

Title

The Blind Square

Source

Method presented during the International Trainers Laboratory, October 2001 by Tony Geudens (Belgium) and Egle Erm (Estonia)

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Field/Content

Workshop on group dynamics

Duration

2 hrs. – 1 day

Participants

About 15

Aims

The aim of this exercise is to show how people work together in groups, what kind of dynamics are involved in problem solving and how challenging it is to take decisions in a bigger group, especially when you can't see!

Materials / Resources

A rope of 15 or more meters long, something to blindfold the participants. It's ideal to have video equipment.

Preparation

See materials.

Methodology

Participants are given instructions to make a square with the rope and all participants have to hold onto the rope. They can only be released from their "suffering" and take their blindfolds off, when the whole group thinks that the rope forms a square. This is an ideal exercise for outside when the weather is nice (and especially there are no corners they can use).

It is good to have observers or even videotape the exercise in order not to lose the precious moments of decision making and problem solving. Observers should have a closer look at how the group functions, how people react (or not) to each other.

Evaluation / Debriefing

As in most of simulation exercises the debriefing is the most important part of the exercise: it is the moment when the people learn and draw conclusions about what they just experienced together. Before starting the debriefing you can do a round of short first reactions (one sentence or one word) about how they liked the exercise, which then can lead to deeper questions (see below).

Some questions for debriefing could be:

- How did you feel during the exercise?

- What was the group atmosphere like?
 - What made the group going? What worked?
 - What made the group block? What did not work?
 - How did you make decisions in the group?
 - Was everybody involved in the decision making process?
 - Did you make rules? Who made the rules? Were the rules common to everyone?
 - Did you see a difference in acting between the people that were focused on the process (caring about the group) / task (achieving the aim)?
 - How could we have done the task more pleasantly/more efficiently?
 - What can we learn from this for the organisation of an International Youth Activity?
- And you can make up any other related question...

Further material on group dynamics

What to look for in groups

One indication of involvement is verbal participation. Look for differences in the amount of participation among members.

1. Who are the high participants?
2. Who are the low participants?
3. Do you see any shift in participation, e.g. highs become quiet; lows suddenly become talkative? Do you see any possible reason for this in the groups' interaction?
4. How are the silent people treated? How is their silence interpreted? Consent? Disagreement? Disinterest? Fears? etc.
5. Who talks to whom? Do you see any reason for this in the groups' interactions?
6. Who keeps the ball rolling? Why? Do you see any reason for this in the groups' interactions?

Influence

Influence and participation are not the same: Some people may speak very little, yet they capture the attention of the whole group. Others may talk a lot but are generally not listened to by other members.

7. Which members are high in influence? That is, when they talk, others seem to listen.
8. Which members are low in influence? Others do not listen to or follow them. Is there any shifting influence? Who shifts?
9. Do you see any rivalry in the group? Is there a struggle for leadership? What effect does it have on other group members?

Styles of Influence

Influence can take many forms. It can be positive or negative; it can enlist the support or cooperation of others or alienate them. How a person attempts to influence another may be the crucial factor in determining how open or closed the other will be toward being influenced. Items 10 through 13 are suggestive of four styles that frequently emerge groups.

10. Autocratic: Does anyone attempt to impose his will or values on other group members or try to push them to support his decisions? Who evaluates or passes

- judgement on other group members? Do any members block action when it is not moving in the direction they desire? Who pushes to “get the group organised”?
11. Peacemaker: Who eagerly supports other group members’ decisions? Does anyone consistently try to avoid conflict or unpleasant feelings from being expressed by pouring oil on the troubled waters? Is any member typically deferential toward other group members – gives them power? Do any members appear to avoid giving negative feedback, i.e.? Who will level only when they have positive feedback to give?
 12. Laissez faire: Are any group members getting attention by their apparent lack of involvement in the group? Does any group member go along with group decisions without seeming to commit himself one way or the other? Who seems to be withdrawn and uninvolved: who does not initiate activity, participates mechanically and only in response to another member’s question?
 13. Democratic: Does anyone try to include everyone in a group decision or discussion? Who expresses his feelings and opinions openly and directly without evaluating or judging others? Who appears to be open to feedback and criticisms from others? When feelings run high and tension mounts, which members attempt to deal with the conflict in a problem-solving way?

Decision-making Procedures

Many kinds of decisions are made in groups without considering the efforts of these decisions on other members. Some people try to impose their own decisions on the group, while others want all members to participate or share the decisions that are made.

14. Does anyone make a decision and carry it out without checking with other group members? (Self-authorized) For example, he decides on the group topic to be discussed and immediately begins to talk it. What effect does this have on other group members?
15. Does the group drift from topic to topic? Who topic-jumps? Do you see any reason for this in the group’s interactions?
16. Who supports other members’ suggestions or decisions? Does this support result in the two members deciding the topic or activity for the group (handclasp)? How does this affect other group members?
17. Is there any evidence of a majority pushing a decision through over other members’ objections? Do they call for a vote (majority support)?
18. Is there any attempt to get all members participating in a decision (consensus)? What effect does this seem to have on the group?
19. Does anyone make any contributions which do not receive any kind of response or recognition (plop)? What effect does this have on the member?

Task Function

These functions illustrate behaviours that are concerned with getting the job done, or accomplishing the task the group has before them.

20. Does anyone ask for or make suggestions as to the best to proceed or to tackle a problem?
21. Does anyone attempt to summarise what has been covered or what has been going on in the group?

22. Is there any giving or asking for facts, ideas, opinions, feelings, feedback or searching for alternatives?
23. Who keeps the group on target? Who prevents topic-jumping or going off on tangents?

Maintenance Functions

These functions are important to the morale of the group. They maintain good and harmonious working relationships among the members and create a group atmosphere which enables each member to contribute maximally. They insure smooth and effective teamwork within the group.

24. Who helps others get into the discussion (gate openers)?
25. Who cuts off others or interrupts them (gate closers)?
26. How well are members getting their ideas across? Are some members preoccupied and not listening? Are there any attempts by group members to help others clarify their ideas?
27. How are ideas rejected? How do members react when their ideas are not accepted? Do members attempt to support others when they reject their ideas?

Group Atmosphere

Something about the way a group works creates an atmosphere which in turn is revealed in a general impression. In addition, people may differ in the kind of atmosphere they like in a group. Insight can be gained into the atmosphere characteristic of a group by finding words which describe the general impressions held by group members.

28. Who seems to prefer a friendly congenial atmosphere? Is there any attempt to suppress conflict or unpleasant feelings?
29. Who seems to prefer an atmosphere of conflict and disagreement? Do any members provoke or annoy others?
30. Do people seem involved and interested? Is the atmosphere one of work, play, satisfaction, taking flight, sluggishness, etc?

Membership

A major concern for group members is the degree of acceptance or inclusion in the group. Different patterns of interaction may develop in the groups which give clues to the degree and kind of membership.

31. Is there any sub-grouping? Some times two or three members may consistently agree and support each other or consistently disagree and oppose one another.
32. Do some people seem to be "outside" the group? Do some members seem to be "in"? How are those "outside" treated?
33. Do some members move in and out of the group, e.g. lean forward or backward in their chairs or move their chairs in and out? Under what conditions do they come in or move out?

Feelings

During any group discussions, feelings are frequently generated by the interactions between members. These feelings, however, are seldom talked about. Observers may have to make guesses based on tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and many other forms of non-verbal cues.

34. What signs of feelings do you observe in group members: anger, irritation, frustration, warmth, affection, excitement, boredom, defensiveness, competitiveness, etc.?
35. Do you see any attempts by group members to block the expression of feelings, particularly negative feelings? How is this done? Does anyone do this consistently?

Norms

Standards or ground rules may develop in a group that control the behaviour of its members. Norms usually express the beliefs or desires of the majority of the group members as to what behaviours should or should not take place in the group. These norms may be clear to all members (explicit), known or sensed by only a few (implicit), or operating completely below the level of awareness of any group members. Some norms facilitate group progress and some hinder it.

36. Are certain areas avoided in the group (e.g. sex, religion, talk about present feelings in group, discussing the leader's behaviour, etc.)? Who seems to reinforce this avoidance? How do they do it?
37. Are group members overly nice and polite to each other? Are only positive feelings expressed? Do members agree with each other too readily? What happens when members disagree?
38. Do you see norms operating about participation or the kinds of questions that are allowed (e.g. "If I talk, you must talk"; "If I tell my problems you have to tell your problems")? Do members feel free to probe each other about their feelings? Do questions tend to be restricted to intellectual topics or events outside of the group?