

Guidelines for Productive Group Interaction

Groups of people are usually better at solving problems than individuals. However, we're all been part of groups whose discussion has not been productive. Groups who follow these nine guidelines for group interaction, drawn from Roger Schwarz (The Skilled Facilitator, 2002), will find their effectiveness and the quality of their decision-making enhanced.

1 Test assumptions and inferences.

Many of us make statements during discussions that are based on unspoken assumptions. If we make those assumptions explicit, others are able to assess the validity of the statement. We also make inferences, or draw conclusions, based on the words or actions of others. By checking with others about the accuracy of these inferences, group members can be more certain they are proceeding with valid information.

2 Share all relevant information.

You must be open with all information that you have regarding the issue at hand. This includes participating fully in all discussions, openly disagreeing when appropriate, and even sharing information that does not support your position. If relevant information is withheld, one of the major advantages of working within a group – access to more information – disappears, and the group's effectiveness and quality of decisions can decline. In addition, commitment to the decision may lessen if others discover that they made the decision without all the relevant information.

3 Use specific examples and agree on what important words mean.

Using specific examples can help other members of the group more fully understand a suggestion or idea from a group member, and enables them to independently assess the validity of the example. Defining important words can help participants avoid simple misunderstandings.

4 Explain your reasoning and intent.

It is important that you fully explain how you arrived at a particular idea or position, and your intent in promoting it. Others can more fully understand the idea if reasoning and intent are shared. It allows them to communicate how their reasoning may be different, and thus add to the pool of knowledge of the group and to the opportunities for mutual learning.

5 **Combine advocacy and inquiry.**

Combining advocacy and inquiry means to follow a statement with an invitation for questions and comments. A group's strength is its differing ideas and perspectives. Asking for questions and comments ensures that your ideas can be strengthened by the thoughts of the others.

6 **Jointly design next steps and ways to test disagreements.**

Group members sometimes find themselves at an impasse when there is a disagreement. By working together to plan how to proceed, and how to find ways to discover the root of disagreements, groups will enhance their effectiveness.

7 **Discuss undiscussable issues.**

Sometimes certain issues pose problems for a group, but you may feel you are not allowed to discuss them. By bringing these issues out into the open, groups have the opportunity to improve their effectiveness.

8 **Use a decision-making rule that generates the level of commitment needed.**

If group members must be strongly committed to a decision in order for it to be implemented, consensus may be the best decision-making rule.
