

Pittsburg State University Communication Department Observation Project

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Introduction

Effective group discussion and communication consists of various characteristics and individualistic traits that work together cohesively in order to reach the group's desired outcome or goal. A lack of effective group communication will seriously damage the group's social health, therefore hindering any of the group's progress. In order to effectively observe a group and analyze the level of effective group communication present, specific characteristics of the group should be focused on and assessed such as: groupthink, cohesiveness, fantasy chains, leadership, roles, conflict, etc. The group we chose to observe was the Pittsburg State University Communication Department. They meet every Friday at 11:00am. We chose to analyze six effective group communication characteristics: Cohesiveness, structure, self-monitoring, norms, roles, and leadership. In order to come to a conclusion of how effective the members of this group are in communicating with one another, the research obtained from our observations will unravel the intricacies of the groups social dynamics by laying out how various individual personalities, experiences and backgrounds interact with one another, examining how information from these individuals is expressed and received between one another, and finally understanding how this information is integrated into the groups procedures that work towards achieving their desired goals.

Cohesiveness

Among the many factors that play into whether or not a group of people will be successful communicators, one of the most essential factors is cohesiveness. The level of cohesiveness that is developed within a group over the time they spend together establishes the backbone of teamwork and explains how well information is interpreted

from one member to the next. Without a good level of group cohesion, there will be a lack of effective communication and therefore a lack of group progress. One of the most important aspects of group cohesion is entitativity, which is a concept characterized by the level by which a group recognizes themselves as being a one body and perceiving unity among one another rather than being solely independent from their group members (Lickert, 2000). Although it was somewhat difficult to fully assess entitativity by just observing two of the PSU Communication Department's meetings, we believe that the individuals in this group have exhibited a sense of unity. We saw this through analyzing the group's social-orientation vs task-orientation, the manner of speech in which members expressed agreement and disagreement, and by assessing the way in which members respect one another.

Throughout both one-hour observations, the person leading the meeting through discussion and the rest of the members generally stayed oriented towards their task. Occasionally, through the group's discourse of the task-at-hand, some members would stray from the topic by expressing personal opinions of a different topic or even a fantasy chain would emerge. This happened during both meetings. However, both the member at the time leading the discussion and the other members would openly make aware to the group that they have gotten too far off topic, then suggest that they return to what needs to be discussed, and the members would accept this by digressing to the previous discussion without opposition. This type of open communication that was accepted among the members of the PSU Communication Department group shows social cohesion because the speaker conveyed accurately what they distinguished as

an unsuccessful tangent and the members that were off topic adequately interpreted the speaker's input and reacted accordingly.

There were multiple accounts during our observations where a member of the group would express the way in which they did not agree with what someone else had said, whether it be based on opinion or false information. Galanes and Adams state in *Effective Group Communication: Theory and Practice* that open disagreement can be much more frequently found within groups that have a high level of cohesiveness rather than that of a low level (Galanes & Adams, 2019, p. 157). These open disagreements were always done with respect to the members in which they were disagreeing with, and we did not perceive these disagreements to hinder the group's progress at all; rather they the opposite by creating progress in an orderly fashion by kneading out any confusion and lingering thoughts of what had been previously said instead of focusing on the discussion at hand. Furthermore, there were many moments of expressed agreement, supporting, and harmonizing that evidently helped the PSU Communication Department's group overall social and group cohesion by signaling a sense of trust and honesty within and among the group members.

The third aspect we'd like to focus on, which can be related back to agreement and disagreement, is respect. After having observed both meetings, we saw how respect was manifested within the group. First, when members would agree or disagree with other members, we perceived it to have always been done with respect and generosity. We did not see any animosity present between members of this group and therefore recognized an established level of respect for each other's differing opinions. Second, when one member was speaking, the rest of the group would listen to the

speaker. This manifests active listening into the group's communication dynamics.

Active listening is vital to the cohesiveness of the group because without good listeners, it is much more difficult for a group member's idea to be heard or interpreted well. Due to the majority of the members remaining quiet while another member was speaking, high group cohesion was demonstrated which propelled progress throughout the duration of the meetings.

Structure

Structure between the members in a group discussion plays an important role when it comes to covering all the bases or topics in a meeting. Structure can be defined as the arrangement of a plan to give it an outline and look organized. Meetings or small group discussions can perform quicker, smoother, and more efficiently when there is structure throughout the group. Having structure in a meeting means staying on task, having a planned outline of topics that need to be discussed, and everyone gets to voice their opinions and concerns. The PSU Communication Department gave us, as observers, a great example what structure looks like within a small group.

The leader of the group is the one who ensures and maintains the structure of the meeting. The leader also, unofficially, creates the structure of the meeting by addressing topics the right way and at the right time. The group we observed had a leader that kept the group on track, rarely getting off topic, therefore giving the meeting a sense of structure. The leader started the meeting by giving announcements and reminders, then ended the meeting with a question for the members to think about and consider for the next meeting. The leader also ensured that after discussing a topic,

they did not move on until the members came to a consensus. The leader was very open to every member's ideas and comments.

Behavioral functions take a part in the structure of a group's meeting. We found that the members harmonized well and quite often, which showed us, the observers, signs of agreement and good communication skills throughout the group. We also found many members suggesting procedures throughout the entire meeting, this shows signs of the group ensuring the meeting goes smoothly and all bases are getting covered, all things necessary for a good structural small group discussion.

Self Monitoring

When you take a look into the world of communication we see there are many different segments that make up how a group communicates. One of these segments is self monitoring. The basic definition of self monitoring is being able to track your own actions. There are different types of self monitoring such as low self-monitoring and high self monitoring. To start, for example, a common theme where low self monitors are often shown is when someone wants to bring up sore topics around the wrong group or people. Even though the group has expressed or hinted no interest in talking about these topics, and that person keeps going, this is a sign that a person has low self monitoring issues. In general, unless the discussion is about that certain topic, nobody wants to be forced to listen to something they don't want to. On the flipside of low self monitoring, being able to pick up on social cues is tremendously helpful while becoming a better high self monitor. What high self monitors do to stay on top of these miscues is paying attention to their surroundings and the people within those surroundings. This leads to what certain feelings one person or everyone in the group can feel. Normally,

when high self monitors feel as if they are not getting the feedback they initially intended to, they will take a step back and re-evaluate their actions towards the group. Following this, high self monitors will then act upon the cues they are picking up and then the group will either cooperate better with them or will continue to go about their business as before.

Examples of high self monitoring can be as easy as being one of the happiest people at a party even though they aren't having the best day. An example from the observation that we observed was when Troy couldn't get the projector to work and didn't say anything about it until another professor stepped in and mumbled something and then Troy said "I was low-key being passive aggressive." Being able to understand your actions and thoughts will convey so much information whether we want it to or not. Another example of self monitoring but on the low end is when someone is on the phone, a person walks in the room and realizes that, that person is on the phone and the person that just walked in starts to talk and can't pick up the cue that it is disrespectful. All in all, we all can work on being better self monitors whether we are a high self monitor or not. A key to doing this is just being respectful and mindful of how others would perceive you or feel about you if you are questioning doing a certain action or not.

Norms

A norm is essentially one of the most important behaviors of a small group. A norm is actually an unstated informal rule, but is brought about by peer pressure that governs the behavior of other group members. Norms that are created among each group determine what is appropriate behavior and what is not. Norms are important for

each group to develop that way they have a unique rule book in order to make their group successful. Setting norms does not mean regulating every aspect of group interaction; rather it is an opportunity for the group to express its values (Bushy Fork, 2016). These specific norms can mirror a group by being the deciding factor in what happens in groups, such as how and to whom a member speaks, how they dress, what they talk about and when, and what language they use as well. Norms are a great way to set the tone for a group.

During both of our one hour observation times, the norms that were distinguished were that group members stop talking when the leader needs to speak, everyone got a fair opportunity to talk, and some members are given the okay to not participate in discussions. These norms are set in stone for the communication group in order for them to accomplish things when they meet. This small group has designated a leader to lead them in discussion, so they have set a norm that when this leader begins to speak, they let him. During these meetings everyone also got a fair turn to speak, that way that each member gets an equal amount of time to contribute to the group. On the other hand, this group had a unique norm of the acceptance of some group members that were not required to participate in group meetings.

While these norms were not set in stone by the group members, we could distinguish them after observing the group meetings. When we entered the meeting, we could observe that there was a leader in control of this group, and he led the group throughout the entirety of the meeting. This group also reflected on norms that included letting everyone have a say so of their own opinion. Joel was a great example of this. When he felt like he had an opinion to give, he did so and it was accepted and taken

into consideration by each group member. Humor was also another norm that was taken into consideration with this group. In some groups, humor may not be a norm, but within this group they developed a norm for humor in order to keep the group on their toes.

Roles

From the nature of the observations and notes taken there is one thing certain about this group of individuals. They do like to spread their “leadership” throughout the group evenly. The only “leader” from observing would be that Troy the COMM head would be the initiator of said meetings. Troy is the head of the department and the broadcasting here at Pittsburg State University. Troy has always been a very approachable person but very passionate about what he does. (Anyone that has been in any of his broadcasting classes can attest to this). I would say his “formal role” would be leader of the meeting due to his status at the university and experience in the past. However this does not make him an aggressive leader. Also a point from our notes was how Troy brought the members back into the topic at hand so they would not become off task for very long. With all of this being said I would consider Troy to be the “leader” of the group however I would say that it's pretty evenly spread. We also noted that we did not see any sort of egocentric behavior during these meetings.

Moving forward I wanted to discuss a topic that was in our textbook on pages 122-123. The point I wanted to bring up was the discussion of informal roles. Being someone that has taken classes from many of the members of this group I would say that a lot of their informal roles play off of their own personalities. For example Jillian being a higher energy person and somehow always seeming happy makes sense that

she would take the role of supporting other members and thanking those who answer her questions. Another point would be Dr. Drew takes over the meeting at one point and is super respectful as this matches her personality as well. It was also mentioned that Cristian would be receiving their PhD in December and Dr. Drew made sure to congratulate her on this. These were the only things that I could find specific hints of informal roles. But that makes me think, what are the types of informal roles? Using our textbook and a small article on Norwest University's website, I have put together a small list(Northwestu.edu).

- Behavioral functions
- Traits functions
- Habits
- Preferences

Now what exactly does this mean? This means that mostly everyone has a role in a group. No matter how miniscule you feel to a group. Just know that you do help that group and develop it. Positively or negatively that is up to you. Everyone has some role in life regardless of the dice roll that puts you here on this campus.

Leadership

In chapter seven of our book *Effective Group Discussion Theory and Practice*, we read how there is a vast difference between being a leader, and leadership.

“Whether your group has a specific person called a leader or not does not matter. What *does* matter, if your group is to function effectively, is that it has *leadership*.”(Galanes & Adams, 2019, p.170). As we observed the communication department's meeting we were able to see a lot of what we learned from chapter seven in action. While Dr. Troy

Comeau is in charge of the meetings as the designated leader, you can tell that even if he was not the designated leader he showed traits that he would be a strong emergent leader in the making. While in the position of being leader he was very positive and task oriented for the most part. They did have a few rabbit trails and fantasy chains they started to embark on and he indulged it for a short time before turning them back to the subject. While keeping them on task it did not mean he had to continually control them or the direction and topics they dived into. The leadership skills in the room were prevalent and strong with most every member there, not just Dr. Comeau. In that regard I would say it was a fairly even playing field.

Of the five sources of power we studied in the book I saw three of them present in the meetings we observed. There was legitimate power, referent power, and expert power. The first example would be of legitimate power, which was due to the fact Troy is not just another teacher, but he's Dr. Troy Comeau. He holds the title of doctor, and he's now in charge of the Communication department, also by the fact that the other instructors have accepted his request of them as group members.

Dr. Comeau's example of referent power stems from the fact that all of the other instructors know that he is willing to do most anything for them, and that he cares about them. This is a trait that the other instructors value, and in return mirror. Since they know the extent of what he is willing to do for them they mirror that right back to him. He's not out to be a dictator, but he is the glue that works to hold the department together, and the stronger they see him working for them and the cause of the group, the stronger they work in return for him. I would say that although this source of power may not be his only one, it was definitely his strongest one. I think this is crucial

because none of the instructors in the group meeting came in with an unpleasant attitude and any characteristics that would display group hate.

The example of expert power that Dr. Comeau showed was in how he showed his knowledge and skill in what he was working to do. This skill was there, but it wasn't fully honed. You could say a lot of things he now has to do as the head of the communications department. Some of the things that he has to do in this position are new to him, but nonetheless he is willing to step up to the challenge with the faculty and staff behind him. Anything he may be lacking in expert power at times he makes up for in his referent power.

The only two sources of power that I would say were excluded were rewards (giving special rewards and attention), and then coercion (a form of punishment power that utilizes threats and force to influence those in the group to do what you want). Maybe if we were able to attend even more meetings I could see us possibly seeing rewards in action as a source of power. Yet I would say that I don't think we would see coercion in action, judging from the group dynamics and camaraderie that we say in action during our time with them.

Dr. Comeau led the fellow instructors well, not by coercion, but by legitimate power. Coercion is a form of punishment or threats to force others to do what you want, whereas legitimate power stems from his recognition and acknowledgement of the others in the group (Galanes & Adams, 2019, p. 171). You could tell that everyone respected him and what he was doing and wanted to get along with him. Dr. Comeau was a very attentive and focused leader that didn't overstep or belittle what someone else said, but strived to have everyone included and talking. While the position of being

a leader is what he is designated as, showing leadership is something everyone in the room was able to contribute as well.

A very straightforward realization from observing this group was that we were in a room full of strong leaders and leadership, both emergent and designated. At any given time I feel I could confidently say that most anyone in the room could have rather successfully stepped up to lead the meeting. The only slip up would be those who were rather new or green who would be nervous as to what they needed to do. The leadership was shared and applied by all those in the group who were contributing both their thoughts and ideas for success of the goals and tasks of the group.

This positive environment that cultivated group engagement and decision making played a big part in why I chose the scholarly article “A look at leadership styles and workplace solidarity communication” Kelly, S., MacDonald, P., (2019) for this next portion of my paper. Early in the journal they say how “Subordinates who feel comfortable communicating with their supervisor and who believe that their ideas and values are more content than subordinates who are missing such a relationship with their supervisor”. I found this to be extremely valuable due to the situation and circumstances of what our modern day looks like currently.

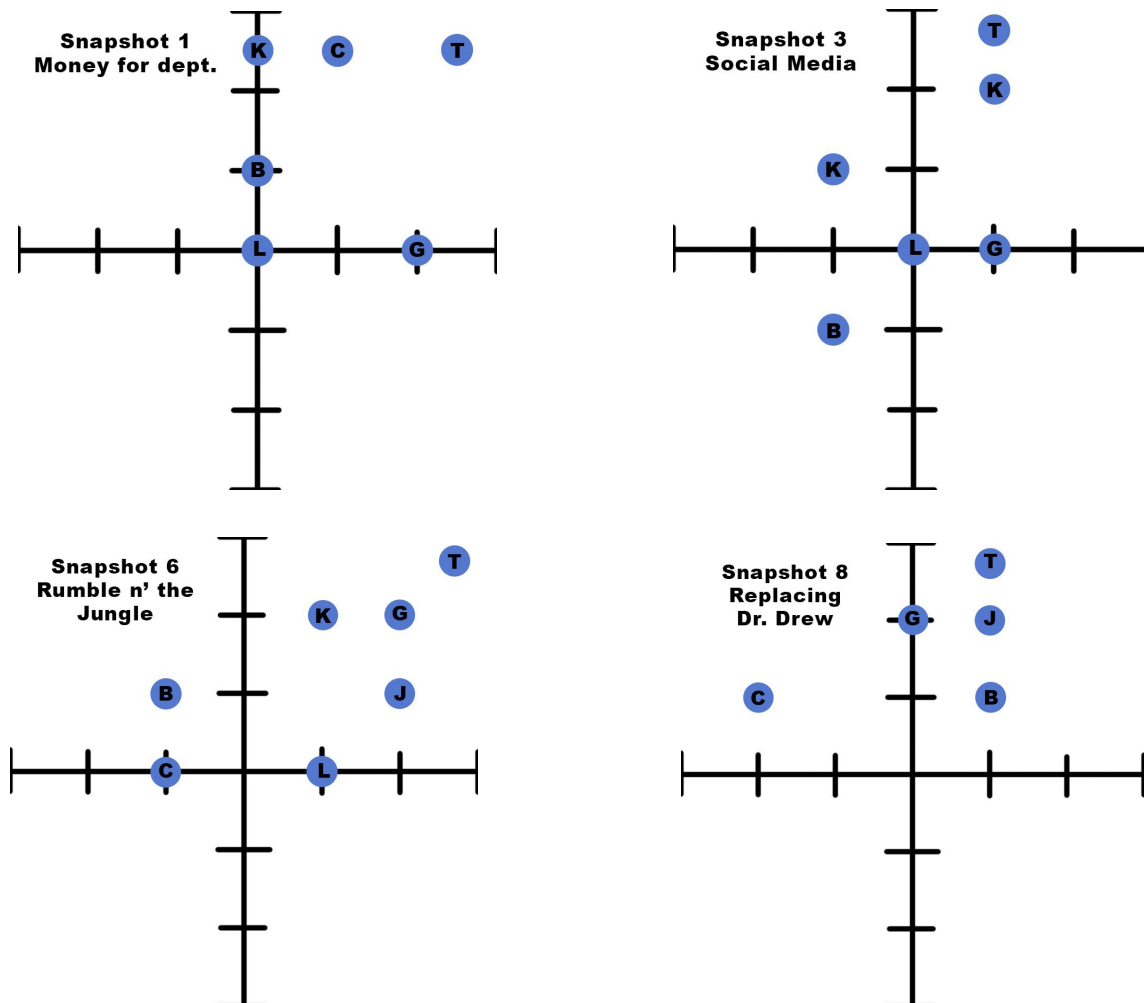
We have jobs that can't be filled due to people who are more interested in staying home not working instead of being in a workplace. All the way to workplaces that are struggling to keep employees as the exhaustion of COVID-19 wears on. As if jobs weren't hard enough beforehand, now we throw the exhaustion and ongoing stress of the continual changes down the pipeline at them. It's no wonder people are leaving places of employment in droves. This is just another stressor that is working against

employers and leaders nationwide. When you have that relationship that is spoken of (referenced above) you see just how important those relationships are in making employees feel valued and their input matters. Nothing can drive away good team members or employees than feel devalued and as though they don't matter. While COVID-19 has caused a myriad of problems, maybe, just maybe it gives us a ray of hope. We are forced to look at our methods of leadership, and involvement with those around us and on our teams. If we can address this one problem, and re-learn how to treat people around us, just think of how much difference it can make to the world around us. Where we are a culture that is very work driven, maybe we can learn to value these chances and opportunities to redefine how we treat others, and are treated in return. Maybe this is a bit of a daydream or fantasy chain, but what if? What if we started to reevaluate how and why we do some things? It's like how so many people across our country have the cultural greeting of each other by saying "How are you?" as a general greeting. Most of the time it is said as nothing more than a generic comment or passing phrase. Yet what if we as a country started to see the value in people again? To be less focused on ourselves, and more focused on living life with those around us. The crazy thing is that maybe this could be a chance to hit the restart button for us. If only we would seek to try.

This all stems from the chance that our leaders engage in developing positive and clear open communication with their team members. "When communication fosters this type of psychological connection (i.e., solidarity) between supervisors and subordinates, subordinates have more positive intrinsic work dispositions, including higher motivation, lower burnout, and higher job satisfaction. In short, the same type of

interpersonal exchanges needed to develop solidarity are those that distinguish leadership styles.” (Kelly, S., MacDonald, P., (2019)

For this next portion of our paper you will see a few examples of SYMLOG snapshots that I took during our group observation.



Here are some of my various SYMLOG snapshots I made. I utilized the ones that the group was the most active on. I will say, they are not perfect, for trying to build these as

the conversations were in motion was difficult. There is a letter pertaining to each person's name. If there is a letter/person unlisted, the person in question most likely didn't contribute to the group's conversation at that time, therefore there should be smackdab right in the middle of the symlog. T=Troy, G=Gil, B=Barth, M=Meghan, J=Jillian, K=Kristi, L=Linden, C=Celia, the second K=Ken.

In snapshot #1 you will see we had a number of people stating their concern as they inquired about how the funding in question was to be broken up between the departments. Whether each department got a specific amount, or if it was to be shared equally among the departments. Upon further discussion in the second meeting it was discovered that the amount discussed was allotted for all departments, and it was more of a first come first serve basis.

In snapshot #3 they were discussing social media outlets and how it was reaching out to students. Most of the group stayed in the positive task oriented area, yet you will notice one member who was off in a bit of the negative relational portion of the graph. Barth, while having good intentions often has a critical eye that can come across as negative if not fully understood by surrounding members. His breakdown of social media came across as such in my understanding for he seemed to be questioning the social media's effectiveness in general, and if we were even using the correct platform to try to reach new students.

In snapshot #6 the discussion turned towards Rumble n' the Jungle for reaching out towards high school students with the hope of discovering some who would be interested in not just PSU, but the communication department as well. Both Barth and

Celia seemed a bit negative on the hopes of reaching new students for the department as finding students with a communication interest seem a few and far between.

In snapshot #8 the discussion turned towards replacing Dr. Drew after she retires from her position, and if it would be filled or possibly eliminated. The concerns of what all she covered were voiced as well as the position of PSU having lower enrollment and how certain positions were no longer being filled back in, but simply transferred to another person as their responsibilities. Celia seemed a bit on the negative side for this observation, but it wasn't without clear cause. I can understand how that would be a hard topic to discuss while still being task oriented and positive.

Concluding these SYMLOG's you will see how the communication department had a great resource of instructors who are focused and involved in striving for being positive and task oriented. I purposely chose these ones to show how even though they were all working together in the same direction for the cause you could still have speed bumps and variety in the many answers and topics covered. In essence, when dealing with people it is a given that there will always be misunderstandings and miscommunications, yet these can be discussed and dealt with in an appropriate manner and for the good of the relationships, work, and goals at stake.

In conclusion, after having assessed the PSU Communication Department and their level of effective communication through six of the essential aspects, we've come to the conclusion that the group is made up of many effective communicators. After having analyzed our observations from the meeting we attended, we can see the high level of cohesion this group has established, there was a clear structure to the meetings by the commencement and closing of the meetings being signaled by the ringing of a

bell, and there was a decent level of self-monitoring as we observed the group members tended to stay on task, seemed to be able to perceive what a productive conversation consisted of, and tended to not bring up any topics that made the group openly uncomfortable. Furthermore, after having observed the PSU Communication Department's group, there were multiple observable norms such as: frequent humor and shared respect among members which manifests good communication etiquette. We observed how different members behaved and took on roles respective to these behaviors, and leaders of the meetings were often designated but leadership was also distributed to certain group members because of their knowledge and experience.

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