MAYBE because we know more. Maybe because the need—in a complex and crowded world—is so real. Maybe because early tendencies toward excessive enthusiasm have given way before sober assessment grounded in interdisciplinary research. For whatever reason, the study of groups has come of age as a respectable concern among people who would increase productivity in human endeavor—in classroom, school system, factory, international council.

It no longer seems necessary to debate whether productivity depends on individual talent or group development. We know that the individual must sometimes work and create alone, and we know equally well that groups can often produce results no aggregate of individuals could separately achieve. Another fear—that pressure to conform may submerge the individual—continues to be a real one, but not many people today suggest that individualism can be defended by resisting a serious concern for groups and how they function. The phrase “group dynamics” may have lost its usefulness through overuse, but not very many people today say that they do not “believe” in it. Rather, one of the important social insights of our day is that the deliberate, conscious study of forces operating in a group can increase the chances that individual resources present in the group will be discovered and developed.

This view of groups seems to be implicit in the request from Educational Leadership for a paper on some of “the basic conditions for effective group development and achievement of goals through group thinking and action.” We would start by asking, What is a group? Or, since a group—like an individual—is always in a state of becoming, when is a group?

Some dimensions of “becoming” may be helpful:

A group is becoming a group—
When it knows why it exists
When it has created an atmosphere in which work can be done
When it has evolved acceptable ways of making decisions

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When it has established conditions under which each member can make his special contribution
When it has achieved real communication among members
When it has made it possible for members freely to give and freely to receive help
When it can manage conflict as a potential source of creative problem solving
When it has learned how to diagnose its processes and its "maintenance" problems in order to repair and improve them.

Goal Setting

One condition of group development, then, involves setting goals—defining the group’s reason for being. A simple principle is involved: Commitment is greater when people help define the objective. This principle is behind management’s emphasis on participative target setting in work units in industry. It is behind the supervisor’s efforts to involve teachers in setting directions for the educational program they will carry out. It is behind the teacher’s interest in helping pupils set their own goals for learning.

The principle is simple and sound—even if it is not always easy to apply. It is, however, easy to detect signs that the principle needs to be applied more effectively. For example, if members ask, “What do they want us to do?” Or if no one volunteers for additional work, or if decisions are made but not carried out, or if attention is brief or wandering—these behaviors may be signaling loud and clear a lack of commitment or a lack of clearness as to goals and purposes. There is no set of gimmicks that the leader—the teacher, supervisor, foreman, manager, chairman—can trot out. There probably is no real way of generating commitment short of stopping action and enlisting the help of the group in resetting goals and charting directions that take into account both individual and group needs.

Work Atmosphere

A second condition, creating a good work atmosphere, is well on toward realization once members have a clear sense of purpose and a willingness to commit themselves to it. A “good work atmosphere” does not necessarily mean being comfortable and cozy. Achievement usually entails a degree of tension, enough dissatisfaction with things as they are to warrant the discomfort of changing. One measure, then, for assessing work atmosphere would be: is there enough tension—or challenge—to motivate action? But at the same time, is there enough security that members function well? Most of us have known the paralyzing effect of excessive anxiety. Without a sense of security, decisions that should be made may go by default—or decisions may be “safe” but not sound.

Another measure of work atmosphere is how much responsibility is shared for moving the group forward. Does the leader alone carry all responsibility or do members also exercise leadership by seeing and filling functions as they are needed—such functions as providing information, asking questions, encouraging participation, assessing progress, suggesting alternative actions? Many efforts to improve group functioning stop with training the leader. A more promising approach would look at membership and leadership skills as equally important areas for improvement in group development.
Another way of measuring work atmosphere is to ask how "open" the communication is. Is it easy to say what one really thinks—and feels? Or are important data being withheld while decisions are being made? Openness, trust, security cannot be established by decree. But many groups have discovered that these qualities can be increased by setting them as desired conditions, by undertaking to work to achieve them, by establishing a group norm that it is all right to test the limits of openness and trust (often it is safer than we think) and all right to experiment—to make provisional tries—in freer and more open approaches to real problems.

Groups will probably learn that they are operating on two levels—the stated advertised purpose and the private purposes composed of the hopes, fears, aspirations, needs of each member. They can learn that pretending the "hidden agendas" do not exist is generally an ineffective way of handling them. One sign of group maturity is the ability of its members to bring out of hiding more and more of the concerns that, though unexpressed, may be blocking group movement. Recent research in industry finds a relationship between degree of trust and effectiveness as to communication, organizational performance, and productivity. The relationship would surely be even closer when supervisor and teacher or teacher and pupil are attempting to collaborate, with "productivity" measured by amount of actual learning and behavioral change.

Decision Making

The third suggested condition for group development is: effective ways of making decisions. Groups that have jointly defined clear goals and purposes, have worked to create an atmosphere in which work can get done, and have deliberately looked at their decision making procedures and tried to improve them will be less likely to be split by controversy, less likely to make hasty decisions, more likely to develop commitment to decisions made. An important step toward better decision making is sharper awareness of present habits and their consequences.

A good work group is able to assess its decision making and to experiment with more effective procedures. A decision is, essentially, a commitment of resources to a course of action. Satisfaction with the decision and—perhaps even more important—with how it was reached will help determine the real effectiveness of this commitment. The highly practical argument against one-man decisions lies in the variety of ways, given limited commitment, in which any decision can be sabotaged (by distortion or by halfhearted testing if not by actual forgetting or deliberate violation).

From Each, His Best

The fourth suggested condition for group development—enabling each member to make his special contribution—is implicit in the first three. A member is more likely to contribute up to his capacity if he has had some say in setting goals, if he feels that his contribution, freely made, will be valued, and if he feels that he has some influence over decisions reached. Many groups in training to become more effective work units have found that they can become more sensitive and more skillful in discovering and releasing potential but unused resources.

When contributions are uneven, it may mean that talent is not widely dis-
tributed in the group but it may also mean that conditions are blocking some members from participating. A group has within it the power to change these conditions. The problem may be autocratic leadership, it may be too rigid adherence to procedural rules, it may be lack of sensitivity to individual needs and feelings, it may be that the group is so “task-oriented” that not enough attention is given to the feeling-emotional element present in any human interaction. Working on these problems may be more effective than pointing a finger at the non-participant and challenging him to produce.

**Communication**

The fifth suggested condition—real communication among members—is not so much a further condition as a likely outcome of the above conditions. One definition of a mature group is that it has established a valid communication system. Communication is usually difficult in new groups because bridges have not been built adequate to support mutual trust and acceptance. Relationships between public assumptions and private or hidden assumptions are not tested. In effect, each member is boxed in by his own assumptions and fears and will be until he feels free to check these out with other members. Until he is able to share with the group the very things that may be most affecting his behavior in the group, the group may be attempting to operate with only about 10 percent of the data needed to make adequate decisions.

Even the most efficient computing machine produces no better results than the data fed into it. We can hardly expect a far more complex mechanism—a group of human beings attempting to work together—to work well if the most critical data are being withheld. Some of the apparently erratic, irrational behavior in new groups (and sometimes in old groups) may stem from the fact that each member is struggling with questions like: Who am I in this group? Who is going to control this group? What will this group do to me? How much of me do I want to invest in this group? Can I work with this group and still be loyal to certain other groups?

If the leader or any part of the group operates under the assumption that such questions do not matter (there is a job to do, we are here to do it, let’s get to work), then members with private concerns may either rebel actively or go along apathetically. When a group is in valid communication, members can stop and look at their behavior and consider whether problems are being created because the group has not dealt with individual concerns. It is efficient to stop for diagnosis and work on process if productivity is being hampered by lack of communication.

**Giving and Receiving Help**

The sixth suggested condition involves giving and receiving help. In an increasingly specialized world most of us are usually moving back and forth between these two roles. Yet much of our education has tended to discourage both giving and seeking help. In school we sometimes outlaw this as “cheating”—though some schools know the powerful role students can play in teaching one another. In stressing initiative and self-reliance as major values, we have understated the importance of interdependence and of mutual aid and assistance. Unskilled in the complex helping role, we often feel clumsy when we
try to help another person behave more effectively.

Usually we don’t even know how to find out whether help is wanted. We may withhold help through fear of being misunderstood. And when others try to give us help, we may feel so defensive that we do not hear very well. Or we may, for fear of seeming inadequate, hesitate to ask for help. And so an important resource for improving both individual and group behavior, the help we could give one another, is poorly used. Perhaps one measure of group maturity, then, should be how well members are able to help one another. Training groups have often made this a major objective, and any group concerned with its own growth might well focus some of its energies on becoming more effective in giving and in receiving help.

Managing Conflict

The seventh suggested condition involves the management of conflict. This suggests that conflict is not necessarily a bad thing to be eliminated but a fact of life to be dealt with constructively. A society without conflict would miss the enrichment from strongly expressed individual differences.

One measure of group maturity, then, might be how it handles conflict. If a group never has conflict this may mean that divergent views are stifled. It may mean that nobody cares enough to take a stand against a prevailing view. It may mean that conflict in the past has been so poorly managed that the prospect of more conflict is too frightening. In training groups one of the important issues is often learning how to fight—and when not to fight. Any group may need to work through its ways of handling conflict so that instead of destroying the group it prevents stagnation, assures honest consideration of differing points of view, and in the long run strengthens commitment.

Observation—Analysis—Evaluation—Improvement

The last suggested condition is the means for achieving the other conditions. There is no shortcut to clear goals, to good communication, to good decision making, to commitment. There is a good chance that a group that has the habit of stopping when things are going poorly (or when they are going very well) and asking “why” can improve along these dimensions.

The data for improvement are in the hard experience of the group. They can be collected and used if members commit themselves to an experimental approach composed of observation (what is actually going on?), analysis (what does this mean?), evaluation (by what standards do we measure effectiveness?) and improvement (what should be changed, what should be kept?). These are not steps that can be taken once and for all. They are the continuing means available to the work unit in a state of “becoming a group.”