we can still make the second mistake, which is fully seeing process in the first place. Oftentimes as members of a group, it is difficult for us in real time to stand aside and look objectively at what is happening. We tend to jump to conclusions, make inferences based on past experiences or interactions or merely make assumptions, especially about our own interactions, that may or may not be correct. We don't see correctly or objectively.

The ability to "see" and understand the implications of what one is observing takes *sight and skill*. Sight comes from having a substantial repertoire of what to look for in a group. Skill comes into play when distinguishing between what one is seeing and what it means. Skill requires that we understand the differences between data, inference, and conclusions.

The "Raw Data" of Observing Process

Physical setting

The room where the group meets sets the stage for the group's interactions: the arrangement of tables and chairs, location and presence of props (e.g., flip charts, white boards, computer consoles, TV monitors) or wall decoration are some aspects of the physical setting to notice. Watch where people sit (Who sits at the head of the table?), how close they sit to one another, who sits next to whom and how often, whether they arrive early to select a favorite seat, take an open seat, or create a place by scooting a chair in. Notice the room itself: its temperature and cleanliness, its ambience, comfort of the chairs, size of the room relative to the size of the

group. People are impacted by their physical surroundings. A room that is too small, too hot or cold, too large and cavernous, too dark, or too cluttered may impact how the group interacts. A team meeting around a round table will interact differently than if that same group were spread out in a tiered classroom.

Group members

Who the individual members are in the group can also impact group process. Some of members' characteristics are obvious, such as gender, race, or ethnicity. A member's background or expertise can tell you why that individual was selected as a group member or what knowledge he or she might bring to the group itself. Other attributes might be more cognitive, such as learning styles, MBTI preferences, or Belbin roles. Be sure when observing a team to have in mind relevant characteristics of the members.

It is also important to note whether group members are interacting exclusively with certain other members of the group; these relationships could provide strong evidence that members of the group are forming coalitions or subgroups. Consider questions like these:

- Are certain members left out of the group's interactions consistently?
- Do certain members come into the group and leave the group often?
- Are certain people or certain subgroups competitive with each other?
- Have members of the group formed any subgroups or alliances?
- Who has allied with whom?

Verbal content

The conversation that ensues in the team is legitimate and observable process data. As you listen to what is being said, think about whether the dialogue is fast and furious, slow and plodding, very specific and detailed, more general, or broad. Are members talking about topics on point to the business of the group or are they digressing into "extraneous" topics? In addition to noticing what topic is being discussed when, notice *how* the team is discussing those topics.

A good process observer will be able to record group dialogue verbatim and create a real time transcript of the verbal communications between and among members of the group.

Participation

When observing a group, it is critical to note who is talking. Participation tends to occur on three levels: on the individual level, the one-to-one level, and the group level. On the individual level, participation refers to who in the group is talking, how frequently each person is making points, and how long each person speaks (i.e., duration or "air time"). On the one-to-one

level, observers should note how the interactions are taking place. Observers should examine who is talking to whom and what they are talking about when they interact. Finally, the observer should consider how the group is participating as a whole. In other words, the observer should note whether the group is leaving certain members out of the discussion, who is talking the most frequently, and so on. Consider these questions to be observational guides:

- Who is talking the most frequently?

- Who is *not* talking?

- What happens when one (or more) members of the group are silent—are they left out of the discussion or brought into the discussion?

- Are there any changes in participators?

- Who is talking to whom? (It might be helpful to draw a diagram to count interactions among the group members.)

- Who keeps the discussion going?

Safety is the key issue regarding group membership. People, of course, tend to stay away from situations in which they feel unsafe; therefore, they seek to join group situations in which they feel that they can express their ideas freely without criticism. Some group members might be hesitant to participate because they feel that their ideas might not be accepted by the rest of the group. It is important to take note of who is quiet in the group, as this information could suggest that a particular person does not feel comfortable as a member.

Moreover, Darden learning teams have a complicating factor that other teams may not have; Darden learning teams comprise a multicultural group of people. Some conflicts that occur within the group could be a consequence of the multicultural dimensions of the team. As a result, this appendix provides an additional list of issues to consider when observing multicultural teams.[3]

When observing *participation* within multicultural teams, keep these questions in mind:

- In general, what cultural similarities and differences may exist in the group that may influence amount of participation? In what way?

- How might silence relate to cultural differences?

- How are any members from different cultures participating, based on your knowledge of that culture? For example, high and low participators?

- Who talked to whom? Do members of different cultural backgrounds interact with each other?

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[3]These issues come from Robert K. Conyne, "What to Look for in Groups: Helping Trainees Become More Sensitive to Multicultural Issues," *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work* Vol 3, No 1 (March 1998).

- Do people from different cultural backgrounds seem to be outside the group? How are they treated by the group? Do other members make an attempt to understand and include them? Is there any sub-grouping based on cultural identity? If so, how do such subgroups relate to others in the group?

Nonverbal interactions

Group process involves not only listening to the spoken words but also hearing and listening to the body language that individuals use. Observe things like:

- How individuals are sitting in their chairs? (upright, slouched, head down, head up)

- Eye contact being made (when and with whom)

- Eye signals (winks, squints, closed lids, eye rolling, eye popping)

- Facial expressions, such as smiling, frowning, quizzical expressions, anger, annoyance, and other emotions.

- Physical movement (when, under what circumstances)

Expression of emotion

There are many types of feelings that can be revealed in a group setting: anger, happiness, sadness, empathy, or disrespect. When feelings are introduced into a group, they are usually not at first expressed in words. Rather, they are generally expressed in nonverbal ways (e.g., no eye contact, covering one's face, or rolling one's eyes) and through tone of voice (e.g., a loud voice in anger). Groups may vary widely in the level of emotion they allow to be displayed. Consider these:

- Observe expressions:
  o   Rolling eyes
  o   No eye contact
  o   Burying face in hands
  o   Smiling
  o   Laughing
  o   Gentle touches on the shoulder

- What tone of voice does each participator use?

- Did anyone raise their voice in anger?

- Did anyone leave the group to "cool off"?

- To what degree does the group tolerate displays of emotion?

When observing *emotions* within the group, consider these questions:

- In general, how do you see cultural similarities and differences affecting the feelings of the group?

- What members are good at expressing their feelings? Is there any relationship to cultural identity?

- Are some group members resentful that they may have to make a special attempt to understand another member's culture?

- Do some members act as if their culture and ideas are superior to those of other members?

- How do members of different cultures display their feelings? What signs of feelings are observable in the nonverbal behavior of members from different cultures?

Influence

Influence within the group refers to the ability of group members to capture and maintain the attention of their colleagues when they speak and to strongly affect the decisions of the team. Sometimes a member has this influence by virtue of position as head of the group. Most often, however, other factors explain why one person in a team is listened to while another is overlooked. Here are some things to watch for:

- Which individuals seem always to get their way? Who doesn't?

- Who makes the decisions? Who doesn't?

- What skills, expertise or backgrounds seem to be important to the group? Which are ignored or minimized?

- To whom does everyone listen when that person speaks?

- Who does the group turn to at critical points in the discussion?

- Which members of the group are ignored when they speak?

- Who interrupts whom?

When noting which members seem to be exerting *influence* within the group, also consider these questions:

- In general, what cultural similarities and differences might be influencing a member's involvement? How are they affecting the group?

- Of what culture are those low in influence? High in influence?

- How do members from different cultural backgrounds tend to rate in terms of influence over certain topics that the group discusses?

- Is any shifting influence related to cultural differences? Who shifts?

- How do members of differing cultures relate to the group's leader(s)? How does the leader handle his or her role in relation to members from different cultures?

- Does the proportion or number of different cultural group members seem to influence the character of the group?

Climate

The atmosphere or "feeling" one has within the group can vary widely, depending on the group. Some groups "feel" warm and inviting, another group can be business-like, yet another might have an undercurrent of hostility and confrontation. This climate is often not seen directly, but sensed from combining bits and pieces of other more observable data.

Consider these questions:

- Are the meetings businesslike or jovial?

- Does the group confront one another or avoid conflict?

- Do the members get along?

- Are people involved or uninterested?

- What kind of language is being used—are the words forceful or easygoing?

- What does the body language of the members suggest about the atmosphere of the group?

- How much does the group balance work and play?

- Does the group spend a lot of time socializing outside the team?

- What are the stated goals of the group?

- Does the group achieve those goals?

Regarding the team's sensitivity to *cultural differences*, consider these areas:

- In general, how may cultural similarities and differences be affecting the group atmosphere?

- Is there any attempt to suppress conflict of a cultural nature or unpleasant feelings aroused by cultural conflicts?

- Is there an openness to exploring cultural differences in this group? Or are such differences ignored?

- Do any members seek to provoke cultural conflicts?

- Do members from different cultures seem involved and interested?

- Do members from other cultures approve of, or contribute to, the general atmosphere?

Understanding each group's preferences for balancing the *social* and *task functions* of the group can help provide evidence of the group climate. For instance, some groups might prefer to focus on their social function; that is to say, they enjoy "chit-chatting," gossiping, or talking about non-work-related subjects. Some groups prefer attending meetings and engaging in conversations that are strictly business, with little or no social interaction. Some groups socialize outside the team; others prefer contact only during meeting times. Some teams allow direct and overt expressions of emotions. Other teams prefer that emotions not be expressed directly, thus there would never be angry outbursts or raucous kidding around. What emotions are allowed and to what degree can they signal something about the team's climate, especially when problems arise. Be aware when observing a group for other signals such as:

- Are problems ignored or dealt with?

- How does the group handle problems?

- Do the members listen to each others' ideas for addressing the problem?

- How are ideas rejected?

- Are certain members' ideas consistently rejected?

- What happens to members when their ideas are rejected?

- Does the group reach consensus on the problems?

Making Initial Observations

As an observer of groups, keep in mind what kind of information one should be looking for and reporting. When observing a group, observers should first focus on the *facts* of the situation, not the *interpretation* of what is going on. Interpretation of the data should come much later. The goal of good process observation is to avoid jumping to conclusions. With only a limited amount of data, the observer might not be able to provide fair and accurate conclusions about the group. Consequently, observers should build up enough evidence to help them make a reasonable and logical interpretation.

Every observer new to group process can feel overwhelmed. The best approach is to realize that as a new observer, you will miss some aspects of the group. Concentrate on becoming aware of what you see easily and then learn to broaden into other dimensions of group activity. You will be amazed at how soon you see things you've never noticed before.