Introduction

Interventions are undeniably among the most difficult tasks we face as facilitators.

From the facilitator's perspective, intervention involves interrupting the flow of group process to correct or improve behaviors, patterns, or interactions to help a group meet its objectives.

Knowing when, how and why to intervene is an art that takes skills, courage, finely tuned intuition, and practice. While effective intervention is the mark of a seasoned facilitator, there are some basic principles that can help you become more comfortable with this skill, whatever your level of experience.

This guide contains several models, tools, and strategies to help increase your confidence and ability to intervene.
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Facilitator's Guide

Who is this guide most useful for?

This guide is for anyone who plays a facilitative or leadership role in a group. It explores practical ways to effectively intervene on individual and group behaviors to realign, refocus, challenge, or protect group process. In particular, it is useful for group facilitators, trainers, life coaches, teachers, business and community leaders, and managers, whatever level of skill they have in group facilitation.
What is an Intervention?

Run an honest, open group. Your job is to (facilitate) and illuminate what is happening. Interfere as little as possible. Interference, however brilliant, creates dependency.

--The Tao of Leadership, John Heider, 1986--

To begin with, let’s get clear on what exactly we mean by “Intervention.” Here are a few definitions of group process intervention to get us started.

- “To enter into an ongoing system of relationship for the purpose of helping those in the system.” (Intervention Theory and Method, Chris Argyris, 1970)

- “Any comment, suggestions or recommendation that the facilitator makes to the group in the service of accomplishing the task.” (Intervention Skills, W. Brendan Reddy, 1994)

- An immediate and timely action taken to positively guide a situation toward a desired outcome. (Rosanna Tarsiero)

For the purposes of this guide, let’s distill the wisdom above into a working definition for Intervention:

Any interruption by the facilitator to further the goals of a group and the health of its process, using as light a touch as possible.

Types of Interventions

So why do we intervene? What kinds of things are we after in an intervention? The reasons are many, and we’ve conveniently categorized them into five broad “types” of interventions that are summarized below:

1. **Information Gathering.** Facilitators often need to intervene to query the group for facts, perspectives, thoughts, and feelings. For example, “What kinds of things has this group already done to solve this problem?”
Often we need to dig under surface interactions to uncover communication barriers and misunderstandings. These are pervasive among typical groups because people tend to withhold information, either consciously or unconsciously, by being indirect and unspecific. Since clear, specific communication is a hallmark of facilitation, we sometimes intervene to get specifics. For instance, “Joe, who are you referring to when you say ‘her’?” “What do you mean by ‘it’ when you say ‘it’s confusing’?” “Would you please offer an example of what you mean when you say, ‘Jill doesn’t explain things well?’”

2. Diagnosing. Diagnostic interventions help the group and/or the facilitator determine the dynamics in play. Though these types of interventions also involve information gathering, they tend to go deeper. Their aim is to reveal individual motivations and desires, to help uncover the symptoms, source, and consequences of problems, or to interrupt and assess ongoing patterns of behavior. Examples of this type of intervention might include, “What’s happening here right now?” “What’s underneath this problem or situation?” “I see this, what do you see?” “Joe, I sense a lot of criticism directed by you toward Jill. What’s that about?”

Diagnostic interventions are also used to get information from the group needed to establish grounds for further interventions by the facilitator.

3. Feedback. At times we need to confront dysfunctional behaviors, enforce ground rules, or provide feedback on what we see going on. And, of course, we always need to check our inferences and assumptions during the intervention. For example, “Jim, the comment you just made to invite the group back on track was excellent.” Or, ”Jill, you have made several comments in the last few minutes that seemed to be off topic. Is there a request you’d like to make?”

4. Teaching/Coaching. A facilitator’s role, in its purest sense, should exclude involvement in the substantive content of the group. However, there are times when some intervention in content is appropriate, particularly when a group has failed to come to a solution on its own, or when the facilitator possesses expert knowledge that can help the group move past a barrier or become more effective.
For example, if a group is working on communication skills and they seem off track, it may be appropriate for the facilitator to spend some time teaching the group what they seem to be missing and coaching them as they practice these skills.

Prior to performing this type of intervention, the facilitator should request permission from the group to step into a teaching or coaching role and inform them of the possibility of it affecting the facilitator’s process neutrality. You should also solicit your group’s agreement to develop a solution to restore neutrality if it is sacrificed.

Another reason we might intervene as a teacher or coach is to help our groups reinterpret their reality. A change in meaning leads to new behaviors. For example, suppose a group has decided that falling revenues in their division means fewer opportunities and trying times. To survive, they are choosing to look at how they can cut back and reduce their level of service. You might intervene to show them that this is only one choice in responding to this situation. Another would be to reframe falling revenues as an opportunity to reinvent how the group provides and markets their service in order to be more successful and turn the situation around.

5. **Process Management.** The fundamental assumption of the facilitator is that improving group process improves the group’s ability to solve problems and make decisions.

So we often intervene to help our groups look at and improve “how” they are doing things. For example, we might ask questions such as, “How is this approach you’re using to solve this problem working for you right now?” “What process are you using to solve this problem?”

Further, we often intervene to suggest relevant processes that might help the group or to structure participant’s behavior by inviting a different direction, process, or line of inquiry. These interventions might involve helping your group stay on track to meet its objectives, assuring everyone and everything is being heard, and that full participation is invited and facilitated.
Core Values of Intervention

Before moving further into our exploration of intervention, let’s review three “core values” we can draw on to inform our decisions to intervene and our approaches for doing so. This values model comes from Roger Schwarz, “The Skilled Facilitator,” and was adapted from the work of Chris Argyris and Don Schon (Argyris, 1970; Argyris & Schon, 1974).

1. **Valid Information.** This means that all relevant information is shared in a way that can be easily understood by all concerned.

2. **Free and Informed Choice.** This means that people can define their own objectives and ways to achieve them based on the valid information they receive. Facilitators don’t change people’s behavior. They provide information and processes that allow people to choose for themselves, and training to show them how.

3. **Internal Commitment.** An environment is created such that people feel personally responsible for the decisions they make and are inspired to make them based on their internal desires rather than from external pressure.

Functional Group’s Core Values

Our interventions should always be in alignment with these core values. Intervention content should include **valid information.** That means sharing your truth without concealing information. This also means that you intervene when you sense participants withholding information or representing something inaccurately.

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We surrender any attachment we have as to how participants act on this information in accordance with their right to make free and informed choices.

Finally, when people make their own choices free of coercion, based on good information, their internal commitment to these choices is of course a natural outcome.

These values are connected in a self-reinforcing cycle. To make a free and informed choice, you require valid information. And when you make a free and informed choice, you tend to be internally committed to it. Continuing to seek valid information, you may choose to make adjustments to your choices over time based on new information.

We'll revisit these values later as we discuss various intervention guidelines and strategies.

**INTERVENTION SKILLS**

Interventions require three basic skills of the facilitator:

1) **To know what kind of behaviors to intervene on.** A facilitator must have some image or model of an effective group to use as a baseline.

2) **The ability to “diagnose” behaviors that may require intervention.** Often it's necessary to uncover the motivation for a perceived behavior to decide whether it's effective or not.

3) **To know effective ways to intervene.** Once you've decided it's best for you to intervene, you need an effective intervention process to use to “help those in the system.”

**WHAT ARE EFFECTIVE BEHAVIORS?**

So how do we recognize or even define for that matter, effective groups and effective group behaviors?

**A Snapshot of a "Functional" Group**

In an attempt to paint a picture of a fully functional group for you, we came up with the following 12 characteristics. They seem to build upon each other in a sort of hierarchy where the later ones, which are more outwardly focused, tend to rest on the more
inwardly focused behaviors that precede them. There may be more, but we believe these are the key pieces that will go a long way to a group getting what it wants and needs. If you have any suggested additions or changes, we’d love to hear about them.

1. **Basic Needs met.** Group understands, acknowledges, and manages basic human needs, balancing them with the needs of the group. Needs include considerations for physical comfort, security, safety, and maintenance of an environment that supports these. If lower order needs are neglected, higher group function is unlikely.

2. **Mutual Trust.** Trust is developed and maintained to the extent required to accomplish the tasks at hand. Members are honest and transparent with one another, expressing their personal interests clearly and directly. Group purpose and duration will dictate depth of trust required to accomplish task. Mutual trust is essential to complete communication.

3. **Complete Communication.** Everything expressed is “heard.” Everything that needs to be said is stated directly. Environment allows free expression of thoughts, ideas, perspectives, and feelings. Non-verbal or indirect communication is compassionately confronted and resolved. Complete communication deepens trust and lays the foundation for mutual respect.

4. **Mutual Respect.** Individuals act with civility toward one another. Honest, respectful, and complete communication maintains healthy levels of energy, motivation, and commitment to the group. Mutual respect makes it safe to look at and improve on weaknesses.

5. **Committed to Growth.** Group installs and maintains feedback loops to support individual and group evolution. Individuals are willing to give and receive constructive feedback. Periodic reviews of process, status of individual members, accomplishments, corrective action plans, etc. assure group corrects problems and continues to improve.

6. **Consensus Container.** Group operating norms and standards are known, understood, and agreed upon by all members.
Most groups have a number of unspoken assumptions about their roles, goals, and expectations. If these are not clearly voiced and agreed upon by all members, they can cause confusion. When they are explicitly voiced, they will help form standards of effective behavior, enabling your group to progress on its substantive work with fewer internal unconscious barriers.

7. **Product/Process Balance.** Group balances product, process, and relationships, i.e., who, what, and how. This balance assures that the most effective process is developed to get the best product out, in a way that respects and nurtures the relationships between those who produce it. This assures the group’s long-term effectiveness by balancing attention to internal needs with outer-focused group activity.

8. **Shared Responsibility.** All group members are willing and able to contribute to the group vision. This means that they have the skills required and desire to apply them to the problems of the group. Each member assumes 100% responsibility for the group’s mission and sees to it that they assume their fair share of the work. This perspective supports a sharing of the leadership burden.

9. **Shared Leadership.** Group leadership shows up organically as needed. An individual leader may emerge or may not. Everyone in the group assumes responsibility for the emergence of effective leadership. The leadership role may be taken up by different individuals at different times, shifting as the situation warrants and as individuals are internally called to take it on. Comprehensive understanding of leadership responsibilities and burdens cultivates a group’s ability to work toward consensus.

10. **Consensus Decisions.** The group understands the power of consensus, freely expressing and resolving differences that support committed outcomes. At the same time, the group is not attached to building consensus for decisions for which it’s not required. Consensus building is inspired by a shared vision.

11. **Shared Vision.** The group maintains a desire to find and pursue a common goal or vision. A shared vision rallies group energy and commitment to a purpose higher than any one individual. A fully functional group pursuing a
shared vision has the best chance of producing their desired results.

12. Produces Desired Results. The group’s “product” meets or exceeds the standards of its customer. A clear measure of a group’s effectiveness relies on the answer to this question, “Did the group produce results as good or better than required by those who will use them?”

A Model for Diagnosis and Intervention

Now that we have a workable model for a functional group, it’s time to explore “how” we go about diagnosing and intervening on group behaviors that are less than functional. In “The Skilled Facilitator,” Roger Schwarz, describes a simple 6-step model for diagnosis and intervention for this very purpose.

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Diagnosis

The first three steps of the cycle concern your assessment of what’s going on in the group and are designed to help you make the decision whether to intervene or not.

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3 Ibid.
1) **Observe the group’s behavior.** Use our “Snapshot of a Functional Group” as a guide.

2) **Infer meaning.** Understand that the meaning you attach to the group’s behavior is your own and may not be entirely accurate. As human beings, we can’t escape making inferences, especially when we’re attempting to diagnose group process. Simply be aware that you’re making an inference, and be aware of its nature.

3) **Decide Whether to Intervene.** Some questions to ask yourself to help make the decision to intervene are:
   
   a. Have I observed the behavior enough to make a reliable diagnosis?
   b. Has the group agreed to allow me to make this type of intervention?
   c. Will a group member intervene if I don’t?
   d. Will there be sufficient time for the group to process the intervention?
   e. Is the group too overloaded to process the intervention?
   f. Is the behavior central and important enough to intervene on?
   g. Do I have the skills to intervene on this?

**Intervention**

Notice that the next three steps in the cycle, representing the intervention itself, mirror the diagnostic steps in reverse order. During each of these steps, the facilitator should check for agreement from the group. This involves the group in observing their own process and confirms or corrects the inferences contained in the facilitator observations.

4) **Describe Observation.** Here the facilitator simply describes his or her observation to the group, e.g. “I’ve noticed that when some of you begin to explore the reasons you’re having difficulty coming up with ideas, Pete and Sarah take the conversation in a different direction.”

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5) **Test Inferences.** Here you check your inferred meaning with the group, e.g. “Pete and Sarah, do you think my perception is correct?”

6) **Help Group Decide Whether and How to Change Behavior.** The cycle of diagnosis and intervention continues to see how any changes play out.

**Example**

Here's an example application of the above cycle with each step of the cycle included in parentheses.

Let's say you're facilitating a group and you observe (1) that one of the members, let's call him Joe, has just interrupted the group for the third time with negative criticism of ideas put forward during a brainstorming session. You infer (2) that Joe's comments are damaging group process and the intent of the meeting. So you decide (3) to intervene.

Facilitator: Excuse me everyone, I'd like to check out an observation. You are currently engaged in a brainstorming session where you've all agreed that critical analysis is to be left to the latter half of the session. Joe, it seems to me that your last three comments were of a critical nature, at odds with your ground rules, and seems to be dampening the group's creative process (4).

Does my perception seem accurate to you? (5)

Joe: Yes that's true. I didn't realize that my comments were critical but I guess I could see how they could be taken that way.

Facilitator: Is it OK if we check out how the rest of the group perceives your input? (5)

Joe: Sure.

(The group members concur that Joe's comments were off the mark)

Facilitator: Joe, would you be willing to hold your criticism until after the idea-gathering part of this session? (6)

Joe: Yes I will.

Facilitator: Great. Thanks for your cooperation Joe and you're willingness to receive constructive feedback.
Guidelines and Strategies for Intervention

Before we move on, let’s take a moment to quickly review what we’ve done so far. We’ve explored what an intervention is and the kinds of things we’re after in an intervention, i.e. “types” of interventions. We took a snapshot of a functional group to help us form a baseline upon which we might judge the behaviors of the groups within which we work. We also reviewed three core values for functional groups, 1) valid information, 2) free and informed choice, and 3) internal commitment, that support and guide our decision and approach to intervention. Finally, we explored a 6-step model to help guide our diagnosis and interventions in accordance with these values.

Now in this section, we’ll look at some practical guidelines and strategies that show us when and how to intervene.

Designing Your Invitation to Intervene

How you set the stage for your group work can impact heavily on the ease and effectiveness of your interventions. Effective interventions begin with the contracting phase before your first meeting, and setting up the ground rules when you start your work together. Because group norms are often unspoken, they are interpreted differently; developing ground rules forces groups to get these out in the open where they can be discussed and agreed upon in service to doing their best work. Taking the time to develop and discuss these rules (valid information) that people choose to keep, change, or exclude (free and informed choice) helps them reach an internal (and explicit) commitment to them.

It’s usually well worth the effort to develop a good set of ground rules that not only meet the unique needs and desires of your group, but also describe and contain the behaviors expected from functional groups. This is true because ground rule interventions are fairly easy to do since you’re simply reminding participants about behaviors they’ve committed to and asking for recommitment to them. A good set of ground rules will actually define a good number of your total interventions and grant you implied consent to do so. (Click here for a short article on setting up ground rules.)
How Deep Should I Intervene?

Have you ever facilitated a two-hour training workshop and wondered whether you should point out the dysfunctional behavioral pattern of the participant who always puts herself down? Are you a personal growth trainer or life coach who believes you should always take a person as deep in self-awareness as they’re willing to go? Or perhaps you’re a consultant who works with organizations who believe that personal issues should be kept out of the workplace and, therefore, not intervened upon.

In this section, we’ll look at some guidelines to help us answer some of these questions and look at the dimension of depth in our interventions.

First off, what does “depth” mean when we’re speaking of group interventions? One of the best definitions of intervention depth can be found in Dr. Schwarz’ book, "The Skilled Facilitator." His model describes the content of interventions at progressively deeper levels, from superficial to deeply personal. These five levels are briefly summarized below.5

Level 1: Structural-Functional

Focus on attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions about roles and functions of members with little regard for individuals’ characteristics.

Example: An intervention here might involve questioning the group’s understanding of the responsibilities of one of their members. “How would changing Bill’s job help solve your problem?”

Level 2: Performance-Goal

Focus on attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions about performance in a way that focuses on goals rather than processes.

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**Example:** An intervention at this level looks at goals without discussing any individuals involved. “Where is the marketing department not meeting it’s goals?”

**Level 3: Instrumental.** Focus on attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions about *changing work behavior and work relationships* (processes).

**Example:** Interventions at the instrumental level might explore how certain individuals carry out their roles, share information, make decisions, and coordinate activities that affect the marketing issue. “Bill, how might the group help you get this marketing plan finished on schedule?”

**Level 4: Interpersonal.** Focus on attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions that *members have about each other* (feelings, relationships).

**Example:** Interventions at the interpersonal level may inquire what staff members think, feel, or believe when Bill is behind on creating the marketing plan. “Bob, how is Bill’s delay in completing the marketing plan affecting you?”

**Level 5: Intrapersonal.** Focus on attitudes, values, beliefs, and perceptions that *each member has about his or her own functioning, identity, and existence* (self-awareness).

**Example:** Interventions at the intrapersonal level might explore what individuals think, feel, or believe about themselves around certain issues. “Bill, how do you feel about Joe’s perceptions of your communication style?”

**Intervention Tips**

A good rule of thumb is to intervene only to the level required for the group to accomplish its task and only to the level that the group is willing to commit its energy and resources. This is not to preclude explaining to the group the consequences and rewards of going deeper and discussions that might create an

environment or approach where members would feel more comfortable doing so. It's just that group members should consent to the depths interventions might reach before you use them.

I have a brief experience to share illustrating the value of understanding this intervention depth model. I was once part of a group of learning facilitators who trained community college students in workplace and personal skills. We were all biased toward coaching, counseling, and personal growth, a bias that outweighed our desire to teach the more practical, "external" workplace skills and knowledge.

Unaware of this model, we would intervene to the deepest levels, the “inter” and “intra” personal levels, almost constantly. I believe our thinking was that the more we could uncover individual's internal barriers, the more effective they and their group would be.

This was probably not a bad assumption. But after learning of this model of intervention depth and hearing that you need only go to the depth required to help the group solve its immediate task, I realize that we very often frustrated the energy and focus of our group with our biases and beliefs around personal growth. We tried to push our group beyond its capacity, sometimes exhausting and frustrating them and the facilitators as a result.

**Basic vs. Developmental Intervention**

The depth and breadth of your interventions will often depend on whether you're doing basic or developmental facilitation. During the contracting phase, you and the clients need to agree at which of these levels of facilitation you will be working.

In Basic facilitation, your role is to guide group process and intervene to help the group solve their identified problem.

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In developmental facilitation, your role is to teach the group to monitor and guide their own process and you intervene to help them to better facilitate themselves. In this case, you might intervene to point out elements of their process or behaviors that hinder the group's long-term effectiveness, or you might stop the process when opportunities arise to help members develop their own process skills.

**Intervention Tips**

For basic facilitation, intervene at the lowest level necessary for the group to accomplish the task at hand. These interventions tend to be more superficial. This is not to preclude discussions with the group about going deeper. Just be conscious that going deeper will require a new commitment from the group that necessitates sharing of “valid information” about the consequences and rewards of such interventions.

For developmental facilitation, intervene at the level sufficient to identify the root causes of the problem. Most likely these will focus on the Instrumental level and deeper according to the depth model discussed earlier. You'll be looking at interactions or sources of dysfunctional behaviors to support group members in their own diagnosis and course corrections.

Ultimately, the purpose of interventions is to move a group toward its goal. If the group's goal is simply to solve the problem at hand with no desire to look at underlying patterns that might cause the problem, then we must respect that desire (free and informed choice) and use only those higher-level interventions appropriate to that end.

Typically, you'll intervene during basic facilitation simply to focus on the actions that will get the group back on task to accomplishing their immediate goal.

If on the other hand, groups seek to uncover and heal their dysfunctional patterns, interventions to the deepest level may be necessary and encouraged based on the groups' willingness in the moment.
Imposing Structure

As a general rule, interventions should impose the minimal amount of structure on a group for it to accomplish its task. Some interventions change the course of the entire group long after the intervention is over and impose a substantial degree of structure. These are referred to as "macro" interventions. For instance, if you notice your group showing up late, side talking, rambling off topic, and taking jabs at one another, you might intervene to suggest they develop a set of ground rules before moving forward. This macro intervention would apply to the whole group, and change the course of their meeting for some time by offering structured guidelines to follow.

In contrast, a "micro" intervention tends to provide very little structure, to individuals or subgroups, and only for a short period of time. For instance, intervening to call an individual on breaking a ground rule would be considered a micro intervention because it focuses on an individual, has a short-term impact on the course of the meeting, and imposes very little change on its structure.

Intervention Tips

Generally, it's best to perform macro interventions before micro interventions. This is true because very often, the micro intervention will be included in the macro intervention and therefore won't be necessary.

For example, if individuals are talking over one another, an intervention to have the group develop ground rules would include addressing how people communicate within the group.

Timing Your Interventions

Here and now behaviors.

Always seek to intervene in the "here and now." Don't intervene today on something that happened last week. Interventions in the present moment are far more powerful and relevant. On the
other hand, if you're doing "Developmental" Facilitation, you may want to give the group a little time to intervene on the behavior themselves prior to jumping in.

**Immediacy**

Don’t be too concerned about intervening immediately on every questionable behavior. If a behavior is truly a problem within a group, it will continue to show up. Your interventions will likely be more effective and on the mark when you’ve been able to observe a behavior more than once. You’ll also be in the position to see group patterns emerge, which are usually collections of habitual behaviors.

**Group Evolution**

The depth of your interventions will be influence by how long you’ve been working with a group, the intended life of the group, and their stage of group evolution. For instance, a deep intra-personal intervention would probably be inappropriate in a group that is just getting to know each other and is just beginning to develop trust in you as a facilitator. So be sensitive to where your groups are in their development when designing your interventions.

**Frequency of Meetings**

How often a group meets will also inform the context and depth of your interventions. If a group meets only once to accomplish a basic task, it would be inappropriate to intervene at a level that would require more time than you have to process. Even if a group meets frequently, you’ll want to use caution in using deeper interventions toward the end of a meeting.

**Intensity of Interventions**

If you were to view yourself as an “instrument” of intervention, then your intensity, defined by your choice of words, voice inflection, and body language, will certainly comprise a useful tool for your interventions. It may be helpful to view intervention intensity on a scale that moves from **Supportive** (low intensity), **Persuasive** (medium intensity), to **Directive** (high intensity).

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9 Facilitation, Providing Opportunities for Learning, Trevor Bentley, 1994
Supportive

Supportive interventions are intended to empower and support the group in the work they are already doing. These types of interventions may comprise facilitator actions such as, silence, supportive comments and body language, and asking clarifying questions.

Persuasive

Persuasive interventions are intended to influence the group’s direction. These may be required when a group is stuck or if they have assumed a significant amount of power and authority, thereby requiring stronger interventions to get their attention. This type of intervention may include questions that inspire the group to change or move, suggestions for new choices or directions, sharing of ideas, or suggesting actions.

Directive

Directive interventions are usually a last resort or may be required when a participant insists on disrupting the group. These interventions consist of guidance, choosing for the group, and directing them.

Intervention tips

Aligning with our intent to positively impact our groups with the lightest touch possible, use the lowest intensity intervention required to help the group achieve its purpose. It’s usually better to err on the low side versus the high side of the intensity equation to minimize group dependence on the facilitator and to maximally empower them.

Intervene on Whom?

When deciding who should be the subject of your intervention, address those group members who contribute to the action, interaction, or pattern of dysfunctional behavior you observe. This can be an individual, subgroup, or the entire group.  

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Is Something Missing?

Sometimes “missing” behaviors indicate dysfunction in a group. These can be especially difficult to identify when we usually have our hands full looking at what “is” going on. The “Snapshot of a Functional Group” model introduced earlier can help you with this. For example, consider a group that is very functional in working together and getting the job done, but in which no one ever laughs. This lack of healthy behavior may offer the clue to an invisible pattern that might be prudent to address given our other guidelines for intervention.

You Are Your Own Best Intervention

As a facilitator, you bring three things to your practice: knowledge, skills, and self.

*Knowledge* is a grounding in and working familiarity with the body of theory, research, concepts, and models pertaining to the field of group facilitation. This is the knowledge we gain from books, journals, conversations, dialogues, seminars, and other forms of study and learning. Not to mention this guide!

*Skills* are the practiced ability to act on, carry out, and support the actions and interventions prescribed by the theory that is in our knowledge base. This involves things like listening, presenting, observing, sensing, supporting, challenging, and diagnosing. Skills are developed through experiential learning; apprenticeships; and practice, practice, practice.

The *Self* is everything we are -- our beliefs, values, and life experiences as they manifest in our attitudes, needs, and motives.

In all of life, and especially in group facilitation, our Self determines our *ability* to use our knowledge and skills. Therefore, of these three, the Self is the most important. No matter how much we know or how hard we practice, if we are blocked in applying the knowledge and skills we have developed, it will adversely impact our performance as facilitators.
Conversely, there are people who, because of who they are, have a seemingly natural talent for helping a group achieve results even without the theory, even the first time they get in front of a group.

Use your presence to set a mood and tone for the meeting. If you are calm, the group will be calm. If you are hopeful, the group will be hopeful. If you choose when to intervene, what process to use, and get the group to agree on process issues, the group will be mindful of process. If you trust, the group will be trustworthy. If you play mind games, the group will play mind games. If you look for hidden meanings and subterfuges, they will be there. But if you are very clear in your communications and take the statements of others at their face value, they will begin to communicate clearly as well.

**Intervention Speak**

The language we use for our interventions can make a huge difference in their success. General guidelines are as follows:

- Be specific about describing behaviors and whose they were, i.e. use names.
- Use simple street language that anyone can understand.
- Speak in a “charge-neutral” tone—a voice free of emotional upset or emotional direction.
- Be direct describing “your perspective,” remembering that your perspective in not absolute fact.
- Use language that is respectful of all group members.

**Sample Intervention Questions**

Here are some example questions you might practice to help you with your interventions:

- “I could be wrong here, but what I’m seeing is ….”
“Right now I’m feeling …, what are the rest of you experiencing?”

“May I offer you some feedback?”

“That’s a valid observation. And here’s another way you might want to look at this …”

“A pattern I’m observing here is …”

“Time out! I’m sorry to interrupt but there’s something I’d like to check out with you …”

“Bill would you please restate what you just said?”

“Jill would you distill what you just said into one sentence?”

“If I were you, I guess I would feel …”

**When Not to Intervene**

- **When the group appears to be on course or even making progress in working through a conflict or difficulty on their own.** Often the group will find its own way, resolving the issue you would have addressed with your intervention. So when the process appears healthy, it’s better to err on the side of less intervention than more.

- **When time is not an issue** and the personality of the group suggests side-trips are useful and/or enjoyable.

- **When the group needs to vent.** If this is an infrequent or obviously necessary behavior based on circumstances, let the venting run its course until the group is ready to get back on task because if they’re not ready it won’t happen anyway.

- **When trust is lacking.** Deeper interventions will require a certain degree of trust between you and group members and amongst group members. Get permission to go deeper with participants when the requisite trust level is questionable.
When the group surprises you by moving into a new direction that leads to more productive discussion that’s on course.

When the group is progressing well on their own toward the objectives they’ve agreed upon.

When it is your agenda, not theirs. This underscores the importance of your motivation for intervening. Interventions should be aimed solely at helping a group to be more effective and aligned with the scope of the work they’ve agreed to undertake.

When something bigger is at work. Sometimes the group mind knows what it’s doing even when you’re not sure. For example: when it could enhance a relatively unknown moderator’s contribution and/or skill, when it focuses on a member’s unsuspected fine qualities, when it allows somebody to improve his/her own self-esteem by helping somebody else, etc.

Raising the Bar

Debrief your Work. Just as it’s been said that if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail, facilitators with a limited inventory of diagnostic and intervention tools will not always be able to effectively see and intervene on relevant issues. Your challenge as a facilitator is to continue to solicit objective feedback from your participants and peers. Debrief each of your facilitated events with a peer to discover where you can improve your ability to see what’s happening in group dynamics and to learn new tools for intervention.

Beware of biases. All of us come to this work of facilitation with certain values, beliefs, and biases. These are only a problem to the extent you are unconscious of them. Get to know the particular types of issues, people, and behaviors that upset you. Be aware of those that you haven’t yet healed, and be extra careful with interventions in these situations. This is another important reason to always test
your inferences as explained in the “Cycle of Intervention,” as they will be strongest around our unconscious issues.

Consider cultural norms. If you are facilitating a group comprised of a mix of cultures, it will be important for you to understand cultural differences that might change what would be considered “functional” behavior. Some cultures consider negative feedback as a show of respect for another, while western culture would view that as disrespectful. Take extra care to explore these potential differences when setting up ground rules for such groups.

Don’t push too much. There may be times when your group is poised to really move to a higher level of effectiveness, yet they may not be open to receiving the depth of intervention required to make this move. Further, they may be stuck unless they do the deeper work. Sometimes a gentle push will invite the group to process the deeper issues. At other times, you may need to explain the value of doing the deeper work (providing valid information) in the hopes that they will choose (free and informed choice) to internally commit to moving forward. But bottom line, it’s important to respect the “free and informed choice” of your group with regard to the work they’re willing to do.

Be pushy. I love paradox, don’t you? Sometimes all a group needs is a little push, well all right, sometimes a big push, to get them past some point of resistance that will really move them into new terrain. There are no rules for this one. You’ll need to trust your instincts, your intuition, your experience, and your read on the group as to whether you need to back off or push them forward.

This reminds me of another experience I had with a group we were facilitating in a long-term training. They seemed to be dragging their feet and really lacked commitment. One of our co-facilitators had lots of challenges going on in her life. Her mother was dying, she was in the midst of graduate school, which she had to travel some distance to attend, and was just plain frustrated by the attitudes she saw in this group.
So at the beginning of one session, she basically “let them have it” She didn’t threaten or judge, she just very. passionately shared her frustrations with the behaviors she perceived going on in this group, the personal challenges she was facing and overcoming, and her challenge to the group to do the same. The group made a quantum leap that day that wouldn’t have happened otherwise.

**Step out of the “Facilitator” Role.** As the above example implies, sometimes we can be more effective assisting our group’s growth by stepping out of the facilitative role. Groups very seldom hire a facilitator. They hire someone to help them solve the problems in which groups typically find themselves. The facilitative skill set can be of immense value in this area, but there are other skills that lie outside the bounds of “pure” facilitation. Sometimes these are needed and if you have them available, use them! Just let your group know when you’re stepping out of this role and be prepared to resolve any issues afterwards that might impact your effectiveness as a facilitator for the duration of the group.

For example, the formal facilitative role is seen to be product neutral, free of opinions or biases thereof, etc. But there may be times when you have some great content information as a result of your prior experience that would really help the group out. To do this, you’ll need to ask their permission to step out of the facilitator role and step into the role of consultant, teacher, or coach.

The bottom line here is this. It’s smart to know your values and your bounds as a facilitator and to honor them. It’s masterful to know when and how to move out of this role if this better supports your group’s needs at the time.
Facilitator's Intervention Checklist

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instructions</th>
<th>Use these questions to help you decide if an intervention is appropriate. A yes answer to all questions is a good sign that it's time to intervene.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>1. Have I observed the behavior enough to make a reliable diagnosis?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Has the group agreed to allow me to make this type of intervention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Is it unlikely that a group member will intervene if I don't?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Will there be sufficient time for the group to process the intervention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Does the group have enough experience and knowledge to use my intervention to its benefit?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6. Does the group have enough information (or can I provide it) for them to make a free and informed choice regarding the intervention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>7. Is the group too overloaded to process the intervention?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8. Is the behavior central and important enough to intervene on?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9. If I don't intervene now, are the odds good that I can intervene later and still help the group be more effective?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>10. Do I have the skills to intervene on this?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Worksheets

Resources I can use to better Intervene in my groups:

1. Facilitator's Intervention Checklist (previous page).

2. _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________

3. _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________

4. _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________

5. _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________
   _________________________________________________
Plan of action to improve at this skill.

1. Take FacilitatorU.com upcoming teleclass on Interventions.

2. ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________

3. ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
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4. ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
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5. ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
   ______________________________________________________
Other Resources

**Intervention Skills: Process Consultation for Small Groups and Teams**, by W. Brendan Reddy

Do you always know how and when to intervene in a functioning group?

Now you can help any group identify, diagnose, and resolve problems as they occur--with this powerful guide to group process consultation!

*Intervention Skills* gives you the know-how to intervene effectively in small groups and teams. Expertly written and filled with real-world examples, this inspiring, easy-to-read book will spur you on to greater success--whether you're new to the field or an experienced professional looking for ways to improve your skills.

**The Skilled Facilitator**, Practical Wisdom for Developing Effective Groups, by Roger M. Schwarz

Roger Schwarz draws on his own extensive facilitation experience and insight to bring together theory and practice, creating a comprehensive reference for consultants, peer facilitators, managers, leaders--anyone whose role is to guide groups toward realization their creative and problem-solving potential. The Skilled Facilitator provides essential materials including simple but effective ground rules for governing group interaction; what to say to a group (and when to say it) to keep it on track and moving toward its goal, proven techniques for starting meetings on the right (and ending them positively and decisively) practical methods for handling emotions (particularly negative emotions) when they arise in a group context, and a diagnostic approach for helping both facilitators and group members identify and solve problems that can undermine the group process.
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Resources

FacilitatorU.com. Just in Time Resources and Training for group workers. Facilitator U is a Virtual University offering resources and training for all those who work with group and offers a variety of resources including easy-to-attend teleclasses on a number of facilitation topics and an economical lifetime site membership packed with resources. Inquire about special rates available to groups.

Let us know how we're doing
We would love to hear your feedback on this learning guide. If there is anything that you particularly liked, think is missing, or believe to be incorrect, please email your comments to us and we'll consider them in a future version of this work. Thanks for your support!

About the Author:
This document was written by Steve Davis and is a product of www.FacilitatorU.com, a Virtual University offering resources, tools, and training to group workers. Visit our site at www.FacilitatorU.com and sign up for our free weekly ezine at www.MasterFacilitatorJournal.com. For more information about the author, visit his website at www.livingmastery.com.