

Undercurrents of Group Dynamics

This is a sample of materials sent to participants to read before attending a custom-designed workshop: "Leading and Facilitating Great Meetings"

What is it that enables a group to work well together? With few exceptions, most of us want the group to succeed in its mission, task or goal. But we continue to hear complaints about meetings and task forces. When people come together to work on issues, something often gets in the way of making progress.

The problem is the unspoken concerns, like undercurrents, that pull us away from our obvious tasks. When we walk through the door into a meeting, we have varying degrees of expectations and anticipation about the group's success. Some of these are:

1. Identity with the group
 - How do I fit in? Am I an "insider" or "outsider"?
2. Influence/Control
 - Who's calling the shots here?
 - How much influence will I have?
 - Will I be listened to, allowed or able to contribute?
3. Getting Along
 - How will I get along with the others?
 - What are their expectations of me?
 - How formal or informal will we be?
 - Can I be open in what I say? Will they?
4. Loyalty
 - How does membership in this group relate to my other roles and responsibilities?

As a group of individuals convene into a task force or work team there is a maturation process. This occurs in fairly predictable phases:

Stage 1: Forming

In the initial stage we are like hesitant swimmers standing by the edge of a pool, dabbling our toes in the water. This is a stage of transition to test our individual status and the leader's guidance. We may feel excited, and optimistic. We may have pride in being asked to serve on the task force or team. Conversely we may also feel a bit anxious about the task ahead and curious (or even suspicious) about others in the group.

We try to define the task and decide how it will be accomplished. We also try to get answers to the undercurrents listed above. We'll have lofty, conceptual discussions among some members and impatience from others. Irrelevant problems or issues often come up, especially complaints about other organizations or entities. All of this is perfectly normal in this stage and often little is accomplished toward the mission or goal of the group.

Stage 2: Storming

This is probably the most difficult stage to successfully navigate. It's as if we have jumped into the water and fear we will drown. So we begin the thrash about. We are impatient about the lack of progress and tend to argue about what actions we should take. We tend to rely solely on our personal and professional expertise, not really collaborating with others.

Often we find ourselves arguing about an issue oblivious that we are in agreement. We may find ourselves choosing 'sides' on issues. We sense a 'pecking order' and some may feel undervalued. Some may feel pessimistic or sorry we are a part of this group. Although little progress toward the group's goal may be made, we are beginning to understand each other. It is a time to get to discover what each of us brings to the group and our preferences for working together.

Stage 3: Norming

At last, we begin to reconcile competing loyalties and agendas. We've sorted out our roles and individuality within the group. We begin to help each other stay afloat rather than competing with one another. We are more optimistic and able to express criticism constructively. There is a sense of cohesion, common understandings and common goals resulting in more time and energy to focus on the project. Yet, in our attempt to be more harmonious, we may find ourselves avoiding conflict.

Stage 4: Performing

By this stage, the group has settled its relationships and expectations. As we've identified each other's strengths and contributions we can now swim on course. We understand each other's concerns and can work collaboratively toward the goal. It is easier to prevent or work through problems in the group and we have a sense of pride and ownership with our accomplishments. At this stage, we get a lot of work done.

The duration and intensity of the stages vary with different groups. Sometimes Stage 4, Performing, is achieved in a meeting or two; other times it may take months. Knowing these stages helps to reduce the anxiety about the group's success. There is a roller coaster of highs and lows and these patterns can be different for each group.