

# Leading Small Groups

# Introduction

This course is intended to help individuals to become better small group leaders. Churches may have many kinds of small groups: Living Faith - the Bishop's Certificate, Alpha, Emmaus, Start or for prayer or Bible study. Good group leadership does not depend on expert knowledge of the subject matter, but on interpersonal skills that can be acquired and developed.

Small groups can play a vital part in developing discipleship, forming communities and supporting the journey of faith.

# Sessions

**Session 1: Understanding Groups**

**Session 2: The Needs of a Group**

**Session 3: Learning Styles**

# Session One: Understanding Groups

### Aim:

- To give participants an awareness of group dynamics
- To reflect on how teams achieve their tasks
- To understand the stages of group development

Working with groups is about understanding people and how they behave in group situations. Some dynamics are obvious but a significant part of the interaction happens below the surface.

### Process and Content

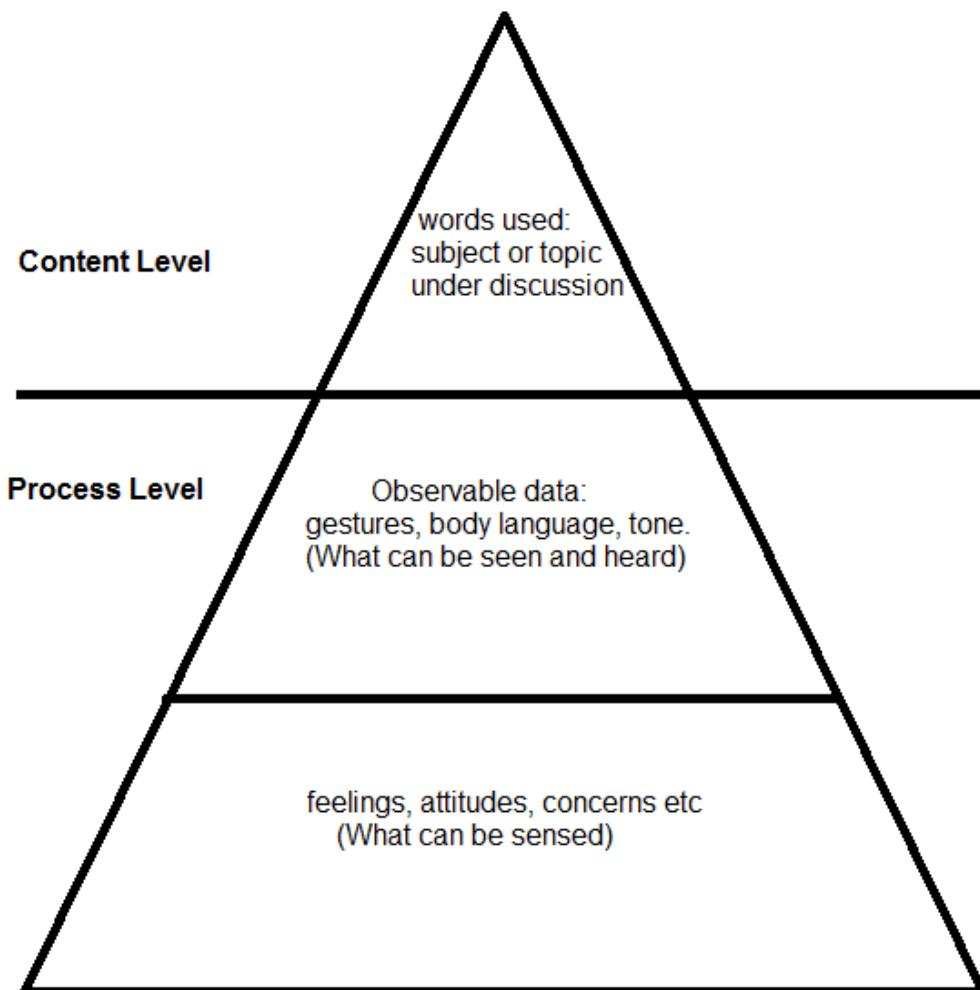
In all human interactions there are two major ingredients: “process” and “content”. The term “content” is used to describe what happens: the substance of the activity, the subject being discussed, or the activity that is carried out. “Process” describes how the group interacts; the mutual relationships and behaviour drawn out by membership of the group.

During a meeting of a group of people it is the hidden, submerged, interaction of the group that often has the most effect on how the group performs. Whatever the content of a group discussion, it will be the group processes which influence what is gained or lost from it. An effective study group needs good material and a good process.

### Observing a Group

Most of us spend a good part of our lives in groups but usually we are so involved in the task or discussion of the group that we have little time to observe what is going on in the group and why members are behaving as they are. In being aware only of the content of a discussion in a group we are seeing the tip of an iceberg. Beneath the mere subject under discussion there lies a whole area of group interaction and process of which we need to become aware. The skill of being able to observe what is going on underneath at the same time is a difficult one and can only be gained with practice.

What is happening?



a) *Content Level*: Words spoken, what is actually said, i.e. the topic or subject under discussion.

(b) *Process Level*: This is concerned with interaction between people and patterns of life in the group. It deals with what is going on beneath the topic under discussion. This area can be divided into data which can be observed if one looks for it and data which can only be sensed and needs therefore to be checked.

(i) *Observable data*

These include gestures, tone of voice, choice of words, physical relationship, order of speaking, etc.

In this area we can examine the patterns of communication and observe:

- Who talks?

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- For how long?
- How often?
- Who do people look at when they talk?
- Who talks after whom?
- Or who interrupts whom?
- What style of communication is used? (Assertions, questions, tone of voice, gestures, and so on)

The kind of observations we make give us clues to the other important things which may be going on in the group, e.g. who leads whom or who influences whom?

### (ii) *Feelings Attitudes Concerns Hidden Agenda.*

These factors cannot be observed, they can only be sensed and therefore it is necessary to check with another person in order to discover whether one is correct. These feelings, attitudes and concerns often lie beneath the observable behaviour we have mentioned above.

## Exercise 1 – Process and Content

*Consider the difference between “process” and “content.”*

*Think of an example, which may be fictional or from real life, of a time when the content of a group’s agenda has been affected by the dynamics of the group.*

## Joining a new group

Whenever we enter a new group we enter an unknown situation to which we must respond. Some of the issues we are faced with are:

- (a) *Identity*: who am I in this group? Where do I fit in? What kind of behaviour is acceptable here?
- (b) *Goals and Needs*: what do I want from this group?
- (c) *Power, Control, Influence*: who will control what we do? How much power and influence do I have?
- (d) *Intimacy*: can we trust each other and how can we increase this trust?

All of these issues evoke different responses in individuals and groups. One individual will not necessarily react in the same way in each group that they are part of. Some of the kinds of behaviour exhibited by the group in response to these issues:

- (a) *Dependency*: Leaning on anyone in the group who represents authority.

- (b) *Counter dependency*: resisting anyone in the group who represents authority.
- (c) *Withdrawal*: trying to remove the sources of uncomfortable feelings by not engaging with other group members, or the group's task, in any depth.
- (d) *Fighting and controlling*: Asserting personal dominance and attempting to get one's own way, to satisfy one's own needs, regardless of others.
- (e) *Pairing or Alliances*: Seeking out one or two supporters and forming a kind of emotional sub-group in which members protect and support each other.

Many of these reactions sound negative, and you may be wondering how any group manages to survive and develop! In fact many groups do function effectively and are enriching for their members. But it is helpful for the Group Leader or facilitator to be aware of these unseen issues and observation of group process helps us develop awareness of others and of our effect upon them.

Good listening and observation skills and an understanding of group processes are at the heart of good group leadership.

### Roles and Responsibilities

The behaviour of each member of the group will be affected by interaction with the others. This affects both the roles that are assumed by individuals and the parts that they play in group processes.

It has been found that groups have their strongest influence on members who have joined the group voluntarily. Indeed, if membership has been difficult to achieve, commitment is very high and it is difficult for an individual to renounce the "privilege" of membership. (An example of this may be the selection procedure for ordination, or a strict baptismal policy).

Groups also have a strong influence on members who depend on each other. It may be the needs of the task or the rewards that are offered that create the dependency, but in both, bonds are made that are difficult to break.

Within a cohesive group there are pressures towards uniformity and a common vision and relationship with the surrounding society. Indeed, a group may strengthen its internal unity by "demonising" those outside it, even creating an imaginary enemy or exaggerating opposition so that the group feels stronger in its own identity.

Within a group an individual may act differently than he or she would when alone.

### Stages in Group Development

The processes of the group will develop over time. Any new group goes through different stages to establish its character and style. There are various different analyses of how this happens. One of the best known is Tuckman's forming-norming-storming-performing model.

Bruce Tuckman developed this 4-stage model of group development in 1965. In brief, the stages are

1. Forming: The group comes together and gets to initially know one other and form as a group.
2. Storming: A chaotic vying for leadership and trialling of group processes
3. Norming: Eventually agreement is reached on how the group operates (norming)
4. Performing: The group practices its craft and becomes effective in meeting its objectives.

*Tuckman added a 5th stage 10 years later:*

5. Adjourning: The process of "un-forming" the group, that is, letting go of the group structure and moving on.

Each of these stages is important for the group to establish itself, and it may help the leader to know which stage the group is at. If the group spends too long in one stage, this may be detrimental to the progress of the group.

### **Stage 1: Forming**

At this stage there will be high dependence on leader for guidance and direction. Little agreement will have been established regarding the team aims other than those received from leader. Individual roles and responsibilities are unclear. The leader must be prepared to answer lots of questions about the team's purpose, objectives and external relationships. Processes are often ignored. Members may test the tolerance of the system and the leader. The leader directs the group.

### **Stage 2: Storming**

Decisions don't come easily within groups. Team members vie for position as they attempt to establish themselves in relation to other team members and the leader, who might receive challenges from team members. Clarity of purpose increases but plenty of uncertainties persist. Cliques and factions form and there may be power struggles. The team needs to be focused on its goals to avoid becoming distracted by relationships and emotional issues. Compromises may be required to enable progress.

### **Stage 3: Norming**

Agreement and consensus is largely formed amongst the team, who respond well to facilitation by the leader. Roles and responsibilities are clear and accepted. Big decisions are made by group agreement. Smaller decisions may be delegated to individuals or small teams within the group. Commitment and unity is strong. The

team may engage in fun and social activities. The team discusses and develops its processes and working style. There is general respect for the leader and some of leadership is shared by the team. The leader facilitates and enables.

### **Stage 4: Performing**

The team is more strategically aware and is clear about why it is doing what it is doing. The team has a shared vision and is able to stand on its own feet with no interference or participation from the leader. There is a focus on achieving goals, and the team makes most of the decisions against criteria agreed with the leader. The team has a high degree of autonomy. Disagreements occur but now they are resolved within the team positively and necessary changes to processes and structure are made by the team. The team is able to work towards achieving the goal, and also to attend to relationship, style and process issues along the way. Team members look after each other. The team requires delegated tasks and projects from the leader. The team does not need to be instructed or assisted. Team members might ask for assistance from the leader with personal and interpersonal development. Leader delegates and oversees.

### **Stage 5: Adjourning**

Tuckman's fifth stage, adjourning, is the break-up of the group, hopefully when the task is completed successfully and the purpose of the group has been fulfilled. Members can move on to new things, feeling good about what's been achieved. From an organizational perspective, recognition of and sensitivity to people's vulnerabilities in Tuckman's fifth stage is helpful, particularly if members of the group have been closely bonded and feel a sense of insecurity or threat from this change.

# Session Two: The Needs of a Group

### Aim:

- To reflect on the needs of individuals within the group, and the group as a whole
- To think about ways in which the group leader can help needs to be met
- To reflect on the roles that people will take on in a group and how they add to or detract from the needs of the group

There are three interrelated needs of any group of people: those of individuals, of the group and those imposed by the task.

*A good Group Leader will try to ensure that the reasonable needs of each are met; whether by them, or by somebody else.*

### The needs of the individual:

The needs of each individual member may vary enormously. Some, for example, may be personally isolated and hoping for considerable social provision in the group. Some may be driven by the need to achieve the team's tasks and have a heavy investment in a successful outcome. Personalities may vary: some liking clear structures and others being essentially informal creatures. Unwilling members, reluctant to contribute may be only prepared to participate if their needs are met in the short-term, while others have a much longer time-scale in mind.

It is not possible to satisfy everyone's individual needs at once and some may have to remain unmet. This realisation can be very liberating! A measure of personal frustration is to be expected whenever work is done collaboratively, since the needs of other people must be considered. It is to be hoped that the frustration will be amply compensated for by the satisfaction of two other areas: the needs of the task and the needs of the whole group.

### The needs of the Task:

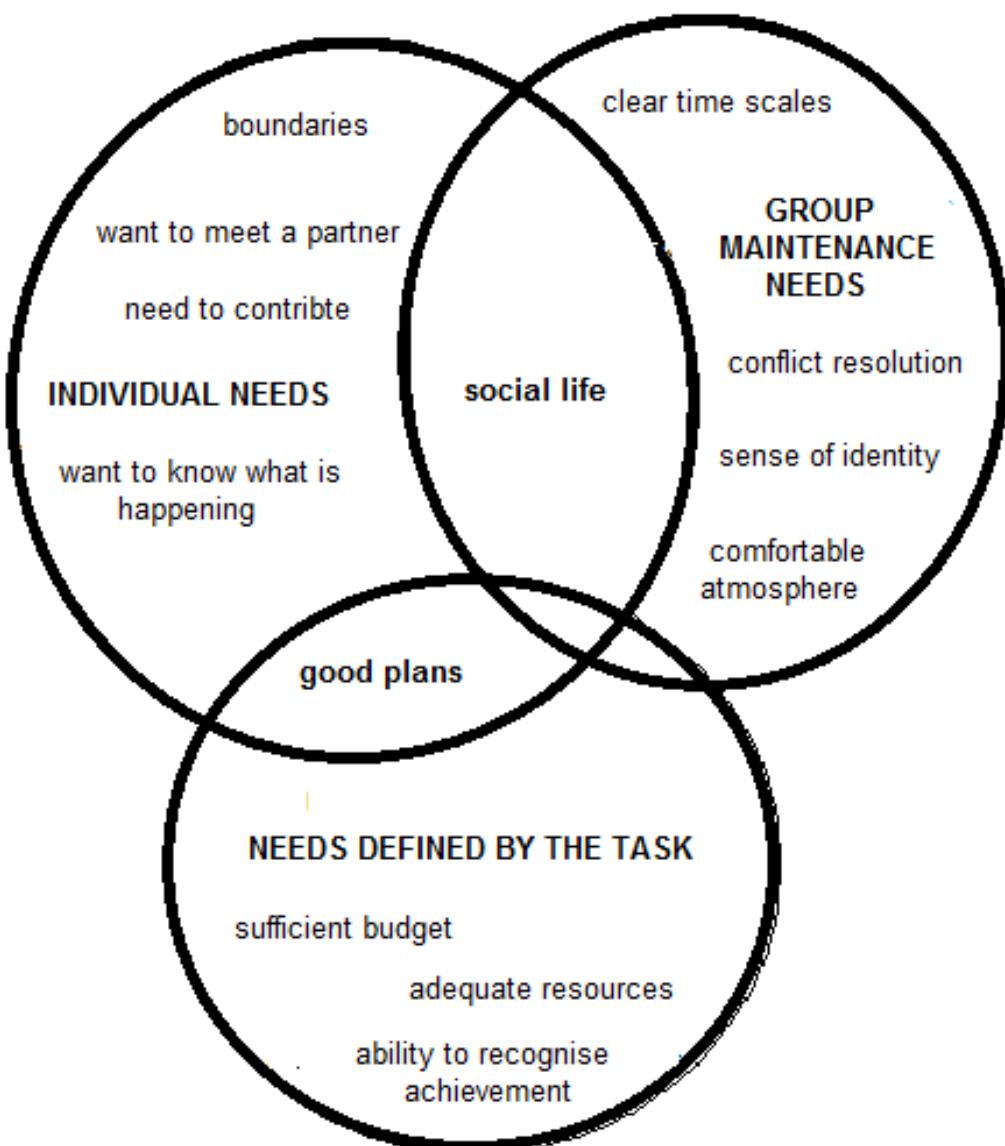
The group will need to identify its goals, but even when the tasks which the group must undertake have been decided it will be necessary to identify what is required to achieve them. These will include the resources of time and appropriate space and may involve time given to further planning, or co-opting new members. It is important the team has sufficient resources to give it a good chance of a satisfactory outcome, to avoid considerable disillusionment.

### The needs of the Group:

When people meet together a new identity is formed that is distinguishable from each individual member. The Group will have its own needs which are different from the needs of individual members, though, as the diagram expresses, there may be overlap between each category. The group will need identified tasks, a place to meet, good communication, support, proper use of skills, mechanisms for handling conflict, and other factors appropriate to its work.

### *The Overlapping Needs*

from: John Adair "Action Centred Leadership" 1973



### Exercise 1 - Assessing Individual Needs

Think of a group that you are part of. Try to evaluate how strongly you feel each factor on this list is important to you in the particular team or group.

Give a score of ten to any elements that are crucial, one to any that are a matter of indifference to you.

Add any additional factors which you want included.

Respect of others		Having fun together	
Clear purpose and goals		Shared planning and decision making	
Frequent team meetings		Regular prayer together	
Feeling valued by other team members		Awareness of mutual strengths and weaknesses	
Good communication		Agreed roles and areas of responsibility	
Many social occasions		Appropriate criticism and praise given	
High level of trust		Conflicts are dealt with	

### Personality Types in Groups

Every group will include certain 'types' – these are roles or personalities that people take on in the group. They may not be their actual or natural personality type, but they will take up certain roles within the group if no one else steps up. All of these roles have advantages and disadvantages for the group. All add something to the process, but also need specific managing by the group leader.

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Here are some of the different personality types identifiable in groups. For each of the 'types' consider some of the ways this behaviour might show up in groups, and ways in which the leader or facilitator might help them to make a positive contribution.

**The 'Slacker'** – lack of practical commitment, poor time-keeping and boundaries in group, passes on responsibilities, unprepared. Appears apathetic about the task of the group, and the other members. Advantages: can help gain perspective because they are standing back from the process. Disadvantages: can be demotivating and frustrating to the rest of the group; can thwart progress as they don't complete their assigned tasks.

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

**The 'Hero'** – Tries to save the group, takes on responsibilities of others, can't say 'no'. will take on unfeasible amounts of work and make unsustainable time commitments. Advantages: Can be a boost for the rest of the group and make the task feel 'doable'. Disadvantages: can be undermining to the rest of the group and unrealistic about genuine problems in the process.

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

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**The 'Tranquilliser'** – will always try to avoid conflict, calms things down, minimises the feelings of others, will leave the group rather than experience conflict, neglects self if that provides a way of smoothing over difficulties. Advantages: every group needs a peacemaker and some conflict can be smoothed over rather than resolved. Disadvantages: conflict is often a growth point, and the tranquilliser will often prevent growth and robust discussion.

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

**The 'Passive Aggressor'** – Is often angry about the process but will not make this explicit. Represses anger and avoids the issues instead forms cliques and isolates the focus of anger. Indirect expressions of anger can be being a martyr, talking 'about' rather than 'to', making angry noises and claiming to be fine when invited to comment. Advantages:

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

**The 'Combatant'** – Always looking for a fight. The combatant expresses anger but unconstructively. They are rigid and inflexible in interaction and with the process. Often singles out individuals for attention of anger, wants to win. Advantages: can stir the group into a clearer focus, and help the rest of the group to bond (although against the person!). Disadvantages: can create tension and an anxious atmosphere. May railroad discussions and decisions.

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Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

**The ‘Negotiator’** – listens to all sides before wading in. Is focused and grounded. Will work hard to include others in the discussion and will offer summaries of progress and ground covered. Advantages: A very useful member of the group who will make sure every member is heard. Disadvantages: may still be negotiating when decisions need to be made and progress speeded up.

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

**The ‘Joker’** – Always ready to crack a joke to diffuse a situation, or detract attention. Avoids issues and minimises concerns. Can obstruct progress and focus. Advantages: can diffuse difficult situations and break tension between members. Disadvantages: can undermine process by never taking it seriously and avoid engaging with difficult issues.

Examples of behaviour in groups:

Strategies for the Leader /Facilitator:

# Session Three: Learning Styles

### Aims:

- To understand individual learning styles
- To choose appropriate educational materials to engage all learning styles

Sometimes when people believe that they are not good at learning the reason is less to do with their own ability than with the way in which they were taught. It is unfortunate that much of the “education” that we receive at school is delivered and assessed in a uniform way. This suits some people, but not all, and can lead to many believing that further study is not for them. An awareness of different learning styles, and an ability to use a variety of activities in a small group can enable many more people to discover their own gifts.

Much research in this area has been done by P. Honey and A. Mumford, who built on the work of D. A. Kolb. They have summarised their finding into four different learning styles, which are now taken as standard definitions.

### Four styles of learning:

#### 1. Activists

Activist learners like challenge and variety. They hope that learning is going to be enjoyable and don't mind making mistakes. Activists do not like to passivie for a long period of time, and like to 'do' rather than observe.

#### ***Activists will approach learning with these questions:***

- Will I learn something new?
- Will there be a mixture of things to do?
- Will I be tied to one particular subject or method – or will there be options?
- Will there be some tough challenges for me to meet so that I do not feel I am wasting my time?
- Will there be other people like me doing this course?
- Will the course be of any use in the rest of my life?

## 2. Reflectors:

Reflective learners do not like pressure or being in the spotlight. They may not be good at giving instant responses to groups or exercises. They like to hear other people's views and then have time to reflect. They may well have their best thoughts when others have moved onto a new subject!

### ***Key questions for reflectors include:***

- Will I be given enough time to prepare and think things through thoroughly?
- Will there be time to do the job properly, gathering information, and considering the options?
- Will we be steamrolled along a particular line, or encouraged to think things out for ourselves?
- Will there be opportunity to question the information we are given?
- Will I get a chance to hear the views of other people in the group?

## 3. Theorists:

Theoretical learners like being intellectually stretched and thrive on argument and discussion. They want to explore the structure of things, the theoretical base and the thinking behind clichés and assumptions.

### ***The theorist may ask:***

- Will I have a chance to question what is going on?
- Do I have a clear indication of the aim of the course and the methods which will be used?
- Is this course going to be too easy for me? Will I encounter stimulating ideas that are new to me?
- Will there be people with my kind of interest and approach there?

## 4. Pragmatists:

Pragmatic learners (sometimes called experimenters) are more likely to learn from successful people who have proved their competency in the field than from theorists and academics. They find demonstrations more helpful than explanations or conceptual learning.

### ***Important questions for the pragmatist:***

- Will there be opportunities to put own new knowledge into practice?
- Will there be lots of practical tips and techniques?

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- Is this course tackling real problems, and my concerns, which I can identify as.....
- Have the people running the course shown that they know how to do things themselves?

There are various reasons not to treat this outline of learning styles in too prescriptive a way. We are all different mixtures of the four styles, which may mean that a description of any one style will not fit any individual neatly. Human beings are immensely adaptable and can work in a variety of ways, perhaps employing different styles as the subject and activity demands. Many activities require a mix of approaches. One can see how restricting using only one style is when one remembers past language teaching methods. Many children left school with advanced certificates of competence in a foreign grammar, but with little ability to speak the language in another country!

### Exercise 1 - Learning Styles Questionnaire

This questionnaire was developed by Honey and Mumford (2004). It is designed to find out your preferred learning style(s). Over the years you have probably developed learning "habits" that help you benefit more from some experiences than from others. Since you are probably unaware of this, this questionnaire will help you pinpoint your learning preferences so that you are in a better position to select learning experiences that suit your style and having a greater understanding of those that suit the style of others. This is the 40 question version, there is also an 80 question version.

There is no time limit to this questionnaire. It will probably take you 10-15 minutes. The accuracy of the results depends on how honest you can be. There are no right or wrong answers.

**If you agree more than you disagree with a statement put a tick by it.**

**If you disagree more than you agree put a cross by it.**

**Be sure to mark each item with either a tick or cross.**

✓ / x	
	1. I have strong beliefs about what is right and wrong, good and bad.
	2. I often act without considering the possible consequences
	3. I tend to solve problems using a step-by-step approach
	4. I believe that formal procedures and policies restrict people
	5. I have a reputation for saying what I think, simply and directly
	6. I often find that actions based on feelings are as sound as those based on careful thought and analysis
	7. I like the sort of work where I have time for thorough preparation and implementation
	8. I regularly question people about their basic assumptions
	9. What matters most is whether something works in practice

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	10. I actively seek out new experiences
	11. When I hear about a new idea or approach I immediately start working out how to apply it in practice
	12. I am keen on self discipline such as watching my diet, taking regular exercise, sticking to a fixed routine, etc.
	13. I take pride in doing a thorough job
	14. I get on best with logical, analytical people and less well with spontaneous, "irrational"
	15. I take care over the interpretation of data available to me and avoid jumping to conclusions
	16. I like to reach a decision carefully after weighing up many alternatives
	17. I'm attracted more to novel, unusual ideas than to practical ones
	18. I don't like disorganised things and prefer to fit things into a coherent pattern
	19. I accept and stick to laid down procedures and policies so long as I regard them as an efficient way of getting the job done
	20. I like to relate my actions to a general principle
	21. In discussions I like to get straight to the point
	22. tend to have distant, rather formal relationships with people at work
	23. I tend to discuss specific things with people rather than engaging in social discussion
	24. I like people who approach things realistically rather than theoretically
	25. In discussions I get impatient with irrelevancies and digressions
	26. If I have a report to write I tend to produce lots of drafts before settling on the final version
	27. I am keen to try things out to see if they work in practice
	28. I am keen to reach answers via a logical approach
	29. I enjoy being the one that talks a lot
	30. In discussions I often find I am the realist, keeping people to the point and avoiding wild speculations
	31. I like to ponder many alternatives before making up my mind
	32. In discussions with people I often find I am the most dispassionate and objective
	33. In discussions I'm more likely to adopt a "low profile" than to take the lead and do most of the talking
	34. I like to be able to relate current actions to a longer term bigger picture
	35. When things go wrong I am happy to shrug it off and "put it down to experience"
	36. I tend to reject wild, spontaneous ideas as being impractical
	37. It's best to think carefully before taking action
	38. On balance I do the listening rather than the talking
	39. I tend to be tough on people who find it difficult to adopt a logical approach
	40. Most times I believe the end justifies the means

## Scoring And Interpreting The Learning Styles Questionnaire

The Questionnaire is scored by awarding one point for each ticked item. There are no points for crossed items. Simply indicate on the lists below which items were ticked by circling the appropriate question number.

2	7	1	5
4	13	3	9
6	15	8	11
10	16	12	19
17	25	14	21
23	28	18	27
24	29	20	35
32	31	22	37
34	33	26	
38	36	30	
40	39		

TOTALS :

Activist

Reflector

Theorist

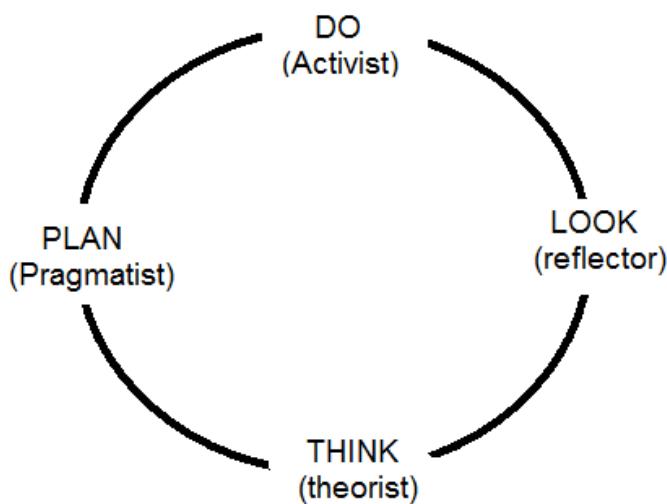
Pragmatist

## Exercise 2 – Learning Styles

*Write a one-sentence explanation of each of the four learning styles.*

*How would you present your understanding of learning styles to a group? You might do it through a talk, diagrams, a drama - whatever you like!*

One could express the learning style preferences in a circular diagram:



The “activist” will be happy with new experiences, but may resist the movement to information gathering. This could result in a purely subjective, one-sided impression of what happened. Similarly, if no general principles are not drawn from particular experiences it will be difficult, to use the experience in similar, but different circumstances. Hence the value of reflection and the need for the contribution of the “theorist.” New ideas need to be tested out, as in stage 4, so that they are not forgotten, and the whole experience lost. Without this stage, often prompted by “pragmatists” who want to try out the new ideas, the learning cycle will be broken.

### Learning Styles and Learning Activities

Because people learn in different ways it is important that the group leader ensures that there is a variety of different activities when the group meets. What suits one person may contribute little to another’s learning and it is good for group members to recognise and allow for this. It may mean that each individual has to engage in some activities that are not in their preferred style. Mutual understanding and tolerance will do much to improve the group’s co-operation and atmosphere.

It is possible to identify activities which are preferred by those with different learning styles. At this point it is good to remember that as individuals we are flexible and able to operate in several different modes; we may have different preferences depending on the field of study, or we may be a mixture of preferences. These categories are only indicators of preferences and help, as a checklist, to ensure that there is a balanced “diet” of activities available. People may feel uncomfortable in some groups if there are no activities which match their first preference. Conversely, the fullness of the learning cycle may be lost if a group concentrates on one aspect of the cycle, only engaging in activities in which all the group feel entirely at home.

As a generalisation one can say that:

**Activists** tend to like: role play, simulation games, buzz groups, and projects.

**Reflectors** tend to like: discussions, film, libraries, one-to-one work with a tutor.

**Theorists** tend to like: lectures, guided reading, help with note-taking.

**Pragmatists** tend to like: case studies, demonstrations, workshops, problem-solving.

### Exercise 3 - Learning styles and Learning activities

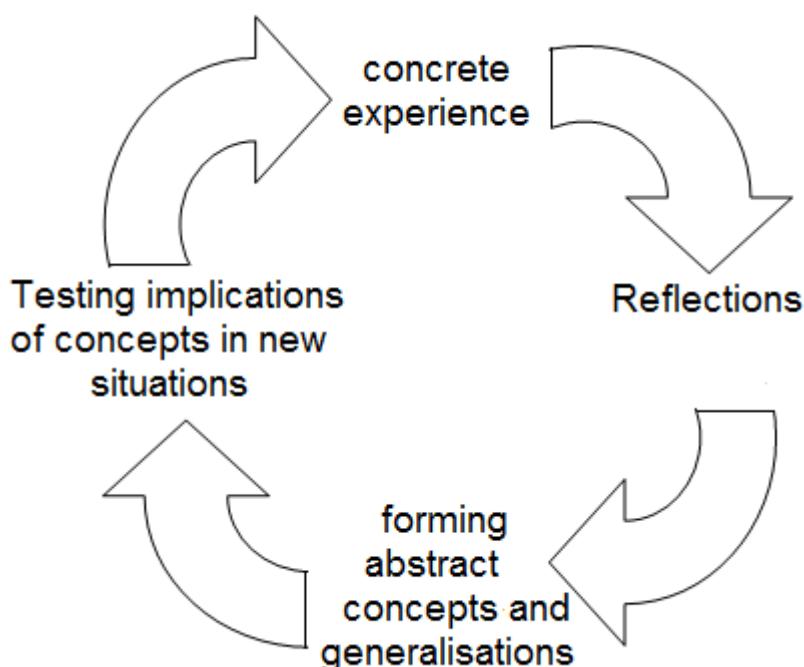
Consider the following list of activities and match the four learning styles with the learning activities they would tend to prefer. Mark each activity with A R T or P, as appropriate. Some activities may suit two or more styles of learning.

brain-storming	Video / DVD	tutorials	computer programmes
case studies	sermons	panels of experts	lectures
on-the-job training	distance learning	debates	drama
discussion	visits	games	reading

### The Learning Cycle

This understanding of the way that adults learn grew out of observation of people in groups. One cannot approach adults as though they are a blank sheet, waiting to be educated; there are always previous patterns of thought and response, based on their previous experiences. Kurt Lewin realised that if people are to grow and learn from their experiences they have to integrate their emotional reactions and their intellectual understanding of what happened. Four stages were suggested, through which learners must progress: the experience, observation, new generalisations and testing concepts in new situations.

These stages can be expressed as a circle, since the fourth stage leads directly to new experience:



*From D.A. Kolb and R. Fry*

**Concrete experience:** The events which make up the actual experience

**Observations and reflections:** Gathering information about what happened. This may be different from the memory of it! The learner may gather information about other examples of similar experiences and facts about them

**Forming abstract concepts and generalisations:** What new principles or ideas can be generalised from this experience and observation?

**Testing Implications:** Once a new idea is formed it will need to be tested before it can be confirmed, falsified or modified.

An example of this process might be the (probably fictional) story of Isaac Newton, sitting under the apple tree. After an apple fell on his head (Experience), he recalled that objects frequently fell towards the earth, rather than the opposite (Observation), and formed the theory of gravity in his mind. (Theorising) Doing the mathematics (Testing) demonstrated that the theory had validity, and further experiments followed. (Back to experience).

It is important that each stage is completed, for learning to take place and a real change of behaviour to happen. Since different stages are favoured by different learning styles, people will feel more at ease with some parts of the cycle than others. This is a good reason for learning to take place in groups, and for all people's contribution to be valued.

### Exercise 4- The Learning Cycle

Try to recall an incident when you have learnt something new.

Can you recognise the process of the Learning Cycle in this experience?

Would your learning have been improved by consciously engaging in the separate stages of the Cycle?