

## **Exponential Consulting White Paper**

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# **Four Strategic Mistakes in Using Group Sessions For Organisational Change – And How to Avoid Them**

By Stephen Billing

Ever thought about why it is that group sessions are such an integral part of the roll out of any significant organisational change? Humans are social creatures and from pre-history onwards we have had a strong need to belong to groups.

In organisational change, groups can be convened for reasons such as:

- Ease of delivery of a common message
- Planning
- Resolving an issue
- Agreeing common approaches
- Sharing ideas and comparing notes.

Somehow there is a power in working in groups that can really help your change to gather momentum. Other times these group sessions can just fall completely flat and set you back more than they move you forward. How do you really harness the energy for change during these group sessions and gain the momentum you know is possible?

This paper covers these four common mistakes in the way groups are utilized during organizational change initiatives, and how to avoid them:

1. Seeing the group session as a unique one off event.
2. Thinking the value of group sessions is in output, outcomes and objectives rather than the interaction itself.
3. Avoiding the opportunity for contrary or negative views to be expressed.
4. Seeing the session objectives as absolutes rather than as intentions.

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### **Mistake #1: Seeing the group session as a unique one off event**

Intuitively, you know that in the life of your organization there have been many groups convened over time and there will be many more after your current initiative is complete. Why is it so common for managers to act as though the group session was the only time the group will ever come together? Maybe travel has been involved and this has incurred tangible cost and so there is desire for the session to have tangible benefits. But even when no travel is involved, these group sessions are often seen as somehow needing to stand alone – having their own objectives which are quite separate from the ordinary life of the members of the group. This tendency to see the group session as the only opportunity to achieve objectives leads to a determination to over fill the unique one off event with stimulating content. While stimulating content is desirable, the conversations that take place during the group session are only part of the ongoing weave of conversations in the organization. And no matter how well designed and productive the conversations in the group session are, the conversations that take place over time after the group session are the ones that will determine the success or otherwise of your change initiative.

**To avoid** this common mistake, bear in mind that the group session will enable certain conversations to take place and they will be taken up (or not) afterwards as themes in the ongoing pattern of conversation in your organization.

As you put together your agenda or plan for the group session, consider the conversations that have taken place prior to the meeting, and those that will take place afterwards. If you want your group session to assist with a change process, then be prepared to explore actively any tensions or areas of potential resistance. Allowing people's divergent points of view to be heard is a surprisingly powerful way of melting away resistance.

### **Mistake #2: Thinking the value of group sessions is in output, outcomes and objectives rather than the interaction itself**

While it is common to advise those facilitating change sessions to be clear about their objectives for the session, the overwhelming focus on objectives causes them to be seen as ends in themselves. The production of action lists or lists of concerns comes to be seen as the point of the session, separate from the ongoing conversations that take place every day in the team and organisation. This diverts attention from the interactions themselves that are taking place during the session.

This is a shame because in terms of their contribution to organisational change, the interactions themselves are what constitute whether the patterns of conversation after the session will change or stay the same. The interactions themselves are far more important in engendering change than the flipcharts and outputs from the session.

This leads to the facilitation or management of the group seeing the purpose of the group as to meet the objectives of the facilitator or manager. Their attention is on their own outcomes or objectives for the group. While this sounds like a good thing it comes at a grave risk. Which is the risk of seeing the conversations and contributions of the group only in terms of their objectives and missing other useful interactions that seem like they are off task.

It is very different to be facilitating in a way that pays attention to the interactions of those in the group as well as the objectives of the session.

I will never forget being in a group in which one of the participants realized that no one had thought of a particular piece of software that would be required and we had forgotten to plan for its development. It was a shock realization to many in the group, but because it came up almost as a by-product of another conversation, the facilitator actually dismissed my colleague's comment, saying "we don't want to get into the detail here." The facilitator thought it was detail because it wasn't directly related to the pre-determined objectives he had for the session. It was clear to me and others that it was not a detail as this issue had a major impact on the project later on.

**To avoid** this common mistake, pay attention to the interactions that take place during the session and actively seek to provide opportunities for all to speak. This means do not seek to close down conversations that seem to be going nowhere, but draw attention to what is going on in the room. Be willing to reframe your objectives if you have to. If you insist on driving the group towards your predetermined objectives, you may well end up feeling that the meeting went well, but what you will have done is drive into the shadows the conversations that people could not have during the session. They will have these "shadow conversations" later on, and you will not be part of them. You will have lost a great opportunity to influence how people are talking about your change.

### **Mistake #3: Avoiding the opportunity for contrary or negative views to be expressed**

Group sessions are often carefully orchestrated to be 'positive' and 'upbeat.' Appreciative enquiry is a good example of such a method, where the group concentrates on discussing only what is going well or what is positive. There is no doubt that people can feel good when they talk about positive things. But while this makes for a nice atmosphere, it is like a sugar rush that lasts briefly and does not contribute longer term to changing your organisation. In fact, such orchestrated positiveness can create a backlash after the session when, in ongoing conversations, people realise that the realities of their situation were not discussed, that they did not get a chance to say how they really feel.

**To avoid** this common mistake, encourage the expression of divergent opinions. I know there is often a reluctance to do this as it is thought that the expression of negative views will create more negativity. But your people are going to talk about the negative things anyway. If they don't talk about them in your group session, they will do so elsewhere, amongst themselves with trusted others. So why not become one of their trusted others? If you want to be effective in managing and implementing change, it is better that they talk about the negative things in the group session where you can influence them towards the change, rather than ignoring or squashing them.

#### **Mistake #4: Seeing the session objectives as absolutes rather than as intentions**

Managers and facilitators spend considerable time planning group sessions during change projects. They become locked in to the objectives they have for these sessions, and as mentioned earlier these objectives tend to make the managers and facilitators drive conversations towards their objectives.

This fails to appreciate the self-organising nature of human interaction. Societies and organisations emerge from myriad interactions amongst people, with no one person having an overarching blueprint for the organisation or society. As a manager, it is tempting to be seduced into thinking that you can control your organisation and the group sessions by articulating a powerful vision, having clear objectives and then driving towards those objectives. While as a manager you may be powerful, you cannot control how people will respond in the group and in the organization, after your meeting.

Remember that people have choice. The experience of those in the group is a result of the interplay of the intentions, choices and wills of those present. As a manager, you and facilitator have your intentions, expressed as objectives, strategies, visions and so on. While you may be powerful, you still cannot control how people will respond to these strategies, objectives and visions. You cannot control how people will take up the themes of the group session afterwards, for example by ignoring them and continuing with what they have always done, or by taking action along the lines you want, or by doing something unexpected like taking industrial action or a personal grievance.

**To avoid** this common mistake, view your strategies, objectives and visions as intentions, express them clearly and listen for the intentions of the others in the group. Explore and ask questions about those intentions. This alone will create a very different group experience from one that is focused on the illusion of having achieved certain predetermined objectives.