

# **PROBLEM SOLVING FOR ADVISORS AND EXECUTIVE BOARD**

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Generally speaking, problems associated with student groups can be divided into two categories: **task** problems and **process** problems. While the division may not always be clear or precise and may seem artificial, it is helpful to think about group problems in these terms.

**Task** functions refer to those programs, projects, and activities, which the group was formed to accomplish. Thus, if a club was unsuccessful in planning and implementing programs due to **disorganization**, it could be said there was a problem related to task.

**Process** functions, also known as group building and maintenance functions, refer to the **interrelationships** among group members. Process functions relate to **how** group members interact. Advisors need to be alert to process problems in the group since they often hinder the group's completion of task. For example, if students cannot plan programs because members do not like/trust each other, the advisor could conclude that the problem was related to the process.

Task and process functions are closely interrelated, and the advisor must try to be aware of both. Some groups often have warm and healthy member interaction, but productivity and accomplishment are minimal. Stated simply, these are happy groups that do little. On the other hand, there are groups that are task-oriented and ignore process functions. In such cases, often due to the efforts of only a few individuals, the group accomplishes a great deal, but member satisfaction is low. This group might be characterized as productive but unhappy.

It is likely that in most groups, there will be individuals who possess differing inclinations toward task and process. Many of the problems and issues that advisors encounter focus on the tensions that surface between high and low task people and high and low process people. An awareness of both task and process can be helpful to an advisor who is attempting to diagnose and resolve group problems.

The most opportune time to observe problems of task and process in groups is during meetings. It is a process in which the advisor must gather a total picture of the task and process events that occur. Observation involves not only paying attention to what is being said but, as importantly, listening to what is not being said. Silence is a dynamic that an advisor must understand. The advisor must be able to identify silence that ignores or buries important task issues and silence that denotes anger, boredom, frustration or other important emotions.

Body language and facial expressions of group members are often indicators of thoughts and feelings. The advisor who uses these indicators to recognize feelings of disgust, confusion, apathy, anger or resentment can address them at a time when they are more manageable. Feelings of this nature that are not addressed and are allowed to grow may lead to difficulties that are much harder to correct.

## INDIVIDUAL TECHNIQUES

Once the advisor has determined that a problem exists, he/she needs to intervene to help the group resolve the problem. Depending on the problem, intervention can be as simple as suggesting changing the meeting time or as complex as trying to help two members resolve interpersonal conflicts. Often, advisors must decide when it is appropriate to intervene. In making this decision the advisor must ask two questions.

The first is: **“To what extent does the problem interfere with the group's task?”** For example, side conversations are unavoidable and may even be desirable in helping members gather information or clarify issues. At some point, however, they can be distracting. The problem for the advisor is to decide if the group's progress toward completion of its mission is being compromised by the side conversations. It should be noted that these decisions usually do not need to be made right on the spot, and it is important for the advisor to consult with the leader or group members before anything is done.

The second question is: **“To what extent does the problem interfere with the group process or the satisfaction of group members?”** Decisions that are made by a few members of the group often cause those not involved to feel left out. This issue is one that the advisor ought to discuss with the leaders.

On the following page there is a list of questions that advisors may find valuable in dealing with group problems. These questions will lead the advisor to appropriate diagnosis and intervention. Depending upon the nature of the group and the problem, it may be useful for the advisor to involve the leaders and members in this process. It should be remembered that **problem diagnosis and intervention** is a process which requires careful observation, thought and consideration of the impact of alternative remedies. Quick solutions rarely occur. The advisor must assess the situation, scrutinize the ramifications of the intervention and be flexible enough to make alterations or changes when necessary.

Before advisors can make appropriate interventions, they must understand the source or root of the problem. Many groups experience the same overt problems, but the causes and best resolutions may differ dramatically. In order to assist the advisor in problem analysis and solution, the following guide offers problem areas, specific examples of these problems, and questions which the advisors can then answer to assess the situation and arrive at an appropriate response.

Please note this listing is not intended to be a checklist. It is a guide containing many options which the advisor may pursue and may select the questions or conditions that are most relevant to a particular group. The guide is not intended to be used directly with the group. The advisor should determine the areas of concern and then use the relevant questions to either initiate individual or group discussions, or choose some other method of intervention. If at any point the advisor needs assistance in deciding how to approach a problem Student Life Assistants--Activities are available to discuss and assist the advisor in developing a plan to guide the club to resolution.

## LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS

Specific Examples: Leader fails to consult with group before making significant decisions. The elected leader lacks self-confidence, is non-assertive, lacks interest in-group, and therefore appears to be incompetent. A rivalry exists between elected leaders. The leader has time conflicts and is suffering from work overload.

Questions to consider:

- Was there a transition period during which outgoing officers trained the new leaders and provided them with supervised experience?
- Has the leader received training regarding leadership skills, job descriptions, group goals, and the group's background?
- Does the leader know how to delegate?
- Is the leader aware of the group's "informal leaders?" How does the leader use them?
- How does the leader run the group's meetings – as a facilitator or a dominator?
- Is the leader more interested in developing a personal social network than in pursuing the goals of the group? Does an "I-they" relationship exist?
- Does the leader or executive body isolate itself and make decisions apart from the membership?
- Is the leader motivated by selfish goals wherein the leader may win but the organization and membership may lose (negative power motivation)?
- How willing is the formal leader to give the floor to members and, especially, informal leaders?
- Do other members complain about the leader? What do they complain about? Is there direct confrontation or is the hostility "behind closed doors?"
- Is the leader grooming others for leadership positions? If so, how does the leader select these people and what type of mentoring is being done?
- How was the leader selected?
- Is the leadership position considered to be one of respect or is the person chosen by default?
- Has the leader established priorities regarding personal, academic and extracurricular activities?
- Are other aspects of the leader's life in order?
- Have the leader and members discussed leader expectations?
- Is the leader personally committed to the group's goals?
- Is the leader being sabotaged by a small group within or from outside the organization? How/why?
- Does the leader accurately perceive and acknowledge problems which confront him/her?
- What methods of feedback or evaluation are available to the leader? Who provides the feedback?
- Does the leader identify more with the advisor than with the group?
- Does the advisor meet regularly with the leader to discuss the group's health and task performance?
- Can the advisor identify leadership skills and attitudes which might be lacking?

- Is the advisor willing and able to confront the leader about problems regarding leadership style?
- How receptive is the leader to constructive criticism?
- What resources dealing with leadership are available to the leader and advisor?

## **MEMBERSHIP PROBLEMS**

Specific Examples: Poor meeting attendance; low member morale and satisfaction; boredom; poor communication; members feel left out; dysfunctional behavior; apathy; members appear to be incompetent; hidden agendas; competition for attention; individual and group goals differ; members stray from task; unclear roles and functions; lack of trust among members; disparate levels of commitment among members; program failure; lack of ideas.

Questions to consider:

- Does the group have goals?
- Have the members been given the opportunity to determine the group's goals, methods of achieving these goals, and expectations and norms of membership?
- Are group goals understood and accepted by all members?
- Has any type of member training or skill development been offered: communication skills, task performance, etc.?
- How do members get involved in the group? Are they appointed, elected or, do they join because of mutual interests?
- How representative of the constituency are the members? (Does not apply to interest groups.)
- What patterns of interaction exist among group members and leaders?  
How are group decisions made?
- Is the organization composed of so many small groups that the total organization never makes a decision?
- What is the functioning style of the group? Are all members involved? Do they have specific duties? How are duties or tasks assigned?
- How are agendas created? Are members involved in their creation?
- Is there a balance between long- and short-term group goals?
- Is the group progressing toward goal achievement? If not, what are the roadblocks?
- Is the group ready to undertake the stated goals?
- What reward structure exists for members?
- Are affiliation needs being met?
- Is group work and membership enjoyable?
- Has the group been given the opportunity to interact informally in or out of the meeting setting?
- Are specific topics disruptive to the group process and why?
- Who dominates the group and why?
- If there are hidden agendas, can they be incorporated into the group process?
- Are opportunities for leadership or skill use available to all?
- What type of climate exists in the group? Is risk-taking allowed? Can people experiment?

- Are group members testing the boundaries of what they can do, or do they or others limit them?
- How does the group deal with frustration?
- What do group members expect of the leadership and advisor?
- Do members accurately perceive and acknowledge group problems?
- What method of feedback or evaluation is available to the group? Who provides the feedback?
- Is the advisor willing and able to discuss problems with the group?
- How receptive is the group to discussion of problems?
- What resources dealing with group process are available to the members and advisors?

## **ORGANIZATIONAL PROBLEMS**

Specific Examples: Disorganized meetings; lengthy meetings; financial problems; uninformed constituency; lack of continuity from one year to the next; failure to complete required administrative tasks; no plan of action.

Questions to consider:

- Does the group have a charter (constitution, bylaws), mission statement or plan of work?
- Is the group familiar with this document?
- Does the group have a valid understanding of its authority, responsibility and tradition?
- Does the group have adequate opportunity to reassess its purposes and goals, taking into account intervening variables?
- Are prior years' records (financial reports, program evaluations, minutes, etc.) available to those who need them?
- Have job descriptions been developed for officers and chair people? Is there sufficient support to perform necessary clerical and managerial functions?
- Is there a method for ensuring personal accountability?
- Are the organization's policies and procedures documented and followed?
- Does the group have a budget and regular financial statements?
- Are policies regarding fund appropriations and disbursements adhered to by all group members?
- Are legal and institutional requirements known and adhered to by group leaders and members?
- Are agendas prepared and distributed in advance of group meetings?
- Are minutes of meetings prepared in a timely fashion and available to all constituents?
- Are all members familiar with parliamentary procedure or other guidelines under which meetings are to be conducted?

## **INTER-GROUP PROBLEMS**

Specific Examples: Disagreement with other student groups; disagreement with institutional policies or procedures.

Questions to consider:

- Is the disagreement a rivalry or a conflict?

- What impact is the disagreement having on the group?
- Is the group progressing toward its task achievement or is it spending all of its energy on the conflict?
- What is the potential for serious problems stemming from the disagreement?
- Why does the conflict exist?
- Can this disagreement be dealt with in a constructive and mutually beneficial manner?
- Is the conflict the result of misinformation or poor communication?
- What resources can be used in resolving the differences?

## **ADVISOR CONCERNS**

Specific Examples: Advisor is avoided; advice is not heeded; advisor is overwhelmed by responsibility and task; advisor is assuming leadership function; there is conflicting advice/disagreements between two or more advisors.

Questions to consider:

- Is the advisor well versed on the group's background, goals and procedures?
- Is the role and function of the advisor determined in consultation with the leaders and members?
- Does the advisor make use of resources: references, supervisors, other group advisors, the Student Life Assistants--Activities?
- Will the advisor allow the group to determine its own goals even if they disagree with his/her own?
- Does the advisor enjoy working with the group – why or why not?
- Does the advisor allow and encourage questions of his/her advice and suggestions?
- What method of feedback or evaluation is available to the advisor? Who provides it?

*Adapted from "The Role of the Advisor", Colby Sawyer College, New London NH*