

Session Objectives:

- Factors in group communication
- Group decision making
- Effective meetings

Factors in group communication

Size: The size of the team is a vital factor in group communication. Smaller groups can facilitate better interaction between the members, and are preferred for decision making and problem solving tasks. Though researchers have not arrived at an optimal size for a group, a number between 5 and 7 is considered to be ideal.

Longevity: The duration and purpose for which a team is formed decides the extent of communication between the members. The communication between members of a team that is set up for a short term focuses only on achieving a specific task. There is no attempt to develop or to maintain interpersonal relationships. On the other hand, in a team set up to work together for a long duration of time, there is more interpersonal rapport developed between its members.

Example: Conferences are organized to discuss specific issues and their duration is likely to be short. The communication that takes place between the members attending a conference focuses only on specific issues. The participants of a conference do not try to develop interpersonal relationships and rapport with the other participants.

In contrast to this, a cricket team is set up for a long duration. Hence, there is scope for rapport and interpersonal relationships to develop between the members.

Leadership: Communication between members of a group depends upon the ability of the group leader to lead his team to accomplish the group tasks while helping them to maintain interpersonal relationships.

Perception and self-concept: The different individuals who constitute a group have different perceptions about the manner in which a group must operate. This causes them to have certain expectations from the group. Further, every individual has his/her own self-concept. This determines the way in which he/she interacts with the other members of the group (submissive, moderate, or aggressive). Thus the success of a group depends on its ability to meet the expectations of its members and satisfy their self-concepts.

Status: Members within a group differ in terms of their social status and qualifications. The interaction among the members is likely to be influenced by these factors. While speaking to peers, the equality in status makes communication more friendly and informal but when speaking to superiors, the communication may be more deferential while it may be authoritative when one is speaking to subordinates.

Example: The nonverbal cues in a discussion between a manager and a supervisor are different from the cues that are evident in a meeting between a manager and a divisional head.

Group decision making

Decision making by a group follows a predictable pattern. While solving a problem, groups go through a few stages.

Stages in group decision making

Four stages of group problem solving have been identified by Aubrey Fisher.

These are:

- **The Orientation stage:** This comprises the preliminary stage of group interaction, where the members get to know each other. The norms that would govern future interactions between the members are formulated in this stage.

Example: The initial meeting where members are introduced to each other and basic issues are introduced.

- **The Conflict stage:** This is the stage in which the members debate on the ideas presented by the members of the group.

Example : Brainstorming sessions where issues are discussed.

- **The Emergence stage:** At this stage, members iron out their differences and come up with various alternatives to solve the problem. The outcome of the exercise as well as the group's social structure becomes apparent at this stage.

Example: A problem is discussed thread-bare and various acceptable options are arrived at.

- **The Reinforcement stage:** At this stage, the members of the group, verbally or nonverbally, reinforce or endorse the decision taken in the previous stage.

Example: The time at which a final decision is taken on an issue. During a board meeting, the board members may show their support to the decision taken by using verbal or nonverbal forms of communication.

Approaches to Group decision making

The purpose of a group may be to achieve a goal or to arrive at a decision. Groups may adopt the following approaches to achieve their purpose.

- **Reflective thinking:** This approach was devised by John Dewey. It provides a systematic manner of tackling a problem and consists of six steps: problem identification, problem analysis, criteria selection, solution generation, solution evaluation and selection, and solution implementation.
- **Brainstorming:** In this approach, the ideas of all the members are assimilated. None of the ideas are weeded out in the initial stages. Each idea is then taken up for discussion. A final solution is arrived at after extensively discussing all the ideas.
- **Nominal group technique:** According to this technique, each member should list out the options and prioritize them. After comparing the rankings given by all members, the facilitator assigns an average score to each idea and determines the idea which is of topmost priority to the group.

The final decision

These are different ways in which a group may arrive at a decision or reach an agreement. Some of these methods are:

- **Consensus:** It involves group members reaching an agreement after debating and discussing various alternatives.

- **Compromise:** In this method of decision making, group members reach an agreement by foregoing a few of their demands.
- **Majority vote:** This method of decision making involves taking decisions on the basis of majority.
- **Decision by leader:** The group allows the leader to take a final decision, and abides by the decision.
- **Arbitration:** Decision is taken by a person who is external to the group.

Effective Meetings

Among all the meetings that are held, most of them fail to be effective because they are held at too frequent intervals and most often lack a purpose. Several times, there are too many people present at the meeting which makes it difficult to arrive at an effective decision. Careful planning is required for a meeting to be effective.

The Planning Process

There are five important questions that need to be addressed while planning a meeting. These are:

- Why have a meeting at all?
- What type of meeting should be held?
- Who should participate?
- Where should the meeting be held?
- When should the meeting be held?

Why have a meeting at all?

Before calling for a meeting, the purpose of holding the meeting should be clearly known. Routine meetings are called to update employees on a daily, weekly or monthly basis about recent developments pertaining to the ongoing purpose of the organization. Meetings may also be called for specific purposes such as to inform, consult or persuade the members

What type of meeting should be called?

Meetings fall under three categories:

- Informational meetings,
- Problem-solving meetings, and
- Change facilitating meetings.
- **Informational meetings:** These meetings are organized to inform the members of the group about recent developments. Usually the communication flow in these meetings is one-way communication but sometimes, it may be two-way, during which the members may ask the convener to clarify certain points.

Example: A meeting is called to inform all the employees about changes in the leave policy of the company.

- **Problem-solving meetings:** The purpose of holding these meetings is to generate ideas and later arrive at a decision. The decisions that result from such meetings may include decisions regarding changes in company policy, adopting a new technology and so on.

Example: A meeting is called to decide on new markets into which the company can venture on the strength of its current products.

- **Change-facilitating meetings:** These meetings require a lot of planning. The main purpose of these meetings is to convince the participants on a particular issue.

Example: A meeting is called to convince the employees to adopt a new application software for carrying out their daily operations.

Who should participate?

The purpose of holding the meeting decides who should participate in the meeting.

In case of an informational meeting, a large number of people are required to attend the meeting but if the purpose of having the meeting is problem-solving, then only those who can contribute to the discussion and who are directly involved in the decision need to be invited.

Where should the meeting be held?

The place of meeting and the seating arrangement at the meeting plays a role in making it effective or otherwise. It also reflects the extent to which the meeting is formal and whether the meeting is dominated by the convener or is participatory. The seating arrangements differ for different types of meetings.

When should the meeting be held?

Meetings that are held on Monday mornings, and in the afternoon on the last day of the week are usually ineffective. This is because the people who participate in meetings held at these times are generally pre-occupied with other thoughts and plans. The timing of a meeting should be such that the participants remain attentive besides making meaningful contributions to the discussions.

Notice

After the questions to be discussed in the meeting are finalized, the convener issues a notice calling for a meeting. While issuing the notice, certain aspects should be taken into consideration:

- The notice must be issued by the proper authority
- It must be issued sufficiently in advance
- The notice should clearly specify the time, date and venue of the meeting
- An agenda should accompany the notice
- The notice should be sent to all persons who are entitled to receive it.

Agenda

The agenda of a meeting comprises the list of topics that are to be discussed in the meeting. The agenda should clearly state the issues to be discussed, the time, date, place and the name of the meeting. The

supporting background materials should also be sent along with the agenda to the participants. The participants should come well-prepared for the meeting.

Minutes

Minutes consist of written records of the proceedings of the previous meeting. Minutes are sent along with the agenda or read out by the company secretary before the commencement of the meeting. The purpose is to brief the members about the previous meeting.

Opening the meeting

The meeting usually commences with the chairman or the leader conveying thanks to the participants for attending the meeting. He then follows this with a brief speech about the purpose of the meeting. The agenda papers are circulated to those who don't possess them. The chairman also gives a briefing on the specific contributions to be made by members, setting the time-frame for the same.

Conducting the business

The main role of the chairman or the leader of the meeting is to ensure that the various issues listed in the agenda are discussed. In case of any deviations, he should immediately redirect the focus on to the main agenda. He should also ensure that all members participate. When tactics such as personal power play, attention-seeking and blocking are resorted to, he should handle them deftly. Personal opinions should be kept at bay and he should consider the practicality and acceptability of the contributions made by members. At the end of the meeting, he should thank all members for their contributions, irrespective of his personal opinion on the different views expressed in the meeting.

Concluding the meeting

When there are few minutes left for the meeting to end, the leader brings it to the notice of the members. This enables the members to be able to wrap up their discussions within the time. After that, the leader should summarize the proceedings stating what has been achieved and what hasn't been achieved in the meeting and inform the members about the future course of action. He should also inform them as to when the minutes will be circulated.

Following up the meeting

After the meeting is over, the leader should review the proceedings and find an answer to the following queries:

- Did the meeting achieve its specified purpose?
- What are the issues that require further discussion?
- Was there adequate participation by the members?
- How can the next meeting be conducted better?

Summary

Effective communication is desired among members of work groups to accomplish their assigned tasks. Group communication is affected by various factors. Effective communication within the group helps in group

decision making which involves various stages and approaches.

Meetings are necessary for group decision making. Careful planning is required on various aspects of the meeting to make them fruitful.