

Not another syndicate group!

Making group work a worthwhile exercise

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In recent years, the use of syndicate groups has been championed by many training professionals and there is a commonly held belief that the use of these syndicate or breakout groups will enhance interaction and the learning experience. Syndicate groups are seen as an effective way to encourage participation, to make the learning experience more interesting, and possibly, to increase group interaction and develop higher-level learning and problem solving skills.

However, many training participants shudder when they hear the trainer yet again announce “now let’s get into small groups and discuss . . .”. The participants dutifully march off, form into a circle, elect a “scribe”, sit back and coast. The trainer pulls up her chair, happy with the fact that she is involving her audience in the presentation. By using the same old method time and time again, trainers are not fully utilizing the potential of the small group dynamic.

This is not to suggest that there is no place for syndicate groups in training. Sometimes the curriculum seems to demand some type of small group work but this does not have to be the traditional type of syndicate group. This article presents seven alternatives that go beyond the traditional method and result in better training.

Self-contained syndicates

Here the premise is simple. *No reporting back*. This may sound like an insignificant change but let us look at what the implications are. First of all there is no need to “elect a scribe” or a group leader, placing everyone on a more even footing. Second, the group can process the information or case study material without the added pressure of having to report back to the whole group. Third, the often repetitive feedback time is not needed and this frees up more time for the group work.

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Syndicate pairs

You have probably tried this before, but in recent years it seems to have fallen out of favor with trainers. You get two people to discuss the topic between them: no feedback is given to the whole group. This works particularly well with large groups and groups that do not know each other all that well.

2-4-8 merge

This method involves splitting the group initially into groups of two. The pair then discusses the set topic/questions/case study for a fixed time (say ten minutes) and then merges with another pair into a group of four. Then, after another ten minutes, the groups of four merge into groups of eight and then discuss the topic again. The advantage of this method is that it involves all participants, even the quiet or less assertive ones. It also facilitates the development of group cohesiveness. The 2-4-8 method also works extremely well with large groups, though it is recommended to stop merging at final groups of between 12 to 14 participants.

Modified Delphi groups

The Delphi technique was originally conceived as a way to obtain the opinion of experts without necessarily bringing them together face to face. However, in the present context it is suggested as a method for group work.

The group is broken up into smaller groups of about six people. Each of these groups is led by a volunteer facilitator. Within each group, participants are asked to share and write down their ideas and disagreements, with the results then shared with the other groups. The groups then review their original results and the process is repeated. Eventually, after several revisions, a group consensus is normally achieved. This final consensus position can then be opened up for general discussion if the trainer feels it beneficial. This technique works well with controversial topics or when group consensus is necessary.

Feedback syndicates

In this method, the group is broken up into groups of five to eight participants. The small groups work through their topics and reach consensus. After a set time, the groups are instructed to send a “messenger” to the other groups to inform them of their results. These are presented by the messenger and then incorporated or rejected by the other group. The messenger technique can be repeated several times (similar to the modified Delphi approach) or stopped after the first message is sent. There is no need for a full group debriefing of the results. Groups seem to enjoy the interaction of this technique, the messenger becomes an interesting introduced dynamic into the visited group and it is a good idea to keep them with their new group for the next group activity.

Debates

The group is split into two teams (or more) and the basic “rules of debating” are introduced. Normally there are three to four speakers on each side with the final speaker being the whip. However, if the group size is not six to eight, and you wish to involve more participants, then the “whip’s role” can be shared by three or four participants.

The teams then debate the subject(s) presented by the trainer and each of the speakers are given one to three minutes to speak. The remaining audience can, if you like, vote on the winner of the debate. This technique is very effective when the topic being discussed is rather dry or when you want to stimulate the group, say after lunch.

Hypotheticals

Based on the “case study” technique of teaching adopted many years ago by the Harvard Law School, this approach is stimulating and entertaining. Each participant is assigned a role in an unfolding scenario, then prodded and challenged into solving the presented hypothetical problem in a practical and interactive way.



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For example, the group may be given various roles such as trade unionist, shareholder, journalist, CEO and human resources manager and taken through a hypothetical situation where a company is closed and the employees all lose their pensions and asked to comment on the situation as it develops.

This method works well for all subjects including the most controversial; however it does require preparation and facilitation to draw out the varying perspectives of the participants.

Conclusion

Syndicate groups can make the learning experience more interesting and should be part of every effective trainer’s toolbox. They can create many opportunities for creative interchange of ideas and lively, meaningful participation. However, by using the same old “breakout” method time and time again, trainers are not taking full advantage of the benefits of the small group dynamic.

This article has presented several alternatives that go beyond the traditional. They attempt to stimulate and involve the audience and consequently develop higher-level learning.

Keywords:

**Training, Group-work,
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