

**THE TECHNIQUE OF
GROUP DISCUSSION**

Jaime Bulatao, S.J.



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Introduction

The aim of this little booklet is to provide an introduction to Group Discussion which may be useful in leadership seminars, social order clubs, student organizations, business training courses, group guidance classes, barrio councils, etc. It is somewhat in the form of a how-to-do-it handbook with instructions written with the Filipino personality in mind. Filipinos will find group discussion very much in accord with the Filipino trait of "small-group centeredness." At the same time it is good training in the art of democracy, in the ability to speak out one's mind and think on one's own feet. For the discussion leader, it provides an experience in democratic leadership, an experience which is quite different from theory as learned from lectures or books and is much more effective because it is alive. The future social progress of the Philippines is said to lie in the formation of civic groups which will mediate between the passivity of the masses and the authoritarian power of the old caciques and *politicos*. The secret of group formation lies in organization, the ability of people to work together. But to work together, we Filipinos have to learn to trust each other, and to trust each other we have to learn to communicate with each other not from our surface selves, but from deep down in our true selves. May the rise of discussion groups of various kinds assist in the promotion of personal growth in the Filipino and national growth in the Filipino people.

JAIME BULATAO, S.J.

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The Essentials of Group Discussion

GOALS

Every human being born into this earth sooner or later discovers that life, especially life in society, has its problems. He meets other human beings faced with similar problems and feels a need to associate with them in order to solve these problems together. Even when these problems are personal to him, he still feels the need for another who will understand and help him understand. But it is especially with problems which are known as "social problems," things about which an individual, standing alone can do little or nothing to change, that the need for joining a group gains strength within oneself.

The goals then that human persons, thus banding together, set to themselves may be summed up under three headings:

1. *To understand* better the world in which one lives, especially the people in it, one's relations with them, and oneself.
2. *To plan* a course of action for solving the problems that one encounters.
3. *To act* together upon this plan, to leave this world better than they found it.

For some, who value wisdom even for its own sake, the first goal, that of knowing the world and themselves, is satisfying and sufficient. For others, especially the starry-eyed young-of-heart, the third, that of action, is the be-all and end-all of the group. Often they have to be warned that success depends upon the successful attainment of the first two goals, that time spent in understanding a problem is not lost, that self-knowledge must precede action, otherwise, the strange devil known as *ningas kugon* will inevitably show his horned head and kill all purposeful activity.

For many or all of these goals, group discussion has proven itself a useful tool. Even where the *ningas kugon* or any similar devil shows itself, a well handled discussion group can discuss that problem as a problem and by facing up to it solve it.

WHAT IS GROUP DISCUSSION

Group discussion may be defined as *Cooperative Thinking*. There are two elements in this definition, (1) thinking, (2) in cooperation with others.

1. Thinking is the most natural thing for a human being to do and at the same time the hardest to do right. Day-dreaming is a form of thinking, of the less productive kind. What makes thinking productive is a sense of realism, the force that brings thinking down to the realities of life, that pushes the thinker to keep asking himself, "Is this true?" "Just what do I mean by this?" "Does my experience tally with the statement just made?" "What are the facts?" "Are there other possible explanations for these facts?" Thinking means to look hard at something with your mind and to ask yourself questions about it.

People, unless pushed by the sense of realism, tend to "think in capsules." Mothers are always "wonderful." Sin is always "hateful." There are no such things as delinquent children but "only delinquent parents." Juvenile delinquency is caused by "bad movies and dirty comics." Rarely are such capsule-thinking people forced to ask themselves, "yes, but are not the so-called wonderful mothers, who claim to love their children so, the very ones who cripple their children for life by rendering them dependent on them?" "Sin is hateful but can we not pause a bit to see what is driving the sinner to sin?" "Delinquency begins in the home, but what precisely in the home makes for delinquency?" "If bad movies and dirty comics really cause delinquency, how is it that so many delinquents cannot read and for that matter rarely see movies, preferring the thrills of real life to the imaginary one of the screen?"

2. It is the need to check the realism of one's thinking against the experience of others that causes people to pool their thinking together and to make of it a cooperative venture. Cooperative thinking means an exchange of views, a putting together of two different sets of experiences in an attempt to push through further into reality. An insane person in a mental hospital may do a lot of thinking but he cannot check the realism of his thinking against another's. He cannot enter into cooperative thinking. But most sane people can, because they are able to modify their own views in the light of others' experiences. They are able to enter into "dialogue" with others and by the fusion of two views come

up with and create a third view, which is more real because more broadly based.

Cooperative thinking, then, has potentialities of being very creative, in a realistic sense. Not only is there creativity in the speculative order as in philosophy but even in the order of action there can be creativity. When people discover that others think the same way as they do within their secret selves, there arises the possibility of action, which is stronger because it is cooperative and based on common conviction. Concrete problems can be analyzed imaginatively and solved courageously because of the pushing of the group.

FUNDAMENTAL ATTITUDES

Cooperative thinking and problem-solving demands a certain minimum of self-respect for others in a group. Each member should have some opinions of his own and some sense of values which he really holds. He cannot be an empty, passive listener with nothing to contribute. On the other hand, he should have some respect for the opinions of others. He has to realize that every human being has a set of experiences which are unique and that he is bound to see things in a way at least slightly different from his own. Hence every man must respect it but he must admit, at least temporarily, the possibility of its being right, or that some aspect of it is right, if only he could understand it properly.

Real, mutual respect will preclude any one person's monopolizing the conversation. The assumption is that no one person has a monopoly on the truth, that all men are fallible, and that there is a kernel of truth in every statement sincerely made. The key attitude in group discussion is "Respect." Self-respect and respect for others are the two wings on which group discussion flies. A minimum of both is needed to start. With practice, both tend to grow and develop.

THREE COMMANDMENTS

The fundamental attitudes, mentioned above, which are absolutely necessary for group discussion, may be put into three commandments for practical use:

1. *Thou shalt hear the speaker with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, with thy whole mind, and with all thy strength.*

To listen thus means to say to oneself "What is the speaker trying to say? Let me try my best to see his viewpoint as possible, without judging its truth or falsity." A test of successful listening is the ability to put in one's own words exactly what the other person said, no more, no less. The good listener will often be caught saying to the speaker, "Let me see if I understood you right," followed by an objective summary of what was said.

Too often, one listens to a speaker but not with one's whole heart. Like a debater, listening to his opponent in order to trap him, one is really more occupied with one's own prejudgments rather than with the substance of what is being said. A true listener, who is a respectful listener, is objective and is open to truth no matter from what source it comes.

2. *Thou shalt speak out thy whole mind, with thy whole heart, with thy whole soul, and with all thy strength.*

A discussion group runs on positive contributions as a car motor runs on gasoline. No problem will be solved unless people speak out. Of what use are the best of thoughts if they are kept locked up in one's head? Of what use is the coconut meat unless the coconut is first broken open?

Among Filipino groups there may often be a tendency for members to keep quiet out of a sense of *hiya*, timidity, shame, or embarrassment. Such members should realize that the success of the group, as well as their own growth as human beings, will depend upon their willingness to contribute their own real opinions, to give and not merely to receive. Every opinion, sincerely expressed, whether for or against the proposition at hand, helps the group forward towards its goal of understanding, problem-solving, or action.

3. *Thou shalt not whisper to thy neighbor.*

This third commandment, which is really contained in the first two, is added precisely for Filipino groups, especially of girls, who are too timid to speak out their whole minds to the group but prefer to whisper their thoughts to their neighbor much to the annoyance of the person who may be speaking at the time. Such behavior is really a violation of the fundamental attitudes of self-respect and respect for others, and is an act of impoliteness. A good motto for such whisperers can be: "Whatever is worth saying, is worth saying out loud." With growing self-respect for others, one

learns gradually to direct all of one's communications more and more for the whole group to hear, rather than to any one particular person.

COMMUNICATION

When these commandments are followed, communication develops between individual and individual, and between the individual and the group. Communication means the opening up of a person's real self to another. It is something quite different from the small talk of conversation, whose purpose just as often is to conceal the truth, to kill time, or just to "make conversation." Diplomacy, they say, is the art of concealing the truth, and we are all, to a certain extent, diplomatic. But when a person puts into words something he has personally experienced, or something into which he has had personal insight, and offers this bit of himself to another, the tendency is for that other to wish to make a return gift. Communication, once established, continually increases in depth and earnestness. It is when people search themselves at such depths that they find the answers they have been looking for. Alone they may not have had the courage and strength to search, but in a group the mutual stimulation of cooperative thinking pushes the mind to dare look where it never dared look before.