

MSOD 614 Assignment 1: Learning Group Formation

February 3, 2013

1. Proposed Methodology for Forming Learning Groups: The following methodology lays out an engaging, potentially challenging series of actions and dialogues that build upon each other for members within our MSOD cohort to self-select their own learning groups, using the core principles of:

- *Examine our assumptions:* “Dialog...makes it possible...to become aware of some of the hidden and tacit assumptions that derive from our cultural learning, our language and psychological makeup.” (Schein)
- *Authenticity:* We are co-creating our own reality and for that to work, “you need to put into words what you are experiencing.” (Block)
- *Responsible Freedom:* “The tension is between being spontaneous and expressive and being self-disciplined and responsible.” (Quinn)

Step 1. Personal Preferences - Individual Reflection (30 minutes):

To start the process, we’ll give each member of the cohort a time to reflect individually on their personal preferences for learning groups. Everyone will be asked to reflect on the following, writing their answers:

- What skills and experience will you bring to your learning group?
- What are you looking for in a learning group (beyond the standard tasks)?
- Who within our cohort would you most like to be in your learning group?
- Who within our cohort would you least like to have in your learning group?

In the book *Team Building*, the authors share four “Determinants of High-Performing Teams”: context, composition, competencies and change. This exercise explores the composition of the team, which is what this methodology seeks to address. The authors note, “for a team to succeed, team members must have the *skills* and *experience* to accomplish the task, and they must have the *motivation* to succeed.” *In between all the steps, we’ll take a 15-minute break.*

Step 2. Mapping our Preferences – Skills, Desires and Flight (1 hour):

The group moves to an open space where we will participate in the following:

- Standing in a circle, everyone will briefly describe one skill they will bring to contribute to a successful learning group experience. Two members record this info on large post-it notes. The group then reflects on skills shared and what good configurations would be in Learning Groups.
- Everyone also shares what they are looking for in a group in a second round, with the same note taking and debriefing to occur after.
- The next activity involves movement. When the activity starts, each member of the cohort will do three things simultaneously: move towards one person they want to share a learning group experience with, move away from one person they don’t want to share the experience with and generally observe the group as a whole during this exercise. We’ll do this for a minute or two. Note: no one ever needs to say who they identified.
- Debrief in pairs: Members of the cohort are asked to pair up with someone that they could see themselves in a learning group with. Pairs will be asked to share the following with each other:

- How was that experience for you?
- What informs our desire to wanting to share a learning group experience with one person and not with another? What assumptions might we be making about the people we identified?
- What could we potentially learn from the person we least want to share a learning group experience with (again, no need to share who the specific person is here)?

In the Tavistock Model developed by Wilfred Bion, he notes that “every group operates at two levels: the "work group" and the "basic assumption group.” While the ‘work group’ strives towards goals, the basic assumptions undermine the effectiveness of the group, which are fueled by the anxiety of being in a group. Bion classified three main assumptions: dependency, fight or flight and pairing. The above exercise seeks to explore each of our “fight or flight” tendencies, specifically around the assumptions we’re making about each other.

Step 3. Pairs form Groups of Four for a Dialog Session (1 hour):

Each paired group is given a moment to look at all of the other pairs. Each pair discusses who they would like to pair up with (two other people that they could see sharing a learning group with) and pair up. Groups of four will reflect on any of the questions Edgar Schein poses relating to entering a new group:

1. Who am I to be? Will I be able to control and influence others? Will the group goals include my own needs? Will I be liked and accepted by the group?

2. What is your coping response to a new group: “tough, aggressive response”, “tender support-seeking response” or “withdrawal or denial response”?

Both the questions and the dialog format are influenced by Edgar Schein from *Process Consultation Revisited* (chapters nine and ten). The more we can examine our own assumptions as we enter a new group and have a safe space to dialog about them, the better prepared we'll be once we actually launch the learning groups.

Step 4. Groups of Four Form Groups of Six or Seven for an Action Research

Pause (1 hour):

Some groups of four will stay together while individuals may decide to leave their group of four to join another group. Like the other pairings, folks are encouraged to form a larger group of six or seven with people they could see themselves in learning groups with. Six or seven will be the size of our learning groups, so this experience also gives people an idea for what a learning group will feel like. The group will reflect on the following questions.

- What do people appreciate about the process so far? What's challenging about the process? Do you have any insights you would like to share?

This action research is inspired by Kurt Lewin, who suggested groups take a minute to step back from their process and reflect on it.

Step 5: Group Formation Pinball - Method for Finalizing Groups (2-5 hours):

- Members in each existing group will randomly count off from 1 to 7.

- We'll start with the 1's in each group. Each will decide to stay or leave the Learning Group (music plays while people choose). If they leave the group, they can join any other group. Each group will then have 15 minutes to reflect on the changes to their group composition.
- We'll repeat same steps for numbers 2 through 7 in each group.
- After everyone has had a chance to move once, if a group reaches consensus that everyone is happy with the group, they can sit down and no one else can enter that group. Rotation continues among other groups.
- If needed, we can pause for a group check-in/discussion/action research.
- Celebration once we finalize groups. Each group member takes turns and shares one affirming thing about each of the members in their group.
- The learning groups form one large circle and we do a group check-in.

2. Making Process Decisions: I propose we make the final process decision by consensus. As Edgar Schein defines it in *Process Consultation Revisited*, "it is a state of affairs where communications have been sufficiently open, and the group climate has been sufficiently supportive, to make all members of the group feel that they had a fair chance to influence the decision." We must allow time for members of cohort to express any concerns they have and give other members of the cohort the opportunity to respond to these concerns. While consensus decision-making takes longer than traditional majority-rule votes, it is a better method to use for important, big decisions. How we decide to form learning groups is a decision we need everyone in our cohort to reach consensus on. If we went ahead with a majority vote decision, then those in the minority would

likely be less willing to go along with the decision, or they might withdraw after their learning group assignments are made.

One challenge with consensus is that different members within the cohort will both have different levels of experience and patience with it. Some may want to rush to a decision while others will feel the need to deliberate more. This will create a tension. As the group moves towards consensus, it will also be natural that a small number within the cohort have big concerns about the methodologies that are showing the most support from the group as a whole. These tensions will need to be normalized. One role that can both help normalize the tensions and also help the group through the decision making process will be to designate a facilitator or facilitation team. The facilitator's role would be to help the group reach consensus, using various process tools. I'm happy to volunteer to serve in this role and have experience facilitating groups to reach consensus.

3. Challenges: This process forces all of us to make decisions to serve our needs and wants (yet recognizing these decisions will be made on assumptions at may be true or false). In this process, I will not only have to make several decisions quickly, but that other people will be impacted by my decisions (and vice versa). I recognize people, including myself, may experience discomfort in this process (exposure to our blind sides...ouch!). But I believe that discomfort examined can lead to valuable learning. The more in advance I can think about what I want and need in learning groups, the easier the decision making will be (intellect). I will also need to trust my intuition, acknowledge my emotion, accept whatever the final results are (and somehow connect that to the spiritual).