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How An Observer Can Help A Committee . . . *

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Too often someone says, "To kill an idea, appoint a committee." The applications of this thought are discomfiting and even dangerous. Committees are the heart and soul of the democratic system. Creative policy making and decision through committee discussion form the core of our way of life. We would expect, therefore, that the committee discussion would be one of the most efficient operations in our society. Too rarely is this true. The criticism of the "committee system" is forcing us to the disjunction of either abandoning committees in favor of authoritarian decisions or of exerting some concentrated effort toward their improvement. This latter alternative is obviously more desirable. To this end a system of group self-analysis is being developed by experiment and practice. Basic to this system is the work of the group observer.

Committee efficiency depends upon at least five basic criteria: 1. Clear objectives or goals; 2. Practical techniques of group thinking; 3. Effective personal orientation and interaction of the members; 4. Effective use of time; 5. High quality of the final product. The effectiveness of a committee can be improved as these standards are met. To meet these objectives, a committee may be trained or may train itself at three different points in its life; before it meets to discuss, during the discussion, and following the discussion. Both before and after the discussion the timeliness and expediency of improvement are rather hypothetical. During the discussion the committee faces the problem of improving its techniques under the immediate pressure of the active needs of the group.

WHAT THE OBSERVER IS.

The effectiveness of a committee can be improved during the discussion by a special group agent called an observer. It is important that we recognize the observer as an *agent* of the group. He is not a "critic" as we commonly construe the term. He is neither pedant nor judge. His distinctive character is as a *reporter* whose major aim is to see *what is happening* and to report this to the group. He is, in a sense, a "mirror" whereby the group can see itself *as it operates*. The observer's role is as an impartial *examiner* of the group's methods of procedure and operation. He is interested in *how* the committee works rather than *what* it works on. His job is to help the group function more effectively by providing an insight into the inner machinery of the group process. This insight into the inner machinery of the process can best be provided by a person removed from the stress of participating in the discussion itself.

The observer may be a member of the committee who is given the special assignment of viewing the group in action. He may also be a specially trained person who observes the group without having the responsibility of title membership in the group. In either case, however, the observer must be considered as part of the group because he performs a vital func-

tion in developing group skill.

WHAT THE OBSERVER DOES.

To assist the group the observer performs several functions of major importance. First, he *describes the process* used by the particular committee as it works. The well trained observer will be able to see and describe the various factors and variables of the procedure and operation of the committee as it attacks the problems on its agenda. The job of evaluating the worth of the process must eventually be done by the committee itself. Only in rare cases and only at the request of the chair or members of the committee should the observer be required to evaluate the procedure explicitly. We do not deny that there is a distinct element of evaluation in describing the processes and calling attention to obstacles and problems in method. These, however, are for the most part still at the descriptive level for the observer and should be reported only as observed facts.

The second function of the observer is to *record the progress* of the group toward its stated goals or objectives. This job may be shared with a special recorder or secretary who keeps a running account of the content of the discussion. The observer, however, is responsible for checking on the appearance of goals and of the progress of the group toward reaching those goals. While this at first may seem to involve more attention to the content of the discussion than is consistent with the purpose of the observer, it is nevertheless a vital part of the functional procedure. The observer is concerned with how the group arrived at its goals and not with the goals themselves as matters of content.

The third function of the observer is to *report his findings* to the committee. These reports consist of summaries and descriptions of the group as it operated. In many cases it is desirable that the observer report his findings orally and also in writing. The written reports then become part of the journal of the group and are valuable as training and reference sources in the study of each group. Such written reports also provide the committee with a source to which they may return to discover how they have progressed over several sessions.

The fourth function of the observer is to *stimulate the committee to work toward more efficient operation*. In this respect we must keep in mind that the observer should be considered a *member of the group*. Even though his contributions are limited to the matters of procedure, he should have regular member status. As an agent of the group he should be able to use the pronoun "we" instead of

* As a special feature of the 1949 Delta Sigma Rho Congress, a corps of observers is being trained to meet with the several committees. It is expected that the educational values of the Congress will be greatly increased by this innovation. Professor Keltner is in charge of this feature of the Congress.

"you" in his reports to the group. This relationship should be a real one and not artificially imposed upon the committee. (We don't deny that the use of the pronoun "we" often helps to create the feeling of belonging, but it should grow deeper roots than a mere title.)

Stimulation of the group requires that the observer know the members well. It requires him to be aware of the motives of the members of the committee and of the group as a unit. This he must determine before and during his observations of the active group process.

Finally, the observer tries to *work himself out of a job*. His function is to sensitize the members of the group to their own processes and procedure. When active members of a committee become able to assess their own procedures the observer becomes less necessary. The more his work can do to develop self-observation on the part of the members, the more effective the discussion becomes and the committee depends less on the observer. Ideally, a committee which reaches the maximum efficiency does not need his service. Unfortunately we have never encountered such a committee.

HOW AND WHEN THE OBSERVER WORKS.

The functions of the observer require him to have a system of observation and recording. He is present at all sessions of the committee; at special sessions as well as the regular agenda meetings of the group. He is introduced at the first session, and a short time is given to him to explain what he is doing and how the group can use his services. From this point on, he is considered as an integral part of the committee.

In order to describe the process, the observer keeps a running account of the progress of the discussion. This account includes at least six factors of importance to the group function.

A record of *participation* is made. This record includes an identification of the persons speaking and of the number of times that a given member speaks. It also includes a classification of the nature of the contributions. Each contribution may be identified as to its particular role in the discussion. Contributions are placed in classes such as fact giving, fact question, opinion giving, testimonial, personal attack, procedure suggestion, etc. The observer thus has an idea of the typical "role" played by each member of the committee in the process of group thinking. This material is vital to the process of group growth. This participation record also includes observations as to the speaking techniques being used by the members.

Drawing from the participations of the group members, the observer attempts to *identify the various attitudes* of the members. He needs to identify those attitudes that are cooperative, antagonistic, "signalized", prejudiced, over-critical, and the like. This job is difficult and the results must be reported with care and good will.

The observer also records the *evidences of group unity*. He sees the group as a unit and points out those places in the discussion at which unity was broken by conflict and division. When possible, he identifies those factors in the group procedure that are causative

in developing undesirable division. At the same time he avoids the dangers of evaluation as such by merely describing the events as cause.

The *progress of the group toward the statement of and understanding of its goals* and its progress toward these goals is noted. Instances where the group breaks away from its goal-direction without intent or meaning are pointed up and the time and cause identified.

Leadership functions are a part of the observer's record. The methods and techniques of asking questions, making suggestions, handling conflict, and stimulating discussion are noted and reported back to the group.

The observer also notes the *reactions of the members* to each other. Evidences of strain and stress between members, of cliques, of attractions, and of isolation are important to the understanding of the group process. These notes are made as the evidence appears in the group. They can rarely be in great detail but are clearly and accurately identified. The margin for error here is great. Good observers explain these observations with care and reservation.

Reporting the observations is done in two ways. The first is through oral "feedbacks" to the group *during* the meeting. These reports are made at those times when the observer is called on by the chairman or a member of the group. (The usual question is, "How are we doing?") The chairman should watch for points at which the group can absorb the "feedback" with greatest benefit and advantage.

At the end of the discussion, the observer presents a summary report. *Time is set aside in each meeting to discuss the report of the observer and to work out methods of improving the work of that committee.*

The second method of report is through the written record, which becomes a part of the journal of the group. The observer presents his report to the secretary as soon after the meeting as he can. There is usually opportunity for members to check these notes personally prior to subsequent sessions of the committee. The observer is often available to interpret these and to answer questions. In no case should the observer be placed in a position to defend his report. It should be viewed as one man's point of view. The degree to which a group will have confidence in his work depends upon the skill that he demonstrates in his reports.

The reports of the observer are objective and explicit. They are concerned with telling a group what it did. At the same time, however, he may use several techniques of *stimulating the group* to do something about improving its discussion. The "shock" method consists of laying out the faults with blunt precision. This method is full of danger unless there is a good spirit in the group. It can be very effective. The "good and bad" method consists of pointing out those factors that seem to work and then the factors that were inhibiting the discussion. This is a valuable method of reporting. The "problem" technique is the third and probably the most effective of the devices. It consists of presenting the observations as factors of a problem in group development and as important in getting good results.