

# **Counseling for Business & Industrial**

## **Group Discussion**

### **8.1 History**

Group discussion is one of the classical methods employed in career counseling. It initially emerged as a method with a lower degree of complexity, but in time it was perfected and numerous variants developed, such as Phillips 6/6 put forth by Donald Phillips in 1948 (Zlate, 1982).

Group discussion requires the participatory involvement of group members in communication. Active participation is a strategy enhancing the development of a climate of trust, it raises the interest to work with a team, and helps share knowledge. Discussion has the meaning of a reciprocal and organized exchange of information and ideas, impressions and opinions, criticism and proposals around a topic or a matter, with the following purpose:

- in-depth examination and common clarification of certain ideas;
- consolidation and systematization of the data that participants have had knowledge of;
- solving complex theoretical and practical issues that offer several alternatives;
- developing the capacity of verbal expression, etc.

Discussion seeks to put to use as much as possible from the knowledge experience and intellectual capacities of participants, with a view to progress in learning and development. In-group discussions, psychological and social communication theories are applied: the participants present and explain, analyze and interpret, reject or accept ideas and solutions, make decisions and adopt attitudes.

In what follows we shall analyze a series of discussion types defined in order to facilitate the preservation of a minimum internal coherence. But let us first classify group discussions

- a) By Cerghit (1997), group discussion takes the following forms:
  - 1) dialogue discussion – of the consultation type (e.g.: when there is a controversy);
  - 2) discussion of the seminar and pre-seminar type;
  - 3) mass discussion (large number of participants);
  - 4) round table;

- 5) Phillips 6/6;
  - 6) brainstorming;
  - 7) guided discussion (on previously announced key topics);
  - 8) free discussion.
- b) Zlate (1982) refers to the following types:
- 1) progressive or evolving discussion;
  - 2) free discussion;
  - 3) risk technique;
  - 4) Phillips 6/6;
  - 5) discussion panel.

The main condition of a successful discussion is *previously acquainting the participants with the topic*. *Auxiliary materials* (boards, graphs, plans, photographs, projected images, etc.) may greatly enhance the discussion progress. In addition, the *setting* itself adds to the success of the method.

Three main parts of the discussion are apparent (Zlate, 1982):

- 1) ***introduction to the debate*** – formulation of the issue underlining the theoretical and practical importance, including the difficulties;
- 2) ***the debate itself*** – whatever participants say;
- 3) ***result synthesis*** – systematization of conclusions and arguments reached; underlining new contributions.

## **8.2 Series of Group Discussion**

Free discussion is an instrument for expressing opinions and feelings on other people, situations, or events. Group members are reunited and asked to express frankly, openly and detached whatever they feel and think, whatever displeases them or makes them behave in a certain way within a group (cooperation or conflict, conformism or deviance, participative or non-participative, etc.).

The aim of free discussion is not necessarily to solve negative group moods or suggest solutions. The simple discharge of tension by exposing their troubles has important effects. Such a discharge is equal to an implicit solution to difficult situations or at least creates the premises of a subsequent solution.

Free discussion thus has two categories of effects:

- 1) brings everything to light; makes opinions and attitudes public; helps members know each other better and then act accordingly;

- 2) creates the premises of tension and conflict solving in the group. Unlike progressive discussion, whose purpose is to make thought pass methodically from one matter to another, free discussion is allowed to wander in order to give all members the opportunity to express.

Free discussion is group-centred, essential being here the interaction between all group members – which is to the maximum, while the interaction between group members and moderator is secondary – and minimal. The tasks of the leader are entirely different than in the progressive discussion (as we shall see below):

- a) **seeks to enhance communication**, discretely stimulate interaction between participants, using either verbal means (“How do you feel about what has been said?”), or non-verbal (nods, prompting looks);
- b) **listens attentively**, respecting everyone’s right to express what they want;
- c) **encourages** group members to express themselves, to present their thoughts, directs them towards feelings, attitudes and opinions, and less towards persons, ideas, facts;
- d) **re-expresses** certain moods already expressed in order to point them out;
- e) **quiets down resentments**, gives minority the possibility of being listened to;
- f) **sums up** the discussion, guides the agreement / disagreement towards issues discussed and not towards individuals involved in the debate.

Using free discussion in career counseling is recommendable, since it has a series of evident positive effects:

- 1) outlines a constructive attitude of the group members, even if no efficient solutions are provided. Sometimes such solutions are not even needed, since attitude can change throughout the discussion;
- 2) leads to the awareness upon the causes of tensed and conflictual situations in the group, favouring their resolve;
- 3) enhances change of opinions and behaviours (more easily done in a group than individually). Attitude change in a group is done gradually, without the individual losing ground;
- 4) increases group cohesion.

Free discussion cannot be used in any circumstances, only when:

- 1) group members are in the course of decision-making;
- 2) some fears appear as obstacles to action;
- 3) the group is divided;
- 4) there are latent tensions which are not apparently motivated by anything acute;

- 5) training programmes are held (when it is not known how people feel on a certain matter). Even if free discussion does not always result in positive effects, it creates the favourable psychological state for their emergence, which is not to be neglected.

### **8.3 Progressive/Evolving Discussion**

Progressive discussion requires the organization of debates in such a manner as to obtain progress, evolution, from a sequence to the next, from a moment to the next, so that a solution is obtained in the end. It is therefore necessary to guide participants towards a certain outcome, assign particular tasks formulated gradually, and only after other elements have been solved in a satisfactory manner. The method consists in an exchange of ideas and information in a group, with the aid of a leader / moderator on a topic.

The central person in such a discussion is *the discussion leader*, who has maximum interaction with all group members, while interaction between the members is minimal. The leader is the one who:

- 1) launches the general problem for discussion, as well as the particular matter derived from it, which constitute the topic of the discussion;
- 2) receives all answers and reactions of the group members and suitably answers requests;
- 3) invites everyone by word and action to participate, get involved in problem solving, and reflect on the matter;
- 4) focuses collective reflection on the debate (guides it towards what is essential, sums up once in a while important contributions, etc.).

The discussion leader must previously have a plan of written questions, and participants must know the topic beforehand, so as to inform themselves and later intervene in discussion.

The progressive discussion is not improvised dialogue, nor a type of knowledge assessment, but a learning technique through active participation in the debate and elaboration of multiple ideas. The topic must be “discussible”, even if not in itself; no predictable answers or previously learned are sought, but interpretations and elaborations that develop judgment on one’s own criteria.

The “Yes-no” questions ought to be avoided. The number of participants must not exceed 12-13. In case of larger groups, smaller sub-groups may be formed, guided by competent persons, and a general summary will be presented at the end. Such discussions can yield

good results if applied in 45-60 minute sessions. It is not necessary for the participants to take notes, especially since it may distract them.

The progressive discussion should take place as follows (Zlate, 1982):

- 1) Outlining of a few general ideas, upon which group members will agree easily (setting rules, criteria, etc.).
- 2) Guiding the participants' thoughts towards a particular matter, which once solved leaves room for another.
- 3) The problem to solve is divided into sub-problems to enhance same aspects.

This way it will be easy to localize the points of disagreement, naturally progressing from one aspect to another. The progressive discussion cannot be used in any situation; the method is valuable and efficient under the following *conditions*:

- 1) the group has sufficient experience to participate in the discussion;
- 2) the experience of group members is adequate to the aspects under discussion;
- 3) the problem is formulated so as to allow progress from a stage to the next;
- 4) there is resistance to the progress expected. For a real debate, the topic must be “*uncertain / debatable*”, in order to be analyzed from various perspectives; there is no point in discussing general truths or evident things.

The utility of progressive discussion is extremely varied. Thus, it may be used with high profit in the following *situations*:

- *performing studies and explorations of ideas* with regard to which there are no optimal implementation circumstances in the beginning (the members do not agree to their application, but their refusal is not based on rational but emotional arguments);
- *decision-making*, when opting for one of several alternatives;
- *training and perfecting programmes*.

The progressive discussion, through its structured character, proves to be efficient others to stimulate participants in the discussion, and to obtain quality results in unexplored situations.

#### **8.4 Discussion Techniques**

Phillips proposed this group discussion technique in 1948. He suggested dividing the large group into smaller units, composed of 6 people, who will discuss a matter of general interest or urgency for 6 minutes. The technique is based both on association and combination, and belongs to the creative methods. Phillips 6/6 is especially suitable for groups of more than 20 people, since allows the active participation of a large number of people, thus obtaining the opinions of all group members in a very short time.

The main objective is reaching a democratic participation in the discussion of large groups' members. In addition, Phillips 6/6 allows a thought synthesis for each 6-member group that will then be transmitted for the benefit of the large group. Positioning of members during the debate plays an important part in the process. Here are a few suggestions (Zlate, 1982):

- 1) *Placing around a rectangular table with the leader at the top* is the most frequent. Each participant develops interactions within the team, to the same extent with all members, including the leader.
- 2) *Positioning around a rectangular table with the leader on one of the sides.* Such a positioning deprives the leader of the authority above, but brings group members closer by shortening the social distance between them and leader. It also makes away with visual dominance monopoly; in the new position not all members are under direct observation all the time (when looking at 1 and 2, he/she does not see 4 and 5).

Since it is a rather elaborated group discussion technique, Phillips 6/6 has a series of standard procedures enumerated below (Zlate, 1982):

- 1) *The group leader announces the topic*, making sure it is clearly delimited and phrased. Usually the discussion focuses on problems requiring:
  - a. establishing causes or solutions to certain problems;
  - b. formulating problems to be brought to someone's attention;
  - c. making a decision, establishing a means of action.
- 2) *Dividing a larger group into smaller ones*, of 6 people each. Such a group chooses:
  - a. **a leader**, who will enhance the strive for solutions;
  - b. **a secretary**, who has the task of writing down on paper the solutions reached in order to present them, in the end, to the general leader of

the discussion group; the existence of a secretary is not compulsory; the secretary's tasks can be taken over by the leader.

- c. *The discussion as such* in groups. It is important to ***make each participant active***, as well as to make sure the moderator will fulfil the role assigned without forcing his or her opinions on the members. This stage can take two forms:
  - d. ***free discussion*** – each group member expresses an opinion and only the contributions agreed to by the entire group are kept;
  - e. ***progressive discussion*** – one group member expresses an opinion that is then analyzed by everyone; should the group agree to it, it is written down by the group secretary, otherwise it is eliminated; a similar procedure is followed for the opinions of the other group members in turn.
- 3) ***The solutions written down in small groups are handed over*** to the general leader once the *6 minutes are up*. There are two possibilities:
  - a. the secretary hands the leader the sheet with the group's answers;
  - b. the secretary announces the answers of his/her group.
- 4) ***Group members issue opinions and present solutions:***
  - a. critical analysis is admitted;
  - b. initially each subgroup keeps its own solutions, but some are gradually discarded and the remaining ones may win majority;
  - c. the majority solution in some sub-groups, confronted with other solution in other subgroup, may lose weight;
  - d. new solutions may come up, that have not been written down by any subgroup;
  - e. valuable ideas will be highlighted.
- 5) ***The leader's synthesis:***
  - a. the leader will sum up or classify the various proposals.

## **8.5 Panel Discussion**

The principle of this method is using a small group of individuals in view of studying a problem, while the audience intervenes through written messages. The method is employed in order to avoid the setting in of a negative psychological state, especially when the group is large and there arises the necessity of informing all members on some difficult issues to be solved by a common decision. A group in a panel discussion has the following composition:

- 1) *jury or panel*: a group of experts – composes of 5-7 qualified and competent people regarding the topics;
- 2) *audience*;
- 3) *animator* or discussion leader.

The duration of the panel is between 1.30 hour and 3 hours. The panel members are usually seated around a table in a half circle. The audience is sitting in front of them, in a larger half circle, so as to see and hear everything that is happening. The animator is placed between the panel and the audience, either to the right or to the left.

Phases of panel discussion:

- 1) Animator *announces* the topic under discussion, insisting on its significance.
- 2) Animator *introduces the panel* (name, speciality, competence).
- 3) Animator presents a series of *organizational measures* with respect to the tasks of the panel and audience:
  - a. Instructions for the panel: “*you are experts in the problem to be discussed and you will analyze the opinions and suggestions of people present in audience in order to arrive to a decision. The discussion will be between us, but the audience may intervene.*”
  - b. Instructions for the audience: “*you may express your opinions, suggestions at any time, using one of the following modalities:*
    - i. *write down on paper what you wish the panel to discuss;*
    - ii. *raise your hand every time you wish to intervene;*
    - iii. *write down on paper what you wish to ask and send the note to me or one of the panel members during the discussion;*
    - iv. *we will interrupt the discussion at some point for 5-10 minutes and you will then have the floor. We can agree to one or several of these possibilities.*”
- 4) Animator *leads the panel discussion* and attempts to involve the audience in discussion. A good animator should:
  - a. be competent in solving incidents that occur in using group activation methods;
  - b. have the professional competence required for the topic under discussion (thus, he or she will be able to rephrase certain aspects



using technical terms and will be able to mark the stages of the discussion, etc.).

- 5) Animator will make a *synthesis* of the discussion, presenting the conclusions and highlighting important ideas or the decision.

The audience may intervene through notes sent to the “jury”. On occasion the notes are written on coloured paper: blue is for questions, white for suggestions, red for personal opinions. It is preferable that the messages not be introduced in the discussion as soon as they are sent, so as not to cut the flow of discussion.

### **8.6 Laws of Group Dynamics**

The laws of group dynamics indicate an ideal number of 7-10 participants to the group (Paretti, 2001). If the number is too low there is not sufficient interaction and not enough ideas. If the group is too large it can be divided into sub-groups, but no unitary discussion can be held. Characteristics of participants:

- a) communication skills;
- b) availability for active listening;
- c) ability to understand various points of view;
- d) flexibility and receptiveness towards opponents and sense of adaptation to their actions.

A strong influence on the discussion is the social and emotional climate that sets in the group, atmosphere that can stimulate or inhibit. Sympathy and antipathy, cooperation or competition will reduce or amplify the advantage of the opinions expressed, accelerate or slow down the acceptance of conclusions.

In principle, there are two possibilities for a group discussion: the participants will either be similar, homogeneous, or diverse, heterogeneous. Each of these two alternatives has its pluses and minuses. In a group discussion people with similar experience are generally used (e.g.: mothers, couples, young graduates, etc.) to treat a specific topic, of interest to them. In a homogeneous group, a relaxed atmosphere and a feeling of mutual trust are easier to create, and thus enhance communication.

A heterogeneous group may generate more ideas, increase the problem solving potential since there is a wider criticizing base, may offer more alternatives but at the same time an increased heterogeneity may have opposite effects: difficulty to establish personal relationships, settling for the handiest ideas, decrease in group cohesion, and implicit decrease in performance.

**Examples, case studies, exercises**

Fragment of a discussion: woman, 25 years old. *“I don’t know what to do... I can’t tell whether I should stay in my current job. I can hardly stand the work, but it is stable and the salary is good. Or maybe I should just forget it and do something I am really interested in ... I may end up badly, with a very low salary ... and I don’t even know if I am up to it ...”*

Possible answers:

- 1) Can you tell me more about what you really wish at present? It is important to reflect on the matter (investigation on the person).
- 2) We can apply some tests that will allow you to weigh your chances in the new field you are interested in. Moreover, we could examine some of the aspects you are currently dissatisfied with (supportive behaviour).
- 3) Your hesitation is understandable, since it is caused by your uncertainty regarding the choice of a new activity and abandoning the old one, to which the reluctance to give up your security is added (cooperative interpretation behaviour).
- 4) It is indeed a tough choice to make, isn’t it? (reverberation, sympathy).

The discussion analysis may prove useful only if systematic and organized. Below, is an analysis model.

Topic	Facts, situations, events	Environment, context	Behaviour, capacities	Needs, motivations, interests	Results
	What?	Where? When?	How?	Why?	
Professional situation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· job change</li> <li>· not enough resources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· a small city in Romania</li> <li>· social isolation</li> <li>· few jobs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· resistance to routine</li> <li>· hesitation in applying a solution</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· looking for a job</li> <li>· more interesting activity</li> <li>· need to make more money</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· sense of responsibility</li> <li>· active person</li> <li>· sociable</li> <li>· latent dynamism</li> </ul>

**Method evaluation Advantages of Phillips 6/6:**

- a) allows all group members to take part in the discussion;
- b) it is overall activating, since it increases the interest and attention of participants, incites and stirs them
- c) it is useful to quickly obtain opinions elaborated by sub-groups, partial agreements reached, suggestions made, etc.; it quickly yields a wide range of solutions;
- d) accustoms group members to the technique of argumentation, supporting or discarding opinions;
- e) favours a representative decision-making manner for various tendencies within a group;
- f) favours confrontation of individual perceptions and acceptance of their complementarity with those of the group;
- g) can be used in classes to find out the general information level of pupils on a topic;
- h) many class activities can be evaluated;
- i) develops synthesis abilities;
- j) contributes to defeating the fear of speaking in public, and stimulates the sense of responsibility.

**Disadvantages of Phillips 6/6:**

- a) work groups might interfere with each other when there is not room enough;
- b) additional time is spent on presenting the results of each group;
- c) the aspects selected from the viable alternatives may be unsystematic.

**Advantages of Panel:**

- a) ensures participation of a large number of members of various social groups in decision-making, solving problems of general interest, and is thus an excellent way to democratically elaborate solutions;
- b) allows reciprocal information of group members on common issues, as well as their direct involvement in their solution;
- c) leads to an increased participation in group life, strengthening the feeling of attachment to it, and an increase in personal and collective responsibility of putting decisions into practice;
- d) triggers emotional aspects of an issue;
- e) supports participants in arguing their point of view in relation to the opinions of other members.

**Disadvantages of Panel:**

- a) discussion may be monopolized by a few;

- b) due to its complexity, it is not easy to apply (an experienced moderator is needed).

**Advantages of Group discussion:**

- a) creates an open, receptive and friendly atmosphere, giving more people the opportunity to express their opinions;
- b) favours cooperation in view of solving problems;
- c) ensures the transfer of knowledge from one situation to others;
- d) stimulates initiative and responsible participation in the multilateral and indepth clarification of issues;
- e) cultivates appropriate expression of personal opinions;
- f) stimulates spontaneity and creativity of ideas;
- g) decisions made as a consequence of discussions are more based, accurate, and easier accepted by group members.

**Disadvantages of Group discussion:**

- a) a time interval is necessary to prepare the topic and the questions;
- b) creates defensive attitudes, of avoidance or wandering from the main issue;
- c) leaves room for subjectivity in opinions;
- d) some have a tendency to monopolize the discussion and impose their own point of view.