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DTU workbook

Dick, Bob, and Dalmau, Tim (1992) *Discussing the undiscussable: a workbook for improving group effectiveness and openness*. Workbook for a workshop conducted at the 2nd World Congress on Action Learning, Brisbane.

This is a workbook-guided activity [1] which can be used by a group of people to identify some of the unstated rules which hinder useful openness, and begin to develop a more constructive style of operation.

Some comments which apply only to the original formatting have been removed.

Please note: the preamble which follows is a necessary part of this workbook. The activity will work more effectively, and you will get more out of it, if you

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1. The original process used in this workbook was designed by Tim Dalmau, and modified by Bob Dick for use in activities drawing on the concepts of Argyris. This workbook was developed initially for the workshop *Managing difficult individuals and groups* held in Brisbane 29-31 January 1992, and revised for the Action Learning Congress, Brisbane, 14-17 July 1992. Some of the types of undiscussable information used in the early steps of the activity we owe to Torrey Orton.

understand the purpose and process. The following sections are to help you to do this.

Background

Humans are social beings who spend much of the time in small groups of one type or another—families, work teams, friendship groups, and the like. The productivity and happiness of people therefore depends, among other things, on the groups they are in and the way those groups operate. Changing the operating style of a group can sometimes do a lot to increase the effectiveness and the joy of the group members.

So it is useful if group members are able to make informed judgments about the way the group operates, and agree on changes if that is necessary. They are more likely to do this if they *understand* how the group operates, and how its operating style supports or undermines effectiveness and satisfaction.

When they have developed an adequate understanding, group members can usually reach agreement on how to operate. They are also then more likely to choose a style which benefits the group collectively and all of its members.

Unfortunately, this is surprisingly difficult to achieve.

It is as if group members obey a complex set of rules. The rules are often unstated. In fact, often the group members are not aware of them. Under the circumstances, it is hard for group members to know what rules would be better changed. Many groups, in fact, do not know what information they would need to devise a better set of rules.

As if this were not enough, some of those rules *forbid* the mention of certain types of information. These are strong taboos. Other rules, as Chris Argyris [2] has

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2.   For example, C. Argyris (1985), *Strategy, change and defensive routines*. Boston: Pitman. Argyris (1990), *Overcoming organisational defences: facilitating organisational learning*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon

pointed out, forbid people from mentioning that there *are* taboos. Argyris calls it the cover-up of the cover-up.

No doubt these rules develop for good reason. Perfect frankness about everything is hardly possible, and of questionable benefit. Some of the taboos, however, prevent people from telling us what we need for understanding their actions. Misunderstandings are common and often unresolvable. The most damaging aspect of the rules preventing open discussion is that they hinder the giving of accurate feedback. Understand how the group operates is thereby hindered, and improvement made difficult or impossible.

In short, tacit rules place groups in a difficult bind. Some group rules are almost never discussed and therefore seldom negotiable. Yet unless the rules can be renegotiated, the group is stuck in its present mode of operation.

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There are a number of activities which allow group members to renegotiate the rules by which they operate, including some which we have described elsewhere. [3] These methods can help; but they suffer from the problem that some of the important issues can not be addressed because of the taboos. Any groundrule-setting or climate-setting activity, therefore, can be strengthened by being preceded by an activity such as the one described in this workbook.

Purpose of the process

The purpose of this activity is to help you to identify information which is relevant to group operation but is hard to discuss. There is no requirement that you will actually reveal the undiscussable information. You may decide to do so, but that is not the primary aim of the activity.

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3.   For example in B. Dick (1991), *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, second edition. Brisbane: Interchange. See the chapter on "climate setting".

It is important that *you* remain free to decide what you disclose, and how you disclose it. You are therefore urged to resist any pressures to disclose information until you yourself have decided that you are freely willing to do so. If you identify the information and the results of its undiscussability, the activity will have served its purpose whether you disclose it or not.

An outline of the process

In overview, the activity has nine main sections (approximate minimum times in minutes, suitable for a 2-hour activity, are given in parentheses for each step)...

1   **Select small groups** [10 mins]. Subgroups, if required, are formed.

2   **Individually list undiscussables** [15 mins]. Some of the undiscussables are privately identified. You make a private list of items which form the basis for your individual work during the activity.

3   **Categorise undiscussables** [10 mins]. You categorise this information into three lists, which we will call the "A", "B" and "C" lists.

A   *Discussable*. These are items which you would be willing to discuss *in this group, now,* if there were sufficient reason.

B   *Potentially discussable*. These are items which you would be most reluctant to discuss in this group now, but you could imagine them becoming discussable *if certain conditions were fulfilled*.

C   *Undiscussable*. These are items which you would find very difficult to discuss in this group even under the most favourable circumstances.

All three lists are of items which are relevant to group and individual satisfaction or performance, and which are to some extent not usually discussed.

At all times throughout the activity you decide for yourself which of the items, if any, you reveal publicly.
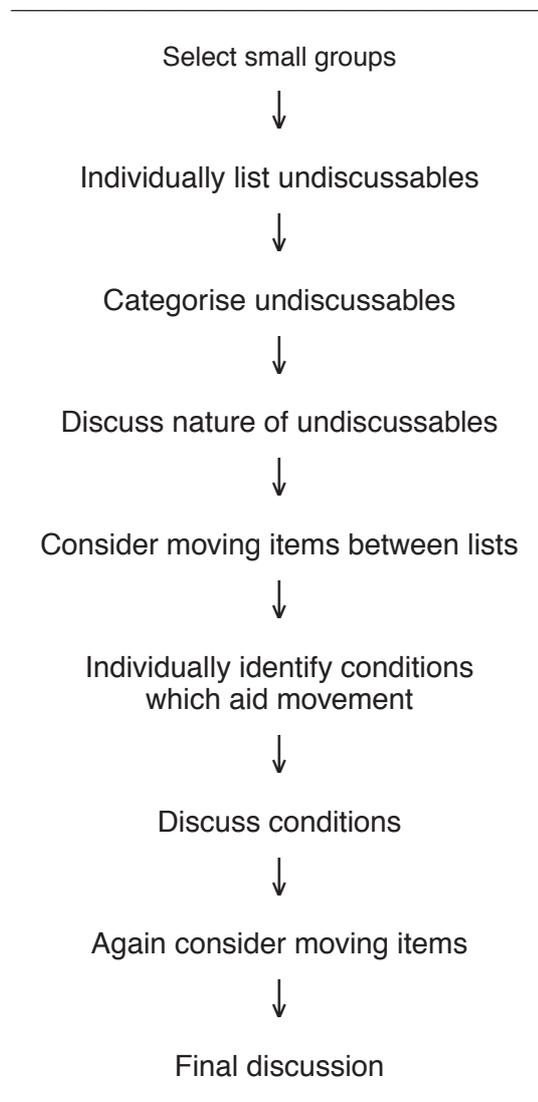
4   **Discuss nature of undiscussables** [15 mins]. There is a group discussion of the *nature* of the items on the various lists. There is no requirement that the

items themselves are discussed. This will help you add to the items on your A, B and C lists. (If the whole group is large, this may be done in subgroups.)

5   **Consider moving items between lists** [5 mins]. Working individually, you decide if there are any borderline B items which you might consider moving to the A list, or any C items which you might consider moving to the B list. It is not necessary that you actually *move* any items, only that you consider doing so. This step is preparation for the step which follows immediately...

6   **Individually identify conditions which aid movement** [5 mins]. Working individually, you identify the conditions which would make it easier to move B items to the A list (and perhaps C items to the B list).

7   **Discuss conditions** [30 mins]. The group or subgroup discusses the conditions which would do most to change some B items to A items (and perhaps C to B). An informal discussion follows on the possibility of agreeing to these conditions. In lengthier activities there may be a structured "climate setting" activity in lieu of the informal discussion.

8   **Again consider moving items between lists** [5 mins]. Working individually, you decide if there are any B items you would *now* choose to move to the A list, and perhaps C items to the B list.

9   **Final discussion** [25 mins]. There is a discussion about the *number* and *nature* of any items which were moved (not necessarily about the specific items themselves).

Overview

For ease of reference there is a summary of the process (overleaf) in the form of a flowchart...

Select small groups

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Individually list undiscussables

↓

Categorise undiscussables

↓

Discuss nature of undiscussables

↓

Consider moving items between lists

↓

Individually identify conditions
which aid movement

↓

Discuss conditions

↓

Again consider moving items

↓

Final discussion

Conditions

Throughout the activity, three important conditions apply...

1   *The lists are private.* The lists of discussables and undiscussables remain private. Your own lists are for your use only.

2   *You decide what to discuss.* You decide what, and to what extent, you discuss any of the items on your lists. (You will find that the nature of an item is often discussable when the item itself is undiscussable, but you decide the extent to which you discuss even the nature of the items.)

3   *You decide what to move.* You decide which items, if any, you move from list to list. In any event, recognising what makes an item easier or harder to move is important; it matters less whether or not you actually move any items. In the spirit of these conditions, you are encouraged to treat the instructions in this workbook as *invitations*, not as commands. If there is a facilitator for the activity, treat her instructions too as invitations.

A word about openness

It is not the purpose of this workbook to achieve, or even encourage, *complete honesty and openness*. Although we think that *might* be a useful end result under some circumstances, we do not believe it is achievable. And when people claim (and perhaps believe) that they are more open than they really are, then problems multiply. In particular, the inevitable buried issues become almost impossible to disinter even when it is crucial for group effectiveness or satisfaction.

To our mind, it is more helpful to accept that complete honesty is an unachievable ideal, and to acknowledge that there are many powerful barriers to achieving it.

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Other concepts will be introduced at appropriate points throughout the workbook. It takes you through the steps in sufficient detail that you can work without a facilitator if someone is prepared to coordinate the activities of subgroups, and monitor the time.

Using this workbook

This is your own copy of the workbook, to guide you through the activity. You may write in it as you wish; and take it with you later.
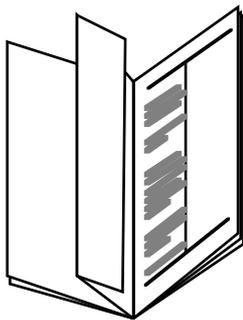
Throughout this workbook there are pages you can use as worksheets. If you fold a sheet backwards down the centre, you will be able to see it while you work on a following page—see the ⇦ diagram at the left. That will sometimes be useful.

A note for facilitators

The process used in the workbook can be facilitated without using the workbook. If you are familiar with the concepts of Argyris and Schön, and have reasonably good facilitation skills, this can be a very effective way of doing it.

There are a number of ways in which the activity can be augmented, described below...

Initial reflection on group activity

For the initial reflection in step 2, you can substitute the two-column analysis which Argyris uses. Participants are given pages containing two columns. They choose critical incidents from the life of the group they are analysing, and record what was actually said and done in the right hand column. They then record in the left hand column what went through their mind at each step of the interactions they analysed.

Conditions for openness

The step at which people consider the conditions which help openness can be developed into a full-fledged climate-setting activity such as that described in other documents we have prepared. [4]   A brief version for use in small groups might look something like this...

1   Individuals list problem behaviours in groups (that is, behaviours which interfere with group effectiveness or which reduce the satisfaction of group members)

2   Small groups collate this material, then use some form of voting to determine priorities. (If people are given multiple votes, and discouraged from voting for their own offerings, agreement on the top priorities usually occurs easily)

3   Taking items in order of priority, group members in discussion devise groundrules which would eliminate or discourage the problem behaviour. About 4 or 5 groundrules are usually appropriate

4   If there are multiple sub-groups, each group reports to the others. Groups are encouraged to add to their list from the lists of the other groups

After final discussion

The later steps of the activity can be strengthened by providing input on relevant skills. Facilitators practised in Argyris' approach can encourage the combination of advocacy and enquiry which Argyris uses. Those who are familiar with the literature on considerate assertion may prefer to substitute this.

Timing

The minimum time for the activity as written is about 2 hours; the times for each step are given in the outline of the process above. It can be more comfortably done in 3 hours, and can easily be expanded to occupy half a day or a day.

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4.   For example Bob Dick (1991), *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, second edition. Chapel Hill, Qld: Interchange. Chapter 5 contains material on climate setting, and a detailed process for it.

The workbook

The workbook begins on the next page. Before you begin, if you are working in an unfacilitated activity, agree on timing for each step. Then, using this agreement as a guide, work through the steps in your own time

1   Select small groups

This step is used if you are choosing small groups from within a larger group

Small groups containing between 3 and 5 people seem to be most effective in this activity. Unless the whole group is very small, therefore, subgroups are probably warranted

If the people in the small group know each other well, this gives them better information to work with, and often better transfer of what they learn to their existence outside the activity. On the other hand, it does make it harder for people to experiment with new behaviours — their habitual behaviours are harder to change.

Groups of relative strangers suffer from the opposite problem: it may be more difficult to develop good information, and to transfer it to the outside world, but group members will probably find it easier to develop new ways of addressing the undiscussable.

You may want to take this into account as you form groups. One way of deciding is as follows...

> *If there are intact teams*, or small groups of people who know one another, the small groups can be formed on that basis. Teams larger than 5 can be split into two or more smaller teams
>
> Alternatively, *if most people in the large group do not know each other well*, it may be better to form groups of those people who know each other least well

In any event, it is important to avoid groups which are "leftovers": those who weren't quick enough off the mark to form a group that suited them. Try to form small groups, each of which is an effective small group for the activity. Unless you are working exclusively with intact teams or the like, aim for as much diversity as you can. It is better if the whole group or team takes responsibility for deciding which small groups work together for the remainder of the exercise.

The easiest way to do this is for people to move into tentative groups, and then swap members between the groups until the best possible mix is obtained

2   Individually list undiscussables

In which you work individually to develop a list of the information which you find difficult to discuss openly in group settings

2.1 Choose a group to focus on

You are working in a small group for this exercise: I'll call it the *present group*. If this small group is one where you know the other members well, compile your list for this group

If not, choose some other group where you do know all the members well. Then answer for both the other group and the present group

2.2 Reflect on what happens in the group you have chosen

Work individually and without talking

Think about the activities the chosen group typically does, and the way people in it typically behave. Try to recall specific incidents and specific in as much detail as you can

As you begin to recollect what happens in the group, pay particular attention to those things you would notice, but would not mention to the other group members. Give particular attention to things which might annoy you, or distract you, or disturb you in some way, but which you would be unlikely to talk about

In particular, note those things that might annoy you or others, or might hinder the groups' activities. If you wish, jot down ideas below as they occur to you. (This list won't be explicitly used; its purpose is to prepare your mind for the step which follows)

2.3 Compile tentative list

Continue to work individually and without talking to begin to compile a list of hard-to-discuss information

What information would you find it hard to discuss in the group?— What types of thoughts about the group or the people in it would you be reluctant to say aloud? As you think of something, write it in the space at the right

You may find it useful to include information about things such as the following...

- Attitudes towards yourself

- Your feelings and thoughts

- Assumptions you form about what is happening in the group, or about the motives of group members

- Your reactions towards characteristics of individuals (age, sex, ethnic origins, social class, education, and the like)

- Behaviour which annoys you

- The competence or style or mannerisms of the people

- People or activities or actions that you like or don't like

Make as long a list as you can in the time available. (If you find this hard, don't be concerned. There will be a later opportunity to add to the list)

(This page is blank [apart from this note] so that a following worksheet falls on the right hand page, for easier access in later steps. Use it for extra notes or working space if you wish)

3   Categorise undiscussables

In which you choose items from the previous step which fit into the three lists

Continue to work individually and without talking

Fold the previous page down the centre so that you can see your list while you work on this page

As you read through the list, look out for specific examples of things which would be hard to discuss

Categorise them into the three lists...

A **Discussable**; possibly hard to discuss, but you would be willing to discuss it in your present small group now

B **Potentially discussable**: you can imagine discussing it in the present group under some conditions, but not just yet

C **Undiscussable**: items that you expect to remain very hard to discuss in this group no matter how favourable the conditions

Now look back over your three lists, and mark in some way those items which it would be most useful to discuss

A   Discussable

B   Potentially discussable

C   Undiscussable

4   Discuss nature of undiscussables

In which you compare notes on the nature of the undiscussables, at the same time adding to your individual A, B and C lists

4.1 Look back over your A, B and C lists, noting the *type* of information which appears there. (You can use the space at the right as a working space if you wish)

4.2 During a brief discussion (whole-group if facilitated, otherwise small group) inform other group members of the type of information

Note: You are not revealing the items, only their general nature

You may be able to add to your own A, B or C lists with items suggested by what other people say

5   Consider moving items between lists

In which you identify items which can be moved from list to list

Working individually, examine your B list. Are there one or two items there which you could almost move to your A list? Mark them in some way. If you were to move one item, which one would it be?

You are not required to *move* any items (though you may do so if you wish), only mark them. Your task is to identify those items which are more discussable, and those which are less discussable

Similarly, are there one or two C items which could almost be shifted to the B list? If you were to move one item, which one would it be?

6   Individually identify conditions which aid movement

In which you analyse the movable items, and identify what it is that makes them movable

6.1 Note the characteristics of the more discussable items

Continue to work individually and without talking

Thinking about moving items has probably drawn your attention to the differences between A, B and C items (particularly between A and B items). What *are* the differences? Jot down your ideas at the right

To help you answer this question, consider what it was that made items movable? How did they differ from the items which were least movable?

6.2 Identify the conditions in a group which make items more discussable

Work individually and without talking, focus on the A and B lists

What is it about a *group* that helps to make an item discussable?—What are the conditions within a group?

Jot down your ideas at the right

At the next step you will be invited to discuss these ideas in the large group or small group

7   Discuss conditions

In which you compare notes with other group members on the conditions which would make it easier for you to discuss the items on your lists, particularly the B items

7.1 Develop a group list of the conditions

On a sheet of butcher paper, list the conditions. A procedure for doing this is as follows... Each person in turn contributes the most important item from her list that is not already listed. Continue going around the group until their individual lists are exhausted, or you run out of time

7.2 Individually choose the most important conditions

Working individually and without talking, from the "conditions" list choose the 3 most important ☐ ☐ ☐ conditions, *excluding* your own offerings from your chosen three. (Your facilitator may change this number of items)

"Important" means those conditions which would make it easiest for you to discuss the items on your lists, especially the B list, especially those which could help to improve the way the group operates

7.3 Agree on the most important conditions

In the large or small group, use a vote to agree on group priorities for the conditions. A quick way of doing this is for each person to place a check mark against each of her three chosen conditions. Someone then tallies up the check marks

7.4 Briefly discuss your willingness to try to observe the conditions

Each person who wishes to, speaking as an individual, identifies the condition(s) that she is willing to try to observe. You are not required to participate unless you choose to

8 Again consider moving items

In which you reconsider the location of items on your B (and perhaps your C) list

Continue to work individually and without talking. Fold the previous pages so that you can see your previous A, B and C lists while you work here

In the light of the conditions agreed by the group, are there B items which you are now willing to move to your A list (and perhaps C items which can be moved to the B list)? **Note**: you are not required to move any items unless you choose to do so. We urge you to resist any pressures from others

As a reminder, the three lists are...

A   Discussable; possibly hard to discuss, but you would be willing to discuss it in your present small group now

B   Potentially discussable: you can imagine discussing it in the present group under some conditions, but not just yet

C   Undiscussable: items that you expect to remain very hard to discuss in this group no matter how favourable the conditions

A   Discussable

B   Potentially discussable

C   Undiscussable

Are there items it would be useful to discuss in the group? If so, mark them in some way

Please read this...

A small group as a self-improving system

Think of a small group as a system of rules, actions, and results...

implicit rules → actions → results for individuals and group

Each group member obeys a set of rules which dictate what she may or may not say or do. Her actions in doing so have various effects, for better or worse, on herself and the other group members.

However, the rules are mostly implicit. Many of the results are undiscussable. And their undiscussability is undiscussable in turn. The group and its members are thus locked into a system which is not as effective as it might be.

For the rules to be renegotiated, two conditions are required...

the rules are made explicit

group members are able to give feedback on the results of anything said or done

The resulting feedback can then be used to critique the existing rules, and renegotiate them...

implicit rules → actions → results for individuals and group

No matter how effective (or ineffective) the group is, it is then able to improve its performance over time. It can also find ways of pursuing its collective goals in such a way that the individuals find it satisfying. It has become a self-improving system.

9   Final discussion

In which the group discusses the nature of the items, the conditions, and the likely effects

9.1 Small group discussion

The small group briefly discusses...

- the nature of the items on the different lists

- the conditions which the group has agreed to try to observe, and the result this had on the categorisation of items

9.2 Large group discussion

A brief final discussion of the activity and its results is held in the large group, preferably facilitated.