Preparing for planning - the Dynamics of Groups
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An overview of groups

We’re talking about us when we think about groups. Ordinary people, like us, belong to groups. Most of us, however, are not trained to operate successfully in groups. Individuals on groups come with their own ‘baggage’ – their own ideas, beliefs, fears, hopes, ways of speaking, and patterns of behavior. People have mixed attitudes towards groups (Hunter et al 1995).

So why be a part of them? What is their purpose? Their main purpose is synergy. Synergy is the combined effect of parts that exceeds their individual effects.

The work of a group can consist of many things – decision-making, creating new ideas, learning from one another, creating change, tackling tough or complex issues, or working together to accomplish something bigger than themselves.

Check your own personal beliefs about groups. Do you believe in the value of working together in a group? Do you believe that a group decision or outcome can be better than the work of a single individual? Have the people in the group made a commitment to work together?

Types of groups and community structures
There are several ways of generalizing about groups of people. There are several types of community structures or relationships that differ in their degree of integration (Hinds 2008).

● Individuals
● Networks – function primarily to exchange information and foster communication
● Informal network – interim structure
● Alliances – a bit more formal in process and serve to reduce duplication of efforts
● Partnerships – involve sharing helpful resources to support each other’s interests and goals and some joint planning and activity, while still maintaining autonomy
● Coalitions – bring members together to work toward complementary goals through coordinated efforts and sharing of resources
● Collaboratives – entail working together towards a common vision, jointly taking action, and sharing the decision-making process

You may encounter various types of groups of people in your Extension work, ranging from a board of directors, a sub-committee of an organization, or a collaboration group of individuals and organizations. Sometimes these groups exhibit characteristics of a ‘conventional’ group, and others a ‘participatory group’, each of which has an entirely different set of group norms, values and assumptions (Kaner et al 2007). Typically, these types of groups are coming together to achieve a mutual purpose for a larger benefit.
It is important to distinguish these groups from audiences. Audiences are a group of people that are generally the target of one-way interaction, information or entertainment, and who are there primarily to benefit themselves.

**Planning groups**
When working on a strategic planning process or a planning approach, we will most commonly be working with a planning body. A primary planning body, or planning team, is the specific group of people charged with leading and developing the planning process and the strategic plan (Grabow et al 2006).

It is important to understand the difference between these different entities before getting involved in a planning and development process. You might find yourself working with an existing planning body that has already gelled, or one that may have issues or personality conflicts. You might be working with a board or collaborative group who is also serving the role of the primary planning body. They may want you there to design and facilitate a process, or they may only want you there to be a flip-chart jockey. In either case, you’ll have a set of group dynamics to learn, understand and foster regardless of whether the planning body is newly formed or not.

**Basic management of group interaction**
Management of group dynamics and interaction is part of the responsibility of the process leader and the process facilitator. While the planning process leader takes on many roles in the strategic planning process, the facilitator must also come into the process with a well-developed set of skills. Skilled facilitation usually depends on the establishment of a successful partnership among facilitators, sponsors and champions. Facilitators must learn a great deal about the organization’s politics, issues, culture and secrets. In addition to process skills, ability to build group trust, interpersonal skills and conflict management ability, facilitators should be able to:

- Know the strategic planning process
- Tailor the process to the group’s needs
- Convey a sense of humor and enthusiasm
- Press groups towards action
- Congratulate people when possible (Bryson 2004)

Additionally, it is helpful to get to know each group member and what resources, skills and assets members bring to the table. Don’t let past experiences blind you from seeing potential.

**Important group interaction and management concepts**
To be successful in a planning or other group process, keep these basic group interaction and group management concepts in mind:
• Understand how well the group is organized to accomplish the task at hand
  o Do they have an agreed upon purpose?
  o What are their methods of conflict resolution? Decision-making?
  o Do they have a realistic timeline?
  o Is there a Leader? Champion? Sponsor?
  o How would they like to handle process and meeting documentation?
• Establish and use ground rules
• Develop group norms with respect to their group culture
• Build trust among group members
• Stay on track and focused – understand creative versus tangential discussion
• Use good meeting planning and process planning
• Hone listening skills (yours and the groups)
• Be aware of non-verbal communication

It is also important to consider how the individual can affect group dynamics.
• Be aware of difficult individual behaviors that might make dynamics challenging – such as dominating, silent, or rambling behavior – and know how to handle them.
• Be aware of how personality differences affect group dynamics. Use your training and experience in Colors, Meyers-Briggs, Responsibility Based Culture, or Team Dimensions to understand the people in the group and how their personality or preferences affect how they work in groups.
• Diagnose and intervene on individual and group behavior as appropriate

There are times in a planning process when the facilitator will need to, or be asked to intervene. Note that in this case, intervention is not referring to conflict management or resolution. There are three levels of intervention which may be appropriate at different times in a strategic planning process.
  • Gentle intervention, such as asking clarifying questions and being silent, might be useful during initial phases of strategic planning where brainstorming and group creativity is important (e.g. SWOC, vision and values)
  • Persuasive intervention, including asking persuasive questions or suggesting next steps or actions, might be effective when a group is stuck while narrowing down a list or unsure of next steps.
  • Directive intervention should be used carefully, such as when directing the group how to proceed next, or guiding them to narrow their choices. As a facilitator you never want to give up your control completely to the group. If you need to be directive, have a recommendation or two for the group to consider, and help them understand implications of each option. Look to the process leader for guidance if appropriate.

(University of Minnesota, Volume 4, 1999)

**Stages of group development…and implications to strategic planning processes**

Groups have developmental and relationship stages. Like peeling an onion, these stages may change as different layers are removed or enough time has passed. Two
fundamental and similar models of group development are Cog’s Ladder and Tuckman’s Stages.

Cog’s Ladder – five stages are necessary for a small group of people to be able to work efficiently. These stages are:

- the polite stage – newly formed group, not well-gelled, participants tend to ‘role-play’, they are getting acquainted or re-acquainted
- the why we’re here stage – specific agenda for each planning session needs to be communicated by the moderator or leader, individual need for approval begins to diminish as members examine their group’s purpose and begin to set goals, members work to feel as though they “fit in”.
- the power stage – disagreements may cause the group to be implosive, members will try to convince others of their opinion and viewpoint, solutions arising out of this stage tend not to produce optimum solutions, patience and structure is necessary.
- the cooperation stage – members begin to accept that others have an opinion worth expressing, a team spirit replaces vested interests, new levels of creativity are achieved and the group’s productivity soars
- the esprit stage– mutual acceptance with high cohesiveness and a general feeling of esprit, the group does its finest work and is most productive at this stage. This stage will not always be achieved as the other four stages must first be met.

Tuckman’s Stages of group or team development:

- Forming – group members tend to behave quite independently, are usually on their best behavior but very focused on themselves; an important stage to allow members to get to know each other, and see how they work together.
- Storming – different ideas compete for consideration, ground rules, issue identification, leadership and group function is important, communication tends to open up and confrontation may occur.
- Norming - members adjust their behavior to each other as they develop work habits that make teamwork seem more natural and fluid, the group works through this stage by agreeing on rules, values, professional behavior, shared methods, working tools and even taboos, and members begin to trust each other. In this stage “group think” may occur, which may stifle healthy discussion and new ideas.
- Performing - high-performing teams are able to function as a unit as they find ways to get the job done smoothly and effectively without inappropriate conflict or the need for external supervision. Dissent is expected and allowed as long as it is channeled through means acceptable to the team.

Understanding stages of group development may have implications for group dynamics during a strategic planning process. Observations from my own practice include:

- Groups or a planning body may not be ready to work together
- Power struggles may make for untenable solutions
• Too short a planning timeframe may not allow true creativity and honest discussion of issues
• People may ‘buck the process’
• Many group stages can be happening at one time

**Building agreement in groups**

Just as groups go through developmental processes, there may also be process stages that occur during meetings or series of meetings. Kaner et al (2007) refers to these stages as “zones” – the divergent zone, groan zone, and convergent zone.

• Divergent Zone – where members are increasing the diversity of material and ideas with which they can work. Here they may be surveying the territory, searching for alternatives and raising difficult issues.

• Groan Zone – the difficult, often unpleasant, but normal part of a process of coming to a sustainable agreement. Members often want to flee this zone, but it is important to struggle here to come to a shared framework of understanding. If a group flees this zone too quickly, they may suffer from being boxed into a limited solution space and miss the benefit of remaining in this zone. If not carefully facilitated through this zone, the group may break into factions or succumb to arguments.

• Convergent Zone – a shared understanding has emerged and the group is on its way to finding a solution that will incorporate everyone’s needs and goals. During this zone they may apply inclusive principles, practice creative re-framing, and strengthen good ideas.

Understanding two different mind sets, and their characteristics, for solving problems -- *Either/Or* versus *Both/And* – is also important. Different mind sets will determine how successfully a group can move through the process zones, and ultimately how sustainable, creative and positive a strategic planning process will be.

Facilitators of strategic planning processes need to be comfortable with tools and approaches to help the group work through these zones and come to agreement at various steps in the process.

(Kaner et al 2007)

**Preparing to work with groups**

**Importance of meeting process and design**

Meeting planning, meeting design and process planning are critical to a strategic planning process. There are three primary components, or building blocks, of a meeting - topics, outcomes and processes – which help create the meeting agenda (Kaner et al 2007)
Similarly, the overall goal of the strategic planning process can be viewed as a series of several nested meetings each with their own goal. Understanding how to achieve strategic planning in a series of steps over time, can help the facilitator and the group remain focused and on task. Samples of strategic planning process and meeting designs can be found in the case studies section of this binder.

**Your role as a facilitator**
Remember the role of a facilitator is to make the process ‘easy’ for the group. Be ready to facilitate, coach, make observations and make recommendations where appropriate. Here are a few more key points to consider when preparing to facilitate a strategic planning process:

- Consider a contract or written agreement of services
- Allow time to get to know them and they you
- Understand where the decision lies
- Be professional - not too chummy
- Be sure you can stay objective

**References**

Building Common Ground Series, National 4H Council, Susan Halbert and Jean Hovey, 1994.


