

On the Symptoms and Survival of Senile Groups

ALVIN F. ZANDER

The difficulty involved in discarding the old while adopting the new is not exclusive to educators. Certainly, however, the comments, "too busy," "so many things to do," "no time for personal living," suggest that we may have been poor discarders. That this may be true in regard to in-service programs which become burdensome or go off in too many directions is certainly a possibility. It is from this point of view that we present this article by Alvin F. Zander, assistant director, Bureau of Studies and Training in Adult Community Education, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

"We've outlived our usefulness."

"There's really nothing for us to do."

"I can't see why anyone created this committee to begin with."

"Just what is it we're supposed to accomplish?"

To anyone who has spent any time in working on group projects, the above comments are familiar. Often we've agreed with them—silently if not audibly. But we've hesitated to strike the final blow—to end the group then and there—to talk out our convictions. Rather, we've gone on with misgivings, apathy, frustrations, antagonism. It might be well if we stopped at such a time and asked ourselves, "Is this group ready to die?"

Many groups will not die even when their best friends think they are ready for it. For example:

A state-wide committee of Boys and Girls Workers is six years old. The new president regrets that he has been elected because he has little interest in the committee but he cannot bring himself to create confusion by refusing to accept his election. The goals of this group have been vague from the beginning. The ac-

tivities have been devoted to small state conferences once a year with inspiring speakers. The group is strongly under the influence of an elderly, maternal woman who was instrumental in organizing it.

A superintendent appointed a committee of teachers to plan for the establishment of a camp outside town. The camp is to serve many educational functions and is to be financed by promised funds from a local philanthropist. It is a project which the superintendent heartily supports. The committee became a very influential group because of its important job and soon found itself planning far beyond camp plans into the future of local educational procedures. Suddenly the money was withdrawn, but the committee was not dissolved. It still meets to discuss things that were not part of its original purpose and which it has no explicit authority to determine.

After the catechism class had been confirmed on Palm Sunday, the minister and his assistant decided that the group should continue to meet on Friday evenings for recreation. The parents agreed to the plan and promised to see that their children attended. The group members arrived late and left early. They played the games in an automatic fashion. Absences were frequent and the members admitted that the

group would fail "if everyone stayed away whenever he wished" and promised to make the next meeting.

The Problem as It Exists

Our purpose here is to discuss why many groups live on past their best days and to describe criteria for determining when a group should end itself. There are no figures at hand to enable us to say how serious this problem is, numerically speaking. Indeed, most discussions of group organization are concerned with the dissolution of groups as a sign of social pathology.

However large the problem is, it is obviously seen as a serious difficulty in small towns and in the committee pattern of large organizations. Their perception of the problem is contained in the often-heard statements:

"Too many useful citizens spend their time in groups that waste their energy and prevent them from working on the real needs of the town."

"No one has any time to help out good causes. They are all too busy on committees."

Most community leaders see their towns as overloaded with unnecessary groups. Whether or not the perception fits the facts is not important here. If the leaders think that this is the case, there is a serious problem for community morale.

Reasons for Survival

How is it, then, that a group often stays alive even when many of its members, let alone its enemies, long for the end of the body? There are some reasons which either singly, or in combinations, could account for the continuation:

► There are no provisions in the charter of the group which enable it to dissolve itself or to find evidence that it is ready for dissolution. Too often neither club constitutions nor the "charge" given to committees contain advice on when and how to end the group.

► Interest by the authority which originally appointed the committee, or by social pressure created by those who know the group, may keep members away from thoughts of revolution until it is apparent that the pressures surrounding the group have been relaxed.

► Members avoid suggesting that the group be ended because of fear that the suggestions be seen as a dislike for the people in that group.

► The traditions and past practices of the group become important and ritualized often to the point of creating taboos difficult for the group member to transgress. To suggest dissolution, in many groups, is tantamount to rejecting the ideals of the group.

► Some continue because they have not completed the task they set out to handle. If they postpone their dissolution, they postpone criticism for failure.

► A good deal of status accrues to members from supporting some groups. It is rewarding to be the "stuffing" of a stuffed shirt.

► The group has no provision for the establishment of new functions and sub-groupings as needed. This means that new ideas for action are either considered by the entire body or are placed within a group organization structure that cannot handle many of them. Thus, the idea or plan is buried. Because there is no use of new plans there is likely to be no threat to the group as it stands.

Symptoms of Disease

How can we tell when a group is ready for the call to disband? This is the practical question to answer if one is to be able to do something about the inertia that bolsters all groups whether they be fully alive or half dead. We do not intend to discuss the ethical question as to whether or not any group has the right to remain alive as long as it wishes to do so, except to say that it certainly has. We are not arguing for the abolition of this or that group. We are simply speculating about the reason many groups continue when one might more properly expect them to be dead.

There are some symptoms which might serve to indicate when a group is ready for dissolution: (The more of these that can be found in a group, the more likely it is ready for dissolution.)

► *When the interdependence between the group members is clearly gone and not recoverable.* This is based on the premise that a good group demands that the members be interdependent upon each other in an emotional sense as well as in an active, cooperative sense. When members no longer need each other they are acting like an aggregation of individuals rather than the membership of a group and they are no longer a healthy group.

► *When the members are not able to identify with each other, and the ability to identify is not recoverable.* This implies that members of healthy groups feel the way others feel, and accurately understand the feelings of other members. When they no longer have the ability to feel about things the way others feel, they are no longer a healthy group.

► *When the goal is reached for which*

the group was organized. If this is true one may assume that the group is weak or is going through a crisis period. (A group does not always need a goal for it to be healthy, since a goal may only serve to enhance either the interdependence or the identification of the membership.)

► *When the methods being used by the group for reaching the goal are inadequate and yet cannot be changed.* Social agencies, churches, and schools as well as smaller groups often are bogged with their means for reaching the group goal. Usually this happens because the method they are using to create a product is no longer a means but has come to be their end. This can be seen in many institutions which do things that are completely unreasonable but are defended as traditional, holy, progressive, or something else.

Ways of Dissolution

How to dissolve a group is a question that need not be considered here. It is clear that it is not an easy task or else the phenomenon would not be with us.

The dissolution of a group certainly demands that someone must first raise the question without shocking the group into rejecting the entire idea without any consideration. Somehow he must be equipped with facts about the state of the group's interdependence, identification, relation to their goal, and the methods being used for reaching their goal. These facts might be obtained by members from the local community council, or the parent organization if it is a committee. An evaluation committee from the membership might prepare a report, and it will be in especially good luck if the

constitution or the group charter allows for questions to be raised about the health and needed continuation of the group.

Groups can lose their original purpose for existing, find no other reason for continuing, and yet they remain alive. We have suggested some hypo-

thetical reasons for the survival of these groups and have described some cues that may be useful in determining when a group is ready for dissolution. New groups that wish to be cautious about outliving their function would do well to provide the means and the criteria for determining when their day is done.

Learning the Skills of Cooperative Planning

ETHELEEN DANIEL

From the record of a study of how children learn the skills of cooperative planning, Etheleen Daniel, supervisor of elementary schools, Montgomery County, Maryland, illustrates the skills which children of various maturity levels use as they operate in a group situation. Excerpts from planning sessions also reveal the extent to which the teacher operates in guiding group planning. The study which Miss Daniel reports is being carried out in cooperation with the Horace Mann-Lincoln Institute of School Experimentation.

"I think we should say what we want them to do."

* * * *

"I don't like that."

* * * *

"Where my father works when something is wrong they have a committee to find out what can be done."

* * * *

"We are wasting time."

* * * *

"Could we vote?"

"What should one do," the teacher asks, "when children are expressing such ideas about problems and ways of working together?" Does a leader tell a group what to do? Should attention be given to members who say, "I don't like that?" What about the techni-

ques from the adult world that children bring to their discussion groups? What about the pupil leader's ability to sense direction and timing in helping members move forward to decision and to action? Does the question "could we vote?" always take into account the value of differences in opinions?

A Look at Six-Year-Olds

Teacher, first grade: "Bill, will you be the leader?"

Bill: "Who wants to tell something?"

The chairman calls each child's name.

Child: "I got a big bicycle."

Child: "I've lost a glove."

Child: "Our turtle got out of its pan last night."

Copyright © 1948 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.