The Handbook for Working with **Difficult Groups**

How They Are Difficult, Why They Are Difficult and What You Can Do About It

edited by Sandy Schuman

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PREFACE

"Isn't this the most difficult group you've ever worked with?" a group member asked earnestly. As a group facilitator, I have heard this question—in one form or another—many times. For years I responded by downplaying or outright denying the group's difficulty. "Oh, this group isn't so difficult; it's not that unusual." "Really?" the group member responded. "I thought this was a really bad group!" and the eagerness and energy that came with the initial question would fade.

After many such exchanges, I finally realized two things. First, from my perspective the group did not seem unusual or difficult, but from the perspective of its members, it was. Second, instead of hearing me deny their reality, these group members wanted me to acknowledge that their group was indeed difficult, provide some insight into why it was difficult, and suggest what they could do about it.

When I finally caught on to the meaning of this question, I started responding differently. Instead of negating people's sense of the group's difficulty, I replied, "That's an interesting question! What makes this group difficult from your perspective?" The responses I heard were often illuminating, and they helped me appreciate the many ways in which groups can be experienced as difficult. And indeed, even for the most experienced and wise group members, leaders, and facilitators, there are "difficult groups."

This leads to an important element in how we think about our work with groups: rather than think in terms of *how to work with difficult groups,* the approach we take in this book is to think in terms of *what makes working with groups difficult.* That is to say, a particular group is not innately difficult; rather, there are various things that make working with the group difficult. Wouldn't it be useful if we had a way of thinking systematically about all the ways in which working with a group might be difficult? That would provide a basis for understanding *why* working with the group is difficult and then *what* you could do about it.

In the Introduction, John Rohrbaugh and I present a conceptual framework for thinking about groups and how they might be effective or ineffective. In brief, the framework presents three high-level factors that affect group performance: *context, structure,* and *process.* In addition, it adopts four perspectives on group performance: *relational*, *political*, *rational,* and *empirical.* These factors and perspectives are integrated to result in twelve conditions. The framework was presented to prospective authors in the "call for chapters" that initiated this book. I asked the authors to locate their chapters within this framework, and I appreciate their willingness to work with it. However, the authors were not limited to addressing one factor, perspective, or condition. Rather, most of the chapters address multiple parts of the framework, as should be expected when dealing with real groups. The framework is intended as an intellectual tool for helping you think about the difficulties that groups encounter, not as a way to categorize groups.

The value of this structure to you is—I hope—twofold. First, *any structure* is valuable if it helps you make sense of the content of the book. Second, the structure itself is *informative.* It provides a framework for thinking about the full range of issues, not just those presented in the book, but in the full domain of concern—group effectiveness.

But why *this* structure? As we say in the Introduction, "Rather than provide a long list or an all-too-simplistic categorization of the ways in which working with groups can be difficult, we would like to present a framework for thinking about groups and what makes them effective or ineffective." Because it is based on several decades of research and thinking about organizational and group effectiveness, the framework is time tested and able to accommodate virtually any group-related topic and place it in the context of others. If you are already familiar with the three factors and four perspectives, their juxtaposition will not present a great challenge. If you are encountering them for the first time, I hope you can make sense of our presentation and see how the framework applies in each of the chapters and in your everyday work.

In addition, I asked the authors to address each of the following questions.

How the group is difficult: a brief story that presents a group and the observable phenomena that reflect the group's difficulty

Why the group is difficult: an exploration of the underlying causes of the difficulty

What you can do: what you as a group facilitator, leader, or member can do to help the group

Initially, I thought I would use the framework to order the chapters in the table of contents but, as I noted earlier, most of the chapters address multiple aspects of the framework, so this didn't work. However, I noticed that most of the chapters were in predominantly intragroup settings (Chapters One through Nine), a few addressed both intra- and intergroup settings (Chapters Ten through Twelve), and a few addressed intergroup settings (Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen). In addition, a number of chapters dealt directly with the roles of leadership and facilitation (Chapters Sixteen through Twenty). I arranged the chapters in this order, but I did not want to reinforce these categories by labeling these as formal parts of the book.

As the third in a series of edited collections sponsored by the International Association of Facilitators (IAF), the idea and planning for this book emerged from the efforts of Tammy Adams, then IAF's strategic initiative coordinator for communications and publications; Betty Kjellberg, then IAF's executive director; and Kathe Sweeney, senior editor at Jossey-Bass/Wiley. Without them, this book would never have been conceived, much less implemented. Fifty-three individuals thoughtfully reviewed and evaluated the chapter proposals that were submitted in response to the call for chapters. The Center for Policy Research at the University at Albany provided support throughout, with Paul Dickson playing a key role in managing the chapter review process. John Rohrbaugh's contributions to the Introduction, and his advice throughout my editorial work, were invaluable. More than I can say, I am indebted to the thirty-seven authors who contributed to this volume, responded thoughtfully and graciously to my comments, made multiple revisions, and saw through the details of bringing this book to publication. Although I hope that everyone has gained something through this process, no one has gained more from these interactions than I.

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Working with Difficult Groups: A Conceptual Framework

Sandor Schuman and John Rohrbaugh

Working with groups can be difficult in innumerable ways, but working without groups is nearly impossible. The aim of this book is to help your working with difficult groups become easier. Indeed, instead of thinking in terms of difficult groups, we would rather think in terms of what makes working with groups difficult and, for that matter, what makes working with groups effective. Rather than provide a long list or an all-too-simplistic categorization of the ways in which working with groups can be difficult, we would like to present a framework for thinking about groups and what makes them effective or ineffective. This framework is not offered as definitive, but it is nonetheless useful for organizing the book. Other recent frameworks are highly instructive as well (see, for example, Rousseau, Aube, & Savoic, 2006).

Three factors (context, structure, and process) and four perspectives (relational, empirical, political, and rational) provide the organizing framework for *Working with Difficult Groups.*

Each chapter of the book focuses on aspects of one or more of the factors or perspectives. In this way, while each chapter addresses particular aspects that make working with groups difficult, the book as a whole presents an integrated view of group effectiveness and ineffectiveness. The following sections describe this framework more fully.

THREE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO GROUP PERFORMANCE

For nearly fifty years, effectiveness or ineffectiveness of group performance has been linked in both theory and research to at least three high-order factors: context, structure, and process (McGrath, 1964; Gladstein, 1984; Schwarz, 2002), as illustrated in Table I.1. A group's *context* takes into account environmental variables and can be characterized by the multifaceted external circumstances that both support and constrain collaboration. A group's *structure* reflects the variables of design and is evidenced by its many formal and informal aspects. A group's *process* derives from the confluence of interaction variables and subsumes a wide variety of behaviors pertaining to exchanges before, during, and after meetings. A group may be difficult due to some particular attribute (or combination of attributes) of its context, structure, or process.

Table I.1
Three Higher-Order Factors of Group Performance

	Context	Structure	Process
McGrath (1964)	Environment-level factors	Group-level factors	Group interaction process
Gladstein (1984)	Organizational resources and structure	Group composition and structure	Group process
Schwarz (2002)	Group context	Group structure	Group process

Context

All external variables that may directly or indirectly affect a group's performance can be considered its *context.* These environmental factors may be described as (but not limited to) physical, social, economic, political, or organizational. In some ways, the context of a group can be beneficent and enhance its performance; in other ways, its environment can be hostile or even catastrophic in character, making any group achievement unlikely, perhaps impossible. Many groups function with considerable ignorance of the full context in which they are working, except for only the most apparent variables. As a result, they may fail to take advantage of substantial resources readily available to them, or to prepare adequately for emergent obstacles that eventually thwart them.

Resource dependence theory instructs groups to devote considerable attention to understanding the key aspects of their context and to making a concerted effort to communicate with external individuals and groups. Such strategic alliances initially may seem beyond the agenda of the group, but building successful networks of partners can serve to accumulate additional resources that may prove essential to positive outcomes. Furthermore, strong coalitions reduce the vulnerability of any one group standing alone.

Structure

Even groups that have come together organically and developed unintentionally with no oversight of membership and no succession of leadership do have *structure*—that is, a distinctive design. To describe a group's design does not imply that there was a designer but merely that a pattern of characteristics is apparent. A simple head count at each meeting can be an indicator of group size, which is a key structural variable; group size, as is true of any aspect of group design, need not be fixed but can vary over time. A group with too many participants (or too few) or a group lacking members' relevant knowledge or skills may be challenged in accomplishing its goals. In addition to its size and composition, a group's structure includes many other aspects, such as its communication patterns, norms, and roles.

A group's goals and objectives are often considered part of its structure as well, because the extent to which they are understood, accepted (shared), and valued will affect group outcomes. However, tasks officially assigned to a group may differ from the tasks that engage the efforts of its members. This is an important distinction. *Formal* structure refers to any aspect of design that has been planned for (and, perhaps, imposed on) a group; *emergent* structure refers to the distinctive pattern of group characteristics that actually are observed over time. We should not be surprised if the formal leadership structure and the emergent leadership structure of a group are not the same. In fact, the divergence of formal structure and emergent structure can be a potential impediment (or, alternatively, the essential key) to a group's success.

Process

Group interaction exhibits a large variety of facets of patterned verbal and nonverbal behavior. Exchanges between group members have been roughly categorized as focused on the task or focused on the group, a long-standing and useful but simplistic bifurcation. To be effective, of course, members need to work constructively toward accomplishing their objectives, but they also need to ensure that their group remains a cohesive collectivity. If an excessive task orientation begins to fragment the group or if meeting the socioemotional needs of individuals largely competes with goal achievement, failure can be imminent. How a group balances its task orientation and its social orientation is an important aspect of its process.

Group conflict, of course, is not limited to the tension between task and socioemotional interests. Conflicts of opinion, conflicts of value, and conflicts of interest (to name only a few) emerge in any group process. As has been well established in the formal study of groups, diversity (or heterogeneity) of membership can contribute positively to task performance. Groups composed of highly similar members may "get along" well, but typically do not have a large enough pool of abilities, experiences, skills, and perspectives to respond effectively to complex problems. Whereas a group's composition is an aspect of its structure, the use of tools and techniques to enable conflict to emerge and be used constructively is a key element of its process.

FOUR PERSPECTIVES ON GROUP EFFECTIVENESS: THE COMPETING VALUES APPROACH

Contemporary standards for both organization and group performance were well anticipated by the theory-building work of the sociologist Talcott Parsons (1959; Hare, 1976). Parsons proposed that there are four key functions of any collectivity (or system of action): pattern maintenance, integration, adaptation, and goal attainment. The essential nature of these four functions—and their appropriate balance—has been the emphasis of the Competing Values Approach (CVA) to organizational analysis (Quinn & Rohrbaugh, 1983; Rohrbaugh, 1983; Belasen, 2008). (An introduction to the CVA is given in the appendix to this chapter.) At the group level in particular, the CVA has been used to identify four domains of collective performance that parallel Parsons' functions: relational, empirical, political, and rational (Rohrbaugh, 2005).

Relational Perspective

> *We are all dependent on one another, every soul of us on earth.*
>
> —George Bernard Shaw (1913/2008, p. 119)

The relational perspective places emphasis on achieving the pattern maintenance function and focuses on full participation in meetings, with open expression of individual feelings and sentiments. Extended discussion and debate about conflicting concerns should lead to collective agreement on a mutually satisfactory solution. Such team building would increase the likelihood of support for any solution during implementation. This very interpersonally oriented perspective is dominant in the field of organization development.

For example, when group members are divided in their values and have conflicting interests, it is important that the conditions under which they are collaborating fully support their joint efforts. In addition to such incentives that would motivate collective work, group composition should be characterized by such attributes as sincerity and openness to others' views so that trust can be encouraged. Groups that are skillful in expressing and using their conflicts constructively will benefit substantially over time.

Empirical Perspective

> *A patient pursuit of facts, and cautious combination and comparison of them, is the drudgery to which man is subjected by his Maker, if he wishes to attain sure knowledge.*
>
> —Thomas Jefferson (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1903–04, vol. 2, p. 97)

Group observers who take an empirical perspective place emphasis on achieving the integration function and stress the importance of documentation. They pay particular attention to the ways in which groups secure and share relevant information and develop or rely on comprehensive databases to support problem solving. Proponents of this perspective, typically trained in the physical and social sciences (especially management information systems) believe that, to be effective, group deliberation should allow thorough use of evidence and full accountability.

In addition to the availability of external information, group composition should be characterized by an appropriate pool of necessary skills, abilities, and expertise to address the focal issues. Furthermore, communication channels must remain open, so that group members can better inform and learn from each other. From the empirical perspective, widening communication beyond single channels and specific occasions (for example, beyond only spoken communication during face-to-face meetings) will enhance group achievement.

Political Perspective

It is not necessary to change. Survival is not mandatory.

—W. Edwards Deming

The political perspective emphasizes the adaptation function and takes the view that group flexibility and creativity are the paramount process attributes. One indication of adaptability is the extent to which the group is attuned to shifts in the nature of the problem, accordingly altering its focus and approach to finding solutions. The search for legitimacy—the acceptability of solutions to outside stakeholders who are not immediate participants but whose interests potentially are affected by the group deliberations—would be notable through a fully responsive, dynamic process.

From the political perspective, a group is credited rather than shamed by explicitly taking into consideration how its standing in the eyes of outside interests is maintained or enhanced. An effective group is one that works to increase its own authority and influence. Over time, such a group improves its readiness to adjust both structure and process to better position itself in the ongoing competition for resources, especially external financial support.

Rational Perspective

> *Our plans miscarry because they have no aim. When a man does not know what harbor he is aiming for, no wind is the right wind.*
>
> —Marcus Annaeus Seneca (Cook, 1999, p. 352)

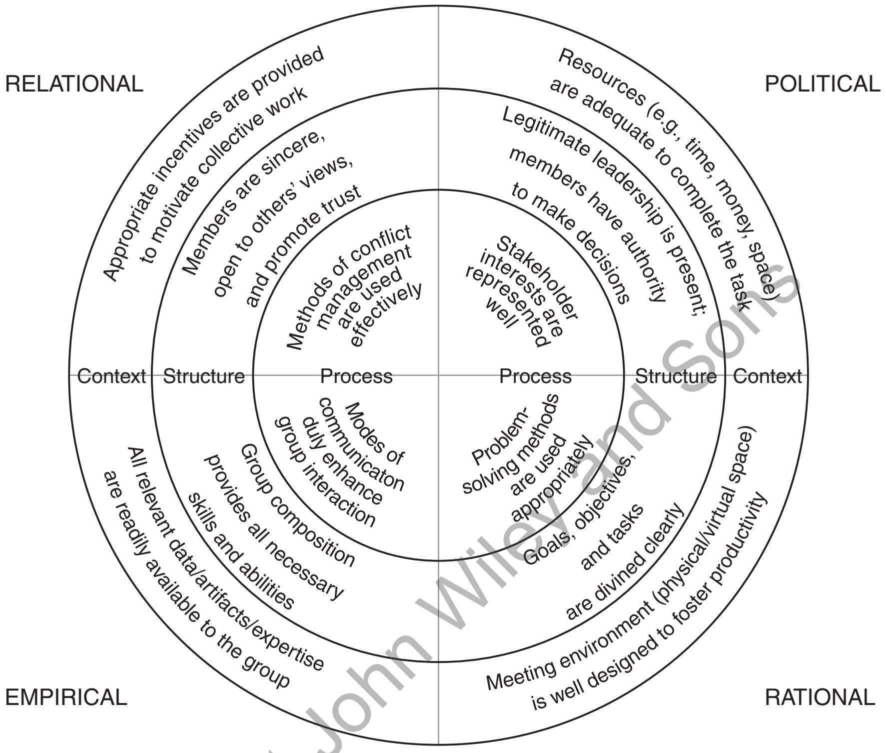
The priority of clear thinking as the primary ingredient for successful group performance is the hallmark of the rational perspective, which emphasizes the goal attainment function. From this very task-oriented approach (particularly common in management science and operations research), groups should be directed by explicit statement and understanding of their primary goals and objectives. Methods that assist group members to be more efficient planners are valued for improving the coherency and consistency of decision making.

For example, rational planning includes thorough consideration of the physical aspects of face-to-face meetings. Collaboration is enhanced when group members are comfortably seated in well-lighted, temperature-controlled, appropriately furnished and equipped rooms, well protected from the distractions of hour-to-hour organizational life. Prerequisites for virtual meetings are adequate hardware and software that are readily available to—and easily used by—participants. Ensuring optimal conditions for the most efficient use of resources, including the investment of everyone's time and attention, is paramount.

TWELVE CONDITIONS THAT CAN SUPPORT OR UNDERMINE GROUP EFFECTIVENESS

Any aspect of a group's context, structure, or process might have profound consequences for its performance. These aspects can be categorized as relational, empirical, political, or rational in nature. As shown in Figure I.1, these factors and perspectives can be juxtaposed. Such a juxtaposition produces not

Figure I.1
A Conceptual Framework for Working with Difficult Groups



an exhaustive laundry list of conditions but rather a relatively concise framework of twelve conditions that can either support or undermine group effectiveness. The framework is further elaborated in Table I.2, with specific examples of each of the twelve key conditions having particular influence on a group's level of accomplishment. Exhibit I.1 provides an additional example showing how the Competing Values Framework can be used to assess the need for an outside facilitator—that is, one who is not a member of the group or organization.

Table I.2
Conditions That Can Support or Undermine Group Effectiveness

	Context		Structure		Process	
	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness
Relational	Appropriate incentives are provided to motivate collective work.	When participants are not extrinsically and/or intrinsically engaged in the group effort, weak cohesion can undermine cooperative achievements.	Members are sincere, open to others' views, and promote trust.	Destructive conflicts result from personal animosities that emerge in groups composed of disrespectful, defensive, and/or deceitful participants.	Methods of conflict management are used effectively.	Groups without tools for constructive use of conflict cannot take advantage of (and may avoid) significant disagreements that can lead to synergistic solutions.
Empirical	All relevant data/artifacts/expertise are readily available to the group.	A group will fail if members are ignorant about critical aspects of their work due to restrictions on their access to external records, reports, and other forms of useful information.	Group composition provides all necessary skills and abilities.	When participants are not adequately prepared to deal with the difficult cognitive and/or physical challenges that their group is facing, task performance will suffer.	Modes of communication duly enhance group interaction.	Faulty communication, including inappropriate, confusing, and often unavailable channels, will limit necessary exchanges of ideas and information and hinder a shared understanding of problems and solutions.

(*Continued*)

Table I.2

(*Continued*)

	Context		Structure		Process	
	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness	Support Effectiveness	Undermine Effectiveness
Political	Resources (e.g., time, money, space) are adequate to complete the task.	When groups are "short-changed" on requisite resources essential to eventual success, it is unreasonable to expect any outcome other than failure.	Legitimate leadership is present, and members have authority to make decisions.	Powerless groups have difficulty organizing themselves and even greater trouble in accomplishing tasks in a timely and consensual manner.	Stakeholder interests are represented well.	Although excluding the concerns of unrepresented parties will reduce the complexity of most problems that groups confront, beyond near-term advantages are long-run disasters.
Rational	The Meeting environment (physical and virtual space) is well designed to foster productivity.	A room that is too hot or too cold, noise, hard chairs, no writing surface, faulty equipment, bad coffee, distractions, too confined a space, unreadable projection, interruptions, difficult-to-learn technology, and so on will all impede effectiveness	Goals, objectives, and tasks are defined clearly.	Group members who do not understand their roles and responsibilities cannot be expected to meet performance expectations that have not been made explicit.	Problem-solving methods are used appropriately.	In the absence of even the most basic tools and techniques employed by well-skilled facilitators, groups will founder when faced with interpersonal challenges and demanding tasks.