

Reviews

Problem-Solving in Groups (3rd ed)

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This book comprises four parts. These cover an introduction to problem solving groups, problem solving techniques, following through (presenting solutions and evaluating results) and working effectively in groups. There are seventeen, mostly short chapters, written in a highly accessible style. The focus is on using groups in organisations in pursuit of continuous improvement and problem resolution. The book assumes the presence of a leader and a facilitator in these groups but it is only the role of the latter that is explored in any depth.

The merits of the book reside in its basic presentation of some group work techniques, methods and skills. Some readers may find that the book's appeal lies in its non-academic style. It contains a useful, introductory discussion of virtual groups, and succinct reminders of basic principles for human resource and task management in organisations, including the importance of partnership and ownership. The disadvantages of hierarchies are clearly laid out. In a context for health and social welfare organisations, where inter-agency and inter-professional collaboration is emphasised, the book is right in its observation that business structures and processes must allow flows of work across traditional functional groupings. The book, however, does not develop the point.

However, whilst accessible, the writing is highly prescriptive, for example on the size of groups. It is also repetitive, for instance on how to manage 'brainstorming' in a group. Nor does the book provide references to research evidence and literature that might support the

prescriptions and advice; neither does it reflect on other possibilities besides what is so confidently asserted. Issues concerned with 'race' and gender in groups are omitted, yet institutional oppression can be a feature of many organisations and of groups within them. Brevity also characterises the majority of the chapters, for instance on conducting a cost-benefit analysis of possible solutions to organisational problems. Arguably the book is too elementary. Understanding and managing group process is a more complex challenge than the chapter, which focuses upon it, communicates. There is little discussion of actual methods in the chapter on evaluation and monitoring. This means that the book is too basic for those experienced in facilitating problem-solving groups, whilst insufficiently rooted in literature and evidence for those new to working with groups.

There is also an assumption that problem-solving is amenable to a rational approach – defining the problem, collecting data, proposing and implementing solutions, and evaluating. There is little or no recognition and discussion of how rational problem-solving can be blown off course and how problem-solving groups might need to respond. Examples are used but sparingly, when case studies might have illuminated the potential of problem-solving groups in organisations. There are no references. Some group work theorists are referred to – Tuckman and Belbin for instance – and some research is mentioned, but no references are provided to enable the reader to check primary sources for research evidence.

Overall, the modernisation agenda for health and social welfare organisations reinforces the importance of paying attention to task and process in agencies. What group work has to offer, in enabling organisations to deliver services marked by quality, responsiveness and standards, is restated through this book but its very basic approach limits the usefulness of the material.

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