

Predictable Dynamics in Groups

While no group is exactly the same as another, or even as itself from one meeting to the next, there are patterns we can anticipate, that inform meeting design and that influence interaction. These patterns, or tensions, are primary causes for individual and collective comfort and discomfort related to completing tasks, making decisions, and engaging in conflict. Understanding these dynamics provides key information to group leaders. Though patterns vary, some useful generalizations can help in diagnosing, planning for and supporting group development.

Our preferences are sources of judgment; consciously or unconsciously, we tend to be drawn to those who think like us. Four tensions are classic in all groups: the tensions between those who focus on task and those who have a high value for relationship; the tensions between varying needs for certainty at any point in a group process and those more at ease with ambiguity; the tensions between working style preferences, including the need to have rich detail, contrasted with the ability to operate with a wide and long term view; and the tensions for individuals who operate with high degrees of autonomy when they are working in settings that require collaboration. These operating preferences produce discomfort or comfort for both group members and group leaders.

The following descriptions highlight the archetypical ends of a continuum of preference and comfort level. No value is placed on any position on these scales; understanding and anticipating the differences for group members provides key information for group leaders.

Task – Relationship: Group member's work style preferences range from a strong focus on task completion to a strong desire for inclusion and collegiality. The press to balance efficiency with the need to include all voices produces tension in groups. Conflicting values for attention to task and patience with process cause friction limit productivity and reduce the group's ability to function as a group. We struggle with this dichotomy, particularly when time is tight. Yet, without a unified voice and shared decisions, school improvement processes bog down in implementation.

Certainty – Ambiguity: Individual group members vary dramatically in their need for surety before moving forward with plans of action. For some, a lack of clear and precise definitions, rules and steps in a process halts progress. However, in both planning and implementation, comfort with some degree of ambiguity is essential for initiatives to move forward. When this tension is polarized, groups get stuck and lose momentum.

Detail – Big Picture: A focus on the specifics of projects and plans is a source of comfort for some group members, while for others a wider and longer-term view energizes their work. Wide ranges in this dimension of work style preference. While each of these perspectives adds value to group work, tensions emerge when working styles conflict. While the big picture preference can cause impatience with the need for specifics, it is these specifics that are the stepping-stones in a final plan. Those who prefer details can feel lost in navigating the big picture, yet a vision of larger view is necessary to inspire movement and to launch direction.

Autonomy – Collaboration: Traditionally, schools are structured for autonomy. Schedules, reward systems and even the physical plant curtail opportunities for shared professional exchange. We have a limited history and limited skills with collaborative examination of teaching and learning practices. The desire for and habits of individualism reduces the potential for collaboration. Individual practitioners who are territorial about their curriculum and instructional practices and other areas of expertise may have difficulty aligning their thinking to engage in shared decisions and in aligning their work to produce the gains of cumulative effect.