

Group work in training

▶ Group work means active and fairly independent interactive learning that is generally used to strengthen knowledge. The group processes information supplied and then comments, assesses and applies it. Group work is applicable as an activating element in all training and is especially useful if attempting to change attitudes.

Advantages/disadvantages of group work

Advantages of group work:

- Offers plentiful possibilities for active working and interactions. Interaction allows different experiences to be exchanged and applied to the subject
- Develops responsibility, leadership abilities, teamwork skills and a shared group dynamic
- Supports role play
- Provides group members with social feedback

Disadvantages of group work:

- Does not effectively pass on knowledge
- The group might concentrate on issues outside the remit of the training and forget its actual mission
- Requires an adaptable training space
- Effectiveness can be limited by group numbers
- The group need to understand the instructions, identify the task and have the determination to complete it.

What is a group?

The members of the group must interact and should have a shared set of values and targets, so that the necessary 'us' thinking will form. In training, group work requires functional exercises and time to get to know each other.

When to have group work?

Group work is at its best when the set task utilises the views, experience and expertise of all the group members.

A group is particularly effective when the personal skills, characteristics and knowledge of its members are from different fields.

This said, group work is situation-sensitive and the mood, relationships and compatibility of group members can affect the functioning of the group.

Assignment and process objectives

A group exercise serves two purposes:

The completion of the assignment (solving the problem, constructing an opinion, making a decision)

Learning the group process (roles, management, commitment).

Forming the group

Group size depends the objectives and method of group work chosen (see table). Groups can be formed prior to the training session, based on background information about the trainees, or during the training period after trainee expectations have been discussed. It is important to:

- Alleviate tension by letting participants become acquainted with each other
- Be flexible and sense the mood of the group
- Give and receive feedback
- Divide responsibility between the groups

If trainees are from the same organisation, it is wise to have a good cross-section of members in each group. This will ensure a variety of line management positions across the groups.

Group work exercises

Exercises should be distributed in written format, and should vary in style and degree of difficulty. They should not be too difficult at first, but should increase in difficulty over time. It is important to reserve time to observe the groups at work, in order to assess the effectiveness of the exercise.

Trainees should feel free to use any approach they are comfortable with to work out the problem.

The exercise should end with a summary feedback session of what has been learnt and its applicability to the trainees' work situations.

It is important that the group feels it is successful!



This information is provided in good faith, however it is not comprehensive and IOSH accepts no liability for any losses incurred from its use, howsoever caused.



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Typical characteristics and ways to use group work methods

| Work method | What is it? | How is it used? | When and why is it used? |
|---------------------------|---|--|--|
| Discussion group | Short - 5-10 minutes duration. Time for all participants to discuss and exchange thoughts. Does not require change of location. | The participants form small groups of 2-3 persons. Sitting near each other, they discuss the given subject for a given time. Often one member of the group gives an oral report to the other groups. | To direct interest to the subject; to get a picture of prevailing assumptions; to activate the lecture. Is also suitable for persons who are not familiar with group work as it motivates everyone. |
| Brainstorming | A working method for a group of 4-6 persons. Encourages the production of a lot of creative ideas. Groups should have a private space to work. | All ideas are written down, even the wilder ones. Spontaneity and building on others' ideas is encouraged. | To get new ideas; to encourage spontaneous expression and to motivate groups. |
| Team | A 4-6 person group discussion with a set objective to achieve. Followed by associated reporting and a general discussion. | The small group aims to perform the given tasks in the given time period. At the end of this period it reports the results achieved. | Examining the problem from many different viewpoints. When one wants experience to be exchanged, participation boosted or discussions made more effective, for example, if there is a large number of participants. |
| Case Study | Longer term group work - can last several days. Description of an event that highlights real problems. Additional material should be made available during the session. | An event is described to the participants, either in writing or verbally, the participants analyse it by discussing the facts, examining alternative actions and drawing conclusions. | If participants need practice in analysing problems related to their own work. |
| Role play group | Persons chosen from the participants take on specific roles, and are asked to act and think accordingly. | After orientation the participants given roles 'act' out a described situation. What happened and why is discussed after by all the participants. | In order to examine problems in relationships between different individuals, from many different points-of-view. |
| Business game | A simulation of the activities of a real organisation. | Participants have to make decisions involving the activities of the organisation. They receive immediate feedback on their decisions. | Gives practical experience of management tools and enables participants to make decisions without the risks involved in the actual situation. |
| Co-operative group | A group of 2-4 persons that emphasises individual and community responsibility. It is based on interaction and learning from activities. The group has common objectives, and its members are dependent on each other to achieve their learning objectives. | The group has a commitment to common decisions and everybody has responsibility to report. Helps with the evaluation of the group, individual activities and personal development. | When the exercise demands discussions and thinking, and even the most 'silent types' need to be involved. Assists with the adoption of new concepts for teaching each other. Helps to formulate a common opinion, and teaches how to solve a common problem. |