

### **How People Function in Groups: Roles Individuals Can Take That Contribute to the Work and to the Atmosphere**

If a group is functioning well, work is getting done and constructive group processes are creating a positive atmosphere. In good groups the individuals may contribute differently at different times. They cooperate and human relationships are respected. This may happen automatically or individuals, at different times, can make it their job to maintain the atmosphere and human aspects of the group.

#### **Roles That Contribute to the Work**

Initiating - taking the initiative, at any time; for example, convening the group, suggesting procedures, changing direction, providing new energy and ideas. (*How about if we... What would happen if... ?*)

Seeking information or opinions - requesting facts, preferences, suggestions and ideas. (*Could you say a little more about...Would you say this is a more workable idea than that?*)

Giving information or opinions - providing facts, data, information from research or experience. (*In my experience I have seen...May I tell you what I found out about...?* )

Questioning - stepping back from what is happening and challenging the group or asking other specific questions about the task. (*Are we assuming that... ? Would the consequence of this be... ?*)

Clarifying - interpreting ideas or suggestions, clearing up confusions, defining terms or asking others to clarify. This role can relate different contributions from different people, and link up ideas that seem unconnected. (*It seems that you are saying...Doesn't this relate to what [name] was saying earlier?*)

Summarizing - putting contributions into a pattern, while adding no new information. This role is important if a group gets stuck. Some groups officially appoint a summarizer for this potentially powerful and influential role. (*If we*

*take all these pieces and put them together...Here's what I think we have agreed upon so far... Here are our areas of disagreement...)*

### **Roles That Contribute to the Atmosphere**

Supporting - remembering others' remarks, being encouraging and responsive to others. Creating a warm, encouraging atmosphere, and making people feel they belong helps the group handle stresses and strains. People can gesture, smile, and make eye-contact without saying a word. Some silence can be supportive for people who are not native speakers of English by allowing them a chance to get into discussion. *(I understand what you are getting at...As [name] was just saying...)*

Observing - noticing the dynamics of the group and commenting. Asking if others agree or if they see things differently can be an effective way to identify problems as they arise. *(We seem to be stuck...Maybe we are done for now, we are all worn out...As I see it, what happened just a minute ago..Do you agree?)*

Mediating - recognizing disagreements and figuring out what is behind the differences. When people focus on real differences, that may lead to striking a balance or devising ways to accommodate different values, views, and approaches. *(I think the two of you are coming at this from completely different points of view...Wait a minute. This is how [name/ sees the problem. Can you see why she may see it differently?)*

Reconciling - reconciling disagreements. Emphasizing shared views among members can reduce tension. *(The goal of these two strategies is the same, only the means are different... Is there anything that these positions have in common?)*

Compromising - yielding a position or modifying opinions. This can help move the group forward. *(Everyone else seems to agree on this, so I'll go along with... I think if I give in on this, we could reach a decision.)*

Making a personal comment - occasional personal comments, especially as they relate to the work. Statements about one's life are often discouraged in professional settings; this may be a mistake since personal comments can strengthen a group by making people feel human with a lot in common.

Humor - funny remarks or good-natured comments. Humor, if it is genuinely good-natured and not cutting, can be very effective in relieving tension or dealing with participants who dominate or put down others. Humor can be used

constructively to make the work more acceptable by providing a welcome break from concentration. It may also bring people closer together, and make the work more fun.

All the positive roles turn the group into an energetic, productive enterprise. People who have not reflected on these roles may misunderstand the motives and actions of people working in a group. If someone other than the leader initiates ideas, some may view it as an attempt to take power from the leader. Asking questions may similarly be seen as defying authority or slowing down the work of the group. Personal anecdotes may be thought of as trivializing the discussion. Leaders who understand the importance of these many roles can allow and encourage them as positive contributions to group dynamics. Roles that contribute to the work give the group a sense of direction and achievement. Roles contributing to the human atmosphere give the group a sense of cooperation and goodwill.

Parts adapted and quoted from the following training materials:  
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Geneva World Health Organization, 1986

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