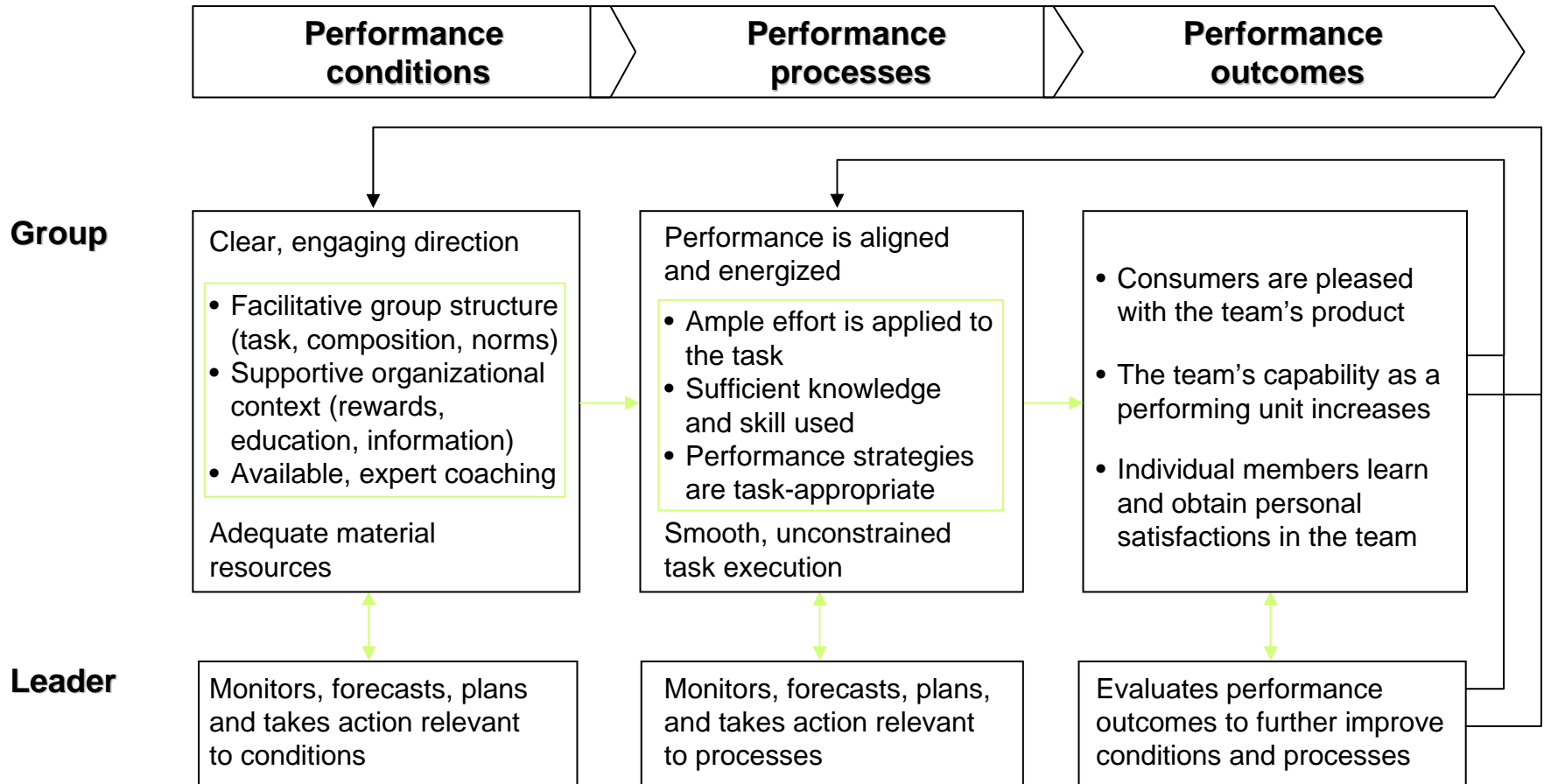


Working Groups: The Ideal, the Real, and the Habitual

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The ideal performance cycle



Adapted from: Hackman, J. R., & Walton, R. E. (1986) "Leading groups in organizations" In P. S. Goodman (Ed.), *Designing Effective Work Groups* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass)

Habits in Groups

- Definition
- Types of Habits
- How Group Habits Develop
- Functions and Benefits
- Dysfunctions and Risks
- Why Group Habits are Difficult to Change
- When Group Habits can Change
- Recommendations for Improving Habits

Definition

➤ Definition

- › Types of Group Habits
- › How Group Habits Develop
- › Functions and Benefits
- › Dysfunctions and Risks
- › Why Group Habits are Difficult to Change
- › When Group Habits can Change
- › Recommendations for Improving Habits

“A habitual routine exists when a group repeatedly exhibits a functionally similar pattern of behavior... without explicitly selecting it over alternative ways of behaving”

Note: The above quotation and much of this presentation is based on:

Gersick, C. J. G. and Hackman, J. R. (1990)

Habitual routines in task-performing groups.

Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 47, 65-97

Types of Group Habits

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- Task performance or socio-emotional/group maintenance
- Peripheral or central to group's activities
- Weak/easy to change or strong/difficult to change
- Inside or outside of member awareness
- Functional or dysfunctional

How Group Habits Develop

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- "Imported" or pre-specified
- Created at first encounter
- Developed over time

Functions and Benefits

- Efficiency
- Predictability
- Group cohesion
- Reduction of
 - Anxiety
 - Conflict
 - Dissent

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Dysfunctions and Risks

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- **Inattention to Changing Circumstances**
- **Unproductive Interaction**
- **Faulty Decision Making**
- **Inaction or Incorrect Action**

Dysfunctions and Risks (continued)

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Inattention to Changing Circumstances

- Illusion of invulnerability
- Lack of vigilance
- Incomplete information gathering
- Incorrect processing of information
- Categorizing new stimuli in old frameworks

Dysfunctions and Risks (continued)

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Unproductive Interaction

- Lack of authenticity
- Lack of candid communication and feedback
- Conflict goes “underground”
- There is “venting” without discussion of possible action steps

Dysfunctions and Risks (continued)

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Faulty Decision Making

- Premature closure or no closure at all
- Alternative interpretations and scenarios not considered
- Contingency plans not developed
- Lack of clear assignments and accountability

Dysfunctions and Risks (continued)

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Inaction or Incorrect Action

- Inertia – not acting at all
- Acting in a way that worked in the past but won't work in the present
- Escalation of commitment to a failing course of action

Why Group Habits are Difficult to Change

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- Group members may not be aware of the group's habits
- Group habits develop as ways to minimize anxiety, so process discussions about habits create even more anxiety
- The challenging of habits produces more anxiety- even for habits the group acknowledges and believes to be dysfunctional
- There is an upfront cost to changing habits and a risk that changes might not pay off- and the group's tasks place immediate demands

Why Group Habits are Difficult to Change (continued)

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- Change in habits may lead to conflict over power or authority and a change in the group's configuration
- There is the legitimate fear that new habits will be even more constraining than old ones
- Individual members who challenge group habits may be branded as deviants and marginalized

When Group Habits can Change

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- › Recommendations for Improving Habits

- Group encounters novelty
- Group experiences failure
- Composition of group changes
- Task of group changes
- The group's authority changes
- The group receives an intervention

Recommendations for Improving Habits

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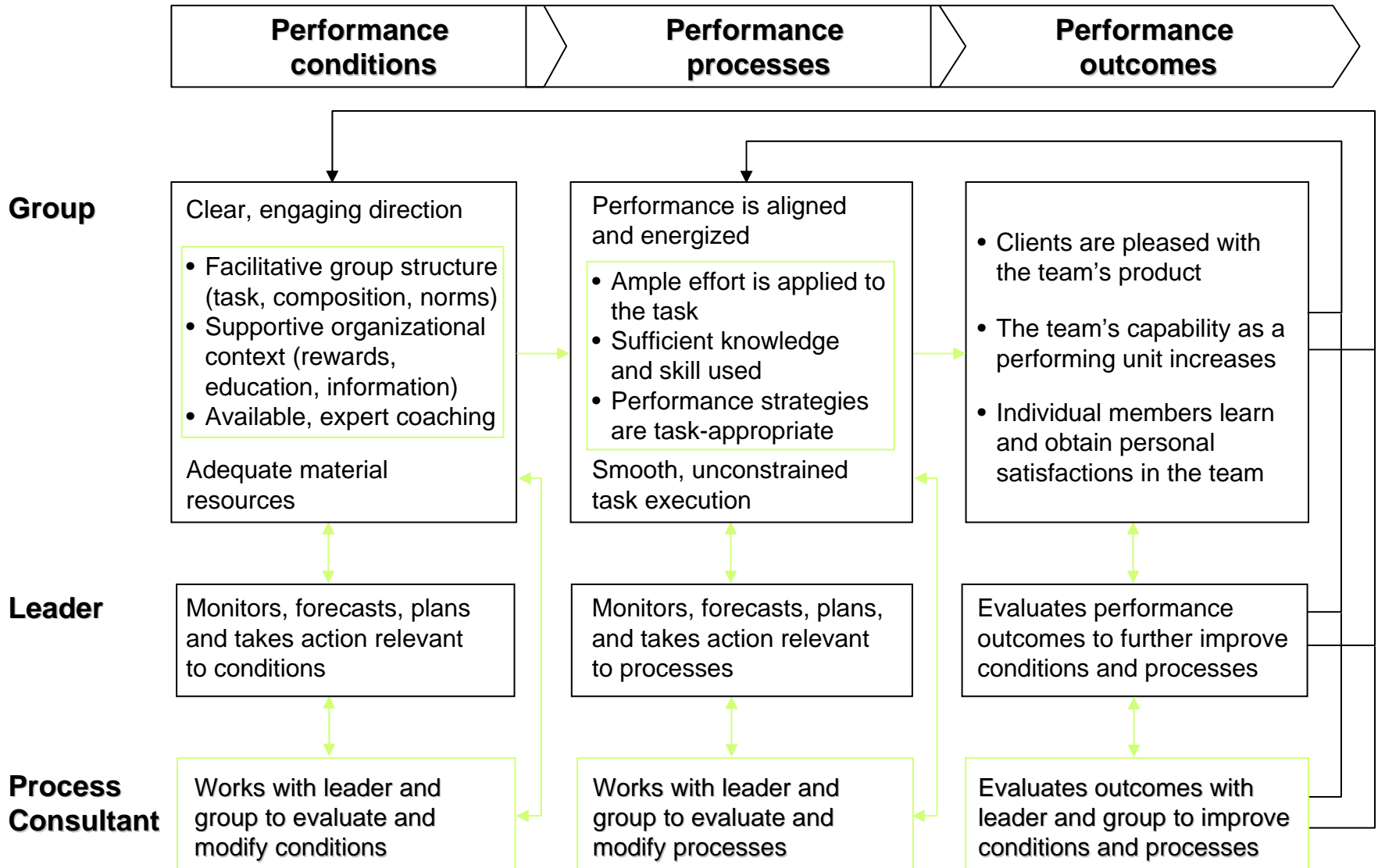
- Pick the timing and location of the intervention carefully
- Gauge the group members' readiness to examine and change their process
- Give feedback and conduct interventions in the least anxiety-provoking, most constructive manner possible
- Try to illustrate habits as they are enacted

Recommendations for Improving Habits (continued)

- › Definition
- › Types of group habits
- › How group habits develop
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- › Why group habits are difficult to change
- › When group habits can change
- **Recommendations for Improving Habits**

- Get the group members involved in the identification and evaluation of their own habits
- Don't try to eliminate habits- help the group unlearn bad habits and learn good ones- "unfreeze, move, refreeze"
- Encourage the group to develop a "second level" habit of examining its habits by having regular process discussions

The Ideal Performance Cycle Revisited



The Bottom Line

- Group performance is either enhanced or constrained by habits at every stage of the performance cycle
- The challenge is to bring the real as close as possible to the ideal-- to continually rebalance competing priorities as circumstances change

Characteristics of effective work groups

1. The atmosphere tends to be informal, comfortable and relaxed. There are no obvious tensions, and people are involved and interested in the group task. Boredom and frustration are generally absent from the group's work.
2. There is a lot of discussion pertinent to the task in which everyone participates. If the discussion gets off track, someone brings it back on track before too long. At any given moment, members have an idea about what issue they are discussing and whether they are trying to share information, make a decision, or plan a course of action.
3. The task and objective of the group is well understood and accepted by the members.
4. The members of the group listen to one another. Points raised by members are processed by the group, and discussion does not continuously jump between topics. At the same time, there is not prolonged discussion of any given issue.
5. There is healthy disagreement. After carefully considering the implications of various alternatives, the group is able to resolve most disagreements. The group is also able to continue functioning well despite disagreements which cannot be resolved.

(Adapted *The Human Side of the Enterprise* by Douglas McGregor, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1960)

Characteristics of effective work groups

6. There is candid but constructive criticism of ideas, and little evidence of personal attacks. People feel free to express their feelings as well as their ideas. There are no hidden agendas, and each group member has an accurate picture of the thoughts and feelings of all other group members about any important issue.
7. Formal voting is kept to a minimum, and the group does not accept a simple majority as a basis for action. Most decisions are reached by consensus in which it is clear that everybody has expressed an opinion and is in general agreement with the chosen course of action.
8. After decisions are made and action is planned, clear assignments are made and accepted.
9. The leader of the group does not dominate it, nor does the group defer unduly to him or her. During meetings, leadership shifts at times according to the issue under consideration and the relative involvement and expertise of the group's leader and members.
10. The group is self-conscious of its own operations, and periodically stops for process checks. The group is able to use this awareness to improve its functioning on an ongoing basis.

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