

Discussion skills

Introduction

This paper recalls a) some of the negative behaviour and b) some of the positive skills that are observable in group discussions. The negative activities are described first.

This material can be used in role-playing games, and as a basis for observations and reflections.

A. NEGATIVE BEHAVIOUR

Irrelevant anecdotes

Telling long rambling stories about things one has done, or that one has been told by a friend of a friend, or has read about somewhere or other.

Flattery

Trying to make a good impression on one other person through compliments and strong agreement, and pointing out to the rest of the group how clever this person is.

Hobby horse

Using the discussion as an opportunity to expound a pet theory or gain support for a particular cause.

Poor little me

Using the discussion as an opportunity to gain sympathy for the hard life one has been having recently – so much to do, and so little time to do it in, and no one understands.

Name-dropping

Mentioning the names of books one has read or heard of, and of people whom one claims to have met, as a way of showing how intellectual and important one is.

Abuse

Being insulting towards someone else in the group, or everyone in the group, and being offensive about various people who are not present.

Closed mind

Refusing to consider the possibility that anyone else in the group might have a good idea or any positive qualities.

Apathy

Yawning, fiddling with a pencil, leaning back in one's chair, gazing at the ceiling, generally indicating with body language and the occasional remark that one thinks the discussion is pointless.

Interrupting

Continually butting in when someone else is speaking, and changing the subject.

Talking to one other person

Addressing one's remarks directly to one other person rather than to the group as a whole.

Generalisations

Asserting one's opinions and perceptions as self-evident truth and sweeping aside any objections or counter-views advanced by others.

B. POSITIVE SKILLS

Clarifying

From time to time asking that something should be explained in greater detail than hitherto.

Summarising

From time to time seeking to summarise where the group has got to and what it has agreed – and what the main points of disagreement seem to be.

Bringing in others

Asking if someone who hasn't yet said much would like to contribute some thoughts or an opinion.

I wonder

Prefacing a remark with the phrase 'I wonder', or something similar, to encourage speculation and enquiry.

Evidence

Requesting hard evidence for factual statements that are made, and the evidence and experience underlying opinions that are expressed.

Building

Prefacing some or most of one's own contributions by referring back positively to something said by someone else.

Spread of opinion

Doing one's best to get a spread of opinion within the group, and recalling that there's a spread of opinion in the outside world.

Keeping the group on task

Accepting responsibility for getting the discussion started, keeping it relevant and guiding it to a conclusion.

Stirring it up

Contributing remarks that are surprising or even shocking, in order to get the group to think more imaginatively, and to express their feelings more honestly.

Feelings

Monitoring one's own feelings (anxiety, pleasure, interest), and expressing them if appropriate, and trying to gauge and respond to the feelings of others.
