12 Making Observations and Giving Feedback

Group Skills Preview

In this chapter, you will learn to do the following:

- Explain why a group could benefit from feedback
- Distinguish between types and levels of feedback
- Complete and interpret an interaction diagram
- Persuade your group to try audio- or videotaping meetings to obtain feedback
- Help your group initiate and design a feedback system
- Give effective feedback in one of your groups

Group success depends heavily on the degree to which group members effectively interact with one another. Groups that meet over an extended time—from just a few meetings to meeting every week—are more likely to effectively perform their tasks and create positive relationships among members if the group creates a feedback system (Dominick, Reilly, & McGourty, 1997). A feedback system includes two separate activities. The first is setting up a system for monitoring, observing, or collecting data about group and individual group member performances. The second is setting up a system for using that data as feedback for group members. By considering both positive and negative features of the group and its process, a group can use feedback to strengthen its performance.

What Is Feedback?

Feedback can be information about the quantity or quality of a group's work, an assessment of the effectiveness of the group's task or activity, or evaluations of members' individual performances. To be most effective, feedback should be an objective evaluation of individual group members' performance or the actions of a group, not one member's opinion or subjective evaluation. The feedback described in this chapter is not part of a formal performance evaluation system; an outsider does not evaluate the group. Rather, feedback is generated for the group by the group itself.

Feedback, as we are interested in it, is a group process that serves as an error detection device to help a group identify and begin to solve its interaction problems.

Thus group members generate their own feedback. Group members are both participants and observers, with observations aboveboard and apparent to other group members. Group members who trust one another can assume these additional group roles. The most effective group is one in which all members contribute feedback information (Keltner, 1989). When trust develops among group members, a bond exists to help each group member perform as effectively for the team as he or she can. When individuals are drawn this tightly into a group, their interdependence is extremely high. By investing in one another through observation and feedback, interdependence is strengthened.

Why Groups Need Feedback

Groups that meet over a period of time require a great deal of time, energy, and other resources. Generally, group members are interested in performing well, making effective decisions, and creating positive relationships. Feedback can help group members understand how their groups work and how to make them work better (Schultz, 1999). That is, feedback helps the team or group learn about itself. Some groups that integrate performance feedback into their activities think of the group as a place of continuous improvement. However, "unless a team has data about how it is doing . . . there is no way it can learn. And unless a team learns, there is no way it can improve" (Hackman, 2002, p. 103).

Of course, by paying attention to how others react to them, group members are getting some feedback from other group members. Unfortunately, without an agreed-upon system for generating feedback, group members are likely to receive
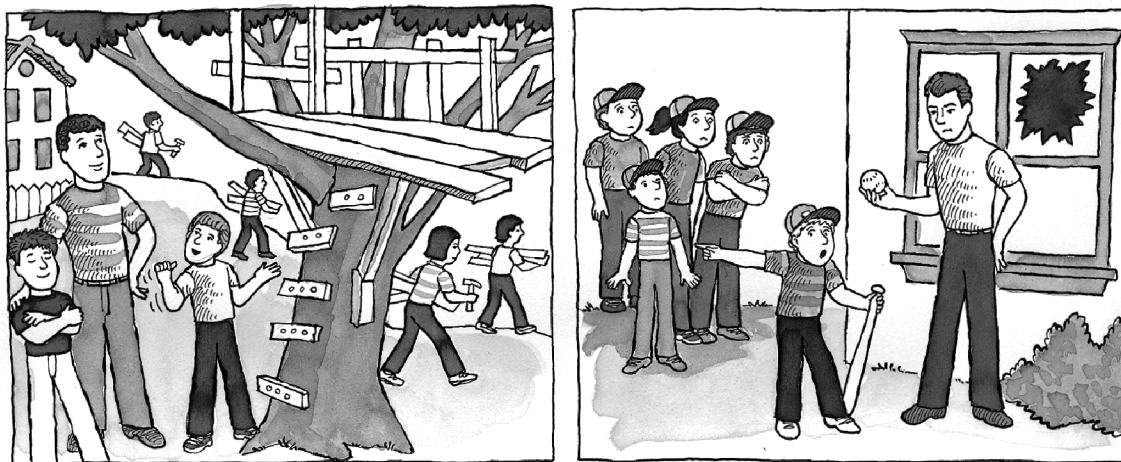
Many of us are biased about our responsibility to groups. If the group succeeds, we tend to believe that the group's success should be attributed to us personally. If the group fails, we blame the group and avoid taking responsibility for its failure. We are more effective group members and a greater asset to our groups when we recognize this type of attribution bias.

biased feedback. Typically, you are more likely to give detailed feedback when the information is negative or the team or group has suffered a loss, and to give general feedback when the information is positive or the team or group is glowing after a success (Nadler, 1979). Feedback can also be biased by another tendency.

When asked how you contributed to a group's success, most of you would reply that you were personally responsible. But when asked how you contributed to a group's failure, you would probably avoid taking that responsibility. This attributional bias is common in group members. Virtually without exception, members claim personal responsibility when their group is successful and deny personal responsibility when their group fails (Forsyth & Kelley, 1994). This type of self-serving bias may cloud your judgment, keeping you from recognizing your true impact on the group. Another factor figures in here as well. Some people are optimists—they expect things to generally go well. Conversely, some are pessimists—they expect things to generally turn out poorly. Personality traits like these can also cloud your judgment of your impact on group interaction. Feedback —or information that evaluates or judges your communication performance—is one type of tool or intervention that can help you overcome this bias and improve your abilities as group members. Feedback also improves the functioning of the team. In successful teams, everyone is accountable all of the time (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Thus each team requires some system of checks and balances —both at a team level and at an individual group member level. If you are still wondering whether a group really needs feedback about how well its members are communicating, consider this: Nearly 75 percent of all group problems are linked to interpersonal problems and poor communication (Di Salvo et al., 1989).

Initiating a feedback system in a group provides several benefits. First, group members who believe that their input to the group will be evaluated are less likely to become social loafers—those members who hide behind the efforts of other group members. Groups that include regular evaluation of group members automatically decrease the likelihood of social loafing. The evaluation process and potential feedback about individual performance usually motivate potential social loafers to take on other, more productive roles in the group.

Second, when feedback is regularly provided in a group, member identification with the group is enhanced. Members of effective and successful groups are committed to their continuing success. They want to know how they are performing and how they can increase their communication effectiveness in the group. As a result, their identification with the group is enhanced, and they become more committed to the group, creating stronger interdependence among group members.

Third, at the group level, group members who receive positive feedback about their group's performance and their interactions are more likely to be satisfied with group member relationships, believe that their group is more prestigious, be more cohesive, and believe that group members are competent at their task or activity (Anderson, Martin, & Riddle, 2001; Limon & Boster, 2003). Receiving positive feedback sets off a spiral, causing group members to enhance their beliefs about the group. As a result, group members are willing to mobilize and coordinate their skills, the amount of effort they are willing to put into the task, and their

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

Group Goal, Interdependence, and Group Identity

How group members give and receive feedback can help the group achieve its goals or weaken relationships among group members. Feedback, even about relational issues, should always be grounded in the group's goal or task. Reflect on your last group meeting. What feedback might have helped the group? specific group members? you? If you had the opportunity, how would you have constructed and delivered feedback to help the group become more effective? Would it have been difficult or easy to persuade everyone to participate in both giving and receiving feedback? How do you think giving and receiving feedback affects group members' interdependence and identity? What fears do you have in giving and receiving feedback? What about the fears of other group members?
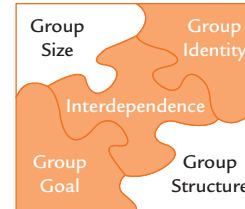
persistence when faced with challenges (Bandura, 1986). Groups wanting to be successful need feedback to identify their strengths so they can capitalize on them. And groups wanting to turn failure into success need feedback to identify their weaknesses so they can make improvements. "Group Goal, Interdependence, and Group Identity" can help you explore the feedback process.

Levels and Types of Feedback

To be effective, feedback must be specific. Feedback differs in two characteristics: (a) the level, or to whom feedback is generated or what feedback is about, and (b) the type, or the intent or function of the feedback.

Levels of Feedback

Feedback can occur on many levels. Feedback may focus on how the group is working with procedures, how an individual is handling a specific group role in working with others, how one member sits silently saying nothing, how the group is dealing with a conflict, or how the organization is using the information the group provides.

Task and Procedural Feedback Feedback at the task or procedural level usually involves issues of effectiveness and appropriateness. Issues of quantity and quality of group output are the focus of **task feedback**: Did the team win? Did the group raise enough money? To what extent did the group's presentation satisfy the judges? Thus, task feedback focuses on the outcome of the group's activity. **Procedural feedback** provides information on the processes the group used to arrive at its outcome. Is the brainstorming procedure effective for the group? Did group members plan sufficiently? Questions like these focus group members' attention on the task dimension of their activity. Groups need this level of feedback,

especially after trying a new group procedure or passing a major milestone in the group's development.

Relational Feedback Feedback that provides information about the group climate or environmental or interaction dynamics within a relationship in the group is **relational feedback**. This feedback focuses group members' attention on how well they are working together rather than on the procedures used to accomplish their tasks. Questions that focus on the relational dimension of the group include Did the group manage conflict effectively? Were the leadership needs of the group adequately fulfilled? Did working on the task enhance cohesiveness among group members?

Individual Feedback Feedback that focuses on specific group members is **individual feedback.** This feedback may address the knowledge, skills, or attitudes a group member demonstrates or displays. A good place to start is with seven characteristics that affect an individual's ability to be an effective group member (Larson & LaFasto, 1989).

The first is intellectual ability. Can the person secure relevant information and relate and compare data from different sources? A group member who is analytical or creative is especially helpful to his or her group. The second factor is results orientation. The group member who can demonstrate the ability to work toward outcomes and complete activities helps further the progress of the team. The third factor—interpersonal skills—encompasses a group member's ability to relate to the feelings and needs of other group members. The fourth factor is the ability to plan and organize. The individual who is able both to schedule personal time and to work within the schedules of others contributes to the accomplishment of group goals. Typically, group members must handle several activities at once and have the ability to meet competing deadlines. The fifth factor is the individual's ability to demonstrate a team orientation. Can the person work collaboratively with others on complex issues? If so, the individual is revealing a commitment to the team on which others can depend. The sixth factor is maturity. The group member is considered mature when he or she acts responsibly when dealing with difficult people or situations. The final factor is presence or image. The person's willingness to present a friendly impression reflects positively on him or her and on the team. The characteristics of an ideal group member described in Chapter 5 apply here.

Feedback can cover any or all of these issues. But, in general, group members are going to respond to three main issues: (a) Do you demonstrate the essential skills and abilities needed by the team? (b) Do you demonstrate a strong desire to contribute to the group's activities? and (c) Are you capable of collaborating effectively with other team members? Remember that while you are being evaluated on these dimensions you are evaluating other team members as well.

Group Feedback At this level, feedback focuses on how well the group is performing. Have team members developed adequate skills for working together?

MASTERING GROUP SKILLS

Topics for Group Feedback

Although each group is different and unique, most groups will benefit if you and other group members reflect on the following questions. How would you answer these questions for one of your current groups? Would other group members provide similar responses?

Goals of the Group

1. Are members committed to the goals of the group?
2. Are members' personal goals in alignment with the group's goals?

Roles in the Group

1. Are roles and responsibilities within the group clear to all?
2. Who in the group is providing leadership?
3. Is the group responding well to this leadership?
4. Are other necessary roles covered by someone in the group?

Procedures and Processes

1. Are group members communicating effectively together?
2. Are decision-making procedures used appropriately?
3. Is conflict managed?
4. Does the group spend its time together effectively?

General

1. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the group?
2. Is someone or something outside the group hindering it?

Use these questions to guide a feedback session at the end of a meeting. Your answers could uncover issues that need to be addressed or resolved for your group to succeed. Even if no difficulties are uncovered, the group will benefit from reviewing its direction.

Does the role structure or communication network of the group support the group's task and activities? Has the team developed norms for communicating that help it accomplish its goals? Are there adequate and appropriate levels of group cohesiveness and group member satisfaction? Are the group's leadership functions being fulfilled effectively? Did the group develop a communication network that is conducive to its task? What decision-making procedures are group members effectively using? How well is the group managing conflict when it occurs?

Feedback at this level can have a dramatic impact on members' attraction to the group, as well as their feelings of involvement and self-esteem. Certainly, feedback to the group about its performance on its task increases group members' motivations to improve their performance. The more interdependently group members work together, the greater the impact of group feedback concerning the task (Nadler, 1979). "Topics for Group Feedback" will give you some ideas for using feedback in your groups.

Over time, it is important that a group receive both task feedback—feedback about the technical competencies or functional task activities of the team—and **teamwork feedback**—feedback about the group's interactions and members' relationships, cooperation, communication, and coordination (McIntyre & Salas, 1995). Using both task and teamwork feedback, a group can actually improve its development over time.

Types of Feedback

There are three types of feedback—descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive—each of which has a different intent or function, and carries different inferences.

Descriptive Feedback Feedback that merely identifies or describes how a group member communicates is **descriptive feedback.** You may describe someone's communicator style, or you may note that someone's verbal communication and nonverbal communication suggest different meanings. For example, you say to Amber after a meeting, "You asked me to comment on how you communicated with others in the group. From my perspective, you were very dominant; you talked a lot and seemed very active in the group. I also felt that you argued each point introduced. Someone once told me that I was contentious when I did that. And you were precise. You said exactly what was on your mind."

Evaluative Feedback Feedback that goes beyond mere description and provides an evaluation or assessment of the person who communicates is **evaluative feedback**. For instance, after describing Amber's communicator style as dominant, contentious, and precise, you follow up by saying that this style causes other group members to avoid talking with her. Amber asks what you mean by that. You let her know that members with a more submissive style find Amber's style overwhelming, making it difficult for them to feel equal to her in the group.

Not only did you describe Amber's style, you evaluated her style as negatively affecting group member interaction. Too much negative evaluative feedback decreases motivation and elicits defensive coping attributions, such as attributing the feedback to others. At the extreme, it can destroy group members' pride in their group. In these cases, group members are likely to spend additional time rationalizing their failures (for example, finding a way to see a loss as a win) (Nadler, 1979). To be constructive, evaluative feedback that identifies group member deficiencies is best given in groups with a supportive communication climate in which trust has developed among members.

In contrast, favorable feedback generates motivation and increases feelings of attraction among group members (Nadler, 1979). Let's go back to Amber. After your feedback, Amber has toned down her dominant style and has quit arguing minor points. You say, "Great job today, Amber. I thought today's meeting went much better. That's due to you, of course." Naturally, we assume that positive evaluative feedback will have positive effects on a group. But can a group receive too much favorable feedback? Yes. A group inundated by positive remarks, particularly in the absence of negative evaluations, will start to distrust the feedback as information and perceive it as insincere.

Prescriptive Feedback Feedback that provides group members with advice about how they should act or communicate is **prescriptive feedback**. For instance, after a group meeting which you believe was ineffective, you ask a group member you trust, "Got any advice?" Brian responds that he too was upset by how the meeting developed. "We've got to get the agenda to everyone sooner so they can prepare for the meeting. Could you remind Sara to do that? She trusts you, and you and she work together on other committees. If you'll do that, I'll talk with people informally after we get the agenda to remind them to get the information we need *before* the meeting." In this instance, Brian's feedback is prescriptive for you, the group, and himself. Try "Giving Specific Feedback" to develop your feedback skills.

Observing the Group

A powerful way to demonstrate the effectiveness of group process or group member relationships is to audiotape or videotape a segment of a meeting. Listening to or viewing the tape and then discussing it can motivate group members to improve their performance (Walter, 1975). Many sports teams do this after every game—win or lose—to enable the team to review its mistakes and to see in what situations the players performed effectively.

Before you suggest taping your group, let's explore the effects taping can have on groups. Some group members may be hesitant for their performance to be captured on tape and so become less talkative in the taped meeting. Conversely, some members may use the taping as an opportunity to show off by clowning around, making jokes, or talking more than usual. Usually, such behaviors diminish as the meeting progresses if other members avoid drawing attention to the taping process. Once the camera or tape player is set up, check to make sure it is working correctly and then leave it alone until the end of the meeting or until a group member asks that the recording device be turned off. If a group member makes this request, it should be honored without discussion or explanation.

A tape of your group's interaction provides a record of what you did (or did not) say, as well as how you said it. Hearing how you communicated in the group can help you determine which of your communication skills need improvement. Taping a group's interaction also helps the group as a whole determine how well its members work together. Taped interactions are undeniable testaments to who

SKILL BUILDER

Giving Specific Feedback

Learning to give effective feedback takes practice. Listed here are examples of feedback statements taken from transcripts of group meetings. The examples show both the intent of the feedback and the actual feedback given. After considering the level and type of feedback, evaluate the feedback given. If you think it is lacking in any way or is likely to be ineffective, rewrite the feedback to be more effective.

Level and Type of Feedback	Feedback Given	Your Feedback Suggestion
Individual, positive	"Connor helped us focus on the real arguments when he asked each of us to describe why we felt the way we did."	
Group, positive	"We did a great job, guys."	
Group, negative	"I think we all could do a better job of managing our tempers."	
Evaluative, relational	"Mark, next time, why don't you just bring a gun and shoot Darius? You were mad at him the entire meeting."	
Descriptive, group, task/procedural	"We made four decisions, each with a different decision-making strategy."	
Negative, group, relational, prescriptive	"We have to get along better."	

talked and who did not, to whose ideas were listened to and whose were not, and to what decision procedures worked and what ones did not. Groups, like individuals, can fall into patterns of communication. Periodically, you need to do an assessment of both.

When the group is ready to listen to or view the taped proceedings, it is best to focus on one aspect of the group's communication. For example, you could suggest that your group count the number of times talking turns were interrupted or assess the degree to which group members satisfied the five critical decision-making functions described in Chapter 7.

An analysis of taped proceedings will be more effective if you avoid focusing on specific group members. For example, it is better to analyze how the group maximized use of its leadership than to focus only on the leader's communicator style. In the former case, group members could listen to or view the tape to assess which leadership roles were distributed among group members and whether the

group successfully avoided a pattern in which the leader talks after every member contributes. These are issues for which the entire group is responsible.

If you captured the group's interaction on video or DVD, you can also identify the structure of the group's communication network by drawing an **interaction diagram** of who talks to whom. First, draw a diagram to represent where group members are sitting. The first time a group member speaks, draw an arrow to the person to whom the message is directed. If the message is directed to the group as a whole, the arrow points away from the group (for ease in seeing the network). For each subsequent message, place a hatch mark across the arrow.

At the end of the interaction, the diagram will represent both the frequency and flow of messages sent to individual group members and to the group. An example of an interaction diagram is displayed in Figure 12.1. Before each tour-nament this baseball team meets for a strategy session. In just a few minutes of interaction, it is easy to see how the flow of communication is developing in the team. As expected, the coach and the team leader, who also plays first base, send the most messages to the group and specific group members. Notice also how a subgroup has developed among the right, left, and center fielders, and among the pitcher, catcher, and first base player. This isn't unusual, given that this is a meeting to develop game strategy. Also notice that the coach speaks most frequently to team members who sit across from him. This is not unusual either. The second base player and right fielder sitting immediately next to the coach are out of his line of sight. Finally, notice the second base player. He is the most isolated of team members. Remember, though, that the coach, first base player, center fielder, shortstop, and catcher are sending messages to the group as a whole. While no one is sending messages directly to the second base player, he is receiving the messages that are communicated the group as a whole.

Recall the description of communication networks in Chapter 3. Analyzing the diagram will help you to determine if the group has a centralized or decen-tralized network. This will reveal the degree of interdependence among members or their subgroups, as well as disparity in the frequency of member contributions or the pattern of group messages. Recall also that who talks to whom is just one type of communication network. An interaction diagram does not capture the quality of members' interactions. Thus, you must analyze the diagram relative to what the group was trying to accomplish in its interactions.

Although the focus of this chapter is on giving feedback to a group in which you participate, observing other groups and creating interaction diagrams of their meetings will make you more aware of how messages are exchanged in group settings. City councils and other governmental groups (such as planning com-missions) hold public meetings anyone can attend. In some communities, these meetings are also broadcast on local cable channels. Listening and observing other group meetings can help you identify and recognize patterns of group con-versation that, if you were participating, may go unnoticed. Although it's unlikely you'll have the opportunity to provide feedback to these groups, considering what you would give as feedback will strengthen your skills in giving feedback in your groups.
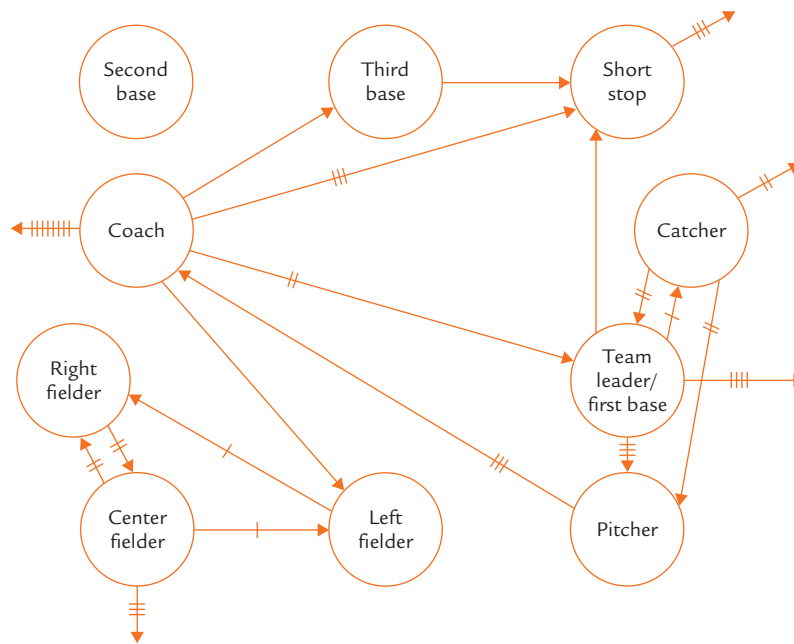
Figure 12.1 Example of an Interaction Diagram

Starting a Group Feedback System

It can be difficult to initiate a feedback system in groups. Often, this will be group members' first experiences with feedback and observation techniques. Here is one way of developing a feedback system that increases incrementally over time until a fully developed system is operating in the group. First, recognize that groups and members do not want to hear only negative feedback—feedback focused on what is *not* working. If a group hears only negative feedback, eventually its ability to function is seriously damaged (Smith & Berg, 1987). Groups and members are more likely to accept negative feedback when positive feedback is also included.

Observation and Feedback Process

For groups that have not used feedback systems before, start by introducing and explaining the concept of feedback at the end of one meeting. Individuals are often hesitant to disclose what they think or feel to others. To ease the group into the feedback process, ask each group member to write down three things that went well in the group session and three things that did not work so well. Focus their efforts on the task and procedural or the group level of feedback—how well the group worked together, how conflicts about which procedure to use kept the group from making a decision, how extensively group members shared the

leadership function, or how well the group was able to work through its agenda. The idea here is to get group members started thinking critically about the group's process.

Starting with yourself, ask group members to alternate reading first a positive and then a negative comment until all of the comments are before the group. You may want to ask someone to write these down on a chalkboard or flip chart. Even if every group member chooses the obvious positives and negatives, the concept of feedback has been introduced in the group. Now, with the positives and negatives before the group, ask group members to select one positive that they will remember and use at the next meeting, and one negative that they can work on together at the next meeting. Before adjourning, ask each member to write down specifically what he or she will do to help the group overcome the negative the group selected. With this procedure, you call attention to the feedback process and stimulate members' thinking about how well the group is operating.

At the end of the next meeting, ask group members to repeat the process just described and to also write down three things they did that contributed to the group's success and three things that they could improve on to help the group. Then repeat the round robin disclosure of the group-level task or procedural feedback, both positives and negatives. Again select a positive and a negative for the group to work on at its next meeting. If you feel the group has developed a supportive communication climate and that trust has developed among members, you can practice more personal self-disclosure. Again starting with yourself, reveal one thing you believe you could improve on to help the group. For example, suppose you reveal that you found yourself talking merely to fill the silences between other members' comments. Now state what you intend to do about it: "So, at the next meeting, I'll try to limit my talking to times when I have something important to say that contributes to the conversation. If you think that I'm talking simply to be talking, would one of you remind me? Thanks." Now you have modeled for other group members a process of revealing a personal issue you would like to work on, your idea for improvement, and your commitment to bettering your communication within the group. When you are finished, ask another group member to continue this process.

If your group decides to use interaction diagrams or tapes to provide feedback, be sure to set aside time for the group to collect data and to hear the feedback reports. Groups that do this regularly are often more satisfied with their group experiences. Not only do group members have an opportunity to contribute to the group's decisions and actions, they have an opportunity to actively and positively influence the group's process. Do not be surprised if your group needs two or three sessions to feel comfortable with the feedback and observation process. To help create acceptance for using feedback, also set aside a few minutes to discuss the effectiveness of the feedback tools used. Perhaps the feedback is not accepted because group members are uncomfortable or do not understand how an interaction diagram can help them.

There is one final consideration in designing and implementing your group's feedback system. When relational problems—conflicts among members, leadership

struggles—arise, there is a tendency to focus on the people involved in the conflict or leadership struggle. Doing so would prompt you to give relational feedback at the individual level. Before doing so, however, consider if and potentially how group structures—such as norms, communication networks, and role assignments—are contributing to the creation of relational problems. Also consider if the group's context (for example, who the group reports to) could be a source of relational issues. Oftentimes, helping the group restructure itself will eliminate or minimize these issues (Hackman, 2002).

Advice for Giving Feedback

The feedback process is not a blaming process. Rather, it should be used as an awareness strategy, a learning tool, and a goal-setting strategy. Many groups use feedback to help them determine and set goals. In this case, feedback is a motivational tool. Task groups frequently use feedback in this way. Feedback can also be used to help members become more aware of their group interaction performance. When group members have higher awareness, they pay more attention to their communication and its effects on others in the group. If you have been a member of any type of self-help or therapy group, you are familiar with this use of feedback.

For example, the leader of a stop-smoking support group notices that Noah frequently refers to his mother when talking about how he feels: "Noah, I noticed that you again said your mother made you feel that way when you were talking about your feelings of inadequacy. Can you restate how you feel without relying on your mom?" Noah responds, "I'll try. I just feel inadequate about being able to quit smoking. I need someone else to help me. I guess I'm just used to relying on her. Sorry, I wasn't supposed to say that." In this case, the leader's comment about Noah relying on his mother creates an awareness for Noah. It is unlikely that he even realized the extent to which she pops up in his comments.

Feedback can also help group members learn new skills. For example, after your softball team comes in from the field, your coach tells you, the catcher, "You have to have your glove up to catch the ball." Next time your team is in the field, you are sure to keep your eyes on the ball and to get your glove up before it is thrown by the pitcher.

In giving feedback, be sure to use specific examples from the group's interaction. This will focus group members' attention on what needs to be improved or what needs to be repeated. Also, use concrete words. Words like "great," "poor," or "okay" are vague and ambiguous, and using them in your feedback is not likely to help group members very much. More concrete words and phrases like "better than last meeting," "disruptive," and "we are maintaining the same level of effectiveness we achieved at the last meeting" are more meaningful and helpful to others. Finally, when giving feedback, be sure to explain the reasons behind your statements, especially when delivering evaluative or prescriptive feedback. Simply telling a group that it needs to improve how members share the leadership role does not provide enough detail for the group to understand how

Some groups cannot afford miscommunication. Using feedback can help group members communicate effectively and avoid communication failure.

sharing the leadership role was ineffective or how to better utilize members in that role.

When groups use feedback, disagreement should be welcomed and expected. It is not likely that every group member will agree with every one of your observations or views. One reason for integrating feedback into group interaction is to raise critical issues with the group. If you raise issues but do not give group members the opportunity to explore them, you have wasted your energy and the group's time. If other group members are silent after you give feedback, invite their questions and comments. At minimum, ask others if they agree with your view. If they do not or are expressing their disagreement nonverbally, ask questions to solicit their reactions. Statements like "Some of you may disagree with my assessment. If you feel differently, I'd like to hear what you think" may open the floor for discussion of the feedback.

Do not rely on one person as the observer of the group or the person responsible for giving feedback to the group. The feedback process should be jointly owned and operated by all group members. At some meetings, the observation process may be in the hands of one group member in the role of observer. Pass this responsibility around. Feedback can only become a regular part of the group's interaction when the group as a whole is involved in the process. Not only should all group members take responsibility for observing and giving feedback, but they

all should understand that everyone is expected to participate in the discussion after feedback is given.

At its best, the feedback process should allow the group to discuss *undiscussable* issues—issues that are relevant to the group's task but that are perceived to have negative or political ramifications if discussed openly in the group (Schwarz, 1994). What issues are undiscussable? In groups, typical undiscussable issues include poor member performance (especially when it is the leader), lack of trust, and personality conflicts. Too frequently, group members deal with these issues by not talking about them or by discussing them with people outside the group. One way to overcome the problem of discussing the undiscussable is to acknowledge to the group that the issue may be considered undiscussable (Schwarz, 1994). "I realize what I'm about to say may be difficult for us to deal with" is an excellent way of raising an undiscussable issue.

What should a feedback system do for your group (SYMLOG Consulting Group, 1986)? Using feedback regularly, group members should be able to discover and correct misperceptions that cause communication failures. Group members should also discover that some aspects of their communication can be improved. And, as group members learn to express their dissatisfactions honestly and tactfully, they will actually come to like one another more. This happens because feedback provides opportunities to develop a greater understanding of why people communicate or behave the way they do. In addition, after using feedback systematically, group members should be able to express their appreciation for and satisfaction with the things they like about their group. This reinforces their ability to work together as a team. Also, using feedback allows group members to develop a clearer picture of their behavior and their communication expectations for one another. And, after using feedback, group members should be able to make decisions more effectively and efficiently. Finally, feedback systems help raise group members' awareness about how groups actually operate.

Summary

An additional responsibility group members have toward the group is to monitor their own and others' performance in the group. By giving feedback, members provide others in the group with information about the actions of individuals and the performance of the group. Feedback serves as an error detection device to help a group identify and begin to solve its interaction problems.

Verbal feedback can be based on observations of the group and accompanied by the use of interaction diagrams or audio- and videotapes of the group. Groups need feedback to overcome common evaluation biases and to help members communicate and perform more effectively. Benefits of initiating feedback in groups include discouraging social loafing, increasing group member identification, and increasing group efficacy.

The style in which feedback is delivered is important. The ability to be direct, frank, and helpful will enable others to accept and use the feedback you provide. And being open-minded, supportive, and positive encourages others to listen to you.

Feedback is identified by its level—task and procedural, relational, individual, or group. Task and procedural feedback focuses on quality and quantity issues and procedures or processes the group uses to complete a group activity. Relational feedback focuses on issues of group climate or environment. Individual feedback focuses on a specific group member. Group feedback focuses on how well the group is developing and maintaining communication processes. There are also three types of feedback—descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive. Each has a different intent and carries different inferences.

Interaction diagrams provide feedback about who talks to whom and how much. Capturing the group's interaction on audio- or videotape provides powerful feedback. These techniques are strong reminders of what you did or did not say, as well as how you said it.

Groups should design their own feedback systems based on their needs and their comfort level with the different techniques. A group should use only one or a few techniques at a time. A good way to initiate a feedback system is to start slowly and gradually add additional types and levels of feedback as the group becomes comfortable with the process. Regardless of which type of feedback is used, a group should set aside time to hear the feedback reports. Doing so increases group member satisfaction.

Remember that feedback is not a blaming process. Rather, feedback should be used as a goal-setting strategy, an awareness strategy, and a learning tool. Feedback is more effective if specific examples from the group's interaction are given. Use concrete rather than vague words in describing members' interactions. When groups use feedback, disagreement should be welcome because not everyone will agree with all of your views or perceptions. If a group member must assume the role of formal observer, be sure to rotate this responsibility among everyone. At its best, everyone contributes to the feedback process. Feedback also allows a group to discuss *undiscussable* issues. Used effectively, feedback systems raise group members' awareness of their individual contributions to a group and of the overall performance of the group.

Discussion Questions and Exercises

1. Watch a television situation comedy or drama. Identify the main characters and their roles and responsibilities. If you were to design a feedback system for this group, what would you recommend?

2. Many of us are dissatisfied with the communication in our task groups. Knowing that your colleagues are likely be resistant to suggestions for implementing a feedback system, what arguments can you offer (and how might you deliver them) to convince them that a feedback system will be an important step in the group's development?

3. Talk with friends and relatives about their work, social, and community groups. To what extent do these groups integrate feedback into their communication?