

PAPER  
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## Small group decision making

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Dick, Bob (1990) *Small group decision-making: a robust version of Heller's group feedback analysis*. Chapel Hill: Interchange.

Revised from an earlier drafts written in 1988. There have been minor corrections since 1990.

### Introduction

Group feedback analysis or GFA is a small-group data-collection procedure devised by Frank Heller.<sup>1</sup> As he originally described it, the researcher (Fig. 1) ...

- prepared a set of questions, for example on group effectiveness;
- administered them to a group,
- scored the responses, typically to calculate some form of average and some measure of the spread of the responses,
- fed these results back to the group,

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1. Frank A Heller (1969), Group feedback analysis: a method of action research, *Psychological Bulletin*, 72, 108-117.

- with the help of the group, interpreted the meaning of the responses,
- and then assisted the group in planning for change in the light of the results.

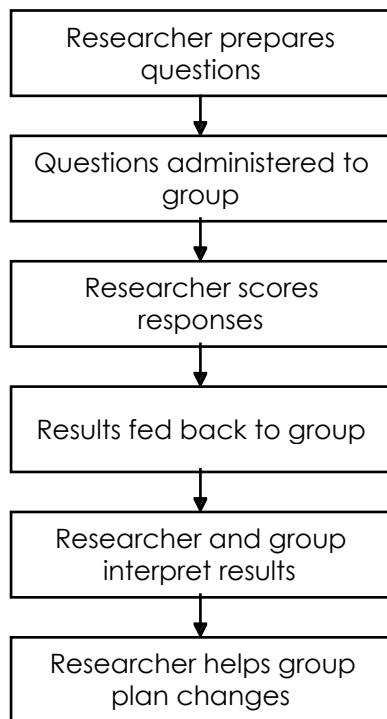


Fig. 1

A research-oriented version of group feedback analysis as used by Heller. Although the primary motivation of the researcher is to produce research outcomes, the results are also used as a basis for action planning

This technique is an example of what is often called action research.<sup>2</sup> That is, Heller used it to produce both action and research outcomes.

In this form, research outcomes are primary and action outcomes are secondary. It is possible to design action research processes which reverse these priorities. The usefulness of GFA as a participative small-group diagnostic process can be increased by doing so. This requires changing it only in relatively minor ways.

As Heller used GFA, good research data can be collected participatively and reasonably economically. In a typical use, the questionnaire is completed just before

2. See e.g. Alf W Clark, ed. (1976), *Experimenting with organisational life: the action research approach*, Plenum, NY.

a lunch break. This enables the researcher to analyse and summarise the results during the break. The results can then be fed back to the informants and interpreted by them during the afternoon. It is common for the discussion to be tape-recorded for later content analysis.

## **GFA and action research**

In fact, Heller has used GFA for interventions.<sup>3</sup> It can be viewed as a small-group equivalent of survey feedback,<sup>4</sup> another diagnostic procedure where data are collected from and fed back to a much larger number of informants.

GFA is a much more interactive procedure than survey feedback, where participation is limited by the numbers involved. GFA collects data in a dialogue between researcher and informant. It therefore offers what is in many ways a stronger diagnostic tool than that provided by a large-scale survey.

With a growing interest in procedures for organisational and community improvement,<sup>5</sup> there is a demand for ways of intervening in social systems, particularly for ways which minimise dependence on an outside consultant. GFA has a number of features which make it easy to use as a small-group process. In this paper, I describe a number of such variations.

The procedures described here have been developed for use by people with relatively little small-group experience. They are suitable for use by a variety of people, for example ...

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3. FA Heller (1976), Group feedback analysis as a method of action research, In AW Clark, *Experimenting with organisational life*, previously cited.
  4. See e.g. DA Nadler (1977), *Feedback and organisation development using data based methods*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass; or Hollis W Peter and RN Dick (1977), Changing attitudes in a mail exchange, *Work and People*, 3, 37-53.
  5. I refer to the growing and now established literature in organisation development and community development. See e.g., Wendell L French and Cecil H Bell, Jr. (1978), *Organisation development: behavioural science interventions for organisation improvement (Second edition)*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ; Jack K Fordyce and Raymond Weil (1979), *Managing with people (Second edition): A manager's handbook of organisation development methods*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass; Jack Rothman (1974), *Planning and organising for social change: action principles from action research*, Columbia University Press, NY.
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- people enrolled in tertiary courses<sup>6</sup> doing field work in communities and organisations as part of their practical training;
- trainers who do most of their training within structured and relatively formal training sessions;
- managers who wish to bring about some improvement within the work-team they are responsible for;
- self-help groups who are unhappy with their present method of functioning but are uncertain what to do about it.

Such people often feel most confident if they have a detailed, step-by-step description of a procedure: witness the success of good cookbooks such as *Managing with people*.<sup>7</sup> Cookbooks can be extremely valuable, particularly when they are as clear and well planned as *Managing with people*.

However, I also think a good recipe is considerably strengthened by having a cook who knows something of the theory of cookery. Without such a knowledge, what do you do when a recipe doesn't work or some ingredients aren't available? I have therefore provided a step-by-step recipe, but also included a discussion of some of the situational factors that have to be taken into account. I also offer some reasons for the modifications to the usual design.

So I hope you will treat the procedures I describe as some examples of what can be done. When you think GFA is the technique you are looking for, I assume you will design your own procedure to suit your own situation. If you apply the actual procedures described here without modification it may be that you haven't thought enough about the exercise before starting the action.

I will therefore begin by discussing some of the factors which may have to be taken into account. I follow this with a detailed, step-by-step description of one

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6. Many of these ideas developed in using them with members of university classes I teach. I am grateful to these many people. They are too numerous to name.

7. Fordyce and Weil, *Managing with people*, cited previously.

way of conducting GFA. In doing this I explore some of the variations which are possible. Finally, I describe some particular applications and discuss some of the ways in which GFA can be combined with other intervention techniques.

## Design issues

Group diagnostic processes have two main purposes. The first is to carry out a form of audit or evaluation: to answer the question "How well are we doing?" The "we" may be the group which is the focus of the diagnosis, but may also include the wider organisation or community of which the group is part. The second is to give a suitable starting point for planning what to do about it.

The success of the process depends upon a variety of conditions ...

- the relationships (formal and informal) that exist between its members;
- the extent of their commitment to their goals;
- their attitudes towards change;
- the extent of their involvement in the change program;
- their trust in other people or groups they depend on;
- how successful they expect the change program to be;
- their communication and problem-solving skills;

to name just a few of them.

Some of these factors are important enough to threaten the success of the exercise. When you plan any process for diagnosis or intervention you have two choices in dealing with problems. Either you choose the processes to minimise the problems; or you do something else to deal with the problems before using the process. Doing something else means modifying the process, or adding other processes to it.

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Unfortunately you can't always know ahead of time how well the prior conditions for success are met. The safest course is to choose a process which minimises the problems as far as possible. The more robust the design you choose in the first place then the less the need for revision, and the less chance of something going wrong.

A useful notion is that of overdetermination, otherwise known as "belt-and-braces" design. Each process has some key events which have to take place if the activity is to work, or some key problems to avoid. Play doubly safe: make sure that there are at least two different features to bring about each key event or prevent each key problem.

For example, suppose you are using GFA with an intact workteam, leader included. One danger is that the leader may be tempted to steer events in the direction she<sup>8</sup> would like them to go. What can you do? If you seat her at the back of the group it is harder for the group members to take her non-verbal reactions into account. Adopting "US Navy rules" — the more junior members in status speak first — further helps.

The design described later is replete with features intended to avoid the most common group process problems.

To help you understand the reason behind some of the design features, I describe below a simple model of process dynamics. It assumes that the one of the most important functions of any process is to manage two different aspects of group dynamics, reflecting two opposing tendencies at work in each of the members.<sup>9</sup> One is disruptive competition. The other is disruptive cooperation, perhaps better described as conformity. Each of them can interfere with group effectiveness.

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8. To avoid both the sexism of common usage and the awkwardness of many of the common unisex constructions, I use feminine gender to refer to people of any sex.

9. These are very nearly the small group analogue of the two motives identified by P. Berger, and discussed under the title *homo duplex* by such writers as Anton Zijderveldt, *The abstract society: a cultural analysis of our time*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1972.

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## Competition, conformity and power

In such a competitive culture as ours there is a tendency in each of us to argue for our own interests and ideas. In this way we set out to prove to others and ourselves that we are worthy of respect. We may therefore expend more energy pursuing our own goals than pursuing group goals.

Acting in opposition to this is our wish to be liked and to be accepted by the other members of the group. We may sometimes be unwilling to challenge dangerous ideas or confront errors in case we harm our relationship with others. This may result in energy being directed more toward supporting the current group mythology than toward success in the group task. Irving Janis<sup>10</sup> has called this groupthink.

These two forces, competition and cooperation, are often allowed to operate in an uncontrolled manner. You might expect them to cancel each other out (and indeed they may within a well-designed process). But often, they amplify each other's effects. Those group members who are used to operating forcefully in the group may advance their own ideas relatively thoughtlessly; those lower in status or less assured may fail to challenge the errors they perceive.

As an example, you can reduce conformity by ensuring that enough is known about everyone's point of view. You can begin by collecting information from individuals without giving much opportunity for discussion. Then use this material as the background for discussion. Anyone wishing to argue for an individual view then has to do so in the knowledge that other group members think otherwise.

Competition and cooperation usually operate simultaneously. Separated in time they can be used to counter each other. Providing more opportunity for one or the other will then allow the relative contribution of each to be varied and

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10. Irving Janis (1972), *Victims of groupthink: a psychological study of foreign policy decisions and fiascoes*, Houghton-Mifflin, Boston.

brought into balance.<sup>11</sup> The balance can be enhanced by having the group deliberately try to use a cooperative rather than competitive style. Agreement on mutual goals makes this more likely.

These same devices also help to reduce the effects of power, formal or informal, in a group. By themselves they may not be enough, but they can make a substantial difference. The main difficulty is that those who have power are often not aware how much of it they exercise. Those that have it exercised over them may for one reason or another feel unable to report it or even acknowledge it. In short, power is invisible downward. The behaviour of both those who exercise it and those who suffer it helps to conceal it or appear to justify it. The greater the exercise of power, the greater the need for a structure which manages it. Highly structured exercises can reduce both the effects of power and the effects of the manipulation which is often used to counter it. Anonymity also helps.

Such relationships as power are important within the group. They may also be important between the group and the rest of the social system of which it is a part. At the start of most diagnostic interventions honesty is likely to appear dangerous. To reduce the apparent risk, make the uses to which the information is to be put very clear right at the outset.

Sometimes when power is known to be an issue an outside consultant may be a useful investment. Outsiders can afford to say what needs to be said. This advantage of an outsider is nullified, however, unless she is trusted by all. If there is no consultant (or to an extent even if there is), a group that has some control over the procedure will be more likely to feel confident about the outcome.

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11. My ideas on this first developed from thinking about such processes as search (see note 14 below) and Delphi (see, for example J. Scott Armstrong (1978), *Long-range forecasting: from crystal ball to computer*, Wiley, NY). I have talked about them at greater length in *Helping groups to be effective: skills, processes and concepts for group facilitation*, Chapel Hill: Interchange, 1987.

It also helps if the group members think there is a good chance that action will follow their provision of information. Participants often imagine (and often for good reason) that there is little likelihood that the information will be acted on. If so there is little point in taking risks. That remains true even when the risks are not great.

When the group is one at the workface, union involvement is essential. To be sure of securing union cooperation, it seems to me that it must be right from the start of the planning. And it must be real and not just token involvement. Union officials and management often have cause to mistrust each other. Because of the invisibility of power, and the element of confrontation that usually accompanies management-union communication, managers can be expected to be very poor judges of how trustworthy they appear to rank-and-file employees and union officials.

It is unfortunate that union involvement requires a lot of preparation. Union perceptions of rank-and-file attitudes are quite often as inaccurate as those of management and for partly similar reasons. A power difference again exists and is again invisible downwards. Union officials are used to speaking on behalf of rank-and-file. They have a vested interest in believing that they do it well.

One side-effect of these misperceptions is that both management and union officials are able to blame each other for rank-and-file apathy at work and in union affairs respectively. Part-time officials who are also rank-and-file employees are for these reasons often valuable members of groups during group interventions.

The skills brought by group members to the exercise may also be important. The better the communication and problem-solving skills of the group, the less likely it will be that the procedure will fail. And there are other considerations.

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### **Other considerations**

Many a group is unused to cooperative communication. A much more robust design is then needed. Group members are frequently unused to working on people problems in a problem-solving manner. To substitute for problem-solving skills the procedure will have to be carefully structured. Participants can then be led through an appropriate sequence of steps. Prior skills training may help; but if skills are lacking then other ways of making the procedure robust must be found.

When these and other problems have been anticipated, expectations can form a trap for the unwary. The risk is of raising expectations which will not be met. To compound the problem, the preparation to needed to deal with other problems may be part of the cause of unrealistic expectations. Accurate expectations may be a force for change. Unrealistic expectations lead to disenchantment. They may also provide an effective inoculation against further attempts at improvement.

Among the other issues there are two I wish to mention. One is the need for support. The other is to do with clear boundaries.

The first is related to expectations. One way to kill future involvement and change is for people in high places to torpedo the program after it gets under way. It isn't always possible to anticipate this. But there are two things that can be done. One is to secure support from the top. The other is to identify anyone who is likely to exercise a power of veto and secure their support too.

Group members will find it easier to plan effectively if they know how much room for manoeuvre they have. If there are any superordinate goals, or limits or constraints, the best time to identify them is right at the start. People will mostly accept and work within limits which are clearly identified.

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## Using GFA

In short, there is not really such an intervention as GFA. There are, rather, a set of procedures which can be threaded together and used for small-group diagnosis. On occasion these procedures allow for the preliminary collection of information, the analysis of this, its feedback to a group, and its use as a starting point for discussion. The intervention can then usefully be labelled GFA. It isn't the label that matters. It's how well the intervention meets the three sets of needs: group members, group, and surrounding social system or organisation.

Even more important is the way the procedure is chosen. GFA may be used because it seems to be the most appropriate procedure given present goals and context. If so then all may be well. Any other reason for selection is suspect.

In fact it could reasonably be argued that I've written this paper the wrong way round. You could make a case that I should start from goals and context and proceed towards a consideration of the appropriate procedures. In practice it turns out that it is very difficult (I suspect inherently impossible) to write a self-contained paper on most aspects of intervention techniques. This paper is a stopgap while we wait for someone to write the appropriate multi-volume handbook.<sup>12</sup>

In the meantime there is one way out of the dilemma. That is to try to state the criteria which indicate that GFA may be an appropriate family of interventions provided the design is sufficiently well fitted to the situation.

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12. A number of books do attempt a combination of an overall framework with descriptions of specific interventions. W. French and C.H. Bell, *Organisation development*, is perhaps the best known of them. In the field of community development, J. Rothman, *Planning and organising for social change: action principles from action research* (Columbia University Press, NY) is excellent as far as it goes. Tim Dalmau and I have a long term intention of developing documentation which classifies interventions according to a general framework. The framework itself is described in a number of places, perhaps most clearly in *A diagnostic model for selecting interventions for community and organisational change*, (Paper presented at Network '85, May 1985), Kenmore: Dalmau and Associates, 1985 (Reprinted Chapel Hill: Interchange, 1986). *Organisational analysis and diagnosis* (note 1) begins to use this to classify interventions.

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## Selection criteria

Do you have a problem whose identity is not fully understood? Or a desire to improve some aspect of group functioning, but no strong indication of where to start? Then a diagnostic procedure is in order. Is there an identifiable group of people who are likely to have the information needed to identify the problem? A small-group procedure is appropriate.

GFA is therefore likely to be an appropriate technique where diagnosis is called for, and the problem is likely to be identifiable by a defined group of people. It is most suitable when there are between about six and forty in the group, or when such a number can represent those affected.

If there is anyone outside the group who can veto any group suggestions it is important that their degree of commitment be known. If they are unprepared to give a commitment outside certain limits then these limits must be known. Similarly, if the group is part of some larger social system (such as an organisation), it is necessary for the group to know the overall goals of that system and the contribution expected from the group. When these requirements are not known then it may be possible to determine them before undertaking the intervention.

Within the constraints arising from this larger view the group members must be able to agree on their own goals before doing anything else. It is therefore desirable either that group goals are known or that is likely that they can be agreed on fairly easily. Some preliminary work on goal definition is needed if there is likely to be any difficulty about this.

Simple goal setting procedures are available. When it seems unlikely that the group will easily reach agreement on goals there are more elaborate goal setting procedures such as search. These are not described here.<sup>13</sup> If it appears that there are outside demands but they seem not be acknowledged there are other procedures which will help.<sup>14</sup>

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Similarly, it must be likely that the group will recognise the constraints within which they have to operate, or that they can be brought to do so, or that some additional exercise can precede the GFA sessions.

In addition, GFA and similar diagnostic methods seem to work best when there is some identifiable action outcome toward which the group discussion can be oriented. There must also be some likelihood that the outcome can be seen through to its conclusion.

Finally, to use GFA under some conditions is to ask too much of it. Serious unresolved conflicts within the group are an obstacle to its use. So are any other issues which concern group members deeply. In other words, the issues to be addressed must be those which the group members are currently most concerned about. If there are such issues they are best worked through first.

There may sometimes be reasons why it is important for a diagnostic session to be held despite the presence of other issues. You can then expect these other issues to interfere with the group process unless you can find some way of disposing of them. A separate exercise may be best. If this is not possible it may be that the group will agree to shelve the other issues for present purposes. But if this option is taken, it may be a hard group to work with, and the use of a consultant may be desirable. This is particularly true for unresolved conflicts.

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13. For small group goal setting see my *Helping groups to be effective* (note 11). Search is described in my *Search*, a detailed workbook for conducting brief community searches (Interchange, Chapel Hill, 1986). Search is a procedure where detailed goal setting is preceded by predictions of likely future developments, and the development of some future shared ideal amongst organisational or community members. See also Trevor Williams' *Learning to manage our futures: The participative redesign of societies in turbulent transition*, New York: Wiley, 1982.
  14. The organisation mirror, described (among other places) in Fordyce and Weil (note 5) is an example. Using it, the organisation finds out what its clients or other interested parties think of it.
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## The procedure

In the section which immediately follows I describe a step-by-step example of an intervention along the lines of GFA. For the purposes of illustration I have made certain assumptions: most of the selection criteria are probably (but not certainly) met; there is a normal degree of cooperation among group members; formal and informal power relationships exist between member; and a consultant is not present but can be called on if needed. I have further assumed that the intervention is (at least for the moment) fairly self-contained, so group goals are unlikely to have been recently defined. This is therefore the sort of procedure that might be appropriate for preliminary diagnosis of a problem confined to a defined group, and largely able to be dealt with by them and their superiors. I have set it in an industrial or commercial organisation which might be private or public. Other variations are discussed later.

### An example of the procedure

The procedure falls fairly naturally into a number of different stages.

- Preparation. This includes pre-reading for the person who is to lead the group, and group selection.
- Developing the questions. This is a self-contained exercise in itself.
- Responses. All questions are answered before there is any discussion.
- Discussion and action planning. These may be done concurrently, or separated into distinct stages. For ease of explanation they will be separated here.

An overall process of change follows a number of steps — typically diagnosis, followed by planning, followed by action, followed by evaluation. Diagnosis itself is intended to prepare for planning and action. If you want to decide how to get somewhere you have to know where you are going and where you are leaving from ...

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now —————→ goal

The development of questions is therefore preceded by components for goal-setting (the *goal* in the figure) and situation analysis (the *now*). In the descriptions to follow, situation analysis will take the form of defining the constraints under which the group must operate or chooses to operate.<sup>15</sup>

### **Facilitator preparation**

A leader has yet to be selected and given time to prepare. Because this role is quite different from what is usually understood as leadership I will use the term *facilitator*.

It will often be convenient and productive for the group to select its own facilitator. As an alternative the duties of the facilitator may be shared amongst different group members. (This is at the cost of some extra time for dealing with preliminaries.) For simplicity I will assume here that some particular person has taken on the responsibility of getting the exercise under way. There is then the chance for that facilitator to do some homework.

The main function of the person chosen is to facilitate, not to direct.<sup>16</sup> Success is to be measured by they extent to which the group members feel that the end result is one they all helped to develop and are committed to. For this to happen the outcome must reflect their real views. Each member of the group must feel able to contribute her views safely. She must feel that normal power and status differences have been left outside the group. For the duration of the exercise, all are equals.

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15. Needs and resources surveys, often used by community agencies to define their role, are an example. The needs define the agency goals. The resources define the constraints within which the needs have to be met.

16. Known as process consultation. See Edgar Schein (1969), *Process consultation: its role in organisation development*, Addison-Wesley Reading, Mass.

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It is also important for group members to listen to one another. A genuine group consensus cannot otherwise emerge. Communication has to be cooperative rather than competitive.

There are techniques which a facilitator can use to help bring about these conditions. This may require some thought and study before the exercise begins.<sup>17</sup> If the facilitator is chosen by the group there are benefits in making a selection some time before the actual GFA is done.

One difficulty will be this: It may be natural for the facilitator to assume a traditional leadership role. People may then either compete to take over that role or feel no responsibility themselves for the effectiveness of the group.

The most useful frame of mind for a facilitator is therefore one where she sees her task as that of keeping the group responsible for its own effectiveness. Some preliminary reading and practice on communication skills<sup>18</sup> can make this an easier task than it would otherwise be. Rather than directing group members to behave differently, the facilitator can report what seems to have happened.

*“John, I’ve noticed that you’ve been talking for 12 of the last 15 minutes.”*

Provided this is said in a sufficiently friendly manner most people can cope with it quite well. It almost always works if the information is specific enough.

If earlier experience has shown that this is not sufficient it may be appropriate to add a gentle suggestion.

*“If we are all to have a chance to make our opinion known, we may have to speak more briefly than that.”*

The three most usual problems in most types of group discussion seem to be ...

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17. See the section on group facilitation in my *Learning to communicate*. (note 11).

18. For a quick overview of communication skills, a good starting point is J. Narciso and D. Burkett (1975), *Declare yourself: discovering the me in relationships* (Prentice-Hall, Englewood-Cliffs, NJ, ). My *Helping groups ...* (note 11) contains a chapter on communication for group facilitators.

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- A failure to keep sufficiently to the topic.
- A tendency to argue against other people's ideas and support one's own.
- A failure to listen to other's contributions.

Each of these can usually be dealt with without too many problems. The following paragraphs deal with each in turn. I have tried to be so specific that an inexperienced facilitator can use them fairly mechanically if necessary. Later familiarity will allow them to be used more flexibly. In keeping with the belt-and-braces philosophy mentioned earlier the overall design is also planned to reduce the incidence of these problems.

Failure to keep on the topic may occur because people pursue hidden agendas. Or they may follow up ideas without concern for their relevance or otherwise. Questioning the speaker will often remedy the problem. If the talk is too general, asking for details or examples will help. Items of doubtful relevance can be dealt with by asking the speaker to give details of its relevance. This will usually either get the talk back to the issue or make its relevance clearer.

Keeping a visible record of decisions made is almost always a good idea. Speakers can be asked ...

*"Can you put that in five or six words, so that can note it down on the board?"*

Competitiveness is almost always present in such groups, often carefully disguised. It is revealed in the group's responses to suggestions from its members. If people greet new ideas with an immediate catalogue of disadvantages ("The trouble with that is ..."), then competitiveness is present. Any procedure which will allow ideas to be produced first, and evaluated only after they are thoroughly understood, will help.<sup>19</sup> Limiting initial reactions to "questions for clarification only" is useful.

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19. Some of the creative problem solving procedures are relevant, including brainstorming. See *Helping groups ...* (note 11).

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Often the most difficult problem to deal with is the use of power (which will often conceal competitive attempts to argue against other ideas). One of the facilitator's primary functions will be to equalise power within the group. The procedures described below (for example, the use of polling instead of open discussion) are often intended to deal with this. The facilitator can also encourage the group to follow the general practice of letting the most junior members speak first, before the more senior members have made their opinion known.

One of the most important contributions the facilitator can make to issues of power and competition is to be a good model of the desired behaviour. This seems likely to happen only when the facilitator avoids offering or arguing for or against any ideas (other than those to do with the actual conduct of the GFA exercise). In terms of the distinction between *content* (what is being discussed) and *process* (how it is being discussed), the facilitator addresses process issues only. Because the facilitator is thus denied a voice in the discussion, this suggests that either someone outside the group be used as facilitator, or that leadership be rotated among group members.

Listening behaviour is closely related to the extent of competitiveness in a group, and will often improve when the facilitator acts to improve cooperation. But even then some people will often not listen. The *questions for clarification* procedure is often particularly valuable, but even this will sometimes not help. When it seems that the group is going over the same ground for the third time or more, or when the group members seem to becoming polarised, poor listening is probably involved. Fortunately there is an effective procedure: no speakers are allowed to say their own piece until they have first paraphrased the previous speaker's offering, and to that speaker's satisfaction.<sup>20</sup>

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20. I do not know the source of this (and some other procedures); it is common in group work generally, where it is usual for facilitators to share their ideas and techniques freely.

## Group membership

The ideal group for an exercise is one which is composed in such a way that two conditions are satisfied:

- all points of view are represented in the membership of the group; and
- the group members will feel enough ownership for the resulting output to want something to be done about it.

The way in which this can be done will vary. It may depend on whether the problem resides in an intact group of some type and whether the group is being used as representative or a greater body of people.

In the first instance, there are two cautions. Firstly, people in the larger social system often have clear ideas about what is an intact group. It is not always safe to assume that they are correct in this. In organisations, for example, the reality may depart greatly from the fiction shown on organisation charts and the like. An intact group is one with some overriding objective and in which all members are mutually interdependent. Secondly, it is well worth checking to make sure who owns the problem you are working on. An intact group is unlikely to have a useful contribution to make unless the problem is truly theirs.

Choosing a representative group is more difficult. Often it will not be known if all views are represented until after the session is complete, when the problem is likely to be better understood than it was at the outset. It may be enough to make a deliberate attempt to identify all interests and have them represented. Caution is sometimes warranted, though. If some of these people are not in the habit of talking to each other then GFA is probably not the appropriate proce-

dure.<sup>21</sup> This is also true if they are in the habit of blaming each other for their troubles.

Depending on the nature of the likely problem there are a number of varieties of *slice groups*.<sup>22</sup> A horizontal slice is one representative of a given level within a social system. A deep slice is one where members are drawn from a wide range of levels within a narrow function. A diagonal slice, most commonly preferred, attempts to represent each level and each function within a larger social system, though not each level of each function.

Where groups are representative, it is as important that interested parties *feel* represented as that they *are* represented. Some method of election makes it more likely that this will happen. As an example, assume that a diagonal slice is being chosen from one site of a large industrial organisation. The lowest level would usually make their choices first. I think it is nearly always a good idea if the lowest level has most functions represented, in which case it might be called an L-slice.<sup>23</sup> Then as each level in turn makes its choice, it avoids each function which already has sufficient representation. If this procedure is followed, each person on the site will find that at least one member of the slice will be drawn from their level and selected by her. She will also find that at least one member will be from within her function (though perhaps chosen by someone else).

## Preliminary guidelines

People taking part in an exercise will usually agree to abide by a simple set of guidelines suggested to them. There are three guidelines which I have found

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21. You may be better off using processes which use direct confrontation. For example see some of the processes in *Managing with people* (note 7), or my *The management of conflict* (paper presented at the Melbourne OD Network conference Network '83, mimeo, Department of Psychology, University of Queensland, 1983).
22. The immediate sources for this were my friends at the Centre for Continuing Education, Australian National University. And see note 19.
23. Whenever several organisational levels are represented I prefer to use an L-shaped slice by combining a diagonal slice with a horizontal slice across the lowest level.

useful (and willingly accepted) in all or almost all types of group. Some further guidelines are useful when communication behaviours are the target.

The general guidelines <sup>24</sup> are an attempt to short-circuit some of the most common unproductive behaviours. They help to create a climate within which cooperation has some chance ...

1. Anyone affected by a problem or its likely solution, or by a likely decision, is a member of (or at least feel represented on) the problem-solving or decision-making group (or: Don't make other people's decisions for them);
2. Problems are stated as goals mutually acceptable to all those affected, and without implying blame (or: Don't blame);
3. Developing solutions is postponed until the problems they are an attempt to solve are thoroughly analysed and well understood by all concerned (or: Don't jump to solutions).

To these can be added a number of guidelines for cooperation, the most important of which are as follows.

- pursue group (not individual) goals;
- all take responsibility for group effectiveness;
- listen to all speakers and try to understand;
- share the available time among all members;
- try to build on other people's ideas rather than trying to "knock" them.

These are better developed by the group itself through some sort of exercise, rather than being declared by the group facilitator. <sup>25</sup>

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24. I have described these guidelines or "groundrules" in a variety of documents, often in a form somewhat different to that quoted here.

25. An exercise for doing this is described as climate setting in both *Helping groups* ... (note 7) and *Learning to communicate: activities, skills, techniques, models*, Interchange and University of Queensland Bookshop, St Lucia, 1986.

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## Defining goals

From this point on the description becomes step-by-step. For ease of reference I will therefore number each step serially, using a system of decimal numbering. The numbers will be given at the beginning of each step.

For ease of identification I have broken each part of the procedure into a number of different modules. Many of these are self-contained enough to be transportable. You can thus do a “cut and paste” on them to assemble them into other interventions.

1.0 Goal setting. As preparation for the later work, goals are set as follows.

- 1.1 The facilitator explains to members that, before proceeding, it is desirable that the group reach agreement on what its goals are. If the goals of the wider social system are relevant they are also mentioned here.
- 1.2 Each group member, individually and without discussion, writes down a brief statement of what she thinks the group's goals are. If this is a representative group, then the goals are those of the wider group which is represented. The facilitator explains to members the reason for this being done without discussion. If some member asks something like: “But isn't it better if we have a chance to develop our ideas through discussion?”, the facilitator can reply: “This is to give you a chance to work out your own views before hearing from the others.”
- (1.3) This step is optional. It is for use when the group is very large or when you expect there might be a wide variation in the goals people identify. People are asked to discuss their statement of goals with one or two of their neighbours, looking for agreement. They are asked to agree on a statement which sums up the agreement.
- 1.4 Each individual is asked in turn to contribute any one goal which she has listed but which is not yet written up on a public list. (If step 1.3 is included, this question is directed to the groups of two or three which compared notes). As each goal is identified the facilitator writes it up on a piece of butcher paper, a chalkboard, or the like.

It is best if the facilitator records each statement in the words used by the person contributing it. If the statement is too long for this, the facilitator can ask the person or group to restate it in five or six words. The facilitator numbers the items as she lists them, to make it easier for members to refer to them. It is also useful to leave a small margin at the left of each item for recording votes in later steps.

- 1.5 When each person (or group) has contributed a goal, members are asked if there are any goals not yet written up, but which should be there. These are added to the list.
- 2.0 Deciding priorities. The list developed in step 1 will often be quite long. The next step is therefore to decide the priorities of the items. One way of doing this is to use a voting procedure where each group member can give one or two votes to chosen items. This module describes such a procedure.

- 2.1 The facilitator counts up the number of items, doubles it, and divides by the number of group members present. For example if there are 17 items and 5 group members, then the result is 7 (Twice 17 is 34; 34 divided by 5 is 7.) For ease of reference call this number **x**.

Each group member is then asked to note down the **x** most important items on the list, and then the **x** next most important items. Group members are asked to exclude their own suggestions from their first **x** items.

*“Choose the 7 most important items from the list, not including your own items. When you have chosen them, then pick the 7 next most important items. You may include your own items in the second 7 if you wish.”*

- 2.2 The facilitator then explains that she is going to read out each item in turn. As each item is read, group members hold up two hands if it is one of their **x** most important items, and one hand if it is one of their **x** next most important item. The facilitator encourages people to stick to their own opinion rather than letting other people's voting change it.

*“I’m going to read out the 34 items in turn. When I read out an item which is on your first list of 7, would you please indicate this by holding up two hands.” [She demonstrates this.] “When I read out an item which is on*

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*your second list of 7, please indicate this with one hand.”* [She again demonstrates.]

- 2.3 Beginning with the first item on the list, the facilitator reads out each item in turn. Both the number and the item are read out. The total number of votes (that is, the number of hands raised) is written alongside each item. If the facilitator notices anyone hesitating because of other people’s voting she reminds them about reporting their own views.
- 2.4 It sometimes happens that a single round of voting is not sufficient. If many items receive almost the same number of votes a second round of voting may be needed. Cross off those items attracting no votes (and perhaps also those attracting only one vote). Then repeat steps 2.1 to 2.3.

- (3.0) Goal statement. The high priority goals are combined into a single goal statement.

This step is included only if seems useful to have a goal statement to refer to in later steps or later sessions. If the GFA session is to be fairly self-contained and priorities have been decided fairly easily this step can be omitted.

- 3.1 The facilitator notifies the group that the goal-statements are to be combined into a single sentence which captures the main features of the priority goals. Each member is asked to think for a minute or so to devise such a sentence.
- 3.2 Members are asked to form small groups of two or three by working with one or two neighbours. Each group is then asked to try to come up with a one-sentence goal statement that sufficiently captures the essence of the priority goals.

If you know that there are wide divergences of opinion within a group you may have to take a little care with this. The idea is to get mixed groups so that most differences are resolved within trios. Most people are probably seated next to their colleagues, with whom they may generally agree. It may be desirable to break them up a bit. This can be done by asking them to number around the room from 1 to **n**,

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where **n** is total group size divided by three. Those numbered *one* then combine into a group, as do those numbered *two*, and so on.

- 3.3 Each group is asked in turn to read out the sentence it has agreed on. These are written up. They may be abbreviated if necessary; but if so, ask the contributors to provide the abbreviation.
  - 3.4 There is usually enough agreement between small groups for the facilitator to choose a sentence that is representative of all or most of them. Write this out clearly and in full. It can be written on chart paper so that it can be typed up and each group member given a copy. This may be useful in later sessions.
- (4.0) Stakeholders. If all those people affected by the group's activities are present this step may be omitted. A representative group, or a group which has important effects on others, should include it. This step is usually necessary in industrial and commercial settings. It is likely to be particularly important when dealing with a functional group within an organisation, or with the top-management team.

This module serves two purposes. One is to draw the groups attention to the existence of other people who may have a stake in how the group acts. The other is to encourage group members to consider the views of these other people.

The general steps followed are those of modules 1 and 2: a list of stakeholders is first developed and then placed in order of priority. Stakeholders are defined by the facilitator as ...

*“ ... those who have a stake in what you do and how you do it. For example this may be because they supply materials, services or information directly or indirectly to you. Or it may be because they use materials, services or information provided directly or indirectly by you.”*

- 5.0 Recording of goals. If module 4 was included the list of stakeholders is checked and the major goals of each are listed. The statement of goals is modified to take account of any goals which group members decide should be taken into account, but have not been so far.
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In any event the final goal statement is recorded on butcher paper for later use. It may be useful to have it typed and duplicated so that each group member can be given a copy.

## Defining constraints

This major step encourages group members to be explicit about the conditions under which their goals have to be achieved. It serves the purpose of situation analysis.

GFA is often used as the beginning of an improvement program within the group. The group is almost always part of some larger social system. In an organisational setting it may be a division of a larger organisation, or a section within a division or public service department.

Whatever the situation it is often hard for the group to give its attention to issues within its own control. It is part of the human condition to see most easily those problems to which others have contributed and to ignore those of one's own doing. By defining constraints, the group members are more likely to work on issues they can do something about.

Even when there is some intention of encouraging or at least allowing the group to identify problems outside its own control, it will still be useful for the group to be aware when it does so. In some instances, it will identify for it the problems which cannot be further pursued without expanding its membership (Groundrule 1). In other instances it may prevent the development of expectations which cannot be met.

Constraints can be defined by using the same procedure as before: develop a list of constraints; place them in order of priority. The procedure described here is an alternative to that. It is often useful to vary procedures to maintain the interest of the group.

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**6.0 Defining constraints.** The explanation given below and the diagram in Figure 1 will often help a group to define more clearly the constraints under which they operate. The purpose of the diagram and the particular procedures described here is to subdivide constraints into a number of categories so that constraints are less likely to be omitted.

There are other ways in which this might be done. Checking that the interests of the stakeholders are not violated is one. Listing the rules and regulations which must be observed, or the expectations of the stakeholders, are others.

- 6.1 The facilitator explains to the group the purpose of these steps: to help the group define the area of elbow room within which they can bring about change without having too great an effect on other people. Explain that constraints can be viewed as falling into three broad categories ...
  - physical constraints arising from materials, equipment, etc. that the group produces or used;
  - information that the group uses or produces, or elements of the structure (for example that described by an organisation chart) adopted by the wider social system to handle information; and
  - the climate of the social system — its beliefs about ways of doing things, its sacred cows, and so on.
- 6.2 The group is subdivided into three subgroups, each as representative as possible of the group as a whole. This may be done, for example, by asking people to number around the room beginning at "1", going as far as "3" and then going back to "1" ("1 ... 2 ... 3 ... 1 ... 2 ... 3 ..." and so on).
- 6.3 Each group works independently on one of the categories, making a list of the most important constraints under that heading.
- 6.4 Each group in turn reports back to the whole group. After each group report members of other groups are invited to suggest additions to the lists so produced.

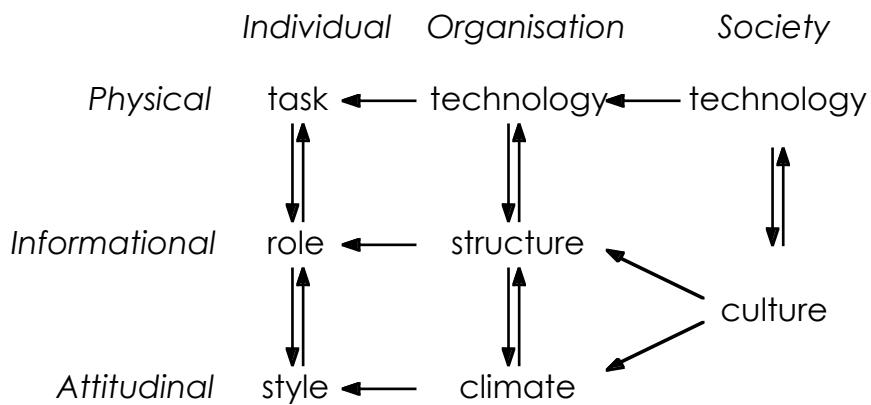


Figure 1. Some of the sources of constraints on a group

## Developing questions

Questions may be developed by the person who is responsible for the intervention. This is what happens in the traditional form of GFA. It may be desirable to do so if the research outcomes of the activity are more important than the action outcomes. If GFA is used with a number of groups under conditions of urgency it may again be justified. When action is the primary outcome, however, it is usually more effective for group members to develop the questions. The following section assumes that this is the procedure which has been adopted.

On those occasions when the research or person responsible for the intervention devises the questions, some preliminary work will be needed to determine what questions can most usefully be asked. Unstructured interviews might be used for this purpose.<sup>26</sup>

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26. For a systematic approach to unstructured interviewing, see my monograph *Convergent interviewing: A systematic approach to open-ended interviews*, Interchange, Chapel Hill, 1986, or the section in *Learning to communicate* (note 25). Convergent interviewing structures the interview process, while the content emerges entirely from those interviewed. It typically uses pairs of interviewers to reduce bias and subjectivity. They conduct independent interviews, check their data for similarities and dissimilarities, and devise probe questions to help in interpreting the results so far.

During both this procedure and the later collection of responses, cards are used. They allow informants to remain anonymous, and also simplify the sorting of questions or responses. I use standard 125mm X 75mm (5" X 3") system cards such as those used in office filing systems. They are small and convenient. Pieces of paper can be used but are not so easily handled. The same cards can be used elsewhere if it seems that anonymity would make it easier to get accurate information.

This part of the procedure has a number of stages. The most important are: developing the questions; collating the questions; collecting and summarising the responses.

- 7.0 Developing the questions. Collecting the questions progresses through the usual stages of getting people to think about them individually, and then pooling that information. On this occasion the collation of questions proceeds using a different method.
  - 7.1 The statement of goals (from a previous step) is displayed. The facilitator asks group members to reflect individually and without discussion on the goals. She then asks them what sort of information would best allow those goals to be pursued and attained more effectively.
  - 7.2 Then ask group members to develop (individually and without discussion) two or three questions which would secure that information from the group. Ask them to phrase these questions in such a way that they can be answered on a seven-point scale. An appropriate scale is depicted in Figure 2. You can usefully display such a diagram during the rest of this part of the activity.

Suggest to members that in the first instance they begin questions with "To what extent ..." or "How much ..." or "How well ...". This increases the likelihood that questions will be able to be answered on the scale.

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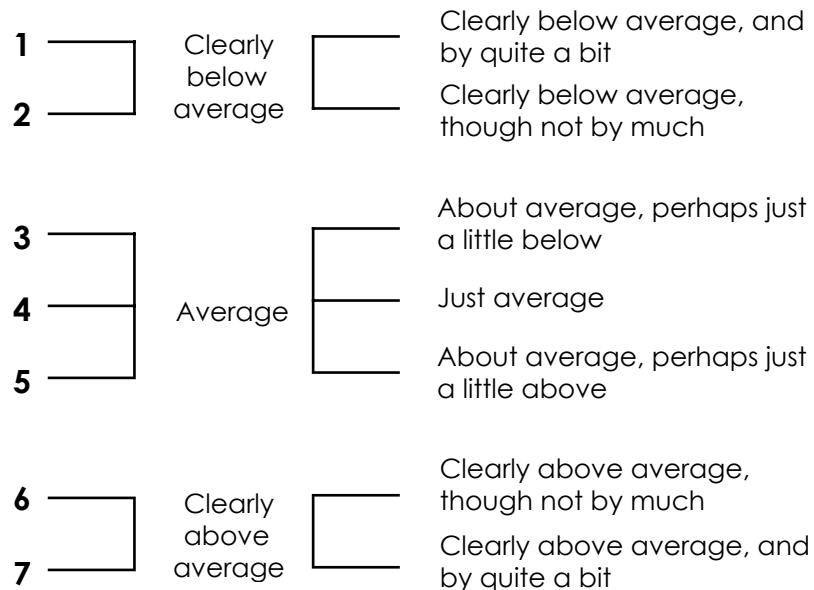


Figure 2. A response scale

7.3 You may want to break a large group of participants down to small groups of three or so (see step 3.2). The list of questions is then not too large for easy collation. Otherwise the questions can be generated by individuals.

Each individual or group writes two or three questions on cards, one question to a card. These cards are then passed face down to the front of the room.

8.0 Collation. Collation can be done by the group facilitator with the group watching. More group involvement, however, results from making the group responsible for the collation, as described here.

8.1 The facilitator explains that fewer questions are required than have resulted from the previous part of the procedure. Ask the group to nominate two or three of its members to group the questions into between ten and twenty questions. Suggest the use of a representative sub-group. Also suggest choosing them from the more junior members of the group; they often have a more accurate perception of relationship issues than do superiors.

- 8.2 Collation can be done conveniently on a large table placed near the front of the room. Arrange it so that there is enough space around it for interested group members to watch and comment. They are then more likely to accept that the final questions selected are a fair choice from all those submitted.
- 8.3 The collators begin by looking for questions which are functionally equivalent; that is, they would obtain the same information. *Note that it is not similarity of wording which is the criterion for grouping.* You may have to make a special point of this when briefing the collators.

When such a pair of questions is found the two cards are placed together on a separate cleared part of the table.
- 8.4 Other questions are then found which also ask for the same information, or information which is very closely related. It is important that questions be grouped only where they serve the same function, and not merely on the basis of being about related topics or having similar wording. For example, the three questions below would be grouped (a) with (c), and (b) separate:
  - a To what extent does our head office give us clear enough objectives?
  - b How clearly do our objectives agree with those of our head office?
  - c Do we know where we're going?
- 8.5 The collators then choose from each group of questions one which is central to the group of questions and which can be answered on the scale used. This will probably begin "To what extent ..." or "How much ..." or "How well ..." or something similar. If the best question is one which would attract a "Yes/No" answer, it can often be remedied by adding "To what extent" to the beginning of it. This would work for example c above, for instance.
- 8.6 The questions are written up on a chalkboard or piece of butcher paper by anyone who can write legibly. Butcher paper is often useful in that someone can later type a summary directly from it. Space for

four columns is left at the right of the board or paper to summarise responses.

8.7 At the end of these questions are added a number of open-ended questions to be answered with a few words or a sentence. I have found the following three questions useful.

- Write down the three major strengths of this group.
- Write down the three major weaknesses of this group.
- Write down the two or three specific changes which you think would do the most to increase the effectiveness of the group.

Another useful question is to ask the group for the “three adjectives which describe us and best distinguish us from other groups”.<sup>27</sup>

## Answering the questions

Questions are answered individually. Summaries are then written up and used as the basis for the later discussion. The summaries are not written up until all questions are answered; otherwise the responses to the earlier questions may influence the later responses.

9.0 Responses. The questions are answered one at a time. The whole group answers the same question at the same time. The responses are collated as the questions are answered. The summary can then be displayed within minutes of completing all the questions.

9.1 The group facilitator reads out the first question to the group.

9.2 Each group member takes a 125mm x 75mm card. In the top left hand corner each person writes the question number preceded by “Q” (someone will confuse left and right, which will otherwise lead to confusion). In the top right hand corner she writes her response to that question. If reasons for the response are also to be collected, these can be written below. The card then looks as shown in Figure 3.

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27. Again, I don't know the source of this. I first saw it used in an equivalent setting by Cliff Bunning, then of the Queensland Department of the Public Service Board.

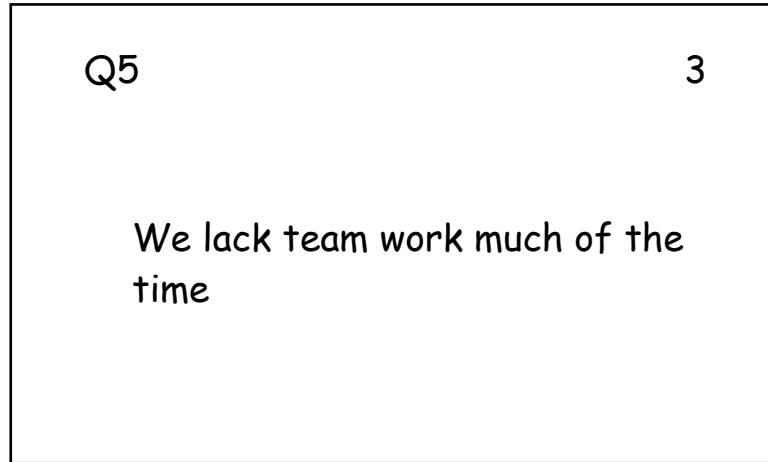


Figure 3. A response card

- 9.3 The cards are collected face-down by one of the collators, and given to a second collator who compiles the summaries. If they are group members, the group facilitator and the collators also record their own responses on cards.
- 9.4 The second collator sorts the card into rank order, with all the "1" responses first, then the "2" responses, and so on. The cards are sorted into two equal piles; and each of those piles is itself further divided into two.
- 9.5 If a pile contains an uneven number of cards, then one card will be left as the middle card when the pile is subdivided. If so, its value is taken. If not, the average of the two cards nearest the centre is taken. The value of the cards near the first division will then define the first quartile (Q1); the second division, the median (Mdn); the third, the third quartile (Q3).<sup>28</sup> Figure 4 shows an example. The values are recorded on a sheet of paper for later use.
- 9.6 This procedure is then repeated for each of the scaled questions. For the open-ended questions, the responses are recorded one to a card.

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28. This is not strictly correct but is a convenient simplification and adequate for this purpose.

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They can be collated on the same table used to prepare the questions, and a summary of the main themes recorded.

3 5 3 7 1 3 5 5 4 2 3 2 4

Original order

1 2 2 3 3 3 3 4 4 5 5 5 7

Arranged in rank order

1 2 2 3 3 3 3 4 4 5 5 5 7

Determining the median

1 2 2      3 3 3      3      4 4 5      5 5 7

Q1=2.5      Mdn=3      Q3=5

Figure 4. An example of 13 responses summarised

10.0 Collating the responses. As a basis for discussion the results for each question are recorded in working space previously provided on the butcher paper.

The four columns to the right of the questions are marked **Q1**, **Mdn**, **Q3** and **R**. The values previously calculated are written in the appropriate columns against each question. In the fourth column (marked “**R**”) are written the rank orders of questions, from least favourable to most favourable. These summary statistics then form an overall picture of the group’s perceptions against which individual people can check their own views.

## Compiling the agenda

- 11.0 Agenda setting. This is an optional part of the procedure. As an alternative you can take the responses in rank order from least favourable to most favourable.
  - 11.1 Group members are invited to study the responses and their favourability. Working individually and without discussion they then write down what they think agenda items ought to be. These questions are then listed on a chalkboard or piece of butcher paper.
  - 11.2 Items are ranked in order of priority, using the “two votes - one vote” procedure described earlier (step 2). If the group is working well together with mainly cooperative styles of communication it may be safe to allow discussion before the vote.

## The discussion

This is the core of the procedure. Group members use their previous responses as a means of knowing if there is close to a group consensus on some items. They discuss items in turn, trying to reach agreement on what action they can take for each of the unfavourable items. This action may be a complete action plan for the item; or it may be to analyse it further, or refer the issue to someone else who can do something about it.

In the interests of free and open discussion, it seems better if this part of the procedure is conducted with the understanding that it is confidential. The task of deciding finally what will be communicated to others outside the group is then left as a separate exercise.

- 12.0 Preparation for discussion. The facilitator begins the discussion by reminding the group members of some of the things they will “find useful to take into account”. As the facilitator mentions each of the following points it is written on butcher paper which remains visible for the rest of the session.
  - 12.1 The facilitator suggests that the rest of the discussion might be anonymous and confidential — that anything communicated to others pro-

tects the identity of those first suggesting it; and that nothing is communicated without the express approval of the group. She asks for reactions to this suggestion. It is usually accepted without debate.

If there is a debate which threatens to become at all heated, the facilitator intervenes and draws members attention to the guidelines described earlier.<sup>29</sup>

12.2 The facilitator draws the attention of group members to the distinction between two different attitudes to group discussion, particularly where contentious issues are being discussed:

- where each group member is keen to win the argument, and uses whatever evidence and reasons are at hand for that purpose;
- where group members as a group try to solve the problems that prevent their being more effective and satisfied than they are.

Their attention is drawn to the preliminary guidelines discussed (under that subheading) earlier. Each is repeated and written up in a prominent place.

12.3 During the discussion, the facilitator indicates, any points made will be written up so that the group has a visible record of its discussion at all times. This written record, like the discussion, is confidential.

13.0 Interpreting the responses. The facilitator reads out the first (or on subsequent runs through this part of the procedure, the next) agenda item. She then asks if a member of the group will comment on what that problem really means, in that person's opinion. Members are asked to observe guideline 2: that all problems are stated as common goals.

13.1 Discussion on the items proceeds. Where two opposing views emerge, this can often be prevented from leading to a breakdown in discussion. A

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29. If that step was not included the facilitator asks members to develop a list of guidelines to be used during discussion. The guidelines are compiled by using the procedure of steps 1 and 2 at the start of this description of GFA ...
- Working individually, people list the groundrules they would like to be followed.
  - These items are collected, one from each person in turn, on butcher paper.
  - The "two-vote - one vote" procedure is used to choose the most important five or six.
  - These are left visibly on display for the rest of the session.

spokesman from one side is allotted to present a summary of their view; the other side is then invited to ask “questions for clarification only”. Then the second side presents their summary, and the first side asks questions for clarification. The facilitator then asks what information would allow the group to decide which view is likely to be the most useful for the group to adopt. If there is still dissension, the facilitator suggests that they place the item on a separate agenda, for later discussion (with outside help if needed).

- 13.2 Usually there will be little dispute. Defining problems as common goals will usually lead to common ground being identified. Failing that, using the “question for clarification” procedure, and checking that people understand one another’s position will usually be effective. If the group is communicating more-or-less cooperatively, it will then be able to work from this common ground towards a consensus on the item.
- 13.3 When it appears to the group facilitator that a consensus is emerging, she asks if anyone in the group is able to summarise the group’s feeling about the item in about a sentence. This is written up. Other group members are then asked if they agree with it, or if they have any changes to suggest.
- 13.4 It may sometimes happen that the item will already be phrased as an “action item”. Otherwise the facilitator asks what action the group can carry out without breaching guideline no. 1 (about participation of those affected).

For those items where the problem involves someone other than (or in addition to) the group then only limited action is possible. The issue can be referred to those concerned; or a meeting with them may be set up if it is a joint problem.

## **The report**

- 14.0 Agreeing on action. All information so far generated and recorded is private information: confidential to the group. The final session of the procedure is used to develop public information, or information which can go outside the group.
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- 14.1 Taking each agenda item in turn, group members decide if they want to take the action already discussed. If they do, they then agree on the wording with which it can be communicated. This can often be done most easily by editing the summary developed when the item was first discussed. When a final wording is agreed on it can be transferred to an appropriate action sheet.
- 14.2 A separate action sheet is kept for each different person or group of persons to whom any information is to be communicated.
- 14.3 Finally, group members decides how widely they are prepared to have each action sheet circulated. However wide or narrow the circulation, copies of the action sheets are prepared so that each member of the group has her own copy.

## Some variations

To illustrate the ways in which a procedure can be tailored to a situation, I describe here two variations on the version detailed above. The first is very close in intention to Heller's original description. The second uses heterogeneous groups to diagnose the situation within a larger social system.

### Pre-determined questions

This variation is appropriate to situations where the wording of the questions is already known. This may arise in a number of ways. The main purpose of the exercise may be to gather research data. You may have used prior interviewing or other methods to decide the questions. GFA may be in use as an alternative to an attitude survey; or there may be multiple GFA sessions and you wish to have comparative data.

It is a variation which is economical of time. I have conducted sessions with three different groups in an eight-hour day. The discussion seems livelier because it is held immediately after the questions have been answered.

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Since the questions are preset, there may be no purpose in using goalsetting or identifying constraints. Collection and collation of questions are unnecessary. The procedure begins with a session on guidelines then moves directly into responding to the questions.

Here is the sequence of steps.

1. Develop guidelines for cooperation.
2. Take the group through the questions one by one. They responding to each on system cards. The questions can for example be written up on chart paper, or projected one at a time from overhead transparencies.
3. As each question is answered, collect and collate the responses.
4. When all questions have been answered, display the summary of responses.
5. Move group members into a confidential discussion based on the summary of responses.
6. Prepare action sheets and communicate them to the people concerned.  
Group members get copies too.

Where the problems identified (or some of them) can be remedied by the group itself, the session may then continue to place these in priority order. Group members may then work through them using some method of problem solving. Because problem solving is difficult in large groups, the most efficient way of doing this is often to set up small working parties which prepare proposals after consultation, and refer them back to further group meetings for amendment and action.

As with most information-collection procedures, the quality of the information may depend on the expectations of participants. They will be more likely to take part with enthusiasm if they think there is some likelihood of something being done as a result. A clear commitment from the wider social system may therefore help. There may be little point in continuing unless there is at least a commitment that any suggestions will be examined sympathetically and responded

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to. In an organisational setting, the chief executive officer is often the appropriate person to be asked for this commitment. In community settings the group may be autonomous enough for this not to be a concern.

Within an organisation one effective way of responding to suggestions is for the chief executive (or manager of the branch or division) to meet with group members. Such a meeting might consider which suggestions are being acted on, and how; and which suggestions are not being acted on, and why not.

## **Preliminary data-collection through GFA**

The procedure described below is a hybrid, in a sense, of those already described.<sup>30</sup> It is intended to converge on an identification of the problems in a large section of an organisation. It therefore begins by developing all or almost all of the questions from the group being worked with. For subsequent groups, the number of pre-determined questions is gradually increased as problems are progressively more clearly identified.<sup>31</sup>

To illustrate how a procedure based on GFA can be fitted to a particular situation and objectives, I will first describe a hypothetical situation<sup>32</sup> and then discuss some of the situational factors to be taken into account. It is set in an organisation; when a community GFA would be different I comment on it.

**The situation.** Imagine that a survey is planned for a division within a larger organisation. Because it is not yet certain if a survey should go ahead, some preliminary information is needed. In any event, if the survey proceeds, it will be

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- 30. This is actually a description of a diagnostic intervention planned in a discussion with Ron Smith and Peter Milton of what was then the Department of Productivity and Alan Anderson and Sue Hamlyn-Harris of the Bureau of Census and Statistics. It didn't actually take place at the time, though I have since used parts of it in other situations.
  - 31. The principles of convergence which this procedure illustrates are most clearly developed for convergent interviewing, described in note 26. This increase in the number of predetermined questions is a usual feature of convergent interviewing.
  - 32. The description is not based on any particular organisation. It is not intended to refer to one. Any similarities to particular situations are coincidental.

necessary to know to some extent what areas of the division's functions should be most closely explored. A procedure based on GFA is chosen to collect the preliminary data.

**Group selection.** Assume that representative groups are to be used, so that each group is similar.<sup>33</sup> This suggests that diagonal slice groups will be most suitable. There is no good way of estimating how many such groups will be needed. But if we choose one group at a time we can continue until enough convergence has occurred. Since a number of groups will be used it is going to be difficult to engage more than one of them in the planning of the exercise. We will therefore assume that there will also be a coordinating committee to look after overall coordination of the exercise.

**Coordinating committee.** Representativeness is desirable.<sup>34</sup> The coordinating committee has to be able to act on behalf of the community or organisation as a whole.

In a community setting a group of opinion leaders is likely to bring a lot of enthusiasm to the diagnosis. They can be chosen with care for representativeness. The simplest way<sup>35</sup> is often to ask a small mixed group of knowledgeable locals to select the group. They can be given enough time and encouragement for them to talk to a lot of people before making the final selection.

Organisation setting are a little more complex. The most appropriate group appears to be a diagonal slice. As workforce employees will be involved in the

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33. Since we designed this diagnosis I have had much more experience with convergent processes. They are quite robust, and yield convergence even in very mixed groups of people. I would now use homogeneous groups, perhaps even intact work teams or (in a community setting) groups of near neighbours who knew each other well. I believe that those agreements which do emerge are more important for having come from groups which are different.
  34. It is important that the coordinating committee is representative. An L-shaped slice may be best.
  35. This approach of "indirect reference" is another technique I first saw used by the people at the Centre of Continuing Education, Australian National University.
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GFA sessions it is worthwhile to secure union representation on the coordinating committee. My strong preference is for part-time officials who also hold positions within the division. They are likely to be less antagonistic than full time officials and know more about the organisation. As they can speak for the organisation. Other members on the coordinating committee include the following.

- Someone from top management with real decision-making power.
- An L-slice — a diagonal slice through the division with extra representation from the workforce. This may be provided by the union members.
- One (or more) internal consultant(s); that is, someone from within the organisation who has some technical responsibility for the program.
- Perhaps an external consultant, used as advisor and resource person for the coordinating committee.

**Defining goals.** Two main alternatives seem to be appropriate here. One is for the goals to be defined by the coordinating committee. Search<sup>36</sup> may be used. Top management people from outside the division may be involved. It is preferable to include representatives from any group whose views need to be taken into account (including perhaps some client representatives, and a member of the board of directors). The second alternative would be to develop the goals within each slice group, but to obtain convergence by feeding to later groups the goals identified by earlier groups.

**The overall procedure.** In the early stages the overall procedure is as described in the major section *An example of the procedure* above. Almost all questions are developed by the group. Two or three open-ended questions are added. The composition of the group should ensure that divisional problems are the focus. To make sure, there may be instructions to this effect. For subsequent groups, the questions are partly devised by the group. They also include, however, an increasing number of questions developed out of earlier sessions. In particular,

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36. About search, see note 11.

where it is hard to know just what a particular problem entails, or where there are discrepancies between groups, follow-up questions can be used to clarify the issue.

**Knowing when to stop.** The basic principle is this. When the amount of extra information gained from a group does not compensate for the time and effort used in running the group exercise, the group sessions are terminated. For the later groups, it may be worthwhile to give details of what earlier groups have said; the groups can then respond to this. When they are obviously in general agreement, and have added little extra information, then there is not likely to be much point in continuing further.

**Planning a survey.** Well-conducted, the GFA sessions are likely to identify the problems nearly as well as a survey would be likely to. In one important respect, GFA is a better technique than survey feedback <sup>37</sup> — GFA data is collected interactively, where there is an opportunity to be sure of the meaning intended by the responses.

There are still some situations, however, where a survey may add something. Sometimes there are enormous differences between different parts of an organisation or community. It may be that only a method which reaches all members can identify all the problems. There are occasions when comparison between different groups or sections is an important part of the survey objectives. Sometimes only data collected from all or nearly all members of a community or organisation will have credibility with the decision makers. Those with influence usually grossly underestimate the amount of dissatisfaction among among those who have less. They may deny the accuracy of evidence rather than revise their opinions.

Feedback of results. After survey data are analysed, feedback of results will presumably be given to all members of the community or organisation. It may

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37. On survey feedback see note 4.

prejudice the survey results if there is feedback before this. But if there is no survey, a decision will need to be made about the nature and extent of feedback of the data resulting from the GFA sessions.

I believe it is important that change programs should consider the needs of everyone. I usually make it a condition of any work I do that any information made available to one group is also available to all others in the organisation. An appropriate system is to feed detailed information to all taking part on the GFA slice groups and to make it available on request to anyone else in the community or organisation.

Presumably some action will follow. When this is decided on (preferably with the involvement of the coordinating committee<sup>38</sup> and those affected), then full and detailed information to all is appropriate. This type of communication also helps to bring about the changes without destructive opposition.

## Some applications

The procedure so far described have been viewed as problem-identification. It has been described as preceding some form of action planning, or used to determine the need for (and if so, the content of) an attitude survey. The description has given most attention to diagnosis within a commercial, industrial or public service organisation.

These are not the only possible applications. GFA can be used wherever data collection is the objective, and the clients consist of a group of people, or can be suitably represented by a group. In either case, the main characteristic is the collection of (mainly) numerical data, its collation and presentation to the group, and a further discussion on the meaning and implications of the responses.

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38. See note 40.

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Further, GFA can be used as an intervention in itself. (I presume it would be followed up in most instances with a more action-oriented intervention.) Or it may form the data-collection part of a wider intervention program. As mentioned earlier, data from any one source and collected with any one method are usually suspect. Using and interpreting several methods at once is likely to lead to more accurate results.

A number of applications are described below — instead of a survey; for course evaluation within a school or university; with a self-help group.

### **GFA for survey-feedback**

Over a number of years now, quite a few attitude surveys have been carried out in a variety of organisations by the Organisational Studies Group at the University of Queensland. This is an informally constituted group, with varying membership drawn mainly from the Departments of Psychology and Management. In retrospect, most of the surveys developed less employee involvement, and led to less change, than we expected they would.

This arose mainly, we suspect, from the difficulty of securing involvement from a large number of people. By working with smaller groups,<sup>39</sup> GFA increases involvement. It also allows the differences between groups to be taken more into account.

I have come to believe that relying on only one slice group is not the most effective way of overseeing an improvement program. Instead, applying the notion

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39. I don't think it is coincidence that one survey which generated a greater than usual involvement did feed back the results to small groups. It was conducted by my friend and colleague John Damm.

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of a matrix organisation<sup>40</sup> to the planning of an improvement program (and applying guideline no. 1) leads naturally to the use of more than one group.<sup>41</sup>

The basic procedure adopted is to use one slice group for coordination of the improvement program. This is the source of the title “Coordinating committee” for this group. Temporary task groups are then formed to work on specific parts of the improvement program. The membership of each is chosen so that those affected by a problem or its likely solution form the group. This procedure, used in the data-collection stage of an improvement program, is admirably suited by GFA procedures.

A GFA-based data-collection program might proceed through the following steps:

1. Form a coordinating committee representing the whole organisation or client system.
2. Identify the likely issues using preliminary interviewing or group-based discussions.
3. The coordinating committee plans the survey and its administration.
4. Intact work teams take part in GFA sessions.<sup>42</sup>
5. GFA teams continue to work on identified problems which lie entirely within their capacity to make decisions, but with at least one representative from the coordinating committee.

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40. A matrix organisation is one where temporary multi-disciplinary work teams are set up at the commencement of a project and disbanded on its conclusion. See e.g. S. M. Davis and P.R. Lawrence (1977), *Matrix*, Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass.

41. See the article cited in note 5, and also B. Dick and H. Peter (1978) *Changing attitudes to work: participative survey feedback in the Brisbane Mail Exchange*, Organisational Studies Unit, University of Queensland, St Lucia.

42. Work teams are best chosen by determining which people are most interdependent and selecting them accordingly. You can't assume that certain people form a team just because the organisation chart says that they do. In a community diagnostic exercise you might form groups by selecting individuals and asking them to invite a number of friends and colleagues to join them in the activity.

6. Information from GFA sessions is pooled and fed back to the community or organisation as a whole.
7. Appropriate task groups are set up to work on problems affecting more than one GFA group, again with at least one representative from the slice group.
8. As each objective is reached, the task group involved evaluates their project, reports back to the slice group, and then disbands.

Though somewhat heavier in use of time resources, such a program is likely to be sufficiently more effective to warrant its use. One of the few advantages for a conventional attitude survey (apart from economy in the use of time) is allowing some of the more sophisticated statistical analyses to be carried out.<sup>43</sup>

Even this disadvantage of GFA could be side-stepped. If the cards on which people respond to GFA questions are coded with a unique code for each person, GFA responses could also be processed in these ways. The greater use of time, if a problem, can be allowed for by spacing the GFA sessions over time.

## **GFA for course evaluation**

For several years I used GFA to evaluate second-year and fourth-year courses I taught.<sup>44</sup> Class members decide the class content (and, at the fourth year level, process). The evaluation at the end of one semester or year provides useful information for the next class to take into consideration. In the first instance I used GFA mainly so that the evaluation session would also be a useful learning

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43. Phil Harker described some of the multivariate procedures applied to survey feedback in his unpublished Masters thesis *Application of multidimensional scaling methods to the organisational feedback process* (University of Queensland, 1977).

44. At the time, Phil Harker and I team-taught the classes. We used an approach very similar to that which Trevor Williams described in a Centre for Continuing Education monograph *Democracy in Learning* (Australian National University, Canberra). I have modified the approach considerably since then, and was interested to find when I talked to Trevor in 1983 that his use of classroom democracy had evolved in similar directions. The present design is described in my monograph *Mechanisms for democracy in learning*, Interchange, Chapel Hill, 1986.

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session for the class members. I continued to use it until recently because it served its evaluation purpose well.

Course goals are specified at the beginning of the year or semester. Class members work in self-selected groups. Each group determines its own learning goals within the framework set by the overall course goals. In addition, the class as a whole can suggest modifications to the overall goals. This means that goals are known before the GFA session. The output from the GFA is a list of suggestions to the following class about what choices they should exercise during the course design sessions. The overall procedure is similar to the main procedure described earlier:

1. Course goals (taken from earlier documents) are written up.
2. Course members individually try to recall obstacles to the attainment of those goals.
3. Individually, they develop questions to produce relevant information. The questions are able to be answered on the seven-point scale described earlier (Figure 2).
4. Volunteers from the class collate the questions while other class members watch and comment. The questions are written up on the chalkboard.
5. Individual responses are collected on 125mm x 75mm cards, collated and recorded.
6. When all questions have been answered, summary statistics are written up.
7. An agenda is compiled from suggestions which are collected from the class and placed by them in order of priority.
8. Each item is discussed. A suggestion to lecturing staff or the next class or both is agreed on. This is recorded on butcher paper so that a report to the following class can be prepared from it.

I have used this procedure with classes of up to about forty people (for larger classes I used a different procedure). Even with this number of people, it typi-

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cally took about two hours to run. The goals had already been defined, and the class members had a lot of practice at working together cooperatively; it would otherwise have taken longer.

### **GFA with a self-help group**

This is included mainly to show that organisational improvement procedures usually translate quite well into a community setting.<sup>45</sup> It discusses briefly a couple of ways in which a small self-help organisation could use GFA, once for improving its own functioning, and again for determining community needs.

If used within the group, GFA would be almost no different to a typical organisational program except in two main respects. The first of these is a gap, usually not acknowledged, between the active members and the membership at large. The second is the otherwise more self-contained nature of a typical group, not usually being answerable to some higher authority within the same organisation.

It is common for voluntary organisations (including such organisations as Parents and Citizens Committees) to have a wide potential or actual membership. Yet most of the work is done by a small number of people. This creates a situation which makes it hard for such an organisation to involve more people.

The active members frequently blame many of their problems on the apathy of the wider membership. They often feel that the wider members have forfeited any right to consultation by their lack of involvement.

The members at large, on the other hand, are reluctant to become involved. They have two main reasons for this reluctance. Firstly, with such a small active membership, those taking part must be prepared to give up a lot of their time. Secondly, the small and active group is often not at all representative of the wider membership, who often feel alienated from the active members.

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45. These are hypothetical examples. Parts of the described procedures have been used in community settings.

Without being able to draw on the resources of the wider group, the active members will find solutions to their problems beyond their resources in many instances. GFA is therefore likely to have a successful outcome only if the wider membership is also involved. The active members may well resist this.

The differences between the active and less-active members will operate against effective problem-solving unless some rapprochement is first brought about. GFA must usually be preceded by some exercise to get the two groups talking to one another.

It is common in such organisations for the non-active members to be the clients. When this is not so it is appropriate for a GFA group to include representatives of the client group. A preceding exercise will again probably be needed. Search conferences are likely to be suitable for this.<sup>46</sup>

The second consideration mentioned earlier (that such groups are often more independent than groups within larger organisations) is more of an advantage than a disadvantage. It means that the same group can move more immediately from problem-diagnosis into the implementation of remedies, without having to have the plans ratified elsewhere. Even where this is so, however, it is worthwhile to convey the results to their clients who did not take part in the exercise.

There is a second use of GFA methods which may have even more potential for self-help and similar groups. It is the use of GFA to define more clearly the needs of clients. Quite often, organisations make their plans in relative ignorance of what the real needs are. (It was mentioned to me that in one self-help group those who were able to use group resources to solve their problems soon left; those whose problems remained, remained themselves. They became the group's office-bearers.) A program of GFA sessions would help to define client needs well, and in addition create the beginnings of closer involvement between group and clients.

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46. On search, see note 13.

## **Summary**

This paper has tried to describe the basic procedures where group feedback analysis is modified to serve mainly an intervention role, and to explore some of the factors which need to be taken into account. I have also explained some of the possible variations, and described a number of applications. In all this, my main intention has been to encourage the view that GFA (and by implication other procedures) need not be applied cookbook-style. It can instead be used as the initial idea from which a program can be developed, taking the objectives and situations into account.

