

GROUP DYNAMICS

1. Group Dynamics

1.1. Background

Group dynamics can be defined as a system of behaviors and psychological processes occurring within a social group (*intragroup* dynamics), or between social groups (*intergroup* dynamics). The study of group dynamics can be useful in understanding decision-making behavior, tracking the spread of diseases in society, creating effective therapy techniques, and following the emergence and popularity of new ideas and technologies. Group dynamics are at the core of understanding racism, sexism, and other forms of social prejudice and discrimination. These applications of the field are studied in psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, epidemiology, education, social work, business, and communication studies.

The history of group dynamics (or group processes) has a consistent, underlying premise: 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.' A social group is an entity, which has qualities that cannot be understood just by studying the individuals that make up the group. In 1924, Gestalt psychologist, Max Wertheimer identified this fact, proclaiming that there are entities where the behavior of the whole cannot be derived from its individual elements nor from the way these elements fit together. Rather the opposite is true, the properties of any of the parts are determined by the intrinsic structural laws of the whole.

As a field of study, group dynamics has roots in both psychology and sociology. Wilhelm Wundt, credited as the founder of experimental psychology, had a particular interest in the psychology of communities, which he believed possessed phenomena (human language, customs, and religion) that could not be described through a study of the individual. On the sociological side, Émile Durkheim, who was influenced by Wundt, also recognized collective phenomena, such as public knowledge. Other key theorists include Gustave Le Bon who believed that crowds possessed a 'racial unconscious' with primitive, aggressive, and antisocial instincts, and William McDougall (psychologist), who believed in a 'group mind,' which had a distinct existence born from the interaction of individuals.

Ultimately, it was social psychologist Kurt Lewin who coined the term ‘group dynamics’ to describe the positive and negative forces within groups of people. Additionally, group dynamics began, as an identifiable field of inquiry, in the United States toward the end of the 1930s. In 1945, he established *The Group Dynamics Research Center* at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first institute devoted explicitly to the study of group dynamics. Throughout his career, Lewin was focused on how the study of group dynamics could be applied to real-world, social issues. Lewin's contribution was of great importance, but, it is important to note, group dynamics was not the creation of just one person. It was, in fact, the result of many developments that occurred over a period of several years and in several different disciplines and professions. Viewed in historical perspective, group dynamics can be seen as the convergence of certain trends within the social sciences and, more broadly, as the product of the particular society in which it arose. An increasing amount of research has applied evolutionary psychology principles to group dynamics. Humans are argued to have evolved in an increasingly complicated social environment and to have many adaptations concerned with group dynamics. Examples include mechanisms for dealing with status, reciprocity, identifying cheaters, ostracism, altruism, group decision, leadership, and intergroup relations.

The phrase has gained popular familiarity since World War II but, unfortunately, with its increasing circulation, its meaning has become imprecise. According to one rather frequent usage, group dynamics refers to a sort of political ideology concerning the ways in which groups should be organized and managed. This ideology emphasizes the importance of democratic leadership, the participation of members in decisions, and the gains both to society and to individuals to be obtained through cooperative activities in groups. The critics of this view have sometimes caricatured it as making “togetherness” the supreme virtue, advocating that everything be done jointly in groups that have and need no leader because everyone participates fully and equally. A second popular usage of the term group dynamics has it refer to a set of techniques, such as role playing, buzz-sessions, observation and feedback of group process, and group decision, which have been employed widely during the past decade or two in training programs designed to improve skill in human relations and in the management of conferences and committees. These techniques have been identified most closely with the National Training Laboratories whose annual training programs at Bethel, Maine, have become widely known. According to the third usage of the term group dynamics, it refers to a field of inquiry dedicated to achieving knowledge about the nature of groups, the laws of their development, and their interrelations with individuals, other groups, and larger institutions.

It is not possible, of course, to legislate how terms are to be used in a language. Nevertheless, it is important for clarity of thinking and communication to distinguish among these three quite distinct things which have been given the same label in popular discussions.

Everyone has an ideology, even though he may not be able to state it very explicitly, concerning the ways in which group life should be organized. Those responsible for the management of groups and the training of people for participation in groups can fulfill their responsibilities only by the use of techniques of one sort or another. But there is no rigidly fixed correspondence between a particular ideology about the “ideal” nature of groups and the use of particular techniques of management and training. And it should be obvious that the search for a better understanding of the nature of group life need not be linked to a particular ideology or adherence to certain techniques of management. The term group dynamics can also refer to the field of inquiry dedicated to advancing knowledge about the nature of group life. Group dynamics, in this sense, is a branch of knowledge or an intellectual specialization. Being concerned with human behavior and social relationships, it can be located within the social sciences. And yet it cannot be identified readily as a subpart of any of the traditional academic disciplines. In order to gain a better understanding of how group dynamics differs from other familiar fields, it’s important to consider briefly some of its distinguishing characteristics.

1.2. Groups and Teams

So, what are groups and teams? This might seem like a silly question, but it is not. Gatherings of less than 10-12 people are considered by organizational development consultants to be a small group. Information in this section is most useful for forming and facilitating small groups of 10-12 people or less. Groups that are larger than that range tend to have another level of complexity not apparent in small groups. For example, the nature and needs of larger groups are often similar to those of entire ongoing organizations. They have their own various subcultures, distinct subsystems (or cliques), diversity of leadership styles and levels of communication. While certain structures are often useful in small groups, they are absolutely necessary on an ongoing basis in larger groups. For example, larger groups should have a clearly established purpose that is continually communicated, and formal plans and policies about ongoing leadership, decision making, problem solving and communication.

1.3. Life Stages of a Team

When developing a team, it helps a great deal to have some basic sense of the stages that a typical team moves through when evolving into a high-performing team. Awareness of each stage helps leaders to understand the reasons for members' behavior during a stage, and to guide members to behavior required to evolve the team into the next stage.

1. Forming - Members first get together during this stage. Individually, they are considering questions like, "What am I here for?", "Who else is here?" and "Who am I comfortable with?" It is important for members to get involved with each other, including introducing themselves to each other. Clear and strong leadership is required from the team leader during this stage to ensure the group members feel the clarity and comfort required to evolve to the next stage.

2. Storming - During this stage, members are beginning to voice their individual differences, join with others who share the same beliefs, and jockey for position in the group. Therefore, it is important for members to continue to be highly involved with each other, including to voice any concerns in order to feel represented and understood. The team leader should help members to voice their views, and to achieve consensus (or commonality of views) about their purpose and priorities.

3. Norming - In this stage, members are beginning to share a common commitment to the purpose of the group, including to its overall goals and how each of the goals can be achieved. The team leader should focus on continuing to clarify the roles of each member, and a clear and workable structure and process for the group to achieve its goals.

4. Performing - In this stage, the team is working effectively and efficiently toward achieving its goals. During this stage, the style of leadership becomes more indirect as members take on stronger participation and involvement in the group process. Ideally, this stage includes helping members to reflect on their experiences and to learn from them.

5. Closing and Celebration - At this stage, it is clear to members and their organization that the team has achieved its goals (or a major milestone along the way toward the goal). It is critical to acknowledge this point in the life of the team, lest members feel unfulfilled and skeptical about future team efforts.

1.4. Types of Teams You Could Use

There are many types of teams that can be used in the workplace. The type chosen depends very much on the nature of the results that the team is to accomplish.

- **Formal and Informal Teams** - These are usually small groups of employees who come together to address some specific goal or need. Management appoints formal teams, that is, teams that are intentionally organized and resourced to address a specific and important goal or need. Informal teams are usually loosely organized groups of people who come together to address a non-critical, short-term purpose.
- **Committees** - Committees are organized to address, major ongoing functions or tasks in an organization, and the membership of the committees often is based on the official position of each of the members, for example, committees in Boards of Directors.
- **Problem-Solving Teams** - These teams are formed to address a particular, major problem currently faced by the organization. Often, their overall goal is to provide a written report that includes recommendations for solving the problem. Membership often is comprised of people who perceive and/or experience the problem, as well as those who can do something about it.
- **Self-Directed and Self-Managed Teams** - These types of teams are increasingly used where a) team members are working to address a complex challenge in a rapidly changing environment, and b) the strong ownership and participation of members are extremely important. These types provide great latitude in how members achieve the overall results to be achieved by the teams. The role of leader in such a team might change during the team activities depending on where the team is in its stage of development and/or achieving its results.