The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups

HOW THEY ARE DIFFICULT,
WHY THEY ARE DIFFICULT AND
WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT

Sandy Schuman
Editor

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The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups
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CONTENTS

PREFACE xi
Sandor Schuman

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS xv

INTRODUCTION xxix
Working with Difficult Groups: A Conceptual Framework
Make sense out of what makes working with groups difficult.
Sandor Schuman and John Rohrbaugh

ONE Keeping Difficult Situations from Becoming Difficult Groups 1
Dissenters need support, or the group risks going off track.
Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff

TWO Building an External Focus: Avoiding the Difficulties on an In-grown Team 17
The critical importance of an external perspective.
Deborah Ancona and David F. Caldwell

THREE The Downside of Communication: Complaining Cycles in Group Discussions 33
Help teams get out of the “complaining loop” and turn to solution-oriented interaction instead.
Nale Lehmann-Willenbrock and Simone Kauffeld
FOUR Facilitating Multicultural Groups 55
Customize structures and processes to match groups’ cultural preferences.
Donna Rae Scheffert and Mary Laeger-Hagemeister

FIVE Interpersonally Hostile Work Groups: Precipitating Factors and Solutions 77
A group perspective on workplace harassment and bullying is essential to understanding and preventing it.
Jana L. Raver and Ingrid C. Chadwick

SIX Diversity by Design: Creating Cognitive Conflict to Enhance Group Performance 95
Ill defined, diversity might undermine a group’s purpose.
Michael Cassidy

SEVEN Facilitating Inclusion: Study Circles on Diversity and Student Achievement 113
Bridging differences in culture and ethnicity can foster academic achievement
Mark A. Clark and John Landesman

EIGHT Overcoming Sources of Irrationality That Complicate Working in Decision-Making Groups 137
Six factors make working with this group difficult in many different ways.
Dennis S. Gouran

NINE Working Without Rules: A Team in Need of a Different Picture 153
Affirmative language encourages new views of a team’s past and future.
Ann Lukens
TEN  Interaction Archetypes: Keys to Group Difficulty and Productivity  169

Identify the repetitive behavioral sequences that reduce a group’s ability to produce results.

Steven Ober

ELEVEN  Virtual Teams: Difficult in All Dimensions  189

Group members working virtually and interdependently face enormous challenges.

Thomas A. O’Neill and Theresa J. B. Kline

TWELVE  Politics of the Arts: Challenges in Working with Nonprofit Boards  207

A “confessional tale”—lessons learned while facilitating an arts board in transition.

Richard W. Sline and Anna C. Boulton

THIRTEEN  Competitive Group Interactions: Why They Exist and How to Overcome Them  223

Groups are less cooperative than individuals—learn how you can reduce intergroup conflict.

Taya R. Cohen, Brian P. Meier, Verlin B. Hinsz, and Chester A. Insko

FOURTEEN  Active Facilitation: How to Help Groups Break Through “Mutual Stalemate”  237

Groups may abdicate their responsibilities waiting until another group makes the first move.

Celia Kirwan and Wes Siegal

FIFTEEN  Mediating History, Making Peace: Dealing with the “Messy” Stuff in the Conciliation Process  251

Identity-based conflicts will not achieve long-term solutions through resource-based settlements.

Dagmar Kusa, Adam Saltsman, and Philip Gamaghelyan
SIXTEEN Deep Democracy: Multidimensional Process-Oriented Leadership
Learn to track the shifting roles of group members. 
Stanford Siver

SEVENTEEN Authentic Relationships and Collective Psychological Capital
How leader behavior can undermine group success. 
Füsun Bulutlar

EIGHTEEN How Leaders Can Make Diverse Groups Less Difficult: The Role of Attitudes and Perceptions of Diversity
Perceptions that lead to subgrouping can override the positive effects of diversity. 
Astrid C. Homan and Karen A. Jehn

NINETEEN The Hero’s Journey: Helping Inflexible Groups—and Inflexible Facilitators—Get Unstuck 
Use the Hero’s Journey as an analytical and facilitation tool to help groups and facilitators get out of difficulties. 
Carol Sherriff and Simon Wilson

TWENTY Difficult Groups or Difficult Facilitators? Three Steps Facilitators Can Take to Make Sure They Are Not the Problem
Facilitators can unknowingly contribute to the difficulties their group’s experience. 
Glyn Thomas

KEY TERMS 353
REFERENCES 367
NAME INDEX 401
SUBJECT INDEX 409
Isn’t this the most difficult group you’ve ever worked with?” a group member asked earnestly. As a group facilitator, I have heard this question—in one form or another—many times. For years I responded by downplaying or outright denying the group’s difficulty. “Oh, this group isn’t so difficult; it’s not that unusual.” “Really?” the group member responded. “I thought this was a really bad group!” and the eagerness and energy that came with the initial question would fade.

After many such exchanges, I finally realized two things. First, from my perspective the group did not seem unusual or difficult, but from the perspective of its members, it was. Second, instead of hearing me deny their reality, these group members wanted me to acknowledge that their group was indeed difficult, provide some insight into why it was difficult, and suggest what they could do about it.

When I finally caught on to the meaning of this question, I started responding differently. Instead of negating people’s sense of the group’s difficulty, I replied, “That’s an interesting question! What makes this group difficult from your perspective?” The responses I heard were often illuminating, and they helped me appreciate the many ways in which groups can be experienced as difficult. And indeed, even for the most experienced and wise group members, leaders, and facilitators, there are “difficult groups.”
This leads to an important element in how we think about our work with groups: rather than think in terms of *how to work with difficult groups*, the approach we take in this book is to think in terms of *what makes working with groups difficult*. That is to say, a particular group is not innately difficult; rather, there are various things that make working with the group difficult. Wouldn’t it be useful if we had a way of thinking systematically about all the ways in which working with a group might be difficult? That would provide a basis for understanding why working with the group is difficult and then *what* you could do about it.

In the Introduction, John Rohrbaugh and I present a conceptual framework for thinking about groups and how they might be effective or ineffective. In brief, the framework presents three high-level factors that affect group performance: *context, structure*, and *process*. In addition, it adopts four perspectives on group performance: *relational, political, rational*, and *empirical*. These factors and perspectives are integrated to result in twelve conditions. The framework was presented to prospective authors in the “call for chapters” that initiated this book. I asked the authors to locate their chapters within this framework, and I appreciate their willingness to work with it. However, the authors were not limited to addressing one factor, perspective, or condition. Rather, most of the chapters address multiple parts of the framework, as should be expected when dealing with real groups. The framework is intended as an intellectual tool for helping you think about the difficulties that groups encounter, not as a way to categorize groups.

The value of this structure to you is—I hope—twofold. First, *any structure* is valuable if it helps you make sense of the content of the book. Second, the structure itself is *informative*. It provides a framework for thinking about the full range of issues, not just those presented in the book, but in the full domain of concern—group effectiveness.

But why *this* structure? As we say in the Introduction, “Rather than provide a long list or an all-too-simplistic categorization of the ways in which working with groups can be difficult, we would like to present a framework for thinking about groups and what makes them effective or ineffective.” Because it is based on several decades of research and thinking about organizational and group effectiveness, the framework is time tested and able to accommodate virtually any group-related topic and place it in the context of others. If you are already
familiar with the three factors and four perspectives, their juxtaposition will not present a great challenge. If you are encountering them for the first time, I hope you can make sense of our presentation and see how the framework applies in each of the chapters and in your everyday work.

In addition, I asked the authors to address each of the following questions.

*How the group is difficult:* a brief story that presents a group and the observable phenomena that reflect the group's difficulty

*Why the group is difficult:* an exploration of the underlying causes of the difficulty

*What you can do:* what you as a group facilitator, leader, or member can do to help the group

Initially, I thought I would use the framework to order the chapters in the table of contents but, as I noted earlier, most of the chapters address multiple aspects of the framework, so this didn’t work. However, I noticed that most of the chapters were in predominantly intragroup settings (Chapters One through Nine), a few addressed both intra- and intergroup settings (Chapters Ten through Twelve), and a few addressed intergroup settings (Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen). In addition, a number of chapters dealt directly with the roles of leadership and facilitation (Chapters Sixteen through Twenty). I arranged the chapters in this order, but I did not want to reinforce these categories by labeling these as formal parts of the book.

As the third in a series of edited collections sponsored by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), the idea and planning for this book emerged from the efforts of Tammy Adams, then IAF’s strategic initiative coordinator for communications and publications; Betty Kjellberg, then IAF’s executive director; and Kathe Sweeney, senior editor at Jossey-Bass/Wiley. Without them, this book would never have been conceived, much less implemented. Fifty-three individuals thoughtfully reviewed and evaluated the chapter proposals that were submitted in response to the call for chapters. The Center for Policy Research at the University at Albany provided support throughout, with Paul Dickson playing a key role in managing the chapter review process. John Rohrbaugh’s contributions to the Introduction, and his advice throughout my editorial work, were invaluable. More than I can say, I am indebted to the thirty-seven authors who contributed to this volume, responded thoughtfully
and graciously to my comments, made multiple revisions, and saw through the
details of bringing this book to publication. Although I hope that everyone has
gained something through this process, no one has gained more from these
interactions than I.

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**Sandor Schuman** helps organizations work more effectively to solve complex problems and make critical decisions. He is a group facilitator, collaborative process advocate, and storyteller. He helps groups create shared meaning, make critical choices, and build collaborative relationships. Sandy is the editor of the International Association of Facilitators handbooks, including *Creating a Culture of Collaboration* (Jossey-Bass, 2006) and *The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation* (Jossey-Bass, 2005). He was the long-term editor of *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal* and moderator of *The Electronic Group Discussion on Group Facilitation*. Sandy is a director of the Program on Strategic Decision Making at the Center for Policy Research, University at Albany, SUNY, and president of Executive Decision Services LLC.

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