

### Characteristics of groups

How would you describe your group? Is it relaxed or tense? Purposeful or directionless? Cohesive or fragmented? Below is a list of some of the characteristics of groups. How does your group compare?

- **Cohesiveness:** The degree to which the members of a group like and support each other depends on how much there is agreement on basic goals and values, how many good experiences members have had with each other. This might be described as a sense of 'community'.
- **Climate:** The psychological tone of a meeting. How much attention do the members have for the issue at hand? Do participants feel easy with expressing their feelings? Is the spirit joyful, tense? The climate is affected very much by the physical arrangement of the meeting place. Is it too warm or cool; too crowded or noisy? Other factors affecting climate might be time pressures and uncertainty over goals. The climate is often set by the perceived leaders.
- **Pressures:** Compelling influences. What are they? Time? Money? Are they external or internal pressures? To what extent do they help the group reach its goals or make members act in rigid ways?
- **Goals:** Ends the groups strive to attain. Goals can be long- and/or short-range. If goals are clear, little leadership is needed. If goals are not clear and/or members are unclear how to accomplish the goals, leadership functions need to be filled. Have individuals clarified their own goals to the extent that group goals are possible?
- **Standards:** Expectations regarding behaviour in the group, e.g. amount of involvement, or being on time. It makes a difference whether standards are set by leaders or by all the members, and whether or not standards are conscious.
- **Control:** Regulation of the group. How does a group insure its own continuation and the completion of its long-term tasks? How are new members included or excluded? Controls of some sort are essential to the life of a group. Are controls used flexibly as needed? Do they work against the goals of the group?
- **Structure:** Interrelationship of all the aspects of a group, such as: the decision-making process, different roles, membership, goals, styles and processes of communication. Structure may be formal, in that it is defined and deliberately followed by the group, or it may be informal.

### Individuals in groups

We all need to be conscious of how our behaviour affects others in the group. Here are some specific ways we can be responsible to ourselves and others in groups:

- Share the airspace. Pay attention to how much you speak, make space for others to contribute, and take responsibility for your own views being shared.
- Let people speak without interruption.
- Becoming a good listener. Good listening is as important as good speaking. It's important not to withdraw when not speaking; good listening is active participation.
- Give opinions in a manner which says we believe our ideas to be valuable, but no more important than others' ideas.

- Value other's contributions and delay judgement. Just because you may not agree with an idea straight away doesn't mean it may not be useful to the group.
- Interrupt oppressive behaviour. Take responsibility for interrupting a person who is exhibiting behaviour which is oppressive to others.
- Challenge oppressive and silencing norms. For example, men often dominate discussion and women speak significantly less. It is important that men emotionally support each other and challenge each other's sexism, rather than asking women to do so. This will allow women more space to break out of their own conditioned role of looking after men's needs while ignoring their own.
- Keep on-topic. Try to keep to the point and avoid picking up on side issues and treating them as central.
- Don't bring bad vibes to the meeting. Frustrations or conflicts at work or home can carry over into meetings and affect how we relate to others and how the group manages the task at hand. Sharing your feelings at the start of the meeting will let people know that you're irritable about something at work or home, not with the people at the meeting.

**Source:** From 'An activist guide for working in groups', Pt'chang Non-violent Community Safety Group Inc, incorporating content from the Tarkine Activist Handbook and sections abridged and adapted from an article written by Bill Moyer of the *Movement for a New Society*. 'Individuals in Groups' section modified and edited by Holly Hammond, Plan to Win [plantowin.net.au](http://plantowin.net.au)

## Stages in group development

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1. **Forming:** Groups initially concern themselves with orientation and establishing relationships with leaders, with other group members and or pre-existing standards.
2. **Storming:** The second point in the sequence is characterized by conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues, with concomitant emotional responding in the task sphere. These behaviours serve as resistance to group influence and task requirements.
3. **Norming:** Resistance is overcome in the third stage in which in-group feeling and cohesiveness develop, new standards evolve, and new roles are adopted. In the task realm, intimate, personal opinions are expressed.
4. **Performing:** Finally, the group attains the fourth stage in which interpersonal structure becomes the tool of task activities. Roles become flexible and functional, and group energy is channeled into the task. Structural issues have been resolved, and structure can now become supportive of task performance.
5. **Adjourning / Mourning:** The final stage of group development involves dissolution. It entails the termination of roles, the completion of tasks and reduction of dependency. Some commentators have described this stage as 'mourning' given the loss that is sometimes felt by former participants. The process can be stressful - particularly where the dissolution is unplanned.

**Source:** Bruce Tuckman <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/tuckman.htm>

# Four Team Types

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The basic four categories have emerged out of many different cultures. Models like it show up in many indigenous traditions (Celtic Wheel of Being, Native American Medicine Wheel, etc.), modern science's analysis of the human brain, and team theory. For sake of maximum cultural accessibility, we call it "Team Types" – though we want to recognise its many roots.

## North:

- Assertive, active, decisive
- Likes to be in control of relationship and steer course of events
- Quick to act, expresses sense of urgency for others to act now
- Enjoys challenge of difficult situations and people
- Can get defensive quickly, argue, try to out-expert you
- Can lose patience, pushes for decision before it's time
- May get autocratic, want things their way, ride roughshod over people



## East:

- Sees the big picture
- Very idea-oriented, focus on future thought
- Insight into mission and purpose
- Likes to experiment, explore
- Can lose focus on tasks and not follow through
- May become easily overwhelmed, lose track of time
- Tends to be highly enthusiastic early on, then burn out



## South:

- Allows others to feel important in determining direction of what's happening
- Value-driven regarding all aspects of personal/professional life
- Uses relationships to accomplish tasks
- Innocence and trust in others based on vulnerability and openness
- Supportive, nurturing, feeling-based
- Has trouble saying "no" to requests
- Internalises difficulty and assumes blame
- Prone to disappointment when relationship is seen as secondary to task
- Difficulty confronting, dealing with anger



## West:

- Weighs all sides of issues
- Uses data analysis and logic
- Seen as practical and thorough in task situations
- Introspective, self-analytical
- Can become stubborn and entrenched in position
- Can be indecisive, collect unnecessary data, mired in details
- May appear cold, withdrawn



**Source:** This particular design is created by George Lakey, [www.trainingforchange.org](http://www.trainingforchange.org) with thanks to David Baum and Morgan Henderson. Australian animal variation: the Change Agency [www.thechangeagency.org](http://www.thechangeagency.org)

# Task and Maintenance Functions

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The two elementary parts of effective group operation are task roles and maintenance roles. Each role is really a set of behaviours to pay attention to in meetings and activities. Generally, task functions keep groups headed toward decisions and action. Maintenance functions help build a group's sense of identity and develop the social relationships in a group.

## TASK

**Initiating:** Proposing tasks and goals, defining the problems, suggesting procedures and solutions all help to give direction and purpose to a group.

**Information seeking:** Requesting relevant facts and soliciting clarification helps groups gather information, and makes them aware of what information is needed.

**Information giving:** Offering relevant facts, and sorting out biases and opinions from facts, helps to provide useful information.

**Opinion seeking:** Asking for opinions or feelings on a topic can test for unity, and helps groups understand an issue more deeply

**Clarifying:** Defining terms, interpreting ideas, indicating issues and alternatives helps to eliminate confusion.

**Elaborating:** Giving examples, developing meanings and explaining help reduce ambiguity and illustrate consequences of plans and positions.

**Coordinating:** Suggesting ways to handle a problem or process can help harmonise conflicting issues, or help a group make tough choices.

**Developing procedures:** Suggesting agendas and discussion formats helps meetings to become more efficient.

**Summarising:** Pulling together related issues or contradictions, restating and identifying conclusions all focus discussions, and keep groups on track

## MAINTENANCE

**Encouraging:** Being friendly, warm or responsive, and eliciting others' contributions all help to bring out opinions in a group and give recognition

**Expressing feelings:** Expressing feelings, restating others' feelings, and getting people to label their own feelings helps groups take risks

**Having fun:** Joking, clowning, breaks and games all help to diffuse tensions, allow groups to express feelings, and create a lively, interesting social setting

**Compromising:** Offering or accepting compromises, yielding status, or admitting error, all help to build trust and group cohesion.

**Facilitating communication:** Drawing out silent members and suggesting procedures for discussions helps keep groups open and promotes equal power.

**Setting standards and goals:** Identifying common concerns and outlining standards for the group to achieve, helps groups to enact direction and follow progress.

**Interpreting:** Paraphrasing often helps to explain and interpret, creating greater understanding.

**Listening:** Actively listening to others builds trust, gathers information, and promotes mutual respect.

**Following:** Accepting and appreciating the ideas of others, and going along with the group promotes unity.

**Declaring success:** Noticing successes, even small ones, helps groups develop self-confidence and greater awareness of their power.

An effective group will pay attention to all of these functions, and to the overall balance between accomplishing things and feeling good about being together. Keeping the balance often feels like a struggle, and each group will find its own point of equilibrium. When it does, the group can be dynamic, enjoyable, effective and efficient. When a group is overloaded on either task or maintenance, people dread meetings, group cohesion is low, resistance to leadership is high, and conflicts don't get resolved easily.

**Source:** First written by Will Pipkin and Betsy Raasch-Gilman for Future Now; this version by Daniel Hunter, Training for Change 2006. <http://www.TrainingForChange.org>

# Active Listening

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Often when people talk to each other, they don't listen attentively. They can be distracted, only half listening or thinking about something else.

To use good active listening skills in either a group or one to one situation the person listening should focus on what the speaker is saying—looking at them, maintaining eye contact and facing them to show they are interested in and open to what is being said. The listener can then repeat back to the speaker in their own words what they have understood from both what has been said and the feelings involved to ensure understanding.

What to be aware of as a 'listener'

- be aware of any preconceived ideas or opinions you may have on the subject
- ensure you allow the speaker to finish their point—don't interrupt
- ensure you listen fully to the speaker—rather than hearing the first part of their idea and then formulating your response in your head prior to them finishing
- even if you don't agree with the speaker's opinion or suggestion, allow them to express their ideas
- use body language and facial expressions to encourage the speaker, for instance face the speaker and maintain eye contact
- avoid distractions during discussions by going to a quiet or private location, for instance eliminate background noise, other people interrupting and mobile phone ringing
- once you have heard what the speaker has to say—summarise what you have heard and feed this back to them to ensure you have understood. This gives the speaker a chance to clarify anything that was unclear
- once clarified, the listener can then respond with any queries, questions, reflections on their own experience or ideas to the original speaker
- as a means of preventing conflict and encouraging further discussion, reflection of the information from the speaker can also be expressed in terms of feelings, for instance "It seems you feel angry when...". This shows you have understood more than just the content of the words.

The speaker and the listener continue to alternate in this process of active listening until full understanding is reached.