

SHARED LEADERSHIP: The Maintaining of Task and Relationship Functions

Shared Leadership

A group functions more effectively when all its members accept responsibility for the work and life of the group. This shared sense of responsibility is also known as shared leadership. Much of the work done in recent years on establishing self-managing teams in the workplace is based on the assumption that employees and members are able and willing to accept more responsibility.

This doesn't in any way diminish the need for skilled, effective team leaders. People who have a designated role in decision making and/or facilitation of team decision-making. While most work teams will continue to make use of designated leaders, team effectiveness can be significantly enhanced by shared leadership, the resources of all can be engaged. In this understanding it becomes part of the designed leader's role to equip others for shared leadership.

There is no reason why it must fall to the designated leader to be the proposer of goals, the clarifier of the task, the timekeeper, and the emotional encourager of the group. Any one who sees the need for these functions at a particular time may perform those functions.

One way of looking at shared leadership is in terms of the various functions that people play in an effective group and the tension among three aspects of the group's life.

Three Aspects of a Group's Life

All working groups are dealing with three elements that may work together in harmony or may come into tension:

- **Task** – the group needs to accomplish some task, it needs to engage in behaviors that help it accomplish that task
- **Relationships** – the group is a network of relationships; attending to relationship needs allows for both a more effective and more satisfying experience.
- **Individual Needs and Wants** – each member of the group brings with them their own needs for acceptance, influence, and intimacy.

All groups have these three elements. They each require attention if the group is to be productive in its work and satisfying to its members. There is a tension among them. A group that is excessively task-oriented may get the job done but may build up resentments among its members because relationship and individual needs are not adequately addressed. A group that is overly relationship-oriented may enjoy being together, but let its task drift. The most effective groups are those that learn how to attend to all three aspects of the group's life.

Task Functions

Behaviors that help a group to accomplish its task. This might include checking out the team's acceptance of the task and objectives, helping to organize the work, or testing the group's readiness to move to a next step. Here is one way of looking at the functions.

Initiating -- Making suggestions, proposing group action, suggesting a decision making process, or a way to accomplish the work E.g. – “I’d like to get started, is that acceptable?”

Information seeking --Asking for facts, or clarification that is related to the group's task. E.g. - "What is the funding for the new project? Will it be adequate?"

Information giving -- Offering valid and useful information that is relevant to group decisions. E.g. - "Receipts have increased an average of 10% over the last three years. "

Opinion seeking -- Inviting others to share their beliefs or preferences and assessment of matters before the group. "Do you think we need to try a new approach to new member orientation this year?"

Opinion giving -- Expressing personal opinions or assessments of alternatives. E.g. - "I don't think the members are interested in half of the programs we are offering."

Clarifying -- Interpreting or explaining facts or opinions; identifying issues before the group, defining terms, paraphrasing other's statements, illustrating ideas or suggestions. E.g. - "You're saying we need to find a new way to discover what programs might best serve our members."

Elaborating – Expanding on ideas and suggestions that have been made. E.g. – “I’d like to see us have focus groups each year to explore member’s interests.”

Setting standards – Helping the group establish norms and standards related to getting the task accomplished. E.g. – “Can we agree to always assess proposals by asking for what we like about them, as well as what concerns us?”

Summarizing -- Pulling together related ideas, restating suggestions after the group has discussed them, reviewing major points in the discussion. E.g. - "So far we have come up with three different ways we could approach this. "

Consensus-testing – Asking if the group is ready to make a decision; offering a process by which the group might test agreement or investment in a proposal. E.g. – “Could we go around the group in a circle, having each of us share what we are ready to agree to.”

Relationship Functions

There are a number of member functions that build and maintain the relationships of the group. Initiative can be taken to facilitate inclusion and acceptance, provide encouragement and support, and manage conflict.

Encouraging -- Being open and responsive to others; recognizing and supporting contributions; inviting comments. E.g. -- "I think that's a very useful idea. I can see how it will help us move beyond the disagreement."

Expressing group feelings -- Testing hunches about the mood of the group; doing so in an open, exploratory fashion; offering your own feelings as related to the group climate or need. E.g. - "I'm not feeling much energy for this project. Where are the rest of you?"

Harmonizing -- Negotiating or relieving tension when appropriate; suggesting ways of accommodating differing views; helping others explore their disagreements; seeking appropriate compromise solutions that "slit the difference" or make some type of trade-off. E.g. - "Both sides have a strong investment in their approaches. Let's see if we can work this out in a view that uses the best of each and respects all parties."

Gate-keeping -- Facilitating the participation of others, inviting less active members to contribute. "Several of us have expressed our opinions on this. I'm interested in what you think about it, Charlie?"

Setting standards -- Helping the group establish norms and standards related to maintaining relationships. E.g. - "I think it would be helpful if we spent a view minutes at the end of each meeting commenting on our work together."

Individual Needs & Wants

The members of any group come with their own mix of needs and wants around being included, having influence, being close to others, etc. These needs and wants are essential to groups' healthy functioning. They provide some of the motivation, energy and glue for group life.

Most of the time people meet their own needs while also contributing to the groups work and the maintaining of relationships. At other time group members may engage in "self-oriented behavior" that is at the expense of the group and others. It may show up in behavior such as arriving late or leaving early from team meetings, ignoring team norms, having side conversations or withholding information that the team could use.

The group and designated leaders can help people use there needs and wants in a productive way by:

- Engaging in shared leadership; taking common responsibility for the task and relationships of the group
- Inviting members to share needs and wants.
- As possible working to address the needs and wants expressed by members
- Using tools such as MBTI and FIRO-B to explore and respect differences

Examples of self-oriented behavior that is likely to interfere with the group's functioning:

- **Controlling or aggressive behavior** - Intimidating other group members, stating a position in a way that brooks no opposition.
- **Condescending** – Putting down the contributions of others
- **Blocking** - Arguing too much on a point; rejecting ideas without considering them; resisting stubbornly, reiterating a point after it has been discussed and rejected, changing the subject or continuing to raise objections when the group attempts to settle on a decision.
- **Dominating** - Asserting authority, status or superiority, excessive talking, interrupting or overriding others' comments.
- **Avoiding** - Ignoring relevant information, ideas and feelings.
- **Recognition seeking** - Horseplay, recounting unrelated personal experiences, pontificating.
- **Withdrawal** - Refusing to participate in group discussions, giving off non-verbal signals of disapproval or opposition; missing meetings; arriving late, leaving early
- **Pairing up** – Creating a caucus within the group of people who protect and support one another while ignoring the relationship functions
- **Dependency – Counterdependency** – A pattern of leaning on or resisting anyone in the group whom represents authority or expertise.

Robert A. Gallagher, 2001 This document is a revised version of earlier writings on group functions that has appeared in training manuals of MATC, LTI, NTL and other groups for many years