

Different Roles in Group Process

CAN works through a rich and varied collection of groups. There is a great deal of energy devoted to making those groups inclusive and to ensuring that everyone in the groups is moving in the same direction. However, tension and difference are essential to the creative process of group problem solving.

One way to use this idea is to recognize the different roles that people can play in group process, provided they are all committed to the group's overall mission.

People may play different roles in different situations, though not everybody has to be comfortable in every role.

The key is to recognize the roles that are helpful and to try to have at least one person playing each role.

Four Productive Roles in a Group

There are many different schemes for putting folks into categories to improve group work. Use whatever scheme makes the most sense for your group. Just use it in the interest of moving the group forward, rather than stereo-typing the folks in the group, thereby limiting them or justifying their unproductive behaviors.

The scheme I offer has to do with the functions involved in getting a group to understand and execute an idea.*

Initiating/Moving—these are the folks who often come up with the ideas and are the initial champions of the ideas. They are very important for keeping the idea moving through adversity, or for simply keeping it on people's radar. They can provide direction and motivation to keep moving.

Critiquing/Shaping—often seen as the nay-sayers, these are the people who raise the “yea, but” questions, which if done in the spirit of the overall goal of the effort, serves a very important function of preventing the group from pursuing unproductive ideas. Often the dissenter or the “devil's advocate,” they are often willing to point out the one thing that no one else is willing to. As long as they do not argue simply for the sake of arguing, they are essential to the process of testing and refining ideas.

Adapting/Implementing—these are folks who are not all that concerned with the seemingly endless discussion about values and principles. They simply want to get on with it, and once a direction has been determined, they can take it and run. Because they are often the one's involved in implementing different schemes that different groups have developed, they can be an excellent resource for adapting ideas in light of experience they have had with other groups and other ideas.

WORKING TOGETHER COLLABORATIVELY

Observing/Keeping Perspective—these are often the folks who are the most reticent to speak and appear to simply be taking everything in. They are sometimes the folks who have “been around” for a while and have seen many ideas come and go. If not jaded and cynical, they provide the very necessary wisdom to fit an idea into a historical context or to help folks in the group remember the overall mission of the group.

Different people can play different roles depending on their charge relative to the work at hand, their natural tendencies, or simply how they decide they want to be involved in the process.

Rather than assessing folks to see into which of these categories they fit, for a given project, lay out the tasks that the person who fills these roles will have to perform and then allow folks to volunteer to fill those roles.

What is absolutely essential for this process to work well is a commitment on the part of all involved to the project and the overall goals. This defines the difference between productive critique and destructive cynicism.

*The four part framework and roles are adapted from William Isaacs, *Dialogue: The Art of Thinking Together*.

Tasks/Questions for Each Role

The questions listed below reflect the work to be done in performing each role. In a given group, different people will fulfill these different roles at different times. It's important not to typecast or assign people to roles beyond those to which they will naturally tend.

Initiating/Moving

- What's the vision for the idea, both as it's evolving and once it's finished?
- How is it consistent with the mission of the group?
- How is it consistent with the values of the group?
- What's at stake such that being aware of it will motivate group?
- What's important to this group?
- What motivates the members of the group and how can I cast my idea in those terms?

Critiquing/Shaping

- Are we being realistic and taking into account the roadblocks which if we consider them now, will be less likely to cause problems later?
- What's at stake such that being aware of it will caution us?
- Are we staying true to the goals we set out at the beginning?
- Are we considering the alternatives, especially the alternatives that we don't like or actively oppose?

Adapting/Implementing

- What's the plan?
- What resources, people, and materials do we need?
- By when and in what order?
- How will we know if we are on track?
- How will we know if we are off track or making mistakes?
- How will we know when we are finished?
- How will we know that we've done well?

Observing/Keeping Perspective

- To the extent that we've "been down this road before," what did we learn last time?
- Are there analogous or related situations that we can learn from as we carry this idea out?
- What are the long term implications of doing this work?
- Who else is likely to be affected by what we do? How?