

Leading a discussion group



Item Code FS310512 April 2005 Edition no 2

0845 300 1818

A discussion may be described as the controlled exchange of knowledge, ideas and opinions on a particular subject by two or more people. It can take many forms and be triggered off in many ways.

Benefits

Effective discussion promotes the sharing of ideas and the increase of knowledge. It helps participants to think more clearly, to manipulate ideas and improve their expression of these. By engaging each participant fully it is an effective method of encouraging changes in attitude. For the trainer it may permit feedback on other approaches being used.

Directive and non-directive approach

Styles of leading a discussion will vary widely according to subject and what the tutor is trying to achieve. There are two distinct extremes of discussion, non-directive and directive and most people aim for a type of discussion between these, choosing the most appropriate approach to any particular situation.

Non-directive discussion

This may be triggered off by the group leader but is then allowed to take an absolutely free course in which the trainer or group leader will only chair the discussion, helping it flow but not deliberately steering it in any direction nor towards any particular conclusion.

Directive discussion

The group leader plans this beforehand with the specific intention of getting the group to think together about certain aspects of a particular subject. The discussion is designed so as to ensure, as far as possible, that this does in fact happen, and the trainer or group leader gives a definite lead in bringing this about.

Role of discussion group leader

Once the discussion group leader has determined the objective of any particular topic the appropriate approach to it needs to be selected. This may be non directive to explore certain ideas or promote group feeling with no measurable end-products or may be directive towards the achievement of particular conclusions. Of course, depending on the topic and the group involved, the group leader will select the appropriate approach from within a wide range of skills. The aim might be summed up as helping people reach the correct conclusion with the minimum guidance; maintaining control but staying in the background. The control that the discussion group leader exercises should be based not so much on authority but on skill.

The skills of any discussion group leader are chiefly those of:

- constructive listening
- skillful use of questions
- co-ordination of group's efforts e.g. by summaries.

Creating participation

'There are no difficult people, only people with a difficulty.'

Resistance to effective discussion may reflect a number of different reasons; unfamiliarity; fear of criticism or reproach; ignorance; lack of interest; inability to think quickly or speak fluently; shyness; resentment of a group member, often based on distorted beliefs or stereotypes to the attitudes of them. If you recognise these possibilities, treat the group members as different individuals with different, as well as common motivations, and frame your style of approach in such a way as to draw on the resources of the group, altering the pace, smoothly, when required.

Recognise also that people may bring to the discussion 'hidden agendas'- topics they particularly want to talk about, axes they must grind first. Only when these have been brought out and dealt with will full attention be paid to the discussion topic.

Discussion aims at considering all aspects, using all points of view, evaluating possible answers. What is relevant should be obvious from the outline discussion plan prepared beforehand but a little latitude must be permitted for 'safety-valve' reasons.

Promoting discussion

Discussion may be promoted by a number of methods. For example, a provocative question, a problem situation for case study, a panel, a tape recorded viewpoint, a dramatised scene, a short film extract. Alternatively, a period of creative thinking. For example, 'Think of all the possible activities Explorer Scouts can do on an expedition.' These should be rapidly provided without comment and followed by a period of critical evaluation.

Control and Involvement

The discussion leader has three fundamental tools to use in controlling a discussion: silence, questions and summaries.

Silence - do not be afraid of silence. It is rarely maintained in a group for longer than a minute but the leader often feels compelled to speak just to fill a gap. The price of doing this is often that the group becomes increasingly dependent on the leader for contributions and cross-talk between people disappears.

In any event, silence for both leader and group, can often be productive and the leader can only achieve understanding of what is happening in the group if an atmosphere of constructive listening is developed and no one feels obliged to cap every comment with one of their own.

Questions - in all topics worth discussion, feelings will emerge. The leader is thus torn between suppressing feeling which could lead to apathy or allowing full rein which could lead to chaos. The leader must avoid being involved on one side or the other but rather draw in other group members for comment from their experience and constantly, but tactfully, bring the group back to its agreed plan.

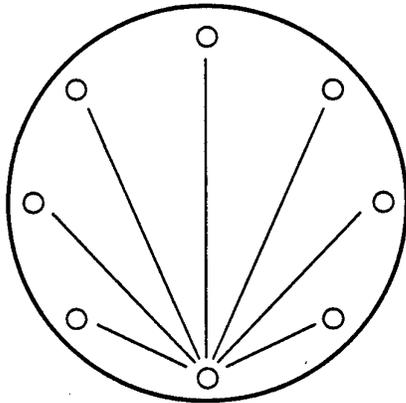
Some group members express their feelings in long, rambling monologues. Interrupting a rambling or dominant speaker and putting the issue back to the group to discuss, or terminating it, is best accompanied by recognition of the contribution made. For example, "I think Sarah has a useful point there, what do you feel Tom?" Don't feel that if someone is talking too much, the reproof or interruption must come from the leader - it will often come more effectively from another.

Recognising the quiet members requires tact and skill with a recognition that some members can be fully involved in group discussion without saying a

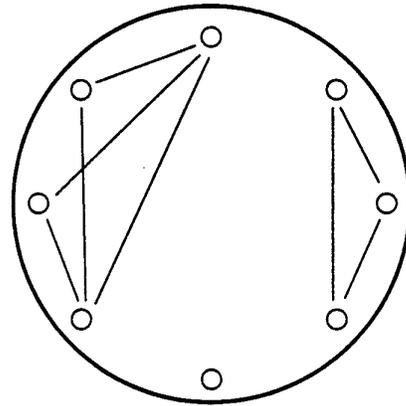
word. Questions should be directed at individuals rather than at the group but they must not be threatening, such as "Surely you don't do that in your Troop, Bill?", or aimed at setting a trap or scoring points. Good questions should be brief, simply worded, easily understandable, related to one point only, arranged in logical order and distributed among the group.

Summaries - from time to time it will be necessary to summarise or clarify. The leader should not put words in peoples' mouths and avoid 'fishing' for a particular, sought answer, as this soon becomes obvious to the group and leads to the group guessing what the leader is after rather than knowing it. Clearly, the leader must not have a notebook out and a list of points to be taken and ticked off! The use of the summary assists the discussion leader in controlling the timing of the discussion.

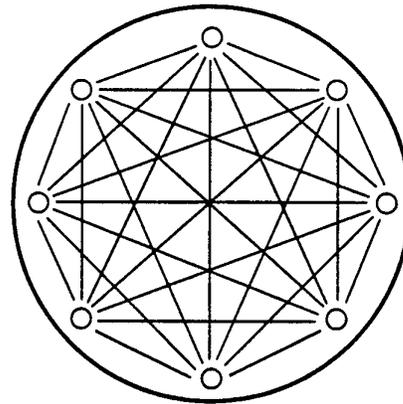
Has the discussion been centred with little group involvement?



Or have cliques formed leaving some isolated?



Or has the discussion been free flowing?



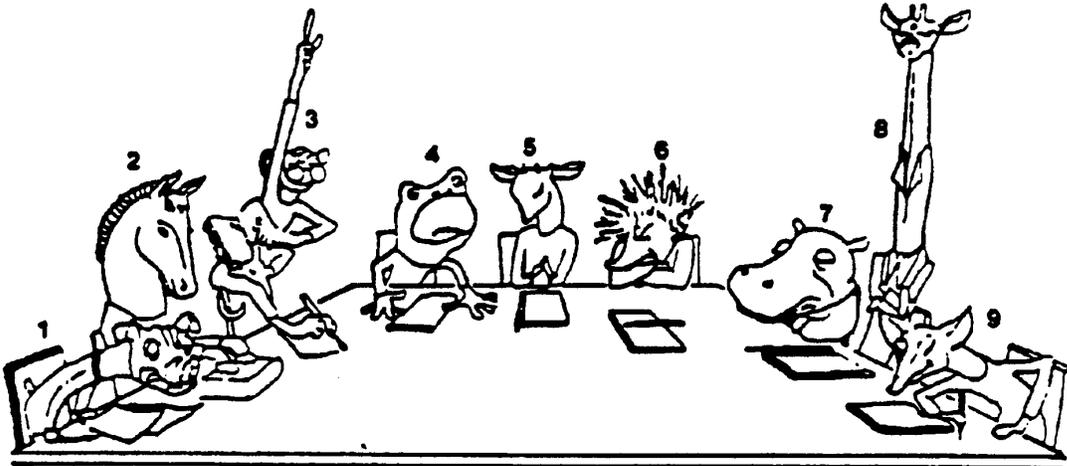
To develop self assessment, the discussion group leader might find it useful to consider the following checklist (a score of 19 or over is excellent, 17 is good, 15 or less is poor).

Discussion group leader's Individual self-rating scale

| No | Statement | Yes | No |
|----|--|-----|----|
| 1 | Objectives were decided and necessary preparations for the meeting were properly handled | | |
| 2 | The meeting started on time | | |
| 3 | There was good discussion - all members participated | | |
| 4 | Questions were well planned, properly asked and provoked discussion | | |
| 5 | Discussion seemed to be spontaneous and not forced | | |
| 6 | Discussion was progressive; it kept on the topic and was directed towards the attainment of the objectives | | |
| 7 | Offering of my own personal opinions, lecturing or domineering was avoided | | |
| 8 | An attempt was made to get members to recognise and respect the opinions of others | | |
| 9 | I did not take sides in any discussions | | |
| 10 | I refrained from answering questions referring them back to the group | | |

- 11 Putting forward opinions and ideas on my part was avoided
- 12 Rephrasing was used only when necessary using the simplest words possible and being brief
- 13 Control over the group was maintained at all times
- 14 Frequent summaries of the discussion were made to crystallize group thinking
- 15 A blackboard or chart sheet was used effectively
- 16 All essential topics or phases of the outline were covered
- 17 Interest was maintained throughout the meeting
- 18 The group left with something to think about so that thinking will continue after the discussion is over
- 19 A final summary was made with the help of the group
- 20 The meeting closed on time

The group members as the leader sees them. A humorous sketch not without its serious side.



1. The quarrelsome type

Stay quiet, don't get involved. Stop them monopolising

2. The positive type

A great help in discussion. Let their contribution add up. Use them frequently.

3. The know-all type

Let the group deal with their theories

4. The loquacious type

Interrupt tactfully. Limit their speaking time

5. The shy type

Ask them easy questions. Increase self confidence. Give credit where possible.

6. The uncooperative type

Play on their ambitions, recognise their knowledge and experience and use them.

7 The thick-skinned uninterested type

Ask them about work. Get them to give examples of the work they are interested in.

8 The highbrow type

Don't criticise. Use the 'yes - but' technique.

9. The persistent questioner

Tries to trap the group leader. Pass their questions back to the group.