THE DYNAMICS OF A GROUP: ONE CONSORTIUM

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Because the group experience is different for each member of the group, there are at least sixteen different versions or interpretations of the group dynamics of our consortium. While I have discussed the content of this paper and checked my perceptions with the group members, it does not represent a composite of group opinion.

When I first came to Denver, I learned that several librarians were interested in establishing a consortium and others, believing the whole thing to be a passing fad, were not. In September of 1977 many of us attended MLA's CE course on consortia development and were impressed by the amount of time Judith Messerle devoted to cautioning us about interpersonal problems. The literature concurs.

Now with a few years of experience behind us, we are able to say, "But it hasn't been that bad." In fact, we can all say it has been better than we ever expected. In an effort to understand why it has been better, DAHSLC asked for volunteers to study the group and to report their findings. This paper is a part of that report.

Frequently cited reasons for joining a consortium are 1) expansion of available resources, 2) production of union lists, 3) educational opportunities, and 4) the desire for less dependency on the resource library. These objectives were already being met for us. Our very active state organization was already
producing a union list of serials, sponsoring two MLA CE courses a year, and offering bimonthly educational meetings. While we were grateful for the medical school library's resources, many of us enjoyed relatively well-developed collections of our own. None of us could be considered "have-not" libraries.

I believe our reasons for creating a consortium included our need for affiliation, a strong desire for professional growth, and a belief that there is strength in unity. Few of us at the time could have identified or verbalized these reasons. Instead our early minutes include the usual list of consortium projects. However, at the time some of us expressed vaguely a need for "something more." A recent survey of DAHSLC's membership included a question on needs being met by the group. Only a few mentioned consortium projects. All mentioned support for personal and professional growth.

I am not dismissing the importance of tasks and work-related goals. I believe that the morale of the group is related to the extent to which an individual's personal needs are met and the effectiveness with which the goals of the group are realized. Group members are concerned with one or both needs. The success of the group depends on working out the most appropriate combination of the two components. Sometimes one goes to a consortium meeting looking for a lift and sometimes for productive activity. Both must be OK with the group.

Many of us believe now that the wisest decision we made was allowing members to pick and choose those projects with which they wanted to be involved. All the group asks is that non-participants
in no way interfere with the project. MOST groups expect and even demand that all group members accept all group goals. We have accomplished most of our goals without group decisions. We rarely even take a vote. Management literature tells us that we must be able to related the group's objectives to our own individual needs. But all of the objectives? Many groups require considerable conformity. How necessary is this? We do require unanimous acceptance of our by-laws, but we wrote and agreed upon them in one afternoon. Other consortia describe 9-month and 2-year stints of by-law writing--indicative of problems with autonomy mentioned often in the literature.

None of us wants to relinquish our autonomy. It is what I value most about being in a small library. But the autonomy issue has been relatively insignificant for DAHSLC because we have been required to give up little. Our self-study also suggests that our loyalties are more strongly professional than institutional.

For example, our approach to implementing a uniform reporting of statistics was to invite anyone interested to a meeting. After several hours of brainstorming, heated discussion and disagreement, MOST of us arrived at definitions of several activities MOST of us wished to count. MOST of us report them monthly and there are enough of us doing so to make it meaningful. If we required consensus, we would still be debating.

The informal structure of our organization is reflected in our style of leadership. Responsibility for leadership passes easily from one to another. We have held no elections. At the end of each calendar year, next year's leaders are an agenda item.
We ask for volunteers. Someone always does.

I believe that our volunteer consortium coordinator sees herself as a "recorder" rather than a leader with the tasks of listening carefully, reinforcing group members positively, recording their ideas and integrating the actions of all group members.

Leavitt and others suggest that one reason we have experienced so few conflicts is because we have no appointed leader. I quote,

> Groups are likely to function with a minimum of personal difficulty when the responsibility for action and procedure lies with all the members rather than with any particular individual.

Chris Argyris in *Personality and Organization* warns that a group can become dependent upon, passive toward and subordinate to a formal leader. He suggests that group members must recognize their own ambivalence to this dependency. Lewin in 1939 demonstrated that democratic, as opposed to autocratic, groups are more creative, more efficient, friendlier and more group-minded.

I do not advocate the abandonment of all formal leadership but suggest that our style of shared leadership is partly responsible for our smooth interaction.

Communication patterns directly effect the efficiency of the group's performance as well as the morale. Many leaders encourage only communication between themselves and the group members--the leader gets a lot of power, satisfaction and control. This pattern is faster. But if all members communicate with each other, morale is higher and the leadership role passes easily from one to another. Communication is "cleaner" as misunderstandings get ironed out more quickly. RCONS, our electronic
messaging system, enhances this style of communication by allowing one to send a message to all DAHSLC members at once. Sociograms of several of our meetings indicate that three of us are more verbose than the others, but everyone communicates with everyone else. The graph also suggests that when people speak, they address the group, and the group listens. There is very little "chatter" going on between individuals in parallel to the group conversation.

Most groups talk about task-related issues during their meetings and group process issues outside of the meetings. For example, if one group member talks too much, we appear to be indifferent to the behavior during the meeting, but complain to each other or to our friends about it later. Leavitt believes we must recognize that "People have feelings at group meetings."

Disruptive behavior, described as emotional "noise", is mostly an effort of an individual to satisfy a personal need in the presence of the group. Authority, parliamentary procedure, or social pressure can subvert such noise, but it will not be eliminated. He recommends that feelings during group meetings be acknowledged. When a member acts out, it is not as necessary to find out why as it is for group members to recognize that the behaviors are not accidental but represent needs for attention or perhaps, to reduce tension. He suggests,

Recognition and acceptance of people's feelings, and encouragement of an atmosphere of permissiveness seem to be sensible directions for a group to take.

For example, I believe that control is an issue for our consortium. We are all strong personalities accustomed to wielding considerable influence over our own lives. I have learned that I react inordinately to what I perceive as an attempt to control me
in any way. Leavitt proposes, and I agree, that when a group reaches a stage of maturity called esprit, group members can allow each other to express these needs or behaviors because they so value the unity of the group.

Group process management training, team-building exercises, simulation gaming and conflict management training are formal ways to learn to talk about feelings and attitudes in order to ultimately improve task performance. But much can be learned informally. At the end of each meeting, the group might spend a few minutes talking about process, not tasks. Questions to discuss include What was especially good about today's meeting? Can we identify problems with the way we communicate? And What can we do about that?

How a group responds to the addition of a new member is an interesting question to study. The literature is contradictory--suggesting on the one hand that groups secure in their relationships accept newcomers congenially--and on the other that groups reaching the esprit level of maturity absolutely cannot accept new members. On this they do agree--the arrival of the newcomer changes the group process for him and for the group, setting into motion complex reactions and adjustments to the change.

The minutes of our meetings reflect that DAHSLC has struggled with this issue numerous times since our beginning. Brief discussions on the optimal size of a group, concern that we will lose something with size, sorting out how we differ from and our relationship to the state organization and discussions about a policy for receiving new members reflect an ambivalence about the issue. Interestingly enough, while all this is going on, names
of new members appear at the top of the minutes among those present at the meetings. Rarely is there even a note in the minutes announcing the addition of a member.

The literature on group development suggests that new members are more easily assimilated during certain stages of development than others. There have been rumors from DAHSLC's very beginning that the group was exclusive and was only "inviting" a select few to join. While consortium members knew this was not true, it would have been reassuring to know that some of the ambivalence we felt about new members was a normal characteristic of the group process.

By studying the dynamics of our group, I believe that we have learned much that will have bearing on our future.

I have learned that the personal and professional needs being met by the group are at least as important to us as the tasks we accomplish. Any effort to quash the personal and social aspect of our relationships will meet with considerable resistance.

I have learned that important to our success is our tolerance for nonconformity and autonomy. We must examine seriously any future project requiring group consensus.

I have learned that the quality of our interpersonal relationships is in part the result of our shared leadership style. We must be aware that if we take on a project requiring a paid coordinator, those relationships may change.

And finally, I believe, we have learned the value of studying our group's interaction and personality characteristics, however threatening that may have seemed at the outset. We have a fresh appreciation for each other, a heightened awareness of the dynamics
of our group process, and new information which may prove critical to future project planning.