

# THE NASA GAME

*exploring dynamics  
of group activities*

The presentation of semi-structured material in a conference setting on how groups are formed, the way in which decisions are made, and the impact of the influence roles can be interesting and informative. However, this setting is not dynamic enough. Such an approach tends to underplay the dynamic processes that occur when individuals interact in a group situation. These processes are difficult to describe. Films are helpful, but they, too, lack the necessary ego involvement. Case problems are useful, but suffer from the same void. Role playing is an effective technique in that it can and does provide opportunities to explore the dynamics of the group process. As a matter of fact, the approach described below involves many features of role playing.

## THE APPROACH

A tool I have found useful in giving individuals an opportunity to explore their actions in a group situation is the NASA Game (National Aeronautic and Space Administration). The game can be introduced in situations where there are between eight and ten group members. It is possible to have more than one group engage in the NASA Game at once. However, each group should have a resource person to provide feedback.

The exercise goes like this:

1. Individuals are part of a space crew and have crashed on the Moon 200 miles from the mother ship. Fifteen given items have been left undamaged.

2. Each individual is to review the items and list them in order of priority, i.e., rank them from 1 (high priority) to 15 (low priority). This usually takes ten or fifteen minutes.

3. A group consensus form is then placed on the table. Each group is to reach agreement on an order or priority of items. Participants are asked not to:

- a. View disagreement as conflict;
- b. Agree for the sake of agreement;

- c. Reach consensus by voting on items (although usually this approach is resorted to).

This phase of the exercise should take from an hour to an hour and a half.

## THE ACTION

The activity generally begins with individuals trying to gain acceptance of their priorities while the degree of involvement varies. Use of this technique with eight groups of supervisors and three groups of evening division college students has resulted in some interesting experiences:

1. Always a struggle for leadership. Nature of struggle varies from the out and out power grab to more subtle approaches.

2. The group generally divides as follows: A majority, a minority, and a few non-committed individuals.

3. The majority tries to push hard, not only for its point of view, but also to get the "job done." They use the task-oriented approach to get acceptance of their views.

4. Those who want to compromise or slow down and discuss what is happening (the whys of what is being done, e.g., question the value of an item), are often overrun.

5. The majority may go through the motions of listening to the minority, but in reality pays no attention to what the minority has to say (which may be meaningful but contrary to what the majority want to do).

6. In one situation where a member of the majority was also acting as a "policeman," i.e., trying to enforce the rules, the majority ignored his actions except in those instances where the rules operated to their advantage.

7. In another group the individual who took leadership role literally rammed his list through the group.

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Minority objected strongly, but others paid no attention, even though they also disagreed with the leader's approach. They did not want to offend him. The leader, who imagined himself to be very democratic, was surprised to learn that the group members had entirely different perceptions. This proved to be a traumatic experience for him.

8. There is usually much search for structure or definition, e.g., a group tends to defer to individuals having either military or law enforcement background, and feel that they are better qualified to deal with the task at hand.

9. At some time during a discussion, a group member may point out that changing the listing or order of items does not mean that items will be left behind. This attempt to overcome road blocks is largely ignored, as there is great ego involvement.

10. The group generally has no difficulty in reaching agreement on item having highest priority, but have trouble with others. Ulti-

mately group agrees to go to the bottom of the list and work up. Finally, they work on those items where they can reach agreement quickly and save the "Tough Ones" for later.

11. Typical comments which are used by majority to persuade others to agree are:

- a. "We are running out of time."
- b. "Don't be so obstinate."
- c. "Do we all agree? Okay, let's put it down." (Even though all may not agree.)

12. Once the group completes the listing of priorities, the correct answers are read to them. Each individual is asked to rate how close both their original list and the group listing were to the given answers. This gives the observer or resource person an opportunity to ask how those individuals who changed their listings felt. Many respond that they really didn't go along, but did not want to be seen as "blockers" — wanted to be part of the group.

## OTHER APPROACHES

Once group consensus is reached, there are variations that can be introduced, for example:

- 1. Use flip chart to record the order of priority of each individual, that of the group, and the given answers. Compare.
- 2. Have individuals complete a questionnaire indicating how each felt about his performance and the amount of influence he thought he exerted. The responses can also be charted and compared.

## CONCLUSION

The activity described is an excellent setting for a discussion on decision making re: perceptions of situations; inputs both demonstrable and inferred; risks as perceived; alternatives; and the weighing of other alternatives in relation to a situation — the risk environment of organizations.

In addition, participants have an opportunity to get immediate feedback on their actions and the impact of such action on others. This approach provides an opportunity to develop new insights in one's behavior.

## CITIES WITH SUBSTANTIAL UNEMPLOYMENT REACH ALL-TIME LOW IN '68

The year 1968 closed with only six of the Nation's 150 major manpower centers remaining in the six percent or above substantial unemployment classification.

This is the lowest number since the U.S. Department of Labor began its present system in 1955 of classifying the extent of unemployment in the 150 most populous areas.

The six areas now with substantial unemployment are Muskegon-Muskegon Heights, Mich.; Wheeling, W.Va.; Fresno and Stockton, Calif.; and Mayaguez and Ponce, P.R.

Below is a comparison table showing the number of manpower centers having

unemployment of six percent or more for each of the years since 1955:

<u>1955</u>	<u>1956</u>	<u>1957</u>	<u>1958</u>	<u>1959</u>
19	20	24	83	32
<u>1960</u>	<u>1961</u>	<u>1962</u>	<u>1963</u>	<u>1964</u>
51	60	41	38	29
<u>1965</u>	<u>1966</u>	<u>1967</u>	<u>1968</u>	
19	8	9	6	

During this 14-year period manpower centers having substantial unemployment included such areas as Los Angeles, San Francisco, Chicago, Baltimore, Detroit, Buffalo, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. None of these, however, are currently listed.