

Is everybody happy? Tools for effective group-work

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Turning the Tide Weekend workshop – May 2009

Brief notes summarising activities of the weekend

Session 1 - Friday evening Shared task

Time limited task given - Details were along the lines of: “You are an affinity group who have come together to decide a protest action at a local company ... you have to decide on the type of action and the details of the action: what /how /who etc. in 35 mins”.

The task was completed, and there was a discussion afterwards on what was observed about the processes involved. The following was noted.

- Time limit – this affected the process
- Group dynamics – the personalities and concerns of the participants
- Leadership – to note how this happened?
- Was it participatory or not? – each participated in different ways, some spoke, everyone volunteered to do something, hand signals were used, checked out with quiet people if they had anything to add.
- Who speaks?
- What about those who did not participate?
- Thought processes – some were faster thinkers & speakers and others were slower: who leads?
- Observation: it was fast paced (as the ‘facilitators’ were quick thinkers). If the slower thinkers facilitate the group goes at a slower pace.
- Suggestion: more actively invite participation from the quieter people
- What roles did people take on in the group?
- Position: circle, relaxed

Session 2/ 3 – Saturday am

First exercise: 2 lines of people, reflecting on what they did that was useful/not useful to the group in the exercise last night, of self and others. Moving along the line so short discussions were had with everyone opposite.

Group exercise: split into groups of 4/5 planning a public open meeting, presenting the ideas back to the group, invited feedback. This led to a competitive nature and some aggressive and defensive behaviour coming out

naturally. Reflected on this and how we, as facilitators, can help avoid a polarised situation.

State of mind exercise: we reflected on how is it most helpful to be before a meeting/before facilitating? Results: calm, spacious, open, give self a pep talk, put luggage aside, aware, expecting the unexpected. Key elements to ensure a successful facilitation: to be neutral, non-judgemental and impartial.

Listening and reflecting exercise in triads: about a dilemma, not stepping in and offering advice, just active listening and reflecting to help people work out their thoughts. This is the same for facilitation. Reflection on how you own mental processes affect your ability to be there for someone else?

Other things from the discussion:

Setting up a mutually agreed starting point

Actively listening

Encouraging other people

Being aware that what one considers an issue may not be the same for everyone

Session 4 - Saturday pm

Discussion about the difference between the differences between 'external' or pure facilitator and 'participant/facilitator' roles (the latter most often used for consensus decision making).

- What is the 'power base' – with factors including: sex/age/social set up (eg privileges – education/articulacy)
- How do I (as facilitator) adapt and thus diminish my impact as facilitator
- Skills used
- Techniques for putting one's stuff aside
- Being honest about what you've heard and not heard as facilitators.

Consensus is about doing the best with the people and time and conditions you have.

Brainstorm about ideas for how to remain external (when in the role of pure facilitator):

- trust the point will come up if it's important enough
- take notes/scribe more actively (to focus more on what the participants are saying)
- mental reminders eg I'm the facilitator this time
- deep breaths and count to 3
- enough preparation time

On the other hand if you are a participant/facilitator then one technique could be to raise your own finger to add a point so people know you are participating, not facilitating.

Session 5 - Saturday pm

Gender

Discussion on how (if?) the fact that the facilitators are both male and the participants are all but one female, has affected the group dynamics. Agreed that being aware of this issue is good/useful – but other issues might have had more impact e.g. whether facilitators stood up or sat down, and at what level (same as participants higher or lower) and that consensus was more relevant.

Task – Boogli Fruit exercise/3 way negotiation

An experiential exercise with one vendor and two buyers (activist + industrialist): how will the players obtain the best outcome for all? What do they want? What do they need? Who has the power? Is self interest going to get the best answer? Who listens? Who speaks? What part does fear play in the interactions? Or ignorance? Or past experiences? Belief systems? Does the third party get marginalised? If so – how/why?

Instead of listening, reflecting, clarifying and understanding what the other parties wanted we naturally went into competition with each other adopting competitive either/or positions. There was enough information for us to reach a very different end position, but none of the group participants asked for this information or explored the reasons why each buyer wanted the fruit. They naturally assumed they were competition. Another example of how we adopt polarised positions quickly and how mediation/facilitation involves postponing assumptions until you have all the information out on the table.

Session 6 - Saturday pm

Facilitated discussion

Question put: “In a non-violent society, is consensus important”

- Democracy is the rule of the majority
- If not stakeholders, people feel disempowered....
- Violence may arise
- Society – what does it seek? – to be moral? / to be happy? / equality?
- Consensus society – you have to leave your ‘pride’ at the door
- Process of consensus building impacts on non-violence
- Idea of what ‘non-violence’ is in a society – needs to be understood...
- If there is no stake in the outcome – there is no *benefit* to consensus

Feedback on facilitation:

- Open questions encourage the participants to find a solution
- Let discussion run quite a lot before summarising
- Watch for polarising words eg “only” and don’t get behind polarisation.

Session 7 - Saturday pm

Discussion

Consensus-building / Flow of consensus meeting

Consensus model:

1. What is the issue for discussion: is everyone clear? Is there a shared understanding? Agree the obvious. *Exercise: think of the colour blue.... Think of a blue sky...think of a blue sky with clouds*
2. Have a broad open discussion - explore ideas, concerns, excitement...
3. Don’t fall into an either/or trap – it is not a case of ‘A’ or ‘B’
4. Synthesise a proposal of the best stuff so far: bring together / listen actively / reflect back / best ideas? / deal with concerns...
5. Discuss the proposal and make “friendly” amendments, add extra thoughts ...take the proposal and make it even better: an ‘aspirational proposal’
6. **Test the consensus: so that the best idea for the whole group is discovered...**
 - **Any blocks/ veto / major obstacle?**
 - **Any ‘stand asides’?**
 - **Any ‘non-supports’?**
 - **Do we agree?**
7. Implement the decision: who/ what / when / how etc....

Discussion and clarification about the above

1. If everyone agrees: has it been agreed too quickly? At a point of absolute tiredness?
2. Non-support: registering dissent, to get it noted, but agrees to take part nonetheless
3. ‘Stand aside’:
 - agree to let the decision go ahead, but will not contribute to making it happen...
 - don’t support for practical reasons (eg cannot make the action)
 - agree to disagree and can live with it – but don’t want to actively support.
4. Block /Veto: if the decision goes ahead it will split the collective – it is a major concern for the benefit of the whole group. This is not because of a personal vendetta or to make a point. Often this reminds groups of their principles. *This means that there is no consensus....*
5. *Participation – community - consensus: similar skills needed – that is: consensus building.*

Session 9 - Saturday pm

What qualities do you need to work in consensus?

1. What qualities does an individual need to do a good consensus facilitation:

- Active listening
- Willingness to be open to the suggestions of others
- Patience
- Honesty
- Willingness to share ideas and voice concerns
- Awareness of group dynamics
- Self awareness
- Self-confident in an assertive, non-aggressive way
- Not taking it personally when disagreement arises: not responding defensively
- Humility
- Ability to communicate succinctly

2. What qualities does a consensus group need to share?

- shared core aim
- ability to be inclusive, without compromising on core values
- open to others' ideas
- know that there is not one right answer
- patience
- humility
- self-awareness / group awareness
- good / active listening skills
- sense of humour always helps
- mutual respect
- willingness to accept that other truths are better
- ability to communicate
- willingness to listen to others' opinions and accept criticism
- willingness to build relationships with other group members

3. What principles of consensus can we use in any participatory group?

- Having a space for a broad open discussion at the start
- For not everyone to agree – but for groups to still function i.e. 'non-support' / 'stand aside'
- Trust that everyone will have a chance to speak
- not being concerned with an idea being 'yours'
- allowing for each opinion being valued for itself without polarisation
- look to bring ideas together to form a proposal
- have the opportunity for amendments to be suggested and made to a proposal
- implement a proposal
- 'you don't need to be disagreeable to disagree'

4. Critiques of formal consensus: Where might it not work or be appropriate?

- Where we don't share basic / core values- or the same aim....
- If there is a lack of honesty or if a particular individual is very dogmatic
- Where a decision is needed in 5 minutes
- Consensus can happen quickly for a simple decision
- Where the word of the leader is final – pope / emperor
- Where there is already a hierarchy
- When participants are not behind the process – or do not understand the process
- In an authoritarian setting: eg prison
- Query re: other organisations: shareholders meeting / parliament / where numbers top 1000
- Geographical / time /spatial limitations

Session 10 - Saturday pm

Last session of the evening was to prepare for a presentation for the following day. Each group of three took one of the following:

- (1) Evaluation of the weekend
- (2) One of the issues from the 'PARK IT' poster
- (3) Preparation for the 'do it yourself' session – to open up any issue from the weekend / course as a whole.

Session 11 – Sunday am

Presentations – outcome summaries

- (1) **Issue** – how to deal with 'difficult' behaviour in a consensus-building meeting. Using the handout provided – asked groups to consider various behaviours (and the underlying reasons for the behaviours – eg: what is the individual getting out of this apparently unhelpful behaviour)) and how to creatively deal with them. Example: dominator – person needs others to 'affirm' him – respond by holding a 'process' meeting / rotating chair / acknowledge and affirm dominator's behaviour / challenge the behaviour (*Note: see Seeds of Change information – available free on line*)
- (2) **DIY day** – considered possible 'forum theatre' as a full / half day. Agreed that we need some time at the next workshop to consider what we want to work on the following month. Need to consider – do we need an external facilitator? (most thought – yes it would be helpful). Agreed that we wanted more practice of facilitation of groups / consensus building / tasks etc.

(3) **Evaluation** – used an active technique – with everyone standing up to position themselves in response to the questions put.

Points gleaned: need to record whatever the feedback is...!...good engagements from everyone.....facilitators excellent... venue good (except some of the beds)food great...!

Notes on facilitation (feedback on the presentations / process)

- ‘Model’ answers to questions put – that is: give an example
- When setting an activity: tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them and then tell them what you told them.....
- Keep a facilitation journal – for reflection
- **Check** for consensus
- Talk to the group
- Take feedback and suggestions in a positive way
- Think ahead: What is likely to happen? How to handle it?
- Summary of post-it notes needs to expand it more

Game

Hands on the table – alternately placed flat on table – then take turns – in order of hands to bang on table.....then reverse order..... etc.....
If you don't know this one – it is a good ‘energy increasing’ game.

Wall poster

Participatory tools and techniques:

This was added to throughout the sessions – as we covered the different

1. **Plenary** (all together)
2. **Task-based learning** eg: role playing exercise
3. **Hassle line:** pairs debrief (two lines opposite each other – one minute to debrief opposite number – the end of one side of the line moves to opposite end – and all on that side move up one space.
4. **Normal group technique:** arbitrary groups take ideas and discuss aspect – then take ideas from the groups one at a time.
5. **Meta-plan** ... with ‘post-it notes’ with ideas written on the notes – and then placed on a chart with a divided space with a division: eg: ‘consensus / external..... and notes might be placed on the ‘meeting line’ where ideas overlap.
6. **Carousel:** charts are set out with one idea per chart listed – then groups move between each and add ideas to each chart

Note – an example of this was used in a ‘large world café’ setting- where ideas were brainstormed form among a large group setting up a meeting / action group for climate change community action group.

Wall poster

‘PARKING’: ideas were listed on a chart – to be ‘thought out’ during the session.

- * Things that are natural or socialised reactions or ways of communicating
- * Tools for avoiding / recovering from polarisation in meetings
- * Climate conference / PGA hallmarks / capitalists / difference between ‘consensus’ – and ‘decision-making’.

Wall poster

MIND-MAP

- highlighting factors to be aware re: ‘state of mind’ when facilitating consensus-building meetings

- Be aware of fears – your own / others
- Expect the unexpected
- Improvisations
- Flexibility
- Gender awareness
- Equality of participation
- Calm – take time and space for yourself – plan your day
- Leave emotional baggage behind – be aware of your own baggage
- Allowing safe silences / spaces – aware of need for space /safety – attuned to rhythm
- External facilitator = process only ... Internal facilitator = process + content