

KNEE GROUPS – IN TIGHT, NOT UP TIGHT

*some experiences with
a new technique for
improving workshop
communications*

A Knee Group is a small discussion group of four to six people seated in a circle of chairs pulled so closely together that the knees of the participants are touching. Its purpose is to stimulate the maximum degree of informality and closeness among the participants in a business-related situation so that a lively, productive interchange of ideas and feelings will occur in a friendly, receptive atmosphere.

We both have used with a fair degree of success over the years the variety of techniques intended to achieve the purpose stated above. Yet we are considerably excited by the results of the knee groups, improvised spontaneously to meet the needs of a specific workshop situation. We want to share with others our experiences in our initial uses of this group discussion technique.

THE FIRST EXPERIENCE

Joan reports:

I was leading one of my Nurse-Manager ACT-U-ARS (Self-Actualization Seminar) at a university program sponsored by the School of Nursing. On my second day with the participants, I was in a situation which presented a challenge requiring something different than my usual small-group techniques.

There were thirty nurses in the total group. The room in which we were meeting was furnished with comfortable chairs but no tables. I planned to use discussion sub-groups of five or six people so that the participants would relate closely to their own small group and not be distracted by the groups around them.

I asked each group to pull their chairs into a huddle – so that their knees would be actually touching. My comment to them was “Get *in* tight, not *up* tight.” Laughter and conviviality was the immediate response!

The total effect was electric – so much so that it was startling. With barriers down, these women began to communicate in a dynamic, spontaneous, intense and yet relaxed way.

Keep in mind that up to this point I had given them no specific instructions as to the purpose of the small groups. We had been meeting for several hours as a group of thirty. Yet as I now strolled from one group to the other there were meaningful communications taking place. Their knees being together literally seemed to bring their *minds* together too!

It was a real learning experience for me – and for them something new and pleasant. Each group was quite unaware of the others even though the clusters were so close to each other that I was unable to walk between the backs of the chairs. The conversations were inward, like the inclinations of the women’s heads. Even the listeners were in good communication with the talkers.

I believe that the knee group has an advantage over the roundtable, typical buzz group, or eyeball-to-eyeball techniques because the communication is initiated quite spontaneously as people pull their chairs together in huddle formation. The touching happens naturally as part of adjusting the chairs as close together as possible. The communication is physical as well as verbal. The usual warming up period is no longer in evidence.

THE SECOND EXPERIENCE

Warren reports:

On the same day that Joan was finishing her ACT-U-AR, I was beginning my part of a three-day management development program in a new plant start-up situation for one of my clients. When Joan joined me at the hotel late that first evening, it was clear that she had experienced the satisfaction of a successful innovative idea. She had been through the highly gratifying experience of being inspired to do the right thing at the right time as the result of years of preparation and professional experience.

I could have reacted that what she had done was only a minor variation of the traditional buzz group. But I was sure it was more than this, since Joan and I had been building upon the writings of Mas-

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low¹, Jourard² and others. I resolved to experiment with knee groups at once.

The next day was my first opportunity. I participated in this one myself as the self-appointed leader to explore with four other group members a plant problem posed by one of them. It was worthwhile; the group enjoyed it; the results were satisfactory, but not startling.

The following day was different. We had been discussing the value of workplace meetings with employees in the new plant. I posed as a possible discussion topic for a meeting of a department head with his new hourly employees (on a role-playing basis), "What would you like to see happen here in this new plant that you have not experienced anywhere else where you have worked?"

The knee group included three new supervisors just promoted from the union ranks at another plant of the company, and two others with some supervisory experience (one a woman). I asked one of the new supervisors with thirty years of company experience to serve as the discussion leader.

As had happened with the other knee groups, discussion began in a jocular, laughing vein as they pulled their chairs and knees together. And the discussion simply continued spontaneously. As a matter of fact, the leader had no opportunity to even pose the discussion topic. And even though (or because?) I had repeated that discussion topic twice, what did they talk about? A more immediate production-related plant situation!

POINT 1

Significant is the fact that even though instructed by the outside authority figure what subject to discuss, they went charging off on their own — immediately — on a highly-relevant subject raised at once by a member of the group and

accepted by the others. No one bothered to say, "Hey, that's not what we were told to talk about."

POINT 2

Midway through the discussion, one of my co-leaders in the program unexpectedly began to circulate around the room taking handfuls of hard candy out of a noisy paper bag and placing the candy at each person's table position. He did this for everyone, for those who were seated at their places as observers as well as for those whose table places were empty because they were participating in the knee group located in the vee between the two tables.

At first I was mildly disturbed. I expected this extraneous activity to be a distraction and possibly affect the results of the knee group discussion. Quite the contrary! No one seemed to pay the slightest attention to this occurrence.

After the discussion had been concluded, I asked for a show of hands in answer to my question, "How many of you noticed when the candy was being placed on the tables?" Everyone not in the knee group raised his hand.

But only two of the five discussants had even noted the event at all. Even the appointed leader of the group had not observed it. This in spite of the fact that the candy had been placed on one table in a spot not more than twenty inches from the side of his face!

Surprising? Not really. But it does serve to underscore the efficiency of the knee group in securing concentrated attention and communication.

POINT 3

Finally I asked every person to write on a sheet of paper his estimate of the length of time consumed by the knee group discussion. The average estimate of the observers was 19 minutes. The

average of the discussion participants was 14.5 minutes. The actual measured time was 20 minutes. Again, not surprising; but this result provides additional evidence of the intense involvement generated within the group.

SUMMARY

Since these first two experiences we have utilized knee groups in other situations where they could be expected to serve the purpose of maximizing the productive results of small group discussions. In each instance our conviction has deepened that the knee group technique is unique in securing:

1. Better results with group efforts in problem solving
2. Concentrated attention and interest
3. Maximum stimulation of thinking
4. Effective use of time
5. Productive participation and contribution
6. Satisfying personal involvement
7. Action-oriented results

Perhaps others have used a technique similar to the knee group — perhaps exactly the same, involving the physical as well as the mental contact. If so, we have not been aware of it. We are referring here to techniques for use in the world of work, where day-to-day utilization of people in their normal opportunities for group interaction is often so wasteful, unimaginative and unproductive.

In any event we urge others to try using the knee group as we have described it. And we certainly would like to receive reports from those who do experiment with it, describing the group situation and the degree of success achieved.

REFERENCES

1. Maslow, A. H., "Toward a Psychology of Being," Van Nostrand, 1961.
2. Jourard, S. M., "The Transparent Self," Van Nostrand, 1964.