

The Flow of Group Life

Physiology describes how human beings develop from birth to death. Few of us realize that the groups we inhabit have similar patterns of development. Groups come and go. Some last a long time, even a lifetime, but most are short-lived. Groups have births and deaths, as well as a life. It is very useful to possess a sense of how these patterns flow.

**Getting
Started**

When a group first forms, everyone is busy getting acquainted. The group depends upon the official leadership or initiators of the gathering to set the stage and “take charge.” Unless outlandish demands are made, a group at this stage is usually compliant. It is depending upon the leadership to set the task, take care of the personal needs of the participants (enough breaks, food and water, comfortable seats, etc.), and to manage the gathering effectively for the common need. In other words, the management is taking care of task needs, individual needs, and group maintenance needs. (CLSM, p. 6-7-3).

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Many groups never leave the dependency phase. This is all that is necessary on a bus where the driver is the person in charge and the task is simple, to arrive from point A to point B in a timely and safe manner.

Groups which last over a period of time encounter new opportunities and challenges. No leaders, no matter how effective and conscientious, will be able to meet all the needs of all the people all the time.

A second phase of group life begins when the leadership is questioned. This may occur passively. People are late or they are absent without an explanation. There may be good reasons, but there is also taking a place a testing of the leadership as well as an assessing of each individual’s freedom to act independently.

**Counter-
Dependence**

This phase may erupt in major conflict with the perceived leadership. Questions arise about why certain things are done; members challenge the methods presented. In EFM this encounter may occur when students challenge the EFM program or the texts because they are suddenly seen as “authoritative” yet mistaken, and thus of minimal use rather than as an opportunity to learn.

This can be a very painful time for the group, especially the mentor, because the challenge may be cast in personal terms. Careful listening is important lest you inadvertently set yourself up for a needless attack. Holding your ground without becoming defensive

is essential. Learning to discern between conflict that is related to group life and conflicts that are more personal and enduring is important.

Euphoria

When a group successfully passes through the initial challenges to authority, there is often a time of joy and a sense of euphoria and freedom. Discussions may become much freer and more personal. A precious sense of sharing and trust energizes the life of the group.

This euphoric moment can be very powerful. It tends to happen as a result of a weekend conference that has been especially powerful and meaningful to participants.

The risk is that we want to return to those moments of bliss and joy rather than move on to new things. In an EFM group it is good to celebrate these moments and also to know that they are just that: moments.

Reality

Life goes on and there are other serious issues to face. These may occur when conflict which cannot be resolved emerges between members of the group, who must then seek common ground upon which to meet. This is not always easy. At other times deep questions may arise because of the personal crises of various group members. These are unpredictable and unexpected, but they will affect the mood and creativity of the group as well as its ability to work and learn together.

Closure and Celebration

A final stage is that time of coming together as interdependent beings, that time of recognition that various things will come to an end and of remembering what we have lived together. This becomes a time of closure, but it is also a time of celebration. It is important to give these closing times as much attention as we gave to getting started.

The Cycles of Life

One final word of caution. These steps appear sequential, but in reality they come and go like circles of birth, life, and death. We encounter them when we change jobs, when a child is born, when we marry and when we experience loss. Whenever our lives change, for better or for worse, whenever anyone enters or leaves our group(s), we experience the opportunity to begin, to live, and to celebrate.