



## Community Groups & Not-for-Profit Organisations: Balancing Performance with Capacity for Performance

### PART 3: A GENERIC PRESCRIPTION

The path to improved performance is unique for every group and organisation. There is no single or best way. Each must blaze its own trail.

And yet, certain generic competencies and insights underlie successful group-work and workplace practices everywhere, while their avoidance accounts for much of the common dysfunctionality.

Many of them are quite simple but it's worth remembering that simplicity is not always easy.

We are all conditioned by long experience of organisations that have so far provided us with models of organising and which, in most cases continue to do so. Until we have had as much experience with models more in tune with our intentions - or until we train ourselves in group models, practices, processes and behaviours that are congruent with our current needs and professed ideals, nothing will change.

Many people have pioneered better practices as specialists, and are willing to help others learn them for the sake of improved self-management, leadership, group and team practices. Use their support, wherever you can.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> My own professional mentoring business, *EncourageMentors* ([www.encouragemententors.com](http://www.encouragemententors.com)) is one such agency.

## Get off the Treadmill - a Generic Starting-Point

One set of generic competencies for improving group functioning is the process of reflection, study, synthesis, decision and action-planning in order to “get the meaning” from everyday experiences and apply the learning. (In other words, getting out of the engine room and up on deck long enough to take stock of where you’ve been and where you’re heading.)

This process should be systematic and never-ending but many leaders and groups leave it until some crisis threatens or calamity has occurred. Others use the process irregularly or infrequently, and are overwhelmed or incapacitated by the volume and seriousness of what is eventually illuminated by it. It is surprisingly simple to improve on this.

Start by planning the bare bones of a developmental plan, especially for how you will engage others’ enthusiastic support for some “reflection on the action”. Establish the degree of shared commitment there is to locating and resolving whatever gaps exist between the ideal and the reality. Apply safe processes for locating this information. If there is significant support for it, take the next step: collectively plan further details of a development plan. Start small. Proceed incrementally.<sup>2</sup>

### Problems/Problem Solving: *start improvements here:*

Identify in advance of it (next) being required, the preferred conflict resolution model to be applied in the event of irresolvable differences. It is a simple enough task if the group has a pre-determined approach to problem solving, as conflict usually involves problems of one kind or another.

Problems, challenges, difficulties and crises are a routine part of any group’s life. Common sense wisdom suggests that effective and efficient processes are determined in advance of the need to apply them; when problems are encountered, the group’s leadership reminds participants of the agreed process and guides its application.

Make this common-sense your group’s common practice. Raise the topic within the time saved by adjusting your meetings’ agenda (see *Meetings: start Here*, page 4 below). Study the discussion papers and practical guidelines on Problem Solving provided elsewhere on the *Thriving Workplace* website and available free to subscribers.

### Purpose: *start improvements here:*

Unless you are certain all group members are unanimously agreed on the group’s official purpose and constantly aware of it, as matter of some urgency reach a common awareness of its official statements of purpose and plan to keep them constantly in each member’s awareness. They represent the group’s Mission and Identity Statement.

An **identity statement** is a summary of how an organisation sees itself and/or from others in the same or similar fields, and positions itself ethically. It is an abbreviated form of the organisation’s moral compass and overarching guide to direction and action. The Identity Statement may contain

<sup>2</sup> For a simple conceptual framework for planning and managing plans, and planning documents to keep records of intentions and progress, see Planning and Strategic Planning articles within the Leadership section of this website.

statements of Purpose and Mission (by which it is driven), Vision (by which it is led) and Principles (by which it is guided). It may also include other briefly-stated discussion to help others understand the organisation and its broad strategic intentions, policies and protocols.

If there is a more appropriate way of expressing the purpose or purposes to provide a better or clearer interpretation, make it so.

If an agreed determination of the order of priority for these intentions already exists, list and number them in that order.

If the current official purpose is out of date, misdirected or otherwise inappropriate, begin the process of amending it if that is possible, at first opportunity.

If the group lacks a clear Identity Statement or statements of Ideals and Vision, start work on them, too: they are also part of the organisation's Big Picture, the fundamental reference-points with which everything else about organisational effort and activities must align.

**Balance: *start improvements here:***

To better attend to capacity development we need to first find the courage to ask these kinds of questions:

- Putting aside for the moment, our purpose for working together, how are we doing as a group?
  - How well are we working together?
  - How functional and constructive or useful are the processes we use to attend to our work and activities together: our leadership and management practices, meetings, discussions (especially discussion of sensitive issues), problems, differences, priority-management, strategic planning, project planning, performance monitoring and learning from experience, decision-making, support and orientation of new members, processes of disengagement, celebrations, acknowledgement of effort and reward of performance?
- How much clarity exists about the purposes, functions and differences between the various respective roles that people fill in the group?
- What steps should we take to routinely monitor and improve effectiveness in those roles?
- How well are individual members' needs met within the group?
- How close do we come to realising our collective potential?
- How well are we served by our official statement of purpose and the rules, procedures, protocols and norms we have so far established for our functioning?
- What do we need to examine, monitor, maintain or modify to improve the ways we function collectively?

The process does not end with answers to *What?* but goes further to ask (in effect) *So what?* and *Now what?* The second question should involve methodical problem-solving processes. Action-plans must flow from the third question.

- What should we do less or more of?
- What have we done to benefit group functioning that we should continue doing?

Thoughts about this kind of introspection worry some people because it's unfamiliar territory that generates awkwardness, discomfort and embarrassment. So, it's not enough merely to ask the questions. How, where, when, with whom and with how much privacy or anonymity they are asked are important matters, too and consideration to these matters lessens the risk of unproductive negativity.

Wherever there are sensitive egos, difficulties in discussing sensitive matters or differences, and anxiety about speaking the truth, the truth will not be told and is unlikely to be heard; outcomes are unlikely to be constructive.

If the questions are asked in "full forum" meetings for example, few people will speak their truth and what they say may be reacted to defensively, sending a message to others that it's unsafe to speak at all or that their experience will not be treated respectfully as valid and accurate for them.

We must also create the circumstances that make it easy and safe for people to provide honest answers, and be genuinely heard and understood. For most groups this requires, initially at least, the use of a facilitator or agent with the appropriate expertise in the design of constructive processes, experience in creating the requisite safety and in facilitating an interpretation of data. Confidentiality and anonymity are critical to the process.

### **Structure: *start improvements here:***

Your organisation's constitution, charter, trust deeds, deeds of incorporation or other foundational document and the legislation under which it may have become a body corporate, probably does not require that the group is structured hierarchically.

If it does, various practices can be introduced to ameliorate its negative effects. Find and make constructive modifications to conventional decision-making, meeting facilitation, leadership and management practices to democratize and make them more fit-for-purpose.

If the requirement is incapable of being changed, one of the first modifications may involve an acceptance of what is. If at times you feel frustrated by a hierarchical organisation's failure to operate as a fair, considerate, consensual *collective* providing unlimited autonomy and opportunities for collaboration over direction-setting and priorities or even reasonable freedom of choice - it's likely you're being a tad unrealistic and may need to get over it.

Try modifying your expectations to more accurately reflect what hierarchies are capable of. Then you can use energy that might otherwise be spent in complaining and feeling victimised, in finding new strategies and habituating skills to respond creatively to that reality, including learning how to enhance the ways people are treated and their potential harnessed.

The success of the ideas in these notes does not depend on turning your organisation into something resembling a semi-autonomous anarchic collective.

### **Meetings: *start improvements here:***

To discover opportunities for improvement, engage the meeting participants in providing feedback, against informal but useful criteria of effectiveness. Here is one process for doing this.

First, have all participants generate a list of features of an ideal meeting, by having them give completions to this sentence: *If our meetings were ideal for their purpose, these things would be happening at them.* Clarify those statements and convert them, where necessary, into single-issue statements describing the presence of things, not their absence. For example:

- (i) The right people are present.
- (ii) We deal with the important matters.
- (iii) Speaking time is shared equitably.
- (iv) It is easy for me to express my point of view.
- (v) We start on time.
- (vi) We handle our differences constructively.

Involve the group in rank-ordering those statements and in selecting the most important, to a total not exceeding 16. Use the items as the basis of a confidential questionnaire completed periodically at the conclusion of meetings: (have people assign each item a number between 0 and 5 on a scale where 0 = Not At All and 5 = Full or Completely). Put the results on Pareto charts (bar graphs) and have participants examine and discuss the results at the next meeting.

To enable the group's governing body to devote more time to developing the organisation's capacity for Primary Task, try altering arrangements for its regular meetings: establish a clear statement of purpose for those (and all other) meetings; minimise time spent on "formal business" to 20% of meeting time, wherever possible conducting it elsewhere. Simply establishing a clear purpose statement would improve very many meetings. Conventionally, *purpose* is confused with *agenda*, whereas in fact they are separate matters.

When there are important issues under discussion (especially when those issues are complex), break from the full forum once the issues have been identified and outlined. Have groups of three, four or pairs, *talk their ideas and reactions into place* or identify the answers to carefully-posed questions, (within carefully-guided processes) before returning to the full forum and hearing reports from each sub-group.

Formal procedural rules (sometimes called Parliamentary or Roberts' rules) can be made to work with some efficiency, but at significant cost to a group potential. Begin the process of change by examining the group's current decision-making processes. Introduce different decision-making models where appropriate and permissible: a larger than simple majority (60%? 75%? 80%?) if voting is done. If a consensus model is desirable, define what that means. (The word means *agreement* but there is rarely agreement in groups on what it means in practice and rarely are guidelines issued for making it work easily.) Identify and describe a fall-back *Plan B* for occasions where the preferred model of consensus can't be made to work.

### **A Common Language of Development: *start improvements here***

The topics and issues I deal with in this discussion – and within my websites – are not normally the everyday domain of leaders, managers and others who staff or are members of organisations. In the main, the focus of all stakeholders is on getting the job done: singing (if a choir), gardening (if a community garden), childcare (if an early childhood education group), the next development project (if a community development group) and so forth. But to be so focused on task that these other matters escape routine attention, is to risk the probability of underperformance and serious dysfunction.

Try bringing these matters of process, systems, planning and methodical development to the attention of the general membership, to raise awareness of them. Not everyone will want the information, nor will everyone be able to work with it, because of its unfamiliarity. However, raising awareness of the need for capacity development and of techniques for constantly working on it, increases your chances – with those interested - of keeping a better-than-usual balance between performance and capacity.

To encourage a common language about these matters, consider getting your stakeholders to subscribe to Thriving Workplace, and hold discussions about the issues which seem most important to them.

### **Summary Discussion & Further Considerations**

There are many aspects of the problem of wasted potential in groups and its effects that can be addressed straightforwardly, simply and in small steps, to make immediate improvements and considerable difference long-term. In the main these are easily-learned common-sense practices that transform leadership, group behaviours and group outcomes.

This is not to say that with different approaches any community group would be perfect: it would still reflect the uniqueness and imperfections of its people, as all our institutions do. Most groups would however, achieve a better return on their investment of time, effort, financial and others resources, from a greater and better-directed flow of the potential energy.

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[See also, in the Thriving Workplace subscriber library:

- PART 1 (of this article): *The Challenge*
- PART 2 (of this article): *A Generic Diagnosis*
- *Governance and Operations: Distinctions and Boundaries*
- *Developing Individual & Collective Capacity for Primary Task*
- *Planning and Managing Plans*
- *Fit-for-Purpose Meetings*