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What Is "Process"?

The concept of process is central to an understanding of consultation and management. In its broadest sense "process" refers to *how* things are done rather than *what* is done. If I am crossing the street, that is what I am doing, but the *process* is how I am crossing: walking, running, dodging cars, asking someone to help me across because I feel dizzy, or some other way.

Process is everywhere. In order to help, intervene, and facilitate human problem solving, one must focus on communication and interpersonal processes. The processes we need to learn to observe and manage are those that make a demonstrable difference to problem solving, decision making, and organizational effectiveness in general.

Understanding of human interpersonal and group processes is critical for the *manager* because effective managers spend far more time intervening in *how* things are done than on *what* is done. An effective manager must be able to create situations that will ensure that good decisions are made, without making those decisions himself and without even knowing ahead of time what he might do if he had to make the decision alone. Managing the decision process in this way becomes more necessary as technological complexity and the rate of change in the environment

increase. The primary job of line managers will eventually be to create and manage the processes that ensure effective decision making.

How to Focus on Process

How does a consultant or manager know what to focus on when trying to intervene to improve a situation? Imagine yourself to have been invited to a staff meeting to see if you can be helpful in making that group more effective. If you are the manager who has called the meeting, imagine yourself trying to make the meeting as effective as possible. What should you be paying attention to? What kinds of interventions should you be considering?

Table 3-1 presents a simplifying model of the possibilities. The cells in the table overlap and, in reality, the distinctions are not as clear-cut as the descriptions imply, but we need simplifying models if we are to make any sense at all of the complex data that typically confront us in human situations.

First, we have to differentiate a situation's content from its process and its structure. Second, we have to differentiate, for each of the three aspects of a situation, whether we are focusing on the *task* issues or the *interpersonal* issues.

Table 3-1
The Foci of Observation and Intervention

	Task	Interpersonal
Content	1. Formal agenda, goals	4. Who is doing what to whom
Process	2. How the task is done	5. How members relate to each other, communicate, etc.
Structure	3. Recurrent processes—"standard operating procedures"	6. Recurrent interpersonal relationships, roles

Task Content (Cell 1). The most obvious thing to focus on in the meeting is why the group is there in the first place. What is its task? What are the goals of the meeting? Why does the group exist at all? Every group, every organization has an ultimate function, a reason for existence, a mission, and its goals and tasks derive from that ultimate function.

A group may not be aware of its ultimate mission or may not agree on its goals. In fact, one of the main functions of the consultant or manager may be to help the group to understand its task and function. This subject is something that the consultant or manager should then focus on explicitly, because if there is misunderstanding or disagreement at this level, the group will have a hard time functioning effectively.

The most observable aspect of task content is the actual subject matter that the group talks about or works on, what would typically be labeled its formal agenda. If the group has a secretary and keeps minutes, the content of the discussion is what will appear in the minutes. One of the choices you have as a helper, whether in the role of consultant or manager, is to keep close track of the task content to make sure that it stays "on track," to ensure that the group achieves its goals.

Task Process (Cell 2). Even if you pay close attention to and actively manage task content, the group may develop communication problems. People may not listen to one another or may misunderstand one another, people may interrupt one another, arguments and conflicts may develop, the group may not be able to agree, too much time may be spent on what you might regard as trivial issues, disruptive side conversations may develop, and other behavior may be displayed that gets in the way of effective task solution.

If you have been in a variety of groups you may also become aware that different groups working on the very same task may approach it very differently. In one group the chairperson calls on people to give their input; another group's chairperson invites anyone to speak who cares to. In one group there is angry confrontation and arguing; in another group there is polite, formal questioning. In one group decisions are made by consensus, in another they are made by voting, and in a third they are made by the manager after listening to the discussion for a while.

In other words, groups may have the same task and same content yet engage in drastically different processes of working on the task. *Task process*, then, is the way in which the group works, how it solves problems, gathers information, makes decisions, and so on. Task processes are elusive. It is easy to experience and to observe them but hard to define and clearly segregate them from the content that is being worked on. Group members learn that they can partially control the content outcomes by controlling the process, as senators do when they filibuster or as debaters do when they destroy an opponent's argument or composure by ridicule, changing the subject, or in other ways diverting the process from what has been said. One of the toughest tasks for the intervener is not to get seduced by the content, not to get so caught up in the actual problem the group is working on as to cease to pay attention to *how* it is working.

Task Structure (Cell 3). You will notice if you observe a group for some period of time that certain patterns recur, that some kinds of events happen regularly and some kinds of events never happen. For example, one group always uses parliamentary procedure, while another one refuses to vote on any issue even if they cannot resolve the issue by any other means. One group always has an agenda and follows it slavishly, while another waits until the meeting begins before generating a list of topics.

If the group contains more than one level of management you may notice some people interrupt others consistently while others never interrupt each other, and the pattern you may observe is that higher ranking people interrupt lower ranking ones but never the reverse. You might also note that if you are the chairman of the group that members will look to you for guidance and direction, and that if members of the group have been assigned particular roles or tasks, they will behave consistently with those assignments. Such regularities in the work of the group can best be thought of as the task structure of the group, relatively stable, recurring processes that help the group or organization to get its tasks accomplished.

In large organizations we think of the structure as being the formal hierarchy, the defined chain of command, the systems of information and control, and other stable recurring processes

that are taught to newcomers as "the way we work around here." But it is important to recognize that the concept of structure is only an extension of the concept of process in that it refers to those processes that are stable, recurring, and defined by members in the group as their "structure."

All groups require such regularities and stability to make their environment and working patterns predictable and, thereby, manageable. The assumptions that develop over time as the underlying premises of those patterns can then be thought of as part of the culture of the group. They become shared and taken for granted, and the structures that we can observe can be viewed as artifacts or manifestations of the culture of the group (Schein, 1985a).

The culture itself is not immediately visible because it is best thought of as the taken for granted underlying and unconscious assumptions that have evolved over time to deal with the various external and internal issues that the group has had to face (Schein, 1985a). But the culture will be reflected in the overt behavior that is visible and can be searched out through a joint process of inquiry between the outsider and members of the group. For purposes of this model it is useful to focus on the manifest artifacts, the visible behavior, always bearing in mind that they reflect important underlying assumptions that will eventually have to be taken into account.

The task structure that evolves in a group is composed of regularities that pertain specifically to the group's survival in its external environment. All groups face at least five basic survival problems:

1. *Defining the fundamental mission that justifies its existence—its primary task.* The structural elements dealing with this issue are usually company charters, statements of philosophy or mission, formal agenda statements, and other efforts to document members' implicit understanding about the role of the group.
2. *Setting specific goals derived from the mission.* The structural elements are written goal statements, formal planning procedures and their outcomes, publicly defined targets and deadlines.

3. *Deciding what means to use to accomplish the goals.* The structures for accomplishing goals are the defined formal organization, assigned task roles, and recurring procedures for solving problems and making decisions.

4. *Measuring and monitoring whether or not goals are being accomplished.* Formal information and control systems are set up, and managerial planning, budgeting, and review processes are formalized.

5. *Getting back on course by fixing problems once they are identified (when the group discovers it is off target or not accomplishing its goals).* A group needs processes for remedying situations, fixing problems, getting itself back on course. Often solutions are invented ad hoc, but any group or organization has to be able to regularize remedial and corrective processes and thus make them part of the structure of the group.

In a young group, the task structure processes will not be very stable; the young group is not very structured. As the group evolves, it develops assumptions about itself. If those assumptions lead to success, they eventually become the culture of the group. They then become visible and may be formally described in organization charts, manuals of procedure, rules of order, and other artifacts of the culture.

Interpersonal Content (Cell 4). We have now defined all the cells that deal with the group's task, its problems of survival in its environment, but, of course, the consultant or manager observing the group will note immediately that many of the salient events that occur in the group have to do with what the members are doing to one another, much of which may have relatively little to do with the task at a manifest level.

We will see that Joe seems to always get into fights with Joan, and that Mildred consistently supports Jim, almost no matter what he says, and that Rudy dominates the conversation and tries to control all the other members, while Paul speaks up rarely, and only when asked a direct question. We will note that some people interrupt others; that some people increase the tension in the group by being divisive, while others reduce tension by cracking a joke at just the right moment when things were getting too

tense. We will see that some members are good initiators and energizers of the group, while others are good summarizers and are able to test consensus in the group.

Just as we can track the content agenda of the group, we can also track "who does what to whom," "who plays what roles in the group," and construct a picture of the group in terms of the actual members and their relationships to one another and to the task. Whereas the focus in cell 1 is on the task content, the focus in cell 4 would be on the relationships among the members of the group, regardless of what the group is actually working on.

Interpersonal Process (Cell 5). Separating process from content is difficult in the task area because people consciously and unconsciously manipulate both process and content. But just as it is possible to observe a group at work and abstract the methods it uses to accomplish that work, so it is possible to abstract the interpersonal processes evident in a group independent of the actual people involved in these processes.

Thus, for example, one group may exhibit frequent confrontation and arguing among members, while another group's members may always be very polite and agree with one another. In one group people may listen to each other intently and try to build on each others' ideas, while in another group they may constantly vie for one another's attention, paying more attention to how they present their own view than to what others may have said.

It is important to observe interpersonal process because group outcomes result from a complex interaction of what goes on at the task (cell 2) and interpersonal (cell 5) level. For example, you may notice that different members have different definitions of the task, and this leads to various kinds of communication breakdowns interfering with task performance. You may also notice that some members systematically seem not to listen to other members, resulting in imperfect accumulation of information relevant to the task.

Or you may notice that, while some members are working on generating alternative solutions, others are busy advocating or attacking one of these solutions, and it may strike you that certain members are always attacking what certain other members bring

up no matter what the task content. Such interpersonal conflicts obviously get in the way of effective decision making. Or you may notice that a great many good ideas have been proposed but that the group has lost track of them because no one has put them on the board. Yet whenever anyone offers to be the recorder some other members strongly resist the idea with jibes about grabbing the chalk as being a power ploy.

All of these behaviors also involve task processes as previously defined in that they affect directly the efforts of the group to work on its task. But, at the same time, each of these processes also involve aspects of members' relationships with and feelings about one another, their roles, and mutual influence patterns that do not directly affect the task. These then would be examples of *interpersonal process* that seem more motivated by the feelings people have toward each other than by task concerns. One of the toughest choices for the intervener is deciding when to intervene around such processes and when merely to note them and leave them alone.

Interpersonal Structure (Cell 6). In order to develop structure — that is, stable, recurring processes — the group needs to develop a culture that will solve its problems of survival in the external environment. Similarly, any group or organization needs to develop stable, recurring processes to manage its internal affairs, to enable members to work together and to feel secure as a group. Recurring and stable processes are necessary to make the internal group environment safe and predictable so that members can relax enough to put their emotional energy into working on the survival tasks (Schein, 1985a).

Part of the culture of the group, then, can be thought of as the stable perceptions, thought processes, feelings, and communication rules that permit the group to function as a group. What are the internal problems for which such stability is required? For any group to function it must develop a stable solution for each of the following problems:

1. *How to communicate with each other — developing a common language.* The observable structure will be the actual language the group evolves as it works together: special termi-

nology, special meanings attached to certain words and concepts, and special symbols that only insiders will understand.

2. *How to define its own boundaries — developing rules of inclusion and exclusion.* The observable structure will be the policies and practices of recruitment, who is given symbols of membership such as uniforms or badges, policies about rehiring people who may have left, policies toward temporary members or contract workers, rules about whom one tells things and from whom one must keep secrets, and so on.

3. *How to allocate power and authority — developing criteria for who can influence whom and on what issues.* In this area what is formally structured and how things work out in practice have often been noted to be different. It is possible to publish organization charts and to have rules about the chain of command, but observers often note that even on a regular basis some of these rules are ignored and alternate structures will develop that often get labeled the "informal" structure.

4. *How to define appropriate peer relationships — developing criteria for openness and intimacy, appropriate levels of cooperation and competition.* This area is often the least structured and, therefore, the source of most anxiety until new members have learned the implicit rules of the game. But in observing indoctrination programs or mentoring discussions, one notes structure expressed by such remarks as "Around here teamwork is the name of the game," "Never get caught playing politics," "We always address the boss by his title here," "We are very informal and on a first name basis here," "You always better tell exactly what you think, even if you feel it might get you into trouble," or "You always have to be careful not to contradict the boss in public," and so on. Such rules do not get embedded as readily as more explicit rules in the visible formal structure, but they always exist in the culture (Van Maanen, 1979).

5. *How to allocate status and rewards.* The formal reward system, the performance appraisal system, the ratings of potential, and the actual recurring procedures for promoting and otherwise rewarding and punishing people are usually observable. As in item 4, however, the structures embodied in written policies and procedures do not always match the recurring regularities that may be observed — the informal reward system.

6. How to deal with unexplainable, unmanageable, and threatening events. This area is the least likely to be formally structured, though every group will evolve rituals and procedures for dealing with those unpredictable and stressful events that cannot be easily controlled. It may develop superstitions, myths, or symbolic rituals like rain dances. Such processes may become stable in that they are passed on and taught to new generations of members.

As it interacts, the group evolves stable perceptions and relationships to deal with each of the above areas, and these gradually become assumptions about itself and come to constitute a major part of the group's culture. Once again, the underlying assumptions will not be visible in the overt workings of the group, but the process observer will see the effects in the political alliances, in the communication patterns, in the recurring patterns of expressed feelings of members toward each other, and in the deference and demeanor they display toward each other.

The immediate intervention focus should be on the dynamic processes that are visible because then members can see the same things that the observer sees. Eventually, as the group itself becomes more sophisticated in analyzing its own processes, less visible structural and cultural elements can increasingly become the focus of intervention.

In summary, as the consultant or manager, you would note events in all six cells of Table 3-1. The key question to consider, then, is which of these events are most relevant to increasing the effectiveness of the group.

The Primary Task as the Basis for Intervention

The most important criterion for deciding what to observe and where to intervene is your perception of what the *primary task* of the group is. By primary task I mean that set of goals which justify the existence of the group, the reason for which it was called together, its basic mission, the perceptions that relate the group to its external environment and that will ultimately determine its survival as a group. The primary task will not always

be immediately obvious but can generally be inferred or even asked about. If the timing of the question is premature, one may not get an accurate answer, so further observation and checking may be required.

In a new relationship with an individual client or when managing a new group, the focus that is safest and most likely to be productive is the process consultant's own primary task or goals as a helper or manager. What are you and your client or subordinates trying to do? Where do you want to be by when? What next steps make most sense given what you are trying to accomplish?

In many consulting models this focus is often identified as "setting a contract with the client." That is usually *not* the right formulation. It is better to focus on our immediate goals in order to be able to intervene effectively from the outset, to be helpful to the client or subordinates from the moment of contact.

For the outside consultant, overt concern for what the client is trying to accomplish 1) signals interest in helping, 2) elicits data that are needed in order to decide how to help, and, most important, 3) is already a critical intervention, forcing clients to *articulate* what they are trying to accomplish. Often this turns out to be helpful in that it starts the client thinking about goals. The contract that may arise is a by-product, not the primary goal.

The same logic applies to managers whose subordinates come to them with problems. The manager who wants to be helpful should focus on what the subordinates are trying to accomplish, why they are having difficulty with it, why they are having difficulty right now, why they are coming to the boss for help, and so on, but always remain focused on the primary task. As the answers to these questions reveal other concerns, the focus can shift to them, but the initial focus should stay in cells 1 and 2 of Table 3-1.

Focus of Interventions: Task Content, Task Process, or Task Structure?

The client is usually pretty sensitive to the content issues but is likely to be *insensitive* to process and structure. The barriers to more effective task accomplishment often lie in the proc-

esses or structure, yet these are often the least visible aspects of how things are done. Hence bringing to light new data on process and structure, and helping clients to see such data on their own in the future, is most likely to be helpful. Generally the task content is something highly visible and chances are that the client is more expert in that area than the helper anyway. But the consultant or manager can really help by noting how the task process and structure helps or hinders decision making and problem solving.

The process of surfacing and changing *structure* may involve confrontive or even manipulative interventions where the consultant in the expert or doctor role directly manipulates portions of the structure in order to change other parts of a system that has become rigid. Such systemic interventions have become common in family therapy and are increasingly being applied in organizational settings, but they are rarely appropriate until enough process consultation has gone on to find out whether clients are genuinely "stuck," unable to diagnose or influence their own system (Madanes, 1981; Durkin, 1981; Borwick, 1983).

Another kind of structural intervention that may help to get the client unstuck is to define a new structure as an "experiment to be tried" rather than a final recommendation to be adopted. Such an intervention is likely to be powerful and confrontive in that it forces into consciousness routines that may be deliberately concealed.

Why Not Focus on Interpersonal Process and Structure?

Since interpersonal issues are generally very salient and easily observed, it is tempting to focus the interventions directly on such issues. The primary reason not to do so is basically cultural. In our culture task accomplishment, progress, goal attainment, and achievement are so central to relationships that most of the motivation for improvement comes from preoccupation with a task. Even if a personal relationship becomes a problem, we define relationship improvement as a "task" to be accomplished.

It is likely that in some other cultures where "effective relationships" and "harmony" are more important than task accomplishment, the focus for facilitative intervention would shift

to interpersonal processes, but in the United States a focus on such matters at the outset is likely to be seen as a waste of time, irrelevant, soft, and motivated by false emphases on "humanism." Consultants or managers who try to promote harmony may fail unless they establish credibility by beginning with task process interventions.

A second reason for avoiding focusing on interpersonal process interventions is that management or consulting to organizations is itself task focused. Organizations are task oriented by definition. They are created to achieve certain goals, to accomplish tasks. Management is typically *defined* as the attainment of goals. Consultants who work with organizations are typically brought in by managers who are "hurting" because tasks are not being accomplished in desired ways.

Thus, interpersonal issues are seen as relevant by most client systems only insofar as they influence task accomplishment. If such relationship issues become primary we think not of consultation but of therapy, and we tend to place such therapeutic interventions into contexts outside of the work sphere. A family business may be engaged with a consultant working on business problems and be working with the same consultant or a different one on family issues (Beckhard and Dyer, 1983). It is important to differentiate these processes and to recognize that only in the therapeutic context is the relationship focus legitimately the primary one.

On the other hand, if interpersonal issues are clearly interfering with task accomplishment, and the consultant or manager believes that this is highly visible to the participants themselves, it may be entirely appropriate to shift explicitly to an interpersonal intervention. What kind of intervention to make and how to frame it will be discussed in later chapters.

Does it make a difference in the interpersonal arena whether one focuses on content, process, or structure? Is it important to distinguish content from process or structure in this area? The answer is yes because of the different consequences of interventions in the different cells of Table 3.1. You may readily observe interpersonal *content* in the sense of who actually feels how and is doing what to whom. Nonetheless, it is in this area where you should be most careful because people are most likely

to be sensitive and defensive about the actual naming of names. When you "name names" instead of merely pointing out a general process, people feel they will lose face, and so naming names is taboo in most cultures.

For example, I may observe a pattern that Pete is always interrupting Jane and may conclude that this reflects a real enmity on Pete's part toward Jane (Cells 4-6). If I decide to intervene because I believe Pete's behavior is making the group less effective, I still have a choice around which cell to focus:

Cell 4 (Content): "Pete, why are you always interrupting Jane?"

Cell 5 (Process): "I notice that certain members tend to interrupt others, and wonder whether this is getting in the way of communication?"

Cell 6 (Structure): "As our discussion has proceeded I have noticed that whenever we interrupt each other, the discussion is not as productive. Should we do something about this?"

Of course these illustrative interventions differ on dimensions other than content, process, and structure, but it should be clear that the highest risk is associated with the content intervention because it threatens to make both Pete and Jane lose face. The structural intervention is the safest but the least likely to be productive because it does not provide a specific reference for the group to organize around. The process intervention maximizes specificity without making people lose face.

In summary:

1. Process is always to be favored as an intervention focus over content.
2. Task process is always to be favored over interpersonal process.
3. Structural interventions are in principle the most powerful in that they deal with recurrent stable processes rather than the dynamic fluid ones, but they are also likely to be most resisted because there is comfort in structure, and also the most likely to be misunderstood because they are, of necessity, general.

Hence a focus on the dynamic task processes — how a client or group sets goals, gathers information, solves problems, makes decisions, and allocates work roles — is the focus most likely to be helpful. In the example given next the issue of where to focus interventions came up repeatedly. Because this case will also be used throughout the book, a certain amount of background is provided at this point.

Helping to Build a New Executive Committee: The Billings Manufacturing Company

Bill Stone, the president and founder of a small but rapidly growing manufacturing company, called me to seek some advice on hiring a new vice president for human resources. I had done a seminar on career development for the top fifteen managers of this company three years before, had known the corporate vice president for planning, and had worked with the recently departed vice president for human resources a year or so before when he had first joined this company. So I had various bits of knowledge about the company and they had various bits of knowledge about me.

Getting Acquainted with the Client. Stone mentioned in his first phone call that when the previous vice president of human resources was leaving, he had recommended that they might get someone from academia to take the job since Stone had a well-articulated philosophy of human resource management that had to continue to be well stated and well implemented. Stone asked whether this concept made any sense and whether I or some other professor would even consider taking an industrial job for a while. I said that I would not personally consider taking such a job but would be glad to examine the concept with him and see where we might come out. We agreed to meet for a long lunch at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

At the lunch Stone reviewed some of the decisions he had made recently. The fifteen-person executive committee was not working effectively, so he had begun to meet on a regular basis with two executive vice presidents, the chief financial officer, and the vice president in charge of new acquisitions. This group was

a good nucleus for a more streamlined and effective executive committee, but they needed to add a vice president for human resources and had just launched a search for such a person.

Stone and I reviewed what he was really looking for in this role, and it became apparent that everyone in the new executive committee would have a big stake in deciding the kind of person to be hired. The idea arising from this discussion was that I should attend some of the meetings of this new executive committee, especially the meeting where the job description for the human resource VP would be hammered out. The other members agreed that my attendance would be helpful, though it was not at all clear to me whether I would be there as an expert telling them what they should be looking for, or as a process consultant helping them to figure out what they needed. I was tempted to try to clarify this point at the outset but decided that they probably were not sure themselves what kind of help I could offer, hence their answer might not be very meaningful until after we had had some contact.

Deciding the Intervention Focus. The first three-hour meeting I attended brought out many of the issues of what role to be in and what to focus on in the group's work. I attempted to make clear at the beginning of the meeting that I saw my role as that of helping the group to clarify its own thinking and that I would not be an expert on what their human resource VP should be — that is, I would not get into *task content*, but would focus on *task process*. I also said that Stone had asked me to work with this group over a period of several meetings to help it to become an effective group, which might involve me in clarifying and intervening not only on task process but also on *interpersonal process*. The group seemed to understand these distinctions and agreed that such a role could be helpful.

As the discussion began, I found myself intervening frequently on the line between task content and process. I kept raising content questions about the role that the new vice president was supposed to play in the new executive committee, especially vis-à-vis Stone, but I was careful to time the questions so that the group would have every chance to raise these issues on its own. I also framed the questions in the most general way

so as to minimize my own content biases. In effect I was performing some problem-identifying functions that were missing in the group's discussion, but instead of simply saying that such functions were missing (which would have been a pure process intervention), I actually asked the content question to facilitate the group's forward movement.

I asked, for example, "Is the new VP expected to be only an implementer or is he expected to contribute to the architecture of human resource policies?" The group said unanimously that they wanted an architect. "Do you want a person who would argue with you and one strong enough to stand up to the kind of fighting that the group often engages in?" I asked this because it was obvious after fifteen minutes of observation that the group was used to intense debate and confrontation, and that Stone himself was often very strong in his own opinions. They said they wanted a strong confronter, and Stone agreed. Note again that I did not limit the intervention to simply noting that the group argued a lot and that Stone was a strong figure (interpersonal content and process), but embedded the data in a task content question that facilitated further problem solving.

"Do you want someone with a track record primarily as a human resource professional or someone with credibility as a line manager?" I wanted to force out into the open what the group really thought about the human resource function, because I began to suspect that they looked down on it. At this point my expertise and prior experience were seducing me into content opinions, but I did not have to voice those opinions. I could stay on the process level. To voice my suspicion would have raised issues about content structure (their stable perceptions of roles), which would have been dangerous because it might have precipitated a quick denial and some suspicion of me, so I chose a more neutral question. They said they wanted both things.

As consensus emerged on various of these criteria I wrote them down on the blackboard, since it was obvious that the group was having trouble remembering what it had said. (This was a task process intervention.)

Periodically I found myself having to deal directly with content and was forced to deal with perceptions that I had expert knowledge in this area. I was asked, for example, what kind of

people were in comparable jobs in other companies that I was familiar with. I could not deny my expertise in this area, relative to the knowledge of the group, so I gave answers that I thought would aid their thinking without making specific recommendations as to what they might need. I emphasized the variety of such people that I knew in order to broaden the group's knowledge base of what was possible.

I was asked whether I had any knowledge of how this kind of function was organized in other companies such as theirs. Again I had to admit to some knowledge, but I was careful to offer a number of different options that I was aware of so as not to bias the discussion or get into a direct argument with any member of the group about the "right" way to do it. I found that I could give information but always tried to cast it in the form of an issue, the pros and cons of different approaches.

Interpersonal issues were obvious and ubiquitous. One of the executive vice presidents, Tom Riley, was obviously a central and aggressive figure in the group. He frequently argued with Stone and between them the two used up a large percentage of the group's discussion time. One of the members was somewhat hard of hearing and seemed to participate less, though it was not clear to me at the time whether or not his reluctance to participate was related to the hearing disability.

When real disagreements erupted, there seemed to be a norm to agree to disagree rather than to resolve the issue, a norm that often left me wondering what, if anything had been decided. It raised the possibility that the group knew that in such cases Stone would resolve the issue after the meeting, but I did not know enough of the history of the group to second-guess this aspect of their structure.

While all of these interpersonal issues potentially got in the way of clear resolution of the problem of developing the criteria for the selection of their human resource VP, at this first meeting I could not possibly intervene on such issues directly because I did not know enough about what was really going on. Later in the project, after I had interviewed all the members of the group and they had agreed to discuss "how the group functioned," it was possible to bring out these issues because they had been brought out in individual interviews.

The meeting ended with an agreement that Stone would take down all my notes from the board and circulate them. Considerable consensus had been achieved and a process agreed upon for interviewing candidates. Criteria were to be tested by applying them to each of the major candidates to be interviewed. At a later meeting that I would attend, the prime candidates would be reviewed by the entire group.

Lessons. As I reviewed my role in this meeting, it was clearly to force clarity of criterion setting by asking questions whenever I felt that the group was being vague or ambiguous and by testing consensus in areas of agreement. I also focused the group by recording their points on the board and helped to design the subsequent interview and selection process. All of these interventions were clearly *task process* oriented, but they involved the content of what the group was working on and thus did not divert the group into a pure process discussion, something that I thought they were not ready for.

Managing an Academic Group: Managerial Choices on Intervention Focus

Does a line manager have the same range of choices as the consultant in deciding on an intervention focus? I can answer this question best by reconstructing some of the decisions I had to make when I was chairman of a ten-person academic group within the Sloan School of Management at MIT. The managerial role obviously required the setting of goals and targets, but I found from the outset that if I did not get complete consensus on the mission of the group, any program of implementation was bound to fail. So my first task was how to design a process that would ensure consensus on what we were trying to do.

My first interventions were to create opportunities in individual conversations and in group meetings to discuss our priorities. These priorities were 1) to create an environment in which we could be productive researcher-scholars; 2) to develop a curriculum that met the needs of our students and drew on our own strengths; 3) to create a recruitment, hiring, and promotion system that would ensure that we get the best possible colleagues as positions opened up; 4) to ensure that we would attract the