

Group Cohesion: Key to Program Planning

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Group cohesion refers to the attraction the group holds for the member. This author details the possible reasons people participate in groups and the importance that group cohesion has for active participation. He details methods for Extension professionals to use the concept of group cohesion in helping a group achieve its goals. A reading of this study should help you when you organize your next group.

Have you ever tried to get the right people together at the right place, at the right time, to make the right decisions about the right purpose? This situation usually confronts the Extension professional sometime during the year, especially during program planning. True, it's hard to reach this ideal situation. But, we have to try to get a group of people together to make decisions about the direction and intensity of the educational programs provided by Extension.

Decisions must be made on what clientele to reach, how to reach them, and what to teach them. These decisions influence the quality of the programs offered and their impact on the target audience.

Professional staff members can't decide on programs affecting clientele without getting major inputs from them. A representative segment of the population must participate in program planning and decision-making processes.

Group Participation

A group is important in program planning. Its decision reflects the attitudes and actions of more than one person trying to achieve some purpose or goal. When groups are involved, the concept of group cohesion becomes significant as a part of the group process.

Cartwright and Zander state that group cohesion refers to the attractiveness of the group to its

members and to which the individual members feel they belong.¹ An individual may be attracted to a group because that group might make it possible for him to attain an important individual goal. A group's goals, program, size, type of organization, and status in the community, as well as the person's affiliation, recognition, and security are also important in group selection.

Reasons for Participating

Why do people participate in a group? Are they dissatisfied with their environmental setting and find others who feel the same way, thus supplying each other's common personal needs? The most common reasons for joining or remaining in a group are group prestige, personal attraction for some members of the group, and group goals.²

Group Prestige

Some people join a group because of the social status and recognition it provides. The community confers this prestige on the group. Group members feel as though their social role in the community is automatically looked on as something important and peculiar. Being a member of such a group helps a person add to or improve his social status in the community.

As long as the community treats this as a prestige group, the holding power or the attraction

of the group will remain strong.³ A person will try—if he can—to join groups that help him achieve his goal and will move out of them when they no longer do so.

Personal Attraction for Group

Some people become a part of a group because they like one or more of its members. If friends or neighbors belong to a group, personal attraction is increased.⁴ A person who participates in a group because he likes the members has a better opportunity to compare himself with his friends. He's also probably more interested in them as people, perhaps supports them, and is more cordial in interpersonal relations.

When cohesiveness is based on the members' personal attraction for one another, the members could make their discussions long, pleasant conversations hoping to persuade each other easily.

Group Goals

Some people may be attracted to a group because its goal or potential goals correspond to their ambitions.⁵ It may also be true when a person feels that participating in the group gives him an opportunity to reach some goal outside the group.

To illustrate these two concepts, look at the motives of an individual who volunteers to become a 4-H adult leader. He joins because of a strong desire to

achieve a goal common to that of the group and to achieve personal satisfaction for his effort.

On the other hand, he may join to achieve a personal goal that's totally different from the group's. A person who's attracted to a group because of its goal usually feels the group's goal is a worthy one. If he finds out they'll never achieve their goal, because of inefficiency in the group, poor leadership, friction, lack of money, or some other reason, he'll become less attracted to it.

Member Selection

Extension's main function is to help the people it serves achieve efficient agricultural production, adequate incomes, and responsible citizenship and to build wholesome and prosperous communities. To get the job done, Extension involves local people in the program planning process to help identify, analyze, and interpret data relevant to the problems in their community, area, or county.⁶ These people plan and conduct action programs to achieve these goals. To ensure group efficiency and effectiveness, many concepts of group dynamics must be understood and applied. To organize and maintain a planning committee and achieve the full group potential, you have to know group dynamics.

Let's look at the following situation.

The county plan of work is due. A committee representing various segments of the county is needed to help decide what priority subject-matter areas to include.

Who should be selected to serve on this committee? The first step is to determine the exact purpose of the committee.¹ Next, develop a plan to accomplish this purpose.² The committee, of course, will function within this framework.

After defining a purpose, criteria for selecting group members can be established, based on the purpose and philosophy of Extension. Selection criteria may include a person's: motives, personality, competence, availability, leadership qualities, and other pertinent characteristics.³

It's hard to see these traits in an individual at a given time. So, the Extension professional must exercise judgment when using these qualities as an index. He may want to discuss the situation with community leaders before making a decision.

Other factors to base selection on are those identified earlier as group cohesion aids: group goals, prestige of the group, and personal attraction for members of the group.

Members of groups with little cohesion aren't really groups at all, but rather just aggregation of isolates.⁷ On the other hand, highly cohesive groups can make irrational decisions. This happens because the members share the

same views and ideas, with no difference in opinions. This could lead to conformity.

Members on planning committees should be selected by a professional staff, in most instances, and perhaps legitimized by a group of local people. The selection should be based on the criteria developed by the professional staff or an executive committee.

First determine the criteria for selecting and identifying individuals. Next, select individuals who meet the criteria. Finally, make the initial contact. Through this effort, the group should be made up with some degree of similarity in purpose. However, it's important to note that a heterogeneous group could arrive at rational decisions if time isn't a factor.

Determine the size of the group based on the purpose and the task the group must perform. A relationship exists between the size of a group, accomplishment of task, and the degree of cohesiveness of the group.⁸

Identifying Potential Members

Identify all groups—special interest groups, agencies, and organizations—that could contribute to the efforts of the committee being selected.

Potential members may also be identified based on past participation on any committee. However, the most important identifying factor in choosing a

potential member is the ability to *work well with others* and *develop plans of action* to achieve specific objectives.

If those selected have conflicts in interests and attitudes, the possibility of achieving effective group cohesion decreases. And, the possibility of the group making an unpopular decision increases. Another identifying factor is how the potential member is accepted in the community.

Selected Individuals

When selecting individuals, choose people who: (1) are interested in the group's functions, (2) are competent, (3) represent the desires of the group, and (4) are able to function properly in a group setting. Groups of local people can recognize, define, and solve common problems and satisfy their common needs by working together.

If the concept of group cohesion is kept in mind when selecting people to work in a group, the probability of productivity increases. Base your selection on factors that ensure group cohesion, such as motives, competence, and personality of the potential committee member.

Initial Contact and Orientation

Decision making requires identifying, collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data relevant to the problem. It also involves deciding which problems and opportunities should have priority. And,

it involves establishing objectives for the economic and social improvement and development of the community.

Before contacting a potential member for the first time, the professional staff should know *exactly* the objective of the group's function. They should ask themselves.

1. Why are we involving these people in this planning process?
2. What will be their specific functions(s) as a group?
3. How much time will it take?
4. What techniques will be used to bring about a good interpersonal relationship?
5. Are we involving the right people to effectively accomplish the task?
6. How are we going to establish a climate to provide learning experiences for potential members?
7. What will be the professional staff's role?
8. Will there be any form of evaluation; if so, what kind and to what extent?
9. What process will be used to replace committee members?
10. Will the individuals selected be competent and accepted by their community?

When considering group dynamics, the professional staff should ask the following ques-

tions about the potential members before selection:

1. Is the person willing to work with others in a group?
2. Will the potential member be interested in the goal of the group?
3. Will the group provide him with an opportunity to achieve a personal goal?
4. Will he join because of the group's prestige?
5. Are there other motives for his participating in the group?

Answers to these questions should indicate how active the individual will be and what he'll contribute to the group's effort.

After establishing the criteria for selecting committee members, you must contact the member.

During the first contact, explain clearly and precisely the purpose of the group. Indicate what he may be able to contribute as a member of the group. The initial contact is important. It's an opportunity to discuss the group's operation, its responsibility, and the role of each member.

A professional shouldn't assume he can accurately identify what makes individuals respond in a certain way when working within a group. However, the status of the group, as viewed by the community, does influence the degree and intensity of member participation. This should serve as a guideline in making the final decision or selection.

To ensure group cohesion when group prestige is important to the individual, make every effort to have the goals of the group legitimized and publicized. If the community has sanctioned the group's goals, tell the potential member that during the initial contact.

When contacting potential members the first time, tell them who the other members of the group are likely to be. Group cohesion may be enhanced when members of the group are friends and neighbors. This also increases interaction among group members. Individuals will probably express themselves and share their feelings about pertinent decisions on a plan of action, if they're working with friends and neighbors.

If a member has some reservations about the group's goals, the interpretation of the situation, methods of collecting data, identifying needs and problems, and arriving at priorities, he'll probably say so now. Any misunderstandings or fears that aren't valid, can be cleared up.

Potential members will probably decide to participate if they feel they can work with other members and can make a contribution to the group.

Potential Disadvantages of Group Cohesion

It's not absolutely necessary to have a high degree of cohesiveness among group members to

make rational decisions. In fact, a high degree of cohesion could mean mass conformity and irrational decisions. There should be factors in each group that contribute to group cohesion, but maximum group cohesion shouldn't be the ultimate goal.

If group cohesion is based on group prestige, group members take little risk of endangering their status. They're cautious, concentrate on their own actions, and adjust to the social environment. If cohesion is based on personal attraction, members tend to transform the discussion into long, drawn-out, pleasant conversations. If cohesion is based on performing a task, group members want to finish the activity quickly and efficiently. They spend only the time necessary to get the job done.

Before arriving at a plan of action, a committee must explore several alternatives, accept those that offer maximum potential and advantages, and reject those that don't. Then, the committee must decide on priorities. A highly cohesive group may not explore all these possibilities before making a final decision. Problems like this may be discussed during the initial contact and orientation period.

Summary

Group cohesion refers to the attraction the group holds for the member. A person may

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join a group because of the group's goals, its prestige, and personal attraction for some of the group's members. If these factors are evident, the intensity of the member participation will probably increase.

Extension professionals should keep the concept of group cohesion in mind when doing the program planning and decision-making processes and also when selecting a committee to serve as a decision-making group. Being aware of the reasons people join groups can help in selecting individuals who will be active in a group structure and perform effectively.

Use the concept of group cohesion as a guideline when contacting the potential member for the first time. Clearly explain the purpose of the committee, whether the proposed action has the sanction of the community, the role of the member, other members involved, the *expected* outcomes, approximate time limit, and other important factors.

This increases the probability of selecting a group that can develop a workable and significant plan of action . . . one that will improve the level of family and community living.

Footnotes

1. Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, *Group Dynamics* (Evanston, Illinois: Row, Peterson and Company, 1953).
2. Dorwin Cartwright and Alvin Zander, *Group Dynamics: Research and Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1968), pp. 91-109.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*
6. H. C. Sanders, *The Cooperative Extension Service* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1956).
7. Muzaher Sherif, Jack B. White, and O. J. Harvey, "Status in Experimentally Produced Group," *The American Journal of Sociology*, LX (1955), 370-379.
8. L. W. Porter and E. E. Lawler III, "Properties of Organization Structure in Relation to Job Attitudes and Job Behavior," *Psychological Bulletin*, LXIV (1965), 23-51.