

INTRODUCTION

In the Western world we have a plethora of groups and meetings. From multinational businesses to enclosed religious orders, from professional bodies and statutory services to church and community groups, from teams of colleagues to training courses, from bible study to self-help therapy. People depend largely on meeting together to keep things going and to move things forward. 'Not another meeting!' is a sad reflection on the quality of many meetings. They are too often experienced as deadening rather than lifegiving. This book is written in the conviction that group meetings, teams and committees of all sorts have a potential both for development and enjoyment which is seldom realised.

Meetings that Work as a title needs some explanation. What sort of meetings are being addressed? The word meeting as I am using it, refers to a gathering of people met together with a task to do which entails the exchange of thoughts and feelings. Simply said but enormously complex.

The task of a group or team may include such things as planning and organising work or research of one kind or another; thinking more deeply about some subject such as racism or religion; learning a skill or giving mutual support. Its task may concern solely the members within the group or it may be to do with others beyond its bounds, as for instance, a staff meeting or a business team which has to relate to a complex system of groups and organisations both locally and nationally. What is written is both about how to help people work at the task and about engendering the kind of interpersonal relationships which will enable them to do so.

Groups may be temporary or long-term; new or established; large or small. Teams may be autonomous or part of a larger organisation. Their meetings may be more or less formal or informal. Groups such as committees, councils, boards, and professional associations will operate at a more formal level than groups such as fellowships, community or church groups, those focussing on a specific issue such as justice and peace, or catering for particular people, youth, young mothers, or the elderly. Many firms are now setting up interdisciplinary teams concerned with new developments and which, for greater effectiveness, need to work in an informal collaborative style rather than in a more formal hierarchical mode.

Groups may have a permanent or rotating chairperson or facilitator who may be self-chosen, elected by the members or appointed by the organisation. The members may be elected or co-opted, their membership may be voluntary, expected or compulsory. The group may be part of their work life or their leisure. Attendance may be regular or fluid. They may or may not have a shared history reaching into the past. They are likely to bring to a meeting a variety of personal needs and concerns, many of which will never be openly acknowledged. These may be connected with the group or completely separate from it, something in their private life which is preoccupying them. Clearly, the task of making a meeting work is complex and challenging.

This book is not primarily written for purely social or fellowship groups at one end of the spectrum nor for formal committees at the other, but for that wide range of groups in which people meet to do a task and want to work at that task more systematically and creatively.

All such groups and teams, whatever their degree of autonomy, and they vary widely, experience certain constraints, internal or external, which reduce their freedom to act. These may be established by custom, tradition, legal requirements, or the situation in which they find themselves. But however binding the constraints, as for instance, committees with their constitutions, procedures, given purposes or tasks, the members always retain a degree of freedom to think and pursue that for which the group was formed. This book is about ways and means of helping groups of people to think, discuss and act together within that area of freedom which is theirs, or to use it to question and push out the boundaries if they decide they cannot work effectively within them.

It is written for anyone who wants to help people in a meeting of any kind to work together in a collaborative way, believing that individuals, groups and communities flourish when people have a say in decisions which affect them.

It is about how to help a group or team function better. It is not about the subject matter which people meet to discuss. For instance, it includes hints on how to deal with faction in a meeting but it does not consider how to work with conflict in the neighbourhood or society.

Although its focus is not on formal committees, I know from my experience of discussing with many people, that much of what I have written here is applicable and could be easily adapted by those working with committees. It is desirable with all task centred groups that their meetings are characterised by creative thinking, open and critical exploration of ideas, and the kind of participation in which all contributions and people are taken seriously.

Most of what is written focuses on meetings of between eight and twenty members although there is a section on working with large groups and much of what is written applies to meetings of all sizes.

This book draws on over twenty-five years experience of helping people with little or no training in group work skills, to conduct the sort of meetings which promote the development of participants, individually and collectively. By development I mean the process whereby people become more thoughtful and self-determining and more sensitively aware of their responsibilities towards others.

Since 1972 there has been a close working partnership between George Lovell and myself as we have worked with groups and communities in the church and neighbourhood in Project 70-75 and in Avec, an agency in church and community work. So many of his ideas have become part of me, that I hardly know where his work ends and mine begins. I remain responsible for the formulation of ideas in this book although drawing heavily on his work and thinking. Where I have used his notes I have written sometimes in my own words, sometimes in his, sometimes in a mixture with a view to putting things as clearly as possible and so that things fit together and flow. Where, for one reason or another, it is clear that I am using his work, it is acknowledged.

The subject matter arises from the difficulties which people faced in conducting meetings and because of which they sought help from Avec. It is based on an appreciation of the essential use of the non-directive approach as defined by T.R. Batten in *The Non-Directive Approach in Group and Community Work*.¹ This book limits itself to the practical application of the non-directive approach in meetings.

Avec was a Christian and ecumenical agency and therefore some of the examples, but by no means all, come from Christian groups. However, as every group or team, however unique, shares in a common humanity, I believe that what one learns from working with one group, wherever it is set, can be relevant to many other meetings and situations.

Using this book

If you are responsible for running a meeting and want to help the members to function more effectively, this book is written for you. It aims to engender in you, as group worker or facilitator, an attitude and a habit of open and critical questioning about what you are doing, why you are doing it, and how you could do it more effectively. It is not a set of rules or a blue print for success. Just as

every team leader is unique, and every group is unique, so is the relationship between them. There may be common problems but individual solutions have to be worked out. Techniques alone will not suffice. The heart of the matter is to do with your attitudes and beliefs: hence the success of this book is bound up closely with promoting an inner dialogue in you, the reader. For this reason I have made an extensive use of questions. Questions are thought-provoking. I believe that questions will draw upon the mine of information and insights you have gained from the experience of living and working and meeting with people at home, and in school, work and neighbourhood.

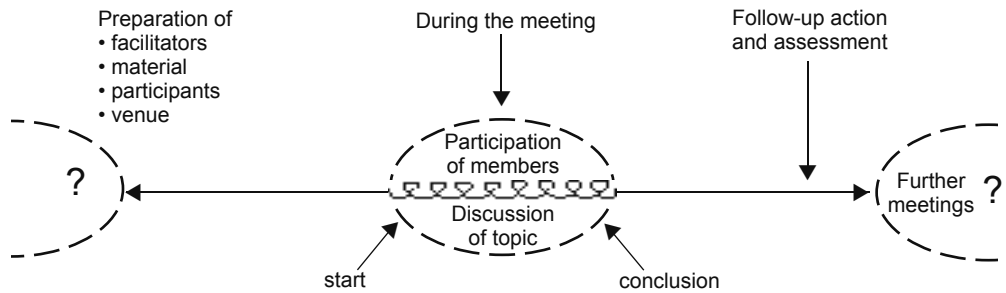
It is therefore a book to be used as you work rather than to be read from start to finish. It is a reference book: use the extended list of contents and the index to search for what you need, whether you are starting a group, working with people you know or do not know, wanting to develop a particular skill, facing a problem, wanting to promote participation or engage in a decision-making process. As appropriate, summaries and check lists are included as an aid to its practical use.

The shape of this book

All groups have a starting point. For some this may be lost in the realms of history. For others it may be a more recent remembered event. As a facilitator you may join an existing group or you may want or be asked to start one. Once started, many groups have a chequered career, with stops and re-starts, or convene so infrequently that each meeting has some of the characteristics of a new group. Furthermore, groups are changed as members come and go. This can be a gradual process or it may be experienced as a sudden transformation or a new beginning.

PART ONE, therefore, is about establishing a new group and its re-establishment after periods of inactivity or infrequent meetings and it includes a section on the welcoming of new members, and organising a one-off meeting.

Every meeting, whether it is a one-off or one of a series of meetings, has a beginning, a middle and an end; it also has a before and an after.



As a group worker thinking ahead to a meeting you have several complementary goals to keep in mind. Your purpose is a fundamental touchstone to guide your thinking: what changes for the better are you hoping to achieve in the lives of this group of people? The quality of the meeting depends in large part on the quality and care of the preparatory thought which has gone into it and this begins with the preparation done by you as facilitator. Fundamental to this preparation is the consideration of people's emotions, expectations, motives and willingness to participate in the meeting; their individual attitudes and relationships to each other, to you, and to the wider group or community; and the task of the group and the objectives of the meeting.

PART TWO is therefore to do with what happens before a meeting: the preparation of the group worker, of the material, of the participants and of the venue. Thorough preparation for a meeting takes time. It is therefore not feasible to prepare in depth for all meetings. It can be important to decide on the crucial meetings for which you will prepare thoroughly and just how much preparation you need to do to ensure that other meetings are profitable.

PART THREE deals with the conduct of a meeting and the interaction of members with each other and with the facilitator at the start, during the actual discussion, and at the conclusion. During the meeting aim to ensure that the objectives for the meeting are successfully achieved; promote participation of an open and critical kind in which people grapple with ideas together in a cooperative and creative way; and get ideas worked at clearly and systematically, seriously and realistically. Clearly what has been discussed by way of preparation is relevant here also. Hence I include detailed cross references to indicate the relationship between the preparatory planning and the actual conduct of the meeting.

PART FOUR discusses possible action after and between meetings.

PART FIVE considers some common situations and problems.

PART SIX deals with specific application of the above ideas to groups of different kinds and particular situations.

PART SEVEN is about developing one's own and other people's group work skills.

As this book has grown from all I have learnt from so many people, I would like to continue the process by requesting you, the reader, to send in comments or insights, problems or questions for incorporation should a third edition be published.

Catherine Widdicombe
August 1999

A note about terminology

- As the English language does not have unisex pronouns I have alternated the use of 'he' and 'she' as appropriate.
- The term 'group worker' or facilitator is used rather than group or team leader, which smacks of giving an authoritarian or directive lead, or chairperson, as this could imply only more formal groups and committees.

NOTE

1. T.R. Batten in collaboration with Madge Batten, *The Non-Directive Approach in Group and Community Work* (Oxford University Press 1967). Abridged version, *The Non-Directive Approach* (An Avec Publication 1990).