Helping groups work more effectively

Groups are effective when they pay attention to both what they are doing (the task at hand) and how they are doing it (processes used to maintain an effective group). Many groups focus mainly on the task and ignore the process. As a result, effectiveness at achieving the group's goals is lowered.

If one uses a car as an analogy, the task might be defined as providing transportation for someone in order to get from point A to point B. Any driver could do this (well, most drivers anyway) as long as the car functions properly. If, however, the auto's inner workings are not maintained -- oil and gas added, brakes checked, water pressure examined -- the car may have some trouble reaching its destination, not reach it at all, or it may in fact arrive, but only with serious damage to its internal mechanisms.

The exact same phenomenon is true for groups. If maintenance functions are minimal, the results could be graphic. The group may not perform well, flounder and find itself irreparably split. Or, the results may be more subtle - a lack of group cooperation, some resources may remain untapped, a weak product is generated, a feeling may emerge that time has been wasted.

One other harmful impact sometimes results when ineffective group maintenance produces conflict which is assumed to be related to the actual task. For example, an individual may disagree with someone else in the group because he/she has been unable to enter the discussion. The disagreement may have nothing to do with the task itself. This can often take the group off in irrelevant directions.

There are specific functions that a group can perform which will increase the group's effectiveness. They are grouped into two categories of MAINTENANCE FUNCTIONS and TASK FUNCTIONS. The assumption is not that any given group will have all of these functions happening at the same time, but that a productive group will have a healthy and conscious mix of functions at appropriate times.

**Group Task Functions**

**Initiating**: Getting the group started on the task. Offering new suggestions, topics for discussion, plans, etc.

**Clarifying**: Probing for meaning; defining terms, clearing up confusion, working to get the task clear. Asking a question or repeating a point, in different words to make it clear to all.

**Explaining**: Giving practical examples to make a point clear.

**Reaching Task Agreement**: Discussing and deciding the best way to proceed with the task given the time constraints; agreeing on time/task management process.

**Focusing**: Staying on target; avoiding topic jumping or going off on tangents.

**Seeking Useful Information**: Asking for facts, opinions or beliefs; asking for feelings or values. Drawing out resources of the group and identifying information that needs to be found elsewhere.

**Giving Useful Information**: Offering facts or opinions; stating beliefs or ideas; making feelings known appropriately; making suggestions, sharing relevant experiences.

**Summarising**: Stating briefly the main points made so far.

**Checking Consensus**: Seeing if everyone, especially the silent members agree on a point.

**Moving Towards Action**: Reviewing; bringing related ideas together; restating - suggestions and positions; checking if group is ready to decide, suggesting a process for decision making.

**Group Maintenance Functions**

**Gate Keeping**: Inviting others to talk; suggesting time limits or other procedures to permit wide participation; keeping talk flowing; avoiding domination by one person.

**Mediating**: Harmonizing; conciliating differences in points of view, suggesting compromises; disagreeing comfortably.

**Listening**: Going along with the group; being a good listener; demonstrating that other's statements are heard; avoiding inappropriate interruptions.

**Diagnosing Difficulties**: Addressing lack of information needed in order to make a decision or the fear of consequences of a decision that is blocking the group from reaching one.

**Harmonising**: Helping those in conflict to understand one another’s views.

**Evaluating**: Creating an opportunity for people to express feelings and reactions towards the working of the group.

**Encouraging**: Being friendly, warm, responsive through words or facial expressions; being supportive even when disagreeing, building on suggestions made by others, showing acceptance and appreciation of others and their ideas.

**Relieving Tension**: Using humor; throwing oil on troubled waters; asking for a "cooling-off" period, making a well timed joke, bringing problem out into the open.