

MAKING INTERVENTIONS IN A GROUP

Interventions are the actions you take in a group as the group facilitator, leader, participant or coordinator in order to develop its functioning with regard to the groups purpose. When discussing interventions it is worth noting that an intervention is something you do either during, before or after a group that assist the group to be effective and to meets its purpose. The areas where you can intervene are numerous. When your imagination and creativity are 'going' you will create new and relevant interventions.

You might do it with yourself. That is, change some aspect of the way you are relating in the group, or the style you use with a particular group. For example, you might coach people instead of teaching them. You might change the physical setting in some manner. You might invite others to try out some new ways of behaving. You might get others to teach and assist the group. You might change the style or agenda of a group's meeting. You might prepare the participants in a different way. You might follow up in a new manner. You might prepare them yourself in a different way.

The one principle that I will let you in on here is the one often called "Pushing the boat into the stream". When you push a boat out into a stream with people in it, at first it is quite sluggish and slow. It might be wobbly and unsteady. Soon it begins to speed up and then the river catches it and off it goes. Similarly, with interventions in a group. Allow time for the intervention to have its effect. It may take some time. It may be slow to take effect. If you rush into another intervention before the last one has run its course you will be bouncing people around and find it difficult to track what is affecting what. Of course, at some point you will need to decide that it is time to act again. However, allow time for people to respond and make use of what you do.

The seven steps of escalating interventions

Bob Dick (1995) has set out seven levels of escalating interventions. These processes have as their basis the group facilitator drawing the group's functioning to the attention of the group. This is sometimes referred to as a metaprocess consultation. It is a metaprocess because it is describing the process in words and action. Much of the description you have been working with will contain metaprocess language. In the model of perceptual positions this would also be called thirid perceptual position.

The approach has three components two of which are optional. They are:-

(inform).....(suggest).....invite

An escalating series of interventions can begin with a very low-key approach and move on step wise to more and more powerful interventions. The escalation can take place at a number of dimensions. You can increase the amount of information given, the depth of the proposed intervention or the strength with which it is delivered.

The steps are as follows:

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|----|--------|----------------------------|--------|
| 1. | | | invite |
| 2. | inform | | invite |
| 3. | inform | suggest minor intervention | invite |
| 4. | inform | suggest major intervention | invite |
| 5. | inform | suggest process analysis | invite |
| 6. | inform | suggest getting help | invite |
| 7. | | give up and go home | |

The steps in more detail

Step 1. Invite.

A first level intervention is an invitation something like saying;

"Do you want to do anything about the way we are operating?"

It invites the group to consider the process of the group and do something about it.

It is useful in that you don't have to be 'right' about what is going on. If you suspect something is going on it is an easy question to ask. It is not a high flying fancy question. It could be asked by the leader or a participant. No one will fall over with shock if it is asked. It is easy to practice and get good at. It builds up your ability to try something more complex at a later stage. It can be asked simply as a way to have the group reflect on its method of operating even if the group is doing well. There is great value in people appreciating when a group is doing well. Interventions in groups can be quite nerve racking so a simple non-threatening approach such as this make it much easier for you to act on the intervention rather than agonise over 'what to do when'. It can easily and without fuss alert the group to pay some attention to the way it is functioning. Of course, if the group is determined to avoid doing looking at itself, then this intervention will not succeed. There can be numerous reasons why a group as a whole does not want to look at its functioning. For instance: the group does not want to embarrass the leader; the group does not want to notice ineffective things it has been doing for some time; the group has other unresolved problems that require fixing before the functioning will improve and it is either unaware of these or unwilling to deal with these; the group has a low emotional tolerance for reflecting on itself (the members get frustrated and feel time is being wasted) and there are others.

Step 2. Inform

At this level of intervention you give the group some process information before inviting them to act. This is where being able to objectively describe what has been going on is of so much value. The more specific the information you are able to provide the more effective you will be. An example is as follows;

"In the past half hour, one participant spoke for 20 minutes total, another spoke for 5 minutes and the rest used the other 5 minutes. Towards the end of this time I noticed one person falling asleep and another yawning and looking away.(INFORM) Do you want to do something about this?(INVITE)"

This type of intervention can be very powerful even when individuals are not named. Things will change even if the invitation is not taken up. Also, it implicitly makes tangible your role to facilitate the group using a low-key non-threatening approach to start with. Once again this intervention allows group members to do third perceptual position or to be attentive to the group process.

Step 3. Minor Intervention.

A minor intervention is one where the process of the group is modified without changing the content. That is, continue a discussion but change the way it is being discussed. For example, if listening behaviour is to be improved, each person could be asked to paraphrase what the previous person said before putting forward their position. This can be done without changing the task.

As before, information is given first. Consequences can also be discussed. Emotional tone and other objectively identifiable behaviour can also be given. The suggestion is offered tentatively as it is based on your assumption about what you have seen. What you have seen and what you make of it may be complete nonsense or it may be completely accurate. Anyhow, being tentative allows you a way out if you are incorrect and also allows others to enter into creating a useful process to move the group forward. An example could be;

"When we've been discussing this problem in the group I noticed that John you began to read the poster on the wall. And there were two other small private discussions going on.(INFORM)

"I reckon we have a problem with listening to each other on this topic. Perhaps paraphrasing could help. (SUGGEST) What do you think?(INVITE)

By finishing with the invitation the responsibility for action is still with the group members as a whole.

Step 4. Major Intervention

A major intervention is one where the group's process has to be altered and requires the content to be set aside until the problem is solved. Apart from this it doesn't differ from the previous level. For example;

"During the last hour we have touched on the topic only three time with anything like interest. When this was done the person raising their concern was not responded to by anyone in the group. The topic hasn't been raised in the last 5 minutes. (INFORM)"

"It could be that we are at cross purposes in the group at the moment. It could be well worthwhile to spend some time clarifying why we are each here and what we think this group is for before continuing with the agenda. (SUGGEST)"

"I could be way off beam, but I would like to hear from everyone. It is important to me to continue. You may have others ideas about what to do and I may be persuaded otherwise in my assessment."

"How does it appear to you? What do you think we should do about it? (INVITE)"

Step 5. Process analysis.

This level also has inform, suggest, invite. The difference between this level and the previous one is that the suggested intervention is designed to carefully examine the process of the group. This type of approach is useful if you are unable to work out what the process difficulty is. It is also the logical next step to the previous intervention if it hasn't worked.

At this level the suggestion is a process to solve the mystery of the information you have presented. An example follows;

"The problems alluded to previously are still occurring. In the last 5 minutes I noticed three people put forward proposals, which sank like lead balloons. It appeared as though no one heard them. I don't want to continue with this sort of process and I don't think many of you do either."

"I don't think we are any closer to completing our task than when we began. (INFORM) I suggest we leave the task for the moment and analyse just what is going on with us at present. (SUGGEST) Unless anyone disagrees, I am going to ask each of you what you think is happening and for some ideas about what we can do about it....(INVITE)"

If the intervention were accepted the group would then work through the process you suggested. The first thing to do would be to set a process goal. Ie: a 'how we will work together' goal. Such as "Working to the agenda and collaboratively discussing various option brought forth." The problem solving procedures would then be used to analyse barriers to that goal, devise solutions and plan how they might be implemented.

Step 6. Getting help

This is the step when the previous ones have failed. It could be that you do not have enough influence in the group to complete your interventions. It could also be that you are too close to the problem or that you are a part of the problem. Either way you need an outsider with credibility and influence to progress the work of the group.

Step 7. Give up and go home

If the previous interventions failed you would be quite justified in giving up and going home. It is important to know that not all problems in groups can be solved. And some groups only develop to a minimal level of effectiveness irrespective of the interventions made. Working with group process is a complex task. Do not despair if things do not work.

Learning how to do this type of work

All these interventions require the group leader or group member to have the capacity to act and take what might appear to be and actually are risky actions. Therefore these suggestions are given not as a recipe to be followed because they wont be. They are given as a tentative map of how a person could intervene in a group process that they believe is not doing very well.

The earlier interventions can be practices in a variety of venues and groups with little or no risk. When practicing in this way you will find that even simple interventions can have a powerful effect. Similarly you will likely find that there are some groups that appear immune to any interventions, simple or otherwise.

This article is mostly taken from: *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, Second Edition. By Bob Dick (with a few additions and explications by Peter and Gavin). It forms a small part of his book which can be purchased here: http://www.interchangebooks.com.au/group_facilitation.html