MEETINGS: FACTORS THAT AFFECT GROUP INTERACTION AND PERFORMANCE

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There are many ideas of how groups should be managed and how people should behave to make meetings more effective; although, the premise on which such instructions are based are largely derived from anecdotal evidence. With a view to identifying factors that inhibit and improve group performance, participants were asked to explore video data of group interaction, which involved themselves and others. The video data was investigated using quantitative and qualitative methods to help uncover interaction trends and patterns. Using the same research methods, participants were asked to record a *bona fide* group meeting and identify overt factors that affected the group behaviour and performance. Using the aggregated research data, the most prominent factors affecting group interaction and performance are identified and the nature of group behaviour discussed.

Keywords: effective meetings, group interaction, management, performance. .

INTRODUCTION

The meeting represents an important gathering of group members, be it for an informal project function or formal strategic review or, indeed, some type of research experiment (Scott 1999). Meetings are a fundamental part of business, yet little attention is given to the effective management of the meeting. The research on *bone fide* business meetings and group interaction is unusually scarce, even though many problems emerge as a result of ineffective meetings. Furthermore, group workers cite poor interpersonal and communication skills as the main reason why groups fail (DiSalvo, Nikkel and Monroe 1989). Unfortunately, those organising and participating in meetings are often unaware of the nature of the group dynamics that affect the meetings performance. The meeting is a complex forum where various aspects of business process and human behaviour can affect group performance. To understand meetings researchers must first identify variables being considered. In Scott's review of meetings, which compared face-to-face and meetings supported by technology, key variables considered within the study included leadership, intervention, task characteristics, group member characteristics and meeting process, and the variables which were communication specific included: participation, influence, information exchange and specific message types. Also, Emmitt and Gorse (2003; 2006) suggest that dysfunctional meetings ignore group knowledge, ignore others who don't contribute, concentrate too much on one chain of thought, insist on discussing irrelevant issues, spend too little time discussing tasks, focus too much on friendly interaction and discuss tasks without paying attention to the relationships. They attribute many of the problems experienced during meetings to the chairperson and the

manner in which the meeting is managed. Others, such as Napier and Gershenfeld (1989) have also identified barriers to effective meetings these include:

- Domination: Domination by a single member at the expense of other members opportunity to interact;

- Lack of supportive norms: Too much criticism can stifles suggestions – criticism should be balanced with constructive support;

- Vested interests: Individual members or subgroups may place their own agendas above that of the group. Where different members place a high priority on their own needs this often results in constant unproductive battles;

- Groups can become too blasé and can fail to challenge convention wisdom. Such issues are symptomatic of groupthink. Participants should be encouraged to engage and challenge others. While new members with new ideas may not be readily accepted they can add different dimensions to discussions.

- Physical barriers that prevent free flow of information. Verbal and nonverbal exchanges should be free flowing unhindered by the environment in which the meeting is conducted.

The project management tool kit, for measuring the effectiveness of project communication, identifies the critical categories of communication, in their relative order of importance, as accuracy, procedures, barriers, understanding, timeliness and completeness (Thomas *et al.* 1998). While the different issues listed are broad and worthy of consideration, it is important to recognise the core aspects of group behaviour that can be observed and changed to help realise the group's potential.

Positive and negative attributes of group behaviour
It is difficult to recognise and accurately predict trends in group behaviour. However, certain aspects of behaviour are both observable and predictable (Gorse 2002). For example, it is well known that the nature of a group's behaviour and its interaction patterns change as it goes through different phases of development (Tuckman, 1965). The members of groups come together, establish norms, the team roles are defined and members establish their position. Some members, chairs and leaders exert considerable influence affecting the group norms. The behaviour of individuals, the way the group develops and nature of the group affects performance.

Meetings are used to bring together key individuals to exchange information and possibly make decisions. It is generally accepted that for a meeting to realise its potential members must be willing to express their views and opinions in an open environment. Yet, interaction is rarely open and evenly distributed and members may unknowingly present barriers that prevent their colleagues' effective contribution. Whether encouraged by good chairmanship or fostered through the development of group norms, participants should feel able to express their views and contribute to the evaluation process.

Group relations and influential members
It is often suggested that cohesive groups, with strong social relationships, are more effective than groups that do not have such interpersonal ties; yet if groups become too close their task-based interaction may be hindered by social distraction (Egbu and Gorse 2002). Also, in tightly knit groups, individual members may be swept along by a particular decision or the general group consensus and the group might suffer from

the negative effects of groupthink. Groupthink usually occurs when the norms, group culture or influential members encourage conformance to set values or beliefs. Individuals may encourage conformance by dominance, blocking others, threats, emotional pressure, aggressive behaviour and or repeatedly stating the same thing until the desired response is received (Emmitt and Gorse 2003; Dainty *et al.* 2006). Communication behaviour, that avoids groupthink and other problematic group behaviour, is often achieved through leadership that encourages team-based solutions (Dainty *et al.* 2006). The role of leadership or chairmanship is often considered to be an important determinant of group norms and success. Chairs can prevent the emergence of groupthink and facilitate the expression of the minority dissent (Hargie, Dickson and Tourish 1999). Appointed and emergent leaders are said to have considerable and sometimes disproportionate influence on group interaction and decision-making (Enayati 2002).

Leadership is almost exclusively seen as a task-role; however, leaders who fail to address relationship issues will have limited success when undertaking tasks that depend on the contribution of multiple members. Engaging support, identifying and forming interpersonal relationships, fostering cooperation, managing conflict, assigning roles are all relational issues that are closely tied to task management.

To maintain their position, emergent leaders must receive support from the group. Bales (1950; 1958; 1970) suggested that working groups often have two types of leader, the social leader and the task-based leader. The task-based leader has a strong focus on the end product and ensuring that the group focuses on that aspect, whilst the social leader ensures that group relationships are maintained and emotions and conflict controlled. Some have noted that there are two types of task-leader those who concentrate on procedures and those who encourage ideas, the procedural and ideas leader (Pavitt 1999). Whilst it is suspected that group performance will be influenced by leadership and chairmanship, it is useful to understand how the leadership functions emerge and what effect influential members have on behaviour during meetings.

Exploring different perspectives
Groups can benefit from the collective abilities and different perspectives offered by its members, but only if members are allowed to express and explore their ideas and concerns. Dainty *et al.* (2006) suggest for a group to reach the 'teamthink' stage, where the synergistic product of the group has greater potential than combined sum of individual knowledge, the group must go through the entrenchment phase of the team lifecycle model. To achieve the benefits of 'teamthink' and avoid 'groupthink' the different ideas, values and beliefs of individuals should be explored. The entrenchment phase of group development tends to suffer a dip in perceived productivity, as not all individual perspectives are positive or offer benefit to the group. If, however, the group is to be effective all members must have opportunity to contribute and recipient members should feel able to engage in the evaluation of ideas.

Some members may be reluctant to engage in the group process, which may result from a lack of confidence with the situation faced (McCroskey 1997). Confidence can be described as the strength of a person's belief that a specific statement is the most accurate and suitable response (Peterson and Pitz 1988). This, rather strict definition, may suggest that if a person feels that that their contribution is in anyway incorrect, may not be accepted or may be challenged by other members then their confidence and subsequent participation may be affected. Confident members tend to be more

influential on the group, research shows that such confidence and influence can be strong regardless of the nature of information being discussed (Zarnoth and Sniezek 1997). Where information is judgemental, rather than factual, and where one persons opinion was no better or worse than another's opinion, research shows that a confident person still has greater influence on the group than less confident members (Zarnoth and Sniezek 1997). Confident members tend to adopt behaviour styles that are more persuasive (Moscovici 1979). They may be more talkative, confrontational, zealous in defending their own view point and more vehement in questioning other positions. It is important that groups are managed so that less confident speakers manage to put forward their views and the influence of confident members controlled.

RESEARCH METHOD

The aim of the experiment was to allow participants to research and observe their own and other people's behaviour during group meetings and to identify factors that affected group performance.

Two groups of part-time and one full-time group of Masters students, studying Project Management undertook the experiment. The experiment involved students engaging in a group meeting which was videoed. The students were not informed of the exercise and after the first meeting the students were allowed to review the video data collected. Twenty nine students took part in the research. The full-time group was predominantly international students. Initially the students were unaware of the nature of the experiment. The students were given no prior reading or guidance. The students were placed in groups and asked to sit in a horseshoe configuration, allowing the subsequent discussions to be video recorded. Groups were given a problem to resolve – identify factors that hinder and help group performance, the task was used to stimulate group activity and does not from part of the research. The session was video and audio recorded. The groups took part in three 15 minute group discussions. Although initially unorganised in the first 15 minute discussion, the groups chose to order the subsequent group discussion by creating a meeting environment.

Following the observation and data collection period student were allowed to reflect on the data. The students were then asked to repeat the task adopting procedures and behaviours that they considered more conducive to an effective meeting. Each student took part in the exercise, collected data and produced their own report.

The students were asked to explore and investigate the video data using the Bales' (1950) IPA technique. The video data was transcribed and the content analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods. Conflict and management profiles and Simple Multiple level Observation Techniques (SMOT) (the methods are described in Fryer, *et al.* 2004) were also used. Conflict and management profiles use a two scale grid to collect quantitative data on the individual group members. Aspects of group behaviour are identified on the grid axes. Members of the group rate there own and / or other members' behaviour. The grids can be used to gather perceptions from an individual about their own behaviour and the behaviour of others. Once the data is collected self perceptions can be compared with the perceptions gained from other group member and the difference discussed. The simple multiple level observation technique (SMOT) is used to collect qualitative observations from group members and observers. Members of the group can make qualitative observations of other members and also state their own feelings, thoughts and beliefs in relation to a specific event or aspect of group behaviour. The three different observations self-reflection, perception

of other members' behaviour and external observation provide multiple observations of specific aspects of group behaviour. If the group event is video recorded further external observations can be undertaken. The use of such methods enables experience, feelings, beliefs and observations surrounding events to be captured and reviewed from multiple perspectives.

Students were not given any specific issues to observe. The students determined the aspects of group behaviour that required specific investigation. They were asked to use the research methods to identify factors that affected group behaviour and performance during the meetings observed. Once the participants were familiar with the research tools and methods they were asked to observe a *bona fide* group engaged in a business or project meeting

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

While there were many issues identified those which were found to be central to the experiment and became the focus of the student research reports are discussed below.

Table 1: Factors identified that affected group behaviour and performance (issues listed are not presented any specific order).

Leadership, nominated leaders, emergent leaders, task leaders, social leaders.
Domination, blocking, defensive behaviour.
Conflict, agreement and disagreement.
Language barriers, multinational members, nationality and culture.
Speed of interaction, multiple and concurrent discussions, interruptions and ability to interrupt.
Nature of tasks, characteristics of participants, purpose of the meeting, meeting environment context and situation.
Nature of information exchanged, content of communication act, type of communication act, emotion.
Procedures, rules, norms, rituals, roles.
Reluctant communicators, confidence, non-speakers, non-participants, social loafers.
Lack of interest distraction.
Participation, number of words spoken, number of communication acts used, duration of interaction, participation at different phases of the discussion, turn-taking.
Cooperative roles, supportive communication, encouraging participation, engaging all group members, cohesiveness.
Activity between meetings, addressing problems, developing relationships between meetings, encouraging purposeful participation
Agenda, organising and structuring the meeting, distributing tasks.
Engagement, asking questions, prompting participants, seeking opinions.

Participation

Participation can be measured by the number of words spoken, number of communication acts (Bales IPA), number of turns taken etc. Depending on which measurement is used members participation often varies. The results showed that generally there was a relationship between the number of communication acts, turns taken and words spoken; however, some members had a tendency to use more words than others during a single turn. Whilst some members used more words to explain or put over a point, others are more succinct in there contributions. Some members had a greater ability to 'hold the floor', contributing more communication acts and words whereas other members would be easily interrupted. Interrupting was identified as a skill which varied between members, those considered more influential had greater success when attempting to interrupt. In all of the meetings observed, interaction was dominated by one or two group members with other members playing a much reduced role. Such domination is common in groups (Emmitt and Gorse 2003; 2006). Using

the Bales IPA it was found that the contribution of dominant members accounted for over 60% of the groups' interaction. Following the analysis of the student and *bona fide* meetings it was felt that many groups experience problems because of the skewed levels of interaction. Some members had minimal input whereas others had experienced high levels of engagement increasing their potential to influence group discussion. With the chair or social leaders of the group encouraging engagement it was felt that interaction could be distributed with greater effect. Through the use of the follow-up role-play exercises it was found that members could be encouraged to interact and, even when reluctant to communicate, members could be helped to engage in the process. This was especially important where reluctant contributors had relevant knowledge. It was felt that participation was affected by the structure of a meeting, topic being discussed, chairmanship, leadership and an individual's predominance to engage. The confident group members have the advantage when attempting to interact and will dominate discussions. However, the socially apt members can use their skills to engage others helping the different individual perspectives to be exposed and explored.

Nature and purpose of meeting
While the term meeting is used interchangeably to label formal group discussion, it is important to note that meetings vary considerably in their purpose, nature and structure. In comparisons between the meetings videoed and observations of *bona fide* meetings, many of the researchers noted that there were differences in the nature of the meetings. Those researchers who noted the differences believed that the purpose of the meeting and those engaged had a considerable effect on the content of interaction, nature of the meeting and interaction patterns. In some of the meetings the chair adopted formal autocratic roles influencing and directing communication; whereas in other meetings the chair was less authoritarian and allowed interaction to develop and informal leaders emerge. If the objective of the meeting is to inform members of a situation or issue rather than discuss it openly, the meeting will achieve its objective with few verbal exchanges, whereas a meeting used to explore problems and generate ideas would want to actively encourage participation. In order to determine whether or not a meeting is effective, it is necessary to consider the purpose and objectives of the meeting. As with previous research (Enayati 2002), chairmanship and leadership was considered to have a strong influence on whether the meeting structure addressed its purpose.

Group phases
While it is commonly accepted that groups develop and change as they become more familiar with each other (Tuckman 1965; Emmitt and Gorse 2003) interaction does not always increase incrementally as the group develops. During the initial phases of the groups' interaction, students found many similarities with the Tuckman model of group development. However, some considered that the Tuckman model, while useful, could be slightly superficial. During what may be considered the norming and performing stages the nature and dynamics of the group changes as it addresses different problems and members become interested and lose interest. Quantitative data from the experiment suggests that members of the group often have periods high and low involvement. Some members interact early whilst others seem to hold back emerging at later periods during the group activity. Some individuals seem to develop or emerge at different times and phases, thus group development and development of an individual within the group are often different. It could be taken that some

individuals seem to be left behind and then manage to catch up and engage. Qualitative data also suggests that changes in the topic being discussed have an affect the level of interaction.

Cohesive and non cohesive groups
The cohesiveness of the group was seen to be an important determinant of a successful group. The college based groups benefited from the help and support of fellow members to ensure all members were engaged and that issues were properly distributed within the group. Pavitt (1998) suggests that it is important to establish casual relationships that help the group perform; however, Emmitt and Gorse (2003) note that if groups become too cohesive and friendly they may be distracted by too much social chat. However, Kirkpatrick (2005) found that the informal 'chat' component of groups was important for group cohesion and, although unstructured and casual, it could help develop relationships that can be used to resolve task-based problems. Lee (1997) also notes that many important problems are raised and resolved during informal conversations. Pavitt (1998) posits that effective groups are both cohesive and task focused.

The full-time group, composed predominantly of international students noted that their group had benefited from the study of their own behaviour during the video exercise. To improve their performance the group had held a number of informal meetings addressing the problems experienced. Because of the difficulty experienced through the multinational nature of the group, the members believed that the group had become more cohesive and relationships had strengthened. Members felt that they were able to discuss issues more openly and had benefited from assistance and support of their colleagues. The informal discussions and reciprocal helping behaviour had led to benefits outside this initial task. This finding partially rejects Emmitt and Gorse's (2003) theory that groups that are too cohesive hinder task performance, more importantly it is the nature of the cohesiveness that has a predominant effect on performance. Where groups use their cohesiveness to be both social and accomplish tasks they can be effective. Socialising, chatting and even discussing task problems informally are important to build and maintain relationships to achieve 'group' tasks.

Multinational group meetings - where English is a second language.
The fulltime group of students was made up of seven students comprising five different nationalities. During initial meetings some difficulties were experienced due to English being a second language for all students. Following the analysis of the video data the students recognised the language problems. The group of students spent much time analysing and reflecting on the group's interaction. In subsequent meetings the group were able to make some dramatic changes to its interaction patterns and structure. Being aware that some member needed time to make their contribution and indeed other members had to concentrate to understand the message effort was extended to giving each member proper opportunity to concentrate and engage. Interaction was delivered at a slower pace, members were allowed to repeat and rephrase statements, ask questions and seek clarification. Interruptions partway through an explanation were discouraged. It was considered important to limit the extent that members engaged in their own sub-discussions and the group generally avoided speaking over another person's message. Following the first meeting it became obvious to the members that when the group's interaction became 'too quick' those less confident or less familiar with English were excluded from discussions.

Controlling the pace of the discussion was important in this international setting. While the members of the group also investigated *bona fide* groups made up of single nation participants, the focus was on their personal experience as the language barriers meant that the group had to rethink they way the group behaved. Many of the problems found in the single nation groups were further exacerbated due to the differences in the ability to use English. During the initial meeting those with a better command of English dominated discussion while others played a minimal role. As a result of analysing the video data the group focused on ways of ensuring that all members contributed. The effort extended towards this outcome seemed to have a dramatic effect on members' confidence and their use of English. All members of the group also noted that they had become much closer as a result of taking part in the experiment and working through the problems.

CONCLUSION

Although meetings are such a fundamental part of working life too little attention is given to understanding the nature of meetings and what can make them more effective. This small study has found that group can recognise attributes that help the group process and adapt their behaviour to provide a more cooperative effective meeting environment. The aspect of group behaviour that was recognised as having greatest potential to affect group performance was participation and engagement. The key factors that affected a persons participation rights were social leadership, provided by influential members, and the emergence of supportive norms that encourage open interaction. Barriers that had to be overcome included individual dominance and blocking. It is also essential that the characteristics of the group members should be considered. Each meeting is different in nature, yet it is taken that the interaction can be nurtured and developed so that members can engage to make a more effective meeting.

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