



Tools for Effective Group Discussion

Objectives:

- ✓ Gain knowledge and skills necessary for being an effective group member and group leader.
- ✓ Demonstrate the ability to interpret non-verbal cues of group leaders and group members.
- ✓ Identify various statements that are examples of communication tools that group leaders use in open discussions.
- ✓ Develop skills in recording contributions from participants on flip charts.

Advance Preparation:

- ✓ Review lesson plan.
- ✓ Duplicate handouts and worksheets for each participant.
- ✓ Review Power Point slides and slide notes for presentation.
- ✓ Prepare overhead transparencies if not using Power Point program.

Materials Needed:

- ✓ Handouts duplicated for each participant:
 - ["10 Rules for Asking Non-Threatening Questions"](#)
 - ["Tips for Effective Use of Flip Charts"](#)
- ✓ Worksheet duplicated for each participant:
 - ["So, What Is He Saying?"](#)
 - ["Tools Discussion Leaders Use in Open Discussions"](#)
- ✓ [PowerPoint: "Skilled Group Leader" slides 18-28](#) and notes pages
- ✓ Overhead Projector or LCD Projector and Computer
- ✓ Screen
- ✓ 2 flip chart pads and easels and markers for chart writing demonstration

Time Needed:

- ✓ Preparation: 1 hour
- ✓ Presentation: 1 hour

BACKGROUND

When individuals work together with others in a group to make decisions, the quality of the decisions is generally better because:

1. Collectively groups bring more knowledge, a broader array of experiences and increased creativity to the decision-making process; and
2. Groups encourage greater participation from larger numbers of people, and the result is greater buy-in and support for the decision.

Four essential skills for effective group discussions are:

1. Asking questions
2. Recognizing and using non-verbal cues
3. Using active listening skills
4. Recording the group's work on flip charts.

For additional background information review the handouts, slide notes, lesson plan and instructor's comments integrated into the lesson.

INTEREST APPROACH

- Announce to the group that you have decided to build a playhouse for your child (or doghouse for your new puppy, sun porch, patio, barn, etc) and you need some help. You want to be sure you have all the materials and tools necessary before you start. Ask the group to tell you what you will need.
- List all suggestions on a flip chart.
- Discuss what happens when people start a task and don't have the right tools.
- The same is true with being a discussion leader. There are tools - techniques and skills - that discussion leaders use that increase their effectiveness.
- Ask the group to identify techniques and skills they have seen discussion leaders or facilitators use. Allow time for sharing.
- Share that this lesson will provide several tools and techniques they can use when working with committees, councils, or volunteer groups to assure everyone participates and the group is effective in completing its' task.

LESSON

I. TOOLS FOR EFFECTIVE GROUP DISCUSSIONS

A. ASKING QUESTIONS

Instructor's Comments: *The key to all effective group discussion is framing the question in a manner that encourages participation of all members, and addresses the issues at hand.*

Distribute Handout: "10 Rules For Asking Non-Threatening Questions" (See slide notes for discussing rules 1-10.)

SLIDE #18 - Rules 1-5 (See slide notes.)

SLIDE #19 - Rules 6-10 (See slide notes.)

B. RECOGNIZING AND USING NON-VERBAL CUES TO COMMUNICATE

Instructor's Comments: *Group leaders should recognize the messages they are sending through their facial expressions, nods of the head, and ways in which they stand or sit. Consciously, group leaders should pay close attention to the cues they receive from participants. A nod may indicate understanding or agreement, and a frown may indicate confusion or disagreement. When leading a discussion or guiding a group through a decision making process, the discussion leader is always "on." Others are watching and taking their cue from the body language.*

Group Activity - Distribute Handout: "So, What Is He Saying?"

In pairs, discuss how participants might interpret the actions of a discussion leader described on the worksheet? In other words, what are the messages the participant gets from the leader's actions? Write the message you think the participant is receiving in the column on the right. (State as: "You wish I would..." or "You feel...", "You think," etc.)

Possible Responses in Italics:

- ✓ Leader looks at watch while participant is speaking. - *You wish I would quit talking. You're not listening.*
- ✓ Leader looks out the window. - *You're not paying*

*attention to me. You wish you were somewhere else.
You're bored with my comments.*

- ✓ Leader maintains eye contact and nods. - *You are hearing me. You are paying attention to my comments.*
- ✓ Leader makes brief notes or records ideas on a flip chart. - *What I'm saying is important. You think what I say is worth remembering.*
- ✓ Leader laughs or smiles. - *You think I'm a joke. You misunderstood* OR *If intended to be humorous - You think I have a sense of humor.*
- ✓ Leader crosses arms and leans back in chair. - *You don't want to hear my comments. You are not open to new suggestions.*
- ✓ Leader writes extensively on note pad during response. - *You aren't listening. You are working on something else.*
- ✓ Leader drums fingers on table. - *You are bored with my participation. You wish I would quit talking so you can talk.*
- ✓ Leader leans forward and maintains eye contact. - *You really want to understand my comments. You think I have something worth listening to.*
- ✓ Leader goes to refill coffee cup. - *You think its break time when I'm talking. You feel you already know what I'm going to say, so you don't have to listen.*

C. FACILITATION LISTENING SKILLS

Instructor's Comment: *Effective discussion leaders have a variety of tools that they use to support participants in expressing their ideas and participation in the discussions. When a participant is very emotional about a topic, the leader is able to acknowledge the feelings and make sure the central point is not lost. When a participant rambles, the leader can paraphrase succinctly to help summarize the main points.*

Distribute Worksheet: "Tools Discussion Leaders Use in Open Discussion"

Discuss each tool, as described on the worksheet. Ask participants for examples of how "paraphrasing" statements begin, etc. Ask participants to record for examples of each tool in column three of the worksheet. (Slides 20-28 provide examples.)

- **Paraphrasing:** Calms and clarifies. Using your own words to restate what you think the speaker said. Watch the speaker's reaction to your

comments and ask if you got it right. Keep asking for clarification. Paraphrasing also helps when you think someone else misunderstood. It is an active listening technique that benefits the entire group by encouraging them to think out loud.

What are examples of how *paraphrasing* statements might begin?

SLIDE #20 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Explore Further:** Guides people in clarifying and expanding on their own ideas. It sends the message, "I understand so far, now tell me more."

What are examples of how *explore further* statements might begin?

SLIDE #21 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Mirroring:** Repeating the exact words of the speaker. Use their words, not yours. Mirror the words, not the tone of voice. The tone of voice should be yours. This technique speeds up slow-moving discussion and builds trust.

What are examples of how *mirroring* statements might begin?

SLIDE #22 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Stacking:** Helps people take turns when everyone wants to talk at once. It lets everyone know they will get their chance. Basically it involves asking for a show of hands from people who want to speak, and assigning a number for the order of speaking. After everyone has spoken, ask if anyone else wishes to speak.

What are examples of how *stacking* statements might begin?

SLIDE #23 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Encouraging:** Creates an opening for people to

participate without putting any one individual on the spot.

What are examples of how *encouraging* statements might begin?

SLIDE #24 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Balancing:** Encourages the group to look at the opposite perspective or other views. It sends the message, "It is alright to express opposing viewpoints."

What are examples of how *balancing* statements might begin?

SLIDE #25 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Making Space:** Lets quiet members know they don't have to talk, but gives them the opportunity to speak if they wish to. The vocal members of groups tend to dominate the discussion, and those who quietly think through ideas before speaking or wait for space to interject their ideas often get left out. Some may hold out because they are new to a group and are shy or hesitant to speak up. This technique helps them feel a part of the group. Identify the quiet members and call on them.

What are examples of how *making space* statements might begin?

SLIDE #26 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

- **Intentional Silence:** A brief (few seconds) of quiet time that gives participants a time to think and discover what they want to say. Some people need time to organize their thoughts, others to formulate a logical sequence for their comments, and others to think to think about whether to make a comment that might be risky. Just five seconds of silence can seem longer than it is, however it may give participants needed time to formulate ideas. Tolerating silence is an important skill acquired through practice. Let someone else break the silences in your conversation.

SLIDE #27 - This is how *intentional silences* sound.

- **Listening for Common Ground:** Discussion leaders summarize both similarities and differences that have surfaced, letting all participants know that they are being heard. They then summarize the differences and follow with common ground or similarities. It is important that groups become polarized to keep the points of agreement in front of them as the foundation for working toward mutual agreement.

What are examples of how common ground statements might begin?

SLIDE #28 (Show examples on slide after group shares.)

D. RECORDING THE GROUP'S WORK - USING FLIP CHARTS EFFECTIVELY

Instructor's Comment: The most often used tool of any face-to-face group leader is the flip chart. Flip charts allow the group to record questions and decisions where all can see. Flip charts support the work of a group by:

- ❖ Recording all ideas
- ❖ Encouraging all group members to confirm accuracy
- ❖ Focusing on task at hand
- ❖ Enhancing creativity of ideas
- ❖ Validating the contributions of each participant

Demonstration:

Ask groups to share what makes a flip chart easy to use. Using two flip charts, one person records responses following guidelines. Second person records responses doing the opposite of the guidelines. Discuss and compare the two sheets.

Distribute Handout: "Tips For Effective Use Of Flip Charts"
Discuss each item on the handout.

Instructor's Comment: *Summary of Skills for Effective Discussion Leaders*

Effective discussion leaders all constantly work to improve their skills. They involve all group members. They think through discussions and formulate questions which encourage everyone to respond. They

body language and pick up on non-verbal clues from the group. In addition, they are aware of various tools which encourage open discussion. They are skilled in using the tools to create productive, open and inclusive dialogue. They are also skilled in recording the group's contributions so that no idea is lost.

APPLICATION

- Practice the art of asking non-threatening questions when you are in a group involved in a discussion. Even as a member of the group (if you are not the leader) you can ask people to rephrase, reframe questions to address one question at a time, acknowledge those who contribute and encourage those who haven't responded. Reflect on the quality of the discussion and the variety of contributions that result from effective questioning.
- As a group, try to use the active listening techniques to encourage participation in group discussions. Make a list of the techniques you observed used by the group and at the end of the meeting share with each other. Discuss the general tone of the discussion and the value of using the variety of techniques.
- Share the responsibility of recording ideas on the flip chart and practice the tips for chart writing.

REFERENCES

Hackett, Donald and Martin, Charles L. Facilitation Skills for Team Leaders. Menlo Park, CA: Crisp Publications, Inc., 1993.

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Butler, Ava S. The Trainer's Guide to Running Effective Team Meetings. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill, 1996.
