

Chapter 18

Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making

- Socio-psychological approach
- Semiotic traditions?

Overview

- Groups make high-quality decisions when members fulfill four requisite functions: (1) problem analysis, (2) goal setting, (3) identification of alternatives, and (4) evaluation of positive and negative consequences. Most group communication disrupts progress toward accomplishing these functional tasks, but counteractive communication can bring people back to rational inquiry.

Introduction

- Randy Hirokawa and Dennis Gouran believe that group interaction has a positive effect on decision-making.
- **Hirokawa** speaks of quality solutions; **Gouran** refers to appropriate decisions.
- The functional perspective illustrates the wisdom of joint interaction.

Four Functions for Effective Decision Making

- Hirokawa and Gouran draw on the analogy between biological systems and small groups.
 - o Group decision-making must fulfill four task requirements to reach a high-quality decision.
 - o These tasks are requisite functions of effective decision-making—hence the functional perspective label.
- 1. Function 1: Analysis of the Problem
 - o Group members must take a realistic look at current conditions.
 - o Misunderstandings of situations are compounded when group members make their final decision.
 - o **The clearest example of faulty analysis is a failure to recognize a potential threat.**
 - o Group members must determine the nature, extent, and probable cause(s) of the problem.
 - o (Heavens to Murgatroyd, this was just ONE..)
- 2. Function 2: Goal Setting
 - o A group needs to establish criteria for judging proposed solutions.
 - o Without such criteria, it is likely that the decision will be driven by politics rather than reason.
- 3. Function 3: Identification of Alternatives
- 4. Function 4: evaluation of Positive and Negative Characteristics
 - o Some group tasks have a positive bias—spotting the favorable characteristics of alternative choices is more important than identifying negative qualities

- o Other group tasks have a negative bias— the unattractive characteristics of choice options carry more weight than the positive attributes

Prioritizing the Functions

- **No single function is inherently more central than the others**
- As long as a group covers all four functions, the route taken is not the key issue.
- ...Nonetheless, groups that successfully resolve particularly tough problems often take a **common decision-making** path: problem analysis, goal setting, identifying alternatives, and evaluating the positive and negative characteristics.

The Role of Communications in Fulfilling the Functions

- Traditional wisdom suggests that **talk is the conduit through which information travels between participants.**
 - o Verbal interaction makes it possible for members to distribute and pool information, catch and remedy errors, and influence each other.
 - o Ivan Steiner claimed that actual group productivity equals potential productivity minus losses due to processes.
 - o **Communication is best when it does not obstruct or distort the free flow of ideas...**

Communication in Decision-Making

- Hirokawa and Gouran outline three types of communication in decision-making groups.
 - o **Promotive**—interaction that calls attention to one of the four decision-making functions.
 - o **Disruptive**—interaction that detracts from the group's ability to achieve the four task functions.
 - o **Counteractive**—interaction that refocuses the group.

FOICS

- Since most communication disrupts, effective group decision-making depends upon counteractive influence.
- Hirokawa's **Function-Oriented Interaction Coding System (FOICS)** classifies each functional utterance for analysis.
 - o Using FOICS, raters determine which of the four functions an utterance addresses.
 - o They also consider whether the utterance facilitates or inhibits the group's focus on the function.
 - o Coding decisions is fraught with difficulty, and Hirokawa continues to refine the methodology.

Implications of Functional Perspective

- In the laboratory, Hirokawa finds that the functional perspective accounts for over **60 percent of the total variance in group performance.**
- Hirokawa's assistants used the FOICS to analyze the role of communication within the groups and judged how well each group met the requisite functions (except identifying alternatives).

- Yet the functional perspective will be unable to forge a stronger connection between communication and good group decisions until it can isolate specific comments that move a group along its path.
 - o Raters could judge the quantity but not the quality of statements.
 - o **Hirokawa believes group decision-making performance is dependent more on quality than quantity of utterances.**

Challenge...

- The crucial challenge for group researchers is to discover precisely when a group's performance of functional requisites yields effective group decisions and when it does not.

Practical Advice for Group Decision Making

- Be skeptical of personal opinions.
 - o Groups often abandon the rational path due to the persuasive efforts of other self-assured group members.
 - o Unsupported intuition is untrustworthy.
- Follow John Dewey's six-step process of reflective thinking, which parallels a doctor's treatment regimen.
 - o Recognize symptoms of illness.
 - o Diagnose the cause of the ailment.
 - o Establish criteria for wellness
 - o Consider possible remedies.
 - o Test to determine which solutions will work.
 - o Implement or prescribe the best solution.

Ethical Reflection: Habermas' Discourse Ethics

- Jürgen Habermas suggests a rational group process through which people can determine right from wrong.
- Being ethical means being accountable.
- People in a given culture or community can agree on the good they want to accomplish and over time build up wisdom on how to achieve it.
- The person who performed an act must be prepared to discuss what he or she did and why he or she did it in an open forum.
- He imagined an ideal speech situation where participants were free to listen to reason and speak their minds without fear of constraint or control.
- Three requirements must be met:
 - o Requirement of access for all affected parties
 - o Requirement of argument to figure out the common good
 - o Requirement of justification or universal application

Critique: Is Rationality Overrated?

- Although the functional perspective is one of the three leading theories in small group communication, its exclusive focus on rationality may cause mixed experimental results.
- The FOICS method all but ignores comments about relationships inside and outside the group.