

Managing Meeting Dynamics Practical Guide

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Tom has just taken on a new project and managed to find people whom he thinks have the necessary competencies and capabilities to ensure the successful completion of the assigned tasks. This team comprises people working in different functional teams and of various ranks and designations. It has been two weeks since Tom held the first meeting and the group is now on their third meeting but they find it difficult to come to consensus and make good decisions. One meeting member is often highly critical of her colleagues' ideas, making other meeting members hesitant about speaking up. Another member hardly contributes to the meeting and is agreeable to whatever the more dominant member suggests. Finally, one group member often makes irrelevant comments and digresses from the original discussion topic. Tom is getting increasingly frustrated with how things are turning out.

Contrast this with another meeting managed by David. David has also taken on a new project and, similarly, has competent team members from different functional teams and of various ranks and designations. However, there is a big difference—David's meeting members enjoy their meetings and work well together. They are focused in their discussions, they proactively seek clarification on concepts that they are unclear about, and they share objective comments on one another's suggestions. Good decisions emerge from their meetings. In addition, members are able to learn new ideas and skills from working with other members at the meeting. They are also on their third meeting but they have managed to make progress on their tasks. This is an example of a high-performing meeting.

Take a moment to recall your last meeting at work. How did your meeting look like? Did it turn out like Tom's or David's? Why did the two meetings turn out so differently?

As we can see from Tom's and David's meetings, it is clear that **effective meetings are not just about managing team goals and being able to accomplish tasks assigned to the team. They are also about team members being able to work better collectively over time and enjoying the experience of working together.** As such, it is necessary to manage the people aspects of the meeting. Furthermore, since meetings are an integral part of organisational life, it is crucial that meetings are

managed well to maintain or improve organisational health. This practical guide explains what drives the group dynamics in a meeting and provides suggestions on actionable steps that you can implement to improve the dynamics at your next meeting.

What are group dynamics?

“Group dynamics” (Lewin, 1951) are the processes that take place when people in a group interact with one another (Forsyth, 2010; Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2015; Oxford Dictionaries, 2015). They are shaped by the task that the group is working on but also exist independently of the task (Berg & Smith, 1990). These are the underlying emotional and psychological processes that exist in a group, which may be conscious or unconscious, and can operate at both the individual and the collective levels (Berg & Smith, 1990). **It is a cyclical and iterative process that involves constant sense-making.** The bigger the meeting, the more complex the dynamics—because each additional person increases the number of interactional loops exponentially (Harris & Sherblom, 2005; Mabry & Barnes, 1980). Group dynamics are not static, but may change quickly from moment to moment and from meeting to meeting. This is reflected in Figure 1 below where, in a group of four persons A, B, C, D, when person A says something, this triggers a reaction in each of persons B, C, D, which then sets off a loop of responses from the other persons in the room (Berg & Smith, 1990).

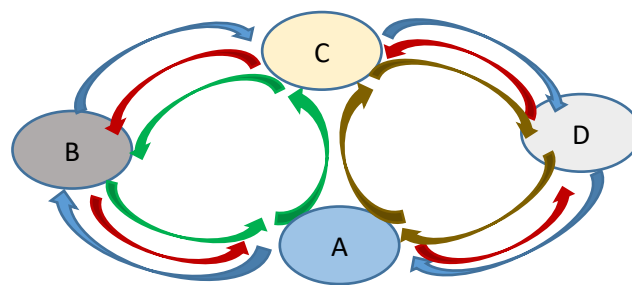


Figure 1: Group Dynamics at Work: Persons A, B, C, D and their interactional loops

Why is it important to understand the drivers of group dynamics?

To be effective in managing meeting dynamics, we have to be aware of the typical drivers of group dynamics so that we can be sensitive to the issues that may be affecting the workings of our group. In addition, we need to know what to observe in the group processes and interactions that will help us identify the specific dynamics at work in a particular meeting and the impact on the group. This is especially helpful to those of us who are new managers as we may be unfamiliar with group dynamics and find it difficult to identify group dynamics because these are, by definition, issues that are under the surface of a group's interaction, and have to be inferred by observing the behaviours of individuals in the group (Berg & Smith, 1990).

What are the drivers of group dynamics?

Find out more about the drivers of group dynamics and use the checklist of indicators below to guide you:

Drivers
<p>Internal</p> <p>Internal drivers refer to the issues and processes that occur within the group because of an individual's personal stated objectives and other motives that they may have but have not mentioned upfront. These may be either subconscious or unconscious and are usually not openly discussed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Power distribution in the group – There is a range of widely accepted bases of power, such as formal positions of authority and levels of social influence. Different people possess different kinds of power and it is often unevenly distributed in a group. People have different levels of need for power and they do not respond similarly to certain levels of leadership and management control. Power can also exist at a subgroup level where people find affinity with each other and organise themselves into smaller units which may create another layer of power structure. ❖ Different attitudes towards the meeting – It is common that different people have different commitments to achieving their common task objectives. Some may be genuinely passionate about their tasks and often have much to share while some may only be present in the meeting just to oblige their bosses' directions and may not share the same dedication to the meeting. ❖ Different objectives in attending the meeting – Regardless of the stated objectives of the meeting, people could have different personal objectives for the meeting, whether these are conscious or subconscious, and they can influence how people show up and respond to others in the meeting. <p>(Note: the indicators mentioned below can often reflect more than one internal driver)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Take note if the power distribution is even or concentrated in a few individuals who dominate the discussion □ Notice if some members are always sitting next to each other and agreeing with each other's opinions as they may have formed a coalition □ Identify if some members are usually seated far away from each other and often arguing with and undermining each other as there may be feuding factions □ Pay attention if any members are silent in the group discussions as silence may also be a form of communication □ Take note of how disagreements are voiced and how conflicts are resolved □ Observe how information is shared and the subsequent reactions and follow-ups to the information □ Identify if and how feedback is given amongst group members and the impact of the feedback □ Consider the non-verbal communication as group members may communicate to each other through non-verbal means like the tone of their voice and body language (e.g. members who receive the most gaze from others when speaking may signify their influence on how group decisions are made)

- Recognise what roles various members are playing and the impact of these on other group members (e.g. constructive roles may help the group achieve its goals or maintain the relationships between members whereas destructive roles may obstruct the ability of the group to achieve its goals)
- Observe each individual's level of engagement (e.g. the number of ideas contributed by each member)
- Consider the energy level (e.g. energy in the voice and gesture of members, or in the interaction between members)
- Take note of the emotional climate of the group (e.g. positive emotional climate would be when members express appreciation and support to each other whereas negative emotional climate would be when members are disapproving of and cynical to each other)

Group characteristics

- ❖ The developmental stage and how permanent the group is often affect the social dynamics. There are typically four stages of development:

- (i) Orientation – group members are new to each other, they tend to be polite, agreeable and restrained
- (ii) Conflict – members may start taking sides and form coalitions or subgroups, negative feelings that have arisen from not working well in the past might be carried forward to future meetings
- (iii) Emergence – different coalitions may begin to find ways to compromise and cooperate to come to mutually accepted decisions
- (iv) Reinforcement – a unity of identity is developed by the members as they work towards a consensus

These stages are often fluid and groups may move back and forth between the different phases over the course of their interaction when there are new members or problems.

- Identify the developmental stage of the group from members' behaviours and interactions
- Consider the group's history — how was the relationship between the members?
- Take note of the norms that have been formed and how these influence the members' behaviours
- Take note of the reaction of the members when they feel that the norms have been violated

External

External issues refer broadly to the issues and processes that arise as a result of the group being embedded in a larger social context.

- ❖ Organisational culture and structure – A top-down culture and hierarchy might result in a concentration of power in the team leader whereas a flatter organisational structure and bottom-up hierarchy might encourage greater participation by all members.
- Pay attention to the organisation's culture and structure and how much it influences the way the group members interact in the meeting

- ❖ Organisational politics – Members might represent different functions of the organisation that have conflicting interests that might affect dynamics in the meeting.
 - Consider what functions/organisations the members come from, and the relationship between these entities
 - Note how much the meeting members refer to themselves and the meeting group in comparison to how much they refer to others outside the meeting
- ❖ Leadership and management processes – Performance management, appraisal and reward/recognition systems might influence individuals' attitudes and behaviours during the meeting.
 - Consider what functions/organisations the members come from, and the leadership and management processes in these entities
- ❖ Organisational issues – Issues that the organisation is going through might have an impact on the group.
 - Be aware of events or new initiatives implemented in the organisation and understand their implications as these might have a potential effect on members

How to manage meeting dynamics?

With an accurate interpretation of the underlying dynamics, we then have to consider which behaviours need to be encouraged and discouraged in the group, and how to intervene appropriately to manage the group process.

There are steps we can take to facilitate positive meeting dynamics. The table below shows key facilitation principles and their respective facilitation tips.

Key Facilitation Principles	Facilitation Tips
1. Equalise power and encourage participation	<p>😊 Exercise discretion for when to intervene where appropriate to seek opinions from quieter members and summarise long speeches of members who have talked a lot.</p> <p>😊 Ensure that individuals take on different yet complementary roles that are constructive for the group. This can be done by assigning roles or facilitating important conversations.</p>

<p>2. Manage relations to ensure constructive behaviours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ When there are conflicts, restore harmony by urging members to focus on reflecting at the group level on the group dynamics and process. ☺ Raise observations of patterns of behaviour that people might be unconscious of and facilitate the sense-making process and the way to move forward.
<p>3. Facilitate open communication and seek a balance between inquiry and advocacy</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ Set up the room to encourage open communication, contracting, constructive interaction and shared responsibility. ☺ Intervene when there is too much disagreement or agreement in the group. ☺ Facilitate conversations by asking for elaboration and supporting evidence on ideas. ☺ Solicit feedback from team members to ensure sufficient and relevant information provided by members is given due consideration.
<p>4. Energise the meeting and build a positive emotional climate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ Build connectivity by having check-in questions to understand each member's energy level and the group's emotional climate. ☺ Note if there are dysfunctional behaviours, such as criticisms and complaints within the team, and address these by encouraging members to express their feelings openly. ☺ Provide real-time feedback to members to raise more self-awareness so that they can adjust their behaviours accordingly. ☺ Create opportunities for the group to reflect on their past behaviours to be more mindful of how they show up when they are stuck in rigid patterns of limiting behaviours.

It is essential to understand this process is an iterative and fluid one. Meeting facilitators have to respond appropriately to manage the group process; there is no standard cookie cutter response for all solutions. We have to tailor our response to the individuals present as everyone has their own communication profile, perspectives and motivations. After intervening, we need to observe the impact on the group, reassess the group dynamics, and then respond to the new situation appropriately. Hence, in the duration of a meeting, there are many iterations of observing, interpreting and managing the dynamics, and these actions require conscious effort and practice. This process is demonstrated in Figure 2 below.

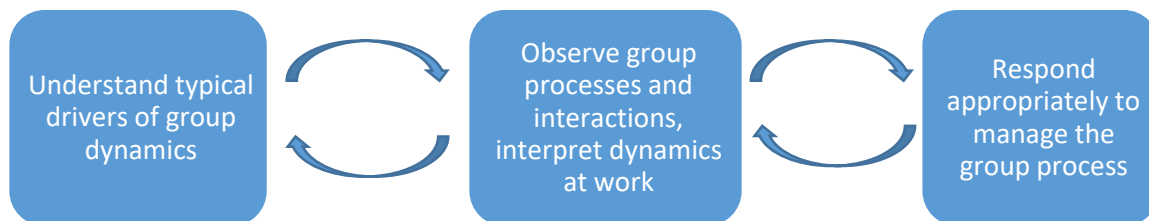


Figure 2: The cyclical and iterative process of managing meeting dynamics

Who is responsible for managing project meetings?

Although project managers or managers of work groups are pivotal in managing meeting dynamics as they play an active role in influencing the group dynamics of a meeting and facilitating its success, the onus of positive meeting dynamics does not just fall onto the managers; it is the responsibility of all members. **Managing meeting dynamics is a shared responsibility amongst the team members especially in our complex working environment where teams are required to learn how to work in an agile manner and be self-organised.** Meeting managers can encourage members to play this role by equipping them with an understanding of the concepts and processes behind group process (Harris & Sherblom, 2005). Meeting managers can also walk the talk by demonstrating self-awareness and mindfulness in how they show up in meetings so that members can learn to be more aware of their behaviours. In long-standing teams, it may be possible for meeting managers to appoint a specific team member as a facilitator for future meetings. This role can be rotated subsequently to ensure all members have an opportunity to manage meeting dynamics and understand the responsibility that rests on their shoulders as well.

Conclusion

As our work environment becomes increasingly dynamic and complex, work groups are likely to become more prevalent as it is impossible for anyone to possess all the knowledge and expertise needed to understand and solve complex problems in the workplace on their own. Even though the nature of work groups may differ, there is a social dimension that cannot be ignored when these work groups meet. It is then important that managers, and even members, appreciate their role in sensing and influencing both the task dynamics and the group dynamics in meetings so that meetings can be more productive and have a more positive impact on the meeting members and the group culture.

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