

# Roles People Play in Groups

Good group dynamics don't happen by accident but are the product of awareness about how groups work: the roles people play in groups, effective management of group-process and an understanding of power dynamics. Effective facilitation juggles these elements to bring out the best in participants to accomplish the group's goals.

## Task & Maintenance Roles

Roles in groups are traditionally divided into task and maintenance roles. Task roles help the group make progress and move towards achieving goals; and maintenance roles help the group build or sustain a sense of community and cohesion.

Everyone in the group plays one role or more either consciously, though more often unconsciously. The challenge for facilitators is to recognise and manage all the roles and fill the appropriate one(s) when necessary.

Ability to perform these functions is instinctive (the tension reliever who cracks a joke at just the right moment), can be assigned (such as appointing a timekeeper) and learned (*I promise myself I will not interrupt this time*). Next time you're in any sort of group setting, observe the dynamics and see how many of the following roles are present, and try out ones that aren't instinctive to you. How do you feel, how does it affect the dynamic?

For a facilitator/trainer the important skill is to learn and constantly sharpen the ability to identify and fill functions as needed, or point them out to the group. Interpersonal tensions may decrease when group members perceive problems not as people's faults but as unfilled roles. It is also healthy to rotate particular roles (of the assigned type) so that people can have a broader understanding of how all the parts fit together to make a whole.

**Task Roles** - help the group make progress and move towards achieving goals

Role	Purpose	Technique
Initiator	Give direction and purpose to the group	Proposing tasks, goals; defining problems; suggesting procedures and solutions
Information-seeker	Makes group aware of need for information	Requesting relevant facts; asking for clarification
Information-giver	Provides group information relevant to its work	Offering relevant facts, avoiding reliance on opinions when information is needed
Opinion-giver	Provides basis for group decision	Stating feelings, beliefs and evaluating a suggestion
Clarifier	Eliminates confusion about the current task	Defining terms; interpreting ideas; identifying issues and alternatives
Elaborators	Reduces ambiguity, synthesises information to show consequences	Giving examples, developing plans and explaining
Harmoniser	Adjusts or harmonises issues, ideas, proposals that may conflict	Suggesting ways that different issues can be handled, new ways forward
Process-organiser	Establishes an order to the meeting	Suggesting agenda items, procedures, where to go next
Summariser	Shows how ideas are related; draws ideas together	Pulling together related issues, showing contradictions, restating suggestions
Philosopher/critic	Shows that a particular issue is not unique; inserts perspectives from similar experiences	Drawing general statements from specific ones; critically examining assumptions and ideas (not people!)

**Maintenance Roles** - help the group build or sustain a sense of community and cohesion

Role	Purpose	Technique
Encourager	Brings out others' opinions and gives others recognition	Being friendly, warm and responsive to others; accepting others' contributions
Feelings-expresser/ Vibes Watcher	Calls group attention to reactions to ideas and suggestions made	Expressing own feelings and restating others' feelings
Tension-reliever	Reduces tension; allows group to express its feelings	Joking, clowning; suggesting breaks or exercises/games
Mediator/Harmoniser	Maintains group cohesion; reconciles disagreements	Offering or accepting compromises; yielding status, admitting error; supporting reconciliation of differences
Facilitator	Maintains open discussion; keeps communication flowing; keeps an eye on all these roles	Drawing out silent members; suggesting procedures for discussions
Standards-setter	Makes group aware of direction and progress	Expressing the group concern; suggesting tasks; stating standards and goals for the group to achieve
Interpreter	Explains what someone has said; helps others to understand each other	Paraphrasing or summarising speakers' contributions
Listener/Follower	Provides stimulating and interested participant for the group	Accepting ideas of others; going along with the group
Agreement Tester	Finds out how close the group is to agreement	Noting progress; stating areas of agreement, making tentative proposals for group reaction; asking if agreement is possible
Evaluator	Keeps group in line with goals; provides a sense of progress	Measuring accomplishments against goals; noting progress
Time-keeper	Keeps the group on track in terms of agreed schedule	Noting the time and suggesting what next

### Challenging Behaviour

There are also negative, or not always helpful, roles such as the blocker, dominator, destructive joker, rambler, windbag, interrupter, wet blanket, egomaniac, diva, cynic, story-teller and so on. The tip sheets on power dynamics and group process look closer at how to manage these challenging behaviours.

### Assigned Roles

Depending on the group's goals there will be a variety of possible 'assigned roles' to divide up the care and maintenance of the group. Some are mentioned above such as timekeeper or sometimes an expressed vibes watcher can be appointed if appropriate. Dividing up these additional roles can add a great element of cohesion to the group and is looked at more closely in the group-process tip sheet.