Key Concept

5

GROUPWORK

When work is a pleasure, life is a joy.
Maxim Gorky

The major areas of concern for work groups — planning, problem-solving and decision-making — are seldom plain sailing. Unclear goals, intractable disputes, lack of progress in reaching a decision are familiar experiences. Cries of 'wasting time', 'going round in circles' and 'grinding to a halt' are well-known accompaniments to the endeavours of the best-intentioned groups, and clearly indicate the need for attention to process as well as content. More often than not, members either do not have appropriate process models, or do not have an adequate repertoire of problem-solving skills (groups that have neither probably terminate early!). This section examines a number of interrelated activities common to all work groups: goal-setting, action planning, problem-solving, conflict management and decision-making.

Goal-setting

A goal is *an image of a future state of affairs towards which action is oriented.* All groups have goals: to win a race, invent a new product, build a better city. The group's ability to define its goals and achieve them successfully is a measure of its effectiveness. A group goal is more than a summation of the goals of all the group members. It is a goal that is desired by enough members to get them working collaboratively towards its achievement (Johnson and Johnson, 1987). The motivation of members to work towards achieving the goal of their group is increased by participation in setting them: goals imposed from outside may not arouse much authentic motivation or commitment.

Most groups have a number of goals, ranging from the long-term to the immediate. Group members are affected by both, but usually it is the immediate goals that directly influence behaviour. Commitment to working to achieve a goal depends on the following:

- how attractive or desirable it seems in terms of the anticipated rewards for achieving it;
- how likely it seems that it can be achieved;
- whether it was imposed from outside or group-defined;
- how challenging it is.
- whether members will be able to tell that it has been achieved.

In setting goals, it is important to distinguish between the definition of the goal itself, the tasks that must be carried out to achieve it, and the interaction processes that the members will have to engage in. For example, the goal may be to produce a report on an investigation; the tasks may include carrying out interviews, analysing data; the processes may include a division of labour, sharing information, constructively resolving conflicts. The goals themselves can also be regarded as (i) guides for action, and (ii) the driving force without which members would take no action at all, becoming apathetic, disenchanted, or frustrated. As members commit themselves to work towards their group goals an inner tension is aroused that makes them restless and dissatisfied until the goal is reached or some other sort of closure is achieved concerning it (Johnson and Johnson, 1987, p. 135).

Initial goal-setting may start with a general statement about the purpose for which the group has formed. For example, a residents' action group may have been formed with the general goal 'to improve the local environment'. This is a *fuzzy* goal and says nothing about what the group will actually do. The next step is to refine the goal to be more *operational*, i.e. directly indicating the sort of actions to be taken. Such a statement might be 'to pressure the local council to act to reduce pollution'. In this form the goal is still not fully operational; in the next step the group might then decide 'to hold a public protest meeting in the Town Hall on March 2nd'. From this sort of clear and operational goal stem the tasks (book the venue, print leaflets, invite speakers, etc). These general-to-specific levels of goals and subgoals are commonly referred to as a *goal hierarchy.* Should the group define several goals (e.g. hold a public meeting, get an activist elected to Council, write an article for the local paper), these would constitute a *goal set.*

Finally, goals must be capable of modification without sacrificing clarity or specificity. This requirement also relates to the conflict-resolving skills in the group: goals inevitably raise conflicts, and modifying the

goals is one way (not always a good way) of resolving such conflicts. Of special significance are the conflicts that arise between a private (individual) goal and the group goal. The importance of these intrapersonal conflicts as a source of hidden agendas is often underestimated.

For detailed reading on goals, see Johnson and Johnson, 1987, Chap. 4; Shaw, 1981, Chap. 10.

Action Planning

As outlined above, if goals are sufficiently operationalised downwards through the goal hierarchy, they in fact virtually transform into tasks. The terms goal and task are often either confused or used as if synonymous, and it is helpful if tasks are defined simply as all those things that must be done if the group is to succeed in achieving its goal. Planning, used here in a specific sense, is defined as *setting out a course of action to achieve a goal.* Usually, a course of action can be seen as a collection or sequence of specific tasks.

Tasks vary enormously, and there are many ways of classifying them. One of the most comprehensive systems is that of Steiner (1972), who divided them basically into two main categories: divisible and unitary. The former are tasks that can be broken down into separate assignments each of which can be carried out by a different individual or subgroup. Group members may decide for themselves who will be matched with which assignment, or rules may be in force, for example demarcation, which predetermine who will do what. Productivity is affected by the appropriateness of this matching of person to task. An example of a divisible task is the planning of a public exhibition, which might be divided into venue preparation, building the display boards, inviting a celebrity to open it, arranging publicity, and so on. Unitary tasks on the other hand require the collaborative effort of all the group members, and cannot be subdivided. An example of a unitary task facing the planners of the exhibition might be making the final decision on the venue.

Tasks also vary in their degree of difficulty, attractiveness, familiarity, and suitability (how suited it is to the group's structure and accessible skills and resources). Some are highly structured or routinised, others relatively unstructured or unpredictable. To all of these dimensions, Shaw (1981, p. 364) adds *solution multiplicity*: the degree to which there is more than one possible solution. This dimension ranges from tasks with only one right solution which is easily seen to be correct, to those with many acceptable solutions, many ways of reaching them, and no easy way of verifying which are good or bad.

How a task is initially described and the manner in which it is allocated will have an effect on the members' attitudes to working on it. The type and number of tasks to be performed, the time and resources available,

and the anticipated rewards for success will all influence the way the group organises itself and approaches any difficulties that may be encountered.

For each goal agreed upon by the group, action planning can be assisted by the *critical path technique*. Working backwards from that moment when the goal has to be achieved, the members first determine what tasks need to be completed and roughly in what sequence. Responsibilities and resources for these are then allocated, and an estimate is made of the length of time each task will take to complete. The tasks and times are now assembled on a preliminary time-line. If the job is to be divided up among a number of subgroups who will work concurrently, the diagram will have several paths and loops. Some of these will feed each other, and they will all eventually converge on the final stage. In this way, the time-line takes the form of a flowchart (Figure 5.1 overleaf).

The critical path is the one through the diagram that takes the longest time to complete, and it is this path therefore that determines how long the whole project will take. The chart helps to find ways to reduce the length of the critical path and to allocate resources and personnel most economically. People allocated to tasks on less critical paths might be reassigned to more critical tasks to make the work-flow more balanced. In Figure 5.1, for instance, since the critical or longest path up to the 'build structure' node is the one involving digging the excavations (30 days), some of the scaffolders could be put to digging. The path the scaffolders are on is much shorter (10 days), and they would otherwise have to wait around until the workers on the critical path catch up to them at 'build structure'. The whole process can be kept under review and appropriately modified, and all members work to a clear and common schedule.

For detailed reading on tasks, see Miller, 1976; Shaw, 1981; Steiner, 1972.

Problem-solving

Every creation is preceded by the right kind of chaos.
William Thompson

As tasks get under way, it is almost inevitable that problems of one kind or another will confront the group. These may be internal (whatever impedes the group's own functioning, such as absenteeism, unresolved conflict, dominance by a few members), or external (whatever directly impinges on the task, such as inappropriate technology, insufficient information, inadequate funding). In some instances, the group task itself may be to solve a given problem, as in the case of a research team commissioned to find a safe way to dispose of radioactive waste. A problem of any kind is traditionally looked upon as a barrier across the path to a goal (Figure 5.2), but if a creative approach is to be adopted, then it is advisable to cultivate a broader perspective and approach it also as a

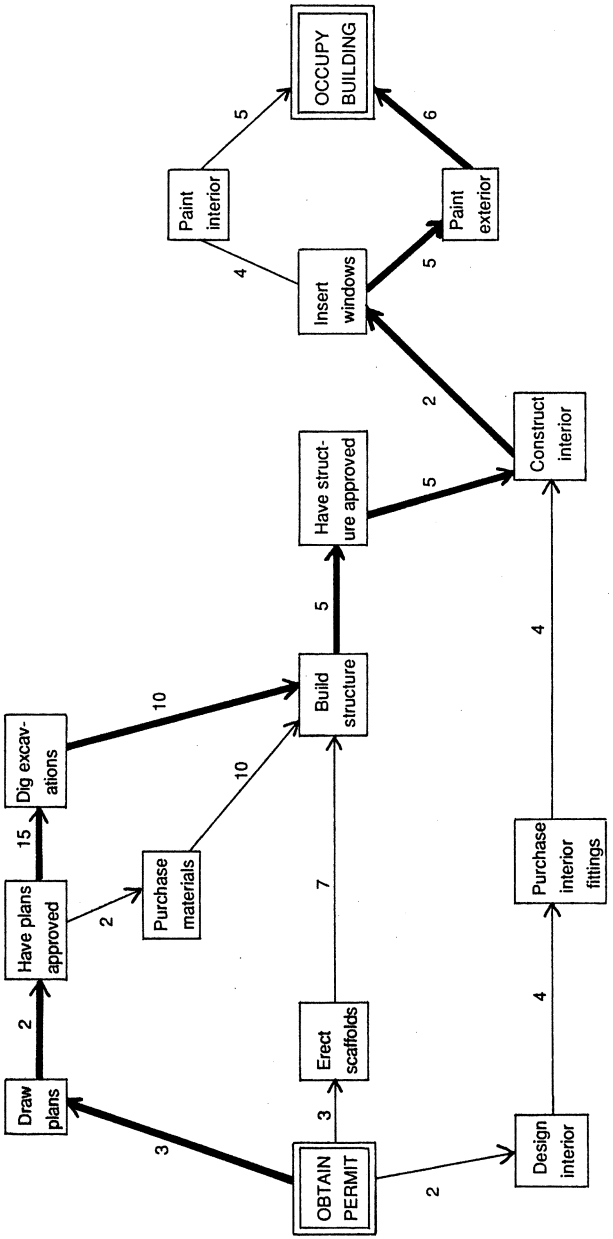

Fig. 5.1 A critical path flowchart (Wyatt, 1989).

challenge and opportunity for learning and growth. It is not unreasonable to go even further and suggest that persistent substitution of the word 'challenge' for the word 'problem' will result in a significant attitude change which in turn will engender enthusiasm for acquiring *challenge-meeting* (rather than problem-solving) skills.

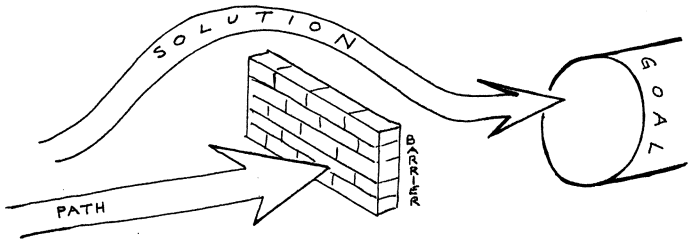

Fig. 5.2 Elements in a problem/challenge situation.

Probably the most common problem is interpersonal conflict, and this will be given special attention in the next section, together with an examination of the 'problem-solving approach' to conflict resolution. Problems which are more product- than process-related are usually approached via the traditional linear problem-solving process with its five main stages:

Stage 1: Recognising and agreeing that there is a problem.
Stage 2: Defining and refining the problem statement.
Stage 3: Diverging — generating options and possible solutions.
Stage 4: Converging — evaluating the preferred or most viable options.
Stage 5: Deciding — choosing and agreeing on the final solution.

Two things need to be said about the linear model above apart from the fact that it is simplistic. First, it omits the important initial step of setting out and exploring the field or system in which the problem (as yet unrefined) is embedded; and second, it obscures the fact that divergent and convergent thinking are also used in stages other than 3 and 4.

The way a group approaches a problem will be influenced by the group culture. Some will approach the metaphorical brick wall in Figure 5.2 with a view to circumnavigating it, others will try to blast their way through or will dismantle it piece by piece. Others still may just sit tight and wait for it to crumble. Both the approach and the techniques used will also be influenced by the levels of cohesion, trust and commitment enjoyed by the members. The most creative work is done when the group is free of negative norms and the majority of members are capable of acting in accordance with the following rules:

1. **Suspension of disbelief and pessimism.** An attitude which is prejudiced against or cynical of any idea offered by another will not foster group creativity. The following sort of comments should be regarded as detrimental:
   (a) That would cost too much.
   (b) The boss would never accept that.
   (c) It's too radical.
   (d) We tried that before and it didn't work.
   (e) It's against company policy.
   (f) That's much too airy-fairy
   (g) It's too early to look at that now
   (h) It's too late to look at that now.
   etc.
2. **Balanced criticism.** Since authentic negative criticism is valuable, negative comment should not be ruled out altogether. The tendency to dwell on 'what's wrong' can be countered by adopting a policy of giving at least an equal number of 'what's right' comments about any suggestion put forward. The right of a member to make a negative criticism might, for example, have to be earned by first offering two or three comments in favour of the suggestion.
3. **Associative thinking.** The creative thinker encourages word associations and trains of thought to develop, looks for associations between apparently divergent suggestions, thinks laterally, and modifies and transforms ideas and possible solutions. Thinking aloud and indulging in apparently crazy or even outrageous ideas are actively encouraged.
4. **Tolerance of ambiguity.** It is essential to be able to profit from contradictory, ambiguous, unclear, or incomplete notions rather than discard or retreat from them. Often, contradiction is the origin of new ideas and spurts of progress.
5. **Tackling specific rather than general problems.** A manager trying to deal with the problem of absenteeism is trying to solve a general problem. Specifically trying to find out why Smith has been absent from all the divisional committee meetings since July may be easier, and may also throw useful light on the general problem.
6. **Delaying solution-mindedness.** There is a natural tendency to rush towards solutions, particularly when a task group has to meet a deadline. Many groups approach every new problem by trying to use only those solutions which worked in the past. The creative group gives attention to all the elements of the situation: the path so far that has led up to the impasse, the alternative ones not chosen, the nature and parameters of the barrier itself, the various ways that might be taken around, over, under or through it, and the nature of the goal being aimed for.
7. **Detachment.** From time to time it is important to 'sleep on it', or at least take time out of the problem-solving session to do something totally different and unrelated. At these times, standing back from the problem allows for the incubation of ideas, which may be followed on occasions by the 'eureka' experience, that all-important moment of insight.

The degree to which a group succeeds in solving a problem will also be determined by the available repertoire of skills in utilising creative techniques. Thumbnail sketches of a range of popular methods are given in Appendix C. When these are used in a group situation, skills in communication, leadership and conflict management are a parallel necessity, particularly on the part of the session leader.

For detailed reading on problem-solving, see Adams, 1987; de Bono, 1968; Le Grew et al., 1980; Maier, 1970.

Conflict Management

When angry, count four; when very angry, swear.
Mark Twain

Conflict (literally 'a striking together') is inevitable in work groups, and must be effectively handled if it is not to be a barrier to progress, a cause of the destruction of the group, or a source of physical or psychological damage to an individual. If members of the group are committed to the task and involved actively in working to achieve its goals as well as their own, differences of opinion, beliefs and values are almost bound to be aired and will give rise to debate and argument as a matter of course. The emotional investment that each party to a conflict puts into the satisfaction of their needs, the achievement of their goals, and the protection of their belief and value systems may also be such that a debate or argument will rapidly develop into a more substantial conflict of interest, then into direct opposition, and — eventually — stalemate or possible violence. Moments of impasse call for particular skills and strategies if the group is to benefit from the opportunity each such incident offers for learning and positive change.

Conflict can occur at the personal level (internal conflict), between people (interpersonal conflict), or between groups (intergroup or international conflict). Most people in our society regard conflict in a negative light, due undoubtedly to the uncomfortable or stressful emotions that generally accompany the emergence of any confrontation between two or more parties. Such situations, if experienced as threatening, give rise to anxiety, fear or panic, depending on the degree of the perceived threat,

and then to a reaction which typically produces one of three types of behaviour: attack, immobilisation, or flight. It is easy to conjure up images of these in the animal kingdom : charging buffalo, petrified deer, fleeing rabbits, for example. In groups, these behaviours show up when members engage in open and hostile verbal battle, are stunned into silence, or 'drop out' in some way, perhaps by becoming apathetic, busying themselves with other matters, or leaving the room. The responses to conflict are idiosyncratic and rarely predictable. Individuals usually first revert to their favoured or characteristic behaviour in the face of opposition (in extreme situations, a full regression to characteristic childhood behaviour may be observed) before attempting to deal rationally with the issue. Groups that become heavily conflicted may therefore manifest either hostile or apathetic behaviour — the troubleshooting chart in Appendix D helps to show some of the causes of these patterns.

Effective conflict handling requires that the energies which have either erupted or are still simmering below the surface are creatively channelled towards a resolution that will bring fresh insights, as well as improving the relationships between group members and enhancing the skills of the group as a whole. Ineffective handling results in a deterioration of the relationship between the opposing parties as hostility escalates into violence, or apathy degenerates into stagnation, either of which is capable ultimately of destroying the group or, at best, causing it to disband voluntarily. The sense of failure and frustration that follows these outcomes is neither pleasant nor healthy for the individuals who endure it.

Conflict is best handled by managing it, that is adopting appropriate strategies to bring about a desired end, whether that be resolution, abatement or suppression. This calls for purposeful action: *dealing* with the situation rather than merely *responding*. Basically, there are two types of strategy for managing conflict: *win-lose* and *win-win*. Both usually involve negotiation, but the intentions in each type differ. In a win-lose approach, the aim is to find a solution more favourable to oneself, regardless of the effect on the other. In a win-win approach, also called the problem-solving approach, the aim is to arrive at a solution that is the most satisfying possible to *both* parties. Such an outcome would be true conflict *resolution*: both parties would win, and would be enhanced by and committed to the result.

Before exploring these strategies in more detail, it is important to consider the need for, and value of, a change in attitude towards conflict, away from the negative one predominant in our culture towards a more balanced one capable of being put to positive use. Although the attitudinal change may take time, the preferred attitude itself is easily described. It is, simply, that *conflict is positive, necessary and manageable, but also has a negative potential for destructiveness that must be approached with understanding and respect.*

Conflict as a positive and necessary phenomenon is nicely argued by Drucker (1977, p. 379): '*The understanding that underlies the right decision grows out of the clash and conflict of opinions and out of the serious consideration of competing alternatives*'. In addition, group cohesion can be improved as a result of conflict with other groups as members band together to reaffirm and maintain the group's identity and boundaries in the face of interference or opposition from the surrounding social or organisational environment. In the course of a conflict, new situations can arise that require the establishment of new rules and norms or the modification of existing ones, and these processes can increase group learning and effectiveness. Conflict as manageable is a proposition supported and illustrated by the Thomas–Kilmann model, an adaptation of which is shown in Figure 5.2. Most of us will be only too familiar with the negative potential, or at least with the ugliness, pain or fear associated with the realisation of that potential. At the time of writing these words, countless wars are being fought around the globe, while the superpowers are adding enormously to the distress of all peoples in their consistent inability to relinquish their win-lose approach to arms reduction and other international peace initiatives.

Conflict Management Strategies

Figure 5.3 shows five basic methods of managing conflict: coercion, accommodation, avoidance, compromise and collaboration.

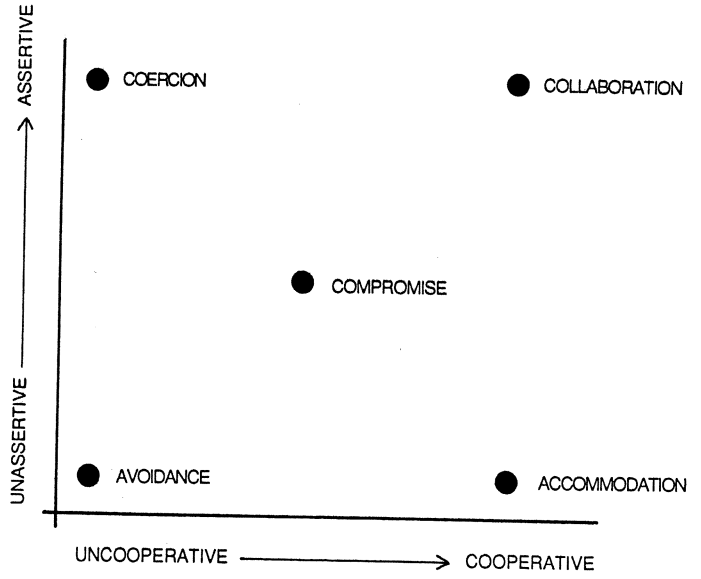

Fig. 5.3 A conflict management model (Thomas and Kilmann, 1974).

The axes of the model refer to the stance taken by either party in a conflict situation towards the other; these are described in detail below.

Coercion is assertive and unco-operative — a power-oriented 'win-lose' mode characterised by competition, stand-over tactics, brute force, etc. Individuals use whatever power seems appropriate to win their goals even at the other person's expense.

Uses:

- when quick, decisive action is vital, e.g. emergencies;
- on important issues where unpopular decisions have to be implemented, e.g. cost-cutting, discipline, etc.;
- as protection against those who take advantage of non-competitive behaviour.

Disadvantages:

- conflict may not be resolved and may resurface later with increased vigour and complexity;
- the loser may become more angry, rebellious or devious;
- the chances of a subsequent negotiated resolution may be lessened or destroyed;
- the conflict may erupt into open violence.

Accommodation is unassertive and co-operative — the opposite of coercion. Individuals neglect their own needs to satisfy those of the other, by capitulation, selfless generosity, charity, obedience, self-sacrifice, etc.

Uses:

- when preserving harmony outweighs other goals;
- when continued competition would damage your cause;
- when you realise you are wrong, to learn from others;
- to allow others to learn by making their own mistakes;
- when it is useful to build up credit for later use!

Disadvantages:

- feelings of self-worth may be diminished;
- winners may come to regard their tactics as condoned or justified;

- winners may press further their domination of the accommodator until the conflict resurfaces in heightened form.

Avoidance is both unassertive and unco-operative — the individual does not address the conflict, maybe by withdrawing totally or by denying that there is a conflict. Other terms may include sidestepping, looking the other way, defusing, and postponing.

Uses:

- when an issue is trivial or relatively unimportant;
- when your power is low — impossible opposition, no chance at all to win;
- when the potential damage of confronting the issue would be greater than the benefits of resolving it;
- to allow people to cool off or recover their balance, to reduce tension;
- when gathering more information is judged to be necessary;
- when a mediator is attacked by one or both of the parties in conflict.

Disadvantages:

- low satisfaction, tends to leave fears and doubts about meeting the same type of situation again;
- perpetuates low valuing of traits such as courage, persistence, self-respect;
- may increase the opponent's frustration and power tactics.

Compromise is intermediate in assertiveness and co-operativeness. It is an attempt at problem-solving, but only seeks to find a mutually acceptable solution which partially satisfies both parties' goals. It might mean splitting the difference, exchanging concessions, or finding a quick middle-ground position. Usually, neither party is satisfied for long; at best, it is a temporary solution, and not a resolution.

Uses:

- when two opponents with equal power are strongly committed to mutually exclusive goals;
- to achieve temporary settlements in complex matters;

- to achieve expedient solutions under time pressure or other duress;
- when the goals are only moderately important.

Disadvantages:

- the conflict is likely to re-emerge later in the same form, or in disguise;
- leaves both sides with residual feelings of dissatisfaction;
- may leave both sides with low committment to implementing the solution.

Collaboration is both assertive *and* co-operative, and literally means 'co-labour', or work together. It means delving into an issue and the concerns and goals of the persons or parties involved, with a view to finding a creative solution that will meet *both* parties' needs to the highest extent possible, with neither emerging as a loser. Successful negotiating behaviours will be needed — active listening, self-disclosure, mutual trust, responsible confrontation, clear communication. A repertoire of creative problem-solving skills is also a priority.

Uses:

- to find an integrative solution when both parties' concerns are too important to be compromised;
- to transcend the 'either-or' polarity and find a truly creative solution;
- to work through hard feelings which have been interfering with the group's progress;
- to maximise commitment by incorporating other's concerns into a consensual decision;
- when it is important to learn from others or to understand the views of others.

Disadvantages:

- can consume large amounts of time and energy;
- can require expensive additional resources (experts, consultants, materials, etc).

The five strategies are best treated as a repertoire: the effective conflict manager understands the consequences of each strategy well enough to

adopt the one that is appropriate to the moment, while giving priority to co-operative and assertive collaboration whenever possible. Whether a party chooses to work co-operatively and assertively towards resolution, or employs one of the other strategies will depend on a number of variables:

- Present-time situational factors and constraints: structure, purpose and goals of the group; the time available, the nature and urgency of the task; the importance of the values underlying the issue; the relative strength, resources and skills of the opposing parties.
- Past experience: individuals enter the arena with memories, emotions, scars and insights from earlier similar situations, all of which result in a predisposition for a particular way of behaving.
- The stage in the process in which the parties find themselves: particular strategies may have a different appeal in the early stages or after some time has elapsed, or a switch to a different strategy might be made as a last resort, or as a surprise tactic.

At this point, more needs to be said about collaboration as the strategy most likely to result in conflict *resolution* as distinct from conflict abatement or suppression. Collaboration holds the same position in the conflict management repertoire as consensus does in the decision-making repertoire: it is the ideal, the process deemed to be the most likely to lead to a satisfactory outcome and to enhance the group's learning and effectiveness. The conflicting parties may work together unassisted, or they may seek the assistance of a facilitator or mediator. In either case, there is a process to be followed, as outlined below:

Step 1 — Preparation

A diagnosis must be made to ascertain whether the issue concerns facts (an information issue), or anticipations (a prediction issue), or values (an ideological issue). Value conflicts are the hardest to resolve; it is important to look for the tangible effects, the precise nature of the impasse, block, or difficult decision to be made. It is helpful to clarify whether the issue concerns content (ideas, problem areas) or behaviour (actions, attitudes). It is also helpful at this stage to spend some time identifying and exploring the *trigger*: the key word or act that precipitated the discussion into an argument or fight. If a review of the process immediately prior to and just subsequent to the outbreak of hostile feelings can pinpoint the trigger, there will be an opportunity for one party or the other to focus on the crucial word or action, perhaps bringing in one of the appropriate problem-solving techniques such as tableaux, graphics, analogy or role-play (see Appendix C). A vital part of each party's preparation is to get clear about what they really want to achieve, how far they are prepared to meet

the other's needs, how they would best like to conduct themselves, and when and where the issue will be broached.

Step 2 — Confrontation

Initiating a *responsible* confrontation means presenting and arguing your case to the other party as a request or proposal expressed as an 'I' statement, including not only the facts but the *thoughts and feelings* which underlie your case. Initiating must be done effectively: it is not a good idea to immediately attack or demean the opposing party — an angry or defensive reaction will be guaranteed. Kurtz and Jones (1973) conclude that it helps if (i) the confronter has a good relationship with the confrontee; (ii) the confronter distinguishes between thoughts, feelings, actions, and facts; (iii) concrete behaviour is addressed rather than emotions; (iv) the confrontee is open and willing to explore himself or herself and the issue; (v) the confrontee responds flexibly to the situation and the confronter's style, rather than in a stereotyped inflexible way; and (vi) both parties are willing to accept some temporary disorganisation.

Step 3 — Listening

Each party must be capable of *active listening*: really hearing what the other is saying, reflecting back to the speaker a paraphrase of what they have said to check for accuracy. Active listening also involves shelving preconceptions, giving the other party plenty of time to put over their point of view, avoiding being defensive or critical, etc.

Step 4 — Collaboration

This step involves the parties in jointly agreeing on a redefinition of the problem or issue, the generation of options and solutions, and the choice of a mutually satisfying solution. Each party must take on the role of *negotiator*. The task is easier if the conflict is *symmetrical*, i.e. the parties are approximately equal in terms of power or status, and much harder if the conflict is *asymmetrical*, with one party in a position of dominance or control. There will be serious problems if either of the collaborators is a coercer, avoider or compromiser in disguise! The less symmetrical the conflict is, or the greater the difficulty being experienced in the collaboration, the greater the need for a third party or mediator. The roles of negotiator and mediator are substantially different, as the guidelines below make clear. The full range of creative problem-solving skills (see Appendix C) available among the members of the group may need to be mobilised.

The negotiator role:

1. Define the conflict as a mutual problem, and pursue goals held in common.
2. Operate from a position of strength (prescribing, proposing and asking, rather than begging, pleading or coaxing); stay respectful, firm and centred, avoid personal attacks, vacillation and lies or misrepresentation.
3. Assess one's own needs accurately, and disclose them.
4. Avoid harassment, harm, or embarrassment of the other party, expressing anger only to get rid of hostile feelings that may interfere with future co-operation.
5. Work to increase empathy and understanding of other's position, feelings, and frame of reference.
6. Try to equalise power, and maintain commitment to a problem-solving orientation.
7. Reduce the other's defensiveness by avoiding threats and communicating flexibility of position.
8. Promote clarity and mutual interdependence; project trustworthiness and predictability.
9. Explore both the similarites and the differences in positions.
10. Seek help from third parties when appropriate.

The mediator role:

1. Focus on process rather than content.
2. Get the parties to define their basic wants and goals, and to state the lengths to which they are prepared to go to achieve those ends.
3. Help determine the relationship, for each party, between ends and means — how far are they reasonably prepared to make concessions without resorting to compromise.
4. Include an exploration of internal conflict, that is, conflicts which exist within an individual or group and which are more than likely significantly contributing to the open conflict.
5. Avoid putting forward proposals or giving advice.
6. Avoid conflict between the mediator and the mediated.

In conclusion, it is possible to construct a general model of the norms in 'the perfect conflict-handling group':

	Members do not try to eliminate, deny or avoid conflict, but view it as healthy, offering opportunities for involvement, growth, change, new insights and creativity.	
Members strive to create a climate of trust and support in which parties in conflict may safely work towards a resolution.		Members value the 'problem-solving' approach rather than the 'win-lose' approach, looking for the creative solution most satisfying to *both* parties, with neither being the loser.
	Members are committed to evaluating and understanding the processes and outcomes of their conflict management performance and to improving their effectiveness in this area.	

For detailed reading on conflict management, see Fisher and Ury, 1983; Johnson and Johnson, 1987, Chaps 6 and 7; Reitz, 1981, Chap. 14; Susskind and Cruikshank, 1987; Wilson and Hanna, 1986, Chap. 10.

Decision-making

It has been my experience to put aside a decision for future pondering. Then one day, fencing a piece of time to face the problem, I have found it already completed, solved, and the verdict taken.
John Steinbeck

Making a decision is generally defined as choosing one of a number of alternative solutions or courses of action. Meaning literally a 'cutting away', it is a *process* whereby proposals are put forward and debated, and then progressively evaluated until a preferred one is selected. Whether the decision involves and is supported by all or only some of the group members is a matter of the decision *method*: consensus, majority vote, decision by authority, and so on. The type of decision refers to the degree to which its implementation will result in significant or substantial change

for the group itself or for its environment. 'Vital' decisions are ones which either implicate the basic values and needs of the group members, or involve commitments of considerable permanence or duration with substantial investments of time, resources or emotional energy. 'Routine' decisions are everyday, repetitive decisions of a less important nature.

The *quality* of a decision refers to its degree of effectiveness, and is measured by a comparison of actual outcomes with anticipated or intended outcomes. Decisions can also be evaluated in the light of the way the group's time and resources were utilised, how many members are committed to implementing it fully, and whether the group's problem-solving ability was enhanced. Intuition, too, plays a part: one can 'sense' a good decision by being aware of one's feelings of satisfaction, relief, or excitement, and of a bad decision by one's feelings of anxiety or a sense of prematurity or incompleteness: what might be called the 'hunch' factor. A knowledge of the indicators of *groupthink*, described below, can alert members to the dangers of a defective process that might lead to a poor-quality decision.

Group decisions are made in a *climate*: some are made coolly and rationally as a result of routine problem-solving, while others are made amidst struggles of emotion, ethics or conscience that embroil the members of a group in sometimes severe levels of pre- and post-decisional conflict. The more vital the interests of the group members, the more likely it is that there will be significant degrees of stress and difficulty. Stress can result from a member's wish to escape from the need to make a difficult choice between alternatives, anxiety about the nature of the commitment that would follow the decision, or apprehension about its anticipated outcomes.

Regardless of whether the climate is calm or stressful, difficulties can arise in the process if the group is lacking in problem-solving skills adequate for the task, or lacks effective mechanisms for dealing with stress and conflict. Conditions which can further reduce decision-making effectiveness include insufficient or false information; group size too small or too large; lack of group maturity; egocentrism and dominance of a few members and non-participation by others; fear of the consequences of making the decision; collusion to avoid disagreement or argument; excessive homogeneity; power differences with low levels of trust; and pressure of time. A diagnostic aid for determining the causes of prolonged indecision is included in Appendix D.

Under certain conditions, groups can prevent effective decisions from being made by the process Irving Janis calls groupthink (Janis, 1971, 1983). He defines it as a '*deterioration of mental efficiency, reality testing and moral judgement*' that he says is associated with highly cohesive but dysfunctional groups, in which norms are present that put concurrence-seeking and morale higher than critical thinking or responsible conflict

management. Such groups bring powerful social pressures to bear whenever a dissident voice begins to raise objections to what appears to be an emerging consensus. A typical norm of this type is that members remain loyal to the group by supporting the policies to which the group is committed even when there are warning signs that these might have unintended results.

Groupthink has been responsible for some catastrophic decisions, the most famous and oft-quoted one being President Kennedy's invasion of Cuba in 1961 at the Bay of Pigs. Within three days, the whole brigade of 1,400 Cuban exiles, who had been aided by the CIA and the US Navy and Air Force, had been killed or taken prisoner. Kennedy, Rusk, McNamara and the other top-ranking policy makers had exhibited all of Janis's eight criteria of groupthink, summarised below:

1. Most or all of the group members share an illusion of being invulnerable that gives them a false sense of reassurance, and makes them take extraordinary risks and ignore warning signals.
2. The group collectively constructs rationalisations in order to discount warnings and negative feedback.
3. Members have an unquestioning belief in the inherent morality of the group.
4. Members hold stereotyped views of those who oppose them, labelling them as evil, weak or stupid. Genuine attempts at negotiation are thus sabotaged in advance.
5. The group applies direct pressure to any dissident voices that question the group's illusions, decisions, rights, etc.
6. A great deal of self-censorship takes place as members with doubts minimise them or set them aside and go with the consensus.
7. Members share an illusion of unanimity as the vocal members simply assume that the silent members are in agreement.
8. Members sometimes appoint themselves as 'mindguards' to protect the group (and particularly the leader) from adverse information and criticism.

The same US government group that was responsible for the Bay of Pigs disaster was faced with an even more dangerous situation only eighteen months later: the Cuban missile crisis. This time however, they negotiated a successful resolution of the crisis with the Soviet Union, in the process demonstrating considerable foresight and skill. As with most groups, their susceptibility to groupthink was variable.

Groupthink can equally well apply in small, everyday work groups. A knowledge of the above indicators can alert members to the dangers of a defective process that might lead to a poor-quality decision. Some of the safeguards against groupthink, recommended by Janis, are:

- each member of the group should take on the role of 'critical evaluator', and at least one member the role of 'devil's advocate';
- group leaders should adopt an impartial stance at the start of a task, to encourage a norm of open enquiry;
- the group should guard against becoming insular: outside groups should be asked to work on the same problem or provide feedback and advice;
- outside experts should be co-opted or invited in;
- when the group is involved with other groups, special attention should be paid to warning signals and other information coming from the latter;
- after reaching a preliminary consensus, a 'second chance' session should be held at which all members air any residual doubts they may have.

With so many potential impediments, it is small wonder that most decisions are made by what Simon (1957) called 'satisficing' (looking for the solution which is just satisfactory or 'good enough') rather than by maximising (getting the best possible result). Even if maximising is an unrealistic goal in all but the most ideal conditions, higher levels of effectiveness will nevertheless be reached if even a few members are conversant with the following:

- the advantages and disadvantages of the common decision-making *methods* used by work groups;
- at least one good descriptive model of the *process* of group decision-making;
- a normative (i.e. prescriptive) model of effective group decision-making *behaviours.*

Decision-making Methods

Method 1 — Consensus

The most effective but also the most time-consuming and demanding of members' skills. Everyone gives their assent in what amounts to a unanimous decision, but there is not necessarily an absence of dissent or doubt. All members can show that they understand the decision, all have had a chance to express how they feel about it, and those who still have reservations nevertheless say publicly and willingly that they will support the decision and commit themselves to its implementation. In a vote, all

hands must be raised to signify assent — if there are any 'no' votes it would be a case of majority rule, not consensus; if there are any abstentions, the decision would have to be agreed or passed 'nem. con.' (*nemine contradicente* = no one against) which again is not consensus. Innovative, creative and high-quality decisions result from the effective practice of consensus-seeking. False consensus, such as groupthink, is the opposite extreme, and dangerous. Assumed consensus, resulting from a failure to obtain an indication of assent and commitment from each member can be equally dangerous. The frustrations and conflicts inherent in true consensus-seeking can lead not only to better decisions but, if effectively managed, to enhanced group skills and relationships. Consensus is unlikely to be achieved if there is an emergency in progress nor in immature groups, and is probably unnecessary for most routine and minor decisions.

Method 2 — Majority Vote

The most commonly used method in Western society, and effective when time is short or the decision is not vital. Its main disadvantage is the tendency to divide the group into winners and losers. The latter may form a potentially disruptive force in the implementation stage unless any feelings of resentment or apathy are confronted and effectively responded to.

Method 3 — Minority Vote

A working group, sub-committee, or task force is often appointed to make the decision on behalf of the group. When the members constitute less than 50 per cent of the total group, the legitimate minority can save time, help to deal with backlogs or contribute special knowledge or resources. A disadvantage of this method is that it does not necessarily ensure commitment of the whole group to implementing the decision.

Method 4 — Decision By Leader After Group Discussion

The group proposes ideas and holds discussions, but the designated leader makes the final decision. The greater the leader's listening skills, the greater will be the benefits of the discussion, but the members may end up feeling powerless or show low commitment; conflicts do not necessarily get aired or resolved.

Method 5 — Decision By Leader Alone

The designated leader makes a decision without consulting the group members at all. In emergencies, or for minor and routine decisions it can be a useful method, but there are widespread disadvantages: group interaction and learning is lost, no commitment is built, conflicts are not worked through, and there is no insurance against later resentment or outright sabotage.

Method 6 — Decision By Expert

The procedure is to select the expert, have him or her consider the issues with or without group discussion, and then make the decision on behalf of the group. Similar in its disadvantages to methods 4 and 5, this has the added difficulty of agreeing on who the expert is, or differentiating between the 'most powerful' and 'most expert' member.

Method 7 — Averaging Or Ranking

Each member is asked for his or her opinion and the results are averaged. Even though discussion is allowed and may be fruitful, there is the disadvantage that the least knowledgeable members may annul the opinions of the most knowledgeable. Commitment to the final decision may be so varied or weak that implementation will be hampered. If rank ordering or rating is used, the group decision is the proposal with the highest aggregate score.

Group members should view the above list as a repertoire from which they may select the one most appropriate for the history and characteristics of their particular group, the task being worked on, and the resources and time available. Also on the theme of matching the method to the situation, and relating that to the amount of member involvement that is desirable, Vroom and Yetton (1973) proposed a leadership-participation model in the form of a *decision tree*. By a process of elimination through a branching set of yes/no questions, a leader can be assisted in judging the amount of participation on the part of the group members that would be appropriate under different sets of conditions. This normative model is somewhat rigid, and provides a contrast to the free-flowing descriptive model which follows.

The Decision-making Process

When the method involves all group members in the pre-decision discussion and debate, there are generally clearly defined phases through which the group passes. Out of these, the decision itself emerges, although the precise moment when this occurs is not apt to be pinpointed. Early theorists (Dewey, 1933; Bales and Strodtbeck, 1951; Simon, 1960) put forward strictly linear models of this process, while more recent thinkers such as Scheidel and Crowell (1964) and Fisher (1980) argued convincingly for 'spirals'. A spiral process can be summarised as follows: one person 'moves' the discussion to a 'higher' level, and others respond with agreeement, disagreement, extension or revision. When the talk solidifies into consensus about that idea, the group 'anchors' that position and introduces a new idea. The spiral process involves both 'reach-testing' forward from an anchored point of agreement and 'back-tracking' when new ideas meet opposition, until a decision acceptable to all members

emerges. Fisher combined linear and spiral thinking in his useful conceptualisation of the pre-decision process as one of 'decision emergence', whereby the group progresses through four distinct phases or levels, as follows.

1. **Orientation:** tentative searching for ideas and directions; opinions and attitudes towards proposals are expressed ambiguously at first, later more confidently as members become less socially inhibited.
2. **Conflict:** members now appear to have made up their minds, and disputes arise as they align themselves with or against the proposals. Members are now more tenacious, providing data to substantiate their views, and engaging in full-fledged debate and argument. Polarisation into 'for' and 'against' coalitions is typical.
3. **Emergence:** as overt conflict decreases, comments unfavourable to the emerging proposals diminish. There is a return to ambiguity, coupled with favourable opinion, as those who earlier voiced dissent now begin their change to assent *via* ambiguity. The emerging decision becomes increasingly more evident as polarisation and dissent dissipate and consensus approaches.
4. **Reinforcement:** conflict and ambiguity have all but vanished as members reinforce each others' favourable opinions and seek consensus and commitment to the preferred outcome. Eventually the announcement of the final decision is urged, signalling the end of the pre-decision phase.

The process that Fisher describes is gradual and cumulative, with occasional backtracking as the group moves towards its decision. Periods of 'skittering' are common: a random and sometimes chaotic series of disconnected suggestions and counter-suggestions, interruptions and distractions. (The word *skittering* originates from the eighteenth-century verb meaning 'to move rapidly and lightly' — it captures the mood of such phases well). Members begin to feel they are wasting time, going round in circles, not getting anywhere. This time of 'muddling through' sometimes conceals a struggle for control (of the group, of the task), sometimes conceals anxiety (about being able to work as a team or cope with the task). So long as this phenomenon does not become too protracted, it can be appreciated as a necessary and potentially creative time, leading up to a turning point towards a more ordered phase of the discussion.

It is a characteristic of group decision-making that decisions are announced or made public in some way: by a declaration or 'statement of intent', a show of hands in a vote, or the signing of a document or contract

for example. This 'symbolic display' signifies the end of the pre-decision stage, and the start of the implementation stage, and is a time to assess the group members' feelings about the quality of the decision and their level of commitment to its implementation. Higgin and Bridger (1965) suggested a simple questionnaire that could be used with a rating scale and be administered (written or verbally) for this purpose in the form of three simple questions:

1. How satisfied are you with the decision just made by the group?
2. How willing are you to carry out the decision ?
3. How satisfied are you with the way the group worked on the task?

Effective Decision-making Behaviours

Having reviewed the methods and process of group decision-making, some prescriptions in the form of a checklist of desirable behaviours and techniques can next be attempted. What follows is a synthesis of work by Hall (1971) on consensus-seeking; by Janis and Mann (1977) on 'vigilant information processing' and the 'decision balance-sheet'; by Janis (1983) on groupthink; and by Yukl (1981) on leadership functions in decision-making groups.

Effective consensus-seeking includes the following prescribed behaviours:

1. Avoid arguing blindly for your own position: present it as clearly and logically as possible, but be sensitive to the reactions of the group each time you do so.
2. Avoid 'win-lose' stalemates and competitive thinking, at the same time withstanding pressures to yield that have no objective or logically sound foundation.
3. Avoid changing your mind merely to achieve agreement and harmony.
4. Avoid conflict-reducing devices such as majority rule, averaging, bargaining and trading, coin-tossing, etc.
5. View differences of opinion as natural and helpful rather than a hindrance.
6. View early agreement as suspect, and ensure that people have arrived at the same conclusion for the same reasons, or at least for compatible reasons.
7. Be positive: assume that your group is capable of excelling at all the foregoing prescriptive behaviours.

The effective decision-maker:

1. Thoroughly canvasses a wide range of alternative courses of action.

2. Surveys the full range of objectives to be fulfilled and the values implicated by the possible choices.
3. Carefully weighs what is known about the costs and risks of negative consequences, as well as positive ones, that could result from each alternative. The 'balance sheet' lists the following:
   (i) the tangible gains and losses for the group;
   (ii) the tangible gains and losses for significant others;
   (iii) group self-approval or disapproval (will we feel proud or ashamed of this choice?);
   (iv) approval or disapproval of the group by others.
4. Intensively searches for new information relevant to further evaluation of the alternative by (i) inviting outside experts to group meetings and asking them to challenge the members' views, (ii) calling for at least one member to play 'devil's advocate'.
5. Correctly assimilates and takes account of any new information or expert judgement even when it does not support the choice initially preferred.
6. Re-examines the positive and negative consequences before making a final choice, perhaps making use of subgroups which meet separately to hammer out differences and express all residual doubts before re-forming to test the degree of consensus and commitment.
7. Makes detailed provisions for implementing the decision, with special attention to contingency plans that might be required if various known or anticipated risks were to materialise.

The effective leader of a decision-making group:

1. Assigns the role of 'critical evaluator' to each member, encouraging the group to give high priority to open airing of objections and doubts.
2. Adopts an impartial stance instead of stating preferences and expectations at the beginning.
3. Encourages members to discuss the group's deliberations with outsiders (within the limits of security or confidentiality) and report back on their responses.
4. Listens attentively and observes nonverbal cues so as to be aware of members' needs, feelings, interactions and conflicts.
5. Models and promotes positive 'task and maintenance' behaviours: initiating, clarifying, process analysing, standard setting, summarising, gatekeeping and supporting.
6. Prevents the group making hasty decisions as a result of 'concurrence-seeking', a desire to agree regardless of consequences

such as groupthink: the very antithesis of true consensus-seeking.

In conclusion, it is possible to construct a general model of the norms in 'the perfect decision-making group:

	Communication is two-way, and the open and accurate expression of both ideas and feelings are emphasised. Participation and leadership are distributed among members.	
Controversy and conflict are seen as positive opportunities for involvement and individual and group learning, leading to better quality decisions.		Creativity, interpersonal effectiveness and self-realisation are encouraged. Members evaluate the effectiveness of the group and are committed to improving its functioning.
	Cohesion and consensus are sought through high levels of inclusion, acceptance, affection, trust and support, with respect for the dissenting voice. 'Unanimity without groupthink' is the motto.	

For detailed reading on decision-making, see Fisher, 1980; Johnson, 1977, Chap. 6; Johnson and Johnson, 1987, Chap. 3; Yukl, 1981. Chap. 9.

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