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Personnel Pitfalls



As many as 22% of the problems facing groups manifest from their personnel and other premeeting issues (DiSalvo, Nikkel, & Monroe, 1989). In chapter 3, we covered two of the three major categories of potential Purgatory Puddle problems (task and supragroup pitfalls). Now we complete the Purgatory Puddle pitfalls as we focus on those evident in the *personnel* available to group.

❖ “WRONG GROUP FOR THE TASK” PITFALLS

Personnel pitfalls, when the wrong number or combination of individuals are available for work on a grouping task, manifest in unfortunate ways as the group attempts to do its work: demonstrating that the individuals involved are the “wrong group for the task.”

Inappropriate Group Size

A key variable in group interaction is the number of people involved. When you are alone, thinking requires one set of skills; when with another person, someone whom you wish to impress, thinking is

Table 4.1 Summary of Purgatory Puddle: Personnel Pitfalls or “Wrong Group”

| <i>Personnel Pitfall</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Inappropriate Group Size | Too many members. Too few members. |
| Members Lack Personal Resources | Lack subject matter expertise. Lack group communication skills. Lack authority or credibility. Lack personal capacity. |
| Negative Assembly Effect | Trait, orientation, style, and circumstance-based issues. |

complicated by the need to communicate with that person. Add a third person to the mix and the complications continue to multiply: you now must attend to each person, to their relationship with each other, and to how they orient to you (individually and together).

Consider the potential interaction time available to each member. A meeting with three members gives each the opportunity to contribute 33% of the talk. Six members reduces talk time to 17%, 12 members to 8%. Each interaction also requires attention from other members, whose work gets more difficult with each additional member. In short, communication dynamics change once the context becomes a group; they then become more difficult with each additional member. Such dynamics can serve the group when grouping is done well. However, they can also be a problem, so as a general rule, *a group should not be larger than necessary*.

The first “wrong group” pitfall is when a group has too many or too few members. Too many group members may get in each other’s way and will be a waste of resources, reducing member productivity. Too few members may render the group unable to complete its task (i.e., because of limited resources or viewpoints). When an organization downsizes or experiences budget cuts, groups attempt to accomplish old outcome levels with fewer members. Increased productivity results when a group learns to need fewer people to do its work, but harm to individual members may also be a consequence. Even if they succeed on task, too few members taxes each for his or her participation, resulting in diminished health or quality of life.

What is the right size for a group? The answer will vary depending on what you want a group to be able to do and on the personal resources of its members (see below). *Three to seven members are typically ideal* for serving the three group functions. Some skilled group practitioners might be able to sustain small group dynamics (the kind

needed to attain process prizes) among 8 to 15 or so members, but that is hard work to accomplish.

A number of dynamics are of concern, even within a small range of group size. Carron and Spink (1995), who summarize the research on the subject, say that direction giving tends to be more shared, less difficult, and more informed by interaction among individual members when there are fewer members in the group. Direction giving is more likely to be autocratic when there are more members. Members tend to feel less satisfaction, less personal involvement, and more anxiety as the size of a group grows. Larger groups tend to be better at additive tasks but less effective at conjunctive tasks, and there appears to be a curvilinear relationship between group size and cohesiveness.

A final issue is that small *groups can benefit if there is an odd number of members* so that role and direction-giving emergence issues are easier to sort out when, for instance, a majority of members prefer a particular role assignment (Bormann & Bormann, 1996). The concern is not with tie votes (voting should be discouraged in groups, anyway, as it stops efforts to achieve consensus), but with the process through which direction givers emerge. In such role competitions, having a group size that allows one person to be a favorite among group members for a particular role function is helpful to the healthy evolution of group processes. In sum, too many or few members is a potential problem.

Members Lack Personal Resources

Member resources and orientation are integral to effective groups and are synergistically related in ways that are difficult to assess in advance of a grouping effort.

Lack of Expertise. Individuals available for grouping may lack expertise on the task facing the group. This may be because nobody in the world has sufficient knowledge regarding some new problem (such as was the case when people first started to die from AIDS but nobody knew its cause or how to treat it). It may be because nobody available for grouping has the necessary expertise. The question of expertise is difficult to sort out because some may use it as an excuse not to try. People can learn some of what they need to know about a task by working on it, but there are some tasks that require subject matter expertise. *If you are required to work on a topic about which you know little, keep in mind that value can be added to a group by an individual who knows little about the subject but is an effective group member; he or she can help even the experts.*

Lack of Group Communication Skills. Even experts in a subject may lack grouping skills and consequently fail in their efforts regardless of their expertise in the subject matter. For example, the people involved in the Challenger and Columbia shuttle disasters were experts in engineering and/or in aspects of public policy. Two important group skills deserve special attention. First, individuals who work well in groups have probably developed the ability to *accomplish a discussional attitude* toward working in groups. Among other things, this involves *keeping an open mind, working hard to articulate one's own ideas, and trying to get contributions from all other grouping members*. Second, effective group members have probably *developed deliberation skills*. These are the analytical skills necessary to be able to *generate and test ideas* and evidence rather than letting the dynamics of grouping determine which ideas become group outcomes. Such skills are why employers are so interested in hiring people with group communication skills.

Lack of Authority and Credibility. A group of individuals may lack the authority necessary to do or to implement the work assigned them, or they may lack credibility because key stakeholders are not represented among those doing the work of the group. The shortage of authority or credibility can render meaningless an otherwise potent group process and outcome. A lack of authority can only be fixed if an entity with authority over the task assigns authority to the group (a supragroup issue) or if a member who has the necessary authority is added or recruited to the group. If the group fails to represent key stakeholders, group processes and outcomes may lack credibility or legitimacy. Some form of representation either in the group or through the group composition process is the solution. *An inclusive and effective process of group construction* does not put everyone interested in the group, but it *ensures adequate authority and it includes opportunities for representation of, or other form of input from, stakeholders*.

Lack of Personal Capacity. Group members may lack other personal resources needed to accomplish their work. The best examples of this are individuals who do not have sufficient time or cognitive complexity to do the work. Does the individual member have the capacity to do the work required? Time is often a determining variable in how individual capacities play out. Cognitive capacity may work to exacerbate or ameliorate the effects of time constraints. For example, one's cognitive complexity (not intelligence), the ability to conceive of and to work with multiple meanings attached to particular ideas, may be involved in one's ability to address complex problems or to multitask. *Change in*

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group composition is the only remedy to this pitfall. More or fewer members may be needed, contingent on the capacities of those involved.

Personal capacity provides a transition to the largest set of potential personnel pitfalls: individual characteristics. These characteristics may combine in problematic ways during attempts to group, which produce the potential pitfalls we call a *negative assembly effect*.

A Negative Assembly Effect

Each individual is an individual because of his or her characteristics and because of how he or she behaves. Some characteristics and behaviors tend to enhance an individual's performance in a group and others tend to diminish performance; many of these effects are heightened when individuals are mixed together in a group. The concept of an *assembly effect* means different things to different scholars: trying to build a cohesive group prior to the first meeting by who is put into a group (Bormann & Bormann, 1996); or the effects in group behavior from combinations of people, though not because of their characteristics (Shaw, 1981). We find the obverse of these concepts to be useful as well. A negative assembly effect could result from problems because of the nature of the people put into the group or because of how combining them together affects group behavior and outcomes. We define a negative assembly effect as putting individuals together in a group who may tend to co-construct grouping activity that accomplishes less than expected given the resources they have. Obviously, contradicting Shaw, we include effects that result from their individual characteristics in our conception. Negative assembly effect represents how individual characteristics or combinations thereof might tend to increase the propensity for a group to struggle.

As you work your way through this material, be careful how you respond to it and try to keep in mind how you can make use of it. As you read these sections, ask yourself, "Is this true of me?" and "How frequently is it true of me?" and "Is it descriptive of others with whom I group?" You should recognize that how people respond to these characteristics and behaviors is more vital to grouping success than is the actual characteristic or behavior. In fact, understanding and adjusting to these characteristics and behaviors as they manifest in a group may actually enhance your group's ability to do its work. There is no personal characteristic or behavior in the following synthesis that is always useful or always hurtful.

Figure 4.1 Individual Characteristics and Behaviors From Traits to Circumstance-Based Tendencies

| <i>Characteristics</i> | <i>Description</i> |
|--|---|
| Permanent Characteristics Low Individual Choice Constant Across Interactions | |
| Trait | Enduring individual tendencies; probably born this way with almost no choice to change; have some choice whether to emphasize. |
| Orientation | Relatively enduring tendencies; probably socialized or raised this way; difficult but possible choices to change or emphasize. |
| Style | Implicit or explicit preferences; develop as strategies of particular action; employ by choice when perceive circumstance is appropriate. |
| Circumstance | Tendencies that may manifest depending on how interaction goes with particular people within particular contexts. |
| Circumstance-Based High Individual Choice Change Across Interactions | |

The remainder of this chapter provides an extensive set of personal characteristics and behaviors that may play out in groups in unfortunate ways. Our organizational matrix (see Figure 4.1) employs four metaphors (trait, orientation, style, circumstance), which represent the origin, duration, and choice involved in the characteristic.

❖ TRAITS

Traits are enduring individual characteristics that change little if at all from your birth through your lifetime (see Table 4.2). One would expect you to exhibit these characteristics in any context that provides opportunities for the trait to manifest. Impossible or very difficult to change, some traits may help you in grouping attempts and others may complicate successful grouping. Each is important only to the extent that it affects grouping, but each has been identified as a phenomenon of importance that recurs across a variety of groups.

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Table 4.2 Summary of Trait-Based Pitfalls for Groups

| <i>Trait Pitfall</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|------------------------------|---|
| Demographics and Personality | Age; sex, intelligence; self-esteem; physical attractiveness. |
| Communication Tendencies | Extroversion, introversion, and communication apprehension; self-monitoring. |
| Ascendancy Tendencies | Aggressiveness, assertiveness, and argumentativeness; Machiavellian; dogmatism and perfectionism. |

Demographics and Personality

These characteristics are born with the individual or determined in large part very early in life. Biological sex of the individual, age, intelligence, height, body type, physical appearance (which becomes a cultural marker of physical attractiveness), and self-concept are examples. Research in the middle third of the twentieth century tried to determine if there are ideal combinations of traits for effective direction giving or group membership. Much of that research suffered from problems with *test tube groups*, which are carefully controlled, one-shot experiments in which group dynamics differ from those in bona fide groups and longer-term group experiences in natural settings. However, the fact that scholars asked such questions in the first place is a sign that they thought the nature of an individual might affect her or his performance.

Grouping members can tend to believe the same thing. For example, numerous scholars have found evidence that member perceptions about sex and gender roles can be influential in determining who eventually emerges to lead a group (Bormann, Pratt, & Putnam, 1978; Gemmill & Schaible, 1991; Rosenfeld & Fowler, 1976; Yerby, 1975). Even though the sex of a group member does not predict his or her potential grouping capacities, combinations of that trait in the group can be expected to have effects because of the responses of grouping members. Would it matter if you were the only woman or man in a group? Would it matter if everyone else in your group were 30 years older than you? Would that affect your grouping or theirs? Imagine that Indira is obviously the smartest person in your group; how might that matter? We base our expectation that traits may affect grouping in

the perceptions group members have regarding the traits of their compadres. A trait has pitfall potential if grouping members let it constrain grouping effectiveness: *avoid that tendency when you detect it.*

Communication Tendencies

Because grouping requires communication, one's orientation toward talk and other aspects of communication is fundamental. Because *extroverted* individuals are more outgoing and interested in interacting with others than are introverted individuals, we might expect them to have fewer problems grouping. That is not necessarily the case. *Introverted* individuals may start interacting more slowly and may never interact as much as the extrovert, but their performance can enhance grouping just as the extrovert's can become a problem. Making negative causal attributions about individuals because they tend more toward extroversion or introversion is the most predictably problematic behavior; *avoid doing so.* These individual characteristics need to be worked around; *avoid the impulse to try to make somebody change.* A version of this pitfall is communication apprehension, which manifests differently for different people but may involve a general sense of unease whenever one is required to interact with others in a group. This goes beyond shyness so that the apprehensive person has to wage a battle with herself or himself in order to be a group member. It serves no purpose to add negative attributions from other group members in response.

Self-monitoring (Snyder, 1974) is looking to external cues to determine which emotional cues are appropriate to present within the context. If everyone is sad and mournful, telling jokes and being light-hearted would not appear to the high self-monitor to be appropriate; the low-self monitor would tell a joke if she or he thought it was funny, regardless of the emotional tone of the context. Each of us falls on a continuum between being a high or a low self-monitor. High self-monitors will tend to adapt to show appropriate emotional cues and probably are adept at doing so. Low self-monitors will not base the emotions they show to others on external cues, but rather on how they feel in the moment. This distinction can actually have quite an effect on a group. Some research indicates that individuals who are high self-monitors may be more in tune with the emotional state of other grouping members and may, consequently, be more likely to emerge as direction givers. If a member appears emotionally out of sync, it can be off-putting to other group members. When someone attempts to

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adapt to group emotions, other problems can result. *No general advice is in order, beyond understanding the phenomenon when it manifests, because either tendency might help groups in some cases and be a problem in others.*

Ascendancy Tendencies

To ascend is to move to the top. Ascendancy tendencies are manifestations of the needs some people have to come out on top. An example might be a tendency toward being *aggressive*. Grouping may be enhanced by cooperative or by competitive activities, but aggression is almost always a sign of trouble. Aggression is activity undertaken to hurt others. It comes at the expense of others. When aggressive behavior is used during grouping, it is almost always a pitfall, though it can be part of a response to other aggression. Regardless, aggressiveness may feel normal to some people. Research indicates that some bullies are less aware of how their behavior “feels” to their victims than we might expect. The use of aggression in response to provocation is one form of assertive behavior, designed to protect self-interests. *Assertive* behavior is also appropriate and necessary if one is to contribute to the flow of active grouping behavior: the ready exchange of information, ideas, and opinions involved in effective grouping. However, assertive behavior may “feel” aggressive to some members, regardless of whether or not it is done appropriately and with good intentions. *These difficult dynamics need to be talked about openly if you perceive that they are manifesting in your group.*

There is a time and place for well-constructed and supported arguments, which are carefully articulated claims with clearly expressed reasons to accept or to support them. Consequently, groups require some argumentation to improve the quality of their work. Some people, however, do not seem to know when to tone down their argumentative nature and others shrink from any communicative exchange involving competing ideas. Scholars say *argumentativeness* is the variable involved. Some people love to argue. Others are put off by that tendency. As long as there is sufficient argumentative capacity in the group to carefully test ideas, the potential for pitfalling locates in any combination of individuals that places one or more members at a disadvantage. If you know that you like to argue, you probably know that others are sometimes turned off by your skills and you need to *find ways to check your tendencies without losing their benefits; do not assume*

that others agree with you just because they cannot answer your arguments anymore than a victim who succumbs to physical aggression agrees with the aggressor. If you tend toward the other extreme, try to recognize the benefits your group can attain through careful testing of ideas and evidence, adapt to allow such exchanges with minimized irritation (breathe deeply), and make your unease known to the group so they can adapt to your needs as well.

The *Machiavellian* (Mach) does whatever is necessary to achieve what he or she wants in a group. If you know someone who always finds a way to come out on top, even if that means having to take advantage of friends or colleagues, then you may know a high Mach. High-Mach behavior can be helpful or not for a group, depending on if it happens to also serve the group's goal. Those who played against Michael Jordan (in basketball) describe his work ethic and court demeanor in manners that suggest to us he may be a high Mach and, arguably, as a consequence, the best basketball player ever. *Accepting such an individual for what he or she is, and protecting your backside by keeping careful records of key interactions, are reasonable tactics. If you are a high Mach, you ought only consider involvement in grouping activities that match your interests well and you need to consider the effects your behavior may have on your own future success after you construct a reputation for mistreating your compadres.*

The *dogmatic* member is inflexible, insensitive to cues from others, emotionally committed to her or his own idea or process, and may be a perfectionist. He or she takes unequivocal stands on issues and may be seen as domineering, bossy, or pigheaded ("my way or the highway"). Such behavior is a pitfall to any co-construction and can only serve a group in times of crisis or flagging energy (assuming the dogmatic did not cause the crisis or energy drain). Unlike the high Mach, the dogmatic may not be adept at getting what she or he wants except by digging in his or her heels and refusing to budge. *Dogma* suggests there is a "truth" that must be obeyed. Dogmatics may believe they are serving a high purpose, they may choose the comforts of certainty over the unpredictability of grouping outcomes, or they may just not understand how systems work: that equifinality means there is more than one way to attain excellent outcomes. Dogmatism is antithetical to a discussional attitude and to deliberative skills.

Groups should attempt to achieve consensus. The dogmatic group member can stymie consensus or cause the group to redirect efforts or outcomes in problematic ways. Neither can be allowed to stand. *After*

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careful consideration of a dogmatic's ideas and controlling against the complete rejection of the ideas because their advocate is so off-putting (remember that his or her motives may be good), grouping members must combine forces to overrule the dogmatic person. A dogmatic member must (be made to) allow the will of the group to manifest, once they have been given their say (or expect expulsion or a future of being shunned, ignored, or ostracized).

❖ ORIENTATION

An *orientation* may be nurtured into the person and becomes a fundamental characteristic of who she or he is as she or he interacts. Bormann and Bormann (1996) say that trait-based explanations of grouping behavior have mostly given way to interest in relatively enduring, difficult-to-change personal *orientations* (see Table 4.3). They give two examples, a group members' orientations toward achievement and toward preference for procedural order. We add several more.

Orientation Toward Achievement

Orientation toward achievement manifests as a pitfall when disparate approaches to grouping result from a significant mismatch between the members of a group in their desire and work toward excellent outcomes. The member or members with a very high orientation toward achievement may spend time and energy between meetings working on the group project only to find that others in the group are not thankful for their hard work. Individuals lower in orientation toward achievement may feel threatened and also shut out of important

Table 4.3 Summary of Orientation-Based Pitfalls for Groups

| <i>Orientation Pitfall</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|----------------------------|--|
| Achievement | High versus low focus and effort toward group success. |
| Procedural Order and Time | Desire for agenda and group structure; felt time versus clock time. |
| Information Processing | Critical and creative process preference; needs for cognition and closure. |
| Interaction | Orientation toward authority; orientation toward grouping and groups. |

decision-making or role-determining processes because they have not "paid the same price" the high achievers have paid. Note that the pitfall is not from the mismatch itself (though that can be problematic) but from how the mismatch is co-constructed into group life. *Knowing that differences in orientation toward achievement can become a pitfall should be used by all members as the impetus for early and explicit discussion of goals, perception of grouping exigencies, and the processes that should be co-constructed given any disparate orientation toward achievement. If the group cannot agree, once their cards are on the table, they should not be a group. They do not share the joint purpose, process, and sense of perceptual boundaries (what it means to be an effective member in this group) necessary to succeed and should adjust membership accordingly.*

Orientation Toward Procedural Order and Time

Putnam (1979) identifies *preference for procedural order* (PPO) as a basic orientation toward how grouping should unfold, and he documents how mixing individuals with different PPOs can result in pitfalls for a group. Each of us has a greater or lesser PPO (Hirokawa, Ice, & Cook, 1988; Putnam, 1979, 1982) and neither tendency is necessarily indicative of effective grouping. High PPOs want the group to have and stick to an agenda and time line, stay on task, and complete its obligations. Low PPOs want to work more organically, focusing on tasks and ideas as they come up, and not relying so much on structure or process but rather on a general feeling of progress. These individuals are more likely to work well with ambiguity, yet low PPOs may be called "lazy," "disorganized," or "addled" by colleagues with a high PPO (who are called "fascists," "anal," or "control freaks" by their low-PPO compadres). In addition to pitfalls from mixing high- and low-PPO members, there can be problems if a group only has members with too much or too little PPO, or if a grouping context conducive to high or low PPOs is dominated by members with the other orientation. *Where possible, group composition should involve individuals with context-conducive PPO levels. Regardless, the competing benefits of structured and of more organic processes need to be appreciated, accepted (perhaps explained to the unknowing), and put to work through role constructions that use members' strengths.*

Orientation toward time involves whether one considers time a resource to be used or an organic part of one's experience (Hall, 1959, 1983). The former stance is "clock time," or regimented time, and the

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latter is "felt time." In a macro sense, if one's cultural upbringing tends more toward the ongoing flow of human experience and "issues of the clock" are not particularly important, one is used to operating on felt time. If you are raised that way, it feels uncomfortable and unnatural to regiment your life according to some arbitrary and external thing like what the mechanism of a clock says is an appropriate time for action. There are seasons, there are days that come and go, and those are the rhythms of life, not a clock. If you were raised "on the clock," people who operate using felt time can be infuriating. You can get a sense of your orientation to time by thinking about how much it bothers you to be late: to a meeting, to a party, to work. Are you always the first or the last to arrive? Do you still attend if you are 5 minutes late, 20, an hour? If all but one group member arrives on time and the final member comes an hour late, does that bother you? Do you want him or her to give a reason and apology?

Orientations to time and order can affect individual and grouping behavior in helpful or negative ways, whether the orientations are mixed or all tend toward one extreme. The vigilant group member asks, "*Are our orientations getting us into trouble?*" Do not just ignore aberrant behavior (defined as different than whatever group norms seem to be). If you don't ask, the chances of experiencing a pitfall increase, as do chances of misdiagnosing behavior that could also indicate a more serious problem. *Understanding and discussing any competing orientations can almost always result in the co-construction of a mutually acceptable process for proceeding.* Ignoring the discussion inevitably manifests in irritated feelings and negative causal attributions.

Orientation Toward Information

Each of us has a preferred learning style, some preferring hands-on experience, others more theoretical or abstract explanations, and others the opportunity to watch or see a model. Each of us has different information processing preferences (e.g., reading about it, discussing it, "tossing solutions around," "sleeping on it"). When we must work with others to group, the risk is that such preferences can become pitfalls either to the individual whose preference is ignored by the group or to the group, which is not well served by the orientations of its members given the task. Some people do their best creative work when there is a period for incubation. They get an idea, chew on it awhile, and then leave it alone, perhaps for several days. Others want

to stay on task and to continue to play around with an idea in the group. Both types of members may get frustrated if their orientation to processing information is ignored. *Opportunities for both types of processing need to be co-constructed into The Way/Process techniques whenever possible.*

Two particular processing preferences have been talked about in recent research. First, the *need for cognition* (not an indicator of intelligence) varies across people according to whether they are more interested in mental relaxation or mental stimulation (Scudder, Herschel, & Crossland, 1994). The low-need-for-cognition individual might be adept at complex games or crossword puzzles (that delight high-need-for-cognition folks) but doesn't have much desire to engage in them because of the effort involved. Second, the *need for closure* (Webster & Kruglanski, 1994) varies according to how much one needs to have a definitive answer and sense of completion on the subject at hand. An individual with a high need for closure wants to see a line of thought or project through to its end or it will continue to bedevil her or him. Mix these individuals in a group and there may be different levels of enthusiasm for continuing to work through a difficult idea or for finishing one thought before moving on to the next. *Again, a co-constructed process that protects the interests and strengths of all involved individuals is made possible through conversation.*

Orientation Toward Interaction

Orientation toward interaction is a stance toward the nature of grouping and of the authority relationships that tend to evolve from any grouping. An example is the *authoritarian* group member who perceives it is appropriate that status and power differences exist to separate group members and their roles. Such individuals "... are demanding, directive, and controlling in their relations with those less powerful than themselves. When they are in a subordinate position, they are submissive and compliant; they accept their subordinate roles as natural and appropriate" (Shaw, 1981, p. 192). On the other extreme are those who reject any authority. If they perceive that the group or one or more of its members is getting too strong, they may reject even the conformity necessary for basic group membership. *Co-construct your grouping processes to protect and to tap the benefits of each orientation to the greatest extent that you can make possible.*

❖ STYLE

The third category of personal characteristics is *style* (see Table 4.4). Your personal style involves choices you make regarding appropriate action or activity, given your perceptions of a Purgatory Puddle. Your personal style might become fairly difficult to change, and there will probably be aspects of it that are implicit, that you are not even aware of. In spite of how ingrained style choices have become for you, they are still easier to change than a trait or orientation. That is because style choices are based in utilitarian attitudes. Utilitarian attitudes are functional: they help you accomplish what you want, or you can change them. Your style choices guide your own grouping and direction-giving activities, because you think that they will work.

Style From Theories of Interaction

Grouping and group direction are fundamental activities for humans. Consequently, each of us has developed, through our lifetime of experiences, a set of expectations or prototypes about how grouping and direction giving ought to be done. Think of the best direction givers you have ever known or heard about. Now, look for common characteristics among them: the aspects that you think makes them effective direction givers. That might give you a sense of your own "*implicit theory of direction-giving*" (Keller, 1999; Lord & Maher, 1991) as well as any explicit ideas you have about how direction givers ought to behave. It could be very difficult to figure out what your *implicit theory of grouping* or of direction giving is, because it is not an explicit

Table 4.4 Summary of Style-Based Pitfalls for Groups

| <i>Pitfall</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|-------------------------------------|---|
| Theories of Interaction | Implicit or explicit theories of grouping or direction-giving; conceptions of appropriate action. |
| Personal Impression | Masking/impression management; hold back/blend in; face work. |
| Theories of Communication Utilities | Rhetorical sensitivity; need to facilitate discussion versus to be the center of attention. |

prescription but rather a more deep-seated set of assumptions probably located in the "blind" part of your personal nature. But both implicit and explicit theories of grouping and of direction giving manifest in your behaviors. You behave differently because of what you think appropriate behavior is. You probably tend to judge others according to how well they play what you think are appropriate group member or direction giver roles. Conceptions of appropriate action manifest in style choices.

Early research into styles of direction givers asks which style is always best: *autocratic* (the direction giver decides), *democratic* (the direction giver facilitates process so that the group can decide), or *laissez-faire* (the direction giver keeps her or his hands off the group and lets them do what they like). The answer to which style is best is: it depends. Our view is that direction-giving styles need to be selected according to the exigencies perceived within a grouping system. If one style of direction giving can work better in certain circumstances, use that style. Because style choices can help or hinder grouping and group direction, they become the source of potential pitfalls and of rhetorical resources. *An interaction style should always be employed rhetorically, with its pitfall potential in mind, which leaves open the possibility for needing to change one's grouping or direction-giving style during the course of any grouping enterprise. Willingness to talk openly about one's style decreases the pitfall potential for changing one's style to adjust to new grouping contingencies. Style is choice borne of experience with effectiveness and should be talked about that way and treated that way.*

Style of Personal Impression

The style choices each of us makes regarding personal impression affect how willing we are to share ourselves with others. Dramatists say that each of us is involved in dramatic action during everyday life as we play out the roles we take on as friend, student, worker, confidant, child, parent, lover, and so forth (Burke, 1945; Goffman, 1967). For example, if you have been promoted at work and have to supervise people who are your friends, you may have to decide how and when to wear your "boss mask" or your "friend mask" as you try to play an appropriate role given the new group contingencies. This *impression management* (trying to get others to see us as we want to be seen) occurs across cultures, and is called *face work* (Ting-Toomey, 1988, 1991). It is face work to try to make the right impressions on others in your group.

For example, some feel the need to fit in so strongly that they tie their effort to group norms, lowering their performance in order to fit in.

During a first meeting of a new group, members experience what Bormann (1996) calls *primary tension*, because they do not yet know what to do or how they will be expected to behave in the new group. "People do not ask many questions in the period of searching for a role and for status, because they do not wish to appear ignorant or stupid. They may, therefore, act as though they understand much more than they do" (p. 256). *Withholding what you really think and feel, including statements of your confusion, lack of understanding, or disagreement can create problems for the group. Without becoming rude, spouting your unpleasant thoughts and feelings in the moment they occur to you, you can still find ways to encourage yourself to give important data to your group. If you are confused, say so. If you disagree, say so. Those actions help grouping quality improve. If you are overwhelmed by the desire to make a good impression, promise yourself that you will take a chance at least twice each meeting to express a concern with some aspect of process or with some idea being discussed. Do not let impression management overcome your ability to contribute. Agreeing with whatever everyone else in the group thinks is not making a contribution: it is passive behavior and works against attaining a process prize.*

Style From Theories of Communication Utilities

Hart and Burks (1984) argue that each of us tends toward being more or less *rhetorically sensitive*. At one end of the continuum are those who tend to think communication is for getting anything that you feel or that bothers you off your chest: expressiveness utility (low rhetorical sensitivity). Those who think of communication as a tool for accomplishing desirable ends (functional utility) adapt their communication to accomplish those ends (high rhetorical sensitivity). There is a parallel here to our discussion of self-monitoring in that the rhetorically sensitive individual is probably better able to be effective in most grouping activities, though he or she may also deprive the group of what might be useful information about his or her thoughts. The individuals who express themselves without regard to consequences may hinder grouping, or may help "shock" the group out of negative behavioral patterns. Individuals who become "group clowns" may do so for expressive ends (to become the center of attention) or to break tension in the group in a functional attempt to help the group get on with its work. *To the*

Exercise 4.1 Style Based on Interaction Theory: Impression or Utility?

How do you behave when you think your opinion is in the minority in your group? Think now about your answer. Decide whether you would express your dissent or just go along with what the majority clearly wants. Ask yourself if you do express your dissent, how forceful and frequent would you be. Once you decide your answers to those questions, ask yourself?

Did I answer that way because of my understanding of appropriate grouping behavior?

Did I answer that way because of how I want myself to appear to others in the group?

Did I answer that way because I think I should try to express myself or because I have some other purpose that can be served by saying what I think or by keeping quiet about my disagreement?

extent that individuals can appreciate how their behavior is helping or hurting grouping efforts, they can make reasoned choices for which style of communication utility best fits the context. If they judge poorly, grouping compadres should tell them so.

When you hold what you perceive to be a minority view in the group, do you keep your opinion to yourself or share it with your group (see Exercise 4.1)? If you hold back your concern or idea, you reduce the possibility of someone else learning from it or using it to develop a new idea. A minority opinion, once it is well understood by everyone in the group, may no longer be held by the previously dissenting member, or it may become the majority opinion in the group. Even if the dissenter remains alone in her or his position, expression of the minority viewpoint serves the function of helping the rest of the group understand better why their majority view is preferable, where it may be somewhat flawed, and what the alternatives are that they rejected. Consequently, even minority opinions that are wrong can be useful if shared with the group.

❖ CIRCUMSTANCES

The final category of Purgatory Puddle, personnel, personal characteristic pitfalls is circumstance (see Table 4.5). These are personal tendencies that manifest as interaction effects for particular people within a particular context.

Table 4.5 Summary of Circumstance-Based Pitfalls for Groups

| <i>Circumstance Pitfall</i> | <i>Examples</i> |
|-----------------------------|---|
| Interaction Sources | Experiences become the base for interaction and innovation. |
| Interaction Reducers | Social loafing is actual or perceived. |
| Interaction Changers | Hidden agenda; sexual interest; dislike another member. |

Interaction Sources

Communication requires some shared base of experience. Some experiences so shape us that we are different people because of them. Does it matter if you grew up in a large city or on a farm; male or female; rich or poor; Muslim, Buddhist, Baptist, or atheist; African, Norwegian, or Taiwanese? Have you been in the military, had someone close to you die, been married, had children? We find it easier to communicate with those similar to us because common experiences are a basis for talk. But, those with different experiences bring diverse skills and backgrounds to the group's problem, which may make different exigencies salient and different tests of grouping processes and outcomes necessary. Process prizes may be attained as a result.

Interaction Reducers

Social loafers do not carry their fair share of a group's work. They are not engaged or involved in the group task. They may talk or remain silent, but any talk and activity are not well focused toward advancing the work of the group. When there are assignments, the social loafer may seek the easiest one or not complete an assignment at all. Social loafers are those doing less than they can to help the group (Lantane, Williams, & Harkins, 1979). Obviously, such activity is a pitfall to grouping. Unfortunately, so is the perception of such activity when the "loafing behavior" really signifies something else (see Table 4.6). Both actual and perceived social loafing can result in pitfalls. *Perceived loafing should be sorted out through conversation, attempting to determine motivations for behaviors that appear to be loafing and then co-constructing a way to get group benefits from the situation. Actual loafing is also sorted out through talk that changes the behavior, finds alternative useful activities that engage the loafer and enhance the group, or draws a line between the*

Table 4.6 Explanations for Social Loafing During Grouping

| | |
|--|--|
| Actual Social Loafing. | Perceived Social Loafing (member is trying to stay engaged with the group progress despite difficulty). |
| Member does not care. | Member believes self-censoring is appropriate given her or his personal style of interaction. |
| Member is lazy and wants a free ride. | Member feels too new to group or too ignorant of process or task or relationships to talk yet. |
| Member feels that the focus of the group at this moment is not his or her job or responsibility. | Member trusts the rest of the group and wants to do what they say/decide is best. |
| Member is angry or turned off by grouping choices, processes, or direction. | Member feels inadequate for the task, as in, "I'm too stupid to be of help." Member is introverted or suffers from communication apprehension. Member is intensely interested but neutral because he or she cannot decide what he or she thinks. Member is overwhelmed by work that feels too hard to do. |

loafer and full group benefits. Treating loafing as a communication construction (Allen, Mabry, & Halone, 2004) makes rhetorical responses to it appropriate.

Interaction Changers

Have you ever known someone who joins a group because of a reason at odds with the group's goal (e.g., she or he wants to pad her or his resume; she or he wants to date a group member)? When such issues play out openly, they can cause problems but they can be addressed. If such issues are hidden from the group, they can be damaging because a *hidden agenda* can affect grouping and group direction without the group's awareness. A hidden agenda is most damaging when the member's agenda is incompatible with group goals and exerts negative influence on group processes or outcomes. Related examples are when one group member has a sexual interest in another member (Bormann, 1996) or when a group member develops a dislike for another member ("She [or he] just rubs me the wrong way!"). *Hidden agendas need to be uncovered; hidden intentionally, they are unethical actions. Openly discussed, group priorities take precedence because*

individual functions are to be served by effective grouping, not by undermining it.

❖ HOW TO EXPECT, DETECT,
AND CORRECT THESE PITFALLS

This chapter provides an extensive set of personal characteristics and behaviors that may play out in groups in unfortunate ways. *Remember, there is no characteristic among those we discuss that is always helpful or always hurtful. Recognize that it is how people respond to characteristics and behaviors that is more important to grouping success than is the actual characteristic or behavior.* Understanding and adjusting to these characteristics and behaviors as they manifest in a group may actually enhance your group's ability to do its work.

How can you make use of information about such pitfalls? You can work to change a characteristic behavior or you can try to ameliorate its negative effects in a group. What about traits: they cannot be changed? True, but they can be understood well enough to be allowed to manifest rhetorically. *Ask yourself, "What can I do to make use of this trait or orientation?" and "How can I minimize the damage I might cause because of it?" and "Under what circumstances can I allow it to manifest in a way that actually helps my group?" and "How can I help co-construct ways to allow competing characteristics of my colleagues become group resources?* Such questions are a rhetorical orientation to this material.

It all boils down to how your interaction can help groups overcome whatever personnel difficulties they face by co-constructing potential limitations into group resources: at minimum, co-constructing ways to avoid or to overcome the pitfall. Effective group members work together to construct processes and orientations for doing their work, which enhance that possibility. The Breakdown-Conductive Group Framework argues that part of each group's work should be the co-construction of ways around or through the pitfalls they face. That may be more difficult when some personality types are involved, but the challenge, if effectively addressed, can ultimately strengthen the group.

Remember the idea that broaching the subject of a potential pitfall can help you orient your group toward the work you know they may have to undertake when a potential pitfall begins to manifest. Broaching the subject involves engaging group members in conversations germane to potential pitfalls before the pitfall arises in the group:

Table 4.7 Prompts for Broaching the Subject on Purgatory Puddle:
Personnel Pitfalls

Is grouping really the way to proceed?

1. *Is this the right group for this task?* What are our strengths and weaknesses as individuals given this task? Is there anyone who should not be in this group or someone we need to add to this group? Is this the right size group for the task? Can we use extra members to benefit the group? Should we release any members?

If so: How do we ensure that we do an effective job of grouping?

2. *How do we hold each other responsible* for the work we are supposed to do? Should we discuss a process now in case someone stops attending meetings or does not seem to be meeting their obligations to the group?

How do we want to do this: What do we want to get out of this?

3. *Discuss grouping goals.* What expectations do we have for interactions as a team trying to work together? What sanctions will we use against ourselves if we fail to do so?
-

beginning to lay the foundation for future attempts to deal with a potential pitfall by co-constructing a conversational history and group norms conducive to such work. What follows is a set of conversational prompts that can help you raise these issues (see Table 4.7).

Humans are quite creative at adapting to difficult circumstances once we experience and understand them. Once the nature of potential pitfalls has been identified, you have the information you need to begin to expect, detect, and correct them. Keys to correcting such pitfalls include (a) *dispel the notion that a trait, orientation, or style of interaction is "good";* (b) *reduce the natural tendency to cast aspersions at persons who are different;* and (c) *find ways to build the benefits of alternative characteristics into group process.* Checks and balances are grouping processes that allow benefits from competing processes and priorities to all serve a common purpose. Humans created the technique of checks and balances to enhance our odds for successfully co-constructing dramatic action. They are part of our wisdom. *Through your discussion of the issues raised in this chapter, you can tap a similar wisdom among group members, in order to co-construct your own checks and balances into grouping processes.*

Now that we have introduced you to potential Purgatory Puddle pitfalls, it is a good time to introduce a specific technique that can help you expect, detect, and correct such pitfalls. This technique, called *Orienting the Group*, is an example of putting a check on natural

grouping processes and tendencies in order to encourage grouping members to be vigilant, to help them so that they do not miss something important (see Table 4.8).

The following framework for problem-solving discussions is based loosely on the work of John Dewey (1910) and that of functional theorists Gouran and Hirokawa (2003). We have assimilated some of their work with the thinking in this book. Although our general advice is to start a new group with some sort of social icebreaking activity, to address the primary tension, and then to proceed through each of the following steps, two caveats are in order. First, because human grouping is rarely a linear process and will always be responsive to perceived exigencies that change as grouping unfolds, do not expect a group to proceed in a step-by-step manner through all of these prompts, especially through all of the detailed suggestions under step number one (Analyzing the Purgatory Puddle). Rather, groups should consider each of these as a potential prompt to stimulate consideration of worthwhile aspects of their work. In short, group members should ask themselves, "Have we considered this prompt or idea?" and "If not at this meeting, then when?"

Second, the best group interaction may move back and forth between topics several times over several meetings, even reconsidering decisions and processes the group might have thought were already completed. This is called *being recursive* and, as the functional perspective briefly described in chapter 2 makes clear, an effective group must be willing to reconsider its work, "even to the point of starting over" in order to improve the quality of its problem-solving and decision-making processes.

The first step in the Orienting the Group technique involves a careful analysis of the group's Purgatory Puddle, providing you with prompts to consider issues that often get ignored even by fairly successful groups. The second through fifth steps in the technique focus on Vision/Outcome processes and pitfalls. More details on how to analyze the Vision/Outcome will be added in chapter 7.

❖ CHAPTER SUMMARY

Communicative interaction is the most important dynamic affecting group effectiveness, in spite of our focus in this chapter on personnel and how personal characteristics can have a presence in the life of your

Table 4.8 Orienting the Group: A Technique for Detecting Potential Pitfalls

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1. *Analyze the Purgatory Puddle.* Discuss all aspects of the situation before working on (or completing work on) the Vision/Outcome.
 - a. Define key terms in the group's charge or assignment. Ask each member to be explicit about his or her own meanings; ask, "Would experts or stakeholders have different meanings?"
 - b. Analyze the group's charge including the problem it must solve or task it must do.
 - i. What is the nature (qualities and quantity) of the problem?
 - ii. What caused/contributed to the problem (where do we find evidence and facts on this)?
 - iii. What is the duration of the problem—will it solve itself if left alone?
 - iv. Is the problem a good task for a group to address?
 - c. Identify stakeholders and the nature of their stakes in
 - i. The problem.
 - ii. The group's charge.
 - iii. The group's The Way/Process.
 - iv. The group's Vision/Outcome.
 - d. Identify and discuss the exigencies
 - i. That led to this charge being given to this group.
 - ii. That will be important to each of the different stakeholders.
 - e. Discuss limitations on the group:
 - i. Resources available and problems anticipated and resources that are lacking.
 - ii. Nonresource-based problems likely to be encountered.
 - f. Discuss and set group goals. Develop criteria for testing: "How will we know whether we succeeded in reaching each goal?"
 - i. Goals for individual contributions to the group.
 - ii. Goals for the nature and quality of The Way/Process the group will use.
 - iii. Goals for the nature and quality of the Vision/Outcome.
 2. *Generate potential Vision/Outcomes.* Identify a relevant and realistic set of alternatives.
 3. *Test Vision/Outcomes.* Carefully examine each alternative against previously agreed-on criteria for group goals and for an acceptable choice.
 4. *Pick best Vision/Outcome.* Try for consensus for each decision the group makes.

Plan to implement Vision/Outcome and to gather feedback on effectiveness. Give the group an opportunity to debrief after their work is completed and allow time for a clear and hopefully celebratory meeting or event to signal the termination of the group's work.

90 GROUP COMMUNICATION PITFALLS

group interaction. "Wrong group for a task" pitfalls include the wrong number of members, members who lack personal resources, and any negative assembly effect. Our objective is not to provide an exhaustive list of such phenomena, nor is it to predict particular effects from any of these variables. Rather, our objective is that you understand and consider the nature of personnel constraints within a Purgatory Puddle, so that you can co-construct your responses to them: do not allow such important pitfalls to be unexpected, go undetected, and remain uncorrected.