

Group and Organization Roles

Ken Petress (Ed.)

Roles are behavior types. There are four typical role categories that occur in groups. Three of these are discussed below; the fourth group role type, *leadership*, is discussed elsewhere. *Italicized role type names are adopted from* Benne and Sheats, (1948), Functional Roles of Group Members, *Journal of Social Issues* 4, pp. 41-49. This nomenclature is now fairly standard in group communication literature.

I. Task Roles: those behaviors which are intended to accomplish or facilitate the group's function. Not all such behaviors actually accomplish the goal; however, if the behavior was intended to do so, regardless of success or failure, they are deemed to be task roles.

1. An individual contributes ideas and suggestions; proposes solutions, decisions, and new ideas; and restates old ideas in novel ways. Such contributions may or may not be solicited by the group.
2. The *information seeker* asks for clarification in terms of the accuracy of comments; asks for information or facts relevant to accomplishing group tasks; and suggests information if needed for decisions.
3. The *information giver* offers facts or generalizations that may relate to personal experiences and are pertinent to the task. Research results also are included here.
4. The *opinion seeker* asks for clarification or validation of member's opinions and asks how members feel and how members are disposed at any given time.
5. The *opinion giver* states beliefs and opinions about suggestions made and indicates what members' attitudes should be.
6. The *elaborator-clarifier* elaborates ideas and other contributions, offers rationales for suggestions; and tries to deduce how an idea or a suggestion would work if adopted by the group/organization.
7. The *coordinator* clarifies relationships among information, opinions, and ideas and suggests an integration of ideas.
8. The *diagnostician* indicates what the task-oriented problems are and possible ways of solution..
9. The *orienter-summarizer* summarize interaction, points out departures from agreed-on goals, brings members back to the central issues, and raises questions about the direction in which the group/organization is headed.
10. The *energizer* prods group/organization members to action. He/she acts as a group cheerleader.
11. The *procedure developer* handles routine tasks such as seating arrangements, obtaining equipment, and handing out pertinent papers.
12. The *secretary* keeps notes on member/group progress and keeps group documents/materials ready for use and for safety.
13. The *evaluator-critic* analyzes accomplishments and checks to see that consensus has been reached.

II. Maintenance Roles: Those behaviors which are intended to establish, maintain, improve, or repair a group's socio-emotional climate. Not all such behaviors actually accomplish the goal; however, if the behavior was intended to do so, regardless of success or failure, they are deemed to be maintenance roles.

1. The *supporter-encourager* praises, agrees with, and accepts the contributions of others and offers warmth, solidarity, and recognition.
2. The *harmonizer* reconciles and mediates differences and reduces tension by giving members a chance to explore their disagreements.
3. The *tension reliever* jokes or in some other way reduces the formality of interaction and relaxes members. These duties need to be kept in perspective else they convert to individual roles [see below].
4. The *compromiser* offers to compromise when his or her own ideas are in conflict with those of others and admits errors so as to maintain cohesion among members.
5. The *gatekeeper* keeps communication channels open, facilitates interaction among some members, and blocks interaction among others.
6. The *feeling expresser* makes explicit the feelings, moods, and other relationships in the group/organization and shares feelings with others.
7. The *standard setter* expresses standards in evaluating group/organizational processes and standards for the members to achieve.
8. The follower goes along with the movement of other members passively, accepting the ideas of others, and sometimes serving as an audience for interaction.

III. **Individual Roles:** Those behaviors that take away from the group's function and focus mainly upon an individual's needs/wants. Not all such behaviors actually accomplish the goal; however, if the behavior was intended to do so, regardless of success or failure, they are deemed to be individual roles.

1. The *blacker* interferes with progress by rejecting ideas or taking a negative stand on all issues and refuses to cooperate.
2. The *aggressor* struggles for status by defining the status of others, boasts, and criticizes.
3. The *deserter* withdraws; remains indifferent and aloof; is sometimes formal; daydreams; wanders from the subject; and engages in irrelevant side conversations.
4. The *dominator* interrupts and embarks on long monologues, is authoritative, and tries to monopolize others' time.
5. The *recognition seeker* attempts to gain attention in an exaggerated manner, usually boasts about past accomplishments, and relates irrelevant personal experiences, usually in an attempt to gain sympathy.
6. The *confessor* engages in irrelevant personal catharsis and uses the group/organization to work out personal mistakes and feelings.
7. The *comedian* displays a lack of involvement in the group/organization through inappropriate humor, horseplay, or cynicism.
8. The *special-interest pleader* acts as the representative for another organization or specialized group and engages in advocacy for non-group causes.

NB. Not all individual roles are problematic to the group/organization. Sometimes, individual needs need to be resolved so as to free the individual for full task focus.