

# Communicating Well: A Fundamental Toolkit

(Chinn Swartz, MacDougall, Barrett, Sinnott, Spillberg, Holbrook, Nelson, & DiManno)

Department of Communication

Curry College

Milton, MA

## Chapter 7: Small Group Communication

*“A small group of thoughtful people could change the world. Indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” (Margaret Mead)*

“Groups usually produce more and better solutions to problems than do individuals working alone” (Shaw, 1976). If you have not been a part of a small group thus far in your life (which is unlikely), it’s a good bet that you will soon be. Everyone experiences being a member of a group at some point in their life. Currently, organizations and businesses are establishing one committee after another to resolve some aspect of their business. Good communication is an attribute that most employers look for. Employers are also interested in a person who works well with others and is willing to listen and entertain ideas that are created by others. Acting in an open and helpful manner and supporting the efforts of others is a very desirable attribute.

### Making small groups effective

A **small group** is defined as a limited number of individuals who communicate interdependently to achieve a common goal. **Interdependence** indicates that what one person does in a small group will impact the others in the group. This can be seen when one participant fails to do their work and consequently the rest of the group cannot proceed to the next level. A

key characteristic of an effective small group is that the members have something in common, for example a true concern for their purpose.

Small groups are typically considered to be comprised of between **3 and 13 people** (Shaw, 1980). However, there are some scholars who stretch the numbers to even greater than 15 and some who suggest that a minimum of two is acceptable. More often 2 people are indicative of interpersonal communication. The problem with a group consisting of only two members, however, is that the different dynamics within a **dyad** (two people) change the communication process. With only two individuals, power is equally distributed. Regardless of how many members make up a group, it is important to consider that all members have an influence on one another. Some factors may shift the equality based on personal characteristics, such as a dominating personality, or one person could be in a position of power (e.g. one person is a supervisor over the other person).

Typically, smaller groups can have the luxury of less formality, but as the size of the group grows, often the more formal rules are needed to structure interaction. Consider: if you have two people talking, there is one relationship. If you have three people, it becomes three relationships, and by adding a fourth person, there are six relationships. It is easy to have an intimate conversation with just one person or even two, but with an expanding group, there is much less intimacy. With greater numbers, complexity grows and leads to a more structured form of communicating.

Katzenbach and Smith (1993) provide a clear distinction between work groups and teams. A **work group** is a collection of people working in the same area or placed together to complete a task. The group's performance is the result of people coming together to share information, experience, and insights. The focus of groups is individual performance and actions

are geared toward it. All teams are groups, but teams are a special subset of groups. They establish a working definition: "A **team** is a small number of people with complementary skills, who are committed to a common purpose, set of performance goals and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable" (Katzenbach & Smith, p.112). Teams require both individual and mutual accountability, whereas groups do not. In groups, members are most interested in and responsible for individual accountability. It is helpful to identify the characteristics of teams and groups, noting which are common to both. By understanding the likenesses and differences between these two concepts, we can begin to create an appropriate environment for each and determine the conditions in which each is effective.

Teams have clear goals from the beginning, and rules and operating procedures are talked about and developed to aid in the groups' collaboration. In current organizations, self-directed work teams exist and are responsible for their own work. Self-directed work teams have proliferated in the last few decades in a variety of organizations and industries (Beyerlein, 2001; Yandrick, 2001). In a small group, roles are not explicit. They will develop according to the needs of the task, and the responsibilities will be governed by needs and who can fill those needs as well. Rules are not typically established, but evolve as group expectations and preferences come forward.

### **Why small groups?**

In today's interconnected world, committees and teams lead the way in problem solving and achieving goals. Nevertheless, many of us are hesitant about joining or working in groups due to shyness, insecurity, or past experiences. Many people have had a bad experience as a member of a small group. A common complaint refers to a member who may have been a **social**

**loafer**, someone who didn't do his or her portion of work. In addition, some people do not share their work, and there may be problems stemming from lack of organization or communication hurdles.

**Cost/Benefit analysis** (Boardman, 2006) can be applied to why we work in groups and teams. If the benefits outweigh the costs, then we will decide to do what produces the most benefits. The need for more and variable productivity or faster turn-around would lead us to think that a group can accomplish this in a more expeditious fashion with a variety of ideas. It can be true that working in a group often takes more finesse, but the benefits can far outweigh the costs. Once you have an understanding of how groups work, groupwork becomes much easier and can be enjoyable and satisfying. Knowledge of group dynamics will help you to avoid many potential problems.

The **advantages of small groups** include having multiple people to contribute ideas and opinions, which helps to generate better ideas and solutions when brain-storming and analyzing options. Collaborating with others offers an opportunity to have contributions made by people with a wider range of experiences and strengths. Also, the more people you have working on a project, the more you can disperse the work evenly, so more can get done more quickly. In addition to having more minds to come up with ideas and more hands on deck, it has been found that shared decision making empowers group members to shape their own goals and provides a greater satisfaction in the outcome. **Group synergy** can occur when members combine their abilities and the outcome is greater than any individual could do on their own.

The **disadvantages of small groups** often center on group members not contributing equally. When we work in a group, we expect participants to work together cooperatively and behave in a positive manner, but of course this ideal takes work and commitment. Some

individuals are bossy, complain often, talk off topic too much, are not punctual, or argue strongly to have their own way. One other disadvantage is that we don't all work at the same speed, which takes ingenuity to overcome without jeopardizing the pace of the project. Making sure that people are assigned tasks suitable for them should help them to work more efficiently. Without a sense of coherent goals and structure, group work can feel like more effort than it is worth when we spin our wheels on group dynamics rather than being able to concentrate on the task at hand. Keeping common goals in mind and making use of some basic structural and procedural understandings can help make small groups really click together and achieve more **synergy** than people working separately.

### **Types of Small Groups**

The likelihood of being in a group is compounded by there being so many types of small groups. Small group communication experts Isa Engleberg and Dianna Wynn (2003) have identified seven types of groups: **primary, social, therapy/self-help, learning, service, work,** and **public**, to which we may add: **civic, focus, virtual, study, community, and problem-solving.**

A **primary group** satisfies one's basic human needs; members have an intimate relationship. Primary groups include your family and close friends.

A **social group** includes members who share a common interest or engage in a common activity, such as a book club, gaming group, religious congregation, fraternity or sorority, an intramural sports team, etc. While close relationships can evolve among members of a social group, it is the common activity or interest that keeps them together.

**Therapy/help groups** are one in which individuals convene to share their troubles and take solace in others who have experienced similar experiences. Self-help groups can help us relate better, find resources, overcome addictions, experience healing, and develop spiritually or psychologically.

A **learning group** includes members who desire to enhance their skills, abilities, cognitive processes, gain knowledge, or improve a behavior. Examples of learning groups include enrolling in a swimming class, taking a birthing class when expecting a baby, attending classes with a religious or spiritual group, or taking a communication course in public speaking to overcome shyness.

A **service group** is primarily composed of volunteers who donate their time, energy, and effort to help others who lack something that would help them lead a functional life or are in need of a particular service. Often organized by religious congregations or community centers, working together on service can be a satisfying way to engage in bettering one's world.

In a **public group**, members interact for the benefit of an audience. There is generally little interaction between the audience and a public group. An example of a public group is a panel discussion, when a group engages in a discussion about a topic. Another example is a symposium in which each group member presents a speech on one aspect of a topic.

A **work group** occurs within an organizational context. The members of a work group complete a common task on behalf of an organization whose members take collective responsibility for the task (Keyton, 1993). Work groups are differentiated by the physical and intellectual abilities needed by group members, the amount of time the group dedicates to task completion, the task structure, the resistance that group members encounter when attempting to

complete the task, the degree to which task completion depends on technology, and the health risks assumed by group members as they engage in task completion (Devine, 2002).

**Civic groups** are local government and education groups that operate within the official structure of public institutions. A civic group might include a school committee or board of selectmen. A board of selectmen makes decisions on local laws, local budgets, and safety issues.

**Focus Groups** encompass a wide variety of groups such as social research, urban planning, usability engineering, and marketing. Often, focus groups are convened by organizations to solicit feedback on programs, policies, or products. For example, a marketing focus group might examine new packaging for pizzas and discuss design, determining which one would appeal to them the most.

<i>Type</i>	<i>Purpose</i>
Executive	Plan/direct
Command	Coordinate
Negotiation	Deal/persuade
Commission	Choose/investigate
Design	Create/develop
Advisory	Suggest/diagnose
Service	Provide/repair
Production	Assemble/build
Performance	Enact
Medical	Treat/heal
Response	Protect/rescue
Military	Protect/neutralize
Transportation	Haul
Sports	Compete/win

*Source:* From Devine, D. J. (2002). A review and integration of classification systems relevant to teams in organizations. *Group Dynamics: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 6, 291–310. Copyright © American Psychological Association.

**Virtual groups** function through mediated communication to allow people to work, play, or socialize interdependently from different locations. From corporate teleconferences to multiplayer online role playing games (MMORPG), virtual groups tend to allow for less nonverbal interaction, which places more emphasis on the verbal content of people's contributions.

**Study groups** are formed to help students learn course material, work on projects, or prepare for exams. Working together gives students an opportunity to discuss the information more thoroughly and deepen the learning experience.

**Community groups**, whether geographic or interest-based, draw people together around shared interests, allowing participants to interact, share information, and coordinate action. From local neighborhood associations to arts organizations to groups that support particular causes, community organizing can make the fibers of a community stronger.

**Task groups** convene to work on a particular task. Often assigned to work together within or between organizations, task groups are less social in nature and often disband once the task is completed. They can be called together within any context, from a school association fundraising for a field trip to a marketing team coming up with a campaign to introduce a new product line. The main characteristic of the task group is that they disband once the task is completed.

**Problem-solving groups** may be temporary or long-standing. They are brought together to coordinate action, overcome obstacles or impediments, or pool resources toward a desired goal. Problem-solving groups may last until a problem is resolved. Coordinating action on issues like environmental sustainability, crime or violence prevention, or meeting needs of the most vulnerable members of a community may or may not ever come to a natural "end."



## Stages of Group Development

At first, being unsure of how group dynamics will emerge is perfectly normal. The anticipation of how you will get along with members is all part of the social process inherent to community life. One thing for certain is that good communication skills are a must. Making sure you listen, choose your words carefully, observe non-verbal communication, and work on creating a polite and productive atmosphere, showing respect to each and every member, will help to make sure goals are achieved satisfactorily. Seeing the larger view of how groups function can help give a sense of structure and help us see the trajectory of the work. Groups move through these classic phases: **Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing,** and **Adjourning** (Tuckman, 1965).

During the **Forming phase**, as members try to get oriented, they are nervous and unsure of how to proceed. This can be a tentative time during which members hesitate to express themselves. Members are concerned about how they are perceived, as well as trying to discover who their co-members are. Wondering who will be in charge and how work will be distributed, they look for a way to move forward. Once individuals feel accepted, they can begin to identify with the group (Moreland and Levine, 1994) and find their niche.

In the **Storming** phase, conflict may arise as members try to establish where they fit in, discover the roles they may play, and argue their positions. Group members may vie for leadership roles, based on members' strengths and their involvement. Many groups are not limited to only one leader, so being open to everyone's needs and creative about distributing resources and responsibilities can be crucial to both success and satisfaction.

During the **Norming** phase, acceptable and unacceptable behavior has been established, guiding behavior and interaction. Roles have been established, as well as norms. Examples of

this could be anything from how timely one needs to be, the type of language used in a meeting, dress or the specific parameters regarding meetings, such as the order of business, how often meetings would take place, time frame, etc. During this phase, the group begins to work cooperatively and make decisions on how to move forward to achieve their goal. Cohesion emerges and members are comfortable enough to express themselves.

In the **Performing** phase, the focus is on accomplishing the goal. Roles change as needed according to group needs. There may be several tasks that need to be achieved as part of reaching the overall goal. Members must work together to overcome obstacles in their path. This is the time when individual members' various talents will come into play. For example, if your group is preparing to have a golf tournament to benefit a particular charity, there would be many facets involved to make it happen. You might want to figure out how you would promote the event, what food would be served, where your golfers were coming from and fundraising for t-shirts, prizes and other costs. Even producing t-shirts can break down into a list of items: What colors should they be? What is the logo? How many do you buy and what sizes? Do you requisition a professional to design the logo and pay for it, or do you have a member who is a talented artist who could do design it? Decision-making is a large part of achieving goals.

After groups finish a project or end a particular phase, the **Adjourning** phase provides some kind of closure before members disperse. The final product of the work may be compiled and presented in some way. A final party may provide punctuation and a satisfying ending to the group effort. Sometimes people make lasting connections, and some groups determine to have a reunion. Reunions often bring special closure to long and arduous work.

## Creating a Positive Group Climate

**Norms** are re-occurring patterns of behavior or thinking that come to be accepted in a group as the “usual” way of doing things (Scheerhorn and Geist, 1997) or, in other words, “the limits of allowable behaviors of individual members of the group” (Bonney, 1974). These guidelines or rules designed to regulate the behaviors of group members (Fujishin, 2007) can be either stated or unstated; they arise socially as part of the group process. For example, when Bethany, in her enthusiasm, kept talking at the same time as her group members, she received discouraging looks from her group. Eventually, she realized that the preference was for each person to talk for no more than one to two minutes, taking turns, with discussion ensuing later. At this point, she began to **self-monitor** (paying attention to her communication and behavior), exhibiting patience, discipline and speaking at the appropriate times.

**Gatekeeping** in a group context is the process of coordinating discussion so that all members have an opportunity to contribute. It might occur when someone suggestion to another member that they haven’t been heard yet, or perhaps setting a maximum amount of time each member can talk about a specific subject. Jill, being slightly reticent to speak, sits quietly while the group chats about the pros and cons of hiring a DJ for their function. John might urge Jill to comment on the DJ she had at recently used at her work celebration. Encouraging members with praise and positive reception of their contributions also keeps member buoyed and confident. Finally, one important part of group work is mediating when conflict arises. Conflict can be both healthy and unhealthy. It can be a normal part of group processes, contributing to more thorough analysis of the information available. Unfortunately, if it continues to escalate, it can be disruptive and uncomfortable. **Mediation** works to resolve conflict in an open, productive manner so that the necessary feelings and information can be aired without shutting down the

group process. When people don't get along, the group needs to be directed to focus on the issues and not the persons involved.

When members of groups work together, it has been shown that supporting each other's endeavors has a profound effect. Working together and creating a climate of trust and reliance makes for better productivity. **Group cohesion** happens when group members feel: 1) a degree of **interpersonal attraction**, genuine liking and trust among them, 2) a **shared commitment** to the task itself, and 3) **group pride**, or a sense of "we-ness" and belonging within the team. Cohesive groups tend to create supportive climates that achieve higher success, fostering optimism and self-confidence. When groups are confident, they are better able to overcome problems and make decisions. Cohesiveness is recognized by how well the group gets along, by their mutual admiration, and their devotion to their purpose. Longevity can also be a characteristic of a cohesive group in that they will often stay together longer.

Committing oneself to the goal of the group and establishing **mutuality of concern** makes for a less bumpy ride. Mutuality of concern is the degree to which members share the same level of commitment to a group. Enthusiasm for the group focus helps to create better cohesion amongst members. Gouran (2003) provided several suggestions for ways to create group cohesiveness. These involve speaking respectfully to other members, being friendly and courteous, showing cooperation, being sensitive to others, showing value in group members' contributions and opinions, staying on task and cooperating with others, and not competing. This does not mean that one must always agree or take everything at face value. Questioning and reasoning never go out of style. Certainly, a sense of justice, versatility, cheerfulness, enthusiasm, confidence, perspective, egalitarianism, and other such traits are important to create an underlying fabric of cohesion that can help the group withstand challenges.

## Groupthink

Although group cohesiveness can have positive effects, it can also have a significant downside if not taken cautiously. Members can become so comfortable with and accepting of each other that they become sidetracked or fail to analyze information carefully. They may believe in their team to the point that they assume their outcomes will be positive. What can emerge is a group that is so cohesive that it forgets to do critical thinking – a potentially dangerous mode of processing known as Groupthink (Janis, 1971). **Groupthink** is a psycho-sociological phenomenon that happens when group members try to minimize conflict and reach a **consensus** (general agreement) without critically evaluating alternative ideas or viewpoints. It happens within groups of people when the desire for harmony or speed overrides a realistic appraisal of alternatives. Communication scholars have found evidence of Groupthink behind policy disasters ranging from the Bay of Pigs invasion to the 1984 Space Shuttle Challenger disaster (t'Hart, 1990).

To evaluate a group process, consider the following **factors that lead to Groupthink**:

**1) Homogeneity:** Are group members basically coming from the same perspective? Are there any ways to encourage the expression of alternate viewpoints? Does the group have such a strong sense of “we-ness” that people may not feel comfortable expressing different ideas or experiences that run counter to the group norm?

**2) Structural factors:** Is the group insulated from fully engaging all relevant information? Is the leadership of the group biased in some way? Are there clear decision-making procedures that ensure that the perspectives of all group members are truly heard? Does everyone in the group feel that they have equal access to contributing fully? Are minority perspectives protected or valued within the group process?

**3) Stressful context:** Are there any factors external or internal to the decision-making context that might be putting the group under stress that could cause them to want to speed along their process? Are people tired, hungry, or uncomfortable? Is there an imminent deadline? Is anything going on between group members that could cause enough stress to make group members want to be done with the work before considering the full range of alternatives?

**To prevent Groupthink**, it is important to provide for oversight and control by having clear, commonly-agreed rules and procedures that provide for a thorough process. Group members should agree to a timeline that allows for thorough **brainstorming**, considering all possible options together as a group, before launching into evaluation and selection between alternatives. There needs to be a built-in way to allow for objection and protect dissenters, sort of a “**devil’s advocate**” that can present alternative views for the sake of considering a wide range of alternatives. The group needs to set up work time and space so that members are not exceedingly tired, hungry, or stressed. (This is one reason many groups arrange for working meals, so people can eat and not be rushed.) Finally, there needs to be a clear decision-making structure, whether voting by majority, coming to consensus, or some other formula. Everyone needs to know how the final decision will be made so that they can weigh in appropriately at the appropriate time.

Examining and discussing differing viewpoints is essential to coming to a sound conclusion. A devil’s advocate can be just what is needed for flushing out a topic and brainstorming for better ideas. When groups fail to look at the pros and cons of an idea, they limit the creative process and thus may inhibit the development of ideas. Although it is important to be enthusiastic and complimentary, it is necessary to be analytical thinkers and to evaluate carefully to ensure that Groupthink does not sabotage the full potential of a group’s process.

## Approaches to Leadership

When undertaking a complicated project, there are many responsibilities and tasks to complete to get the job done on time. Leadership roles may trade off based on members' strengths and their involvement; groups are not limited to only one leader. Good leaders are usually good facilitators, making sure that all members are encouraged to contribute and to keep efforts moving forward.

There are **three basic approaches to leadership** that a group might take on in order to structure their group process:

**1) Traditional leadership** typically involves one central person who holds the main responsibility for the group's functioning. Within this traditional notion of leadership, there are three ways a leader might operate: **A) An authoritarian leader** takes charge and holds the ultimate responsibility for the completion of a task in command-and-control style. Often, authoritarian leadership emerges when one person with a dominant personality or obvious experience or opinions related to the topic steps forward. In cases when a task needs to be completed quickly or with minimal communication, authoritarian leadership can be the most streamlined, although the depth and richness of a broader group process may be sacrificed. **B) A democratic leader** emerges through some sort of voting or consensus-building process through which members agree to structure participatory leadership. This takes more time, structure, and communication, but allows group members more involvement in selecting and supporting their chosen leader. **C) A laissez-faire leader** does very little to direct the group. Although they may be appointed in some way to bring the group together, the laissez-faire leader does not propose structure or solutions, but simply holds the role to create the container for the group's process to emerge as it will. This kind of open process can be organic and low-stress, but when a task

needs to be completed, it offers little to keep the group on track or offer accountability for outcomes. Support groups in which the group process itself is the only goal can be very suitable for laissez-faire leadership.

**2) Shared leadership** means that all group members hold some of the responsibility for the outcome, often through some process of voting and/or consensus-seeking. Although there may be one or more individuals who serve as facilitators, the sense of accountability is shared equally among everyone in the group. This requires more communication, but can be very worthwhile to leverage the contributions of all group members. Shared leadership works best when there is equal commitment from all members of a group, and when the group process itself is one of the goals of the group. It is an empowering group structure that requires conscious focus from all, but can be an excellent growth experience for everyone in the group.

**C) Functional leadership** means that different group members take responsibility for different aspects of the work. Each person may be responsible for producing a particular piece of the final product according to their strength or area of expertise. The functional leadership approach views each member of the group as a unique contributor to both the process and product(s) of the group. Particularly when various individuals (or departments) are being brought together to represent their respective areas of contribution, a functional approach can be useful to empower each member of the group to hold accountability for the aspect of the process that they are expected to bring.

There are **two main types of functional leadership** that contribute to a healthy group process: **Task leadership** and **Process leadership**. **Task leadership** behaviors deal with the facilitating progression of the group's overall goal. Structuring conversation, assigning roles, taking notes, doing research, delegating tasks, etc. all have to do with moving the necessary work



forward to keep the group on task and get the job done. **Process leadership** deals with the group's well-being and making the group process comfortable so that members can contribute freely and fully. Maintaining a positive group climate is necessary to keep the group moving along productively. Sometimes when arguments get intense, a process leader might make a joke or use a calm voice to redirect the conversation or suggest a break. Because of the diversity in a group, there will be all kinds of personalities and experiences. Sensitive people who can pick up on interpersonal vibes and make appropriate suggestions to "grease the wheels" between people keep the group process positive and smooth. The value of what we know can only be appreciated when members share their knowledge and experience with everyone. It is harder for some group members to speak out than others, so creating a positive group climate that supports everyone in participating is an important process functions that makes group work pleasant and productive. Acknowledging both task and process leadership as important to the group's outcome means considering a variety of group roles as important to the process.

### **Group Roles**

We bring our unique talents and personality traits to a group. The make-up of the group may influence the various roles that you and other members play. Who you are and who they are will dictate what roles you adopt, and how you contribute to the group. Three categories of group roles were originally defined by Kenneth Benne and Paul Sheats in 1948: **Task roles**, **Maintenance roles**, and **Individual (Dysfunctional) roles**. The two functional categories include **Task** and **Maintenance Roles** that get the work of the group done and make the group climate smooth and productive. The dysfunctional category is comprised of **Individual roles** that display the personality traits of particular group members that are put above the group's

intentions. These tend to be disruptive of the group, weakening its cohesion. Roles are often shared; the challenge is for each group member to take as many different roles as are appropriate to the group's needs in the various phases of its process toward achieving its purposes.

### **1) Task Roles**

- a. Initiator/contributor—offers new ideas or approaches.
- b. Information seeker—asks for clarification of facts.
- c. Opinion seeker—asks members to share opinions.
- d. Information giver—provides facts, statistics, and examples.
- e. Opinion giver—offers opinion or belief statements.
- f. Elaborator—provides comments or example to extend ideas.
- g. Coordinator—clarifies and notes relationships among ideas.
- h. Orienter—summarizes ideas and seeks to keep the group focused on task.
- i. Energizer—spurs group into action by giving motivational statements.
- j. Procedural technician—handles tasks like writing ideas on the board.
- k. Recorder—makes a written record of the group's progress.

### **2) Maintenance Roles**

- a. Encourager—offers praise, support, and positive feedback.
- b. Harmonizer—manages conflict and mediates personalities.
- c. Compromiser—manages conflict by mediating ideas.
- d. Gatekeeper—invites less talkative people to contribute and vice versa.
- e. Follower—goes along with suggestions and ideas.
- f. Expresser—articulates consensus feelings of group members.
- g. Observer—summarizes the group's progress or lack thereof.
- h. Tension Reliever—provides humor and suggests breaks where appropriate.

### **3) Individual/Dysfunctional Roles**

- a. Aggressor—attacks people, not ideas; steals credit.
- b. Blocker—stubborn and disagreeable, shooting down ideas.
- c. Recognition Seeker—wants credit for everything.
- d. Self-confessor—self-discloses personal information to gain group sympathy.

- e. Joker—focuses on fun, jokes, and stories to the point of distraction.
- f. Dominator—takes control of agenda and conversation.
- g. Special interest pleader—has a hidden or personal agenda to fulfill.
- h. Help seeker—seeks to evoke sympathy due to low self-esteem.

It is common for group members to hold multiple roles and move between them, sometimes facilitating the group process, and sometimes holding it back. It helps to know all of these possible roles so that we can pay attention to our own behavior and bring out our best contributions in the ways that serve both ourselves the group most effectively. Think for a moment about your own tendencies in groups, and that of others with whom you've worked. Why do you think particular roles are more or less comfortable for particular personality types? How do we learn and step into new roles as needed? How can we politely call attention to particular role patterns as they emerge and impact the group process? Are there new skills and roles that you'd like to cultivate the next time you work in a group?

### **Situational Leadership**

It is crucial to recognize that there is not one best way to lead or participate in a group. Each group experience will be unique and require different skills, from day to day or even minute to minute. This is why it is important to bring strategic flexibility and a wide repertoire of possible behaviors and contributions, so that you can know when to speak up and when to hold back, and to become a more skillful observer of the group's flow and progress.

One way to understand how important it is to invoke different leadership styles and role behaviors is through the lens of **situational leadership** (Hersey & Blanchard, 1969), in which we utilize different styles of interaction depending on the situation. When the task orientation is

high (we have something we must accomplish, and perhaps not much time to do it), a good leader needs to invoke **directive behavior**—telling people what to do and how to do it. Think of a firefighter in an emergency situation, needing to give clear guidance quickly without much group process. However, in a situation when the group process is very important, a good leader will invoke **supportive behavior**—listening to group members, considering their feelings, and spending much more time around the process itself. For example, in a group therapy session or a focus group around a new office policy, the entire reason for drawing people together is to listen and consider their feelings and opinions. In that case, directive behavior would be highly inappropriate, and we would need a repertoire of supportive behaviors to draw on.



To understand the choice of situational leadership behaviors we may utilize, we draw axes of high and low supportive versus directive behavior. If our involvement is not crucial to the group process (either in terms of direction or support), we may choose a style of **delegating/observing**. If we need to give strong guidance, and there is not much need for supportive behavior, we may choose a style of directing/telling. When the need to offer support is higher than the need to offer direction, we would choose a **supporting/participating** approach. And when our need to provide both support and direction is high, we need to be equipped with a **selling/coaching** style in which we can both offer our expertise and support group participants in understanding why particular choices are made. What situations can you think of that would be most suitable for these different styles of leadership?

### **Conclusion**

Small group communication can be one of the most valuable and productive experiences of our professional and personal lives, but can also be one of the most challenging. Effective small group participation requires us to have a broad skill set, as well as high motivation to bring our best contributions to the experience. We need to combine skills in verbal and nonverbal communication, effective listening, with a high degree of interpersonal awareness and sensitivity. We need to possess a sense of our strengths and be willing to developing new ones, while also noticing and being able to rely on the strengths of others, as well. Because the range of skills and behaviors we need for successful group communication is so broad, it is very helpful if our motivation to participate is high so that we can keep our energy and focus through the process. This is why maintenance roles and supportive behaviors are just as important as directive roles and task behaviors—they keep the group environment open, supportive, fruitful, and fun.

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