

Increase Work-Group Productivity with Conerescent Conversation

Once you understand how people interact in groups, you can help team members achieve their goals.

By Obasi Haki Akan

Understanding groups is crucial for all nonprofit managers. The most common ingredient in organizations is people, and the most common way for people to get things done is to divide into work groups or teams.

What Makes a Good Team Leader?

To understand how groups work, let's look first at a team development model created by Bruce Wayne Tuckman.¹ His model is based on an analysis of over 50 research studies on groups.

As a team matures, Tuckman discovered, a good leader will use four different styles of leadership, in the following order:

1. Directing: At first, the leader takes charge, organizing the team, clarifying objectives, and helping people establish procedures to follow.

2. Coaching: As the team begins to coalesce, the leader ensures that things stay on track and that everyone participates. Encouraging team members to validate one another's concerns and give each other feedback, the leader helps people forge relationships and build trust.

3. Participating: The leader acts as part of the team, intervening to avoid problems and modeling good team-work behavior.

4. Delegating: Finally, the leader steps back and turns leadership over to the team.

How Do Teams Coalesce?

As people learn to work together and become a productive team, Tuckman found, they pass through five stages:

1. Forming: During the first stage, group members depend on their leader for guidance and direction. There is little agreement on team aims. Roles and responsibilities are unclear.

2. Storming: People vie for position as they establish themselves in relation to other team members and the leader. Group decisions don't come easily during this stage.

3. Norming: At this level, the team develops its processes and working style. Roles and responsibilities are accepted. Agreement forms among members, and big decisions are made by consensus.

4. Performing: This is the stage at which real work gets done. The team has a shared vision, focuses on achieving goals, and stands on its own without the leader. Commitment is strong.

This research pinpoints ways you can use conversation intentionally to make sure teams perform at their peak potential.

5. Adjourning: The team breaks up. If things have gone well during the performing stage, group members have achieved their goals and completed their tasks. They move on to new responsibilities, feeling good about what they've achieved.

What Is Conerescent Conversation?

Conerescence is a metaphor for a group flowing together to become a team. Conerescent conversation, which takes place during a team's performing stage, is what turns a group into a productive team. John Rogers Searle² notes five ways group members use conversation during the performing stage:

- 1. Asserting:** making a statement supported by evidence
- 2. Directing:** asking others to do something
- 3. Promising:** committing to a future action
- 4. Expressing:** conveying an emotional state – for example, threatening, apologizing, worrying, or wishing
- 5. Declaring:** rendering a decision.

Research has found that **asserting** is by far the most common of these types of conversation.³ We conducted further research to explore exactly what team members are doing with their words when they engage in assertive conversations.⁴ We discovered that they're doing three things:

- **Disclosing:** sharing information
- **Questioning:** seeking information
- **Steering:** taking a position.

We found that **disclosing** is the dominant verbal activity, occurring far more often than questioning or steering. We also found that, if these conversations are to be fruitful, certain group behaviors must be present. When these behaviors occur in the correct amounts, then an optimal profile for productive conversation exists. Figure 1 (on the following page) shows these profiles for disclosing, questioning, and steering behaviors during the performing stage.

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Figure 1

OPTIMUM PROFILE FOR CONCRESCENT CONVERSATION

Optimal profile for using disclosing conversation:

- (1) Most of the group members are present.
- (2) Risk taking is high.
- (3) The information provided is considered useful.
- (4) The frequency of sharing is neither very low or very high but, rather, moderate.
- (5) Group members show appreciation for the information provided.
- (6) Feedback to information providers is high.

Optimal profile for using questioning conversation:

- (1) Relevancy of questions to the topic being discussed is high.
- (2) The manner of asking questions is generally friendly.
- (3) Members are spontaneous with their questions.
- (4) Members' receptivity to questions is moderate.
- (5) Questions are valued by other group members.

Optimal profile when using steering conversation:

- (1) Direction giving is perceived as moderate.
- (2) The force of steering is low.
- (3) Steering efforts are perceived as helpful by others.
- (4) Acceptance of a group member's authority in a subject matter area is high.
- (5) Group resistance to steering is low.

in accomplishing organizational goals. All groups live in conversation. This type of unique talk can help group members disclose important information, question each other's ideas, and steer group decisions toward productive results.■

Footnotes

¹Tuckman, Bruce Wayne, "Developmental Sequence in Small Groups," *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384-399.

²Searle, John Rogers, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, London: Cambridge University Press.

³Scheer, Wilbert E., *People Policies: Successful Personnel Management*, Chicago: Pluribus Press.

⁴Our research took place at the NASA Glenn Research Center in Cleveland, Ohio. The conversations of several groups were recorded and coded using John Searle's speech act categories.

Your Work-Group Tool Kit

Use these *Nonprofit World* articles, available at www.snpo.org, to help create work groups that work:

- **Build a Powerful Staff Team** (Vol. 18, No. 4)
- **Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
- **Teams: The Essence of Quality** (13, No. 3)
- **Too Much to Do: Four Keys to Effective Delegating** (Vol. 26, No. 1)
- **Zen and the Art of Team Building** (Vol. 20, No. 1)
- **Eight Steps to Managing Conflict** (Vol. 20, No. 4)
- **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)

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How Can You Use This Information?

The research summarized here pinpoints ways you can use conversation intentionally to be sure teams perform at their peak potential. Your group's most productive work will likely occur in its fourth stage — the performing stage. By this point in a team's life, the leader will have stepped aside to let group members work together toward common goals. This is when conversation becomes especially meaningful and productive.

Remember that the type of conversation used most frequently during this productive period is asserting — making statements supported by evidence. (In our study, 309 of 420 conversations, or nearly 75%, were assertive conversations.) And during these conversations, the most common verbal behavior is disclosing — sharing information.

Figure 1 shines a light on things you can do to make this sharing behavior as productive as possible. For example:

- Make sure as many group members as possible are present and that they're consistent in attending the team's meetings.
- Encourage people to take personal risks as they share information with one another.
- After someone shares information, urge other team members to provide feedback.

When questioning is used, be sure the questions are:

- relevant to the topic being discussed
- asked in a friendly, not confrontational, way.

When group members take positions and steer the conversation, remember:

- The person taking a position should do so in a gentle, not forceful, way.
- Group members must perceive the person taking a position as an authority on the subject.
- The position-taking should be done in such a way that others see it as helpful, not arrogant.

Achieving optimal group profiles can result in a powerful advantage