

Group Work

Practice Ideas

Re-Norming a Permanent Group: Applying group principles to the reinvention of a workplace leadership group

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This Practice Ideas column is based on Burt's reflections from his election as an ASGW Fellow in 2008.

How can longstanding group norms intentionally be changed in an intact and on-going workplace group? This article provides a summary of a group work consulting project that addressed this issue. Additionally, through the description of this consulting project, I will highlight how group work skills can be utilized to respond to the needs of a group in a business setting.

Discussion of the importance of group norms, how they should be established and/or maintained are standard fare for anyone conducting groups or teaching/supervising group work. These discussions inevitably underscore the importance of intentionally establishing group norms at the outset. Every group work text deals extensively with the importance of the process by which the group leader, in collaboration with group members, determines norms which will govern the behavior of members and the role of the leader. Considerable effort is also given to discussions of how a group leader can respond when members challenge group norms. Within the ASGW community the "group" is typically a counseling or therapy group, perhaps a psycho-educational group.

In this article, I want to invite you to think about a different type of group and a different challenge related to group norms. Recently I was asked to assist a group in **transforming** their **norms** to support a **fundamental change** in the **purpose of the group**. Group work professionals often work with task groups in business and community settings. Typically task groups are time or project limited; there is a beginning and an end to the activities of the group. The group comes together to accomplish a certain task; once the task is complete the purpose of the group has been fulfilled; the group is dissolved. The workplace group I was asked to work with was in a business setting but was not a task group. It was a leadership group that was intact,

permanent and on-going, the membership of which would not likely be altered in the foreseeable future. Thus the usual methods for norming a task group would not have been appropriate. Let me describe the group as well as the specific challenge.

The Group

Since its inception 39 years ago, Alan & Associates, a financial services company, has been led by the founder/owner. He is approaching retirement and has offered to sell controlling ownership of the company to the five top "sales producers." For the past five years these five sales producers have met as a group once each month to discuss customers and business development strategies. They have participated only tangentially in decisions affecting the overall operation and management of the business. Sales producers typically focus on increasing sales commission income for themselves; concerns about the overall operation of the company are generally related to how the administrative functions of the company are or are not supporting the producers' efforts to service their customers. During the monthly meetings, the producers "endured" the two hours, coming to life only when they "had a dog in the fight." In fact most of the norms in the monthly group were built around cooperating "just enough" to "appear helpful" without diminishing any competitive advantage the producer might have in terms of their "book of business" (the clients they were serving).

The offer to gain ownership of the company resulted in a cosmic shift. If these five producers were to become business owners they must find a way to work together. They must become a leadership team in spite of years of interactions that had created norms that were, in many ways, directly contradictory to group cohesion and teamwork. The group members could not articulate what they needed; yet they all agreed that something had to change. They finally concluded to retain outside assistance in order that the functioning of their group could change.

The Challenge

The challenge was to create a new normative structure within an on-going work group without changing group membership while the group grew into its leadership function. Unlike a counseling or therapy group where discussions of norms can easily be considered the “business of the group,” members of this group were keenly aware that “time is money.” They wanted a solution that was efficient in terms of consulting fees and in terms of the investment of time. They were apprehensive that devoting time to discussing group norms, identifying new group dynamics, and imagining/rehearsing new behaviors would really be worth the investment.

I’ll describe how I undertook this project in the hope that it may prompt you to consider how you might apply group work principles to the professional groups; workplace task and staff groups; and neighborhood, community, and religious groups that are important to you.

What then was a reasonable approach to working with this group?

When the group of producers contacted me they had in mind a training solution. They thought I could teach them teamwork principles and they would simply apply the principles during business meetings.

As we know from our own experience with group process – you can read about group process and it makes some sense, but it isn’t until you have lived the group experience that you really understand the powerful dynamics at play. With that in mind I proposed to provide a cognitive construct and then coach them as they attempted to re-norm their group process.

The cognitive construct I utilized was developed by Patrick Lencioni in his popular business book entitled *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Lencioni (2002) created a five level pyramid (see figure) to reflect what he calls the dysfunctions of team. You will note, the five levels are presented as negatives:

- the absence of...
- the fear of...
- the lack of...
- the avoidance of...
- the inattention to...

(p. 188-190).

Therefore, when considering this model I have found it helpful to turn the negatives into positive attributes:

- Trust – the ability to be vulnerable within the group,
- Openness – the ability to passionately debate ideas and challenge thinking,
- Commitment – the ability to fully invest in decisions and plans of action,
- Accountability – the ability to hold each other responsible for delivering action,

- Attention to Details – the ability to focus on the achievement of collective results.

I asked the group members to read the book before our first meeting. During that first training session we discussed the five levels. Most members expressed their belief that the group was functional and productive. However, as the first session unfolded there were early indications of trust issues (given the competitive nature of their relationship I could not have imagined it otherwise). By midway through our second meeting it was clear to everyone that there were major trust breaches. Conflicts and tensions had gone unresolved (sometimes even unacknowledged) for years! Even in this re-norming process, the “storming stage” (Tuckman, 1965) was fully present and could not be ignored.

Over the next 6-8 weeks we worked through several conflict-filled group meetings coupled with individual coaching sessions with members. Lencioni’s model began to gain credibility and traction with the members. They could see that in the absence of trust, honest conflict (as opposed to passive-aggressive acting out) was not possible. Without the ability to express honest differences and disagreements and work-through the inevitable tensions, the group could not provide real leadership to the company. So long as lack of trust and fear of conflict governed the group norms, members would withhold their full commitment; they would continue to live the old group norm of being just cooperative or committed enough. During those early meetings, group members were tempted to flee from the conflict; tempted to re-embrace the inauthentic communication norm. Fortunately, the members stuck with the process and as they worked through the layers of conflict their commitment to each other and the company grew.

The test would come around the issue of accountability. Under the old group norms members were accountable to themselves to generate a book of business that would result in commissions suitable to support their lifestyles. As owners they would continue to be compensated through commissions but additional income would come from the overall profitability of the business. However, maximizing company profitability meant that members had to balance short term commission rewards against the capitalization and human resources

needs of the company. Everyone had to do their part to ensure the overall viability and growth of the company. One of the old norms (score-keeping) had to be challenged and re-crafted. Under the old system, score keeping was very consistent with the competitive nature of sales producers. Every month was a contest to see who sold the most and inevitably there were winners and losers. As owners, they needed to find a way to consistently guarantee the success of the company even if it required sacrifice in terms of their monthly



sales commissions. Ultimately they came to understand that each member had to be accountable to the other owners not just in terms of their sales volume but also accountable in terms of investing time and energy into non-commission generating activities. Such non-commission activities include staff recruitment (interview, selection, and hiring); staff development and training; human resources; capital equipment (research, decision-making, and installation); and agency marketing. Score keeping as a norm had to be re-crafted to include tracking each member's contribution to these non-commission business owner activities and holding each other accountable to participate in non-commission activities.

The Re-Norming Process

In this section I want to provide a brief outline of the re-norming process I employed. Please understand, while the list appears to be linear, the living process was not remotely linear.

Process Observation – Raising process to awareness

Process observation of group dynamics was an essential activity throughout the project. This was vital in the beginning as it provided me with an opportunity to not only learn about their process but also to non-judgmentally comment on what I was observing and to ask “not-knowing” questions about how the normative behavior served the old group and how they imagined it might serve or frustrate the purpose of the new group.

Facilitating Awareness – Encouraging exploration

As group norms and process were identified members were encouraged to talk with each other about the process observations. Facilitating awareness was what led to the outbreak of unspoken and unresolved conflict. Facilitating awareness also was utilized to give language to the growth of trust and safety in the group.

Storming – Building trust through productive conflict

I reference the storming process earlier but what I didn't describe was the caldron of rage, confusion, suspicion, fear, and anxiety that overflowed into this group. Each time we met the story took a new twist revealing yet deeper levels of betrayal and hurt. The group with active modeling by the facilitator had to become a holding container for this raw emotion. If that could happen, the conflict no matter how ugly had a real chance of being worked through. On the other hand, had these issues not surfaced and not been given the air time they deserved the re-norming process could never have been successful.

Cognitive Construct – Utilization of a cognitive model of group functioning

Reading Patrick Lencioni's *The Five Dysfunctions of Team* (2002) provided members with a cognitive construct upon which to understand what was occurring in their group. It also provided a model for what was possible if they would stick with the process.

Old Group Norms – Discussion of implications

All along the way whether from process comments or as group members became more conscious, old group norms were identified. This awareness led to important discussions of the implications of the old norm in terms of its affect on the functioning of the group.

Points to consider when working with workplace groups/teams

No matter what the client says the story is always more complex; more layered and potentially more embarrassing than the client would like you to know about.

Clients want simple solutions for complex emotional issues. Preferably they want solutions that can be delivered by reorganizing work flow and/or sending people to a training class.

Don't be lulled into believing that because this is a business setting everything should be rational and “business like.” These are human beings - emotions run deep and powerful.

Once the storming begins you must see it through; it's time for all the non-anxious presence you can muster.

Reassuring the client during the storming stage requires careful calibration; too much reassurance and the client may not take it seriously; too little and they may lose their nerve and pull the project.

Shifting to task is critical. Too much time spent in high emotion and conflict can turn the experience into an encounter group and prematurely end the project.

It is the rare client who will invest in developmental work once the acute pain passes. Don't be afraid to make bold moves; the clock is ticking!

New Group Norms – Identification of new purpose and supporting norms

At first, the powerful significance of the differences in the purpose of the old group as compared to the new group seemed to run off their backs. But as time passed members became increasingly aware of the profound shift in the purpose of the group and with it a recognition that new norms would be required to support the new purpose.

Shift to Task

In a business setting, there is a point at which continuing to explore interpersonal conflict is counter-productive. Before reaching that point it is critically important to shift the focus of the group to a task; not just any task but something relevant and important to the purpose of the group. Shifting to task allows people to return to the business of the group secure in the knowledge that they no longer need to fear or avoid disagreement or conflict. Focusing on the business of the group also provides an opportunity to experiment with new norms.

The shift to task in this group involved the creation of a Vision and Mission Statement. This task activity was accomplished over three additional meetings. During those meetings new/different group norms were evident.

Two examples were particularly important;

1. members were present and engaged; they intentionally gave each other their full attention during the vision and mission discussions (this was a very different group norm) and
2. all members actively participated in the vision and mission discussion even when the process became tedious (as is inevitable during the vision and mission development process).

Permission – Challenge unproductive normative behavior
Laying the groundwork to establish a group norm that gives both

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permission and encouragement to challenge unproductive behavior sounds like a good idea; and it is. However, learning to remain mindful of the process when deeply engaged in the content is not easy for anyone; and surely not for members of this group. However, encouraging members to stay tuned into process so that unproductive interactions could be challenged remained an aspiration norm in which there was some evidence of progress.

Closure – Preparing the group to be self directed

Because the group was intact, permanent, and on-going there was not a point of closure in the traditional sense. Much as I would have preferred it we did not have the luxury to debrief the overall experience and integrate the learning. The group achieved what we might call a “good enough” group. At that point members made a business decision (which often happens in a business setting). They decided there was sufficient anticipated return on their investment of time and money for continued assistance. My involvement was concluded.

Summary

How can longstanding group norms intentionally be changed in an intact, permanent, and on-going workplace group? The task of

re-norming a pre-existing group that has a history and will continue into the foreseeable future presents unique challenges. Many of the traditional dynamics affecting group norms apply to such an effort. However the extra wrinkle in a re-norming process involves the unlearning of old norms (well reinforced habits) while at the same time identifying new norms that are supportive to the new purpose of the group and accomplished all this while the group struggles to fulfill its purpose. The success of this project seemed to turn on at least four variables; 1) members understood the importance of changing the purpose of the group, 2) members were willing to acknowledge and work-through intense conflict, 3) members had an opportunity to “practice” new norms while engaging in an important task activity consistent with the purpose of the group, and 4) members were motivated by the promise of ownership and increased income if they could become a functional leadership team. Finally, I hope this has given you some insight into how group work skills, common to every group work professional, can be utilized to respond to the needs of a group in a business setting.

References

Lencioni, Patrick (2002). *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*. Jossey-Bass
 Tuckman, Bruce. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399.

Registration Form

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