

Group Theory and Quilt Guilds

Group theory, group dynamics, group development – whatever you call it, is essential to understand when dealing with any group if you want to do an effective job as a leader. We are all individuals looking to the group to have our needs met in different ways – if these aren't met then we will not be willing to become full and active members of the group with a commitment to its purpose and life.

By looking at individuals we can see how people function on a basic level and a complex level. Abraham Maslow a psychologist studied people and determined that he could group individuals according to levels of needs they have for growth. He came up with five levels: 1) the need for basics of survival – food, water, shelter, or the money to buy these with; 2) the need for safety, security, stability; 3) the need for love – friendship, companionship, relationships; 4) the need for acceptance, approval, competence; and 5) the need for self-actualization. These needs are hierarchical in that one level has to be met before the next level has any meaning; i.e. hungry people don't seek out companionship, unless it will feed them.

By understanding individual needs we can see how they might function in a group. If a group does not meet the needs of the individual – if she doesn't find the acceptance and approval she needs, if it doesn't allow her to stretch herself to fulfill her own desires for perfection (meeting the self-actualization need), she will go elsewhere. If these people are your volunteers, the group will suffer for it.

As a leader you have to understand the stages your guild will go through in its growth from a group of strangers to a functioning, performing group. Groups start at a forming stage, which from the name, you can tell is when the group is new with new members who have very few connections with each other and are very cautious about revealing much about themselves, or doing much for the group. The leader must take a lead at this point and help the group to develop a list of needs and determine the direction in which it wishes to grow. The next stage of group development would be the storming stage, which can manifest itself in many different ways, but is a necessary step in the path to good group growth. The storming can be prolonged or not depending on how the leader reacts to it – a gentle, understanding hand must be used here to allow all members to find their places, or the storming can lead to group breakdown. Once people have been together for a while the norming stage is reached where members start to take ownership of the group, start to feel recognized and comfortable, and start to make associations outside group time. The word norming is used as this is the time when group norms are set – what is done by the group for the group. It is not as leader directed. Once the leader feels the group is ready she can let go some of the power of leadership and let the group work for itself, and it is at this point the group becomes known as a performing group. When people are accepted as members and everyone has the best intentions of the group at heart. This stage allows for greater risk taking by group members, allowing for personal growth or for the them to develop their creativity.

A leader has to recognize all these stages, determine what is best to serve the needs of the group and the individuals that make up the group, and programme to this end. If leaders continue to be too controlling once the group has moved on to the norming stage she will never see the group perform on their own. If she does not provide opportunities for members to air their points of view during a storming stage, the group will not grow and people will leave. If she arranges speakers for the first few meetings and doesn't allow members time to meet each other and develop relationships, no one is going to want to do anything for anyone else or the group.

Once leaders determine what stage their group is at, what its needs are at that stage, then it will be much easier to determine the best programme for the meeting.