3.2: The Life Cycle of Member Roles

Learning Objectives

1. Describe different types of group members and group member roles

Just as groups go through a life cycle when they form and eventually adjourn, so the members of groups fulfill different roles during this life cycle. These roles, proposed by Moreland and Levine, Moreland, R., & Levine, J. (1982). Socialization in small groups: temporal changes in individual group relations. (L. Berkowitz, Ed.) Advances in Experimental Social Psychology, 15, 153. are summarized in Table 3.2.

Suppose you are about to graduate from school, and you are in the midst of an employment search. You’ve gathered extensive information on a couple of local businesses and are aware that they will be participating in the university job fair. You’ve explored their websites, talked to people currently employed at each company, and learned what you can from the public information available. At this stage, you are considered a potential member. You may have an electrical, chemical, or mechanical engineering degree soon, but you are not a member of an engineering team.

You show up at the job fair in professional attire and completely prepared. The representatives of each company are respectful, cordial, and give you contact information. One of them even calls a member of the organization on the spot and arranges an interview for you next week. You are excited at the prospect and want to learn more. You are still a potential member.

The interview goes well the following week. The day after the meeting you receive a call for a follow-up interview, which leads to a committee interview. A few weeks later, the company calls you with a job offer. However, in the meantime, you have also been interviewing with other potential employers, and you are waiting to hear back from two of them. You are still a potential member.
After careful consideration, you decide to take the job offer and start the next week. The projects look interesting, you’ll be gaining valuable experience, and the commute to work is reasonable. Your first day on the job is positive, and they’ve assigned you a mentor. The conversations are positive, but at times you feel lost, as if they are speaking a language you can’t quite grasp. As a new group member, your level of acceptance will increase as you begin learning the groups’ rules, spoken and unspoken. Fisher, B. A. (1970). Decision emergence: phases in group decision making. *Speech Monographs, 37*, 56–66. You will gradually move from the potential member role to the role of a new group member as you learn to fit into the group.

Figure \(\PageIndex{1}\): As a member of a new group, you will learn new customs and traditions © Jupiter Images

Over time and projects, you gradually increase your responsibilities. You are no longer looked at as the new person, and you can follow almost every conversation. You can’t quite say “I remember when” because your tenure hasn’t been that long, but you are a known quantity and know your way around. You are a full member of the group. Full members enjoy knowing the rules and customs, and can even create new rules. New group members look to full members for leadership and guidance. Full group members can control the agenda and have considerable influence on the agenda and activities.

Full members of a group, however, can and do come into conflict. When you were a new member, you may have remained silent when you felt you had something to say, but now you state your case. There is more than one way to get the job done. You may suggest new ways that emphasize efficiency over existing methods. Co-workers who have been working in the department for several years may be unwilling to adapt and change, and tension may result. Expressing different views can cause conflict and may even interfere with communication.

When this type of tension arises, divergent group members pull back, contribute less, and start to see themselves as separate from the group. Divergent group members have less eye contact, seek out each other’s opinions less frequently, and listen defensively. At the beginning of the process, you felt a sense of belonging, but now you don’t. Marginal group members start to look outside the group for their interpersonal needs.

After several months of trying to cope with these adjustments, you decide that you never really investigated the other two companies; that your job search process was incomplete. Perhaps you should take a second look at the options. You will report to work on Monday but will start the process of becoming an ex-member, one who no longer belongs. You may experience a sense of relief upon making this decision, given that you haven’t felt like you belonged to the group for a while. When you line up your next job and submit your resignation, you make it official.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New Member</td>
<td>Joined the group but still an outsider, and unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Member</td>
<td>Knows the “rules” and is looked to for leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Divergent Member</td>
<td>Focuses on differences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marginal Member</td>
<td>No longer involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ex-Member</td>
<td>No longer considered a member</td>
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This process has no set timetable. Some people overcome differences and stay in the group for years. Others get promoted and leave the group only when they get transferred to regional headquarters. As a skilled communicator, you will recognize the signs of divergence, just like you anticipate the storming stage, and do your best to facilitate success.

**Key Takeaway**

- Group membership follows a predictable pattern of stages.

**Exercise 1**

1. Consider a time when you were exploring group members, but had not yet decided to join. It would be accepting a job or joining a church, for example. What points did you consider when deciding to become a member (or not). Share your results with your classmates.

2. You decided to be part of a group but quickly learned that there were members of the group, full members, who viewed you as the new person. How did you know they considered you a new person, and how did their language use reflect their full membership? Did they use terms that were unfamiliar? Did they discuss topics that made little sense to you? Share your results with classmates.

3. As a full member of a group, you may have been asked to train a new employee, help a new person find their way around, or otherwise help them learn about the group, organization, or company. Did you think about your own orientation process and did your experience guide your actions? What did you do to help this person? What would you do differently if the same situation presented itself again? Share your results with classmates.

4. As a full member of the group, you know the ins and outs. You know the strengths and weaknesses of the group members, their likes and dislikes, and at times, familiarity can breed contempt. Have you had conflicts arise because of this close familiarity and how was it resolved? Share and compare your results with classmates.

5. Think of a group you no longer belong to. At what point did you become an ex-member? Were you ever a marginal group member or a full member? Write a 2–3 paragraph description of the group, how and why you became a member, and how and why you left. Share your description with a classmate.