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October 2000

Helping Groups Make Effective Decisions

Manage Perspectives for Good Outcomes

Groups are an integral part of every organization. Whether you call them teams, committees, or boards, chances are your agency uses groups to make important decisions. Organizations routinely rely on groups to gather information, analyze situations, and organize priorities. But it's often a difficult task to manage the multiple perspectives of members and encourage them to make effective group decisions. This task is crucial if the organization is to proceed with important business and information technology projects.

A number of facilitation tools exist that help people lead groups through these crucial decision-making processes. A strong group leader can skillfully use these tools to empower and encourage the group to make effective decisions.

Hopes and Fears Exercises

Hopes and fears exercises are techniques that help members of a working group share their perspectives on the task at hand and build a common understanding of goals and potential problems. These examples help answer the question, "Do we share the same idea of what's supposed to happen here?"

What are they?

Share hopes for project outcomes. A facilitator or team leader first asks each member of the group to articulate his or her hopes for the outcomes of the process. These are recorded on a board or other display so all members can see them. The hopes are then organized into related clusters. Each item is discussed so it's well understood by the members.

Prioritize and discuss group hopes. You may use rating or prioritizing techniques to show the relative importance of the different hopes or expectations. The discussion can also include ideas about how to ensure that the most important hopes are realized.

Express project fears. The same process is then used to elicit and discuss the fears. Each member is asked to articulate what undesirable outcomes they fear will occur. Again, cluster and discuss the fears.

Determine ways to prevent fears. As with the hopes, the discussion can include attention to preventing the most important or costly fears from being realized.

What are they good for?

Build common understanding of goals and barriers. These exercises are most useful in building a work group's shared perspective of its tasks and potential problems. This is

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particularly important near the beginning of a group work assignment. It's at these early stages that the members are likely to have the greatest differences of opinion about what they're supposed to do.

Shared perspective for effective work. Coming to a more thoroughly shared perspective is necessary for effective group work and communication among its members. It is also useful to identify where some members' hopes may be unattainable or even inappropriate to your overall goal.

Prevent sources of frustration. If these unrealistic or inappropriate hopes are identified early in the process, they are less likely to become sources of frustration and resentment that can interfere with your group's effectiveness. It's also reassuring for members to learn that others share their fears.

Simple, effective icebreakers. These unthreatening activities are useful as icebreakers for new groups. They allow the members to learn about each other and begin useful interaction smoothly. The process of eliciting individual member's hopes and fears, and giving them credence, also emphasizes the value of each person's contributions and can promote more enthusiastic participation in future activities.

Some limitations and considerations

Reluctance to reveal feelings. Since these exercises are commonly used for new groups, members may be hesitant to reveal their hopes and fears to unfamiliar people.

Skillful facilitation necessary ingredient. A good facilitator is required to get the hopes and fears process moving. Even with such skillful facilitation, it's likely that some members will withhold information for strategic purposes, or out of simple embarrassment. So the full range of hopes and fears may be unavailable for discussion.

Smaller groups most effective. Because the process depends on active and relatively free-flowing discussion, it's inappropriate for very large groups. The effectiveness of the discussion may also be reduced by disruptive behavior.

Visioning

Visioning is used to establish an image of what you want your organization to look like in the future. The time frame associated with the vision depends on the needs of the group and may range from months to years. The point of creating a vision is to stretch your organization; describe what you want your agency to look like and strive for in the future. It's important to be realistic. The vision should express the work that all participants will need to do in order to accomplish the desired outcomes.

What is it?

Various methods. The task of visioning can be completed in several ways. Here you'll find a generic example. You must get everyone to share ideas, reach a shared understanding, build consensus, and craft a meaningful vision statement.

One approach:

1. Use a round robin format and elicit responses from those in the room regarding the characteristics they want to see in your project. You might consider grouping these by categories such as products, customers, etc.
2. Display, in some appropriate format, all of the responses from step 1.
3. Clarify what is being expressed in each statement, but avoid debate at this time.
4. Establish one or more small groups to take the statements and report back with alternative vision statements that reflect the key ideas.
5. Encourage the full group to discuss the statement and begin modifying it—this is when debate begins.
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 until you produce a statement that satisfies your needs.

What is it good for?

Shared goals. Vision statements are often very good at getting everyone on the same page. In the process of constructing a vision statement, preferences will be stated and conversations stimulated in order to reach consensus on ultimate goals.

Reflect interests, needs, skills. Remember that vision statements should reflect your interests and be attuned to your specific needs and capabilities. Otherwise, the likelihood of accomplishing the vision will be greatly reduced.

Important activity for any group. A well-crafted vision statement that has buy-in from everyone involved is often a crucial first step in beginning any group activity.

Some limitations and considerations

We've done this before. Almost everyone has been through a process like this at one time or another. Some of the most prolific buzzwords around mention vision, mission, empower, and consensus. The level of cynicism may be very high when an exercise like this begins, and may remain high even when a vision statement is developed.

Address skeptics. Perhaps the best advice is to directly address participants' cynicism. Let them know that they are in the room to make things different. The group has to find a way to cooperate and take responsibility for the outcomes.

Predict the future. The final pitfall associated with vision statements is that people often make lousy prognosticators. Time and experience may necessitate revisiting the vision and modifying it as circumstances dictate. The real key here is to see the vision as a dynamic statement and not simply a static document meant for framing on the wall.

Consensus Building, Collaboration, and Decision Making

Projects don't happen in a vacuum. Work with groups from other agencies and organizations is often required to successfully plan and implement a business or IT project. These tools are ways of answering the question, "How can we help the teams function effectively?" Consensus-finding and building tools are often needed to help your team resolve different views and conflicting objectives or interests. Teams also frequently need models for collaboration, especially if they've never worked together before. Effective teamwork will also involve difficult decisions about details and how to proceed with development, so some decision-making tools and techniques can be useful.

What are they?

Meeting management methods, ground rules. Managing meetings involves ground rules, agendas, clear purposes, facilities planning and preparation, careful recording of results, notification of members, and communication.

Effective group processes. Group facilitation is one widely-used method. A facilitator is someone trained in group process and methods to build the group's capacity for managing its own activity. The facilitator typically works with a group for a limited time to build its capacity for effective work or to accomplish a specific task.

Effective conflict resolution. Conflict is a normal part of group work that can result from adversarial relationships, different interests, or both. Techniques for conflict management include diagnosing the causes of the conflict, mediation, negotiation, and problem solving. Mediation involves helping the parties understand the possibilities, communicate effectively, and recognize opportunity for compromise. Negotiation provides a framework for finding a mix of compromises that will resolve the conflict. Well-understood rules and guiding principles can be particularly effective in conflict negotiation.

What are they good for?

Elicit information, brainstorming. Facilitators often use nominal group process to elicit information from the group. In this technique, a facilitator provides an opportunity for all group members to contribute to the discussion and share ideas. The results can be prioritized by voting methods in which all group members have equal influence on the results. Multi-voting, where each group member can vote for more than one choice or has multiple votes to distribute, can be very effective for complex decisions and help avoid forming factions within a group.

Understand issues, resolve conflicts. Consensus building tools are useful in facilitating the two key requirements for reaching agreements in a work group setting: identifying and understanding issues, and resolving conflicts.

Some limitations and considerations

Effective group process takes time. It's unreasonable to expect new groups to accomplish substantive work immediately. Invest in building skills, sharing understandings, and committing to the group process.

Vulnerable to disruptive, subversive behavior. Individual members can wreak havoc on a group's efforts to work collaboratively. Without effective internal controls and norms, such behavior can derail group efforts.

Right people at the table. It's critical to make good decisions about who to involve in group processes. You can have too much as well as too little participation. Choosing the most effective level requires careful consideration of the needs of the group and the participating organizations.

For More Information

Any organization can put these techniques to good use when determining how to move forward with important business and IT initiatives. Tools for gathering, analyzing, and organizing information are essential. Over the years, CTG has used these tools and techniques to help a variety of government agencies manage multiple perspectives and make effective decisions. You can learn more about these and other tools in:

And Justice for All: Designing Your Business Case for Integrating Justice Information
http://www.ctg.albany.edu/projects/doj/dojmn.html

This business case guidebook contains an extensive appendix full of tools to help: assess your current situation, articulate a vision and choose specific objectives, identify and understand your audience, identify and evaluate options, and prioritize and plan projects.

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October 2000
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