



Technical Note on Using Groups and Teams Effectively



Introduction

Utilizing groups and teams in educational programming capitalizes on synergy, the effect of working together to achieve something that could not have been achieved through the efforts of individuals (Rees, 2001). Today's complex problems and issues require a variety of thoughts, ideas and experiences to develop the solutions and creative approaches necessary to solve problems and work within these issues for local communities, farmer associations and others.

Objectives

- * Address the fundamentals of working in groups and teams.
- * Examine challenges of working with groups and teams.
- * Describe various types of group and team learning approaches.
- * Create activities utilizing a team approach.

Addressing the Fundamentals of Working in Groups and Teams

Working in groups and teams requires cooperation among members, open and honest communication, the ability to work through conflict, and a willingness to put the interests of the group or team above individual interests and recognition.

The productivity of a group or team depends on the heterogeneity of its members. Groups and teams should be representative of the larger group represented and include diversity of gender, age, ethnicity, etc. Groups and teams composed of individuals in pre-existing social groups may not focus on the task or goal they have been assigned. Groups and teams made up of members with differing perspectives, backgrounds and abilities are more likely to succeed in accomplishing the goal set before them (Leighton, 1994).

Challenges of Working with Groups and Teams

Working with groups and teams of farmers and others in the local community can present several challenges. Well-prepared team leaders such as local field agents recognize the potential effects upon the group.

Conflict

Though conflict can occur when groups and teams are working together, not all conflict is the same. Some types of conflict can actually be beneficial or constructive; other types are often detrimental (Stewart, Manz and Sims, 1999). Two of the most basic types of conflict are relationship-oriented and task-oriented conflict. Relationship-oriented conflict occurs when team members are incompatible on an interpersonal basis. Task-oriented conflict is when members disagree about the tasks to be performed and how they should be accomplished. This latter type of conflict is often beneficial to a group or team because it does not become personal and it leads to critical evaluation of what the group or team is doing and how to achieve its goals. In this type of conflict, members have open and honest discussions and disagreements without feeling threatened. It is important to note that all group and team work will incorporate some form of conflict.

Grouphink

A challenge to individuals working together in groups and teams is that "grouphink" may occur. Grouphink is when one idea or position is outlined by a group or team member and everyone agrees with it without raising any objections or examining reasons why it might not work or be the best decision. No alternatives or differing opinions or perspectives are offered. To prevent this from occurring, group and team members should not focus on why one idea is the best without not only generating other ideas but also developing reasons why the first idea may not work or not be the best decision. Leaders or facilitators of groups and teams should be careful not to state their opinion or idea too quickly because often group and team members will decide that it is the best decision and not look for any alternatives.

Consensus Building

When working with groups and teams, reaching consensus becomes one of the main goals. Consensus is defined as "a point of maximum agreement so action can follow" (Rees, 2001, p. 197). To achieve consensus, members of groups and teams share ideas, organize, prioritize and evaluate these ideas to reach the best decision together. Building consensus is the process of reaching a general agreement that is supported by all group and team members. Facilitating groups and teams requires skills in consensus building, such as understanding various types of activities that will foster the sharing of ideas and encourage group decision making.

Types of Group and Team Learning Activities

Utilizing a variety of group learning activities at appropriate times will help the group address concerns and move toward decision making.

Think-Pair-Share (TPS)

This activity is used to measure the level of comprehension of participants in an educational setting. When an instructor utilizes questions addressed to an individual to check for comprehension, only that individual has the opportunity to express his/her ideas and receive feedback. With TPS, all participants have an opportunity to share their ideas and receive feedback (Leighton, 1994).

To utilize TPS, the instructor will explain that a TPS strategy will be utilized before explaining the problem to be solved, or the item or technique being taught for mastery. The class will be divided into small groups of two or three people, depending on the size of the group. At appropriate times during instruction, the instructor will call for a brief "think time" during which the participants will remain silent and develop their own answers to or thoughts about the question that was posed. After this short period, the instructor will ask individuals to get into their small groups and share their thoughts and develop a team response. This may take several minutes because team members may have to work out any differences and develop a response that reflects their mutual thinking. At the end of this time, the instructor will ask for each team or small group to report.

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Creating a Flow Chart

This activity is used to gather information and thoughts on how an idea might work or to develop a solution to a problem. This is an application activity in that participants will apply their own thoughts, ideas and knowledge to solve a problem. This application occurs in small groups of three to four members (Macpherson, 2000).

Creating a flow chart generally takes about 30 minutes. The instructor poses a question to the larger group, which will then be divided into smaller groups to develop their flow charts. Equipment needed for this activity might include sticky notes, flipchart paper and markers. If materials are not available, the small groups could develop their flow charts on paper and then sketch them out on a chalkboard or white board when presenting to the larger group. The instructor will explain the process of creating a flow chart:

1. Consider the question posed.
2. Determine priorities (can write these on sticky notes or make a list)
3. Develop a sequence for the priorities and the ways that information will be gathered.
4. Plot this sequence on a piece of flipchart paper showing the flow of decisions and information.

After all small groups have presented their flow charts, the large group can compare ideas and discuss the advantages of each.

Brainstorming

This activity is used to generate a lot of ideas and information on a topic. The instructor poses a question or a problem to the large group and asks participants to think of as many possible solutions or ideas related to that question or problem as they can. Then participants in this large group are divided into smaller groups and asked to develop a list of ideas or solutions. All ideas are written down on a piece of flipchart paper or a white board. Group members are asked not to critique ideas -- all should be considered, and every group member should contribute. At the end of the brainstorming time, the small-group lists should be shared with the larger group, and commonalities between groups can be discussed.

Stakeholder Analysis

This beneficial group and team method is used to explore an issue and improve on existing and proposed solutions (West, 2004). People (or stakeholders) are less resistant to change if careful thought and planning are utilized to determine how those changes could affect the stakeholder group. This technique involves small teams that are given the identity of a stakeholder group. These small teams have to determine the advantages and disadvantages of the proposed changes to the group they represent. Team members will brainstorm and list all the potential advantages and disadvantages to the stakeholder group they represent, and then amend the proposed change to maximize the advantages to the stakeholder group and minimize the disadvantages.

Manage a Learner Activity that Utilizes a Group or Team Approach

Many programs at the local farmer and community level could benefit from group and team work. One example would be a proposed new program initiative or changes to an existing program that would affect many stakeholder groups. West (2004) outlines the steps of putting a **stakeholder analysis** into practice:

1. Identify the proposed change or initiative to the larger audience. Outline the background of this change or initiative, define the goal(s) and discuss the process of implementation.
2. Identify the major stakeholder groups. In your larger audience, you may have members of the stakeholder groups identified. If this occurs, participants can be divided into the stakeholder groups that have been identified. If participants do not belong to these stakeholder groups, the instructor can either assign them to small groups representing those stakeholders or have them self-select the stakeholder group they would like to belong to for this activity.
3. The smaller stakeholder groups brainstorm the possible advantages and disadvantages of the initiative and/or change. Members of these groups should be given time to develop individual lists of possible advantages and disadvantages of the initiative and/or change to their particular stakeholder group. After developing their individual lists, they should work as a group to brainstorm all the possible advantages and disadvantages without evaluating individual ideas.
4. Adapt the change or initiative. After identifying all the potential advantages and disadvantages, the small group then develops and proposes modifications to the change or initiative to meet the needs and concerns of the stakeholder group represented.

Each stakeholder group will then present its adaptations to the larger group for discussion and comment. Program facilitators should take notes of these presentations to incorporate into their proposed change and/or initiative. If requested, a final report of this activity could be made available to participants and interested individuals.

Summary

Incorporating group or team work into educational programming takes careful thought and planning. Understanding group and team approaches and incorporating these into activities will benefit both the educational program and the participants. Creative solutions to complex problems are best solved through the use of groups and teams comprising a diversity of thoughts, ideas and experiences of individuals working together.

Resources

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