



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

Management

GROUP DISCUSSION- AN UNDERUTILISED TOOL FOR COMMUNICATION ENHANCEMENT AND EVALUATION

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ABSTRACT

Group Discussions are conducted when focused comments are required from people and certain decisions are to be taken. It is used as an instrument for judging the suitability of a candidate for a job as several personality traits come to the fore during the discussion, and this helps the prospective employers assess the applicant. While the relevance of GD as an evaluation tool is well recognized, its efficacy as 'communication enhancement' tool remains neglected. Another area, where GD skills are of great value is the workplace, with cross functional teams being the flavor in most of the organizations. In this paper the authors, each with over a decade of experience in teaching of communication skills at the university level, have chosen to discuss GD for Communication Skills Enhancement, Evaluation and as a tool for Workplace Communication.

In a recent Campus Placement drive for MBA students, the GD topic given was, "Group Discussion is an outdated tool for short listing of students for an Interview". The concerned panel conducting the GD was from a famous brand in the hospitality sector. The following day, the students shared their 'Interview Experiences' with two of us (authors). One could feel the shock the students went through in the initial stages of the group discussion. As per their feedback, no one seemed to be ready to speak for a minute or so, unlike the usual scenario, wherein, almost everyone wants to take a lead in introducing the topic. This 'holding back' may be attributed to the struggle to find answers to the following:

- If it's out dated, why have we been made to sit in a GD, is it a trap?
- Which side should I take? Since the candidates try to say what the panelists want to hear, some call it a 'politically correct' approach
- Is the panel just collecting ideas, it sounds so.
- If I have to offer alternatives, what those could be?
- Can I come up with concrete solutions, if probed further during the interview?

Although, the selection of this topic raises more questions than it answers, yet, the fact that panel chose to start the interview process by a GD, is reassuring that it remains a useful tool of evaluating students for job suitability, especially where 'Interpersonal' communication and team skills are essential, which of course is the case with jobs even in the technical sectors. While the relevance of GD as an evaluation tool is well recognized, its efficacy as 'communication enhancement' tool remains neglected. Another area, where GD skills are of great value is the workplace, with cross functional teams being the flavor in most of the organizations. The authors, each with over a decade of experience in teaching of communication skills at the university level, have chosen to discuss GD in the context of three areas:

- GD for Communication Skills Enhancement.
- GD for Evaluation, often referred to as Selection GD
- GD as a tool for Workplace Communication.

The sequence chosen for discussion is purely on 'chronological' considerations, as it corresponds to the academic journey of a student, wherein, each student at our campus, irrespective of the course she/he is pursuing, learns one course on 'communication skills' every semester during his/her entire stay.

GD For Communication Skills Enhancement

A challenge almost universally faced by the teachers of 'communication skills' is the gross variation in the English language skills of the students, especially at the entry level of UG courses. Students come from different backgrounds and many of them having studied in a medium other than English. A teacher has to find creative means everyday so that none of the students lags

behind. Due to constraints of time, it is not practical to pay attention to every student to the level of individual practice. A well planned and executed GD has proven to be the most efficient solution, when we carry out a 'cost benefit' analysis. The cost here is the 'time investment' and benefit is the 'learning outcome' in terms of communication skills improvement. Let us further probe the two dimensions of Planning and Execution.

Planning

In the highly acclaimed book "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" by Mr. Stephen Covey, in Habit 2 (Begin with the End in Mind), the author has convincingly brought out the need for keeping the Mission/Objective in mind, for every activity, big or small. The same applies for conducting a GD. For example, during the first two semesters, the objectives may be limited to the following:

- Develop good listening skills
- Every one speaks
- Students pick up the basic GD etiquette and learn team behavior

Execution

One method that has worked well with us is to nominate 'recorders' corresponding to each student. For example, if there are 10 participants, let there be 10 recorders, who record verbatim for the corresponding number. At the end of discussion, the recorders are asked to share their respective scripts. It not only improves the listening skills of the students, but provides an opportunity to the additional numbers to speak. With skillfully managed participation from the class, wherein, they are encouraged to share their views, almost 25 students get a chance to speak in a single GD. The recording also helps the facilitator to focus on key issues as the 'content' is readily available.

GD For Evaluation/Selection

Selection Group Discussion- Meaning and Scope

As per M Ashraf Rizvi, 'a Selection Group Discussion (SGD) is a recruitment method to evaluate the group participation, leadership, and team communication skills of a candidate' (172). This definition matches the parameters suggested by other practitioners, though they may have used different words. The format found most practicable by us includes the following four dimensions for evaluating a candidate:

- Knowledge
- Communication Skills
- Group Behavior
- Leadership

Knowledge

Candidates are expected to have adequate knowledge of subjects related to their domain, though it's not uncommon to take up

abstract or totally unrelated subjects for GD as we saw in the opening episode. While vast reading and general awareness are helpful, we found the 'idea generation' methods, as suggested by Hari Mohan Prasad and Rajnish Mohan in their book "Group Discussion and Interview" published by TMG, very effective. Two good approaches suggested by the authors are 'Concept Analysis Response (CAR) and Concerned Party Approach (CPA)' 18. CPA is useful especially when the parties affected on account of a particular decision, are easily identifiable. For example, in a discussion on the desirability of permitting FDI in Retail, the producers, consumers, small retailer are the parties affected, the candidates can easily find arguments to support the group they wish to, and bring out the advantages or disadvantages of a particular decision.

CAR can be applied practically in all situations. The focus of CAR approach is that the content should follow a particular sequence beginning with an Introduction or the Background and follow a logical sequence. This argument of first introducing the subject is valid because it has been observed that most of the initiators begin with, "in my opinion" Obviously this approach is fundamentally flawed, since a GD is a 'collaborative' effort rather than an individual venture. It may be pertinent to add that during practice, the facilitators should discourage the tendency of turning a GD into a debate, where the pole position is acceptable.

Communication Skills

Communication is not only about speaking, but also about listening and expression through body language. Many students complain that they didn't clear the GD despite their superior articulation. We bring out the salient aspects of these important components.

Listening-

Namita Gopal observes that while participating in GD 'some members prefer to keep an aloof stand and concentrate on listening rather than contributing to the discussion' (141). But by observation one can easily make out if a candidate is actually listening or merely waiting for a turn to speak. The real indicator of good listening skills, however, would be that when a candidate speaks, the arguments must fit in with what was being discussed by the previous speaker(s).

Articulation-

Choice of words and clarity of expression should conform to the expectation of the group and aid flow of a GD.

Body Language-

An evaluator may not be able to pick up every word being spoken, but can see all what is coming out through posture, facial expression, gestures, eye contact (or lack of it), therefore, one need to be aware of, and display good engagement with the group, even if one is unable to muster enough arguments.

Team Spirit

Most of the work we do is through our teams. The recruiters therefore lay great emphasis on group behavior at the time of selection. The 'mantra' is 'hire for attitude and train for skills', and what could be a better method to judge these personality traits than a GD.

Leadership

A GD works on the principal of 'shared leadership', as no one is nominated a leader at the commencement of the discussion. It is left to the group dynamics to 'throw' a leader and everyone tries to emerge as one. The negative fallout of the competitive zeal however is that everyone wants to speak at the same time and in this 'fish market' kind of environment the entire group stands to lose. Various authors have listed ways to improve performance in a GD, our three top most recommendations that the facilitators should pass on to the students are as follows:

(a)Initiate- The one who initiates the discussion, has the distinct advantage as it has been seen that an early speaker becomes a reference point for the group and the other candidates start addressing him, a clear indication of a leader emerging

(b)Periodic Summing up- Often neglected, this is one of the best ways to contribute to the group performance. After every 5-10 minutes, a quick review of the gist of discussion would be a proof that an individual has comprehended what was discussed until then, and it will also brings the group back to the core area of discussion.

(c)Interruptions- In an ideal

situation, one should not interrupt, that is something basic we are taught from our childhood. But in a GD, in most of the situations, it's only by interrupting others that one gets a chance to speak. The cues for entry suggested in the book by Hari Mohan include 'low noise level, speaker's exhaustion/confusion point and a weak speaker'. (pg 17)

Group Discussion at the Workplace

One may not see a GD taking place at a workplace in the 'classic' sense with participants seated in a semi-circle. However, increasingly, planning, strategizing, problem solving gets their inputs from the discussions that routinely take place at any workplace. One of the authors worked in an automotive components manufacturing unit before moving to academia, where the team discussions took place at least once a week and at times the Plant Head joins in.

Therefore we can conclude that if one follows all the procedures of conducting a group discussion, it can be an enjoyable and profitable activity. People can improve their communication Skills, can be screened in a considerable lesser time and the supervisors can make a note of special skills of the selected candidates.

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