Intervention Strategies

By practicing and persistently applying intervention strategies, organization leaders and members can improve their group's effectiveness and promote greater participation.

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Have you ever been in a situation where you could see a problem in your group, but couldn't get anyone else to do anything about it? For example, have you ever been disturbed by the lack of participation by your organization's members, but when you bring it up, no one else thinks it's a problem? Or have you ever watched an individual alienate himself from the group but not been able to help him operate more effectively? Or have you ever been frustrated about your group's members' lack of follow through, but not known how to improve their track record? These are common situations in-groups, and if there were time or space, the list could go on indefinitely!

It's not hopeless, though. There are strategies an organization leader can use (or any member who is willing to initiate them) to solve typical "process" problems, and deal with the ways people interact within a group. Process analysis looks at the way a group makes a decision, not what decision it makes. It involves the ways people communicate, participate, fight, compromise, plan, coordinate, learn from their mistakes, and accomplish goals in groups. How each of these interactions happens can lead to a satisfying group experience or can drive out members due to sheer frustration. When your group's frustration level increases, you have a process problem on your hands. The following interventions can help you bring problems to the attention of the group, create opportunities for the group to talk about and solve the problems, and decrease frustration levels at the same time.

The art of intervention

So what is intervention? An intervention is any action initiated in hopes of creating a more positive way for the group to interact. Interventions are also defined in terms of the outcomes they create. As a result of any intervention, the following changes could take place.

1. The group or individual members (whoever is being targeted for the intervention) will increase their ownership of the problem, and take responsibility for creating change.
2. The leader's concern that he or she is the sole person trying to solve this problem will be alleviated.
3. Progress will be made toward solving the "process" problem, and change will be initiated by more members of the group or by the individual who is targeted in the intervention.
4. The group (or the individual) will learn how to diagnose and solve "process" problems and will be able to transfer and apply these skills to future situations. The group will learn how to learn.

5. The leaders' role will shift from telling people what to do or what to change to teaching them to operate more effectively.

Interventions can be directed toward one individual in the group, a few individuals in the group, or the total group. For example, if one person is dominating meetings, then the leader could target that individual with an intervention. If there are three members out of 12 on the executive board who hinder productive meetings by talking among themselves, then an intervention could be directed at those people. If the group as a whole is sending more time in endless discussion than in accomplishing a task, then an intervention could be targeted at the entire group.

Initiating an intervention, with the purpose of creating change in an organization or individual, is an inexact science. Here, then, are a few words of wisdom for people who initiate interventions.

1. If one intervention does not achieve the desired outcome, try another.
2. Every group has its own personality. What works with one group will not necessarily work with another.
3. Groups move through different stages. An intervention that didn't work at one stage of group development may work at another stage (and vice-versa).
4. People also grow and change. An intervention that worked well once may not work again if an individual has moved into a different stage of development (and again, vice-versa).
5. Practice helps. Do not expect that these interventions will work perfectly the first time you try them. Initiating interventions is a skill. A skill is developed as a result of practice over time and application in a variety of situations.

There are four major areas of an organization where you can intervene. The are:

- Through the agenda for a meeting;
- Through gathering and sharing of data or observations;
- Through coaching or counseling individuals or the group;
- Through structural changes in the organizations.

Each major area has a variety of specific strategies or techniques that can be used to achieve the desired outcomes. The are of intervention and the type of strategy you use will depend on your comfort level with the technique, the stage the group is in, and other information you have about the situation. Furthermore, each intervention carries a different level of intensity. Always begin with a gentle intervention. "Gentle interventions, if they are clear, overcome rigid resistances" (Heider, 1985). If the gentle intervention doesn't work, try another. Use harsh interventions only when all else fails.

With those thoughts in mind, let's look at the four areas of intervention and how you can implement them.

Agenda development

The development of a meeting agenda is one of the simplest and most direct interventions, for two reasons. The first is that meetings are the "Elmer's Glue" that hold your organization together. Meetings gather your members together in one place for the purpose of sharing information, making decisions, reporting on progress and solving problems. The second reason is that the agenda is the "game plan" that sets up what will be covered at the meetings. If you presently don't have an agenda for your meetings, you may be having trouble getting everything covered, or the meetings may take too long. If so, the first intervention you can try is developing agendas for your future meetings.

There are several ways to use the agenda to solve process problems in a group.

1. **Ask questions in the agenda that direct attention to interpersonal issues Affecting the effectiveness of the group.** Usually, meetings concentrate on getting things done. That focus can lead to a lack of attention on "how" you get things done. For example, the way you make decisions, communicate with each other, handle controversy, set goals, delegate tasks, participate, trust each other, support each other, and work through conflicts are all process issues. This first technique can take the form of a direct question on the agenda about a specific "process" problem affecting the group. For example, you might use one or more of the following questions, depending on the problem.
    a) What problems or concerns are you having in your position right now?
    b) What factors are hindering your ability to accomplish your job?
    c) How does each of us want to receive feedback (both positive and negative)?
    d) How can we work through the conflict that is hurting our group right now?
    e) What motivates you? What decreases your motivation?

    The questions placed on the agenda should relate to the issue hindering the group. They should start with a "how" or "what" rather than a "why." Why questions usually increase defensiveness of the members instead of getting them to focus on solving the problem.
2. **Add a regular process-analysis period to the agenda.** Set aside an amount of time at the end of every meeting to analyze how the meeting went or how the organization is doing. This creates a legitimate time to gather information about how the group is functioning. It gives the organization an opportunity to learn about itself and to discover what helps or hinders the accomplishments of its goals.
3. **Review the present agenda and test it for appropriateness in the group.** If you sense a problem with the agenda, or an issue that group members want to bring up, ask the group to add to or adjust the agenda. This gives them the opportunity to change how much time is spent on each item, the order of items, or the content of the meeting.
4. **Have meetings and agendas that are devoted solely to interpersonal process.** Examples might be team building, conflict resolution, or clarifying role expectations. This intervention is sometimes needed because organizations go through cycles. One cycle is called the maintenance cycle, a period when an organization has its routine down, and members are "maintaining" the organization. During this cycle, the main purpose of meetings is to share information. The other cycle is when the organization is going through change. During the change cycle, the purposes of meetings shift to problem solving, planning, and interpersonal issues (e.g., developing trust, conflict resolution, decision making processes, etc.) If your organization is in the change cycle, then this intervention is particularly appropriate.
5. **Have conceptual inputs (like mini-lectures or theory memos) on process topics (like decision making models, dealing with controversy, or negotiating win-win conflict resolutions) on the agenda.** This strategy gives the group members information and training on a variety of concepts. It helps them make sense of what they are experiencing. Often an individual will be more receptive to changing her behavior if she understands how it will help.

6. **Increase the information on the agenda.** Adjust the agenda to include information that will help facilitate action on agenda items. For example, if a decision needs to be made, include on the agenda the information needed to reach a conclusion: for example, the amount of money or resources needed to implement a decision, or what action is required.

Additional information can also serve as a training tool. For instance, committee members may not know how to compose a committee report. You can train them by listing on the agenda the questions they need to answer on their reports and then handing out the agenda in advance so that they can prepare. You might include questions like "How successful was your event?" "What was the attendance?" "What problems or concerns do you have about your committee?"

Gathering and sharing data or observations

I have often noticed that groups make very good decisions as long as they have the necessary information. If their information is incomplete, their decision will reflect that lack. In this intervention, the job of the change agent (the person initiating the intervention) is to increase the amount and type of information available to the group.

1. **Send out a questionnaire or have people respond to a topic of concern.** Then collate the information and present it to the group for their reactions. Sample survey questions could be "What could we do to increase your current level of satisfaction at work, or in this organization?" "What could we do to increase your level of satisfaction?" "What is causing problems for you right now?" "How could this be handled better?" After you present the information to the group, facilitate a discussion about what people said in the survey results.

2. **Individually interview the members of the group (or have others do it) about a topic of concern or about the general operation of the group.** The content is confidential by individual, but the results (the collated answers) are shared with the whole group. Topics might be the quality of meetings, how people are working together, what people think the problems or concerns are right now in the organization, how to handle work schedules, or what the minimum standards of quality should be on a particular task.

3. **Have a process observer watch your meeting and give feedback to whole group at the end of the meeting.** This person would watch how often people participate, who talks to whom, or how well the group concentrated on the task. Then, the individual shares this information without using value-laden words, so that he or she doesn't leave people with a feeling of having been judged. After the information is shared, group members respond with their thoughts about the accuracy of the observations, whether they like or disliked the information, and how they may want to change the next meeting so it runs more efficiently.

4. **Set aside a separate time to give feedback to individuals about their behavior in the group.** Feedback works best if the person needing it solicits it. Try to create a sense in your organization that it is good to ask for reactions and feedback. If you model this, others will follow. Also, give only as much feedback as the person can use now. Often we overload people, and they respond by becoming unreceptive. A person will change only if he or she remains open enough to actually hear what you say. Part of giving feedback is sharing your thoughts and information; the other part is managing resistance so that the person remains open.

5. **Increase the amount of immediate feedback to individuals after meetings**

regarding their behavior in the meeting. When a person does something well, applaud them. Don't pick on the one part that they missed and point it out. When a person does something a little bit wrong, ignore it: it will go away. On the other hand, when a person does something very wrong, give them constructive feedback. Don't ignore it and hope it will go away. Furthermore, the sooner after the action you praise or reprimand, the more impact it will have.

6. **Share written material with members of the group to increase their under standing of a concept that would help them become more effective.** This could be a handout on communication skills, a memo that explains a theory or concept, or a newsletter.

7. **Have other members give feedback to the individual on ho inappropriate behavior affects them.** If Sally won't listen or believe you, and yet you know that others feel the same way you do, get them to share their reactions with Sally. This lets Sally realize that your feedback isn't just your problem or perspective, but that others feel that way as well.

Coach or counsel individuals or groups

Sometimes individuals or groups need to be developed in order to accomplish their jobs. This requires providing information and training. The following interventions help develop an individual's personal skills and knowledge of how to do the job.

1. **Set up individual meetings with your group members to help develop Plans, share information, create strategies, and enhance personal skills.** If you set up this system before a conflict or problem occurs, then individual meetings can be used as a forum to solve problems in a natural way. If no natural channel is in place for individuals to receive training and feedback, then when you do schedule a special meeting, members interpret it with "Oh, no…I'm in trouble." Set on a regular schedule, meetings have a positive connotation instead of a negative one, and the past positive encounters help keep members open and actively working toward change.

2. **Use the "recommend, and if approved, act" concept.** If one of your members asks you to make a decision for him, resist the temptation to do it. Instead ask him to recommend what he thinks should happen. You then create a situation where the individual learns to make decisions rather than depending on you to do it for him. If he comes up with the wrong answer, help him see why it won't work and then ask him to try another recommendation. Only approve action (by the individual) after the recommendation passes the acid test of "not being the 'wrong' answer." This technique is called coaching, and it helps people realize that you expect them to learn to think for themselves.

3. **Hold up a mirror of their actions and get their reactions.** Anytime you see something that decreases the effectiveness of an individual or group, take time to describe their actions to them. This feedback needs to be a clear description of their actions without judgement or evaluation. The description acts like a mirror and lets Bill see his behavior as others see it. You can then ask Bill for his reaction or response to what he sees. If he doesn't like what he sees and wants to change, offer to help using one of the other intervention strategies.

4. **Have an individual actively observe or work with another to see how they do things.** Have Mary identify a person who is very accomplished in a skill she wants to learn. Have her watch that person to see how he accomplishes the skill. Then challenge

her to try the behaviors she observed. Or, create an opportunity for Mary to work with this person so that she can learn by working alongside him.

5. **Collaborate with individuals.** Actively work with the person, or pair up individuals with each other, so that each can teach and learn from the other. In order for this technique to work, each person needs to have different strengths and their weaknesses need to be offset by the other person.

6. **Balance the amount of challenge and support.** A person who feels over Challenged and under skilled will not learn. Neither will someone who feels over supported and under challenged. Challenge and support need to be balanced in order for growth to occur. The situation is somewhat analogous to shooting a watermelon seed, which only flies forward if pressed equally between the thumb and forefinger. If a person is feeling over challenged, give more encouragement and training. If a person is feeling over supported, increase the amount of challenge in the job.
7. **Use communication, counseling, and rapport building skills to decrease decrease defensiveness.** People can't grow if they are actively building defenses while you are talking. Work on developing trust and rapport with others in order to help them stay open to what you are saying.
8. **Create a pinch in the environment.** If people feel the negative consequences of their behavior, then they will be more motivated to change. Often we decrease this "pinch" when we rescue them and do their jobs for them. Figure out how individuals can receive the direct consequences (either positive or negative) of their behavior.

Create structural changes in the organization

Finally, changing the way you do things (such as procedures) or the way your organization is structured (the staffing plan, communication channels, organizational purposes, etc.) can sometimes help eliminate problems. As an organization evolves over me, the old structures may no longer work.
In this intervention technique, structures and procedures change in order to increase the effectiveness of an organization or to solve a problem.

1. **Change the constitution, or the committee structures, etc.** This intervention is needed when you wake up one morning and discover that your organization has evolved into something slightly different from what the by-laws outline. Name changes often redirect the need to change other parts of the structure as well.
2. **Change the procedures used to get things done.** Existing procedures ca either help or hinder a person's ability to get work done. Often problems can be solved by evaluating whether the existing procedure help or hinder the work flow of an organization and changing them if necessary.
3. **Change the formal communication channels of the organization.** Examples of this strategy include changing the number and types of meetings that are held in an organization, and reassessing who needs to be involved in each. A change in formal communication channels could mean an increase or decrease in the actual number of meetings. It could also include changes who receives memos and other written materials.
4. **Change how you delegate tasks, allocate work (staffing plan), or the levels of priority, etc.** The method an organization does to delegate work may need to change if it creates regular problems. For example, if you regularly burn out members because your normal policy is to drop them into the deep end to see if they can swim, then you will be

over challenging them. This intervention would change that policy so that people are given more training or support.

Practice and persist

These strategies can be used in combination or singly. I use single interventions in the coaching or agenda sections if the problem I am trying to resolve is in the pre-conflict stage. (In the pre-conflict stage, the conflict hasn't formalized yet, and individuals are more willing to listen.) In this stage, single interventions work because you don't need the increased leverage of multiple interventions to remove the resistance that forms after conflict has crystallized.

When the conflict is established, and people have polarized on the issues, then multiple intervention strategies are needed. By using several intervention strategies at the same time, you have more ways to go around that resistance and polarization. Remember that multiple interventions are complex, and the strategy that works with one person may not work with another. However, multiple strategies increase your changes of successful conflict resolution.

One more thought: people support what they help to create. These interventions are designed to give your members an opportunity to become involved in diagnosing and solving problems. This involvement creates a sense of ownership, which is why people will support interventions, and why they work.

Interventions are necessary for the health of your group. Ignoring the process part of your organization is like failing to give your car a tune-up: eventually your organization, like your car, will break down when you need it most.

However, in order to be skilled at interventions, you must practice them. Some of the strategies are complex, others are more simple. The only way to master them is to try them out, learn from your mistakes, and try again just as in any other skill.

Maybe this analogy will help. I was watching some beginning surfers down at the beach the other day. What amazed me was the persistence these people showed in learning how to surf. Over and over they would fall, and each time the waves crashed over them. It had to hurt. Yet, they would get back on their boards and head back into the ocean to try again. That is the level of persistence that you need when you try these strategies. Some will work with just a little practice, while others take much more. Remember the surfers, and persist.

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