

How to Manage Group Dynamics

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Managers have long viewed meetings as a necessary evil. This attitude is understandable but unfortunate, as a good meeting should be an active forum in which colleagues exchange ideas, solve problems, and make decisions. The fact that so many people abhor meetings is testament to managers' inability to manage group dynamics.

Groups function on two different planes: "content" and "process." Content involves a group's inputs and outputs, while process refers to the way those inputs and outputs are controlled and manipulated. It's important to realize that these two planes are not independent, as the process controls the content. Thus, the conventional wisdom that meetings are pointless and mind-numbing reflects a misunderstanding of these two elements. The fact that meetings produce such poor content is actually symptomatic of a poorly controlled process.

To be more concrete, process includes such factors as agendas (whether hidden or not), the personal needs of group members, feelings, norms, rules, and informal leadership. Lapses in a group's process hamper the efficiency of the organization even when individual members competently carry the work. Again, managers have a significant role to play in this context. They have to study the various aspects of the organizational environment (e.g. quality of communication, decision making methods, etc.) to eliminate the hurdles.

In this situation, the manager's task is not to make decisions or boss his/her employees around. Rather, the manager should behave as a facilitator, working to improve the process that constrains the team's outputs and productivity. This means guiding the meeting in such a way as to maximize the contribution of all participants and successfully resolve the issue at hand.

In a group, different members take up different tasks, but the manager's main duty is to ensure that the others can perform their jobs. This often-overlooked

aspect of group dynamics and meeting management is a major obstacle to the effectiveness of many meetings.