Characteristics of Small Group Tasks

Chapter Six

Characteristics of a Task

Seven Characteristics

Characteristics of a Task

1 Task difficulty

Refers to the ease of task accomplishment

2. Solution multiplicity

Refers to the number of alternatives that exist for accomplishing the task

Characteristics of a Task

3. Intrinsic interest
   Centers on what each group member finds interesting or fascinating about the task

4. Population familiarity
   Refers to the degree of group members' familiarity with the task

Characteristics of a Task

5. Acceptance level
   Describes the degree to which group members find the task outcome acceptable

6. Area of freedom
   Centers on the amount of authority or responsibility the group possesses when it comes to implementing the task

Characteristics of a Task

7. Social complexity
   Refers to the degree of ego involvement present among group members in accomplishing the task

Decision-making and Problem-solving Tasks

Decision-making
Problem-solving

Decision making and Problem solving

Decision making

When a group engages in decision making, it chooses one option from a set of already selected options in which no externally correct option exists

Decision making is viewed as a judgment

Decision making and Problem solving

When a group makes a decision, it does so in one of four ways:

1. <u>Consensus</u> means all group members agree with and are committed to the decision

2. <u>Compromise</u> means some group members may not agree with the decision, but the group as a whole stands by the decision

Decision making and Problem solving

When a group makes a decision, it does so in one of four ways:

3. Majority rule means the majority of the group members support the decision

4. Authority rule means someone in a position of power makes a decision on behalf of the group

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Decision making and Problem solving

When a group engages in problem solving, it defines the problem, identifies the solutions, and chooses one solution from the set of identified solutions

Problem solving is viewed as a process

Functional Perspective of Small Group Communication

Also known as:
Functional Theory

Functional Perspective

A group's performance directly relates to the communicative functions performed by a group

Functional Perspective

Seven assumptions guide the functional perspective:

1. The members of the group are motivated to participate

2. The choice to be made is nonobvious

3. The collective resources of the group exceed the resources of the individual members

Functional Perspective

4. The guidelines for task accomplishment are provided to the group

5. The information needed to complete the task is available or can be easily obtained

6. The members possess the cognitive skills and abilities needed to complete the task successfully
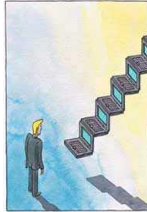
7. Communication is instrumental

Functional Perspective

Five Steps of the functional perspective

1. Develop a correct understanding
   of the issue

A group can enhance its understanding
   of the issue by determining the charge,
   or the direction given to a group about
   how to proceed with the task.

Functional Perspective

A group can ask four questions to determine its charge

1. A question of fact addresses whether something holds true

2. A question of value addresses whether something is
      viewed favorably or unfavorably

3. A question of conjecture addresses the possibility of
      whether something might occur

4. A question of policy addresses whether a plan of action
      should be adopted

Functional Perspective

Five Steps of the functional perspective

2. Determine the minimal characteristics required of
      the alternative needed to resolve the issue.

3. Identify an appropriate, adequate, and
      unambiguous--not to mention relevant and
      realistic--set of alternatives

Functional Perspective

Five Steps of the functional perspective

4. Examines the alternatives (step 3) in relation to the minimal characteristics of the alternative established in the second step

5. Select the best alternative in light of the previous four steps

Functional Perspective

Two notes of caution:

1. The order of the steps is less important than the fact that the group has gone through each step

2. Not all five steps are equally important for every task

Functional Perspective

In addition to the five steps, groups should consider two contexts

1. Historical context refers to the group's history of working together and whether the group qualifies as a zero history group

2. Institutional context refers to the group's position within a larger group membership

Functional Perspective

Two sets of obstacles can be encountered at any point during the decision-making or problem-solving process

1. Task-related obstacles refer specifically to the informational, analytical, and procedural problems that impede a group's ability to effectively accomplish its task

Functional Perspective

2. Relational obstacles refer specifically to the differences in attitudes, values, and goals that arise among members that impede a group's ability to effectively accomplish its task

Note: Other obstacles include a member's communication and personality traits

Groupthink

Groupthink

<u>Definition</u>

According to Janis (1982), groupthink is "a mode of thinking that [members] engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive group . . . which override[s] their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p.9)

Groupthink

Cohesion must be accompanied by three sets of antecedent conditions

1. <u>Decision characteristics</u> refers to the parameters surrounding task assignment as experienced directly by the group

2. <u>Group structure</u> refers to the behaviors and characteristics unique to the group

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Groupthink

Six components of group structure:

1. Insulation of the group
2. Lack of impartial leadership
3. Lack of norms using methodical procedures surrounding how groups engage in task accomplishment.
4. Low group self-esteem.
5. Group member homogeneity.
6. A high amount of stress accompanying the small group task.

Groupthink

Three sets of antecedent conditions

3. <u>Decision-making context</u> refers to the organizational parameters surrounding task assignment that are independent of the group

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Groupthink

<u>Three symptoms of groupthink</u>

1. When a group <u>overestimates its own mortality</u>, creating an illusion of its own invulnerability

2. <u>Closed-mindedness</u>, which means a group relies solely on its members to gather and evaluate information

3. <u>Pressure toward uniformity</u>, which results in members engaging in self-censorship and mindguarding

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Groupthink

<u>Four tips to prevent groupthink</u>

1. Allow sufficient time for discussion
2. Actively think about how each group members' communication influences the group's decision-making and problem-solving processes
3. Probe each idea or statement offered by group members
4. Discourage promotional leadership

A Final Note

A Final Note

The decision to be made or the solution to be generated is ultimately the result of several interrelated variables. To make satisfactory progress on a task, work groups require motivated members, adequate time and informational resources, competent leadership, and direct organizational assistance.