

Five Days with a Group in Action

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Experimentation in the field of group process is going on in many different places and in a variety of situations. Phil C. Lange, professor of education, New York State Teachers College, Fredonia, describes one such experiment. "This article reports the five-day history of one of the discussion groups participating in the Northwest Regional Conference of ASCD at the State College of Washington, Pullman, July 28—August 1, 1947. **WAYS OF WORKING WITH PEOPLE** was scheduled on the program as one of three discussion groups each day at 3:00 P.M. Four different leaders worked with the group on successive days. Two of these leaders were charged with developing continuity through the sessions. A keynote address on **WAYS OF WORKING WITH PEOPLE** was a feature of the first morning session of the conference and subsequent speakers re-emphasized the significance of group dynamics." Mr. Lange was a member of the faculty of the School of Education at the State College of Washington during the summer of 1947.

"I ONLY CAME TO LISTEN, but stayed on to learn through doing." So commented a school superintendent after his experiences in the five discussion periods on *Ways of Working With People*. His comment was apt. Each discussion session had been, in itself, a demonstration of group method.

A record of the discussion, an analysis of group behavior, and the summation and evaluation of each session were available at succeeding meetings. This meant that the actual experiences of group process were supplemented by "second looks" and evaluative retrospection. The superintendent who felt he learned "through doing" had been encouraged to participate and later to examine his actions and feelings in terms of group progress.

CONDITIONERS OF GROUP READINESS

Of course, not all who "came to listen" were so patient in their kibitzing. Group leaders were constantly

aware of the large audience-conditioned bloc who felt little responsibility for group action, or who preferred to shop around for an entertaining show instead of tying themselves to a group to work through a problem.

The five discussions had been planned for persons who would be with the group for five days. A nucleus of about thirty administrators, supervisors, classroom teachers, and students were regular members throughout the week, but another seventy persons merely sampled the group.

The printed conference program undoubtedly conditioned some who came to listen. It listed pre-determined topics for the first three meetings, named three daily "discussion leaders," and may have suggested that the meetings were to be round tables or panels with many semi-formal presentations, a minimum of group participation, and with no continuity between sessions except as the topics were related. However, the

discussion leaders of the first session agreed to make this a working group and decided to "get the problems and discussion from the group."

Leadership in the following session effected continuity of process and subject by reviewing hits and misses from the first meeting and by providing "homework" for the succeeding meeting. This obvious inter-dependence of meetings may have confused and discouraged drifters, but it was extremely important in establishing the theme and promise of group growth for regulars.

VARIETY IN LEADERSHIP TECHNIQUES

Although members were forewarned of discussion topics, neither the members nor the leaders of the first two sessions knew exactly how procedures would develop. However, with the completion of these first meetings a pattern developed for group exploration.

The five periods illustrated very different methods: (Monday) permissive leadership in an initial, unstructured discussion with a group inadequately motivated toward participation; (Tuesday) forceful, judicious leadership that drew out individual differences in opinions and worked toward their group resolutions; (Wednesday) strong leadership in a highly structured and pre-planned, analytic type discussion; (Thursday) strong stimulating leadership transferred from discussion leader to demonstrator and back again to the leader for group interpretation of the demonstration; (Friday) permissive and group-shared leadership, within a group-planned schedule and agenda, with a five-day-old group.

These variations in group process

were not subtly engineered by a master mind. Rather, they "just grew" out of the individual differences of leaders, out of what happened in the sessions themselves, and especially out of the daily post-session evaluation by group members and leaders appraising that day's process and content. The last session, for example, was planned in all its phases by the ten group members who completed the post-session evaluation of the fourth meeting.

PARTICIPATION FOR ALL

Group participation of any specific member was of two types: spontaneous comment or contribution whenever his interests and background moved him; and completion of a defined role or assigned responsibility for group progress. On Monday three members volunteered to "keep track of what we do"; two were to summarize the content of discussion; while the third, a student, was quietly asked to observe the process of group behavior. These three, plus the three leaders and two "interested" members, were the evaluators and historians in the first post-session evaluation. They developed a mimeographed statement available at the second meeting, reporting on what the leader and group *did*, and what was *said*. The report also raised questions on procedure and suggested references.

Although new record keepers and evaluators were added at each meeting, the experienced hands tended to retain some feeling of responsibility for group direction and to continue to participate as "interested members" in these open post-sessions. Thus the names of over twenty members—not counting assigned leaders—appear in the evalua-

tion-summary sheets either as planners, evaluators, reviewers, or record keepers. It was this member-participation in both hindsight and foresight that added significance and direction to group activities, at the same time dissipating social distance between member and member, and between leaders and members.

THE DAY-BY-DAY RECORD

A look at each day's session will add to the general picture of how leadership functioned, how the group worked, and what was finally achieved.

Monday Focuses on Teacher Participation

The three leaders had decided against framing the discussion by opening statements. Instead, problems were to be begged and the group given its head. The group sat in on this decision, but found it difficult to believe. When the group overflowed the scheduled room, the group moved to an auditorium with one leader located far back and the other two down front at either side of the room. Obviously the group had expected the three leaders rather than the group members to do the discussing. The reversal was interpreted variously—disillusion, confusion, challenge, opportunity.

Poor group setting, split leadership, leaders' dependence upon suggestions from an unprepared group, no oral summary, too large or too vague a problem, members unacquainted with one another—all these factors were pointed out by the evaluators. The use of blackboard to list occasional summation, the mimeographed suggestions and references distributed at the meeting, the opportunity for suggestions were redeeming factors. Yet this session closely

resembled many faculty meetings which are inadequately group-planned, tinged with artificiality, have too many members pledged to keep quiet, waiting to see what *they* do.

Although this freedom was expected to (and *did*) result in much feeling of indecision, time loss, and frustration; the systematic record surprisingly revealed extensive development of suggestions for getting teacher participation. Open the channels of communication; develop school morale and faith in group action; capitalize on dissatisfactions, real problems and needs; see the other member's point of view; respect his interests; help groups to study all angles of a problem, then define the problem in terms of what's to be done, who's to do it, when, and how; and finally evaluate the outcomes.

Lay Cooperation Is Tuesday's Topic

In a new room the leader elected to open the discussion by suggesting an evaluation and review of the previous session. This obviously resulted in a division of interest between Monday's and Tuesday's topics. The leader, however, played out this disagreement until a member concluded, "The two topics have the same problems." On this basis the topic was restated to be inclusive of both, to everyone's satisfaction. The leader used leading questions, "pumped" the group into discussion, "bounced" members' comments back to the group, held resource persons in reserve, kept nudging the group into participation, and continuously underscored principles for group action as the members developed them. Without use of blackboard, the leader maintained continuity through frequent oral

review and a final summation. She also prepared for the succeeding meeting by giving the leader an opportunity to assign homework.

Outstanding agreements reached included the following points:

Neither lay nor teacher participation should be exploited in artificial or hopeless problems.

Leaders should begin with real, vital problems from which action can follow.

All persons affected by the group decision should be ready to join actively in the planning.

Leaders must be willing to act on group decisions if there is to be confidence in decision making.

There should be a common understanding of the problem; this challenges the right of leaders or members to withhold facts. Moreover, it questions the integrity of the leader who knows exactly where *he* is going to *lead* his group according to *his* five- or ten-year plan.

In genuine group action we want to work toward a "meeting of minds" rather than forcing ahead on majority votes that defeat but do not convince.

The running transcript of this session was edited and included in the evaluation-summary sheet because it illustrated so well how such a record could help leaders identify the unique interests and response patterns of individuals.

Wednesday Sees Consideration of the Pupil's Role in Planning

Members had been given the assignment—What opportunities do your pupils have for school planning? The leader opened the discussion with the question—What are the areas in which pupils can participate in planning? The areas became column headings of a

blackboard chart which thereafter framed the discussion, the members listing specific practices of pupil participation in six areas: unit planning for learning, evaluation of learning, student government, care of room, student services, and extra-curricular activities.

The three resource persons were held in reserve as the leader drew heavily on how-we-do-it testimonials. Sociometric patterns of the discussion revealed the focus of discussion shifted to seven different persons, the shifts coinciding with wane of interest and change of topic. Observers noted humor used as a relief from an impasse and low interest; and that "babel points"—everybody talking—were more frequent as the group got older.

At the close of the session, Thursday's leaders used a lock-the-door technique to force group agreement on Thursday's topic, and got wide, loud, and active response. A majority vote was employed, but immediately upset—an illustration of the relative merits of voting or just showing hands.

Developing Individual Responsibility for Group Action Is Thursday's Keynote

The leader shared responsibility with an appointed demonstrator and subsequently used a question-answer technique. The demonstrator, using the group as an apathetic high school class, was to show how group planning might be started with a new group; however, there was nothing sensational in the performance. In fact, it was a very conventional opening day session; *except that it kept a door wide open for initiative and responsibility from the group.* That the demonstration was more workable than wonderful was evidenced by

the comment, "Anybody can do that!"

In the resultant discussion based on the demonstration, some basic principles evolved: Start with the group at their particular participation level and *grow* from there. There's no single recipe for starting. Quiet beginnings invite few critical eyes. Leadership is strongest at the peer level. Get to know and be known by members. (By this time this group was completely at the first name and nickname stage.) Democratic leaders must trust people; and children are people, too! Skillful leadership is not subtle trickery but a fine *sense of group feeling* and *social imagination* which results in effective timing and pacing.

It seemed significant that four times in this meeting different persons voiced the insight that each session could be reviewed as a demonstration.

On Friday We Summarize and Evaluate

Leadership was shared by eight members and the designated leader. The agenda had been member-planned and mimeographed by Thursday's evaluating committee. They provided for rearranging the room to permit face-to-face seating. One person was to be armed with an alarm clock, for Time was the driver in this session. Another person was authorized to stop all discussion to say, "That's something each of us can put to practice," (but somebody always beat him to the punch). Reviewers and reporters were to hold their schedules so as to permit free discussion to develop as "we re-examine our actions."

Crucial to the whole week's meeting, the group now decided, was the problem (it stopped the clock by unanimous

decision): *Do we really believe in (or merely idealize) democratic action?* More specifically, are we as members of a group willing to—respect individuals and minority groups? share responsibility by being responsible to the group, and as a group being responsible for our leaders? develop and keep active the channels of communication that facilitate the "meeting of minds?" carry group action through to successful conclusion? delegate away our democratic responsibilities?

The issues and discussion became so overlapping and spirited that the leader called for "a minute of silent thinking upon the implications of these questions to human relations in American schools." (One member, writing in October, said, "I'm still thinking.") At this final session members felt they saw implications and had a determination to act upon them.

The review of group processes revealed that the group had experienced the relative success of varied techniques: daily summaries, observation of group dynamics, record keeping, transcript record; use of resource persons, experts, observers, recorders, reviewers; single, split, shared, and group leadership, and differences in leadership in different situations; use of demonstration, assignments, agenda, question-answer techniques, a "silent moment," majority vote, mimeographed information and instruction sheets; attention to room settings, seating, rapport, climates; ways of "structuring" the discussion with blackboard, pre-planning, questions, lectures, setting, use of first names.

Every regular member and leader claimed to have experienced the gradual growth of group participation and a

sense of belonging. There was an enriched realization of the importance of selecting a worthwhile problem to attack, establishing group feeling, gearing discussion to action, and securing success from such group action.

A BACKWARD LOOK

As part of the evaluation of the entire conference, a questionnaire was developed to which conference registrants were requested to respond quite some time after the meetings and when they had had time to think more deliberately. The analysis of all evaluative comments pertinent to the five sessions on *Ways of Working With People* were summarized as follows:

Everyone mentioned the informal friendliness of the group. By the end of the week they felt they had experienced the growth of group action and group climate. They felt they saw some of the difficulties first-hand and discovered some ways of getting around these difficulties. Everyone who stayed with the group all week liked the freedom and permissiveness which the five-day planning allowed. *Only those who shopped around expressed concern about the lack of structure.*

The most complete comments came from students. (They had been "treated as equals" and had shared more than their allotment of leadership roles in the group.)

Members would have liked more briefing on what was going to happen and what to expect. Yet, on the other hand, they felt that a certain amount of struggle and uncertainty was necessary if the group was to participate in its planning.

Some suggested that the group be together for an entire day on a single topic, but an equal number preferred the shorter sessions over five days so that they could become better acquainted and sense group growth. A few suggested that only one leader be selected to lead the group for the whole week; this leader and his group could then develop or procure supplementary leadership as needed. Many felt that more training for the leadership roles would have been helpful. Generally, they liked the idea of a few pre-determined topics and a few to be determined by the group after they assembled. They liked the day-by-day analysis of group action.

The evidence would seem to show that all of us who participated in working together in this group gained friendship and respect for one another. We modified our beliefs and attitudes. We hope it improved our actions.



Courtesy Los Angeles (Calif.) City Schools

Group working means getting down to real problems

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