

## **The Art of Making Groups Work Effectively**

By Christina Swahn

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Professor Susan A. Wheelan has studied the development of the working group for thirty years. She has developed The Group Development Questionnaire, GDQ, — a questionnaire that determines the developmental phases of a group. Based on this, an intervention is formed where the focus is aimed at the goals. The performance of the group is increased this way, says Susan A. Wheelan during her Stockholm visit.

Susan A. Wheelan was a professor at Temple University, Philadelphia, for many years and received several nominations for her skill as a teacher. Since a few years back, she is the President for GDQ Associates, a company that works with organizational development, consultation and professional development. Schools and universities, medical facilities and companies such as GM, Merrill Lynch, UNISYS and Westinghouse are among those who have used the GDQ. The process within the group is the same whether it is the executives or the janitors who are members of the group, said Susan A. Wheelan in an interview during her Stockholm visit.

There are over 500 certified users of GDQ around the world, six of whom are at Sandhahl Partners in Sweden. During the STP days in March, they will talk about the method Susan A Wheelan described to the psychology institute and students at Stockholm University in November. At Stockholm University, her book, *Group Processes: A Developmental Perspective*, is used as optional literature for the third semester of the psychology program. She has some 60 scientific original articles on her list of qualifications.

In the beginning, she studied and worked with groups according to the Tavistock model. From her studies of work groups, she created a group development model with five phases. With the help of students, over a thousand group meetings have been recorded, where every meeting has been coded and analyzed.

Susan A. Wheelan compares the group's development with that of an individual. The child is dependent on the parent as a leader and in the first phase, the group is dependent on their leader. The child who becomes an adolescent and revolts against his parents resembles phase two of group development. This is the phase where the leader is challenged and the members fight each other. In the next phase, the group is characterized by dedication. In the fourth phase, the group reaches peak performance and in the fifth phase the group is retired.

Having studied working groups in different sectors and parts of the world, Susan A. Wheelan knows that groups in the fourth phase save more patients, give better service to their customers, have students with better results, produce more in a shorter time and generate greater profits for their company than other groups.

The group has to go through the early phases of the development model to achieve high productivity but even a well functioning group can fall behind. When corporations make significant staff reductions, the remaining group usually does not perform as well. The reason is that the individuals feel bad and have anger towards the management, which becomes costly for the company due to reduced productivity.

To determine which phase the group is in, Susan A. Wheelan developed a method, GDQ — a questionnaire with 60 statements. Each of the four phases of the group development model are characterized by fifteen statements in the GDQ. The result shows what phase the group is in and what the problems are, such as undefined goals or members having the wrong roles.

Groups that need help are often stuck in one of the first two phases. Characteristics of the first phase include that the leader talks too much and the members are cautious and polite. There are few conflicts and few subgroups. To move the group forward, the leader has to increase the members feeling of security, give feedback and discuss roles, goals, and values.

Conflicts regarding values, goals and how to do things are common in phase two as well as having group members challenge each other

and their leader. A shared feeling of responsibility is missing. One will often hear how everything would be great if we got rid of “Lars” or “Harry”. But it is not about the personality, it is about the process. The developmental phases are the same regardless of who is in the group, says Susan A. Wheelan, who is not afraid of using drastic wordings. An emotional bond among the individuals is not important according to Susan A. Wheelan.

An important theoretical starting point is the so-called Attribution Error, i.e. the individual’s tendency to explain other people’s actions based on individual personality traits. We have a hard time seeing the involvement of other factors — the situation and the group process. This will lead to an incorrect interpretation.

All members take credit when a group is successful. When the group is not successful, the members blame the leader or external factors. Dr. Wheelan said, “I have seen groups that have had four or five leaders in two years but the group does not change. Three of these leaders got fired because they failed to get the group to do what the company asked. But if the individuals themselves don’t want to, they won’t accept a task.”

Susan A. Wheelan believes you need knowledge of group development in order to move past phase two. Additionally, it is important to understand that groups can get stuck. When people understand that they aren’t bad, that this is normal, they are prepared for change, she says.

If conflicts can be solved in phase two, it will give the individuals a feeling of camaraderie and hopefulness. These are experiences that are necessary for phase three. Teambuilding activities, like mountain climbing, try to move the group from phase one to phase three without going through phase two. But it doesn’t work. Conflicts are a necessary part of all relationships. A conflict that has been resolved in a satisfactory manner creates confidence.

Conflicts provide the group with energy to work out values, goals and structures, which generate better decision making. Clear

communication is required to make the conflict resolution positive. The members must cooperate and negotiate to reach a mutual solution and if necessary seek help of a third party.

The leader's role in phase three is to give support. The emphasis is on the fact that everyone in the group understands his or her role, how to resolve problems, make decisions and get them executed. It is important that the members share a common goal and opinion that leads to increased effectiveness, achievement and productivity. One doesn't have to do any silly team building activities. If the group is going to participate in mountain climbing, you need a different competency than that of work. The problems you face are of a different type than those at work.

Susan A. Wheelan believes that member collaboration is as important as the leadership. Therefore, she educates in member collaboration and leadership simultaneously. The group task is to think about what good collaboration is and what can be improved. To train individuals about groups is meaningless according to her. When the individual comes back to his group and tells about what he has learned, the group reacts with a "get lost". But if everyone participates, you can achieve change. The method therefore attempts to make everyone feel comfortable in their roles and make everyone's voice heard. A group in phase three is highly motivated to move on. So the group members may change tasks and reorganize processes that have not been working well. When that happens, you enter phase four, which is highly productive. In this phase, the members look forward to the meetings, they work together and creativity and productivity are high. It is fun. You wouldn't want to miss a meeting even if you have a migraine!

The roles are defined and everyone accepts them. The tasks are suitable for both the group and the members who willingly carry them out. Successful groups spend 60 to 70 percent of the time talking about goals and tasks. Problems get solved and decisions are made. The leader delegates tasks that the members are willing to execute.

It is not easy to reach the fourth phase. In Susan A. Wheelan's experience, one in four individuals have experienced this phase but phase four doesn't last forever. The group may forget to cultivate what has been achieved. Members can become bored and the group can therefore fall behind in their development. If the group wants to maintain a high performance level, continuous effort is required, much like it is for athletes.

It is therefore important to change roles, tasks and raise the bar. The leader's role is to participate as an expert member of the team, give feedback and manage the rules for how you collaborate. Every time a group meets, someone ought to ask how the group is doing, says Susan A. Wheelan. Take five minutes to ask if we are on the right track, if we have the right focus, what is left to do, and what is important.

Not all groups make progress. Some people don't want to reorganize since that might impose more work. It often involves competitive people. When groups are uninterested in changing, Susan A. Wheelan attempts to change the organization. One way is to change the payment terms. If the employees get paid for their individual performance, why should they help the group develop? Salary needs to be based, in part, on group performance, not just individual performance.

When Susan A. Wheelan meets a group for the first time, the members fill out the GDQ questionnaire. When that has been analyzed, she spends a day with the group, tells them about the results and their group's development. A profile of the group is presented. The majority of the members usually agree on the problems, for example that the goals are undefined. After that, the group develops a plan for how to go forward. The plan should consist of one or two things, such as clarifying goals. "I want them to conduct their first meeting while I am there so they will start to change the situation. That changes the individual's perception. As a follow up, she meets with the group again after three months. The idea is to have the group take on the initiative and responsibility. Groups in phase three or four need the least guidance.

Susan A. Wheelan believes that one of the reasons her method is successful is that many have been upset over what she calls ridiculous team building activities. In some such activities, the members are forced to reveal their emotions to each other. For many people, that is completely wrong based on their cultural background. They are grateful when they don't have to reveal their emotions, says Susan A. Wheelan.

**The Handbook of Group Research and Practice**, ed. By Susan A. Wheelan.  
Sage Publications, CA, 2005. 589p bibl index afp ISBN 0761929584,

While experts in many fields conduct group research and practice, these very experts seldom manage to collaborate or work cohesively as a group. Wheelan seeks to change this odd situation with her collection of 29 writings by scholars and practitioners from various disciplines, including psychology, social work, sociology, communication, and business. An organizational consultant who writes extensively on group dynamics of team building, Wheelan makes a strong case for multidisciplinary collaboration among scholars and practitioners in overlapping fields. The book's focus flows from counseling groups to executive training to virtual teams (in which members never meet face-to-face), while remaining organized and consistent. The history and current status of group studies are covered, along with the dominant theories of group dynamics ranging from the rather outmoded psychoanalytic approach to trendy new perspectives such as nonlinear dynamics. Methods of research and practice in group work, such as observational field studies and the creation of artificial societies, are also explored. This comprehensive work may appeal to students and faculty in both the social sciences and business, making it a valuable supplementary reading resource for a wide variety of courses.