

Council of Small Business Executives



# COSBE

JULY 2008

## “Effective Management of Group Dynamics”

**H**ow can groups leverage diverse expertise and experience to build camaraderie and strengthen problem solving capacity? Recently COSBE group facilitators explored this question in a workshop sponsored by MMAC titled “Effective Management of Group Dynamics”.

Leadership development and strategic planning specialist, Paul Woerpel conducted exploratory interviews with ten COSBE leaders to identify group development issues and challenges. He then facilitated a 2½ hour session patterned after a typical COSBE meeting, which allowed workshop participants to exchange ideas and share best practices.

### Problem Solving Discipline

Attendees tackled a number of common group development issues, among them: how to help the group engage more deeply, so that meetings are more compelling.

Paul shared his own experience as a professional facilitator of CEO roundtables, emphasizing the importance of utilizing a systematic problem solving approach (see below) to avoid misdiagnosis and “jumping to solution”. To reinforce that message, he also recommended that groups implement a disciplined approach to issue exploration, asking questions to clarify, before offering recommendations or solutions (see insert on next page). Group facilitators agreed that often the problem presented by a

COSBE member is just the “tip of the iceberg” and that questions help to the group achieve a deeper level of understanding.

### Mutual Accountability

Workshop participants learned that the quality of group interaction is the key determinant of group results—even at times more so than the content knowledge group members themselves possess. For a group or team to be successful members must share accountability for the quality of their collective experience. Facilitators shared ideas on how to build “ownership” within their groups:

- Take time to focus on the meeting *process*, (not just the content. Conduct an evaluation of what’s working and what’s not working. Brainstorm ways to improve the group exchange.
- In addition to working *in* the group, work *on* the group. Develop a group “constitution” which clarifies mutual objectives, expectations and rules of engagement.
- Participate in the ½ day training session offered by MMAC to help the group gel, or when the group is going through a renewal phase.

### Integrating New Members

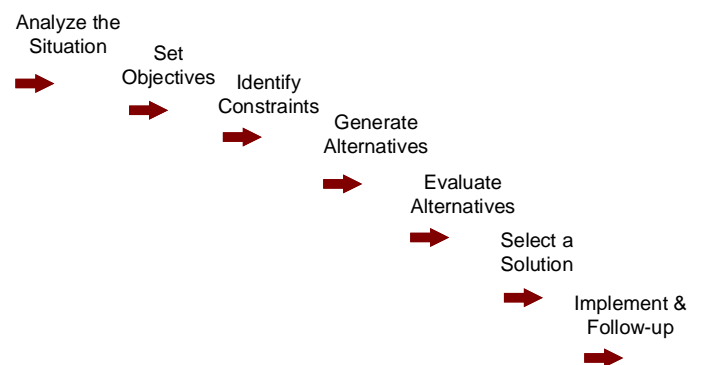
All groups go through cycles and from time to time face the

## Systematic Group Problem Solving

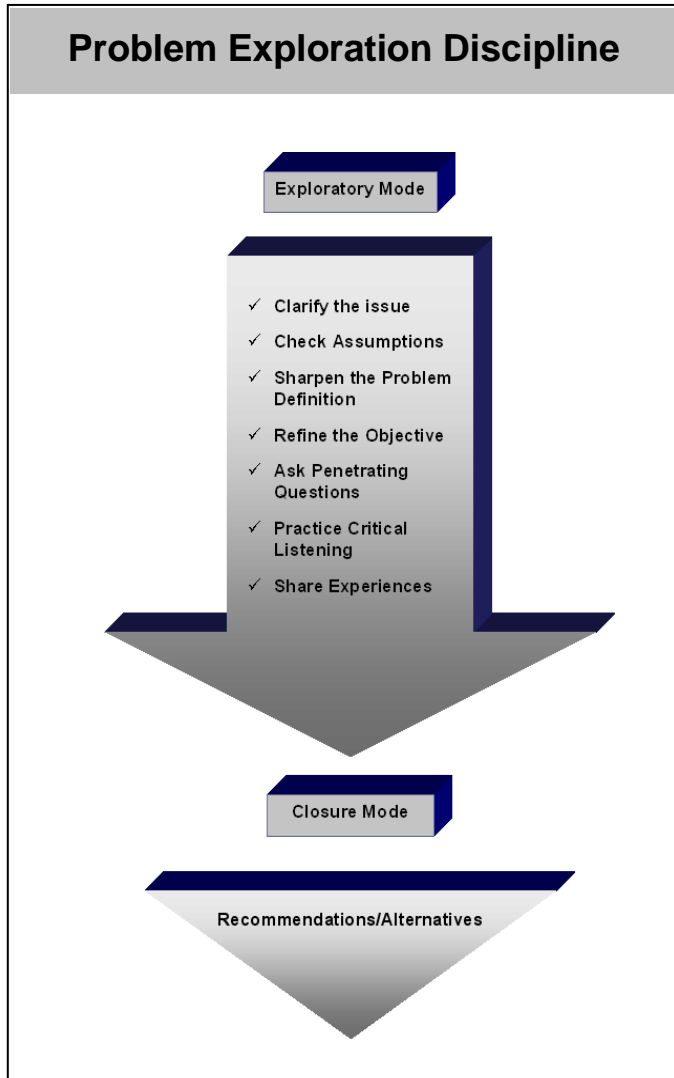
### Problem Solving Pitfalls

- Failure to clearly define the problem.
- Failure to distinguish between symptoms and root cause.
- Moving to solution before fully analyzing the situation.
- Failure to establish clear objectives.
- Failure to fully explore assumptions.
- Confusing solutions with objectives.
- Failure to fully explore multiple perspectives.

### Seven Step Problem Solving Process



## Deepening the Roundtable Experience



challenge of adding and integrating new members, either to revitalize the group, or to simply add dimension. Participants discussed how to seamlessly incorporate a newcomer into an existing group:

- Look for areas of similarity that support synergy and areas of difference that enrich perspective.
- Screen carefully for “fit”. Conduct a preadmission interview with the candidate over lunch to explore motivation, discuss expectations and test chemistry.
- Set realistic expectations upfront. The value of the COSBE experience cannot be measured by what transpires at a single meeting. It may take a year for new members to become comfortable with the degree of trust and openness required to share deeply.
- With a mature and closely-knit group, consider adding two new members at the same time.

### Balanced Participation

Active engagement and balanced participation are key indicators of healthy group dynamics. Do members demonstrate the ability to both give and take, in a context of mutual respect? When one member draws a disproportionate amount of group time and attention, energy is drained from the group. One work-

shop participant reported when a dominant member left his group, a more reticent member opened up.

Several COSBE roundtable facilitators admitted they struggle with how to politely deal with a member who tends to monopolize conversation. More experienced and confident leaders are likely to gently remind the overbearing individual to share the floor, “to make sure we hear from everyone.”

Some will call on quieter members to ensure their contributions are not overlooked. Others have confronted the issue outside the meeting context, so as not to publicly embarrass the member.

### Self-Management is Key

According to Paul Woerpel, mature, well-functioning roundtable groups have the ability to largely self-manage. Leadership is exercised by group members in a fluid fashion. A facilitator is designated to serve as gatekeeper and guide, and to encourage participants to take ownership. Because members have clarity of purpose and consensus on the factors that will impact desired outcomes, they are comfortable calling one another on actions and behaviors that don’t contribute to their collective success.

Less effective groups complain to the leader about unacceptable behavior, or worse yet, resort to back-channel gossip. These practices are generally ineffective, and furthermore, they are destructive to group morale.

Roundtable groups that understand “you don’t have to be sick to get better”, challenge each other to continuously improve the quality of their meetings. They raise questions (see insert) that promote an ongoing re-examination of the interpersonal processes that foster trust and teamwork, and take responsibility for the effective management of their own group dynamics.

#### “Stop Action” Questions

- ▶ What progress are we making with respect to our objectives?
- ▶ Are we staying focused on the task or issue at hand?
- ▶ Are we hearing from all members of the group? If not, why not?
- ▶ Are we listening to what others have to say?
- ▶ Are we approaching the issue with open minds?
- ▶ Are we seeking to clarify and understand?
- ▶ Are we exploring ideas before evaluating them?
- ▶ Are we focused on the problem or situation, or personalities?
- ▶ Are we challenging each other’s ideas and willing to take positions that may be unpopular with the group?
- ▶ Are we avoiding conflict, or giving in?

*Paul Woerpel is President of Transformation Consulting Group, [www.strategic-agility.com](http://www.strategic-agility.com) a consulting firm that helps key executives cultivate strategic agility and develop leadership skills that align culture, business processes, organizational structure, technology systems and staffing, while building deep levels of engagement and commitment. For 25 years, Paul has consulted with manufacturing, retail, service and distribution businesses—companies large and small; publicly owned and privately held. He can be reached at (262) 691-4540 or [paul@strategic-agility.com](mailto:paul@strategic-agility.com)*