Working with Groups: The Necessary Interpersonal Skills
by **Brian Nichol**

For most new leaders an early priority is to understand how leaders work with their subordinates to optimize the performance of a work group or team. The guiding principle here is to learn to observe group processes, and apply the enquiry cycle - observe, make sense, and intervene to influence the system. The basis of the Leadership for Performance program is to be aware of the process dimension of social activity and use this information as a basis for acting to influence these processes.

Group Process Awareness
Our understanding of social process has developed in the past century through the work of the behavioral sciences. Psychologists, social psychologists, sociologists, and anthropologists have provided a rich language of theory and concepts with which we can identify features and patterns in human interaction. For example, from the study of group behavior we know that groups progress through developmental stages. Various writers describe this progression in different terms, a popular version is Forming, Storming, Norming, and Performing.

Initially when a group forms people are uncertain of the part they will play in the group and unclear what they are expected to do. There is considerable anxiety in the new group although members will defend themselves against this in various ways (some will joke, others will withdraw and some will be hostile). As a whole the group is relatively passive and looks to the leader for direction (dependency). In the storming phase people begin to assert their individuality and compete for control in the group. Often there is conflict between individuals and with the leader, hence the term "storming". Norming is the stage when the conflicts subside and the group negotiates the group norms within which it is going to work. The final stage in the model is performing when the group understands its task and settles down to working towards the goals of the group.

Each stage has its particular characteristics and requires a different approach from the leader. Consequently, a leader cannot expect a high-level performance from a team until the team has matured to the fourth phase of performing. This may take only a few hours, or several meetings depending on a variety of factors. The skillful leader can speed up the process of development, and, on the other hand, the unaware leader can maintain the group stuck in the forming stage and lose the advantages of working with an effective team.

Edgar Schein (1989), developed an excellent synthesis of theories relevant to leadership in organizations. He makes an important distinction between two major aspects of group interaction. - content and process. Content covers the subject matter or the task of the group. For example, a group is discussing the issue of developing a mass transit system for a rapidly developing region. The content in this case is the ideas and arguments that the group members are presenting to the group. Process is about what is happening between and to group members while the group is working. Group process

(sometimes referred to as group dynamics) deal with such things as participation, competition, influence, decision-making, morale and conflict within the group. In organizations when people work together, typically little attention is paid to process, even when it is a major factor in a group's ineffective performance. Becoming aware of group process enables a group leader (or a group member for that matter) to identify group problems early and deal with them more effectively.

Our traditional vocational education, by and large, prepares us to work with the content of group activity. For example, in a group project established to introduce a new software program into the company the accountant gives her attention to learning about the software's advantages over the old system, and whose jobs will be affected by the change. She understands that her job is to put her expertise at the service of the project. However, if the accountant is also the project leader she will have more effect on the success of the project if she also pays attention to group process. By becoming aware of group process and understanding the meaning of these processes the leader is in a stronger position to influence the group in the service of the project's goals. Noticing that a member has been quiet in a group for some time the leader can bring her into the discussion. Being aware that the discussion of alternative plans has gone on long enough the leader proposes the group should move on to making a decision and developing a plan of action

The purpose of group process awareness and group work skill [a subset of leadership skill] is to enable the leader to more effectively serve the mission of the group.

Key Group Processes
A group a leader needs to become fluent with the following key group processes:

- *Participation* Who in the group contributes? Who remains silent? Where are the alliance and antagonisms?
- *Interactive Skills* What level of interactive skill do people bring to the group? How do people contribute? Who asks questions? Who provides summaries to move the group forward? Who criticizes? Who supports an other member?
- *Problem-solving* Does the group use a systematic approach to problem-solving? What creative problem-solving techniques are used by the group members?
- *Decision-making* What methods of decision-making are being employed by the group?
- Leadership: Task Needs Who is attending to the traditional leadership functions such as setting goals, acquiring resources and drawing up a plan?
- *Leadership: Group Needs* Is this a group which supports its members?
- *Leadership Individual Needs* Do the individuals know what their roles are in the group? Do they have the necessary skills to carry out their roles?
- *Group norms and culture* What kind of group culture is appropriate to the work of the group?
- *Group defense mechanisms* What are the defense mechanisms the group typically use to defend itself against issues which stimulate anxiety?

This list is not exhaustive; there are other important processes which are significant for leaders working with particular types of groups. However, those listed are important for leaders of work groups, and if leaders can master them they will be more effective.

Reference

Schein, E., (1969). Process consultation: Its role in organization development. Addison-Wesley.