

Group Process Consulting as Organizational Tool

Group process consulting is an application of group psychology principles described primarily by writers associated with the Tavistock Centre for Human Relations in London. The term, "group," is used conceptually, defined by circumscribing membership according to demographics (e.g., class, geographics, race, gender, etc.), organizational status/role (e.g., manager, subordinate, employee, independent contractor, etc.), ideology or political affinities (e.g., conservative/liberal, socialist, etc.), and any other characteristics, attributes, or memberships attached to people that can be used as categories of inclusion or exclusion.

This definition of "group" has heuristic and practical value because it is readily understood by anyone even minimally practiced in assessing social relations. The importance of group membership in organizations becomes clear when the principles are used to highlight such processes as scapegoating, recurring conflict, low morale, inconsistent levels of productivity, leadership issues, and difficulties in working with other organizations. The organizational stumbling blocks that can be addressed and worked through with group process consulting are not limited to these examples, but these are typical instances where disruptive psychological group processes are particularly tangible. Virtually all cases concerning these processes can be diagnosed using psychological group process principles. Further consultations can lead to designing interventions that shift the organizational dynamics and minimize whatever obstacles were originally diagnosed.

The Theoretical Origins of Group Process Consulting:

Group process consulting, as I use the terminology here, intertwines several theoretical strands. With the list of theoretical influences, below, references for further reading are included and are listed in their entirety at the bottom of this page.

1. Open systems theory has been applied to group and organizational behavior (Alderfer, 1976; Rice, 1969). Open systems theory was originally developed as a biological concept to describe the transport of materials across semi-permeable membranes. From a group standpoint, the psychological membrane of a group is the boundary that determines group inclusion or exclusion. The open systems theory component of group process theory provides the skeletal structure on which the psychological principles can be arranged.
2. Object relations psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Melanie Klein (Jaques, 1974; Klein, 1932, 1955; Klein & Riviere, 1964), provides much of the dynamic, psychological process content. The primitive, infantile defenses described by the object relations theorists (Klein) are surprisingly useful in making sense of many of the counter-productive, even destructive, group processes in organizations. Among the defenses described by Klein are projection, projective identification, splitting, and other processes that are inherently boundary-related.
3. The Tavistock Centre for Human Relations promoted a psychoanalytic group psychology tradition that was interested in uncovering unconscious group-level psychological processes (Bion, 1961; Colman & Bexton, 1975; Colman & Geller, 1985; Gibbard, Hartmann, & Mann, 1974). This theoretical tradition wove together a picture of unconscious group processes that provided powerful and surprisingly robust analytical tools for the group process consultant.

A Word on Method:

Although group process consulting is fundamentally psychological in its substance, data used to diagnose conditions of a group can take on any form. Facts and physical objects are significant only in how they are interpreted and used by members of a group. It is from this perspective that information is used in group process consulting.

The group process consultant immerses him or herself in the organizational environment and engages the physical and psychological 'material' as a participant observer (a concept borrowed from anthropological ethnographic methodology). The consultant's primary method of data collection is the use of *the self as instrument* (Smith, 1990). This allows the collection of many levels of data: behavioral observations, interview responses, documentation, emotional content of interpersonal encounters, the nature of system-wide information and material flow, assessing the overall psychological state of the organization and its subgroups. The consultant must be vigilantly aware of how the data, in parts and in their entirety, influence his/her thoughts and feelings. These data are particularly crucial because their identification is how many of the unconscious undercurrents that subvert organizational functioning are detected. Oftentimes, the diagnosis of these undermining processes serve as the turning point for beginning to understand why the symptoms have been so intractable.

Further Reading

- Alderfer, C.P. (1976). Change processes in organizations. In Dunnette (Ed.), *Handbook of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*. Chicago: Rand McNally.
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- Jaques, E. (1974). Social systems as a defense against persecutory and depressive anxiety. In Gibbard, Hartmann, & Mann (Eds.), *Analysis of Groups*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
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- Klein, M. & Riviere, J. (1964). *Love, hate, and reparation*. New York: Norton.
- Rice, A.K. (1969). Individual, group, and intergroup processes. *Human Relations*, 22, 565-584.
- Smith K.K. (1990). On using the self as instrument: Lessons from a facilitator's experience. In Gillette & McCollom (Eds.), *Groups in context: A new perspective on group dynamics*. Reading, MA: Addison- Wesley.