

## The structure of group process

A group's process looks like the group itself: the parameters of a group's culture and communication style dictate how the group process will look. In some groups, the process may look like a moderated discussion, while in other groups, at other times, it has more of an emotional and non-linear quality.

The following steps to a group process are meant as a guideline or blueprint. Of course, each group process doesn't always follow the steps as they are outlined, however, these steps are a summary of the processes groups tend to go through and clarify the facilitator's role:

1. Sorting and filtering through issues
2. Framing, naming and consensus
3. Identifying roles and ghost roles
4. Watching for communication edges and hotspots
5. Framing topics, levels of conflict, and communication style
6. Noticing and framing momentary resolutions and atmosphere changes

### I. Sorting and Filtering for Topics

This step helps the group focus on a topic. Some groups already have a topic chosen, while other groups need to go through a sorting process to find what topic they want to choose. Even if a topic is chosen, sometimes the group still needs to go through the topic to find the specific focus within that topic.

There are different ways of doing this. People can name topics, or write them down on a piece of paper. The method depends on the group's culture and communication style.

#### Some helpful pointers to remember while sorting:

- If the floor is open for topics, those who can speak up right away will list their topic. Be mindful of those who don't feel free speaking up. Solicit input or encourage topics from those who otherwise haven't spoken.
- Take some time to clarify the topics people suggest. You might want to flesh it out by asking the person more about their topic. Be careful that this doesn't slide into a process. However, it's useful later when trying to reach a consensus because it's easier to see if some topics overlap when they've been fleshed out a bit.
- Topics may be implicit in the atmosphere. Sometimes the facilitator can sense unspoken tensions, topics or feelings in the mood or atmosphere of a group, such as fear, criticism, or conflict. These topics may be difficult for participants to

name, but the facilitator often picks up and feels the atmosphere, and can offer the feeling or atmosphere as a topic.

## **II. Gaining Consensus** – coming to a momentary agreement about what to focus on.

Consensus is a method of framing a direction the group, or a part of the group, seems to be heading. It is not a unanimous agreement to go in a direction, but a momentary agreement of one part of the group to focus on a topic, and on another part of the group to put their issues on hold in order to focus on that topic.

Consensus means framing and focusing on something, and in order to so, marginalizing other topics temporarily. By framing it this way, the facilitator and group acknowledge that important issues have been temporarily side-lined, appreciates those whose topic has been put aside for the time being, and, if necessary, might even discuss a time when that issue can be addressed.

## **III. Identifying Roles/Polarities**

The topic contains various points of views or polarities, that we call *roles*. Roles are often communicated as positions, feelings, points of view, and some of them can be named and identified with by people. Other roles are less obvious, and are just felt in the atmosphere or implied, for instance, one point of view is against another that isn't explicitly named, and no one in the group, at that moment, identifies with that point of view.

Roles emerge organically as different positions or polarities. It is helpful to explicitly name and make room for these roles, and even role play them until their meaning and message is clear, and until someone in the group can occupy the role authentically.

**Roles and Individuals:** At some point, individuals feel very strongly and drawn into a role. They may even feel they are personally 'in' the role. This is when the individual has little distance to the role. When an individual fills a role in a personal way, it is still a role, and yet it is personal, and often needs to be personally addressed. Sometimes this can be very relieving; the group's process is worked out through a personal or relationship experience. Other times, the individual alone cannot work through the issue, and is free to also step out again, and have others come in to take that role.

**Role Switching:** It is important in a group process that people feel free to go in and out of roles, and to take various roles. If the interaction between roles is allowed to go very deeply, role switching often organically occurs. People suddenly feel themselves moved to the other side, or they notice an aspect to their role, or another feeling or role in the conflict, that they feel moved to represent. Role switching helps the field process itself. It is important to remember that the roles are bigger than the individual – many people are often needed to fill out the role. At the same time, the individual is also bigger than any one role – no one role captures our whole complexity.

