**Buzz Groups**

**What are Buzz Groups?**

A useful way of encouraging everyone to participate within a group session is to divide the learners into small groups for a short time to discuss ideas or share information.

These groups are known as "Buzz Groups" - a buzz of conversation can immediately be heard; after about 5 minutes the noise dies away and the trainer knows they're ready to report back.

In managing a typical Buzz Group, the trainer will:

- divide the group into pairs/threes as they sit round the room;
- allocate a topic for discussion, and allow 5-10 minutes;
- ask the groups to discuss the same question, though other possibilities include different groups listing advantages and disadvantages; and
- keep the report back short (relative to a syndicate); the trainer may list points raised on whiteboard.

**Uses/Advantages**

- early in an event, when participants may be unwilling or unable to express themselves openly;
- at any time when there may be barriers that inhibit individuals stating views which may be critical of themselves or the group;
- allows individuals to retain anonymity in the report back, though they can express a personal view should they wish;
- takes less time, and is less disruptive, than a syndicate; it could replace a syndicate if time is running short;
- breaks up a Q&A session; particularly appropriate if there is not much response from the group and
- generates ideas very quickly.
"Golden Rules" for Managing Buzz Groups

• keep subject(s) simple, eg list ideas, advantages, methods etc;
• keep time short, about 5 minutes;
• ask groups to note points ready for report back;
• give other groups a chance to comment on topics they haven't discussed in their Buzz Group; and
• note points you need to make if not brought up by groups.
Syndicates

What are Syndicates?

Syndicates are sub-divisions of a larger group, enabling greater participation from individuals. The trainer can use them to:

- assess existing knowledge/skills/attitudes;
- encourage people to think and reason things out; and
- validate learning.

Syndicates may be used for the purpose of discussion, an exercise, a case study, a project or other practical work.

Different groups may be asked to consider the same topic/question or different ones; the trainer will need to make this decision based on:

- objectives for the session;
- how the learning will be validated;
- time available; and
- knowledge of the group.

The size of each syndicate will also depend on these factors, as well as the activity to be undertaken. Case studies, or role plays involved lengthy interviews, may lose people’s attention if the groups contain more than 4; discussion groups work well with 5-6; suitable numbers for exercises may vary widely according to their content and objectives.

The roles within a syndicate eg Chair, Report, may be defined by the trainer or left to the group/each syndicate.

Advantages of Syndicate Work

- used early in an event it provides the group with an opportunity to get to know each other;
- it encourages frank discussion, particularly when the trainer is absent;
- it can provide an opportunity for chairing discussion and presenting reports or findings;
- report back can enable each syndicate to test its approach and conclusions against the other syndicates;
- by encouraging group members to take an active part, it helps the learning process, particularly if questions require the learners to think/reason; and
- it can be used to assess knowledge etc and/or validate learning.

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Possible Pitfalls

- certain members of syndicates can dominate/impose their views;
- if levels of knowledge/experience vary greatly, those less knowledgeable may push the "expert" into dominating the group or undertaking the work;
- if objectives are not clear, or time insufficient, people will get discouraged/frustrated; and
- even if objectives are clear, discussion may wander; it may take more time than just presenting information.

Trainer's Role

Set objectives - each group needs to know what they need to do and what help is available. You need to:

- decide what needs to come out of the discussion or be learned through the syndicate process; any question(s) must be clearly phrased to encourage the desired outcome;
- consider writing the question(s) down for each group to refer to;
- make sure the objective is realistic in the time allocated;
- decide the composition of the syndicates. This may be done:
  - at random, eg according to where people are sitting;
  - by selection, eg according to experience or expertise;
  - by free choice, allowing group members to decide;
- make sure they have all the equipment they need;
- make clear what you expect at the report back (one reporter? on newsprint - how many sheets); you need to have considered how you want to handle the report back (see below);
- appoint any roles or request the group to do so; and
- make yourself available if they need you.

As well as being available, it is worth checking progress:

- after a few minutes, to ensure they know what they're doing;
- towards the end of the time given, to see if they are finishing or need any extra time; and
- possibly, once or twice in between, depending on the length of time, how happy they were when you first checked etc.
Managing the report back needs time, timing and control. You need to:

- consider whether it is necessary for each syndicate to explain every point in detail. Other options include inviting other syndicates to read what is on the newsprint and ask for clarification where necessary;

- ensure that one syndicate is not reporting back for a long period to the exclusion of other people, particularly if the other syndicates have been considering the same issue(s); one solution may be to take one or two points from each syndicate in turn. Another is to invite the other group(s) to comment or enlarge on the points being reported; and

- ensure that each group (or individual) is given the right to have their view heard without attacking anyone else. When views conflict, your role may be to encourage an exchange to back up the respective views, helping a greater understanding between each group.

Keeping your objectives and learning points in mind and in front of you, will help you to ensure that the report back is on the right track.