

# Toward Improved Skill in Group Living: A Discussion

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Some of the issues, principles, and results of research in the area of group dynamics are discussed by Kenneth D. Benne, associate professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University; Ronald Lippitt, research director, Research Center for Group Dynamics, MIT; and Leland P. Bradford, director of the Division of Adult Education Services, NEA. These were among the leaders in the pioneering experiment held at Bethel, Maine.<sup>1</sup> The discussion gives emphasis to some of the particular problems with which leaders in supervision and curriculum development are concerned.

*Bradford:* I wonder if you people are as impressed as I am with the great interest and concern throughout the country in the group process. This interest is apparent in many different fields—supervisors and administrators in industry and government, community workers, social workers, youth leaders, adult educators, teachers, supervisors, and administrators in our schools—all are showing a deeper interest than I think was present before. Furthermore, this interest is in the actual functioning of groups rather than only in their composition. There is an increasing awareness in the dynamics of group action.

*Benne:* Well, Lee, I agree with you. But I think it's more than just a deeper interest and concern. It seems to me that people from many of these same groups are asking questions about how they can improve the productivity of the groups they work in. In contrast to an interest in group process which was present ten, fifteen, twenty years ago, people are now asking questions directed toward a rather basic understanding of democratic group functioning rather than looking for tricks and techniques to control groups. And I think they're asking questions which can be put to some kind of experimental

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<sup>1</sup> The first National Training Laboratory in Group Development was held at Gould Academy, Bethel, (Maine) June 16 to July 4, 1947. The laboratory was sponsored jointly by the National Education Association and the Research Center for Group Dynamics of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Cooperating institutions were Teachers College, Columbia University, Springfield College, and the universities of California, Michigan, and Maine. The basic research on group productivity conducted at the laboratory was supported by a grant from the Office of Naval Research.

Delegates to the laboratory were sixty-five carefully selected individuals in important leadership positions in education, adult education, industry, labor, government, social and group work, health education, and community organization. The research team included about thirty-five social psychologists, clinical psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists. Delegates, faculty, and research staff cooperated in identifying, practicing, and testing the understandings and skills required for effective group development and improvement of human relations. At the same time, all participants were attempting to increase their effectiveness as trainers of others in these skills and understandings.

The faculty consisted of: Kenneth D. Benne, Teachers College, Columbia University; Leland P. Bradford, NEA; John R. P. French, Jr., Research Center for Group Dynamics, Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Ronald Lippitt, Research Center, MIT; Robert Polson, Cornell University; Paul Sheats, University of California; and Alvin Zander, Springfield College.

test—that impresses me as well as this wide interest and concern you mention.

*Lippitt:* I certainly think we have some clear evidence of this more fundamental questioning in the analysis of the thirty or forty questions asked most frequently and most generally by the very representative group of social leaders from education, industry, government, and social welfare, who came to the National Training Laboratory for Group Development at Bethel last summer. If you look at that analysis, you see that those leaders were asking, "How do you take a more effective problem census as a starting point for group discussion?" "How do you lead discussions and conferences more productively?" "How do you get deeper insights into the 'whys' of group behavior?" "How do you stimulate more active interest in participation on the part of inactive group members or non-members?" "How do you help a group carry on a program of self-diagnosis to improve its own productivity?" "How do you go about building better group morale?" And running through the questions from all these leaders was the one of how to stimulate and carry forward continuous in-service training as a staff-growth procedure.

*Bradford:* That certainly was a significant list of problems. However, right now our question is whether these problems are the kinds faced by educators concerned with supervision and curriculum development. After all, that's the group with whom we're now concerned. Personally, I think they are. I know in working with one group of supervisors that their major job seemed

to be that of developing a real program of curriculum committee meetings and in-service group meetings. They indicated that one of their problems lay in the need to develop better relations between principals, administrators, and teachers as to the potential value of such an in-service program. They came to see, I think, that only as they worked with these three sets of persons as groups would they be successful. They proved, too, that another of their major problems was that of helping teachers to discover that they did have common skill needs in their teaching and in their parent and community relations which could best be learned through group analyses, discussion, and practice.

*Benne:* Well, Lee, we were working with the ASCD group in Chicago and there seemed to be quite a bit of concern with managing conferences—an area of group process. Certainly quite a number of the supervisors and curriculum workers who were there felt that leading a discussion was a pretty important skill, not only in that conference, but in their own job situations. I'm sure that a good many of the people there became pretty much involved in digging into this "why" of group behavior. Many seemed to see that here was a pretty important set of understandings for them to use with teachers, principals, parents, and superintendents in their jobs of trying to improve the curriculum back home.

*Lippitt:* As far as I've been able to see from the action-research project we have in one school system now, these problems are right on the beam of what is involved in pushing ahead productively on curriculum development and staff relations in the school system.

I've been particularly impressed by the importance of the faculty group that has pushed ahead on a self-assessment of its own relations to the parent and student members of the curriculum development team. And one of the things that has come out so clearly in our recent research is the importance of using good group decision techniques in bridging that gap between talk and effective action.

*Benne:* Isn't this where the study of group dynamics comes in? As I understand it, it's an *attempt to focus research effort upon the problems of how groups function and upon the methods for improving the functioning of groups.*

*Lippitt:* It seems to me that's putting it very clearly. Traditionally, social psychologists and others have steered away from a study of many of these crucial problems of group functioning because they have seen them as complex, scientific problems and because they have lacked the skills of working with groups that were needed to carry on such studies. It's certainly clear from the research developments of the last five years that a new and exciting vista of social research is opening up, focussing on the group as the object of study in the same way that individual clinical psychology was focussed so fruitfully on the "hows" and "whys" of individual behavior.

*Bradford:* Already this approach is uncovering many important findings. For example, we're coming to a clearer realization that groups have a growth process, that there are stages of group development and decay; we are beginning to see the results of internal conflict within a group in terms of blocking that group's achievement; we are realiz-

ing more clearly that a collection of well individuals can easily form a sick group and that a collection of mature adults can form a very immature group, that groups can learn to diagnose their stage of growth and do something concretely about training their own group members to contribute to the group, and that leadership is a function or responsibility that endeavors to help the group grow in ability rather than to force the group to a product that is the leader's and not the group's. We're rapidly moving toward a realization that the managerial and control function of the leader should be decidedly secondary to the leadership function of stimulating growth. In this sense leader control is present but of an entirely different nature.

*Benne:* Doesn't this suggest something of where the laboratory for the study of group dynamics is located. It seems to me that it tends to bring research on groups out into the action field where groups are working and where efforts are being made to improve groups. It suggests that the laboratory for group dynamics would require bringing social science research in direct connection with efforts to train groups—whether it's in a community council, a curriculum committee, or a faculty in-service program. It suggests to me, and I think the story of experimentation bears this out, that group dynamics requires an action setting in which to undertake the study and testing of principles concerning the behavior of groups and the methods of improving group functioning.

*Lippitt:* Yes, it's certainly true that a new type of team work is required between the social researcher and the

experimentally-minded practitioner to study crucial problems and come up with basic principles in this field of group behavior. Everything depends upon studying group life in real organizations and institutions.

It might be worth pointing out several examples of current research projects. There is, for example, a study which has now been completed with two state departments and some ten communities in the same state on the training of community leaders. There the research objective has been to discover new and more effective techniques of helping community leaders change their ways of organizing and leading community groups to more effectively tackle the problem of group conflict in the community structure. One of the interesting problems in this study has been to discover the importance of teams of community leaders working together as contrasted to individual leaders trying to struggle against the forces of resistance single-handed.

Another project has been to vary systematically the way of life of a housing project neighborhood to discover ways of overcoming the social distance between families in order to help them plan together to organize and carry through a good curriculum of neighborhood life—a cooperative nursery school, a program of parent-led recreation for the teen-agers, and a neighborhood-planned adult education program for the parents. This study has been focussed on the problems of community maladjustment that come from an over-emphasis on privacy and a lack of sharing of responsibility for a healthy neighborhood group life. Isn't this like

a school situation where, say, the science teacher feels a superiority to the English teacher—and vice versa? Each maintains a privacy from the other, and from the principal as well. In such a situation the supervisor might reduce social distance between the science and English teachers and the principal through cooperative planning.

*Bradford:* Another project carried on over the past few years has led into the study of ways of improving the productivity of conferences and committees. Certainly both are an integral part of the American scene, and certainly neither has reached anywhere near its production potential. It is extremely interesting to discover how much group intelligence is typically lost by a working procedure and atmosphere that inhibits contributions to group thinking. It is only as efforts have been made to discover ways of helping conference and committee groups to think as groups that we have begun to get a picture of what conferences can really do.

*Benne:* Aren't there also some interesting studies of a very different area of group productivity? I'm thinking of factory life where people are working closely together on assembly lines in producing a physical product rather than creative ideas, as in the conference and committee. Here again, aren't studies finding that opportunities for creative participation in group thinking and decision are basic to changes in the level of group production?

*Bradford:* All these studies, although they're just in their infancy, are showing some of the principles that we need to know about ways of improving group production.

In looking at some of these principles in relation to the problem of educational supervision and curriculum construction, wouldn't it be a good idea to start with the point that any change, to be successful, must be carried out in relation to all the forces being exerted on the individual or group making the change. These forces may be of many kinds. One may be the expectations others have for us—that we shouldn't try anything new in the school, or that if discipline is relaxed in the slightest the class will get out of hand. Other forces or pressures may be lack of communication, with consequent fear and insecurity, between teacher and principal. Another force may be the lethargy of tradition, the "we have always done it this way" force.

*Lippitt:* Let's make that a little more concrete. If I'm a supervisor and have hopes of being helpful in bringing about a change in the performance of a given teacher or teachers; the research findings would seem to indicate that, to a greater extent than we have customarily done, we need to see that this change in the teacher's behavior is part and parcel of a larger change in the attitude of the principal toward this teacher's way of working, and in the receptivity of the students for the curriculum experimentation. Training thus calls for working out a strategy of stimulating sympathetic readiness and encouragement for the new departures in teacher performance on the part of those above and below and in the adjacent classroom.

Growing out of this very important principle is a further need for any supervisor endeavoring to bring about a change in a group of teachers or administrators to start with a pretty thor-

ough census of the problems as seen by the group members. Only in this way will they be involved in any change. Such a census, furthermore, can take place adequately only if an atmosphere of permissiveness has been built up that encourages the bringing out of problems before the rest of the group.

I've observed too many staff and committee meetings where no one felt free to stick his neck out. As a consequence the leader was forced into dealing with nice platitudes that everyone knew would make no change in any real problem situation.

*Bradford:* Ron, I don't think the importance of this atmosphere of permissiveness can be overestimated in any training or staff situation. At the same time such permissiveness does not mean the *laissez faire* attitude of "let everyone talk about anything he pleases." I know your own earlier research indicated that nothing destroyed a group quicker than a *laissez faire* atmosphere. Permissiveness really means, I take it, a willingness to contribute personal problems, resources, and solutions that are in the direction of the total group problem. It means that the group has come to a point where the individuals no longer feel afraid to bring out their problems for fear of consequences from authority or aggressive criticism from fellow group members. It means that the group leader has helped the group to realize that the group problems must get out on the table and that they will get out only as the group members contribute them. They can't be given by an outside expert and get any successful group involvement. But it also means that the leader helps the group learn self-discipline so that problems and

gripes are important to the group and not merely to an individual.

This leads us into thinking about the function of good group leadership. Certainly this skill to help a group feel free to make group-oriented, rather than ego-oriented, contributions is the first major leadership skill. This, and other leadership skills, mean, furthermore, that the leader's attention and efforts are directed toward helping the group grow in ability to discover, diagnose, and solve their own problems, rather than toward the traditional task of policing or managing the group.

*Lippitt:* Actually it seems clear now that the leadership functions that must be performed in a group cannot possibly be filled by any one person. At various times in the meeting of a group there will be a need for a summarizing of progress to date, in pointing the directions ahead. This can be a function more adequately filled by someone who has been keeping a group record of what has been going on, rather than by the person who has been busy coordinating discussion. At other times the leadership function will call for helping the group to look at itself and the way it is moving along toward its group goal as a basis for making decisions for improvements in procedure. This, again, is a function which cannot be filled by someone who has been busily involved in helping the group move along in its discussion procedures. It can be carried through by someone who has had the special membership role of group observer, looking specifically at the operational efficiency of the group, rather than the thoughts which it has been producing.

*Benne:* I wonder if you're not saying that the leader's main function is that

of helping the group to move both in the direction of adequate awareness of and solution to its problems and in the direction of growth toward greater maturity and production. This would include the leader helping the group to sensitize itself to its own process, to the various leader functions, and to the need for the group to learn self-discipline.

I wonder, also, if the leadership function won't vary somewhat with the degree of maturity that the group has attained. I'm thinking of the kind of thing that Lee suggested earlier, of the leader's function to preserve and defend the right of every member to present his gripes, confusions, and difficulties. I suspect that is especially important during the early stages of group development. Certainly something that a leader must develop, moreover, is a recognition that in a young group there is very likely to be a considerable amount of ventilation and griping, and that a leader at that stage who demands a highly respectable concentration on his problem is likely to be defeating the growth of the group rather than promoting it. At a later stage in group development, it may very well be possible for the leader to remind the group of its chosen problem and of the necessity of keeping on the beam with respect to the group goal. That very type of leadership action might be fatal in the development of a very young group.

*Bradford:* You're right, Ken, to stress the leadership responsibility for group growth. There seems no doubt that there are many different stages of group growth, ranging from what could, I suppose, be called group infancy all the way to group senility. Many of our dif-

difficulties with groups result from a lack of awareness of this point and consequent frustration from the expectation that an adolescent group can do the work of a really mature group. It's the old story of sending a boy to do a man's work and then blaming the boy when he fails. We often blame our group failures on the democratic method rather than on the fact that we have done nothing about helping groups grow to proper strength for democratic behavior.

However, there are other functions of group leadership. Certainly one is to help the group to determine not only what kind of leadership functions, but also what kind of membership responsibilities or functions, are needed and how the group can analyze its own abilities to provide those functions for itself. This may and frequently should mean the leader helping the group to train its own members to fill these membership functions. The group leader has the responsibility of helping the group to analyze not only its own resources, but its need for resources, and to find ways of getting such help when needed. The group needs to learn how to prevent resource help, whether material or personal, from diverting the group from its real problem. It needs to prepare itself to use resources in terms of its problems, and, where the resource is a human resource, to train that resource person in how to be used.

This means, of course, that the supervisor or curriculum director who wishes to use the results of a school in another city, or in another part of the same city, or the visiting expert, or the university professor, faces some very careful problems. He must help his own

teachers think through their need for this experience or experimentation, and plan how it fits into their particular problems and goals.

*Benne:* While I'm in full agreement with all that's been said so far about permissiveness, and particularly about group growth and leader and member functions, I wonder if we are not forgetting that all those results aren't easily accomplished. A group doesn't grow like Topsy. Usually, when left alone, a group either dies or endures in a stage of arrested adolescence. There must be definite help to the group if it is really to grow. So far we have discussed the need for the group to start on its own problems, through a problem census developed in a permissive atmosphere, if there is to be any deep concern by the group in its own action. We have talked about leadership function being shared by all the group, and we have mentioned the need for all to be conscious of the various necessary membership functions in a healthy group. But we have said nothing about how the group members got this way.

I've been impressed in much of this group dynamics research with the great importance of groups finding ways of looking at their own functioning as groups and feeding these observations back into a discussion of how they can function more productively and more efficiently. Through such observation and analysis of how the group is acting at present, and why, the group becomes sensitive to its own problems, inadequacies, and needs. In this way members can come to understand the group's needs for various leader and member roles. It's difficult for all members of a group who are very much

involved in the content of a discussion to watch their ways of working at the same time. So, many groups have found it efficient to get one of their members to serve as an observer. His job is really to look at the ways of working of the group; to keep records with respect to aspects of the group process; and then to make this data available to the group as a basis for making its ways of working more efficient. However, it's probably wise to note that there are cautions to be observed in the use of the observer. Simply having one won't cure all ills of group living. Nevertheless, this process has been one of the major results of research and experience to date.

*Lippitt:* You're certainly right, Ken. It's obvious that a group will make no great change in its way of working until it learns its present difficulties and becomes aware of how much more productive it can be. This principle of group sensitization to its own way of living is the same principle used in bringing about a change in an individual.

*Bradford:* We've spent quite a bit of time, and very rightly, on the problems of group growth and on the group process. I wonder if there are other points concerning supervision and in-service training we can touch upon?

*Benne:* Here's one. I suspect that every curriculum director has had this experience with teachers who have accepted some new curriculum notion—let's suppose the idea of dividing the class into small committees for certain study jobs. The teachers have accepted the idea but when they get into the classroom they click back into their old habits and their old skills that have been shaped by an entirely different way of

working. I'm wondering if this group dynamics approach has discovered any way in which teachers, ahead of the time when they actually put their ideas into practice, can develop a little more security in the different set of skills that are required by the new plan? It seems to me that if we have anything to say there, every curriculum director and every supervisor would be very thankful to group dynamics.

*Lippitt:* It's certainly a perfectly natural thing for anyone to feel awkward in contemplating a change in his style of working, or to have a great many qualms when he actually faces the problem of putting into practice the new ideas and intentions. Research in the area of training indicates that it is very important to have the opportunity for practice in a situation of "not playing for keeps" before one is called upon to actually put new ways of performance into operation. It has proved both practical and helpful to set up sympathetic laboratory opportunities for the teacher to try out with a number of colleagues new ways of working with students in which some members of the group take the role of students and others take their turns at new approaches to the teacher role; followed by free, sympathetic discussion of each other's performance in these new skills.

*Benne:* We have done little more than suggest some of the many possible applications of the principles that are emerging in the study of group dynamics to the work of the educational leader. I suspect that supervisors and curriculum directors are going to be interested in how they can learn to use these findings, as they are developed and established, in their work.

Actually, many of the same principles apply to the learning and skill practice of supervisors and curriculum directors that apply to their own work in the educating of teachers. For example, the conferences of supervisors and curriculum directors might very well be devoted to the location and practice and discussion of skill problems in working with teachers and principals. Wouldn't that bring into operation the principle of group reinforcement within this group that we have talked about as so

important in the development of stable changes within a group of teachers?

I suspect, also, that one of the very important ways in which curriculum directors and supervisors can improve their skills in this area is to become partners in action-research enterprises, because there is probably no way that's better to learn how teachers may be helped to use their own group processes as a laboratory for improving their own skills in human relationships than to participate in such action-research.

## *Let's Work Together on the Curriculum*

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ALICE MIEL

Any realistic examination of the factors necessary for curriculum improvement must take into consideration the nature of the climate in which a group works. In this description and analysis of why one effort toward curriculum improvement failed, Alice Miel, assistant professor of education, Teachers College, Columbia University, points to many of the very practical and concrete aspects of group interaction which materially affect the results of curriculum experimentation.

NOT LONG AGO a school principal came to a college office with a request, "My teachers want to improve the curriculum. Will you serve as a consultant to them? You may have the whole hour at my November teachers' meeting. I will take care of my announcements some other way. I should inform you, however, that my teachers have many home obligations after school. It is a real hardship for them to stay after three o'clock. It would be most unwise

to prolong the meeting beyond four."

Thus began a short association that ended in failure; but many were the lessons it held for the process of curriculum improvement. Let us continue the story, analyzing as we go along the apparent successes and failures, the assumptions on which people were operating, and other possible explanations of the chain of events. First, however, we need more background for analyzing the facts presented so far.

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