

DISCUSSION SKILLS IN GROUPS

- Many of the groups we are in have a social purpose and, whilst we may not think about it consciously, we need a range of personal/social skills to relate effectively with others and come to agreements. This is particularly the case when we have to co-operate with others in order to achieve a specific goal.
- In particular this occurs when working in small discussion groups, when having to make a presentation or when involved in social, political or environmental action. These Notes are about what you need to know and the skills you need to develop in order to be able to do that well.

1. FEELING SAFE

What comes up

- I wonder what comes up for you when you find yourself in a group? Some of the feelings will probably be: Who are these people? Will I like them? Will they like me? What if someone criticises me? Or it could be: This could be fun. I'm looking forward to this. I might learn something new here. I might make new friends.
- But notice that in each case what comes up are quite strong feelings. This is normal - for everyone. The important thing is to pay attention to them, to listen to them, to see what they tell you about yourself. The affective (feeling) domain is equally as important as the cognitive (thinking) domain in social experience.
- Some of the feelings you will have will be to do with safety. Does it feel OK to be here? Are these people I want to be with? If you've chosen who you are with this may partly be on the basis of how safe you feel with them, supported and respected by them. Remember other people will be having similar feelings to your own.

Ground rules

- It is difficult to work well with others in a group if you are feeling insecure, setting up a framework which helps give a sense of security to the group is thus essential. This involves agreement on 'ground rules'. Ground rules should be agreed by the group members themselves. Here are five essential ones.

Speaking – only one person speaks at a time, this could be as a result of putting a hand up or agreeing to take turns to speak.

Listening – it is important to really listen to what the other person is saying without interrupting them.

Not judging – it is really important to listen without making judgements about the other person, this is where they are coming from, respect that.

Sharing – no one person should dominate the discussion, no person should be left out and everyone should be encouraged to contribute.

Voice – it's not necessarily about saying the right thing or having an answer, it's about 'finding your voice', which may be just to say what you're feeling.

The group task

- The most important thing in a task-orientated group is to reach agreement on the goal and how best to achieve it. There is always a tension between individual/group needs that has to be resolved. You may thus have to put some of your own needs aside in order to achieve the set task.
- This does not mean ignoring them. You might want to take it in turns at the beginning just to say how you feel about being in the group before getting down to the task. Q: Is there anything you need to do before you can be really present to what we've got to do?

2. DISCUSSION SKILLS

Sharing feelings

- It often really helps the group dynamic to periodically check-in with how you are feeling about the task. You might therefore make observations such as: 'I feel quite excited about working together on this'; 'I feel a bit daunted about the task we have to do'; 'I feel nervous about having anything valuable to contribute'.
- Such statements don't necessarily require an answer but they do reveal what is going on for you. Others know where you're at and can then take this into account. Feelings are kept out in the open which, if not expressed, might hinder achievement of the task. It also often strikes a chord of sympathy with others.

Sharing opinions

- For a group to achieve its task everyone needs to contribute, this means everybody needs to share their thoughts and opinions in the group. Two things may happen at first: i) you may feel you don't have anything to say; ii) you may be nervous about sharing your ideas with others.
- Firstly, whatever the topic you will have some responses to it, so spend a moment or two jotting down any questions, ideas or experiences which you feel might be relevant. Secondly, it is quite alright to be tentative about what you first say. It's often only in the process of discussion that ideas become clear.
- Remember to hold your certainties lightly, i.e. whilst stating your opinion about a particular issue you may still find you want to refine or alter it later. Similarly other people's starting points may not be where they finish up.

Active listening

- Don't be afraid to remind the group of the ground rules for by remembering these the group will feel a safer place in which to experiment and try out ideas. Everyone has a shared responsibility for this.
- Active listening means really listening to what someone is saying whether you agree with them or not. It means not interrupting or spending the time thinking about your answer. It is also really helpful to check out with the speaker that you have understood correctly what they are saying.
- This can best be done by paraphrasing what you feel they have said and reflecting that back to them. 'What I heard you say was...' The speaker then knows she has really been heard or can clarify any points if needed. When everyone feels really listened to and respected the group's task will be much easier and more fun.

3. REACHING AGREEMENT

Working co-operatively

- If your group is following all of these strategies – and it takes practice – you are well on the way to good cooperative working. Co-operative working involves considering different ways to set about the task and agreeing on the best one. If you feel safe in the group you are less likely to mind about making compromise.
- Working co-operatively does not mean everyone has to agree. You may work co-operatively and supportively to identify the main differences of opinion on an issue and to really clarify the arguments for and against different opinions. Co-operative working also means working to bring out the best in others.

Difficulties and disagreements

- If someone's behaviour upsets you first remember the ground rules! Then you need to share what you're feeling. There's a crucial difference between saying 'It really annoy me when you mess around in the group' (blaming) and 'I find it difficult to stay on task when you play around' (ownership of your own feelings).
- On some issues discussion may get heated and someone may need to use the ground rules to cool things down. You might say 'Let's take a few minutes out to reflect on what's happening here. Is there a more constructive way in which we could move this forward, I wonder?'
- It is also fine to disagree! No one is suggesting that everyone in the group must have the same opinion on how best to do something. However, if it is a collective task, e.g. a seminar presentation, everyone will need to agree on how to share this out and work effectively together.

Staying on task

- It always helps to stand back occasionally and watch what is going on in a group. Is someone dominating conversation, is someone staying quiet, is the group getting off task? It is always important and helpful to feed your observations back to the group.
- 'Keeping on task' can have both a narrow and a broad interpretation. You may feel conversation is straying from the topic under discussion and decide to draw attention to this. You might be right, but what appears to be straying off course can sometimes lead to fruitful insights and a sharpened perception of the issue.
- Developing these skills takes time, so learn from mistakes and try again. Gradually working in a group will become easier. You will know what you want to contribute and 'synergy' will begin to occur – when the insight and output of the group begins to feel more than the sum of its individual parts.

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