

SMALL GROUP EXERCISES

THESE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS and exercises are for groups seeking to understand themselves and become more democratic. They concern issues central to small group democracy: power, inclusiveness, commitment, competence, individuality and mutuality, congeniality, speaking opportunities and responsibilities, and listening.

Most of the questions and activities are geared toward groups of three to twenty people, but all can be adapted for larger groups: exercises and discussions can be streamlined, and large groups can do many of them by breaking into small groups. All of the exercises can be tailored to the unique purposes and features of the group.

Power

Discussion Questions

1. What is power? What are the different forms that power takes in the world and within our group?
2. What kind of power do we want our group to have? What do we hope to achieve by working together?
3. Do any external forces prevent us from realizing our goals? What can we do to change this situation?
4. How should we handle the power that we have? How should we distribute our group power among ourselves? If we want an equal distribution, *how* equal need it be?
5. Is our current distribution of power in synch with this ideal? If not, how did it become out of synch? What can we do to reach a better balance of power?

Group Activity

Group members rate themselves and the other members of the group on a 100-point scale according to how much power each person appears to have (100 signifies virtual omnipotence, whereas zero corresponds to powerlessness).¹

If group members insist on viewing power as a zero-sum equation (i.e., when you gain power, I lose it), they can work with percentages. The combination of each group member's power score equals 100 percent. Otherwise, the group can rate group members independently; two or more group members could have over fifty points each.

When all group members have rated themselves and the rest of the group, scores can be compared. If the group is small, one person can quickly write the scores on the board in a matrix (rows for who did the ratings, columns for who's being rated). Comparisons could prove revealing. One person may be rated most or least powerful by all group members—or by all but themselves. Variations in ratings might reveal misunderstandings or complementary perspectives on power within the group. Group members might also find it useful to discuss what *kinds* of power they believe they and others possess.

Inclusiveness

Discussion Questions

1. When we formed our group, whose lives did we hope to change? What role do those people play in our decision-making process?
2. Has anyone besides current members expressed interest in joining the group? Why have they not joined?
3. Which people have left this group? Why did they leave?
4. How large can our group become?
5. Do we want anyone else to join our group or talk with group members on a regular basis? What can we do to encourage those people to join or maintain contact with our group?
6. Is there anything we do that might discourage people from joining us?

Group Activity

As a group, brainstorm to identify the different groups of people that your group affects when it makes and implements its decisions. On a chalkboard or flipchart, write a name or word for each group. Consolidate this list into a dozen or so groups, then mark each one according to the degree it is affected by your group's actions (1 = profoundly, 2 = significantly, 3 = marginally).

On another part of the chalkboard, draw three concentric circles. The inner circle represents full power within the group decision-making process. The second circle represents having influence upon the group, and the third circle symbolizes being disconnected from the group. Place each of the social groups you identified within one of these circles, according to their connection to the group.

A highly inclusive group would have ones in the inner circle, twos in the middle circle, and threes in the outer circle. There might even be twos in the inner circle and threes in the middle circle. A highly exclusive group would place none other than the group members themselves in the inner circle. Where does your group fall on this spectrum? Why?

Commitment to the Democratic Process

Discussion Questions

Talking about a commitment to democracy makes more sense after clarifying what exactly constitutes a democratic process. For this reason, the first two questions might help a group develop its own definition of small group democracy.

1. What does democracy mean to us? What would a fully democratic group look like?
2. What other groups have we been in or heard about? What features of these groups were democratic or undemocratic?
3. What are the different things we value in our group? What are our goals? How does democracy relate to our other goals? Do any take precedence over it?
4. What would each of us do if the group used a democratic process to reach a decision we strongly disliked? If this has happened before, what did we do?
5. Are our democratic principles embodied in our group's meetings? If not, how committed are we toward making our meetings more democratic?
6. Are our democratic principles embodied in our group's written procedures and bylaws? If not, what can we do to put our principles in writing?

Group Activity

Write on a chalkboard all of the words and phrases group members associate with democracy (e.g., "free speech," "equality"). Then cluster these ideas into categories and try to organize the clusters of terms coherently. Use these as a basis for defining the democratic process. (Groups might wish to focus on what democracy means in small groups.)

The list of terms and ideas may produce some contradictions. Clarify the meaning of the conflicting ideas (e.g., majority rule vs. consensus), making certain that the apparent tension between them is not superficial. Discuss any possibilities for integrating or reconciling the two opposing principles. The list should also produce some principles or procedures that all group members agree are a part of democracy. Clarify the degree to which the group agrees, building a definition of democracy all can accept.

Competence

Discussion Questions

1. What people do we think of as incapable of deciding what's in their own best interests? (If group members cannot think of any people, ask the group to consider conditions such as infancy, insanity, senility, and ignorance.)

2. In general, how much confidence do we have in one another? In what situations are we most willing to trust each other's judgment? When are we most likely to doubt one another's judgment?

3. Do we think we, as individuals, are the best judges of what's in our own personal interests? Under what circumstances would we prefer that someone else decide something for us?

4. Do we think we are the best judges of what's in the interest of our group? Under what circumstances would we prefer that someone outside the group make the decision for us?

5. What information or resources do we need in order to be competent judges of our own best interests? What do we need in order to be good judges of what decisions are in the group's best interests?

Group Activity

Each group member writes his or her name on a slip of paper and places it in a hat or other receptacle. Each member then writes an action, trivial or serious, that requires a decision (e.g., what school to attend, where to go to lunch, whether to marry, what movie to watch) and places these slips of paper into a separate container.

One by one each group member picks a name and an action and tries to make the decision for the other person. People should draw again if they draw their own names.

After each decision, the person deciding can say how it would feel to have made that decision for the other person. If people had to make the decision for someone else, what information would they need? Have they ever been put in a position where they played such a role?

People who had the decision made for them can also share their feelings. What would it feel like to have that other person make the decision for them? Have others in the past made such decisions for them?

Individuality and Mutuality

Discussion Questions

1. When we are together as a group, do we still maintain our identities as individuals?

2. When we are by ourselves, do we still sometimes view ourselves as part of the group?

3. At what times have we most clearly seen ourselves as individuals? When have we viewed our self-identity as independent of our association with the group?

4. At what times have we felt our strongest attachments to the group? When have we viewed our self-identity as connected to the group?

5. When is it most important to be treated as an individual? When would it be inappropriate for others to stress our group identity?

6. When is it most important to draw upon our identity as a group member? When would it be inappropriate to focus upon our separate, individual identities?

Group Activity

This exercise can be very revealing, and it may bring up strong emotions. On a piece of paper, write the name of each group member in a pattern that forms a circle. Make a photocopy of this circle of names for each group member, then have each draw straight lines connecting every pair of group members that has a strong bond. (In groups with less familiarity among members, draw lines for any moderately strong bonds, such as a budding friendship or regular friendly interaction.)

After drawing the lines, place arrowheads on them indicating which of these people seeks the other one out. There might be a one-way relation between two group members, or the relation may be reciprocal.

Compare members' different drawings, discussing any noteworthy similarities and differences in the patterns of lines and arrows. Discuss why some people have more or fewer lines connected to their name. Discuss why some group members have more arrows pointing toward them, and why some have more arrows pointing away from them.

Congeniality

Discussion Questions

1. Is it important to us that we create a comfortable or friendly group atmosphere?
2. What makes us feel comfortable in a group? What does it mean to be friendly or congenial with one another?
3. What do we do to make each other feel at ease? How do we show our affection for one another as group members?
4. In what ways do we express hostility toward one another? What do we do that might intimidate each other? When do we feel intimidated?
5. How can we show anger or frustration without making others feel defensive or hurt? Is it possible to be friendly while expressing "negative" emotions?
6. How do we treat the people we consider our friends? How is this different from how we treat each other? Why is it different?

Group Activity

For groups unaccustomed to sharing feelings openly, this exercise may make some members uncomfortable. Members each share with the others one group experience they have had that made them feel good (e.g., comfortable, happy) and one that made them feel bad (e.g., uncomfortable, angry, intimidated). It is preferable if these experiences occurred in the same group doing the exercise.

Speaking Opportunities

Discussion Questions

1. How does our group regulate speaking turns? (For example, "only one person can talk at a time," or "speak when called upon by the facilitator.") Do we follow these rules? Do these rules make us feel constrained, or do they make it easier for us to speak during meetings?
2. Do we all have ample opportunities to set our meeting agendas? Do we all get a chance to redefine the issues on the agenda, amending them or reframing them?
3. When we have bits of information, personal views, or arguments that we wish to share with the group, do we present them? If not, why not?
4. Do we all get a chance to vote during meetings? If we still disagree after a vote has been taken, is there a way we can reiterate our views?
5. What does it mean to "talk too much"? Do any of us do this? If so, what do we do when someone is doing this?

6. What does it mean to "talk too little"? Do any of us do this? If so, what do we do when someone is doing this?

7. How do we respond to silence during meetings? Does someone always take the floor quickly when there is a pause?

8. In what ways might a more reserved speaker join in a heated discussion? If it is difficult to do so at present, how can we ensure that a reticent speaker has access to the floor?

Group Activity

Sit in a circle with two chairs in the middle, facing each other. Going around the circle, place people in the middle in pairs until everyone has sat in the middle once. When a pair sits in the middle, both people begin talking and try to hold the floor as long as they can. Some pairs may wish to play in a no-holds-barred style, unrelentingly talking over one another for a minute. Others may try to gain and regain the floor using more subtle methods. After each pair returns to the circle, group members may wish to discuss the tactics used to hold the floor. Which of these are appropriate, and which are normally considered rude? How does the group enforce speaking norms? Should the group create new norms to make it easier for more reticent speakers to gain and hold the floor?

Next, bring a clock with a second hand into the room. A group member begins speaking to the group on a current issue. Each group member holds a notepad and listens attentively, then writes down the time at which they believe the speaker should stop talking. Everyone also writes what it was that made them believe it was time to stop talking. When the last person has written "stop now," compare the times and the reasons for wishing the speaker to stop.

After testing members' patience with speakers, the group can explore its feelings about silence. A group member makes a brief comment on a current issue, followed by total silence. Each group member writes when they think it is time for someone to speak. Group members also write what they did during the silence. Were they thinking? What distracted them? When did the silence become uncomfortable or cease to be productive?

Speaking Responsibilities

Discussion Questions

1. What kind of information can we justifiably withhold from one another?
2. If a decision requires specialized information that only one or two group members possess, should the group make the decision? In what

cases should the information be shared with others before making a decision? How detailed does this shared information need to be?

3. What effort do we make to ensure that our decisions are well informed? Do we conduct research whenever it is necessary? Do we check the accuracy of our assumptions before reaching a decision?

4. When we are trying to persuade other group members, what responsibilities do we have to them? What kinds of argument are unethical?

5. What role can emotion play in the persuasion process? Is it acceptable for a group to be swayed by emotions? When can a speaker appeal to the group's feelings? Is it okay to appeal to some emotions but not others (e.g., hope vs. fear)?

6. Is it okay for a speaker to make an argument based on weak evidence or unsound logic? What responsibility do speakers have to acknowledge any weaknesses they see in their own arguments?

Group Activity

Make a list of past decisions the group has reached and/or future issues the group may need to discuss. Identify the kinds of information that the group needed/would need to make informed decisions. Discuss how the group can ensure that it obtains the information it needs (e.g., we have a lawyer on retainer if we are sued, or one of us should learn more about noncompetitive children's games before we decide what activities to sponsor at the community fair).

Each group member shares with the others a time that they were moved by an argument, changing their beliefs or feelings on an issue. Identify what made the speaker effective, and consider when these speaking strategies might be unethical. Group members can also share a time they felt manipulated. What strategies made the speaker (or advertisement, etc.) manipulative or unethical?

Listening

Discussion Questions

1. When do we have trouble understanding one another? Do we speak too soft or too loud? Do others sometimes speak in words or styles that we cannot understand?

2. When do we have trouble expressing ourselves clearly?

3. Do we carefully consider what each other says? What speaking behaviors make it harder for us to listen to a person?

4. How do we show a speaker that we are listening? Do we nod or make eye contact? Do we ask for clarification or elaboration if we are unable to follow what a speaker is saying?

5. When we wish to speak, are we still able to listen to those who are presently speaking?

6. How do we feel when others listen to us? How does it affect us? How do we feel and react when we sense that others are not listening?

Group Activity

Every group member thinks of something that will be hard to express to the rest of the group (e.g., moving experiences they had by themselves or a technical concept from their workplace or classes). Members then take turns trying to express their idea or experience in a way others can comprehend. No one can interrupt the speaker. The group discusses what speakers did to try to make themselves clear.

Next, group members each think of something they would like others to hear about—an idea or an experience they have in mind. Members then take turns telling others about their idea or experience, without worrying so much about how best to express themselves. Listeners can interrupt the speaker only if they believe it is necessary to fully understand the speaker. This time the other members must make a concerted effort to listen and to let the speaker know they are listening. Discuss what it felt like to be heard and what signs made it clear that others were listening. Discuss anything that made it difficult to understand the speaker.

Other Group Exercises

Several books on group decision making provide helpful exercises. Here is a partial reading list for those who wish to try additional activities.

Brilhart, John K. *Effective Group Discussion*. 6th ed. Dubuque, Iowa: William C. Brown, 1989. *A small group communication textbook with discussion questions and exercises.*

Center for Conflict Resolution. *A Manual for Group Facilitators*. Madison, Wis.: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1977. *A guide for learning facilitation. Although it has few exercises, it can serve as the basis for discussion.*

———. *Building United Judgment*. Madison, Wis.: Center for Conflict Resolution, 1981. *An excellent manual for learning consensus.*

Coover, Virginia, Ellen Deacon, Charles Esser, and Christopher Moore. *Resource Manual for a Living Revolution*. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1978. *This resource book on a wide variety of topics contains a*

handful of great group process exercises, including methods for ensuring equal speaking opportunities.

Fluegelman, Andrew, ed. *The New Games Book*. New York: Headlands Press, 1976. *Includes many games for small and large groups of children and adults.*

Jensen, Arthur D., and Joseph C. Chilberg. *Small Group Communication*. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1991. *A small group communication textbook with a special section to develop member skills in problem-solving groups.*

Johnson, David W., and Frank P. Johnson. *Joining Together: Group Theory and Group Skills*. 2d ed. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1982. *A less academic group communication textbook with dozens of creative exercises.*

Rice, Wayne, and Mike Yaconelli. *Play It*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing, 1986. *Group games for children and adults.*

Starhawk. *Truth or Dare*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986. *A spiritual and philosophical work, much of which focuses on group process.*

Notes

1. This is inspired by Jane Mansbridge's "power circle exercise" in *Beyond Adversary Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 183-84.