

GROUP MEMBER ROLES

FOR GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

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INTRODUCTION

One notable characteristic of our society is the way we work as formal groups to get things done. This is true at the neighborhood, community, state, and national levels. These formal groups cover a wide range of purposes and play an important role in our lives. A person who is actively interested in community and public affairs may be associated with church, school, business, and other community groups, to mention a few. And typical of our way of doing things, any one of these formal organizations, such as the church, may have many working committees and boards within the larger organization.

Because we tend to be so active in groups and organizations, we have the opportunity to observe that some meetings are much more productive than others. One purpose of this discussion is to suggest reasons why meetings sometimes fail to accomplish their purpose.

Group effectiveness depends upon many things. The size of the group, the personal characteristics of the members, the physical setting, the nature of the group's task, the style of leadership, the group motivation towards fulfilling the task are all important to an effective group. There are many more.

A factor of special importance is the manner in which the group operates during their meetings. What roles do the various members perform? For that matter, what roles are necessary for group effectiveness?

The purpose of this publication is to:

- (1) Define the roles that must be performed for effective group meetings.
- (2) Discuss the importance of these roles to leaders.

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- (3) Identify the implications of roles for group effectiveness.

Not all groups are set up to solve a problem; some may be formed purely for social reasons, such as bridge clubs. This discussion has the most application to groups attempting to solve problems.

Groups formed for problem solving are generally more productive if they follow a logical sequence of steps in deciding upon a particular solution. This sequence is commonly referred to as the decision-making or problem-solving process. While these steps may vary from one situation to the next, groups generally are more efficient if they move through the following steps in their listed order:

- (1) Define the problem
- (2) Analyze the situation
- (3) Determine the alternative solutions
- (4) Select the best alternative
- (5) Execute the alternative chosen
- (6) Evaluate the consequences of the decision

In order for the group to move effectively through these steps, certain jobs need to be performed by various members of the group. These can be categorized under the term "group member roles."

Group-Member Roles

Whenever we make a suggestion or offer a comment in a meeting, we are playing a role or roles. In general, we are doing one of three things: (1) We may be offering a suggestion that helps accomplish the objective of the group, (2) we may be trying to maintain or improve the social relationships within the group or (3) we may be trying to satisfy our own psychological needs.

In the first case we are playing a *group-task* role which may take many forms, such as suggesting ideas, giving information, or seeking opinions from other group members. In the second instance we are playing a *group-building* or *maintenance* role. This can also take several forms, such as trying to harmonize a strained relationship or encouraging participation of other group members. Finally, in the third case we are playing an *individual* role, which is also recognized in several forms. One of the most recognizable individual roles is the "blocker." This individual attempts to block constructive suggestions of other group members, and thus slows the group's progress.

Group members and leaders who understand these group-member roles and their effects can use this understanding to increase group effectiveness. The understanding must be great enough so that the leader of group members can recognize (1) the role(s) which need to be played when the meeting bogs down, or (2) how individual roles may be slowing group progress.

To help the reader understand the importance of group member roles, the description of the roles will be set in the context of a group discussing juvenile delinquency in their town. The task is to identify a solution for this problem in Theirtown. Certain portions of the conversation will be used to illustrate the various roles.

Group-Task Roles*

Group-task roles are related to accomplishing the task, or purpose, of the group. In order for a group to solve their problem, certain jobs (roles) must be done. Some of these are: somebody must furnish ideas; someone must have the necessary facts; the values and attitudes of the group need to be accounted for. The most important group-task roles are outlined below.

As indicated, any time a group member plays one of these roles, he is performing an act of leadership. He is providing ideas, information or having an influence on other group members and on group effectiveness.

*The discussion of specific roles in the rest of this publication is based on Kenneth D. Benne and Paul Sheats, "Functional Roles of Group Members," *Journal of Social Issues*, Vol IV No. 2, 1948. With minor modifications, the roles and role definitions are theirs.

Initiator-Contributor

When an individual proposes new ideas or changed ways of doing things relating to the group's problem or goals, he is playing the role of *initiator-contributor*.

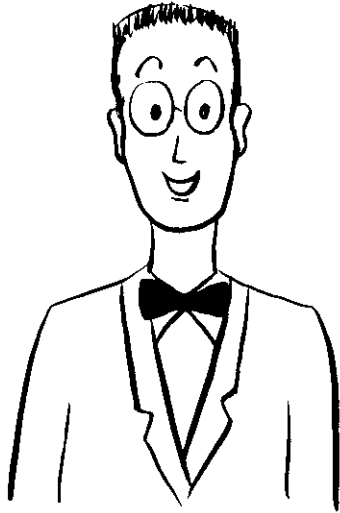


The importance of initiating and contributing suggestions should be obvious. The initiator-contributor role can be summarized in the term "ideaman." Related to the problem-solving sequence, the initiator-contributor plays a crucial role at the stage of determining alternative solutions and selecting the best alternative.

An initiator-contributor in the Theirtown meeting might say, "...perhaps we should consider an enforced curfew, this might..."

Information Seeker

The *information seeker* asks for clarification of suggestions. He seeks authoritative information and facts pertinent to the problem being discussed. This role is important as the group attempts to analyze the situation and select the best alternative solution. An excerpt from the meeting illustrating this role might be: "...what I want to know is, what has been the change in the rate of juvenile delinquency in the country over the past 10 years, because..."



Information Giver

The complement of the information seeker is the *information giver* who offers facts or generalization related to the group problem. This role must be played if the group is to analyze the situation adequately, determine the alternatives, and select the best alternative. An information giver might be heard to say, "...just last year, according to the Police magazine, juvenile delinquency rose by nearly 12 percent, compared to the previous year that is..."

Opinion Giver

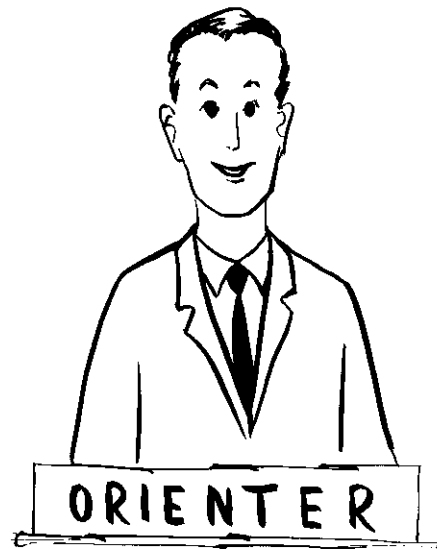
Democratic group problem-solving not only deals with facts but also with the values and attitudes of the group members and the society of which they are a part. The *opinion giver* states his belief, attitude or opinion on the suggestion(s). The emphasis is on relating the values of the group to the suggestion of the initiator-contributor in addition to the facts supplied by the information giver. In our mock meeting we may hear someone saying, "...I believe that a curfew will bring about increased rebellion of the young people."

Opinion Seeker

The counterpart of opinion giving is opinion seeking. The *opinion seeker* is also concerned with the relationship of suggested group actions to the

values of the group and the community. The major difference is that the opinion seeker *asks* for clarification of the values relevant to the proposed group action. The opinion seeker usually asks a question such as, "...how do you feel about that idea? Do you think people will accept it? I wonder if?"

The opinion seeker is frequently aware that a particular idea may not be accepted by the group unless it has the approval of a key group member. Recognizing this, the opinion seeker may direct his question to this influential member in hopes that his response may either speed the idea along or slow further discussion so that additional ideas may be generated.



Orienter

The *orienter* defines the position of the group relative to their goals. He also indicates where the group has gotten off the path. This role is particularly important in directing the group toward the eventual solution of a problem. Furthermore, it is one which the leader needs to play, especially at the beginning of a meeting.

One of the major reasons for ineffective groups is that group members *do not know*: (1) what they are to do, (2) how they are to do it and/or (3) the amount of authority they have. The orienter (group leader) can help prevent this problem. The emphasis on the leader playing this role does not mean that other group members cannot or should not orient the group.

Summarizer

The *summarizer* sums up the main ideas at a given time in the group process. The summarizer in practice might say, "...let me see now, it seems that three major ideas have been suggested. First we have talked about a curfew, second..."

Integrator

Closely related to the role of summarizer is the role of *integrator*. The integrator tries to coordinate the various ideas, that is, examine the elements in common of several ideas by showing their relationship to each other. The integrator attempts to pull the good parts from each separate idea and formulate a new idea. An eavesdropper at the Theirtown meeting might hear an integrator saying, "...the curfew idea, along with the idea of a youth center, and also increased supervision of high school parties which was mentioned might help..."

Other Task Roles

Other roles which contribute to achieving the group task have been identified. While important, these roles are often assumed or assigned to one person for the course of the meeting.

The *recorder* is the "group memory," writing down the group's ideas and decisions. In effect this is a secretarial role usually assumed by one person.

The *procedural-technician* helps the group by taking care of seating arrangements, ventilation, equipment, distribution of materials and other chores. As with the recorder, one particular person usually plays this role.

Group Building and Maintenance Roles

Social scientists have noted that the activity of a group tends to move through a cycle from the beginning until the problem is solved. Generally speaking, this cycle is one of the task roles – maintenance roles – task roles – maintenance roles, etc. The diagram below may clarify this notion.

The major reason for this cycling is that when a group is attempting to complete a task, tension begins to build up between conflicting ideas, values, and attitudes. As the tension increases, group cohesion may begin to decrease.

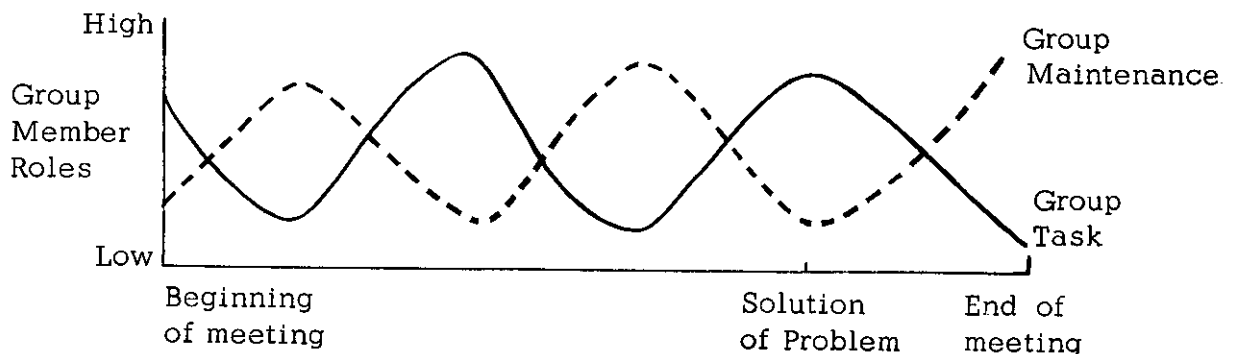
If the group is to maintain itself as a unified force, something must be done to decrease tension, i.e., some maintenance roles must be played.

Depending upon the past experiences of the group and the problems to be solved, the proportion of maintenance to task roles will vary. Some groups, such as a bridge club, may only perform group-maintenance roles. Their sole purpose is sociability. A church building committee, on the other hand, has an assigned purpose. It would probably show a preponderance of group-task roles.

The following roles are important in continuing the group as a unit rather than a collection of individuals.

The Encourager

The *encourager* offers praise, commends, and agrees with or accepts the ideas of other group members. He attempts to make other group members feel that their contributions are worthwhile. An encourager might say, "That is a good idea. Would you explain it a little more?"



The Harmonizer

The *harmonizer* attempts to resolve conflict between members. He often may say something in jest to break the tension. "...I don't think Joe really meant that you didn't know anything, Jerry. What he was trying to get across was..."

The Compromiser

The major difference between the harmonizer and *compromiser* is that the compromiser is one of the parties in a conflict. The compromiser may help maintain group cohesion by "coming half way" or admitting an error. He will sacrifice status to maintain group harmony.

Gate-Keeper

Another maintenance role of importance is that of *gate-keeper*. The gate-keeper attempts to keep the channels of communication open so that all group members are encouraged to participate. The gate-keeper might be overheard to say, "We haven't heard from Perry yet. Perry, what...?" This role can be played particularly well by the discussion leader and should be one of his major responsibilities. It can be played by any group member, however.

It should be noted that the difference between these maintenance roles and the task roles of summarizer and integrator is in what they are intended to do. The maintenance roles are primarily for maintaining group harmony. The task roles are related to achieving the purpose of the group. It is quite possible that both kinds of roles occur almost simultaneously and within the same "speech" by any one group member. Thus, it is easy to visualize a person *summarizing* and *encouraging* at the same time, or *integrating* and *compromising*.

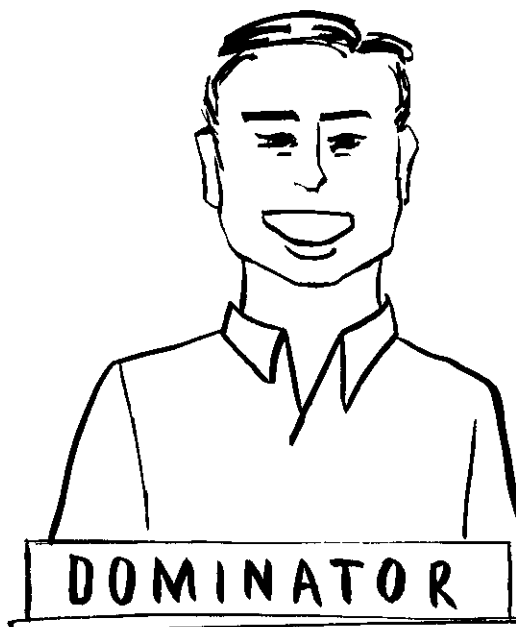
Individual Roles

Besides maintenance and task roles, there are individual roles. These roles are frequently attempted by members of a group to satisfy individual needs. This self-centered behavior is detrimental to achieving the group's task.

Whenever we find a high degree of individual roles being played, some diagnosis is needed. Apparently the group is not sufficiently productive for individuals to satisfy their needs through identification with group success.

There are many reasons why a group might be characterized by individual rather than group task or maintenance roles. The leader's lack of skill in keeping the group working, the use of authoritarian instead of democratic leadership, the inappropriate choice of a group objective, a low level of skills of group members, and an inadequate understanding of group purpose and ways of achieving the purpose are just a few.

One caution is in order, however. Whatever the reason for a predominance of individual roles, outright suppression of the individual role player is not the cure. The entire group needs to discover the cause and then apply a remedy, *agreed on by the group*. Some of the frequently occurring individual roles are described below.



The Dominator

The *dominator* tries to "take over" the group by giving directions, making decisions *for* the group or making sure everyone knows about his "knowledge" and status. *All* of this is unrelated to the task of the group. In general, this person contributes little to the group because of his self-interest.

The Anecdoter

Anecdotes properly used can be a stimulus to group problem-solving. But the *anecdoter* who relates incidents only to bolster his own ego, enhance his status or display his wide scope of experiences has a negative effect on the group. Characteristic of his role is the phrase, "That reminds me of the time back in 1912 when I..."

The Blocker

The *blocker* might also be labeled an "aginner," because he reacts negatively towards every suggestion for solving the problem. Not everyone who disagrees with an idea or resists a particular change is a blocker. It is only when this resistance goes beyond reason that the label blocker properly applies.

The Special-Interest Pleader

The *special-interest pleader* role is played most often when representatives of various organizations are called together in a group. Depending upon his point of view, we find the special interest pleader characterized by phrases such as, "The opinion of the 'grass roots' is the important thing;" "the 'small businessman' doesn't have a chance in this plan;" " 'labor' does the most for this community, so we should have the greatest number of representatives."

Implications for the Leader

This discussion of group member roles should be valuable to all who participate in problem-solving groups. It should, however, have special significance for the group leader. How often have you as a leader been disappointed with the results of a group meeting but have not been able to put your finger on the trouble?

A familiarity with the three kinds of group member roles -- task, maintenance, and individual -- should provide the leader with a tool for diagnosing the weak points during a meeting. If the leader determines, for instance, that the meeting is bogged down because no one has summarized, he can call on someone to be the summarizer, or play

the role himself. If he sees that a lack of factual information is the problem, he can seek out an information giver.

Correct diagnosis is not always easy, nor is selection of the appropriate remedy always apparent. The ability to do either must be developed over time. Furthermore, as noted in the introduction, group member roles are only one of many factors affecting group effectiveness.

An understanding of these roles, however, is a part of the specialized knowledge and skill of the leader and can be used by him to improve group productivity.

Summary

This publication has attempted to outline one of the major factors determining group effectiveness, namely, the playing of certain key roles in achieving the group's task and maintaining group solidarity or "we-feeling."

Any group member may play several roles within one paragraph of conversation, such as giving information and following it up with an opinion.

There is no prescribed order in which the roles are to be played, although there tends to be a general pattern of movement (see diagram).

In summary, this publication has attempted to:

- (1) Define the three major categories of roles played in groups.
- (2) Identify the specific roles in each category.
- (3) Define and illustrate each of the specific roles.
- (4) Relate the importance of each role to the general order of problem solving.
- (5) Discuss briefly the implications of group-member roles for leaders.