

Groups at Work

Strategies and Structures
for Professional Learning

by

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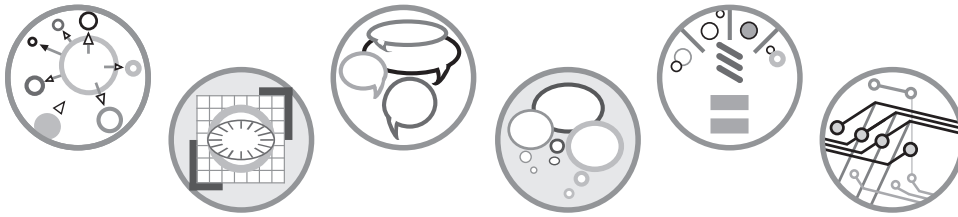
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Celebrate success. Learn from failure. Acknowledge both.

About This Book

THIS book is based on the belief that groups that employ a repertoire of strategies and structures work more productively and time efficiently than any groups will without them. Strategies and protocols build capacity by providing guidelines and parameters that structure group interactions. They provide an organic base for behaviours that then become internally driven. That is, protocols become patterns, patterns become habits and habits become norms.

This book is for group leaders and members of small groups that share leadership. Effective groups own their processes, actions and outcomes resulting in cooperation, coordination and shared understanding of procedures and protocols. Reliance on a single facilitator often inhibits group development. To spread skilfulness across the group and encourage more self-directed learning and monitoring behaviours by individual members, this book offers a rich palette of resources for teams. Shared tools and expectations help all group members increase their confidence; making facilitation a collective responsibility not a role.

Though meetings may be informal, they should never be casual. Thought, energy and intention must be put into design and preparation. The strategies in this book are easy to access, easy to follow and easy to apply by busy professionals.

What's Inside?

The 78 strategies offered here are organised into six functions to support purposeful process design: 1) activating, 2) assessing, goal setting and planning, 3) dialogue and discussion, 4) generating ideas, 5) summarising and synthesising, 6) text and information processing. These functions are arranged alphabetically and reflect the major activities that engage productive groups. Cohesive groups require tools to focus tasks and build relationships. Such processes encourage the interpersonal behaviours necessary for task success, such as listening for understanding, encouraging participation of all group members and balancing advocacy for one's own ideas with inquiry into the ideas of others.

While this book presents strategies within a specific function, a number of them can be applied to other functions. For example, many strategies for activating also serve to generate ideas and/or summarise. Although there is a section of strategies for generating ideas, many of the other strategies have a step that incorporates this function.

The strategies are formatted for ease of use. Each strategy page provides a variety of information for the group leader.

Groups at Work: Strategies and Structures for Professional Learning

Know/Think I Know/Want to Know

Logistics: Suggested grouping, length of time, preparation and materials necessary for effective application. This symbol **R** indicates that a recording sheet is available to download online at www.go.hbe.com.au

Tips: The voice of experience to guide application.

Example: Most pages have illustrations, or sample facilitation questions to increase success, especially for first-time users.

Purpose: Scan the purpose statement for an overview of the strategy and to help determine whether the application will fit your outcome(s).

Intention: Information on what the strategy will produce for groups and group members.

Instructions to Group Leader: Step-by-step directions for application. The accompanying PowerPoint® slides provide directions to the group members. These slides are available to download online at www.go.hbe.com.au

Logistics

Materials and Preparation **R**
 Reproduce the three-column recording sheets.
 PowerPoint® direction slides

Time
 25–35 minutes

Grouping: Trios or quartets

Purpose

Know/Think I Know/Want to Know begins a session by focusing attention and energy on a specific content or topic – a fact, a data point or an idea – and extends the exploration to include inferences, interpretations, multiple perspectives and implications or predictions based on the point of focus.

Intention

This strategy scaffolds a sequence of thinking processes, increasing the depth of exploration of individual points. Beginning with a discrete piece of information, group members elaborate, extend and explore, increasing understanding as they do so.

Instructions to Group Leader

1. Explain the function of each column to the group members. Distinguish the “Know” from “Think I Know” so group members will include ideas and information even if they are a bit tentative or unsure.
2. Individuals complete their own recording sheet.
3. After approximately 10 minutes have groups share their thinking.
4. Groups can create a collective list of “Want to Knows”; prioritising and preparing to share with the full group.
5. After another 10–15 minutes, ask small groups to share their “Want to Knows” and create a master list for the full group.

Tips

Model the use of the columns for the full group.
 Have groups use public recording on chart paper to focus their work.

Variations

Use the protocol as a tool for planning professional development.
 Use the protocol as an action research tool – using the “Want to Knows” to organise topics and teams.

Example

Topic: Facilitation

Know	Think I Know	Want to Know
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is hard work • There is a skill set • You have to know when to talk and when to listen 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paraphrasing is an essential skill • Some groups are more skilful than others • Many group members don't think they're responsible for what happens in a meeting 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What some of the essential facilitation skills are • How I develop these skills • Whether I'll be appreciated if I use these skills in meetings I run

Stacking Strategies and Agenda Design

Design matters. Productive sessions require thoughtful attention to matching process with purpose. To support process design, strategies can be “stacked” by function. For example, sequencing an activating strategy, a text processing strategy and a summarising strategy provides an effective design for a 45–60 minute meeting. For extended time frames, adding a dialogue or discussion strategy furthers the group’s work. Selecting and sequencing strategies from the six functions named above creates effective and purposeful process designs. These strategy stacks save design time and produce productive, satisfying, high engagement sessions. See Table 1: Sample Strategy Stacks.

45-60 Minute Session	Topic: Collaboration
Activating: Help Wanted Ads	Help Wanted Ads for a skilled group member
Text and Information Processing: Say Something	Research synthesis or appropriate article
Summarising and Synthesising: Key Words	Individuals select and share key words from the session's reading and dialogue.
60-90 Minute Session	Topic: Improving Student Writing
Activating: Create a Recipe	Create a recipe for a productive writing lesson.
Dialogue and Discussion: Card Stack and Shuffle	Stems: Skilful student writers... Effective writing teachers...
Assessing, Planning and Goal Setting: Fishbone/Cause Effect Diagrams	Create diagrams analysing factors that influence skilful student writing.
Summarising and Synthesising: Most Important Point	Individuals select a most important point
2-3 Hour Session	Topic: Formative Assessment
Activating: Reflect, Regroup, Return	Participants respond to and reflect on prompts about current assessment practices.
Text and Information Processing: Three As Plus One	Participants read an article or sample chapter from a text. To save time this might be assigned prior to the session.
Generating Ideas: Colour Question Brainstorming	Participants generate ideas and insights into improved assessment practices.
Summarising and Synthesising: Generate, Sort and Synthesise	Group members generate, sort and synthesise key ideas from the session.

Table 1: Sample Strategy Stacks

Designers consider the following questions when constructing a process agenda:

- How much time is available to achieve key outcomes?
- What ways does this group need to operate with this information/topic at this time?
- What cognitive processes or interactive patterns will be most productive?

Select from the strategies in this book to create a process design that answers these questions for your groups and group work.

Tips for Facilitators

This book provides a variety of strategies and protocols to support effective group work. These strategies fit within the larger field of orchestrating productive work sessions. Group members want to know two things: “Will this session be relevant to me?” and “Will my time be well spent?” Skilled facilitators signal their respect for these questions by being prepared, starting on time and outlining the purpose and design of the session. Their verbal and non-verbal actions communicate to group members that they are in good hands.

Facilitating group work is a complex yet learnable skill-set, requiring clarity of purpose, a repertoire of strategies, a verbal and nonverbal toolbox and the ability to read and adjust to the needs of the group. The tips below offer some facilitation fundamentals.

Introducing the Session

The opening sets the tone for the session. For both small and large groups, the first few minutes require intentional design and delivery. The ways in which a facilitator frames the purpose, task and process establishes receptivity and readiness for the work ahead.

Effective facilitators name the context within which the meeting occurs, along with the ways in which the process and products of that session mesh with each other and the wider frame. The time line, purpose, logistics and expectations are then clearly and explicitly stated.

Introducing a Strategy

Capturing the group members' attention and promoting their willingness to follow directions is a fundamental facilitation task. The basic pattern for accomplishing this task is to offer the *what*, *why* and *how* of structures, strategies and protocols. The "what" names the structure, strategy or protocol with which the group is about to engage. The "why" reveals the benefits of engaging as individuals and as a group. These might include efficient task completion, balanced participation, improved work products and opportunities to learn from and about each other. The "how" is the directions outlining steps for the procedures and processes.

Effective directions include modelling, specific examples and, in the case of complex or multi-step processes, visual support. Checking for understanding before proceeding will ensure that all group members are involved and will promote responsibility for accurately implementing the protocol. Each strategy in this book has related PowerPoint® slide(s) to support giving directions.

As a session progresses, facilitators create a pathway for group learning and group success by offering connections between strategies to create cohesive sessions. They do so by revisiting what has occurred (backtracking) and describing what is to come (foreshadowing) for both topics and processes. Group members' confidence increases when they have an orientation to the bigger picture and can track incremental accomplishments and project future experiences.

Fitting the Strategy to the Group

Strategies are most effective when structured intentionally to meet a specific group's needs, skill level and purposes. Thoughtfully structured strategies maximise the efficient use of time and increase the quality of both interactions and results. Novice groups require formal structures to scaffold success. More expert groups know how and when to structure a strategy to match the emotional and cognitive demands of their work.

Effective design includes three structuring variables: group size and composition, length of time and degree of structure. Designers use these elements to customise strategies to fit the specific requirements of the task, the group and the available time frame.

TASK GROUP SIZE AND COMPOSITION. Using pairs, trios and quartets increases active participation and creates a climate for safe interaction. It is more efficient and manageable to subdivide large groups into smaller working units. The strategy descriptions that follow suggest an optimal group size. These small groups can be pre-assigned or randomly selected. (See Strategies for Forming Groups, page 91).

In some cases, such as small year-level teams or ad hoc committees, the trio or quartet is the group. In these circumstances, intentional design still matters and strategies should be modified accordingly.

Mixing members by same or different role, level of knowledge and degree of experience enriches the interaction and widens perspective related to tasks and topics. For example, groups can be organised as trios with each teacher from a different year level or department, or by creating task groups whose experiences range from beginning teachers to seasoned veterans. When appropriate, task groups can combine to extend the conversation.

LENGTH OF TIME FOR A GROUP TO STAY TOGETHER. Small groups are effective for text-based tasks, idea generation and data exploration. By varying the length of time that groups work together and regrouping periodically, session participants develop deeper working relationships and greater knowledge of one another. Switching task group members also provides a period of purposeful movement for energy and brief social interaction. One pattern for intact groups is to establish base groups that meet regularly and employ informal grouping for designated tasks.

DEGREE OF STRUCTURE. Structuring choices involve materials, space, time, interaction patterns and roles. Structure increases productivity and engagement. Some fundamental structures include recording publicly on chart paper so that all can see ideas and information, creating individual writing time and space before a conversation starts, providing individual recording sheets, using a round-robin-pattern for sharing ideas, using a public timer to guide processes and assigning roles, such as that of a reporter, a recorder and a materials manager. Higher performing groups are not harmed by structure, and groups and group members that need structure will be greatly aided by it. (See Interaction Structures, page 89).

Without thoughtful choices to create the conditions for success, the strategies in this book become interesting activities and not purposeful processes.

In the Interest of Time

Time is our scarcest resource. Most groups have more task than time. Increasing time efficiency is a critical outcome for groups and group leaders. The strategies offered here can be modified to maximise meeting productivity. Several mini-management moves accomplish this purpose.

WORK OUTSIDE THE SESSION. Engaging with topics and tasks can begin before the meeting or work session and extend between sessions. For example, group members can read and annotate text, collect observations and examples of student work, complete stems related to the content, respond to a survey or set of questions, or record ideas on a structured worksheet. Using email, wikis, blogs and other technologies supports these activities. Having something in the hand, rather than just in the head, focuses the group and jump-starts the session. Adaptations for using this time saver are described in many of the strategies that follow.

READY RESOURCES AND MATERIALS. Easy access to the tools necessary for group work saves time and energy and maintains attention and momentum. Preparing a central materials station or table tubs filled with highlighters, index cards, sticky notes, textas, etc. are simple ways to achieve these outcomes. Other time savers include: arranging furniture for high engagement, posting flip-chart paper prior to the meeting to create work stations and testing the technology when appropriate.

ASSIGN ROLES. Many strategies described in this book indicate the need for various roles. Groups expend time socially negotiating role selection, such as recorder or reporter. Group leaders save time by pre-determining or assigning these roles “on the spot”.

DIVIDE THE TASK. Everyone doesn't have to do everything at the same time or together. Both tasks and strategies have natural sub-divisions. For example, small groups within the whole can explore different data sets, create scales and rubrics for different criteria, or read different and related pieces of text and then share their conclusions, work products or syntheses. Many of the strategies in this book can also be segmented. For example, each task group can be assigned different letters or sections of the alphabet when completing an alphabetical listing (see A–Z Listing, page 2).

Learning by Doing

We don't learn from experience, we learn by reflecting on our experiences. Learning groups and learning leaders preserve time and energy for reflecting on their processes and products and develop specific designs for this purpose.

Systematic experimentation with strategies and design elements in low-risk situations offers a trial run and the opportunity to refine facilitative practices. Tracking strategies and the results of their application supports adaptations based on observation, feedback and reflection. To serve this purpose you will find recording sheet masters available to download online at www.go.hbe.com.au.

For leaders, stretching against comfort and style preferences provides opportunities to learn while meeting the needs of a broader spectrum of group members. For example, choosing strategies that may not be personally appealing often serves the learning needs of those with different preferences. Choose strategies from this book that will stretch your repertoire.

Groups also learn by applying similar processes for producing growth. Learning groups extend and refine their repertoire, stretch out of their comfort zones and modify behaviours by explicitly assessing successes and challenges. These groups expand their capacity to do more complex and challenging tasks, more collaboratively, more of the time.

Groups at Work

This book is a practical guide to structuring productive groups, providing strategies for conducting time-efficient, task-focused meetings. Thoughtful application of this toolbox will change the dynamic of your meetings resulting in greater satisfaction, stronger relationships and higher quality collaborative work.

We invite you to use this book as a resource for your own professional learning and as a guide to continual growth for your groups.

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