Chapter 5
Group Process and Meetings

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We all went to the same different meeting together.
—Marvin Weisbord quoting Jim Maselko, at ODN Conference

Introduction

In any culture or organization there may be effective or ineffective meetings. There often are individual perspectives on what happened during a meeting and how effective it was, as illustrated by the quote above. It is not unusual to find subgroups of people rehashing a meeting after it has ended, offering criticisms they did not voice during the meeting. Although at the meeting the discussion addressed the content of such issues as problems to be solved, work to be coordinated, or progress on projects, team members were most likely also noticing the process of how discussions were conducted.

Many teams do not overtly discuss the process that is used to accomplish a task. Particularly in multicultural teams, where there are differing beliefs, assumptions, and values that impact how people behave and how they think others should behave, it is important to be aware of group process. Those who are aware of the process may then be able to intervene to improve the group’s effectiveness. This will help move covert processes to more overt and intentional ones. This chapter will discuss principal components of small-group process: leadership, communication, conflict, and problem solving. The four chapters that follow will each focus on one of these components.

The chapter will also discuss roles and behaviors of team members, and describe procedures for effective team meetings.

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Learning Objectives

After reading this chapter, you should be able to:

- Define group process
- Describe covert processes and the reasons for them
- Describe power dynamics in group process
- Identify individual functional and dysfunctional roles and behaviors
- Describe factors that are important for effective meetings

Overt and Covert Group Process

In any interpersonal or group interaction there are always two things happening simultaneously: content and process. Content is the what, or the task of a team. Process is how it is being discussed. For example, in a firefighting team, the content is about what equipment should be used, and where and how to rescue individuals. The process is who is giving directions, who is responding, the speakers’ tones of voice, the pace and rhythm of the communication, and nonverbal communication. In a team of human resources managers from Japan and the United States in a multinational corporation, the content could be about methods of performance review and managerial development. The process would involve the same issues mentioned for the firefighters, with the added complication of differing cultural assumptions. These assumptions could lead to unexpressed emotional reactions related to both the communication process and the content of performance review and managerial development.

One can think of content/process as an iceberg with only one-eighth of what is happening, the content, above the water, and seven-eighths, the process, below. As with a steamship when it encounters an iceberg, it is the seven-eighths of group process below the water that is the most dangerous. What is not seen can cause damage. It is often not discussed, or brought above the surface, and therefore people can leave a meeting with different understandings and feelings about what went on. This underwater or covert process usually is not helpful, although, as explained below there are times when it might be strategic.

Covert processes derive from behaviors and beliefs that are not, or cannot be, openly discussed in team meetings. Marshak and Katz (1997) posit that something is likely to become covert when

untested assumptions, beliefs, or constructs are limiting either reasoning or choice; the basis of the covert dynamic is in the unconscious or shadow of the individual, group or organization, or, behaviors, thoughts or feelings are defined by the prevailing rules, norms, and/or culture as inappropriate, unacceptable or out-of-place (p. 33).

They describe three dominant types of covert processes, which arise in the following circumstances: