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O'Hair, D., & Friedrich, G. W. (1992). Evaluating group effectiveness. In *Strategic communication in business and the professions* (pp.339-344). Boston : Houghton Mifflin.

## *Evaluating Group Effectiveness*

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Modern business and professional organizations are rarely satisfied with the way they are. This is true no matter how successful, productive, or effective the organization is. Unless there is a strong and clearly articulated vision for the future, today's successes are tomorrow's busts.

One key method by which organizations may prepare for the future is by evaluating the present. To define what we mean by evaluation, we must contrast it with description. Description focuses on what a group or person is doing; evaluation focuses on how well the group or person is doing it. Evaluation, then, requires a judgment or an assessment.

As John Brilhart noted, "Unless practice is constantly evaluated, it may result in bad habits. The means to learning is practice with analysis and evaluation leading to change in future discussions."<sup>14</sup> You are probably

aware of the cliché “Practice makes perfect.” Unfortunately, this is true only if the practice itself is perfect! Therefore, you must monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of the groups in which you participate if you intend to join the future.

Many different students of group communication have provided categories, rating forms, evaluation instruments, or questionnaires designed to assess the strength of different units. In the next sections, we discuss the dimensions of group evaluations and techniques for conducting them successfully.

### *Dimensions of Group Evaluation*

A very effective evaluation system was devised by Albert Kowitz and Thomas Knutson, who divided group evaluation into three dimensions: informational, procedural, and interpersonal.<sup>15</sup>

**Informational.** According to Kowitz and Knutson, the informational dimension is concerned with the task that the group is working on. Evaluation of that task can be broken down into several components. One is whether the task before the group lends itself to discussion. If not, the group may have to expand the scope and nature of its topic. If the task is suitable, a second component presents itself: How prepared is the group for discussion? Was needed research or necessary advance planning done by the members before the meeting? Is there a need to get more information before the group can make an adequate decision?

As for a third component, how well does the group “tear apart” the problem? You will recall from the previous chapter that analysis depends on reducing an issue to its component parts. Is there evidence of high-quality information giving, opinion giving, evaluation and criticism, elaboration and integration?

Note that of these factors, evaluation and criticism are extremely important to the success of the group. The group meets to test ideas. If there is early agreement and signs that certain participants are reluctant to express reservations, the meeting is headed toward groupthink. Does anyone state, “Let me play devil’s advocate for a moment”? In evaluating a group, you should see evidence of productive conflict with debate, questioning, and exploration of alternatives.

**Procedural.** Evaluation of procedural functions looks at how well the group’s activities and communication are coordinated. We have specified earlier in this chapter that most of these functions are performed by the leader. Yet in groups where the leadership function is a shared one, each participant has a responsibility to exhibit some essential leadership behaviors.

The key functions to be evaluated include eliciting communication, delegating and directing action, summarizing group activity, managing conflict, evaluating process, and releasing tension. Let us highlight a few problems that you may see in these areas.

One behavior that occurs with regularity in groups is some members talking too much and others talking too little. To counteract this behavior, an astute leader and others attempt to keep the lines of communication open among all group members, a function known as gatekeeping. A line such as "Tim, I think you've covered that issue pretty well. Bob, do you have anything to add?" is a tactful way to suppress and elicit contributions.

Another recurring behavior is a return to issues that have seemingly been decided on or worked through. When this happens, many members get frustrated and tense. You will hear, "We never get anything done in here," or "We're just spinning our wheels." There are two possibilities for corrective action. One is the use of summaries. Does the leader or do other members continually keep the group posted of its progress with remarks such as "What we've been talking about is . . ." or "So, what we seem to be saying is . . ."? A second possibility is to determine if the group has lost sight of its objectives. What is the group trying to accomplish, and how well does the present discussion help to accomplish these objectives?

Finally, there is a need for members to release tension at certain points of interaction. This can be done through a joke, sharing of feelings, and so on. Kowitz and Knutson stressed that participants may need to be reminded of their individual responsibilities and importance in the overall group function. Once members are aware of what is expected of them, tension can decrease and the group can resume making progress.

**Interpersonal.** In this portion of the evaluation, the emphasis is on the way that the members work with each other, which includes the climate or atmosphere in which the task is accomplished. There can be little doubt that when the circumstances in which the group operates are uncomfortable or unpleasant, productivity and results will be affected in negative ways. There are four areas that can be assessed in this dimension: positive reinforcement, solidarity, cooperativeness, and respect toward others.

We have already noted that one of the most dangerous things that can happen in a meeting is when the conflict shifts from tasks to individuals. Personality conflicts can distract the group from its primary task and responsibility. The group leader and each member should attempt to convince the group to "stick to the facts" or "get back on the problem" whenever an outburst such as "You've never known anything about this before, and who the hell are you to talk about it now?" occurs.

If the atmosphere is negative or unpleasant, the leader or any group member can use rewards to emphasize the positive aspects of the meeting. There may, however, be some issue-based reasons behind the negative statements being made. If this is the case, the reason for the derogatory comments merits exploration.

### *Individual Evaluation*

Apart from the group as a whole, each individual participant can be assessed. The focus of such an evaluation is on how well members helped the group accomplish its task and how well they performed functions in the process.

An excellent instrument for evaluating individual participants and leaders was created by Larry Samovar and Steven King.<sup>16</sup> Each of the factors on their instrument has been previously defined and discussed in these chapters. We simply list the factors that can be assessed.

**Participants.** Eleven factors make up the individual member evaluation form. The form may be completed either by another group member or the group leader. The following is an example of a participant evaluation form.

<h2 style="text-align: center;">PARTICIPANT EVALUATION FORM</h2>	
Name of group member _____	
Name of rater _____	
Date _____	
For each characteristic, fill in a rating from 1 (excellent) to 7 (poor). Write any comments in the space below the rating list.	
<b>Participant Characteristics</b>	
1. _____	Preparation
2. _____	Speaking
3. _____	Listening
4. _____	Openmindedness
5. _____	Sensitivity to others
6. _____	Worth of information
7. _____	Critical thinking skills
8. _____	Group orientation
9. _____	Procedural contribution
10. _____	Assistance in leadership
11. _____	Overall evaluation
Comments:	

**Leaders.** There are also eleven factors on the leadership evaluation form. Note that this form operates best when the group has an assigned or des-

ignated leader. In this way, the evaluator can focus on one individual and how well he or she performs the role. The following is a sample leadership evaluation form.

<div><div>LEADER EVALUATION FORM</div><div>Name of leader _____ Name of rater _____ Date _____ For each characteristic, fill in a rating from 1 (excellent) to 7 (poor). Write any comments in the space below the rating list.</div><div><div>Leadership Functions</div><div><div>1. _____ Open discussion</div><div>2. _____ Asked appropriate questions</div><div>3. _____ Offered reviews</div><div>4. _____ Clarified ideas</div><div>5. _____ Encouraged critical thinking</div><div>6. _____ Limited irrelevancies</div><div>7. _____ Protected minority viewpoints</div><div>8. _____ Remained impartial</div><div>9. _____ Kept accurate records</div><div>10. _____ Concluded discussion</div><div>11. _____ Overall leadership</div></div><div>Comments:</div></div></div>
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For both the individual and leadership evaluation factors, assessments can be made about the relative strengths and weaknesses for each group member. Evaluating these areas contributes to improvement in group work.

### *The Group Behavior Inventory*

One of the more reliable methods of group evaluation is the Group Behavior Inventory (GBI).<sup>17</sup> It is a long instrument consisting of seventy-one items. The following evaluation form includes items from the GBI that conform to the dimensions discussed in this and the previous chapter.

## GROUP EVALUATION MEASURE

Rate the following items according to how you feel about the group or its members in the following way: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = disagree, and 5 = strongly disagree.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ The group is an effective problem-solving team.
2. \_\_\_\_\_ Divergent ideas are encouraged at group meetings.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ Members are more intent on satisfying the leader than on optimizing the potential output of the group.
4. \_\_\_\_\_ The goals of the group are clear-cut.
5. \_\_\_\_\_ It is important to be on friendly terms with other group members.
6. \_\_\_\_\_ Conflict within the group is submerged rather than used constructively.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ There is an open examination of relationships among group members.
8. \_\_\_\_\_ The group should be achieving more than it is.
9. \_\_\_\_\_ There is a destructive competitiveness among members of the group.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ Group meetings result in creative solutions to problems.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ There is no point in raising critical problems at group meetings.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ There is open examination of issues and problems at group meetings.
13. \_\_\_\_\_ Group members are willing to listen to and to understand me.
14. \_\_\_\_\_ Group meetings should be continued.
15. \_\_\_\_\_ The policies under which the group works are clear-cut.
16. \_\_\_\_\_ Meetings are not effective in discussing mutual problems.
17. \_\_\_\_\_ The chairman should give the members guidance.
18. \_\_\_\_\_ Meetings are trivial.
19. \_\_\_\_\_ The criterion for evaluating ideas in the group is "who said it" rather than "what was said."
20. \_\_\_\_\_ The chairman is oriented toward production and efficiency.

To score this measure reverse scoring for items 3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 16, 17, 18, 19 (i.e., if you scored these items with a 5, replace it with a 1, replace 4 with a 2, keep 3 the same, replace 2 with a 4, and replace 1 with a 5). Add up all 20 items using the replaced scores for the above items. A low score (20–50) suggests a very effective group. A high score (70–100) reveals group problems. A mid-range score (51–69) represents a group that could rapidly improve with a few changes in how it operates.

This evaluation measure can come in handy after meeting with a group several times to determine areas of strength and weakness. All group members should score the measure and discuss their individual results with the group. In this way, everyone will understand the relative perceptions of their counterparts, and weaknesses can be healed and strengths can be maintained. Look for specific areas that need improvement, and work together to strengthen these.