

A Consultant's Perspective on Groups
By Carrie Hutton

While group development theories are useful for understanding group process from the participants' perspective (Tuckman, 1965; Schutz, 1958; Bennis & Shephard, 1965), an analysis of group behavior from the consultant's perspective is needed (Reddy, 1994). This article examines Bennis and Shephard's (1965) *Theory of Group Development* with attention to the role of the OD practitioner.

Phase I: Dependence

During this phase, the group resolves authority issues in three sub-phases: i) *Dependence-Flight*, ii) *Counterdependence-Fight*, and iii) *Resolution-Catharsis*. Three types of members emerge: 1) *Dependents* – who are comforted by authority structures, 2) *Counterdependents* – who resist authority structures, and 3) *Independents* – who are unconflicted in this regard.

Subphase i: Dependence-Flight – The group attempts to identify a shared goal and demonstrates security-seeking behaviors to alleviate tension created by forming. Dependent members expect the trainer to provide procedure and direction, while counterdependents look for trainer behaviors that will offer grounds for rebellion.

Subphase ii: Counterdependence-Fight – Counterdependent expressions are overt and the group becomes polarized into subgroups in conflict over the need for leadership and structure.

Subphase iii: Resolution-Catharsis – As the group moves toward breakdown, the trainer is asked to step down and become “just another member”. This act allows the group to redefine power in terms of member responsibilities and contributions to group goals. For the first time, members feel a sense of “groupness”.

The consultant who has no stake in the outcome often adopts the role of the independent member in helping the group to resolve issues of authority and control. During this phase, the consultant should be careful to resist pressure to direct the group and provide all the answers.

Interventions focused on helping the group to develop goal clarity, assign formal roles, identify member competencies, and develop creative problem-solving and decision making strategies, will help alleviate anxiety and move the group toward task completion. However, the group's intense task focus often creates pressure to ignore covert maintenance issues. The consultant must be keenly aware of issues of inclusion, membership, dependency, risk of openness, physical and psychological comfort, contributions, and group identity.

Phase 2: Interdependence

During this phase, the group resolves interpersonal issues in three sub-phases: i) *Enchantment-Flight*, ii) *Disenchantment-Fight*, and iii) *Consensual Validation*. Three types of members emerge: 1) *Overpersonals* – who are uncomfortable unless a high degree of intimacy is established, 2) *Counterpersonals* – who withdraw from interpersonal intimacy, and 3) *Personals* – who are unconflicted in this regard.

Subphase i: Enchantment-Flight – The group works to maintain a sense of togetherness, but underlying tensions mount due to unresolved issues within the group. Overpersonals are concerned with maintaining harmony at all costs.

Subphase ii: Disenchantment-Fight – Counterpersonals resist further commitment to the group and two subgroups form in conflict over the degree of intimacy required for group membership.

Subphase iii: Consensual Validation – The need to complete the group's work on time often results in compromise solutions designed to alleviate anxiety and give the group a sense of closure. Consensus, when reached, is the result of discussion and decision making rather than an impulsive attempt to relieve tension. Highly personal or counterpersonal members can hinder the group's ability to resolve interdependence issues.

The focus in Phase 2 shifts to interpersonal behaviors that inhibit the group's work, thus increasing differences and conflict within the group. As the unconflicted, personal group member, the consultant should anticipate more frequent maintenance interventions in the areas of participation, commitment, satisfaction, diversity, dysfunctional members, conflict and confrontation, etc.

The consultant must resist group pressure to lose sight of the task, and should initiate maintenance interventions only in service of the task. Upon completion of the group's work, the consultant should offer the group opportunities celebrate accomplishments, explore lessons learned, and express feelings about the end of group life.

Conclusion

Knowledge of the progression of members' concerns with leadership to their concerns about interpersonal relationships will help the practitioner to identify interventions that will help the group move from one phase to the next. The client situation, in consideration of the stages of group development, will dictate the extent of direction and involvement provided by the practitioner.

References

- Bennis, W.G. & Shephard, H. A. (1965). A theory of group development. *Human Relations*, 9(40), 415 – 437.
- Reddy, W. Brendan (1994). *Intervention skills: Process consultation for small groups and teams*. San Diego: Pfeiffer & Company.
- Schutz, W. C. (1958). *FIRO: A three-dimensional theory of interpersonal behavior*. New York: Holt, Rhinehart & Winston.
- Tuckman, B.W. (1965). Developmental sequences in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384 – 399.
- Note: Carrie Hutton, along with Matt Minahan, Pearl Acquaah, Laurie Lemieux, and Jeffrey Brooke, will be presenting a pre-conference workshop on group development theories called “Group Development: Meet Schutz, Bennis, Shepard, Drexler, Sibbett, and More.”