Group Dynamics

The following methods for gathering concerns facilitate all to express openly, reduce resistance to moving in a positive direction, increase individual and group responsibility, focus on productive problem solving, and give managers/leaders opportunity to reduce resistance.

Confidential Interviews

It is understandably difficult for many employees to trust that anything said to a hired consultant is actually confidential. But if such trust can be built, it provides the organization with a powerful tool, i.e., access through the consultant to hidden but potentially destructive information. Consultants who are trusted discover where the 'land mines' are buried. They learn where unresolved hurts and angers are festering that reduce employees' productivity, especially when a frustrated employee must work with people they consider to be a difficult co-workers or supervisors. This provides consultants with the opportunity to assess which upsets are based on which of these three categories of conflict:
1) a misunderstanding, 2) no misunderstanding but negotiable and 3) no misunderstanding but not negotiable.

Confidential interviews that are trusted can provide an opportunity for employees to have their concerns understood. For some people, it could the first time they have experienced such understanding at work. Although it is often best to have upsets understood by the person directly involved, psychotherapy demonstrates that some heal is possible by addressing long standing difficulties with a professional who is not directly involved. This can be the first step in helping the person communication more effectively with the co-worker or authority figure. The same potential for reducing emotional intensity can occur through the process of a confidential interview. But unlike counseling, where the topic is psychological, confidential interviews conducted by a qualified organizational consultant are work oriented, and thus in the realm of coaching.

Confidential interviews lay a foundation for building a rapport between an employee and a consultant. This can facilitate not only the sharing of relevant and pertinent information at critical moments within a change management process but can actually form the basis for avoiding crises. During teambuilding activities the trusting relationship that began during a confidential interview can provide the consultant with extra leverage to confront an employee in a supportive manner by encouraging them to take a risk related to the concerns they expressed.

Employees who exhibit strong resistance to a change process may begin to feel that they have an ally in the consultant who understands (not necessarily agrees

with) their concerns. Such support may help the employee reduce his or her resistance enough to allow the change process to succeed.

Anonymous Surveys

As with confidential interviews, anonymous surveys provide employees with an option for expressing their concerns without fear of retaliation. Ensuring that survey responses actually remain anonymous requires two conditions. First, the survey must be accessible over the Internet by any computer at any location, inside or outside of the organization. Secondly, responses occasionally require editing if they reflect personally identifiable information. It helps if the same organizational consultants who conducted the confidential interviews coordinate the anonymous survey.

Many employees are suspicious of the oversight organizations have on their email and are therefore apprehensive about surveys that are distributed by email, paper or pencil or even through an organizational Intranet. But if they can access the survey through computers that are not controlled by the organization, there is a greater willingness on the part of most employees to express their honest opinions and feelings.

"Fishbowl" Discussions

Often, leaders have a great deal of experience and knowledge, but employees still feel misunderstood. The leader tries to say, "I understand your needs and problems," through a speech, newsletter, or email. A supervisor tries to say, "I passed your concerns along to the Director," but the employees do not believe that their concerns are accurately conveyed. They do not have an experience of being understood, even if the management understands perfectly.

Of course, managers cannot take the time to go individually to each employee to listen to every concern until each person feels understood. But there is a process a leader can use that begins to shift the "group mind-set," so that people begin to allow for the possibility that the leaders do, indeed, understand and factor our concerns into their decisions. This process uses what has been called a *Fishbowl Discussion*.

In the context of promoting understanding within an organization, a leader can use a Fishbowl discussion to help employees feel understood. Simply stated, the goal is to allow the group to hear their words coming out of their leaders mouths, without the leaders tainting the message, or arguing and criticizing it. Below is a brief description of the process, followed by a case study.

> **Step One:** Employees communicate with immediate supervisors. Focusing on a specific change, proposal, or challenge, a group of employees (team or department) describes their concerns to their immediate supervisor. The supervisor practices being Actively Receptive, using the Three Questions, [(1) This is really important, what is it you want me to do? (2) Is there anything else? (3) Is that all?], and interviewing them using the Five Levels of Communication to pull out all relevant information. The supervisor should take notes, so that he or she can eventually repeat back all of these concerns to the group until they say, "Yes, you understand everything completely."
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> One might think that this would be sufficient. But the employees are still likely to be concerned that a supervisor will not pass these concerns clearly to upper management. This is the value of the Fishbowl Discussion.
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> **Step Two:** Supervisors communicate directly to Manager. The supervisors sit in a circle with their Manager (District, Vice President, or whatever is the next highest position on the organizational chart). The supervisors task is to accurately present to the Manager all of the employees concerns, unfiltered by their own opinions. This message needs to be accomplished sincerely, not only with words, but also with tone of voice and body language. While the supervisors are sharing these messages with the Manager, all employees stand around outside of the

circle observing, listening to how accurately and completely their supervisors are able to represent their concerns.

Step Three: Manager responds to communicate understanding. The Manager's task is to verbally reflect a clear and complete understanding of the messages being shared by the Supervisors. The Manager is essentially doing with the Supervisors what the Supervisors did with the employees. The difference is that the employees are watching! At this time, the Manager is not to try to answer questions, or justify his or her actions or policies. The Manager should focus primarily on ensuring that everyone is clearly understood.

During this process, the Manager may be able to build common ground, make agreements, and even get employees to be willing to accept conditions that are not difficult. In one instance, an administrative staff at a State University complained that the college's leaders were withholding information about future plans and changes that would significantly affect their jobs. The Associate Dean of the College said, "You're right. We pass along directives that we want you to do. But it has not been the habit of this college to pass along to you our goals, objectives, and plans that will then lead to the day-to-day directives that affect your jobs. It must be very frustrating for you to work without this overall context of where we are going. This is something that we do want to change, so that we share this information with you when we know it." He then went on to describe certain restrictions that the Dean's office has in knowing, making decisions about, or communicating these objectives and plans. But by this time these comments were not see as justifications, because he had already built a common ground of understanding and agreement. The Associate Dean reduced their resistance to trusting management. He still needed to carry forward with this promise over a period of time. But this one conversation changed the group's mind-set, and opened a possibility for more respectful relationships.

This process also allows the Supervisors to gain the trust of the employees. When the employees hear their supervisors accurately representing the concerns of the employees, and risking the Manager's reactions, they are more likely to believe that the supervisor will do this in the future when they are not watching the fishbowl.

Step Four: Follow up by the Manager. In addition to the verbal interaction that the Fishbowl Discussion provides, the Manager should also take time to reflect and prepare a response to all of the concerns expressed by the employees, letting them know what can and cannot be done to deal with them. This could be done at a later time, either verbally or in writing.

This process places the responsibility on the leaders to practice skills of understanding. But it does not require them to agree or disagree, to give in, or to make any changes they do not want to make. Authority figures do not lose their authority just by hearing the concerns of those who will implement the decisions the authority figure makes. When an authority figure provides this kind of interaction sincerely and successfully a group mind-set begins to build that management understands the employees concerns. In such an organization, employees are more likely to share these concerns constructively, rather than through passive or aggressive behaviors. This in itself will give management more information for making better decisions. It also lets management know better how to relate their *Purpose, Picture,* and *Plan* to the *Part* they want to motivate each employee to play. (Bridges and Mitchell's *Four P's of Transition*.)

Case Study

A national company conducted annual meetings of all local company Presidents in a region, together with the District Managers, Regional Manager and the President and CEO of the national company. These meetings provided a forum to discuss current issues, resolve commonly held concerns, and roll out new plans and initiatives.

At one such meeting the CEO was trying to stimulate enthusiasm for his new technology initiative that would integrate all individual company databases onto one common database and network. But the enthusiasm was not catching on. During one of his impassioned speeches, the consultants noticed the local company Presidents rolling eyes and holding foreheads as if to say, "Here he goes again." They looked bored, and as if they didn't want to hear any more. The consultant interrupted the CEO and said, "I know you feel so strongly about your vision and really want everyone to share in your goals. But I am curious. Do you know what these people think about your ideas?" The CEO admitted that he didn't, but that he would like to know. The consultant said, "Let's ask them."

What ensued was a Fishbowl Discussion process. The Local Presidents communicated their beliefs and concerns to their respective District Managers. The group of District Managers then passed along these beliefs and concerns to a group that consisted of the Regional Manager, and the President and the CEO of the national Company, while all the local company Presidents observed. In contrast to the CEO's presentation, all local Presidents were attentively focused, eager to hear if the CEO truly understood their concerns.

The outcome of this discussion was that whole group was in favor of the CEO's plan. They were already enthusiastic about it. They simply had specific concerns they wanted to address, and then get on with it. What

they did not want was another enthusiastic, cheerleading lecture from their boss. This came as a tremendous relief to the CEO, who was then able to address many of the concerns, and assign teams to work out the other issues. The entire process took three hours. In the past the CEO would leave one of these conferences knowing he had given the best speech he could, but not knowing whether everyone would get behind the plan. They would spend the next year trying to work through all the questions, concerns, and disagreements. This time the group walked away from the conference with a full consensus, with clear assignments for follow up, and with the satisfaction that their leader took the time to listen to them.

This is a very poignant message for all leaders. These local company Presidents were highly successful leaders in their own right. They all agreed that the most productive meeting they ever had with their leader was when he focused on understanding their concerns.

Delivering the Mail Activity

In many training classes, a trainer presents models and techniques or a list of do's and don'ts, and then leads the group through generalized role-playing scenarios that may or may not apply to their real work experience. Unfortunately, when they return to the real challenges of the workplace, many people have difficulty making a successful transition from theory to application.

This *Delivering The Mail* activity is both a training process and a work session. Not only does it facilitate practical application of communication techniques, it also allows co-workers to build agreements and resolve current, real work issues. It also establishes a method through which they can continue to work together to do this successfully.

It can be used with any group of employees who have work experience with one another. It gives groups of co-workers an opportunity to apply three of the communication models presented in this article (Five Levels of Clear Communication, Feedback Sandwich, Six Stages of Creating Supportive Agreements) to current work issues in the office.

1. Preparatory training: In a previous session, participants should be introduced to the three communication techniques.
2. Materials: Distribute 5"x8" cards, at least three to each participant.
3. Expectations: Instruct each participant to write an expectation, a request, or something a fellow staff member (or supervisor) could do that would make his or her job more effective, accomplish a necessary task, or simply make this a more enjoyable place to work. One request or expectation per card.

4. Deliver the Mail: Have participants "deliver the mail," handing these cards to the person for whom they are intended.
5. Follow the Six Stages for Building Supportive Agreements in order to resolve these issues and build new agreements.
6. Some participants will work quickly through simple tasks. Others will address ongoing issues that have contributed to tension in their day-to-day work relationship. Significant misunderstandings may be clarified, and action steps outlined to resolve the issues.

In most organizations there is an unstated grass roots tolerance for complaining, gossiping, and passive resistance. In order to fit in, everyone does it. However, when all staff members participate in this Delivering the Mail session, the group mind-set begins to make a positive shift toward resolving issues productively. They experience an opportunity to express their concerns (CBAM), and communicate about those concerns respectfully and productively toward a positive outcome (AI).

It is especially valuable when leaders participate in this activity with employees. First, a leader's participation emphasizes how important it is to work this way with one another on a daily basis. Second, it gives employees a positive experience of working out issues with the leader in a facilitated environment. Third, it give the leader an opportunity to be a model of understanding, while working through issues that people may otherwise hesitate to bring forward.

Team Post-It-Note Problem Solving

If a people have initiated a change or have set a goal because they believe it is in their own best interests to do so, they will be more highly motivated to work through all blocks and barriers in order to succeed. But if they are dealing with a change or a goal that is imposed upon them by circumstances or by authority figures, they may have task, self, and impact concerns that could cause resistance in implementing solutions. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)

This model, proposed and used by Resource International, is a group problem solving process that is specifically designed to reduce passive or active resistance to a change or to a stated goal. The process facilitates team members to overcome inertia, develop individual initiative, and recognize the possibilities of working with others to achieve positive results. It lets the group point out to themselves that most of what we complain about is actually out of our control while what we can control, both individually and together is quite extensive. Participants are often surprised at the vast number of options this activity generates.

Post-It-Note Problem Solving Process Outline

1. Target
2. Blocks barriers, and difficulties
3. Benefits
4. Brainstorm solutions
5. Personal initiative, team cooperation
6. Action steps and assignments

Post It Note Problem Solving Process Instructions

1. **Establish the Target**

   This step begins to address Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model –"Target." (Schmuck 1972)

   Set a clear target, goal, or mission. This may be a definition of a project outcome, or a statement that defines a successful solution to overcoming an existing problem. It may include a description of a change that is being considered, or that is inevitable.

   As with any goal, target, or mission, this should be stated in positive terms, and not simply a description of a problem or difficulty.

2. **Blocks, barriers, and difficulties**

   This step begins to address CBAM's Task, Self, and Impact Concerns. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)

   Have each person write down what people expect would be the blocks, barriers, or difficulties that will be faced in attempting to deal with the change, or to succeed at the target/goal.

   - Specifically state that participants are not only to list their own concerns, but what they have heard others express as concerns. Because some people are hesitant to be perceived as complainers, and may keep concerns to themselves, this can allow greater comfort for people to speak up.
   - Allow about 4-5 minutes for people to make these notes.
   - It may be appropriate to have quiet music in the background while people are doing this kind of reflective writing. Extended periods of silence in a group can be distracting to some.

   Put individuals together into small teams. Have each team combine everyone's input and make a list of the blocks, barriers, and difficulties. Again, some individuals are hesitant to speak up in a larger group. This allows these people to contribute more than they are likely to do in the larger group, because the team is representing their issues.

   - The leader will work as a team member in one of the teams, where he or she can make sure that his or her areas of concern are included.

   Combine the lists: Have each team report its findings to the whole group. As people are sharing, write all blocks and barriers on a flip chart. Emphasize items that are repeated.

Define the top 4-5 categories. Have the whole group look at the combined list and condense all of these into four or five general categories of blocks, barriers, and difficulties. By this time, these categories are usually clear.

- Create a flip chart page for each Block/Barrier to Success category. List the specific blocks, barriers, and difficulties that fit in that category.
- Post these four or five flip charts at stations around the room.

3. **Benefits**

This step begins to address CBAM's Impact Concerns, by allowing the group to discuss benefits to their work and to the organization as a whole. (Schmuck, et al., 1972)

Have each person write down what he/she expects would be the benefits if we could successfully make this change or reach this target. This should include benefits to the organization, and benefits to the individual. Allow about 4 minutes for people to make these notes.

Combine these in teams of four again. Then have each team combine its lists. Make a flip chart of these benefits as they are being presented. Depending on the type of issue being addressed, this step of identifying the benefits of success may be skipped. It is most useful when there is strong active or passive resistance among employees to cooperating with management in any positive direction. This step allows the group to identify that even if there are difficulties, the benefits may be worth the effort. If the group members do not see the benefits, this is good for a leader to know and find ways to educate.

- If the group is clearly aware of the benefits but is still struggling with solutions, move directly from identifying blocks and barriers to overcoming blocks and barriers.

4. **Brainstorming solutions to overcome blocks, barriers, and difficulties**

This step begins to address Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model – "Proposals." (Schmuck 1972)

Give each person a stack of post it notes. Use a variety of colors.

Give each team 4 minutes at each station to brainstorm any solutions that would help overcome the blocks, barriers, and difficulties on that list. What could be done, or what would need to be changed in order to for this to be successful?

- Each post-it-note should include only one suggestion/solution.
- Write clearly, legibly so that others can read.
- Do not spend too much time on one issue. Write the idea briefly, and then move on to the next idea.
- Do not spend all your time reading what others have written. Create your own suggestions. Repetition reinforces ideas and suggestions that are commonly held.

Alternatively, you could just have each person circulate around the room at his or her own pace. But since it is not necessarily helpful to spend too

much time at one station, the process usually works better when facilitated as a timed team activity.

5. Identify personal initiative and team cooperation

This step also addresses Schmuck & Runkel's S.T.P. Model – "Proposals." (Schmuck 1972)

Assign a team to each station.

Have that team collate the post-it-note suggestions/solutions by grouping together those that repeat or relate to one another (this will be obvious). Also, have them group the post-it-notes into the following three categories. They could make three vertical columns on their flip chart.

- A: What we can do: What any individual can do without coordinating with others, without needing to get permission or support from anyone.
- B: What we can do with support: We must coordinate with others, we must get cooperation or support or approval, possibly by submitting a proposal.)
- C: What we cannot influence or control (the weather, the law, company policy at a level beyond this particular group, the economy and market forces, gravity!)

Have each team present its findings to the rest of the team. Others may have additional input to add at this point.

6. Action Steps and assignments

Initiate a discussion

- Ask the group to notice how many things fit into Category C. Usually very few. Point out that there is a lot we can do to make this (change/goal) succeed (Category A Items), a lot we can work with others to do (Category B Items), and comparatively little that would prevent this from being successful (Category C Items).
- Review the benefits. Review the solutions we have outlined to overcome the blocks and barriers. Do we think the benefits are worth the effort it will take? Are there enough steps we can take to make it worth achieving the benefits? Is there anything else we can do that would help us to reach those benefits?

Who will do what?

- Assign Category A solutions. Since all the items on this list have been identified as what any individual could take initiative to do, allow individuals to volunteer and identify at least one or two items that they take personal responsibility to do.
- Set time lines for action steps, and for reporting back.
- Assign teams or individuals to prepare proposals, plans for Category B: getting help, support, approval from others. Assign time lines for action steps and reporting back.

- **Summarize the decisions and action steps** that have been made, and be sure everyone is clear on follow up action steps, and dates for reporting back on progress.

Additional problem solving methods or team decision-making models may be applied at various stages of this process. The overall goal is to allow the group to recognize that there is always something they can do to move in a positive direction, and that this is more productive than complaining. Management could point out this simple truth, but such motivational speeches may be met with suspicion. This activity facilitates the group to point it out to it's own members, allowing them to overcome their inertia and resistance to change. This can create a positive momentum of peer pressure that could make it difficult for individual employees to resist or sabotage.

Follow up by Management/Leadership

To maintain the positive momentum generated from this activity, it is essential that management respond to what the employees have generated as suggestions and possibilities for improvement. It is not necessary to agree or accede as if everything were a demand. Remember – the key to reducing resistance is not agreement, it is understanding.

In a "Fishbowl" meeting, a skilled leader can use face-to-face communication to express a sincere interest in the concerns of the employees. Too often employees may think, "I tell my concerns to my supervisor, but who knows what information she really passes up the ladder." It is especially powerful for employees to actually hear their supervisors representing the employees concerns directly to the division managers, or for the division managers representing these concerns to the President or CEO. In response, the leader should essentially complete Stages One and Two of the Six Stages of Building Supportive Agreements. This would include

1. Repeat these concerns back to the supervisors so that everyone hears that they she got it.
2. Confirm the points with which she agrees. (*That's a valid concern*, or *This is a high priority*, or *That is a plan we can set in motion*.)
3. Address CBAM concerns for impact. (*You're concerned that the new system may slow our customer response time. It's to be expected may take more time at first. If response times do not reduce by the end of the first month we will have to make adjustments.)*
4. Address CBAM concerns for self. (*I realize that the changes require more effort from you, and I am grateful that your hard work will keep us moving ahead in these difficult times.)*
5. Point out those issues that are beyond her control. (*Economic forces, legal considerations, instructions from the Board, ongoing negotiations*.)
6. Point out which items will take more time to respond. Let them know how and when she will get back to them on these concerns. (*I'll work with the*

Wellness Committee and get back to you in two weeks with a list of steps we can take.) Of course, then it is essential to get back to them within that period of time.

If it is not possible to do a "Fishbowl Session" with the group, then respond in writing to their written reports, addressing as many of the abovementioned points as possible.

Case Study: Post It Note Problem Solving

The Dean of a College included this Post-It-Note Problem Solving process in a staff development training, along with other techniques for resolving misunderstandings and disagreements. Prior to the training, an online anonymous survey allowed the staff to identify high priority issues (Step 1) and to create the categories of blocks, barriers, and difficulties (Step 2) about upcoming changes. These included:

1. Communication problems
2. Petty politics
3. Underutilized and unrecognized staff
4. Lack of training and preparation for jobs
5. Upcoming change of Dean

Flip chart workstations were established around the room. Each team added to each flip chart station by listing specific issues within that area that needed attention. Then the teams followed the process to complete brainstorming solutions, and assign individual-initiative and team-cooperative assignments.

Each team then presented a verbal summary of the challenges, concerns, recommendations and responsibilities defined within the topic area to which they were assigned. This was presented to the entire group and to the Associate Dean. The Associate Dean's responses were refreshingly candid, which facilitated an atmosphere of trust in which staff could express themselves more openly and honestly. He surprised many staff members with his understanding and sincere compassion for the changes and challenges they have to deal with that are beyond their control. His comments were pragmatic and reasonable about what could be accomplished and what needed further information and consideration.

Each team chose one task to follow up on and report back to the group with their progress. As a result of this discussion, one group suggested that the staff request permission to work with the faculty in sending a recommendation for Interim Dean to the Provost. The faculty encouraged the staff to present its own recommendation, which had never been done at the University, which was received by the Provost and considered in the decision making process.

In a follow up memo, one staff member stated,

> "Yesterday was a great day, in my opinion, giving us all some tools for making our environment a better place every single day. I used to work in Residential Life for years, and was in weeks and weeks of training every year. I facilitated quite a bit of training for student staff, as well. And I have to tell you both that yours was the best training seminar I've ever been to. It was useful without being fluffy. It built on real work scenarios and emotions. We are often taught that it is bad to mix emotion and work, so it was good to see a training that discussed emotion as a REAL piece of everything we do and taught us how to understand it in the context of the workplace."