

**Supplemental Chapter for *Confidence in Public Speaking*, Seventh Edition
(Telecourse Version)**

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GROUP LEADERSHIP AND PROBLEM SOLVING

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Question Outline

- I. How do leaders gain the ability to influence others?
- II. What are the major theoretical approaches to studying leadership?
- III. How can group members promote effective group problem solving?
- IV. What are the major steps in the Procedural Model of Problem Solving (P-MOPS)?
- V. How can group members encourage creativity?
- VI. How is conflict related to problem solving?

Introduction

When Maria was appointed chair of the membership committee in her service club, only she and Luis were experienced members of the committee; the others, while enthusiastic, were not aware of the club's activities, operating procedures, reporting requirements, and so forth. Maria wanted to be the kind of committee chair who encouraged members to participate in decision making and to share the work of the group, but she knew it could take months for the new members to learn the ropes. The committee didn't have months to spare! While it went against her inclinations, Maria decided that at first she and Luis would have to provide strong direction for the group. During the early meetings, they established the agenda and assigned members specific tasks. She and Luis followed up between meetings to see whether they could provide any help or additional information. As time progressed and the new members caught on to their duties, Maria encouraged the members to assume more responsibility for the group and gradually turned over full decision-making responsibility to the group. By the end of the year, Maria's role had changed from director to coordinator. Eventually, she became less involved in the details of the committee's work and focused her attention on the process of discussion and on problem solving. Because all of the other members had become competent at handling tasks for the group, any one of them could have led the group. Maria's leadership helped develop several new leaders for the club.

This story illustrates several important points to be covered in this chapter. First, the story suggests that there is no one right way for leaders to behave. Leaders have to be able to "read" the group's situation in order to provide the most appropriate leadership behaviors

for the particular group. Maria changed her behavior to fit the growing competence of the members. Second, the story reminds us that leadership is about behavior. Maria's assessment of the group's leadership needs had to be translated into communicative behavior. When Maria judged that the group needed strong guidance, she did such things as suggesting direction, making assignments, and vetoing suggestions she didn't think would work. Later, as the others' leadership skills developed, Maria did such things as asking the members what they thought, supporting their decisions, and giving them authority to act. Leadership is about *communication*, not personality or luck. Finally, this story demonstrates the connection between group leadership and effective group problem solving. Maria's actions as a leader were appropriate to the group and its situation, and helped the group become effective. Because of her early strong guidance, the group was productive from the beginning and remained productive throughout its life.

In this chapter, we will explore two very important small group subjects, leadership and problem solving, and how they are related.

What Is Leadership?

Most social scientists define **leadership** as a process of interpersonal influence. Communication is at the heart of this process:

Leadership is human (symbolic) communication which modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others in order to meet group goals and needs.¹

Leadership, then, is enacted through communication and persuasion, not through physical force or coercion. Furthermore, only influence designed to benefit the group can truly be termed *small group leadership*. One member persuading another to sabotage a group goal is not considered leadership by this definition.

A **leader** is a person who influences the behavior of others through communication. In small groups, there are two types of leaders, designated and emergent. A **designated leader** is someone who has been appointed or elected to a leadership position (e.g., chair, team leader, coordinator, or facilitator). Maria was a designated leader because she had been appointed chair of the membership committee. An **emergent leader** is someone who becomes an informal leader by exerting influence toward achievement of a group's goal but who does not hold the formal position or role of leader. Emergent leaders are group members who become influential by behaving in ways helpful to the group and valued by the other members. Thus, *any* member of a group can provide leadership for a group. In fact, groups work best when all members contribute skills and leadership behaviors on behalf of the group.

In college, you may be placed in several groups without a designated leader, but having a designated leader usually helps provide stability to a group. Groups with designated leaders accepted by the members have fewer interpersonal problems and often produce better outcomes than groups without designated leaders.² Even in a group where leadership is shared among members, someone still must coordinate the flow of communication and the work of the members.

Sources of Influence (Power)

How do leaders, designated or emergent, gain their ability to influence others? A classic study by French and Raven identified five types of interpersonal influence, or **power**: reward, punishment, legitimate, referent, and expert.³

Leaders can exercise **reward power** by giving followers things they value, including tangible items such as money, material goods, and personal favors, or intangible things such as special attention, acknowledgment, and compliments. Leaders can use **punishment power** by withholding these same items. For example, a leader who frowns because a member has failed to complete an assigned task is administering a form of punishment. **Coercion** is a special form of punishment that attempts to force compliance with hostile tactics. Genuine leaders should not resort to coercion because it breeds resentment.

A leader has **legitimate power** by virtue of title or position. For example, Maria's appointment as chair of the membership committee gave her legitimate power in that group. Legitimate leaders have the right to do certain things in groups that other members may not have, such as calling meetings, preparing the agenda, checking on the work of other members, making assignments, and so forth.

Referent power is based on how attractive, admired, or respected someone is. When someone likes you, you have considerable influence over that person. **Charisma** is an extreme type of referent power that inspires strong loyalty and devotion from others. The more people are admired and respected, the more others copy their behavior, and the greater is their power to influence the group.

Leaders have **expert power** when the other members value what they know or can do. For instance, if your group must conduct a panel discussion for class, and you are the only one who has ever participated in a panel discussion, you have expertise the others value and thus can influence the others because they respect your knowledge.

All members of a group have the ability to influence other members. For instance, all members, not just the designated leader, can reward others, withhold rewards, or have expertise potentially valuable to the group. In addition, a designated leader's influence usually stems from more than just legitimate power. In addition to holding the title of leader, that person also has expertise, referent power, and so forth. In fact, if legitimate power is the leader's only source of influence, then someone else in the group with more broadly based power will probably emerge as a more influential informal leader. In short, all group members possess some sources of interpersonal influence and have the capability to lead the group, even if they don't have the title of leader.

Theoretical Approaches to Leadership

Since Aristotle's time, people have been interested in what makes a good leader. Is it something you are born with? Can you learn to be a leader? In this next section, several approaches to understanding leadership are presented. The most useful current theories about leadership focus on the communication behaviors of individuals.

Trait Approaches

Trait approaches generally assert, "Leaders are born, not made." Originally, people believed that leaders possessed certain traits, or characteristics, such as intelligence, attractiveness, and size, that made them leaders. Some studies did find relationships

between leadership and certain traits. For example, leaders tended to have higher IQs, were taller, more attractive, and larger than nonleaders.⁴ However, there are no traits that leaders have that followers don't, and the leader is not necessarily the person in the group most endowed with any of these traits (i.e., the tallest or most intelligent). Current theorists dismiss the idea that leadership can be explained solely on the basis of traits.

More contemporary trait approaches examine personality characteristics that are more complex than simple traits. For example, the person who emerges as a group's leader is someone highly skilled at verbalizing ideas.⁵ Several recent studies have found complex traits such as self-monitoring are related to leadership emergence. Self-monitoring refers to individuals' abilities to monitor, or pay attention to, both social cues and their own behavior.⁶ High self-monitors are sensitive to contextual cues, socially perceptive, and can adjust their behaviors according to what seems needed at any given time. The ability to self-monitor is related to leadership emergence because high self-monitors seem better at adapting their behaviors to suit group needs.⁷ Interestingly, females that are high self-monitors may not emerge as leaders because they pick up cues that female leadership is inappropriate and conform to other members' expectations. Low self-monitors can emerge as leaders in certain circumstances. Because they respond to their own internal cues rather than external ones from the other members, they may emerge as leaders when they personally have favorable attitudes about expressing leadership.⁸

Verbal style is another trait-like characteristic associated with leadership emergence. In one study, members whose communicative style was quiet, tentative, or vague did not emerge as potential leaders.⁹ Instead, members who suggested procedures and helped organize the group emerged as leaders. Members with dramatic communication styles were perceived as helpful to the group, but did not emerge as leaders.

Although the characteristics mentioned above are often called traits, they are certainly complex traits that are associated with specific communicative behaviors, such as paying attention to contextual cues or speaking clearly and directly. People whose communication behaviors help clarify the group's task and motivate other members will be influential in groups.

Style Approaches

Style approaches focus on the pattern of behaviors leaders exhibit in groups. Considerable research has examined three major styles of designated leaders: democratic, laissez-faire, and autocratic. **Democratic leaders** encourage members to participate in group decisions, even major ones: "What suggestions do you have for solving our problem?" **Laissez-faire leaders** are nonleaders who take almost no initiative for structuring a group discussion, but may respond to questions: "I don't care, whatever you want to do is fine with me." **Autocratic leaders** maintain strict control over their groups, including making assignments and giving orders: "Here's how we'll solve the problem. First, you will. . ." They ask fewer questions but answer more than democratic leaders, make more attempts to coerce, and fewer attempts to get others to participate.¹⁰

Groups vary in the amount of structure and control their members want and need, but research findings about style have been consistent.¹¹ Most people in the United States prefer democratic groups, and are more satisfied in democratically- rather than

autocratically-led groups. Although autocratic groups often work harder when the leader is there, members are both more aggressive and more apathetic. Laissez-faire leaders fare poorly, too. Members are more satisfied with leaders who provide problem-solving structure than with those who provide no structure.

The style approaches imply that there is a single leadership style good for all situations. However, most scholars believe that the style should match the needs of the situation.

Contingency Approaches

Contingency approaches assume that group situations vary, with different situations (contingencies) requiring different leadership styles. In addition, a single group's situation will vary over time, like Maria's did. Factors such as the type of task, the time available, and the skill of the members determine what type of leadership is most appropriate for a given situation. Most current researchers accept contingency assumptions. In this next section, information about three contingency approaches is presented.

The Functions Approach

One contingency theory is the **functions approach**, which assumes that groups have two main types of functions that must be performed for the group to be effective: task functions and interpersonal functions. The functions approach is classified as a contingency theory because it assumes that the balance of task and interpersonal functions needed will vary from group to group, and also from one time to another in the same group. For example, a group with a crisis on its hands and little time to solve it will need to concentrate on task-oriented functions, whereas a newly-formed group whose goal is celebrating cultural diversity will need to pay careful attention to interpersonal functions such as harmony, respect, and support.

Many people have described several functions helpful to groups.¹² The following four functions emphasize the communicative focus of leadership:

1. Leaders provide sufficient information, as well as the ability to process and handle considerable information.
2. Leaders enact a variety of functions needed within the group.
3. Leaders help group members make sense of decisions made and actions performed within the group by supplying good reasons for those actions.
4. Leaders focus on the here-and-now, stopping the group from jumping to unwarranted conclusions or finding formula answers too quickly.¹³

Communication is central to leadership. One of the most important obstacles a group must overcome is the need to reduce a vast amount of complex and sometimes contradictory information to an understandable level.¹⁴ Group members must devise procedures for narrowing the number of plausible interpretations so they can devise appropriate solutions. A basic function of the leader is to help the group do this by creating effective organizing procedures for problem solving.

The functions approach focuses on behaviors, not traits. It assumes that leadership consists of what people *do* for the group, not what they *are*. In addition, it assumes that the designated leader cannot, and should not, provide every function needed in the group. Instead, members can and should perform whatever functions the group needs. Thus, it encourages the designated leader to use the talents of all members. The leader's unique

function is to serve as the completer, to observe what needed functions are not being performed and perform them or encourage others to do so.¹⁵ This approach acknowledges that group leadership behavior is a property of the *group*, and a product of the interaction among members and the designated leader.

Situational Models

Situational models encourage leaders to focus on certain aspects of a group situation to determine the best leadership approaches and to adapt their behavior accordingly.

Because of the infinite number of Situational variables that potentially could be considered, most models suggest that leaders focus on one or two key aspects of the situation. For example, Hersey and Blanchard's classic Situational model of leadership suggests that leaders focus on group maturity--the extent to which group members are knowledgeable about the task, motivated to complete it, and have developed into an effective team.¹⁶ According to this model, leadership behaviors can focus on the task, the interpersonal relationships among members, both, or neither. Groups at different maturity levels need different leadership behaviors. For example, a relatively immature group of members who are inexperienced or unmotivated needs a leader who focuses on task concerns, at least until members understand their charge and objectives. As members become familiar with the task and the group begins to mature as a team, the leader should begin to increase relationship behavior. With even greater maturity, task behavior can be reduced, and, at full maturity, the leader can essentially allow the group members to run the group themselves, with little or no task or relationship activity from the leader. . . .

This model suggests that a group's situation changes over time. Effective leaders can both assess a group's situation and adapt their behavior to fit the ever-changing needs of the group. Several studies, such as the self-monitoring studies described earlier, have found that leaders do adapt their behavior. Leaders adjust the amount of structure they provide to group discussions,¹⁷ vary the amount of dominance and supportiveness they provide,¹⁸ and their interactions are more complex than the interactions of other members.¹⁹ Good leaders are competent in perceiving the needs and goals of members, then adjusting behaviors to these needs.²⁰ . . .

Situational models generally focus on communicative behaviors. They conceive of small groups as being like puzzles, with each leadership piece having a unique shape in each puzzle. Trying to force a round puzzle piece into a square hole won't work well. Thus, the most effective leadership for a particular group should fit that group's situation, and the adjustment that leaders make to fit situations is an adjustment in their communication behavior.

Communicative Competencies Approach

Communication scholars who adopt the **communicative competencies approach** have tried to focus on the communicative behaviors of leaders as they exercise interpersonal influence to accomplish group goals. They ask such questions as "What do effective leaders do?" Kevin Barge and Randy Hirokawa's Communication Competency Model of Group Leadership is one of the most comprehensive models to address this question.²¹ This model assumes that leaders help a group achieve its goals through the process of communication, and that communication skills (competencies) are the means used by individuals to lead small groups. Two broad competencies include the task and

interpersonal or relationship distinctions discussed earlier. Leaders must be flexible to draw from a personal repertoire of such competencies. Some of the most important leader competencies are described briefly.

1. Effective small group leaders are active communicators who encode ideas clearly and concisely. Emergent leaders speak frequently, although not necessarily the most frequently in a group,²² but frequency of talk alone is not sufficient--the quality of the talk is essential.²³ Leaders should speak clearly and fluently and be able to verbalize problems, goals, values, ideals, and solutions.²⁴
2. Effective group leaders communicate a good grasp of the group's task. Their communication behaviors reveal extensive knowledge about the task, how to organize and interpret that knowledge, and what procedures will help get the job done.
3. Effective group leaders are skilled in mediating information and ideas supplied by all members. They are good at structuring disorganized or ambiguous information, at asking probing questions to bring out pertinent information, and at evaluating inferences and conclusions drawn from information.²⁵
4. Effective group leaders express their opinions provisionally. Members do not like dogmatic leaders. Groups produce more and better alternatives if their leaders withhold their own opinions until later in a discussion instead of expressing them early.²⁶ Groups whose leaders suspend their own judgments and encourage members to consider multiple viewpoints fully produce better solutions than other groups.²⁷
5. Effective group leaders express group-centered concerns. Effective leaders do not act cocky or arrogant,²⁸ but do exhibit personal commitment to the group's goals in both word and deed,²⁹ and confront members who are more self- than group-centered.³⁰
6. Effective group leaders respect others when they speak. They are sensitive to nonverbal signals and what they might mean, and they are courteous.
7. Effective group leaders share rewards and credit with the group. Effective leaders share as equals. Democratic leaders share rewards and punishments equally with the group,³¹ give credit to the group for accomplishments, and work to develop the leadership competencies of all members.³² They communicate their appreciation for the efforts of others.

Distributed Leadership

Members and leaders together are responsible for effective leadership in a group.

Distributed leadership explicitly acknowledges that each member is expected to perform the communication behaviors needed to move the group toward its goal. Although it does not often happen, groups may even survive without a designated leader, like the long-term group studied by Eleanor Counselman.³³ This group functioned without a designated leader, but it was not without leadership. Various members performed leadership functions such as providing structure, gatekeeping, setting group norms, and keeping the group on task. Although this group is unusual, it supports an important point made earlier: leadership is a property of the *group*, not a single individual.

In fact, groups seem to be more productive when leadership behaviors are distributed. When Kevin Barge compared a leadership model where the group leader was an active, directive influence to one where all members engaged in the leadership process, he found that overall leadership activity, not the designated leader's activity alone, predicted overall group productivity.³⁴

Most groups you are in will have a designated leader. However, all members share leadership and responsibility for the group. This may be difficult to achieve, but it is a worthwhile goal. Ideally, all members should know something about group process so they know what a group needs at any given time and can provide it appropriately. Wise leaders encourage members to share in the leadership of the group.

Problem Solving

Most secondary groups exist to solve problems. Group members must be both creative and critical to arrive at the best solutions. Groups are usually (but not always) better problem solvers than individuals, because several people can provide more information than one person, can supply more resources, collectively have a broader perspective, and can spot flaws in each other's reasoning. However, there are trade-offs. Group problem solving takes longer, and sometimes personality, procedural, or social problems in a group make it difficult for members to work as a team. Group problem solving is superior under certain conditions, such as when multiple solutions are equally appropriate, decisions must be acceptable to all the members, and there is ample time for the group to meet and discuss.³⁵ Groups are particularly well suited for **conjunctive tasks**, where no one member has all the necessary information but each member has some information to contribute. Individuals are often better at **disjunctive tasks**, which require little coordination and can be completed by the most skilled member working alone.³⁶ Group problem solving is usually more effective when the process is systematic and organized because a group that does not have an overall plan for decision making is more likely to make a poor decision.³⁷

Problem Solving and Decision Making

Problem solving is the process of moving from an undesirable present situation to a desirable goal by overcoming obstacles to that goal. . . . For example, if your organization is losing members (an undesirable present situation), increasing membership may be your goal. You face certain obstacles, such as lack of information about why members are quitting. The problem-solving process is a comprehensive procedure with several steps, including assessing the current situation, creating alternatives and evaluating them, selecting one or more, and implementing them. **Decision making** refers only to the act of choosing among options that already exist. The two processes are related, however, because many decisions are made in the process of problem solving. For example, a task force charged with designing a new campus union is a problem-solving group, but a screening committee selecting the best site for the union from among several pre-approved sites is a decision-making group.

When a group is given its **charge**, or assignment, there are limits placed on its ability to act. This is the group's **area of freedom**, which is usually stated or implied in the charge. The charge specifies what a group is to do, and the area of freedom defines the boundaries within which the group must work. For instance, the task force designing a

new campus union is given a financial limit it cannot exceed: the union must not cost more than \$2 million. Both the charge and the area of freedom should be clear to all group members at the beginning of a problem-solving discussion.

Effective Group Problem Solving

If problem solving is to be effective, three major criteria must be met. First, the group must be systematic. If not, essential business that should ensue will not occur or may not be fully completed. Second, the group must be creative. Members must extend their individual thinking to come up with innovative ideas. Finally, the group must manage conflict appropriately so it is helped, not hurt, by differences of opinion. Each of these will be discussed in greater detail.

Organizing Problem Solving Discussions

Groups using systematic procedures solve problems more effectively and have discussions that are perceived to be of higher quality than do groups which do not use systematic procedures.³⁸ Following a structured procedure often reminds discussants of something they forgot to do (such as analyze the problem thoroughly) in an earlier stage of problem solving and suggests logical priorities.³⁹ An effective problem-solving process starts with an appropriate discussion question, includes explicit discussion of criteria, and follows a systematic problem-solving procedure.

Wording the Discussion Question

Problem-solving groups typically handle three basic types of discussion questions. **Questions of fact** deal with whether something is true or can be verified. **Questions of value** ask whether something is good or bad, better or worse. Cultural and individual values and beliefs are central to questions of value. **Questions of policy** ask what action *should* be taken. The key word *should* is either stated or implied in questions of policy. Examples of each type of question are included in figure 1.

Figure 1 - Questions of Fact, Value, and Policy

Fact

How has the divorce rate changed in the last fifteen years?
How many Hispanic students graduate from high school each year?
What percentage of college students graduate in four years?
How often on average does a person speak each day?
What occupations earn the highest annual incomes?

Value

Why should people seek higher education?
How should Americans treat international students?
Does our legal system provide "justice for all"?
How should young people be educated about AIDS?
What is the value of standardized tests for college admission?

Policy

What courses should students be required to take?

Should the state's drunken driving laws be changed?

What are the arguments for and against mandatory retirement?

Should the U.S. intervene in foreign disputes for humanitarian reasons?

What advantages should government provide for businesses willing to develop in high risk areas of a city?

Regardless of the type of discussion question guiding a problem-solving group, the leader must state the question appropriately. Well-stated questions are clear, measurable, and focus on the problem, rather than a solution. First, the language and terminology should be concrete rather than abstract. If ambiguous terms such as *effective*, *good*, or *fair* are used, providing examples helps each group member have as close to the same meaning as possible. Figure 2 gives examples of how abstract terms can be made more concrete. Second, a well-stated discussion question helps group members know when the solution has been achieved. For example, a task force charged with "completing a report by May 15 on why membership has dropped from 100 to 50 members" knows exactly what it is to do by what deadline. Finally, a group should start its problem solving with a problem question rather than a solution question. **Problem questions** focus on the undesirable present state and imply that many solutions are possible. They do not predispose or bias a group toward one particular option. Solution questions, on the other hand, slant the group's discussion toward one particular option. They may inadvertently cause a group to ignore creative or unusual options because they blind members to some alternatives. Examples of each may be found in figure 3.

Figure 2 - Making Abstract Concepts More Concrete

"I think Ms. Brown is **a good lawyer** because she is **very credible**. **She knows the law** and always **comes up with novel arguments that her opposing lawyers can't counter.**"

"Our solution for the parking problem has to be effective. I mean, it has to **reduce parking complaints, eliminate the amount of driving around looking for a space that happens now, and not cost the university any money.**"

"I think **weapons** should be made illegal. I mean, **guns** are really dangerous in the wrong hands, and you can't tell me that people need **semi-automatic assault rifles** to hunt with."

Figure 3 - Problem Versus Solution Questions

Problem questions

How can we reduce complaints about parking on campus?

What can we do to increase attendance at our club's activities?

How can we make National Avenue safer to cross?

Solution questions

How can we increase the number of parking spaces in the campus lots?

How can we improve publicity for our club's activities?

How can we get City Council to reduce the speed limit on National Avenue?

Discussing Criteria

Criteria are the standards by which a group must judge potential solutions. For example, a solution's likely effectiveness ("Will it work?"), acceptability ("Will people vote for our proposal?"), and cost ("Does this option keep us within budget?") are common criteria groups use. Group members should discuss and agree on criteria before a solution is adopted. Because criteria are based on the subjective values of group members, two members, each using rational tools of decision making, can arrive at different conclusions. The more similar group members are--in age, gender, ethnicity, background, attitudes, values, and beliefs--the easier it will be to agree on criteria.

Two kinds of criteria are common. **Absolute criteria** are those that *must* be met; the group has no leeway. **Important criteria** are those that *should* be met, but the group has some flexibility. Group members should give the highest priority to criteria that *must* be met. Ideas that do not meet absolute criteria should be rejected, and the rest ranked on how well they meet important criteria. Examples of each type of criterion are included in figure 4.

Figure 4 - Absolute Versus Important Criteria for a New Student Union

Absolute criteria

(*must* be met)

Must not cost more than \$5 million.

Must be wheelchair-accessible.

Must include flexible space that can be arranged in different ways.

Important criteria

(*should* be met)

Should be centrally located.

Should have stage space for concerts.

Should be attractive to all campus constituencies, including traditional and nontraditional students, faculty, and staff.

Keeping the Problem-Solving Discussion Organized

Effective problem solving does not happen by accident. If a group wants to solve a problem or make a decision effectively, certain events must occur during the discussion. The following functions are essential: a comprehensive analysis of the group's current situation, a clear understanding of what the group wants the solution to achieve, a complete survey of the options available, a thorough evaluation of the positive and negative aspects of those options, and appropriate use of high quality information during

the process.⁴⁰ The quality of a group's output depends on how well these criteria are met.⁴¹ The single biggest error made by groups that reach faulty solutions is the omission of, or failure to, discuss thoroughly one or more of these steps.

It does not seem to matter what problem-solving procedure a group uses,⁴² but using no structural pattern definitely seems to hurt the group's solution.⁴³ Apparently, using a systematic, problem-solving procedure helps ensure that addressing the essential functions is not left to chance, so groups using systematic procedures are more likely to be effective problem solvers.⁴⁴ Systematic procedures help groups tap into members' critical thinking skills and knowledge.

Several models exist to help groups engage in systematic problem solving. Many of these models are based on the **reflective thinking model** of philosopher John Dewey.⁴⁵

Figure 5 - The Steps in P-MOPS

- I. Problem description and analysis: "What is the nature of the problem facing the group?"
- II. Generation and elaboration of possible solutions: "What might be done to solve the problem we've described?"
- III. Evaluation of possible solutions: "What are the probable benefits and possible negative consequences of each proposed solution?"
- IV. Consensus decision: "What seems to be the best possible solution we can all support?"
- V. Implementation of the solution chosen: "How will we put our decision into effect?"

The Procedural Model of Problem Solving (P-MOPS) presented below incorporates the essential functions discussed earlier. It is designed to help groups engage in critical thinking by keeping problem-solving discussions orderly so the group is less likely to omit an important step in the problem-solving process. In addition, it can be modified for a number of different kinds of problems.

A Procedural Model of Problem Solving (P-MOPS)

The acronym **P-MOPS** has a double purpose: it makes remembering both the full name of the model and its main purpose easy--to help groups "mop up" all necessary functions for high-quality problem solving. Its systematic structure can be adjusted to suit whatever contingencies a group faces. P-MOPS encourages the leader and members to construct a written outline with specific questions about all sub-issues the group must consider so no important contingency is overlooked. It is not a rigid formula, but a guide to encourage thorough problem solving. Whether your group uses P-MOPS or some other procedural guideline, displaying the steps during discussion and keeping visual records of the discussion (such as with flip charts) helps members keep on track. The five major steps in P-MOPS are listed in figure 5 and are described as follows:

- I. *What is the nature of the problem facing us?* The group makes a thorough assessment of the problem, including what is unsatisfactory, what led to the undesirable situation, what members ultimately desire, and what the obstacles to that goal might be. Focusing on the problem before thinking about how to solve it is essential. What would you say if your doctor recommended surgery

- without first making a thorough examination? Problem analysis encourages group members to develop a shared image of the problem, to stay on track, and to develop solutions that address the real issues, rather than just symptoms.
- II. *What might be done to solve the problem?* Having many ideas from which to choose makes it more likely that good ideas are included among the choices. Writing down ideas where all can see them prevents losing ideas and may trigger new ones. Procedures such as brainstorming, described later, can help a group develop creative options during this step.
 - III. *What are the probable benefits and possible negative consequences of each proposed solution?* Once the problem has been thoroughly analyzed and alternatives described, the group is ready to evaluate the alternatives. Pros and cons of each solution must be explored. Every member must feel free to express opinions openly and honestly if this step is to work optimally.
 - IV. *What is the best possible solution we can all support?* If a decision seems to have emerged during evaluation of alternatives, the discussion leader should test for consensus ("We seem to be all agreed that our second option is the one we prefer. Am I understanding everyone correctly?"). Sometimes, members find ways of combining or modifying options to refine them during this step.
 - V. *What will we do to put our solution into effect?* The final step involves implementing the solution. That may mean planning how to present the final recommendations to a parent organization (including deciding who will make the report and in what form) or actually carrying out the plan developed (for example, buying the materials needed and implementing the plan).

P-MOPS helps ensure that a group meets its critical thinking function, which is one of the main jobs of group problem solving. Another important aspect of group problem solving is creativity. Brainstorming, described in the next section, is often used in conjunction with P-MOPS, especially during step II, to help spark group creativity.

Encouraging Group Creativity

One of the most important jobs a leader has is to encourage group creativity. One procedure that encourages creativity is **brainstorming**, a technique originated in the advertising industry to help develop imaginative advertising campaigns.⁴⁶ Critical evaluation kills creativity, so the main rule of brainstorming is "no evaluation," at least during the brainstorming process. Evaluation of the ideas takes place *after* the group has exhausted its options, such as during step III of P-MOPS. There are four steps to brainstorming:

1. First the group is given a problem to solve. The problem can vary from quite specific ("What shall we name our new sports car?") to highly abstract ("How can we increase commuter student participation in student activities?"). Sometimes, group members may prepare ahead of time. For example, a team brainstorming names for a new pudding first ate some of the pudding, then talked about its taste and what it reminded them of, then brainstormed over 500 possible names!
2. Members of the group are encouraged to generate as many solutions as possible. Four guidelines are essential:

- a. No evaluation is permitted--no criticism of, laughing at, or negative reactions to any ideas.
 - b. The group strives for quantity--the more ideas listed, the better.
 - c. Innovation is encouraged--unusual, wild, and crazy ideas are sought.
 - d. Hitchhiking is encouraged--members are asked to piggyback on others' ideas or modify others' ideas.
3. All ideas are charted so the entire group can see them. All ideas are written down on a chalkboard, marker board, or on large sheets of paper plainly visible to all members of the brainstorming team, because looking at the posted ideas often triggers new ones. The listed ideas can later be used to write meeting minutes.
 4. All ideas are evaluated at a different session. After the brainstorming technique has been used to generate a long list of possible solutions, critical thinking is used to evaluate each idea, possibly to modify or improve on some of them, and to retain for consideration only those ideas that meet essential criteria. Sometimes a different group evaluates the ideas created by the brainstorming group. If the same group does the evaluating, it should take a physical break to let members switch mental gears from creative to critical thinking.

Many other specialized procedures and techniques help groups improve creative and critical thinking, or help with some other aspect of group discussion. P-MOPS and brainstorming help with two of the most essential discussion functions.

Conflict in Small Group Problem Solving

Conflict is an expressed struggle between people who must work together (such as group 3 members) but whose goals or values are incompatible.⁴⁷ Not only is conflict inevitable in small groups, it is desirable. Disagreement is a natural byproduct when members with different perceptions, goals, and values try to come to some agreement about an issue or problem. Conflict is at the heart of effective problem solving and decision making because it can improve group creativity and critical thinking. The saying that if two people perceive things in exactly the same way, one of those people is unnecessary, underscores the value of disagreement. Group members who are doing their jobs well *should* disagree. The failure to express disagreement is called **groupthink**, and can seriously damage a group's problem-solving process.⁴⁸ However, conflict must be managed appropriately to realize its benefits.

Substantive conflict, also called *intrinsic* conflict, is disagreement over ideas, meanings, issues, and other matters pertinent (intrinsic) to the task of the group.⁴⁹ It is the basis for effective decision making and problem solving because it is how ideas, proposals, evidence, and reasoning are challenged and critically examined. Managed well, substantive conflict helps a group. **Affective conflict**, or *extrinsic* conflict, stems from interpersonal power and personality clashes that have nothing to do directly with the group's task.⁵⁰ It is harmful to the group.

Capitalizing on Conflict for the Good of the Group

Although affective conflict may be better left unexpressed, substantive conflict cannot benefit the group unless it is made available to the group. The following guidelines will help members capitalize on conflict for the good of the group:

1. Express your disagreement. Failing to confront disagreements reduces satisfaction with the group and circumvents the decision-making and problem-solving process. Not speaking up deprives the group of potentially valuable information.
2. Stick with the issue at hand. Deal directly with the issue under discussion and do not bring up side issues or allow hidden agenda items to motivate you.⁵¹
3. Express your disagreements with sensitivity. Do not try to push others' emotional buttons. Monitor the effects of your statements on others and adjust your communication appropriately.
4. Disagree with the idea, but do not ever criticize the person. Express disagreement so that it does not devalue the person with whom you disagree. Otherwise, you risk establishing a defensive climate that discourages honest discussion.
5. Base your disagreement on evidence and reasoning. Disagreements should be substantive, based on evidence and reasoning instead of rumor, innuendo, or emotionalism.⁵²
6. React to disagreement with a spirit of inquiry, not defensiveness. If someone disagrees with you, do not react as though you have been attacked personally. Listen actively to your fellow member's remarks. Clarify any misunderstandings and work together to discover a mutually acceptable solution. In this way you make conflict work for, rather than against, the group.
7. If someone persists in attacking you, stay calm. This may be one of your biggest challenges. First, do not let another's attacks intimidate you into being silent. Instead, confront the attacking member calmly, explaining how you feel and what you want: "I resent your personal attacks and I think they are inappropriate. I am willing to listen to your objections, but I want you to stop your attacks now." The attacker may apologize and calm down. If this doesn't work, ask for the group's intervention: "Do others think that personal attacks are acceptable behavior?" The other members, who probably are as uncomfortable as you, may now be encouraged enough to support you.

Managing Conflict

Whether conflict helps or harms the problem-solving process depends on how it is managed. Three general conflict management styles exist: nonconfrontation, control, and solution-oriented styles.⁵³ Each is appropriate under certain circumstances.

Nonconfrontation (including avoidance and accommodation) is a passive style in which the group member who disagrees says nothing at all or quickly gives in to another member. This style is appropriate only when the problem is unimportant and risks of making a poor decision are slight, or when the relationship is genuinely more important to you than the outcome.

Control (competition, domination, win-lose) is a highly aggressive style in which one person tries to win over another. It can cause heart feelings in a group, but it is appropriate when you believe strongly about something and you perceive your needs will not be acknowledged or accommodated with other approaches.

Solution orientation (negotiation, collaboration, compromise, win-win) is a cooperative and assertive style that encourages all conflicting parties to work together for a solution that meets everyone's needs as fully as possible. It is always appropriate, but can take a lot of time. Solution-oriented outcomes often last because all members have

their most important needs met. Sometimes members try to negotiate solutions that fully meet everyone's needs, but are unable to arrive at such ideal solutions. In those cases, they may have to compromise, and each member gives up something. However, compromises can be effective outcomes when members feel that what they gave up is fair in comparison to what others gave up.

The Leader's Role in Problem Solving

The leader's role in problem-solving discussions is important because the leader can ensure that the important discussion functions, such as using systematic procedures, thinking creatively and critically, and managing conflict appropriately, are performed. The following guidelines for leaders help promote effective problem-solving discussions.

1. Make sure everyone knows the specific purpose of the meeting, the group's charge, and its area of freedom. Members should have been informed of these by a meeting notice, but a brief reminder helps members focus on the task. In addition, members may have questions, so addressing them early may save time and prevent misunderstandings later.
2. Suggest procedures to follow. If P-MOPS or some other discussion procedure is used, make sure everyone knows the steps. Provide a handout or put the steps on a board or chart visible to everyone.
3. Ask a clear, measurable problem-question to focus initial discussion.
4. Keep the discussion goal-oriented and summarize each major problem-solving step as it has been completed.
5. Equalize the opportunity to participate. Make sure that everyone has an equal opportunity to speak, with no one either dominating or withdrawing.
6. Stimulate creative thinking. Use brainstorming or other creativity-enhancing techniques, and defer evaluation of ideas until members have no more ideas to suggest.
7. Stimulate critical thinking. After a group has done its creative thinking, encourage members to evaluate information completely. See that all proposed solutions are given a thorough testing before they are accepted as final group decisions.
8. Finally, promote teamwork and cooperation. Establishing a climate of trust does more than anything else to develop cooperation and teamwork among members. Watch for, and challenge, harmful norms, role patterns, or hidden agenda items that seem to conflict with group goals and with creating a trusting, supportive environment. Keep arguments focused on facts and issues, not personalities.

Summary

This chapter covered two important topics essential for understanding how small groups function: leadership and problem solving. Leadership is the exercise of interpersonal influence via communication to achieve group goals. A leader is someone who exercises influence. Designated leaders are appointed or elected to official leadership positions, whereas emergent leaders are informal leaders who are influential because their behaviors are useful to the group. Leaders' (and members') ability to influence stems from five power types: reward, punishment, legitimate, expert, and referent power. There are numerous theoretical approaches to studying leadership. Trait approaches assume leaders are born, not made. Style approaches focus on the democratic, autocratic, and

laissez-faire behaviors of leaders. Contingency approaches, including the functions and situational approaches, assume that different leadership situations require different leadership styles. The communication competencies approach examines the communication behaviors leaders use. Distributed leadership suggests that both members and leaders are responsible for the group and should perform whatever leadership functions a group seems to need at any given time.

Problem solving is a comprehensive procedure that moves a group from an undesirable present situation to a desired goal by overcoming obstacles. Problem solving, which includes problem analysis, creation and evaluation of alternatives, and choosing and implementing the agreed-upon alternative, is differentiated from decision making, which involves only the selection of an alternative.

Effective group problem solving requires that a group be creative, systematic and thorough in its problem-solving approach. First, the group's discussion should be initiated with a clearly worded problem question, which focuses on problem analysis, rather than a solution question, which may bias a group toward a particular option. Criteria, or standards for evaluating the solution, should be discussed and agreed upon by all members. Then, the group's discussion should be kept organized by using a systematic problem-solving procedure such as the Procedural Model of Problem Solving (P-MOPS), which can be tailored to fit a group's unique circumstances. Creativity can be encouraged by using procedures such as brainstorming, where the group's critical thinking is temporarily suspended so a number and variety of options can be developed without fear of judgment.

Conflict, which is inevitable during problem-solving discussions, can be helpful to a group if it is used to promote effective critical thinking. Substantive conflict over issues and ideas can be especially helpful to a group, but affective conflict stemming from power and personality clashes is harmful. Whether conflict helps a group depends on how it is managed. Nonconfrontation, a passive style, prevents group members from receiving the full benefit of members' careful reasoning. Control, an aggressive, competitive style, tries to win no matter what and can tear a group apart. Solution orientation, an assertive, cooperative style, encourages conflicting members to search for a mutually acceptable solution, but can take a long time. Each of the three major conflict management styles can be appropriate in certain circumstances.

The leader's role helps determine whether group problem solving is effective or not. Although the members also are responsible for the group's ultimate output, the leader can facilitate effective problem solving by making sure the important problem-solving functions are met.

Vocabulary

absolute criteria Criteria that must be met; the group has no leeway

affective conflict Conflict that stems from personal dislikes and power struggles

area of freedom The limitations placed on a group as part of the group's charge

autocratic leaders Leaders who maintain strict control over group members

brainstorming A technique to help groups increase the number of creative options available by suspending judgment or evaluation

charge The group's assignment

charisma A form of referent power that inspires strong loyalty and devotion from others

coercion A form of punishment power that uses hostile tactics of force to influence

communicative competencies approach An approach to leadership that focuses on how leaders exert influence by using specific communication skills and behaviors

conflict Expressed disagreement between people who are interdependent

conjunctive tasks Tasks that require a high degree of coordination in order to be completed well

contingency approaches Approaches to studying leadership that assume different leadership situations require different leadership behaviors

control A highly aggressive conflict management style in which one person tries to win at all costs

criteria Standards against which a group's solution or decision is evaluated

decision making The act of choosing among alternatives

democratic leaders Leaders who encourage members to participate fully in group decisions

designated leader Someone who has been appointed or elected to an official position of leadership

disjunctive tasks Tasks with low coordination requirements that can be completed effectively by one member working alone

distributed leadership A leadership approach that expects each member, not just the leader, to take responsibility for the group by exerting appropriate influence

emergent leader Someone who becomes an informal leader by exerting influence in a group but does not hold the official position or title of leader

expert power Power derived from knowledge or expertise valued by the group

functions approach An approach to studying leadership that assumes groups have certain task and interpersonal functions that must be performed, but may be performed by any member, not just the designated leader

groupthink The failure of a group to evaluate its options thoroughly and critically because members fail to express their disagreement

important criteria Criteria that should be met if at all possible, but the group has leeway

laissez-faire leaders Nonleaders who take little or no initiative for structuring a group discussion

leader A person who influences the behavior and attitudes of others through communication

leadership The process of using communication to influence the behaviors and attitudes of others to meet group goals

legitimate power Power by virtue of having a particular position or title

nonconfrontation The passive conflict management style in which the individual gives in or avoids disagreement

P-MOPS An acronym for Procedural Model of Problem Solving, a structured, flexible procedure groups can use to ensure that no important step needed for effective problem solving is missed

power The ability to influence others

problem questions Group discussion questions that focus on the problem and what created it, and do not contain any bias toward a particular solution

problem solving The comprehensive process of analyzing a problem, generating and evaluating alternatives, and selecting and implementing the group's choice so that the group can overcome obstacles to move from an undesirable present situation to its goal

punishment power Power derived from the ability to withhold what others want and need

referent power Power based on others' admiration and respect

reflective thinking model A problem-solving model developed by philosopher John Dewey based on his assessment of how individuals solve problems

reward power Power derived from the ability to give others tangible or intangible things they want and need

self-monitoring The degree to which individuals pay attention to contextual cues and adjust their behavior to fit

situational models Models of leadership that encourage leaders to focus on specific factors within the group situation to determine the most appropriate leadership behaviors

solution orientation A cooperative and assertive conflict management style that encourages conflicting parties to search jointly for a mutually acceptable solution

solution questions Group discussion questions that bias discussion because they focus the group's attention on a particular solution instead of the problem

style approaches Approaches to studying leadership that focus on the leader's style or pattern of behavior

substantive conflict Conflict over ideas, meanings, issues and other matters pertinent to the group's task

trait approaches Approaches to studying leadership that focus on the leader's personal characteristics; assume leaders are born, not made

Application Exercises

1. Think of the small group leaders you have observed. Make two lists, one listing specific characteristics of the best leader, and the other listing specific characteristics of the worst leader. Form groups of five or six and discuss your lists. Compile a master list of best and worst characteristics, and share with the class as a whole.
2. As a class, select a current problem on your campus. (Examples: parking problems; registration problems; alcohol or other substance abuse problems; date rape.) Form groups of five to six students each. Each group should do the following:
 - a. Construct an appropriate problem question to guide the discussion.
 - b. Decide upon criteria, both absolute and important, that must be met.
 - c. Use P-MOPS to guide the problem-solving process. Try conscientiously to follow the steps in sequence and not to skip steps.
 - d. After the groups have agreed upon their various solutions, share them as a class and discuss what you learned, including what seemed to help the problem-solving process and what seemed to hinder it.
3. Think of a group to which you currently belong or have belonged to in the past. Try to remember all of the conflicts you have experienced in the group. On a sheet of paper, place the following headings in this format:

Description of the conflict Type of conflict How conflict was resolved The conflict's effect on the group

Discuss your findings as a class. What conclusions have you reached about conflict and its relationship to the group problem-solving process?

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