

Chapter 1

Why Use Interactive Methods?

- Building Relationships and Bringing a Group to Life
- Increasing the Group's Understanding of and Investment in Its Mission
Scenario 1: Connecting to the Mission
- Surfacing Dissension and Building Strong Agreement for Effective Action
- Surfacing and Resolving Dysfunctional Group Dynamics
Scenario 2: Interaction Surfaces Group Issues

If you were to look in on a staff meeting of our organization, you would certainly wonder what was going on. You might see 18 adults walking backwards within a circle of chairs, crisscrossing and weaving around each other, apparently trying simultaneously to tag someone and to avoid being tagged. There's a general sense of confusion, and a couple of people may be laughing too hard to concentrate on tagging. In the few moments before the facilitator calls an end to the exercise, you might be thinking, "Don't these people have important work to do? Why are they wasting time with this silly game?"

Working up to It

This chapter shows people working with the Interactive Meeting Format in its entirety, but we know that many readers will need to build up gradually to that level. Find out how in chapter 2, "Working into Interaction."

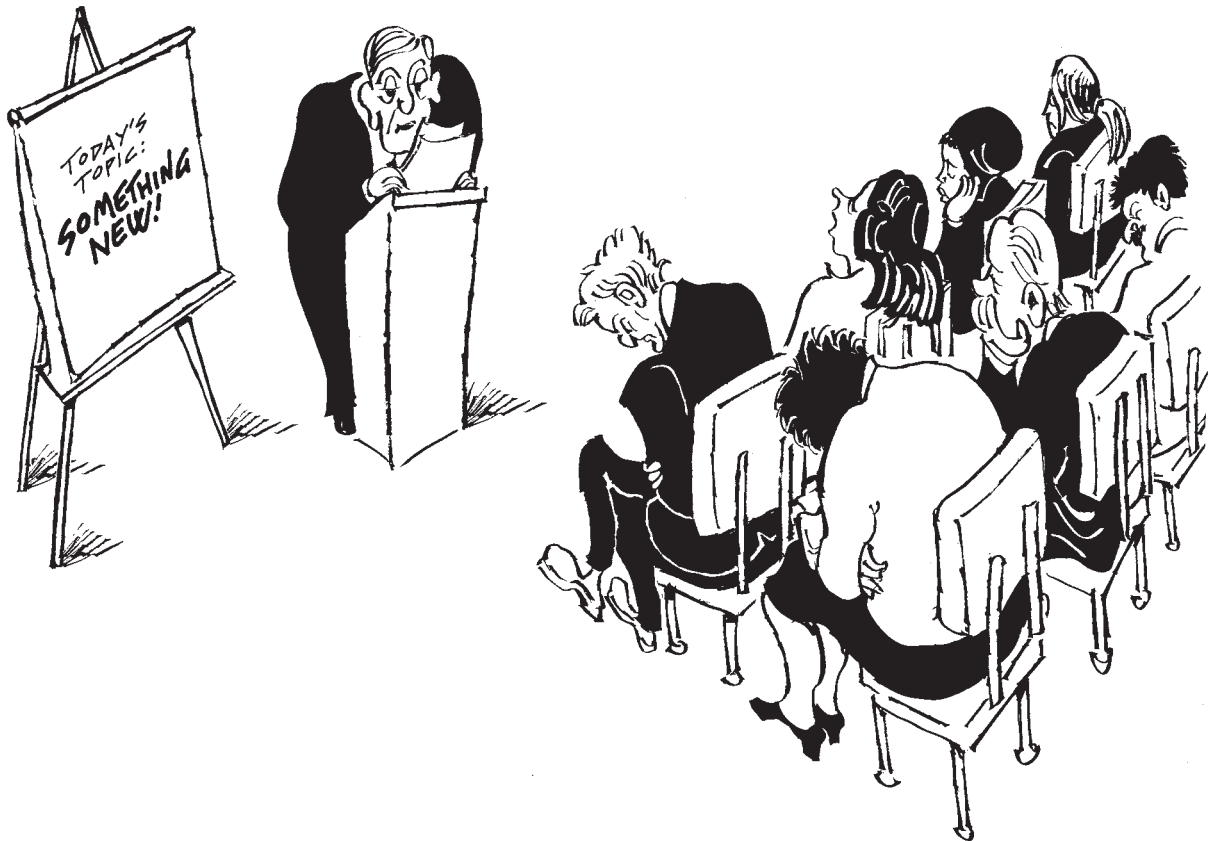
Then people take their seats, pulling the chairs into a closer circle. The facilitator asks for reactions to the exercise. Someone observes that doing the exercise backwards makes it even crazier than usual. People share their experiences with the exercise and strategies they used to deal with this new challenge. The facilitator draws the parallels between this exercise (BACKWARDS STOP TAG, p. 273) and a situation the group is currently facing: they are planning an event that they "backed into," without fully understanding the ramifications, and now everyone has to work extra hard to make it successful. They also discuss how important it is for everyone to take responsibility for their own tasks, rather than trying to "tag" other people and pass off their jobs.

The exercise, together with the discussion ("processing") that followed, have brought the group in less than ten minutes to a point where they are focused on their common goal of organizing a successful event and aware of some of the dynamics they must deal with to achieve their goal. They have had an in-the-body experience that illustrates some of the intangible issues confronting the group. Energized by the exercise, the group comes up with a variety of creative strategies as they work through their agenda.

This meeting presents a bright contrast to a "normal" meeting. It's safe to say that every day millions of people leave meetings feeling that they have wasted their time, or that their potential contributions have not been allowed to emerge. Vast numbers of people regularly sit through meetings that are alienating and unfocused, that fail to produce forward movement toward the group's goals, or that produce such movement with input from only a minority of the meetings' participants. Even meetings with the avowed purpose of seeking new approaches often are mired in old, ineffective methods—such as:

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a workshop entitled “Using Interactive Teaching Methods” that consists of a lecture and a question-and-answer period, or a conference about the importance of relationship-building for effective learning that does no relationship-building among participants and contains no practical information about how to build relationships within a group.



This book invites you to break out of these static and largely unproductive traditional meeting formats and to take on the challenge of the *Moving Beyond Icebreakers* approach. With this approach, you will learn how to create a dynamic group context where the norms are excellent communication, strong and positive motivation, and creative problem solving. Its many benefits can be summarized under four headings:

1. Building Relationships and Bringing a Group to Life

Groups exist for people to be in relationship, and meetings exist for people to come together and create something through their interaction that could not otherwise have been created. If you accept this view, then you will surely agree that building relationships is central to the purpose of any meeting. Yet people often leave group meetings knowing little to nothing about those they've met with. If any relationship-building occurred, it may have happened despite the meeting structure, not because of it.

An interactive approach, on the other hand, begins with the need felt by people of all ages for connec-

tion and for active engagement in the world around them. It always includes mechanisms both to ensure that group members are awake and engaged and to build relationships and trust as a basis for the work that lies ahead. A meeting, workshop, or classroom where everyone has the opportunity to move, laugh, speak, and share their ideas is going to be much more interesting and productive than a traditional lecture/question-and-answer format where very few people speak and even fewer people really listen. The skillful use of interactive methods creates a context in which group members get to know each other and have opportunities to participate actively in the group's work.

2. Increasing the Group's Understanding of and Investment in Its Mission

When a group faces challenges, as every group does when it is engaged in meaningful work, a strong understanding of the group's goals and a belief in those goals will keep people involved in the task at hand. For a group to function most effectively, people need to be consistently aware of their common purpose. Often, groups begin meeting without clearly stating or discussing their mission, or they discuss their mission only at an initial meeting and then do not revisit it. As time passes and people struggle to accomplish their tasks, they may lose sight of the purpose that brought them into the group in the first place. They may find that they are facing difficult and overwhelming tasks without a conscious awareness of the importance of their work.

Interactive methods provide the mechanisms to enable group members to explore, on a regular basis, the reasons they are doing their work and why it is important. They provide people with opportunities to consider and share the experiences, understandings, and commitments that brought them to the group. Being in touch with these fundamental elements is critically important if group members are to be invested in the group's work and motivated to make difficult decisions, resolve disagreements, and apply energy and focus to their work. Scenario 1 is an example of how interactive exercises can help a group stay connected to its mission.

Scenario 1: Connecting to the Mission

Julie was a teacher in a middle school in which teachers and students were organized into clusters. Her cluster had a number of students with difficult behavior issues and learning problems, and the school year thus far had not been going well. Teachers in the cluster had tried several strategies with minimal success. Some were feeling frustrated and were beginning to adopt a “just get through the year” attitude. Julie volunteered to run the next teachers' meeting for the cluster, at which the teachers would try find a new approach to dealing with these problems.

She felt it was important as they got started to restore people's sense of confidence in themselves as effective teachers and to combat the sense of hopelessness that was beginning to take hold. Therefore, after a brief introduction, she asked the group to answer a Warm-up Question (chapter 10): Tell us about a difficult student you remember from your teaching career whom you were able to reach, and how you were able to reach that student.

As people recounted their successes, Julie could feel the pessimistic mood lifting. The exercise had several positive effects on the group:

- Individuals had the opportunity to remember and rethink strategies that had worked for them in the past.
- Each story sparked ideas in other group members about possible solutions to the current

situation.

- People were able to reconnect to the reasons they had become teachers in the first place.

Julie followed the Warm-up Question with an exercise called BAG TOSS (p. 302), in which people throw an increasing number of beanbags in a set pattern within the circle. After a chaotic round with many dropped bags (and a lot of laughter), she added the variation THINK AHEAD BAG TOSS (p.304); in this version, people think about strategies and set goals before they start throwing bags. Julie then took a few minutes to discuss (“process”) the exercise. She pointed out that the first time they did the exercise, everyone felt overwhelmed, as students often do (and as the teachers were feeling at this point in the school year). She said that by working together thoughtfully, the group could find ways to strengthen the network among themselves so that no students would be “dropped.”

The group then went on to do BRAINSTORMING (p.385) about possible solutions, and to discuss and prioritize their ideas. From the prioritized ideas, they created an action plan.

When they evaluated the meeting, the teachers expressed many positive feelings. They said they had made progress toward resolving the cluster’s problems, they had a renewed sense of commitment to meeting these challenges, and they felt more unified in their approach and more aware that they were all in this together.

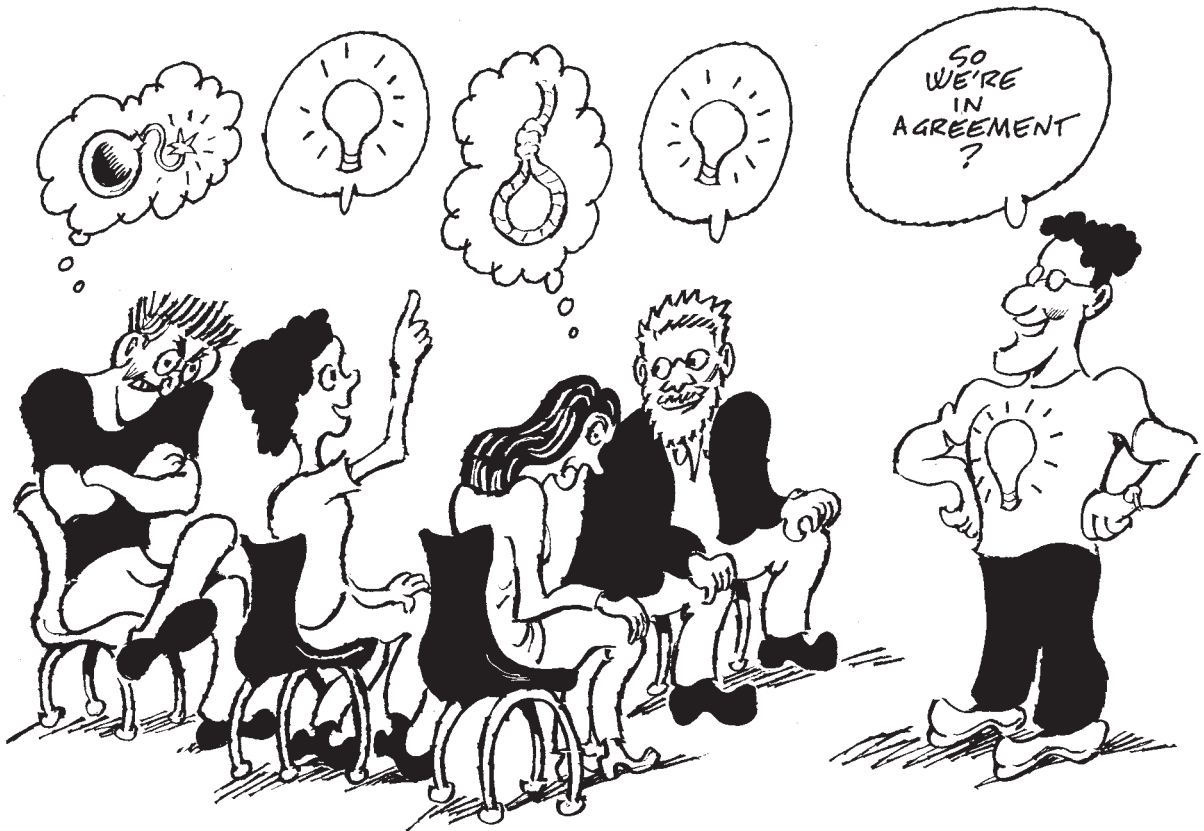
3. Surfacing Dissension and Building Strong Agreement for Effective Action

Agreement is intimately related to productivity. When people are truly behind a group’s decisions, they act on those decisions with inspiration and dedication, allowing the group to achieve a great deal. Conversely, productivity and effectiveness suffer greatly when a group is not united behind its chosen course of action.

The tendency of most facilitators is to bring the group to agreement as quickly as possible, believing that this is the most efficient way to get through the decision-making process to the point where a group is ready to take action. They set the agenda and position the issues in ways that minimize dissension, and they do not seek to draw out doubts and questions. If no one in the group expresses disagreement, they assume the group is united behind the proposed course of action. However, these leaders fail to recognize that, in a typical group, some people are quiet because they are uncomfortable speaking up; others do not speak because they are unsure of their true feelings; and others may not feel that it is their right or responsibility to contribute their perspective.

While facilitators would prefer agreement, they are often satisfied with a lack of dissent. When a group is at the discussion stage, this approach seems efficient and productive. But its negative impact on productivity becomes apparent when the group tries to move into action. The people who silently disagree will be uninspired and unmotivated in their work. They may passively, or even actively, undermine the group’s work. Meanwhile, the leadership may not be aware that disagreement exists, and may be puzzled or frustrated by the lack of energy and momentum in the work of the group.

Interactive techniques move a group toward authentic agreement by helping people to clarify and articulate their thoughts and feelings. Often people are surprised to find that an interactive exercise uncovers feelings they had not been conscious of about an issue, or prompts ideas about possible solu-



tions to problems that the group is working with. An interactive format combines this process of discovery with a comfortable environment for speaking up in a group. Interaction thus brings more voices into the discussion, increasing the opportunities for creative ideas and solutions to problems.

Without interaction, solid agreement about a group's goals and activities cannot be achieved because disagreements and doubts are likely to be invisible, at least among some members of the group. By skillful use of interactive techniques, facilitators can bring out people's opinions, feelings, and ideas, so that all members of the group are heard. The spirit of the group and its ability to achieve its mission are greatly enhanced by surfacing disagreements and encouraging all voices. By using interactive methods thoughtfully and consistently, you can bring individuals' feelings about the group and its projects to the surface of the group's daily life. Once surfaced, these issues can be acknowledged and worked through. This process makes it possible for the group to build real agreement about what it is doing and should be doing, and to set the stage for powerful and effective group action.

4. Surfacing and Resolving Dysfunctional Group Dynamics

Interactive techniques can be used to help a group define its own dynamics and its own problems—the first step in moving through the issues and toward the group's goals. When tension between people, general stress, or individuals' personal issues or behaviors are impeding a group's functioning, these can be dealt with most effectively when the group itself, rather than the leader, articulates the problems.

Picture a group that includes three people who are dysfunctional in the group context; perhaps they

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are unmotivated, unable to listen, unwilling to follow through on group decisions, disruptive, or always bringing up side issues. The group also includes six other people who are basically functional in terms of the group's work, on a continuum from highly to marginally motivated and involved. This group is working on a big project, but progress is stop-and-go. The facilitator decides that it's necessary to articulate the problems he or she sees: "This group isn't motivated. We have an important job to do and we are just not doing it. People are being irresponsible," etc. Instead of being motivated by this talk, however, most groups will respond in one of these ways:

- Individuals fuse together, creating a wall in opposition to the leadership. Now *everyone* is resistant to the work. The facilitator has defined the group as having problems, which tends to push everyone together, place people's varying degrees of motivation on the same level, and create a united and dysfunctional front against the facilitator's attempt to reinvigorate the group's efforts.
- Members of the group turn against each other and begin blaming one another for the group's difficulties. Now even those motivated to do the work are distracted by the need to uproot those who are letting the group down.
- Or, most likely of all, the group is simply unaffected by the facilitator's talk, which is not connected to the layers of feelings that are preventing some group members from being motivated and taking action.

A more effective approach is to come at the problem indirectly, giving the group the tools to help them recognize problems for themselves and articulate what they see. Interactive techniques have the power to surface what's going on in a group: agreement, disagreement, resistance, anger, enthusiasm, pessimism, or personal and interpersonal issues. By selecting techniques that address the group's issues in a subtle way, you can create a context for group members to see and talk about the dysfunctional group dynamics in ways that change these dynamics and allow the group to become more productive in achieving its mission.

Furthermore, problems that hinder the group's work can best be solved in an atmosphere and a format where everyone's voice is heard. Solutions to problems often lie in the authentic voices of group members, and interaction is the tool that can free those voices to speak.

If an issue outside the group (such as someone dealing with a family problem or other personal problem) is impeding the group's work, carefully chosen interactive techniques can bring the situation to the surface in an appropriate way. Once the issue is brought to light, understanding, empathy, and assistance may be available to help alleviate the problem, in contrast to the anger and frustration that group members might otherwise be feeling toward the dysfunctional person.

Even if the group cannot do anything to help, simply knowing the source of the problem will be helpful to the group's functioning. For example, if a group member is moody but no one knows why, each person in the group will form an opinion, and many of these opinions may be far from the truth of the situation. Some will take the moodiness personally ("He must be upset with me for some reason") and others will be angry about it ("What's her problem!"), whereas the moodiness may have nothing to do with anyone in the group and be a normal reaction to the person's situation. When the source of the problem is unknown and there are insufficient channels of communication between the moody person and the rest of the group, both the group and the individual will suffer. In the hands of a

skilled facilitator, interactive techniques can help the person to see how their behavior is affecting the group and to take steps to remedy the dysfunction. In our example, if the moody person is given a supportive context to explain the problems that are causing them distress, or at least to explain that they have some things on their mind that don't have to do with the group, the dysfunctional impact of their moods will be greatly reduced. Furthermore, this communication may open up opportunities for group members to support this individual in a way that helps them to participate effectively in the group once again.

Scenario 2: Interaction Surfaces Group Issues

In Cody's group, there had been some problems getting everyone to participate on equal terms. Several group members complained of feeling left out all the time.

For the meeting at which the group was to begin planning its next project, Cody selected the exercise ALL ABOARD (p. 299). This exercise challenges the group to fit everyone into a small square marked off on the floor with tape. The activity is a metaphor for incorporating all of the differing opinions and skills of group members into the work of the group.

Melissa was the last person to get into the square. At first she didn't want to get in at all. She said that she wouldn't fit; there was no room for her. Finally, with a lot of encouragement from the group, she got in, and the group successfully completed the exercise.



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In discussing (“processing”) the exercise, Cody asked various group members about their experience of ALL ABOARD. He asked the person who got in the square first if he often took the lead in the group, and why. He asked Melissa if she was often the last person to join in. She admitted that she was, then with great hesitation explained that she didn’t feel part of the group and worried that they would not appreciate her input or ideas. Other members of the group quickly responded that this wasn’t true, that they wanted to get to know her and hear what she had to say. They pointed out that Melissa was always holding back, to the point where she would even walk behind the rest of the group when they were going somewhere together. They explained that it seemed Melissa had put up a wall between herself and the rest of the group.

Everyone in the group was changed at least a bit by this experience. Melissa began to open up more and to bring her thoughts and talents forward. Others felt more understanding of Melissa and began to reach out to her and more consciously include her in group activities and discussions. The exercise brought to the surface an important dynamic that was keeping the group from fully bonding and utilizing everyone’s talents. If this issue had not been brought to the surface in a way that was caring and supportive of Melissa, she would have continued either to create unease and drain motivation from the group by her aloofness, or to pull away from the group until she left it completely.