Four Innovative Ways to Lead and Facilitate SME Groups in the Assessment Industry

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In developing a valid assessment instrument, test developers, psychometricians, and researchers almost always use the opinions of subject matter experts (SMEs). Focus groups comprised of SMEs are used to identify examination or instrument content, review items and item performance statics, and recommend passing scores. For less technical tasks, SMEs are used to solicit information concerning marketing, strategy, and evaluating other aspects of an assessment program. In many assessment programs, SMEs are appointed to various committees such as oversight/strategic, ethical, and incident committees. While test developers, psychometricians, and researchers are trained on many of the technical aspects, they are often not trained or even qualified to facilitate groups.

In an attempt to address this gap, I have summarized four ways to lead and facilitate SME groups in the assessment industry based on years of studying, educating, leading, and facilitating clinical and assessment groups.

What is Leadership?

As a facilitator of an SME group you are the de facto leader of the group. With that in mind, it is important to determine how that role is defined. A number of years ago, I attended a leadership seminar delivered by Barry Posner that was hosted by Saint Joseph's University's Marketing department. Barry began the seminar by asking the audience members "What is a Leader?" After a number of audience participants attempted to answer this question without much success, Barry stated that a leader is **one who has followers.** I believe this to be a very good definitive answer as to who a leader is but it doesn't address the process and models associated with becoming a leader. I think many of the psychological models explaining human behavior can be applicable to leadership models. The figure below lists and defines the major leadership models over the decades.

Decade	Model	Model Description
1840s	Great Theory Model	Born a leader
1930s	Trait Theory	Born with certain traits to be a leader
1940s	Behavioral	Learn to be a leader
1960s	Contingency	Leadership is based on situations
1970s	Transactional	Leadership is the ability to reward/punish followers
1970s	Transformational	Leaders develop conditions such as change, vision, and direction that cause individual and systemic change for followers to eventually become leaders

? What is a Group?

It is important to first define what a group is. My first professional experience in participating in a group was from well-known family therapist, Jay S. Efran. Jay introduced me to systems thinking, so my definition and models of groups bear his influence of systems theories, constructivism, social constructionism and post-modern approaches to therapy. I also draw from Social Therapy by Fred Newman, which uses teachings of Marx, Wittgenstein, Vygotsky, social learning and postmodern theories, and theatrical improvisational to effectively work with groups. Based on these experiences, I have defined groups, specifically in the assessment industry as having the following characteristics:

Dynamic · Two or More People · Accomplish Goals · Interpersonal · Systemic
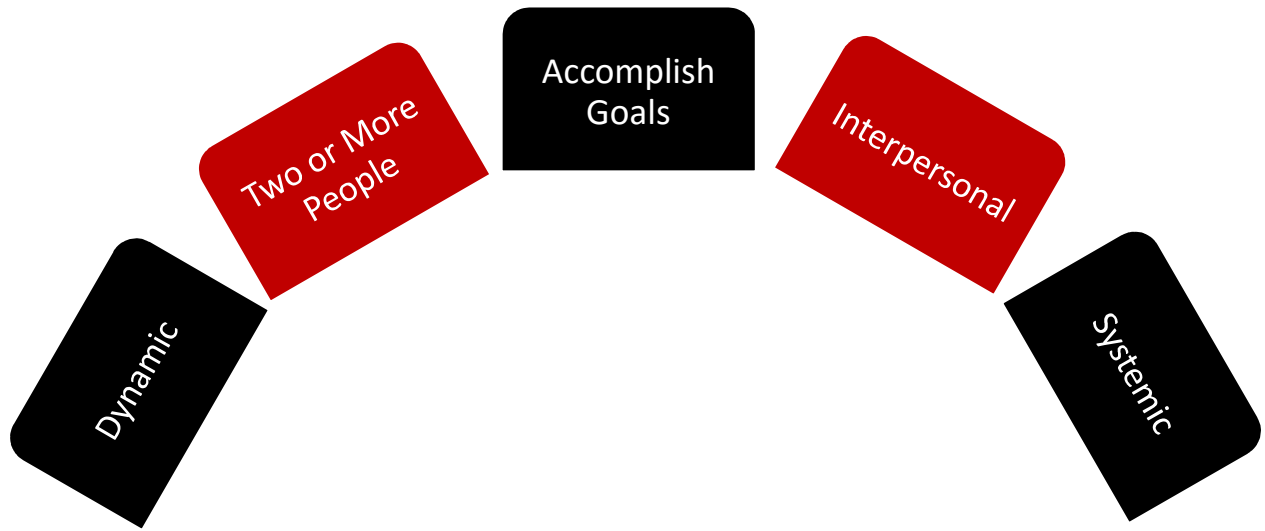
What Are Some Types of Assessment Groups?

There are a number of groups that are formed when developing an assessment. They are listed in the figure below.

Assessment Group	Purpose
Feasibility/Marketing	Purpose, Strategy, Value, Cost, Satisfaction, Salary
Job Analysis	Identify Content, KSAOs, Critical Incident
Item Development	Write and Review Items
Item Audit	Review Statistical Outcomes
Standard Setting/Cut Score	Set the Passing Score
Maintenance Activities	Determine Recertification Activities, Review Exam Outcomes, Oversee the Exam (Scheme Committee)

Assessment Group	Purpose
Policy and Legal Committees	Ethics, Appeals, Security, Accreditation Requirement Committees, EEOC, International Compliance
Other Committees	Translation and Localization

Four Ways to Lead and Facilitate Assessment Groups

Once the group and its purpose are defined, the question of how best to facilitate and lead the group remains. The graphic below shows the four methods that I propose to lead and facilitate SME groups in the assessment industry.

Get Attention

Manage Yourself

Four Ways To Facilitate Groups

Manage Expectations

Manage Dynamics
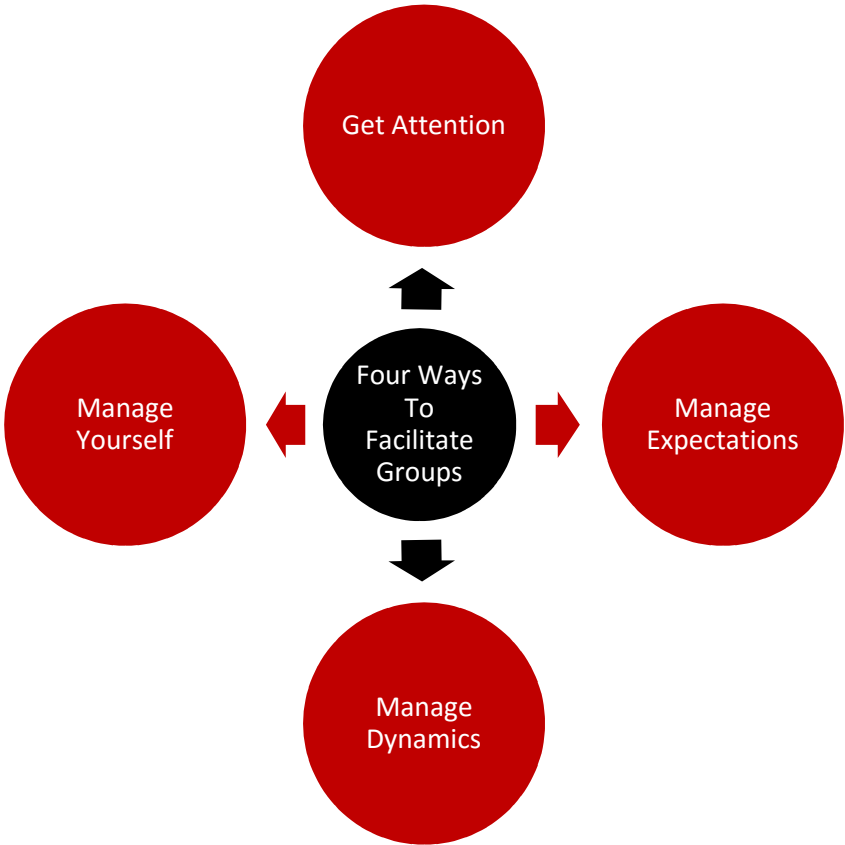
1. Get Attention

To facilitate a group, the ability to direct and elicit attention from the group is required to manage the goals and/or expectations. Groups often become distracted or disrupted by side conversations. A classic action used by classroom teachers is to state the names of members who are having these side conversations. Over the past few years, I have shouted out the words "focus" while I raise both of my hands and move them back and forth similar to an aircraft marshal guiding a large commercial jet to their gate (see picture). I will also use humor to bring the conversation back to the topic at hand. Saying something like "perhaps we should try to conduct this meeting with various conversations because it may be more interesting" gets a laugh and stops the conversation, allowing me to redirect their attention to the topic at hand.
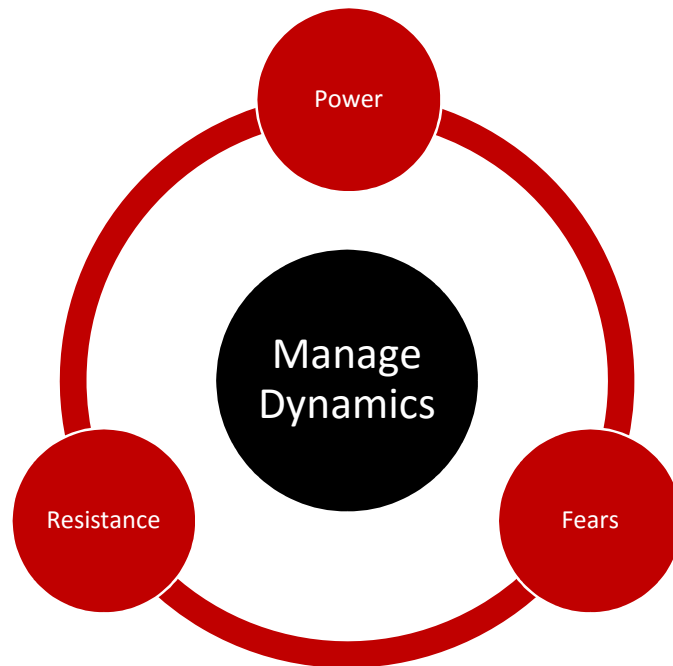
2. Manage Expectations

It is important to effectively communicate the expectations to the group. First, they need to understand what the group needs to accomplish. With assessment groups, that tends to be very specific. For instance, for a job analysis meeting the group of SMEs is required to identify tasks and knowledges on an assessment (KSAs). Other behavioral expectations must also be clear. These can include SMEs only having one conversation at a time, when to take breaks, rules of participation, and rules to avoid distractions (e.g. turning electronic devices off). Once these expectations are clearly communicated, it is the facilitator's role to ensure that all expectations are met.

3. Manage Dynamics

Out of all the four ways to lead and facilitate groups, dynamics can be challenging. While there are many dynamics to focus on, I have identified three which I believe are consistently present and can be used most effectively to influence change. They are shown and discussed below.

A. Power. In family therapy, every therapist learns about power dynamics in groups and are taught to address the hierarchical dynamics. There will always be a group member who wants to challenge and redefine the expectations and ultimately lead the group. Therefore, every group facilitator needs to be prepared to manage the power dynamics. In my experience, there are three overall ways to confront the power dynamics:

- Directly confront it with the individual member
- Directly confront it by using the group to address the member
- Completely ignore it and observe whether the group will address it

All of the above options are legitimate and depending on the situation one may be more suitable than another.

An example of where I had to use these tactics occurred a few years ago when I was facilitating a job analysis focus group. A group member suggested that a specific task be included. The task was considered and discussed, but the group did not believe that the task was relevant, important, and critical. However, the group member who suggested this specific task would consistently mention it throughout the focus group. At first, I asked the group whether we should discuss the task again to consider for inclusion. Again, the group did not find this specific task relevant, important, and/or critical. The individual group member continued to interject by requesting that this specific task statement be included. As a facilitator, I choose to be less directive and allowed the group to address this individual. Unfortunately, the

group allowed her/him to continue a few more times until I decided to directly confront the group member. Consequently, I asked this group member whether she/he thought that "it was useful to consistently mention the inclusion of this task when the group has decided to exclude it?" I followed up by asking the member "what do you believe is not being heard?" She/he responded and the group said "we understand you and we need to continue with identifying the remaining tasks." With the group's response, the individual no longer mentioned that specific task.

B. Resistance. Often groups are resistant to accomplishing the goals and expectations that were agreed upon. Resistance is normally unintentional and is often related to power, trust and fear. Most group members are unaware of their own resistance. Like most dynamics, resistance has many forms including verbal and non-verbal. Normally, the same three ways I manage power dynamics work to manage resistance.

I have encountered groups where none of those management techniques worked. For example, I was working with a group of SMEs to identify the relevant, important, and critical tasks and knowledges of a job analysis and explained to the group members the importance of conducting this work. They spent the first day and a half analyzing the facilitation process instead of working on the job analysis. I made many attempts to confront the resistance using the group and confronting the leaders. Unfortunately, those methods did not work. The group just did not have the capacity to move forward until they could trust the process from their own perspective. This example shows that the facilitator needs to be able to overcome any situation. In this case, once the group began doing the work, they were assigned homework assignments to identify the task and knowledges virtually to make up the time lost.

C. Fears. It is imperative that the facilitator manage the fears that may arise among group members. I have observed, even in teaching graduate counseling students, that group members will not ask questions or explore situations because of unconscious fear. It is important to check in with group members to ensure they are participating. Often I will talk to group members who are not verbally participating during breaks. They almost always have something to contribute and simply need some encouragement to raise their opinions and suggestions to the group.

4. Manage Yourself

I believe learning about yourself is the most challenging of all the four ways to lead and facilitate assessment groups. To manage oneself, one must find ways to become self-aware of their emotions and thoughts. Below are four behaviors you can use to help manage yourself and, thereby, the group.
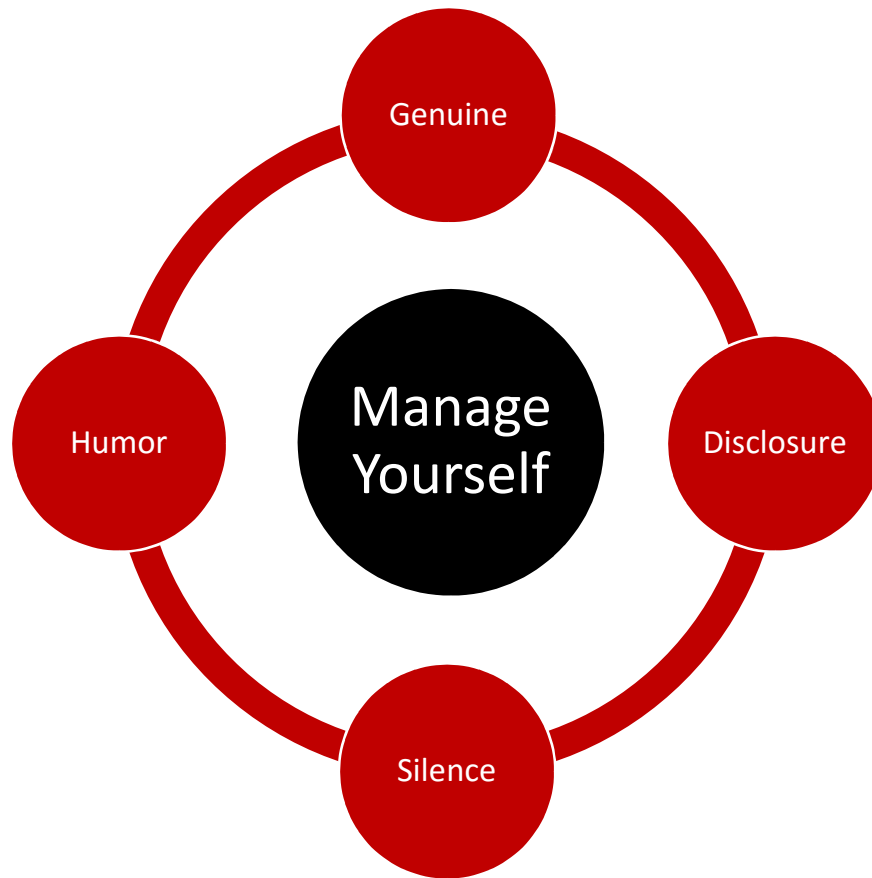
Genuine. Being genuine is difficult, especially when you are assigned a professional role such as a group facilitator. It is also the most difficult character trait to teach an individual since many individuals never have an opportunity to learn who they are and how to accept and be comfortable with themselves. Yes, there are certain roles, rules, and expectations for every situation - however, in each of these roles one needs to also "be themselves". In fact, when people are asked what a leader should be, the answer is almost always that they should be genuine.

So, in every group I am ok with being who I am. I have flaws. I make mistakes. But I sincerely care about the people and work to meet the expectations of the group. I have also found that without a sense of genuineness, it is very difficult to connect or relate to any members of the group.

Disclosure. Disclosure is a very advanced skill but is highly effective when used properly. It usually requires a rationale of why the facilitator should share their own experiences and whether the timing is appropriate. Above all, it should be taken into consideration whether the disclosure will help the group achieve their goals and manage their dynamics more effectively.

With every item writing group, I share my very brief experiences of writing statistical items for a national exam. I discuss with them the difficulties and methods to overcome those challenges. Why do I do this? I believe by sharing my own experiences, I am deconstructing the hierarchy through empathy. In other words, any resistance or power dynamics that could have been an issue in completing the task may have been thwarted by the use of disclosure.

Silence. I consider silence an advanced skill that is rarely used deliberately. When working with the groups, silence can be used to allow SMEs to process information, dynamics, and observations of the group. For instance, pausing after explaining directions to the group is an effective use of silence. Silence can also be very effective in moderating group dynamics including the tempo, behaviors, and emotions. For instance, a group of SMEs began challenging the method on rating items for an Angoff standard setting exercise. They had a series of questions concerning the Angoff method which I began to respond to but was soon interrupted by their own responses without completing my response. I decided to stop responding and waited for them to stop. I then intentionally had the group remain silent for about 10 seconds and then provided them with the rationale but in a slow and calm manner. This slowed their process which had become very fast and disordered. I also told them that "If you have a response, let us try to address your questions one at a time."

Humor. Using humor can increase group cohesiveness while minimizing negative resistance, power, and fear dynamics. Humor should be used very selectively as it has the highest likelihood of failing, creating unintended negative consequences. There are two reasons using humor may fail. The first reason is that humor can easily be insulting and the second reason is that the joke may only be humorous to a few individuals. Used well, humor can be very effective in helping reach your goals. It is one of those few interventions that can help move tasks forward by increasing comfort and promoting connectedness and trust within the group.

When I work with groups, I usually use humor improvisationally. However, I have some prepared humorous interventions. For instance, I have told group members that if we don't complete a particular task before lunch, I will show them Richard Simmons workout videos. The SMEs usually laugh and normally get the task done before lunch.

🗄 What About Group Process?
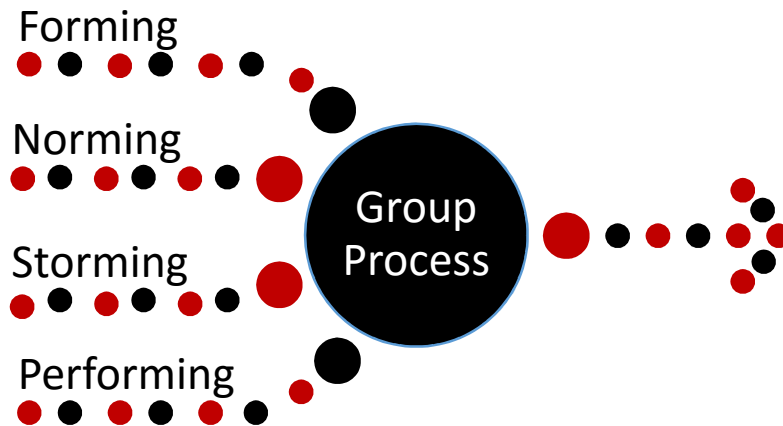
We believe group process are important and helpful to leading and facilitating groups. Many researchers have and continue to propose theories on group process. The most known and popular of these theories comes from Bruce Tuckman. In his theory, he describes group process in four stages: forming, storming, norming, and performing. While his theory is incredibly powerful and applicable, there are countless theories that can be equally or more effective in explaining the process. In my opinion, I believe many group behaviors and dynamics can be explained using various group theories on process; some will be obviously more applicable and useful than others. The group facilitator should learn and adapt theories that allow them to be a more effective group therapist. I often use marital and family theories and social therapy when explaining group process.

📢 So What Does This All Mean For Me?

The above white paper was intended to propose four ways of leading and facilitating SME groups in the testing industry. I believe that using the four ways will help SME group facilitators be more effective. It should be noted that these methods represent my experiences and opinions and do not cover all that needs to be discussed concerning groups, such as facilitating groups and understanding the various demographic cohorts (e.g., ethnicity, race, region, gender, education). Therefore, I encourage current facilitators to continually educate themselves on group theory, processes, and interventions.