

# Group Communication

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# Group Communication

by Dave Sharpe\*

We belong to groups to satisfy needs that we cannot meet on our own. By coming together with others, we pool our knowledge and experience to make decisions and accomplish tasks more efficiently than we could individually. We consider groups so important that the average person will spend one year of his or her life in group meetings! Clearly, the more effectively we operate in groups, the greater the return on the investment of our time.

The principal activity in groups is communication. Groups function by communicating ideas. An effective group is one that reaches its conclusions after considering the widest range of ideas. The group will have a wider range to consider if all members contribute ideas. For the group to fulfill its potential, all the members need to feel comfortable in communicating their ideas, and must feel a responsibility to contribute to the group discussion. If all members are not participating, some of the advantages of group action are lost.

Both the leaders and members influence the degree of participation among group members. By increasing participation, not only will the group do a better job of accomplishing its goals, but it is more likely to satisfy individual member goals. The more we believe the group capable of meeting our needs, the more attractive it will be to us, and the more likely we are to increase our future participation. So both members and the group as a whole benefit from improved group communication.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING GROUP COMMUNICATION

### Group Size

The optimum size for a group depends on the nature of its task. On one hand, enough members are needed to provide diversity of specialization and interest. On the other, if the group becomes too large, participation will be stifled. As group members are added, the potential for new combinations of ideas increases significantly. However, there comes a point of diminishing returns as each new member simply limits the amount of speaking time available to other members.

Usually, groups smaller than five feel they lack enough diversity. Once the group has grown beyond seven or eight, the more reticent members may stop contributing. In groups of 15 or more, the forceful members often monopolize the discussion. Two or three members may do all the talking. The other members' ideas may never surface.

When the group is large, it is helpful to break it down into smaller groups for discussion. After the smaller groups have discussed matters, ideas generated in the smaller groups can be brought before the whole group for consideration. Methods such as the Nominal Group Technique (see MontGuide 8401, Setting Group Goals) are designed to facilitate this process.

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## Physical Arrangements

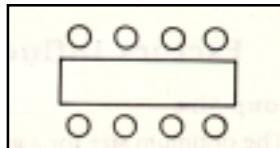
Studies observing numerous small groups have demonstrated a strong relationship between physical arrangements and communication interaction. They have shown interpersonal communication is enhanced by comfortable surroundings. In a classic study done in 1956, Maslow and Mintz examined the influence of meeting places on group productivity. They selected two different meeting rooms: an ugly room such as a janitor's store room, and a beautiful room with carpets and drapes. The ugly room was described as producing fatigue, headaches, irritability and hostility. The beautiful room produced feelings of enjoyment, importance and a desire to continue the group activity.

Where people sit also has an influence on how they interact. Kenneth Short reports that in any group with a designated leader, tension will develop between the leader and the person sitting directly across. The person directly across will either lead support for the leader, lead the opposition, or withdraw from the discussion, leaving a curious leadership vacuum. Further, the person to each of these leaders' right will offer the greatest support for the leader, and the person to their left will offer the next greatest support. You may want to look for this phenomenon in your meetings. By seating known adversaries side by side instead of across from each other, you may be able to reduce group tension.

Member status and eye contact are key considerations in seating arrangements. Where a person sits indicates his or her status in the group. Those who sit at the head of rectangular tables are most often chosen for leadership. People talk much more freely if they have eye contact with other members. Those who sit at the corners of tables have the least eye contact and tend to contribute the least.

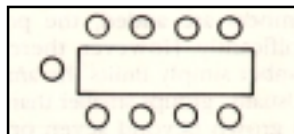
### *The Face-Off*

Direct eye contact does not pull this group together; rather it tends to put members into confrontation with the individual directly across the table. This arrangement is often used in negotiations.



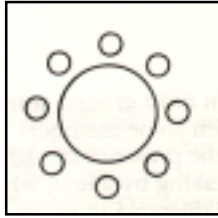
### *The Headman*

The headman arrangement automatically focuses attention toward one person. This member has better eye contact with all the members than does any other. It is frequently used when one person desires to have an authoritarian relationship in the group.



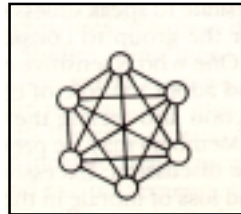
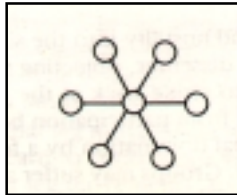
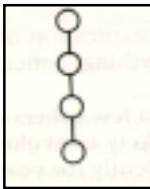
## ***We're All in This Together***

In these arrangements, members have opportunity for equal eye contact with all members. It is best used when the group is working on an equal basis, as did King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table.



## **Communication Networks**

Groups tend to develop communication networks among members and leaders that influence who talks to whom. For the group to function effectively, information should move through the network so the needed information reaches the right person at the right time. A good network ensures that information is available when needed and that the network does not become overloaded with irrelevant information.



A well-known example is the military "chain of command" in which information moves down the line from superior to subordinate. A real problem with the chain of command network is trying to get accurate information back up the line. More common networks are the "wheel" and "web" or variations of these networks.

In the wheel network, the leader is the central communicator. All communication flows into the leader and the leader sends messages back to others in the network. The advantage of this network is that the leader is on top of everything and can more easily control the group. This is also a disadvantage because most members don't like to feel controlled. Another disadvantage is that important information may be lost or filtered out due to overload on the leader. This network slows the transmission of information to the needed parties, which may slow down problem solving or result in missed opportunities.

The web network is a more open communication system in which members are encouraged to communicate directly with each other as well as the leader. Information gets relayed more rapidly, members feel they have a greater influence in the group, and more ideas are likely to be generated through the increased interaction.

## **Psychological Factors**

Each group develops its own ways of handling information. These include the method for making decisions—determining what information is needed to make decisions, how that information is gained and shared, who makes the decisions, and how decisions are implemented. Attitudes of group members and leaders influence these processes. To what extent do they listen to each other? Which topics are or are not acceptable for discussion? What information is expressed openly? What is suppressed? Who controls the flow of information?

In most groups, interaction is not free and equal; there is more interaction between some members than others. Lack of participation by members may be due to the presence of higher status authority figures, poor self-image, or to excessive speaking by a few, which leaves no time for the rest to contribute. The underlying dilemma in group participation is that not everyone's needs or goals can be met. Phillip Hanson points out, "The basic universal concern is about whose needs are being met—How much for me and how much for you?"

If we are to maximize group participation, it is important from the beginning to establish a climate that allows everyone to participate. Anything that suggests some members' ideas are unworthy damages the chance for balanced participation.

Members may be reluctant to contribute for several reasons. The quiet person may be self-critical, succeeding in destroying his or her ideas before presenting them. Then the self-critic doesn't have to open up and be exposed to criticism from others. The member who does not feel fully accepted by the group may restrain his or her output until he or she feels more secure. Another member may hesitate to speak unless she knows that what she wants to say is important enough for the group to consider.

One who is sensitive may read hostility into the simplest expression of criticism and adopt the role of chronic dissenter, objecting to everything, anticipating rejection and feeling the need to strike back at the group.

Members may be prevented from participation because a few others dominate the discussion. Excessive verbal domination by a few is likely to evoke hostility and loss of morale in the many. Groups may suffer along silently for years, enduring such domination. The larger the group or the more dominant a few, the more the others are denied speaking time.

Finally, member listening skills have an impact on the effectiveness of group communication. If we are busy rehearsing our own statements while another is talking, we are likely to consider his remarks more of a distraction than a help. (For a discussion of listening skills, see MontGuide 8303, Talk About Listening).

## **Non-Verbal Communication**

While only one person at a time may be talking in a group, all of the members may be sending non-verbal signals. Non-verbal signals consist of facial expressions, eye movements, gestures and body postures that give clues as to how we are feeling. While one member is speaking, the others may be reacting to his or her nonverbal signals as well as to each other. Some may be leaning forward nodding agreement and signaling to continue. Others may be turned away ignoring the speaker, sending quite different messages by their

posture. Some faces may show openness, others antagonism. Still other members may be trying to send deliberate non-verbal messages to other speakers. All this may be going on at the same time.

In verbal communication, you can choose whether to speak or not. But if you are in the presence of others, you have no choice but to communicate something. Voluntarily or involuntarily, you will be communicating something to others as they observe you. Because much non-verbal communication actually is involuntary, many people consider non-verbal signals more accurate sources of information as to what we are really feeling than our words. If there is discrepancy between our verbal and non-verbal signals, chances are it is the non-verbals that will be believed. In a sense, our actions speak louder than our words.

Unfortunately, most of us are notoriously inaccurate interpreters of non-verbal signals. Study after study has shown we are very poor at reading others' non-verbal communication correctly. This is especially true if we do not know the other person well. In any form of communication, it is important to check with the message sender to be sure your understanding of the message is the one the sender intended. Such checking is especially important for correct interpretation of non-verbally communicated messages. Yet, in a group this is usually impossible. Someone may give us a peculiar look while another is speaking and expect that we gained some information from it. Not only did we probably not receive the message as intended, but our attention was distracted from the speaker, and we have no chance to check back with either message sender. Likewise, others may be incorrectly interpreting our non-verbal signals.

There are two requirements to non-verbal reception: attention and interpretation. We have touched on the difficulties in interpreting non-verbal communication in groups. We also need to consider the problem of attention. If we are to correctly interpret non-verbal signals, we first need to know where we're looking for and pay attention to those signals. Several potential measures of non-verbal receiving ability have been devised in the past decade. Studies using these instruments have found that our culture influences which non-verbal cues we attend to and which we ignore. The ones we tend to ignore may actually give us the most accurate clues. In a study of non-verbal clues to honesty, evasiveness and deception, it was found that leg movements were the most accurate clues to the sender's intentions. We learn to control our voices and eye movements, but we rarely learn to control our leg movements, so they may offer the best clues. Yet, few of us pay much attention to leg movements.

The difficulty of paying attention to non-verbal clues is compounded by their numbers and the rapidity with which they take place. Ray Birdwhistle claims the human face is capable of making some 250,000 different expressions. Ross Buck reports the average involuntary non-verbal signal is very brief, usually lasting only 1/30th of a second. When you consider the number of non-verbal signals that are being fired off every minute in a group and the 9,000 words per hour spoken in group discussion, it becomes apparent what a staggering task we face in attempting accurate group communication.

## LEADERSHIP RESPONSIBILITIES

The group leader must perform a variety of functions if the group is to reach its goal of full and open participation. First, the leader is usually responsible for selecting and arranging the meeting place. The suggestions listed earlier in this publication can help. Second, the leader is usually responsible for preparing the agenda. (See MontGuide 8433, Planning Meeting Agendas.) Third, the leader is responsible for conducting the discussion.

The leader needs to introduce the topic and establish the procedures to be followed. At the beginning, these questions need to be answered: Why are we here? Who got us together? What is our mission? What rules or guidelines of behavior must the group follow? What is expected of each member? How will we know when we have accomplished our task? Each member needs to be clear about the task at hand and his responsibility to participate in carrying it out, e.g., to represent the position of small business during the discussion.

The leader plays an important role in establishing the climate of the discussion. The leader should strive to keep the spirits high and to encourage members to relax and enjoy the discourse as much as possible. Informality and good humor can help. Friendly disagreement and conflict of ideas should be encouraged. Conflict of personalities should be discouraged. The leader should show respect and appreciation for all ideas but stress the importance of keeping the discussion on track.

The leader is responsible for “gate-keeping,” opening the door of participation to all members. It requires making sure that each member has an equal chance to participate. The leader needs to be sensitive to attempts to participate. A hesitant member may make an effort to contribute, get drowned out and not attempt again. If the leader notices the attempt, he or she can call the person by name and ask for the contribution.

Reinforcing early efforts at participation can encourage continued participation. Statements like, “I hadn’t considered it from that point of view before,” act as reinforcers without committing the leader to the idea expressed.

However, addressing a question directly to a shy person may be more frightening than reassuring to him unless he is already on the verge of saying something. A better approach is to ask open-ended questions that will encourage the shy person to join in: “What do some of the rest of you think of this? How would this suggestion affect some of the other groups in town?”

The leader may also have to step into the discussion to shut off a talkative member so others can be heard. This requires tact. One approach is to pick up on the speaker’s last statement: “That’s a good point, and before we lose that thought, let’s see what some of the rest think about it,” “Can we wrap up discussion on this point before considering your other ideas?”

The leader can use questions to keep the discussion moving, to probe for more information, to bring the discussion back on track and to deal with interpersonal problems: “Ted and Charlie seem to differ quite a bit on this point. Would it help to list the important elements of each position?” The group may conform to the drift of the group in a certain direction and feel bound to continue in that direction. This may be compounded by a feeling of righteousness: “We are doing what’s right” or “God’s on our side.” The group members may practice self-censorship, withholding ideas that might run counter to the

movement of the majority. The members may feel that to express such non-conforming ideas would be disloyal. This line of thinking contributed to the Nixon administration's Watergate situation and was first described by Irvin Janis in his observations of White House planning for the Bay of Pigs invasion.

The leader can help the group avoid this "group think" by trying to keep the group from getting locked into one position early in the discussion, by encouraging the group to be open to criticism of ideas, by inviting in an outside critic, by breaking the group into small independent groups to consider the problem and report back, or by having a group member act as the devil's advocate.

Sometimes no one will have anything to say when a topic is introduced. In this situation, the leader can request that each member silently consider the topic for a few minutes and gather his or her thoughts before beginning the discussion. Members may discover they have new and useful things to say.

The leader needs to recognize when the group has accomplished its task and keep the discussion going until that happens. A discussion runs out of vigor when the participants run out of new ideas and begin repeating what has already been said. Unless the leader can see that an important angle is being neglected, this is the time to wrap up the discussion.

Some members may feel that their job is simply to reach agreement whether the agreement makes sense or not and whether it will work or not. The members need to know what constitutes success or failure from the discussion. If the group ignores the implications of its decisions, it has probably wasted time.

Finally, the leader should ensure that a record is kept of the group's progress and decisions. Good minutes are required of formal meetings. For less formal groups, someone should act as recorder. The meeting record should include a statement of the group's accomplishments and a record of the intermediate decisions arrived at along the way. The record protects against later misunderstandings. It should be reviewed by the group before departure while events are still clear. Three weeks later, details are likely to blur. Reviewing at the meeting helps ensure that everyone leaves with the same understanding of what has been agreed. Otherwise, members are likely to go away feeling that their particular version of the decision was, in fact, the group's version.

## **MEMBER RESPONSIBILITIES**

Group members share the responsibility for good group communication. Members greatly influence the personality of the group. They affect the group climate. They create and dissipate group conflicts. They bring their own goals and agendas to the discussion. Further, their attitudes bear on the amount of participation from various members and influence whether or not other members continue to participate.

The competent group communicator adapts his or her behavior to the needs of the group. He or she exhibits verbal and non-verbal behaviors that highlight interpersonal liking for the other members of the group. The competent group communicator is concerned that others feel comfortable and secure in offering ideas. Success in a small group depends on the skill of a person in integrating his or her personality into the group personality and moving from there to constructive interpersonal contact with the various members.

Since a group's goals are seldom completely compatible with every individual's goals, a good group member needs to be prepared to modify or compromise commitment to individual goals and help others in the group make similar adjustments. We can't have our own way all the time in groups.

The competent member is willing to say something when it is necessary without becoming personally defensive about his or her remarks. This member works to develop a sense of trust among all group members. When a sense of trust exists, members can transmit their ideas to the group for examination and evaluation without offering a partisan defense. The ideal attitude would be: "I think this is a good idea or I wouldn't offer it, but it's up to the rest of you to determine what to make of it." This approach is termed "provisional sharing." Provisional statements say, "I think I'm right, but I may be wrong. So, it's all right for the other person to differ because I won't become defensive." It is an attempt to phrase statements that will not create or add to the defensive atmosphere.

Being a good group member requires a balancing act of finding one's middle ground between being prominent in the group, achieving one's own agenda, and the need to be supportive of other members. It necessitates being frank and open in dealings with others. You don't have to show all of yourself, but what you do show must be real. Pretending creates suspicion and loss of credibility.

The competent communicator is open, yet assertive. Openness is a combination of the ability to receive information and willingness to respond to other group members and their suggestions. The open member maintains an attitude of searching for the best solution. Research has found that openness on the part of one communicator leads to reciprocal openness on the part of others. Assertiveness is the ability to state personal views and argue for those views without infringing on the rights of others. It is the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

Care must be taken when disagreeing or criticizing so that the comments are not construed as an attack. Phrasing opposing views as questions rather than as frontal assaults helps.

If a member feels under attack, he or she is likely to become defensive. A defensive member, in addition to thinking about the tonic thinks about how he or she may be seen more favorably, how he or she can win, dominate or avoid further attack. All these behaviors greatly limit his or her effective participation in the group.

Finally, a competent communicator realizes that we each perceive the world a little differently. Words and events are likely to mean different things to different group members (See Extension Circular 1291). So the competent communicator tries to express his or her ideas in terms the other members can understand with a minimum of distortion, and then asks for feedback to ensure the message was received as intended.

## SUMMARY

We spend a great deal of time in group meetings. Effective group communication can help us reap the maximum benefit from our participation. As group leaders and members, we can help our groups communicate effectively by carefully planning the size of our groups and the physical arrangements, considering the psychological impacts on participation, briefing members on their responsibilities and remembering the influence of our own attitudes and behavior on the group.

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