The Empowerment Pyramid: Building the Capacity for Effective Decision-Making

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

We have to make a decision. All of the relevant documents are laying on the table in front of us. We have spent several, often-tense, hours trying to get the facts straight and trying to get some alignment regarding our goals and desired outcomes regarding the initiative that sits on the table with the relevant documents. Will we be successful in arriving at a decision upon which we can all agree and that is likely to lead us to a successful outcome? I would suggest that many factors go into determining whether or not we will be successful; furthermore, a considerable number of these factors reside outside of our control—and we must take into account these external factors. However, some of the factors reside here in the meeting room.

These factors often relate to what I have identified as the four dimensions of group empowerment: communication, conflict-management, problem-solving—and decision-making. These four dimensions tend to stack up on top of one another. Effective conflict-management requires effective communication, effective problem-solving requires effective conflict-management—and effective decision-making requires effective problem-solving. Because they stack up on top of one another, I like to portray them as a pyramid with communication residing at the base and decision-making at the apex. With this pyramid in place, I wish to turn first to the nature of Empowerment—for it is the fundamental feature of the Empowerment Pyramid (this four-stage decision-making model)

The Nature of True Empowerment

The term *empowerment* is widely bandied about today in corporate board rooms, human relations training laboratories and popular books on management. Empowerment is a good term and is responsible in part for the growing interest of many organizational leaders in bringing their subordinates more fully into the dialogue regarding the way in which their organization should operate. However, the term often moves an organization no further than rhetoric and good intentions—for it lack the "muscles" of a practical, informed notion of the ways in which

individuals and groups truly begin to effectively influence the ways in which an organization operates.

The Keys to Empowerment

A new organizational mind-set requires a fundamental shift in personal attitude, group process and organizational structure. Let's look at each of these shifts, one at a time. First, as Goodwin Watson noted, a shift in *personal attitude* is required for any sustained organizational change. Watson further proposed that sustained organizational changes require a shift in *the processes of the group.* Finally, Watson would encourage a shift in *organizational structure* if empowerment is to occur.

It would seem that any effective empowerment must ultimately incorporate a wide range of strategies and tools that impact on the structures, processes and attitudes of individual employees, work groups and the overall organization. Everyone seems to agree that these conditions are necessary. But they are *not sufficient*! The key to empowerment lies not only in the ways in which people work together, but also in the manner by which individuals and groups specifically work within one of the three domains: the *domain of ideas*. Empowerment concerns ideas. It concerns the creation of settings and the development of individual and group capacities to work with ideas. Empowerment exists when ideas are being freely generated. It exists when ideas are being discussed and tested out. In particular, empowerment exists when differences in opinion regarding ideas are not just tolerated. Differences are actually welcomed as the basis for expanded dialogue and further development of a solution or new program.

We cannot begin to review all of the many ways in which empowerment can be engendered in an organization. We have chosen to focus on the group rather than the individual. Most of the concepts and tools being presented, however, are readily translated into individual actions. Specifically, we identify four building blocks for group empowerment.

The Principles of Empowerment

I propose that *individuals and groups move toward empowerment by addressing these four functional building blocks in a systematic and sequential fashion.* Each of these four building blocks rests on satisfactory resolution of issues associated with the previous building block. The

second building block (conflict-management) can't be addressed until the first (communications) is satisfactorily faced, just as the second must be resolved before the third (problem solving) and the third before the fourth (decision-making). Successful conflict-management requires effective communication. Successful problem solving, in turn, requires effective management of conflict and effective communication. Finally, successful decision-making requires that a group already be masterful in communicating, managing conflict and solving problem. One might think of this model of group empowerment as a pyramid, each domain resting on the foundation of the previous domain and providing a foundation for the subsequent building blocks.
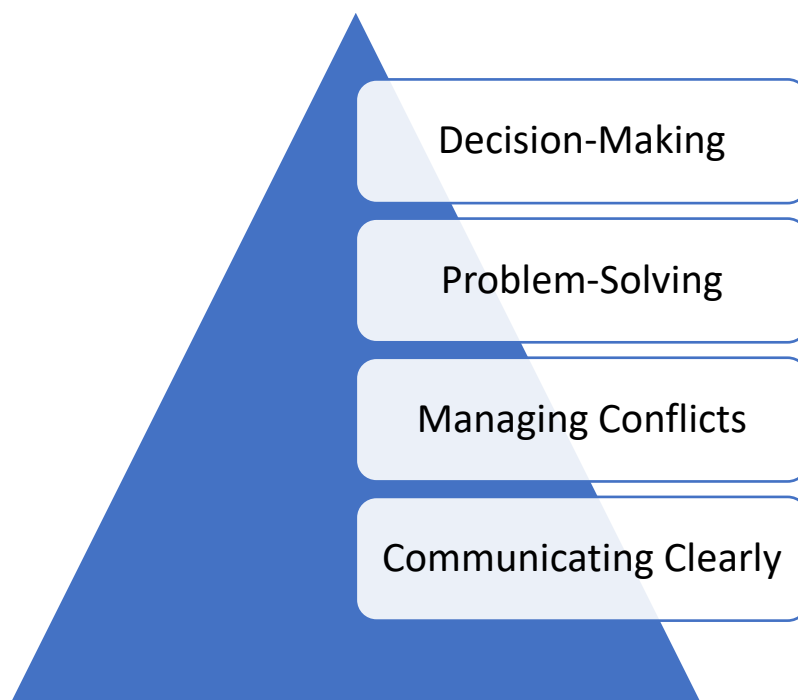
The first building block is *communication*. Individuals and groups must be able to openly and accurately communicate with one another. Ideas must freely flow without major distortion or misuse. The second building block involves the capacity to *manage conflict*. Once individuals and groups begin to communicate openly and accurately with one another, they begin to recognize more fully their different opinions, perspectives and values. This, in turn, tends to create conflict. Thus, when conflict begins to emerge among individuals or within a group, this is not necessarily a negative outcome nor is it necessarily a condition from which one should escape. It may instead be a positive sign that the individuals or groups are maturing and

communicating with one another. In order for individuals and groups to handle this second set of challenges, they must develop the capacities and procedures to effectively manage this conflict.

The third building block of group empowerment concerns the capacity to *solve problems.* After underlying conflicts are addressed, an individual or group is ready to establish its unique mode of operation and, in particular, its way of addressing the problems that the organization faces. The tools and procedures of problem solving must be mastered if an individual or group is to act in an empowered manner. The fourth and final building block concerns *decision-making*. Once an individual or group has identified ways in which to effectively address problems, the time has come for the individual or group to make decisions. This is the ultimate goal of any empowerment process. It should enable individuals and groups to make decisions regarding the ideas that have been generated in the organization. Furthermore, these decisions should be aligned with the clear intentions of the organization and should be based on the ample information that is made available to the individual or group.

Empowerment requires that ideas be closely linked to information and intentions. We now turn to each of these four building blocks of group empowerment and suggest ways in which group members can master each of these four fundamental functions.

Communications

Often, the most serious problem in the communication that occurs in a group concerns *selection.* We live in a world of information overload. Each of us is confronted on a daily basis with a wealth of memoranda, reports, statistics, and news. We often come to a meeting in dread of assimilating a large chunk of new information. An informational meeting should be designed to convey essential ideas, statistics, plans, procedures, etc. in a clear and concise manner. Meeting leaders must screen out the peripheral and extraneous material before the meeting; otherwise, participants are likely to retain the unimportant information and forget that which is important.

Decisions regarding participation in the meeting also require some soul-searching and establishment of priorities. Considerable research has shown that accurate information-transfer tends to decrease as a function of group size. The larger the group, the more likely will be

4

miscommunication. The reasons for this effect are rather obvious. In a small group, members can ask questions, comment on the information, or ask the speaker to repeat a particular point or state it in another way. This type of receiver involvement is less likely to occur or be acceptable in large groups. In selecting members for the group, therefore, it is usually preferable to invite a few people who will accurately receive the message than to invite many people who are likely to walk away from the meeting with inaccurate information. A few well-informed group members can, in turn, inform other people in other small groups, thereby enabling the message to spread accurately and more personally.

Accuracy in information transmission also can be improved by attending to the sender of the information. The conveyer of information should have credibility with specific reference to this body of information, should be minimally distracting (in terms of other roles and relationships with those attending the meeting) and should have command of the information to be conveyed. These characteristics sometimes come into conflict. The boss may be most authoritative and knowledgeable about the information but will elicit an emotional block that prevents subordinates from hearing the message accurately. Conversely, a more neutral party may have neither the credibility nor the knowledge to be an effective communicator. Under such circumstances, both the boss and neutral party might be present, with the boss making an initial presentation and the neutral party leading discussions, attempting to clarify and mediate between the boss and subordinates to ensure accurate communication in both directions.

The way in which information is conveyed also increases (or decreases) accuracy. If information is complex, emotionally laden or unusual, then it should be conveyed in a *redundant* manner; i.e., it should be conveyed several different times in several different ways. Preferably, this information should be communicated through at least two different media, for example, speech and the written word, or speech and a visual diagram. If questions arise, they should be answered, if possible, by shifting to a different medium. If information is being conveyed verbally, for example, then questions might be addressed by constructing a visual model or demonstration, or by telling an illustrative story.

Unfortunately, some communicators simply repeat the same words they used before when asked to clarify a point or they simply speak louder. Some communicators only make use of one medium, usually verbal, when many of the people with whom they work exhibit a strong preference for other media when receiving complex and disturbing information. Group members who are often described as "thick-headed" or inattentive may prefer communication in a medium with which we don't feel comfortable. In order to improve their own communication skills, group leaders should learn how to communicate in several different media: speaking, writing, visualizing (diagramming) and enacting (physically walking through a process or procedure).

Communication and Appreciation

We return to a fundamental question with regard to this first group function: why are meetings used for the sharing of information? More effective and efficient procedures and technological tools are available for disseminating information to multiple destinations. Before calling an information-sharing meeting, shouldn't we consider the reason why a group is needed to convey this information? Does the meeting provide a forum for exchanging ideas? Does it stimulate minds? Is this an efficient means for presenting information? Is this a support and appreciative setting in which to generate and make use of information in order to hammer out decisions, arrive at consensus, and reach agreements?

Before initiating an informational meeting, it is important to acknowledge that most of these four functions can be served without the potential participants gathering together in the same room. Routing schedules are the simplest form of information transfer. Instead of meeting to pass out information, send the information by e-mail to relevant people. Reply comments can come back in the same way. This method serves three of the four functions: exchanging ideas, providing and receiving stimulating ideas, and presenting information. Only the fourth function, hammering out decisions, consensus, and agreements, may require a face-to-face meeting.

In many instances, a meeting that is called for information-sharing purposes is actually being used to *instruct* and *convince*, rather than just inform. Meetings can be effective when used for these two purposes—provided all members in attendance know that these are the intentions of those convening the meeting. An appreciative meeting can provide a forum for immediate, two-

way communication, thereby building team spirit and group acceptance of changes that have been made in the organization. An appreciative informational meeting can also include avenues for dissemination of information, for group member's feedback on this information, for exchange of pertinent information among all members of the group, and for further definition, planning and clarification in all three domains: information, intentions and ideas.

Managing Conflict

Once members of a group begin to communicate with one another and provide each other with feedback regarding the accuracy of information being conveyed, the validity of an underlying belief or assumption, or the quality of an idea being presented, then conflict will inevitably arise. We have consulted with many groups that shy away from their continuing maturation precisely at the point that they encounter conflict. There are several ways in which to manage the conflict that inevitably occurs in group settings. One can focus on the individual conflicts that arise among members of the group and make use of the many mediation tools that are available to manage these interpersonal conflicts. Given that we are focusing in this essay on group-level empowerment, we will address the issue of conflict-management primarily from the perspective of group management of conflict-filled issued. Even more specifically, I will focus on the attitudes, structures, procedures and processes that group members use in managing inevitable differences of opinion and priorities among group members.

Obtaining Group Feedback on an Idea

In many instances, it is when information is shared that conflict emerges. It is often the case that the information concerns feedback regarding an idea that has been presented in the group. Differences in perspectives, values and intentions often are only manifest when feedback occurs. Participants react to the ideas being presented by other members of the group. Fear about feedback and the potential for conflict is often hidden. The person presenting the idea often does not really want feedback but is only soliciting it so that other participants feel like they are involved and appreciated by the person presenting the idea.

Unfortunately, this hypocrisy will soon get most group leaders in trouble. Participants soon learn that their suggestions are being ignored, hence build up even more resentment than if they were

never asked for their feedback in the first place. Unless the meeting is being convened on a one-time basis, with people who will never work together again, it is better to be honest about a lack of interest in feedback than to fake it.

In starting a meeting in which ideas are being discussed (rather than one in which information is being conveyed and members are expected to be passive), it is essential that members of the group at least briefly candidly talk about the kind of feedback, if any, that is desired and about the best time for this feedback to be solicited. There are at least five different kinds of feedback that can be given:

1. **Corrective Feedback:** Information suggesting that a specific course of action is not desirable because of a specific undesirable outcome that can be anticipated, for example: "I don't think you should hire John. This would alienate the entire department."

2. **Diagnostic Feedback:** Information suggesting why a specific course of action has been or will be successful or unsuccessful, for example: "I think Susan is frustrated with your work because you keep promising things that you can't deliver!"

3. **Corroborative Feedback:** Information that confirms and at times expands upon a specific suggestion that has been offered, for example: "I think this idea is good for the following three reasons. . . "

4. **Descriptive Feedback:** Information that conveys to another person the nature of their specific behavior in some setting as observed by another person, for example: "You have been less active in this group's discussion during the past half hour than you were during the first hour."

5. **Judgmental Feedback:** Information concerning a group member's own opinion of a suggestion that has been made, including, at times, a rationale for this opinion, for example: "I don't think this is a good idea for it will prevent us from reaching our affirmative action goal."

Corrective and judgmental forms of feedback are often confused in meetings. They differ from one another in that corrective feedback provides information about how a specific course of action would adversely affect the achievement or the course of action as well as typically, the

other members of the group. Conversely, judgmental feedback usually is based on a difference in goal priorities. The person providing the feedback is letting the person who made the suggestion know that the suggestion will not be supported because it works against or is at least not responsive to one or more goals that the feedback-giver values. The first of these two forms of feedback operates in the domain of information, whereas the second form operates in the domain of intentions.

All five forms of feedback can be appreciative in nature, though corrective and judgmental feedback must be carefully crafted if it is to be appreciative. Corroborative, diagnostic, and descriptive forms of feedback all help a group progress toward its assigned task. Corroborative feedback encourages group members to build on each other's ideas. The problem solving process called *Synectics* relies heavily on corroborative feedback. Diagnostic feedback is of great value as well in problem- solving settings, while descriptive feedback helps members of a group monitor their own behavior and improve their effectiveness as group members. Descriptive feedback, unlike judgmental (and sometimes corrective) feedback tends not to elicit defensive responses from the recipient. She can decide whether or not the behavior being identified is what she intended to enact. With some additional diagnostic or corrective feedback, the recipient can determine the probable consequences of his behavior.

A group leader significantly increases the probability that feedback will be offered in a helpful manner if she plans for a specific time when feedback is to be solicited. Frequently, when feedback is offered in a spontaneous manner, it has not been carefully prepared by the sender, hence is confusing, contradictory or incomplete. Furthermore, off the cuff feedback often occurs when the sender is particularly frustrated or feeling angry, hence it tends to be emotionally laden and judgmental. If members of a group are told that the presenter would like to take ten minutes to present her ideas before feedback is solicited, then group members will usually comply with the request. They will not comply, however, if they have been told the same thing at previous meetings and never given an adequate opportunity to give feedback.

Given a credible timetable, group members typically will take notes during the presentation, carefully prepare their comments, and provide their feedback after the presentation. This model

will be particularly successful if the initial presentation is short, or if it is broken into five- or ten-minute chunks with feedback after each chunk. It will also be successful if group members, at some early point, learn about and are given an opportunity to practice, observe, or read about the specific type of feedback that is desired.

Whatever the feedback process being employed, it is particularly important that an appreciative norm be established regarding the purpose of the feedback. Appreciative feedback is oriented primarily to the needs and interests of the person requesting the feedback, not those of the person conveying the feedback. Rarely will feedback that is unsolicited and unwanted be effective in changing the opinions, ideas, or behavior of another person. The person who is requesting the feedback needs to receive it directly, not via a secondary source. Whenever possible, the feedback should be given by someone who will be affected directly by the suggestion being made, behavior being emitted, etc. Secondary speculation about possible impact is much less desirable than direct testimony.

Appreciative feedback is conveyed in a sensitive and careful manner, with the sender checking frequently to be sure that the message is being received accurately. Even feedback that affirms a recipient's values or self-perceptions should be checked for accuracy. The recipient is likely to overestimate the degree of affirmation being offered by the sender or is likely to discount what is being said. This reflects the pervasive inability in our contemporary society to accept compliments or support from others. Informational meetings that incorporate appreciative feedback not only make the participants feel good, it also enables the group to do a better job of receiving, interpreting, distilling, and making use of the information that is held by its members.

Appreciative Perspectives on Conflict
Even with effective communication and appreciative feedback, members of a group will create or become involved in conflicts that disrupt group functioning. Members of a group begin to recognize their differences of opinion and differing styles and values precisely because members of the group have communicated successfully with one another. Difference of opinion and perspective are now apparent. Pandora's box has been opened. It can never again be closed without disrupting the preliminary trust that has been built in the group.

As the leader or a member of the group, one can take several courses of action to mediate a group conflict. First, the leader or facilitating member can help each party to the conflict communicate their version of the conflict in a systematic manner. In this way, other members of the group can assist in managing or even resolving the conflict. Second, the leader or other members of the group can call on a third person in the group to mediate between the two parties. This assumes that the third party is neutral, respected by both parties, and open to this difficult role. Third, the leader or other group members can identify the person in the group with the lowest stake in the outcome of the issue and ask the opinion or this person. This is a dangerous step to take in that this person may suddenly and inappropriately take on the burden of the conflict. As a last recourse, the group may choose to bring in an outsider to consult on the issue or even mediate the conflict.

There is another strategy that can be employed. It is more appreciate in nature. Members of the group can exhibit a little patience and courage. They can exhibit *patience* by giving each party sufficient airtime to present his grievance or perception of the problem. Frequently, conflicts erupt primarily because one or more members of the group have not found space in which to talk and react to other ideas that have been presented. Conversely, the conflict might be based on one member's overuse of group time. The leader or other members of the group might exhibit *courage* by testing out group opinion about the excessive use of time by this member of the group: "I think we've spent a lot of time on what's really a minor point. Do you agree?"

Avoiding Conflict
The best way to manage conflict may be by trying to avoid it, through use of appreciative strategies at each stage in the group's development. While most groups can't avoid the storming stage in its development, the group can ensure that this stage is constructive and relatively short-lived. This rapid and productive movement through the storming stage can be done by avoiding the dominance of personal agenda during meetings and by giving each person ample, but not excessive, time to voice her opinion. It can also be done in an appreciative manner by focusing on those moments when the group is working effectively, and by seeking to replicate these

dynamic processes when the group encounters conflict. Let us offer more specifically advice, particularly with regard to preparation for successful and appreciative meetings.

Among an almost infinite number of reasons for the failure of groups to be more effective in addressing conflict, the lack of a clear agenda for meetings must rank among the most prevalent. Virtually, all group process experts who have written about the improvement of meetings and managing conflict begin with an emphasis on explicit, clear agendas. The lack of focus and progress demonstrated by many groups often can be traced to an unclear or even nonexistent agenda. Several steps should be kept in mind when preparing an agenda and several procedures might be considered in the improvement of existing agenda setting processes.

First, a decision must be made as to whether or not a group is the appropriate vehicle for dealing with the conflict at hand. Is there a less costly way, in term of time, money and raised expectations, to obtain the desired results than convening a group? Second, if a meeting is warranted, then a specific assessment must be made concerning the status of the issue with which the group must deal. What are the responsibilities of the group with reference to this issue? This assessment and an answer to this question regarding group responsibility will further clarify the function of the group meeting.

Where is the group right now with regard to resolution of this issue? The answer to this question should tell one whether the meeting is primarily concerned with the management of a conflict or if it is primarily concerned with information sharing, problem solving or decision-making. Can the issue be resolved through the sharing of more information? Then an information-sharing meeting should be convened. If sufficient information is available, but the central issue is not clear, then the group should be focused on the conflict. If the issue is clear and the group has effectively addressed the underlying conflict, then the group should focus on an appropriate and feasible solution to the problem embedded in this issue. If the solution has already been found, then the group is ready to come to a decision regarding how action will be taken to implement this solution

Conflict-Management and Leadership

The key concept in all forms of appreciative group facilitation is freeing the communication of group members. As a group leader, one should attempt to increase the autonomy of all group members and increase their sense of equality. One does this as a leader by encouraging group members to increase their understanding of the ideas of other group members and to share this understanding with these group members. To accomplish this, an appreciative group leader should make extensive use of paraphrase and encourage active attentive listening, which involves responsive listening, not just silence. In addition, the appreciative leader will seek out information to help her better understand other members of the group. She will primarily ask questions that are directly relevant to what the other person has said, rather than asking many questions that introduce new topics. The appreciative leader should also show her desire to relate to and understand other group members by checking out her own perception of the thoughts and feelings of these members and by showing acceptance of these feelings.

The appreciative leader should complement this concern for other group members by sharing personal thoughts and feelings about the issues facing the group. An effective group leader also will encourage members to understand each other's thoughts and feelings by asking them to share information that has influenced their feelings and viewpoints. They also encourage group members to directly report on rather than just express their own feelings, and to offer alternative solutions to the issues being addressed. In an appreciative group, action proposals are hypotheses to be tested, rather than being fragile treasures to be protected against the competitive and insensitive assault of other group members.

Problem Solving

When an effective group is confronted with a problem to solve, members of the group typically take a deficit stance. They first ask: "Who is responsible. Who do we blame?" The second set of questions a group poses, once the blaming is done, typically are more constructive: "What do we want to see changed?" and "How did things get the way they are now?" The first of these questions concerns *targets and intentions*. Members of the group want to know about the desired state. What will make them and other members of the organization happy? The second question concerns *situation and information*. The group members want to know about the current

conditions: What's now going on and what are the reasons for it? Before any problem can be solved, we must know about both the current situation and the desired target; for any problem involves a discrepancy between the way things are now (current situation) and the way someone would like them to be (desired target). When we analyze a problem, we have determined the extent and nature of this discrepancy. When we solve a problem, we have identified one or more proposals that will significantly reduce, if not eliminate, this discrepancy.

Problem analysis and problem solving are complex processes that always involve the interplay between information, intentions, and ideas. Problem analysis involves three components: (1) identification of the target, (2) assessment of the current situation (generation of valid and useful information), and (3) determination of the causes of the problem being confronted, based on a comparison between the situation and target. Problem solving similarly involves three components: (1) generation of proposals, (2) evaluation and selection of alternative proposals, based on the situational analysis, and (3) monitoring of the selected proposals based on the identified target.

Effective problem analysis and problem solving require repeated recycling through situational assessment, target identification, and proposal generation. This process never comes formally to an end but rather moves the person or group confronting a problem toward increasingly better ideas to meet increasingly accepted values, based on increasingly valid and useful information.

Background

Usually when confronted with a pressing problem, we attempt almost immediately to generate solutions to the problem. This is the classic deficit-based model of problem solving: discover the deficit and immediately try to reduce or eliminate it. While at times we have all experienced the gratifying feeling of rapidly producing a solution, we have also all undoubtedly experienced the frustration of repeated failure. At times we think we have developed a sound solution, yet soon find it to be inadequate or unacceptable. At other times, we appear to have solved the immediate pressing problem only to discover that in the long range, our "solution" has created other unexpected problems that are even more difficult to solve.

One approach to problem analysis and solution that seems to avoid these pitfalls is to emphasize the concrete *specification of desired outcomes.* The management-by-objectives (MBO) approach to administrative problem solving, for instance, places great emphasis on the specification of outcomes or objectives. The assumption is that problems are often not fully understood, analyzed, or solved because they have not been formulated in terms of goals, objectives, or outcomes. Without such guidelines, proponents of MBO would argue: We have neither a direction for solution of the problem nor a basis for evaluating our actions.

While the specification of a desired state is essential for effective problem management, it is still a deficit-based model. We determine where we are falling short or the distance we still must travel to arrive at a specific destination. However, this approach still lacks a full appreciation of the problem. It is also essential that a clear picture be gained of the current state in which the problem is being experienced. Any objective we might establish runs the risk of being unrealistic. Or, when achieved, the solution selected is the cause of yet another, unexpected problem. Furthermore, it is often difficult to establish a realistic objective without first understanding the resources and resistance inherent in the current situation. Objectives identified without adequate knowledge of existing conditions may look good on paper but be useless or even destructive when achieved.

In solving a problem, we must do more than just prevent the recurrence of the undesirable symptoms. The nature and scope of a problem are not fully appreciated until two distinct, but related, sets of information have been made explicit: (1) the relevant characteristics of the current condition, and (2) the key characteristics of the desired condition. The solution of a problem involves taking action that will change the current conditions into the more desired alternative.

Alternative Approaches to Problem Solving
A problem-solving meeting is often difficult to manage. While this can be a particularly effective use of group resources, the problem-solving meeting is rarely successful—perhaps because of the difficulty inherent in its management and the failure to use systematic problem-solving processes such as we have introduced in this essay. Knowledge about group-based problem solving abounds, but it is rarely employed in actual group meetings. The concepts and tools we

have just presented are not new; yet, they are rarely used to empower groups. The clear message to be gained from this discussion is that problem-solving tools should be used. They work!

If an organization is unwilling to embrace systematic problem-solving processes and tools, then the group should not be used for this purpose. A multi-round questionnaire procedure can be used instead to clarify the problem and/or solicit alternative solutions to the problem. Known as the *Delphi Technique*, this procedure is particularly effective when used with people who are busy or have incompatible work schedules.

A *circulating notebook* has also been suggested as an alternative to the problem-solving meeting. Instead of meeting to brainstorm or solve a problem, a statement can be sent around indicating what needs to be accomplished. A notebook is set up to which everyone can contribute. This notebook may be located in physical space or in digital space (web board or chat room). This freely accessible notebook becomes a repository for thoughts, ideas, and idle speculations—the same comments that might be made at a meeting.

Participants in the problem-solving venture are encouraged to look through the notebook to see what others have contributed. They are then instructed to respond directly or contribute a new idea or approach. If the notebook is a paper-and-pencil affair the new contents of the notebook should be routed to everyone in on the project and, thereby, present a new, sharper focus to keep the group moving forward. These notebooks are valuable resources for problem solving, brainstorming, exchanging ideas, and gaining consensus or agreement

Decision-Making

Once a group has become proficient in communication, managing conflict and solving problems, it is ready to tackle the task of becoming more effective in making decisions. Actually, this is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Typically, the authority to make decisions and the accompanying responsibility are slowly phased in. First, little decisions. Later, there will be big decisions. The phase-in should be gradual because this is often the most demanding and important process in which any group will engage. Without this careful preparation, groups often are ineffective in making decisions. The meeting often becomes a waste of time when the group flounders in

16

making a decision. The meeting soon becomes even more wasteful, because the decision is now being made prior to the start of the meeting: "since the group can't make a decision to save its soul, someone else will!" The meeting becomes nothing more than "window dressing" and tends to produce alienation and resentment, rather than any feeling of ownership for a decision that has already been made.

To make group decision-making successful and empowering, we propose a multi-stage process of increasing responsibility. Initially the team should address such issues as "how do we improve operations in ways that cut costs, reduce defects, reduce errors, enhance quality, or reduce down-time. At this initial stage the team should not be asked to address the big issues, such as which of several new products to development or what should we do about modification in the production processes being used in this manufacturing division. These latter issues are strategic in nature, whereas the issues the team should first address are short-term and tactical.

In many ways this first stage is closely aligned with the problem-solving phase that we described previously in this essay. Provided with sufficient training in problem solving (as well as communication and conflict-management) an empowered team should be able to readily make decisions regarding tactical issues. Further group empowerment involves the progressive movement toward decisions that are complex, difficult and consequential. At each stage, it is helpful to draw upon those decision-making skills that have been previously taught. This training should focus on communication, conflict-management and problem-solving skills. Each of these skills gives the team greater decision-making responsibility. When team members have earned greater responsibility and exhibit increasingly skillful group functioning, they will feel appreciated and therefore will be even more motivated to address these complex, difficult and consequential decisions.

This gradual movement toward increasing group responsibility for making decisions relates not just to the needs for new skills, knowledge and perspectives. It also relates to a deeper issue concerning the appropriate balance between freedom and control in the organization. The manager can't just abandon control, given that ultimate responsibility usually resides with this person. Furthermore, is it fair to ask employees to assume responsibility when they are not being

paid as managers or do not have the staff support of those in management positions. On the other hand, the granting of freedom to employees so that they can create, learn, and influence the operations of their organization is a very generous and appreciative act.

The real challenge during this last stage of the appreciative empowerment process is finding this right balance. We would suggest that this right balance is struck by helping group members master the subtle art of decision-making through the creation of appropriate group structures, processes and attitudes.

Decision Making and Intentions of the Group
Clear intentions are critical to empowerment. We certainly must first seek to empower group members by promoting effective communication and the sharing of information, particularly in the meetings that these members regularly attend. This seems to be an obvious statement: we all know that communication is a good thing and that information should be shared. However, the real message regarding communication and information is not obvious.

For one thing, information-sharing meetings are rarely discussed in the literature on group functioning. Yet, most meetings are convened primarily for this purpose. Many staff meetings, general organizational meetings, advisory group meetings, and administrative cabinet meetings are devoted primarily to the sharing of information. This function, however, is rarely acknowledged. Group members are led to believe that decisions will be made or problems solved at the meeting—the sharing of information is considered to be of secondary importance.

What about when the meeting is called solely for the sharing of information, rather than for either instruction or inspiration? While meetings are often called primarily for the purpose of sharing information, this purpose is not formally acknowledged, perhaps because most people envision their role as listener to be passive and rather unimportant. Unfortunately, many people do not adequately value the role of listener and do not realize that effective listening is a highly active role, requiring skillful performance on the part of both sender and receiver. Group members also fail to recognize the need for frequent shifting in roles between speaking and listening if information-sharing transactions are to be successful.

While it is true that other modes of information dissemination often are more effective than face-to-face communication, there are occasions when a meeting should be called for information sharing. Reasons for calling such a meeting include:

1. A specific body of information must be communicated to a specific group of people in a short period of time or must be simultaneously communicated to several individuals (to avoid rumors, distortions, or animosity).

2. A specific body of information that is particularly complex or subject to misinterpretation (because of its subtlety, emotional tone, or potential impact) must be conveyed to and clearly understood by a group of people.

3. All of the pertinent information that is available regarding a specific problem or decision has not yet been collected but can be accessed through a specific group of people. This information is needed in a short period of time and/or is readily misunderstood, given its complexity or emotional tone.

4. A specific group of people must feel a sense of ownership for a specific decision that is to be made or a specific problem that is to be solved, based on information that they now possess or could readily receive.

The Art of Decision-Making

Effective team empowerment also includes the introduction of new knowledge and skills with specific regard to the complex processes of decision-making. Effective communications, conflict-management and problem solving sets the stage for the most challenging of all group functions: the art of decision-making. Once a team is effective in making decisions then it can be truly identified as "empowered." Yet, this is not an easy stage of group development. Unfortunately, the meetings in most organizations have never been noted for efficiency of decision-making procedures. Numerous committees, with shifting memberships and often vaguely defined areas of responsibility, meet seemingly endlessly; decisions appear somehow to be made, either to be overturned by other committees or to be re-decided all over again at subsequent meetings.

Consensus Decision-Making

In a group decision-making situation, two major concerns are present. First, there is the concern for the *adequacy of the decision* to be made. Second, there is a concern about *degree of commitment* once the decision is made. "How good is this decision?" "How many members of this group are behind this decision?" These are the two basic concerns of an effective decision-making group. Moreover, the degree of emphasis that an individual or a group gives to the issues of adequacy and commitment can effectively describe their orientation toward decision-making and toward the kind of decisions they are likely to reach.

A consensus decision-making group expresses a maximum concern for both the adequacy of the decision being made and the level of commitment among group members to the decision that is being made. Other approaches to group decision-making typically assumes that adequacy and commitment are irreconcilable and that a group cannot produce a decision that is at the same time a good one with a high degree of group support.

The consensus decision making group, by contrast, believes that the best decision can be reached if all the resources of a group can be used. Consequently, the group strives for a high level of involvement from all members of the group and sees the group as a good place to make decisions. Members see conflict as a source of new ideas and not something to be avoided. If everyone can be involved in the decision, she believes then not only will the decision be the best one possible--it will also have the greatest degree of support. Genuine consensus will produce the best possible decisions.

Consensus decision-making has a number of advantages over other approaches. The time necessary to reach a decision by consensus will be greater than the time a self-sufficient decision-maker will take. However, over the long run the consensus approach will save time. The unilateral decision maker finds herself making the same decisions over and over while a decision made by consensus will tend to stand up over time. Moreover, once a group has established a pattern of consensus decision- making, its members often find that decisions made later come quicker and easier.

Once a decision is made by consensus, of course, its implementation is assured, while decisions reached on a unilateral basis have no such group commitment behind them. Even decisions reached by a majority vote may be difficult to implement, for the assumption that the minority, once voted down, will cheerfully support the majority position is often dubious. Finally, because a group that uses consensus to make decisions is one that is aware of its own process, only it can learn from experience. Most decision-making groups that do not engage in consensus decision make are constantly engaged in power struggles or in developing majority support; each new decision is a new power struggle, a new vote.

Consensus decision-making is difficult and, initially, time consuming; but its results, in the long run, are worth the effort. Moreover, it can be learned. This is a critical, appreciative assumption regarding the skills and motives of group members. If decision-makers and decision-making groups genuinely wish to become more effective, they can become aware of their own processes and can find in consensus decision-making a viable alternative to other patterns.

Concluding Comments

The multi-dimension approach to empowerment that we have described in this essay is appreciative in at least five different ways. First, this multi-dimensional approach to empowerment brings out the latent strengths and resources of all group members. Using this approach, one begins with the assumption that each group member has skills, knowledge and aptitudes that can be of great benefit to the group.

Given this assumption, it is imperative that group members appreciate these talents, and that the environment of the group is conducive to the display and nurturing of these talents. Just as negative assumptions can be self-fulfilling, so can positive assumptions regarding strengths and competencies. Effective and empowering group leaders discover and foster talents in all members of the group—including themselves!

Second, the approach presented in this essay recognizes the multiple leadership roles that make a group effective and empowered. Everyone can be a leader in certain areas of group functioning, at a certain time and in a certain place. Andy Warhol once suggested that each of us is famous

for fifteen minutes. While this may be a bit of an overstatement mixed with profound cynicism, it is possible, from an appreciative perspective, for each member of a group to find herself in a leadership role at some point in the group's life. The group members have only to acknowledge this leadership role and to allow it to emerge and be honored by the group.

Third, an appreciative approach to empowerment recognizes not just the multiple leadership roles in the group but also the many other contributions to be made by group members. In recent years, we have come to recognize that people possess multiple competencies, and that these many different competencies are often unacknowledged in our society. One of these forms of intelligence, often called emotional intelligence, has been acknowledged as particularly important in all organizational settings and, in particular, in group settings. Members of a group must be appreciated for all of the talents "they bring to the party," not just those that are most visible and commonly honored in our society, such as technical and analytic skills, decisiveness, and perseverance.

Fourth, an appreciative approach is embedded in the emphasis being placed in this essay on not just generating ideas but also moving these ideas to action. Empowered groups are always leaning into the future and seeking ways to translate items of discussion and dialogue into steps toward realization of clearly articulated intentions, based on shared information. Effective empowerment *means business*. Empowered employees who are appreciated by their organization are expected to influence their own individual future and the collective future of their organization. As a result, appreciative empowerment tends to add pressure to group members rather than reduce pressure.

Finally, the information we have presented regarding the empowerment of groups is appreciative in that it enables the reader to better understand and appreciate the subtle and often complex dynamics of groups in which they participate. Contemporary group dynamics researchers and experienced group facilitators have provided us with many valuable insights and suggestions regarding effective and empowering group structures and processes. As we gain a fuller appreciation of the group dynamics literature, we can more readily embrace the complex drama

of group life, while also learning how better to influence the outcomes of groups in which we participate.