

Encouraging Productive *Group Norms* ... Without the Rules¹

There are two key problems that emerge when developing *group norms*:

1. **Group norms can be difficult to implement at a practical level, because different participants have different understandings of typical key words (eg. *confidentiality, honesty, trust, respect*).**

This can be overcome by *banning* these types of key words, and asking participants to describe their needs in behavioural terms (rather than as principles)².

2. **Group norms can be difficult to implement at a practical level, because they describe *perfect communication*.**

We all come to groups with a long, embedded experience of poor communication. We each have our own established patterns of communication. To change these, can be very hard! The establishment of behavioural norms expressed as *rules*, runs the risk of encouraging *blaming* behaviours in a group and setting up groups or individuals for failure.

This can, in part, be addressed through identifying group norms as a goal (rather than a requirement), and talking about *being kind to each other* in the process of learning to work better together. However, there remains a risk of the group norms, especially in times of high tension, being used as a basis for the exercise of unconstructive power and inclusion/exclusion behaviours in a group.

Developing *Group Understanding*

The term *Group Understanding* is deliberately used in preference to *Group Norms*. *Group Understanding* seeks to encourage participants to understand both other individuals and the group. Simply understanding the different needs/preferences/*comfort zones* of group members can provide some of the tools participants need to be able to work together. It also enables recognition of both the significant common ground **and differences** in group members' preferences.

¹ © Copyright Suzi Quixley 1998, 1999 & 2008 (revised). It draws heavily on a process developed by Rob O'Brien and Matthias Micka ... thanks to them for permission to make use of it.

² A variety of strategies for developing behavioural group norms are outlined in a chapter of Quixley, Suzi (1995), **8 Participatory Training/Learning Methods**, ESSQ, Adelaide.

Focusing on understanding, rather than *agreement*, creates a different climate to a normative one. **It is about developing a culture of mutual accountability, rather than a set of rules.** It gives permission to members to be responsive to the needs of others (thus contributing to shifting established patterns of destructive group behaviour). **Everyone becomes an *insider***, belonging within the group, is a two way street.

Group Understanding is particularly well suited to settings where self disclosure is required and/or the group will be dealing with topics which may have a personal impact on participants. It has the added benefit of being fully customised to each group. This may encourage a higher level of ownership, than where participants feel that *standard words* and a relatively brief outcome reduce their *felt needs* to a functional document. Developing *Group Understanding* in a personal development setting requires approximately 2 hours.

The process can also be adapted to more formal groups, such as workplace or training situations. The level of engagement encouraged (and therefore, the amount of time allocated for the exercise) should be varied according to the setting. In formal groups, it is important to recognise that the process might encourage a *personalised culture* ill-suited to a task-oriented group, or a group where participants have significantly different levels of structural power.

The following is an outline of a possible process for developing *Group Understanding*. It encourages participants to **understand** each others' needs and try to respond to them. It focuses on mutual responsibility for group effectiveness, rather than the blaming of individuals for any problems. It also functions as a group building/*get to know you* tool, for situations where a group plans to spend some time together. (In fact, it aids in making *get to know you* processes relevant by encouraging participants to target their comments to the purpose/functioning of the group.)

The Process

The following is a step-by-step way of developing *Group Understanding*. Clearly, a similar purpose could be achieved through variations to this process. In particular, the exercise could be shortened through moving straight from identifying individual experiences (Step 1) to listing ideas in the whole group (Step 3), or, through working with a smaller number of topics.

1. Each individual identifies a concrete example of a situation in which they have experienced each of the following: *trust, respect, valuing, honesty, support, help* and *belonging*. A shorter version of this might cover:

Topic (<i>A time when you felt ...</i>)	Typically generates stories about ...
Safety Belonging Valued	Self Interaction Others

2. Participants are paired, to share their stories. (This provides an opportunity for each person to *practice* talking about their experiences, before they are required to do it in the large group of relative strangers ... which may be a threatening experience for some.)
3. Back in the full group, each person tells their stories. Each story is summarised to a **descriptive sentence** or **key theme**, through negotiation between the facilitator and participant, and listed under the appropriate heading (*Trust, Respect, etc*).
4. The findings are discussed, with some analysis encouraged. It is important here to focus on the very **different** understandings people have of these key words. Key aims are to:
 - Identify the role of *self-fulfilling prophesy* in how individuals feel in groups (ie. how you feel might be as much about what you do, as about how others behave).
 - Recognise the difficulty in accommodating everyone's preferences/needs all the time ... sometimes opposite experiences lead to a particular outcome for different participants!
5. Participants are encouraged to try to remain aware of others' preferences/needs, and try to behave in a way that is responsive to these.

Consolidating Learning from the Process

At the conclusion of the exercise, there are several ways of **reminding** participants of the exercise, and hence of the things that others may need to work well together. The following are based on *real life* examples³:

- Prominently displaying **key themes** emerging from each story, for example:

³ Courtesy of Matthias Micka & Rob O'Brien. The material in this section is based on real examples from *Country Men's Weekends*, with identifying details modified to protect participants.

<i>We Feel 'SAFE' When ...</i>	<i>We Experience 'TRUST' ...</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ meditating/working out ▪ going inward ▪ at home environment/castle - comforts (water, landscape, ease with people) ▪ be at ease and accepted (emotional self) ▪ being able to process stuff ▪ being self-contained ▪ being dealt with honestly ▪ being in bed ▪ close out world ▪ comfortable with others ▪ ease of talking ▪ alcohol free/not alcohol determined ▪ we can decide how much honesty is right for us at the time ▪ there's other people around 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ when things we ask to be kept confidential are kept confidential ▪ at different levels ▪ differently at different times (ie. it changes) ▪ in a mutual way ▪ sometimes unequally ▪ when people are reliable ▪ when it has been proven over time in a consistent way ▪ when we observe others' behaviour with others ▪ being honest ▪ maintaining contact/ relationship ▪ freedom of choice ▪ people confide in me ▪ working independently ▪ looking after other people ▪ given responsibilities ▪ used for information/advice ▪ confidence in your abilities ▪ absence missed

- Prominently displaying the **descriptive sentences** that summarised each story, for example:

<i>TRUST</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ I started with trust in relationships - then mistrust comes in ▪ I have had trust in family, friends and partner, but I was burned by all, so mistrust took its toll. I have taken back a friend and I am now rebuilding my trust to her. ▪ The only situation of complete trust I have ever had was with Ruth, my doctor. (etc)
<i>Or: VALUED</i>	<p>MARK M. I feel valued when I care for someone (eg. partner ill at the moment) or just people in general.</p> <p>BRUCE G. I had a friend who was anorexic, and I felt valued when she confided in me. I am now her son's godfather.</p> <p>MARGARET P. I felt valued when my (grown up) daughters tell me how much they love me. Also, when my ex-clients meet me and tell me how much they appreciated me! (etc)</p>

- Distilling ideas into **general norms**. As the following examples indicate, these would not be behaviourally-based, just some themes that emerged from discussion.

We want to work well together, therefore we will try to:

- *be kind to each other*
- *be attentive to each other's preferences*
- *recognise that making changes is hard*

- Identifying key **general** principles that emerged from discussion, for example:

We acknowledge that in order to grow and develop people will make mistakes. We therefore acknowledge that stuff-ups will happen and we value learning from them.