

ROLES IN GROUPS AND THE ART OF FACILITATION

Remember when you finished a meeting and were energized, not only by the decisions made, but by the meeting itself? Remember a time when issues were unresolved but you still felt good about the meeting? Ever wonder what makes such meetings different from those that seem unproductive, frustrating or even destructive? Can you increase the odds that your next meeting is in the former group rather than the latter? Absolutely!

Whether in a meeting with five hundred people or five, chairing the meeting or at the side of the table, putting the following principles into action will make a difference.

These principles might be called *Roles in Groups*. We are accustomed to moving between different roles in life, functioning as parent or child, teacher or student, supervisor, employee, friend or partner. We take on roles all the time and different roles at different times in different groups.

People take on different roles in groups, as well. Roles in groups can be described in three ways:

Task Roles: These behaviors help the group accomplish its goals.

- A. Information seeker. She asks for facts/opinions/suggestions on the topic under discussion:
“What date shall we hold the event?”
“How big is our budget?”
- B. Information giver. He offers facts/opinions/suggestions on the topic being discussed:
“I think we should suggest two dates.”
“There is \$300.00 left in the budget.”
- C. Clarifier. She clears up confusing statements, asks questions, checks to see that questions are answered, and keeps discussion on one point at a time.
“Let’s discuss dates first. Does anyone have a suggestion?”
- D. Summarizer. He pulls together related ideas, calls for discussion of ideas, and may write down or organize ideas.
“It seems we’re leaning towards Sunday evenings. How about March 22nd?”

Maintenance Roles: These behaviors help people in the group get along with each other, and therefore help the group work better.

- A. Gatekeeper. He keeps communications open, encourages others to speak, gives verbal and non-verbal support to others, and suggests ways to share ideas.
“John, you haven’t spoken yet. Do you think the 22nd would work?”
- B. Harmonizer. She attempts to clear up disagreements, settles conflicts among members, and reduces tensions in the group.
“I sense some hesitation. What are the pros and cons? Let’s look at the calendar again.”
- C. Encourager. He shows genuine friendliness to group members by using their names, expressing agreement, giving verbal and non-verbal support, and listening carefully.
“Susan, I think you’re right. I think we need more planning time.”

- D. Evaluator. She checks to see that group members are satisfied with group progress and suggests ways to keep the group moving toward its goals.
“Is everyone O.K. with April 2nd? If so, let’s discuss what we want to do and how to keep it within budget.”

The most effective groups are groups in which all members use both task and maintenance roles. In particular, an effective moderator uses both task and maintenance roles during meetings and assumes those roles not being filled by group members

Blocking Roles: These behaviors draw attention to individual needs and distract the group from accomplishing its goals. They include such behaviors as dominating the group, attacking individual or group ideas, being unreasonably negative, not paying attention, undercutting others by verbal comments or non-verbal actions. People in blocking roles are often unaware of their unhelpful behaviors and appreciate someone who graciously establishes boundaries.

The most effective way to deal with someone who is taking a blocking role is for another person to assume a task or maintenance role.

“George, I know we need to come back to that topic tonight, but I’d like us to go back to the original question of whether to paint the warehouse doors red.”

More Tips for Facilitators

If you know a particular person often functions in blocking roles, ask this person to sit beside you. Use your body posture and either a task or maintenance role to regain control of the meeting as needed.

Be aware of your personality strengths and weaknesses and rely on group members to fill the gaps. For example, one of my friends who is notoriously unaware of time asks someone in the group to be his timekeeper. Another friend who is scattered and non-linear in her thinking asks the group to get her back on track if she begins to wander. Yet another is so task-oriented that he can seem uncaring and asks his committee to slow him down if necessary so people have time to make decisions at their own speed.

When training new members or helping a group develop healthy interaction, distribute a card with one of the maintenance or task roles listed on it to each person, asking that person to assume this role for the meeting. This teaching moment, although it may feel stilted, provides practice in a safe environment and pays long-term dividends.

Most of us already assume task and maintenance roles in committee work, but being aware of the need for them helps our meetings to be both more gracious and effective. Even the best intentioned people slip into blocking roles on occasion. We help our groups by knowing effective and gracious ways to move them back into helpful, respectful and productive dialogue.

Addressing people by name, summarizing what has been said, clearing up confusion and encouraging others are nearly always appreciated.