

REVIEWING BY NUMBERS

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Reviewing Skills Training

What is the best sized group for reviewing? 1? 2? 3? 6? 10? 16? 24? 30? 100? This article looks at the problems and possibilities of reviewing with group sizes - from 1 to 100.

BIG IS SMALL

'Working in large groups' seems to describe situations in which people are working in small groups with lots of people nearby who are also working in small groups. Why is it that the larger the reviewing group, the greater the chances that people will end up in the smallest of groups - reviewing in pairs, or even on their own?

REVIEWING FOR ONE

The presence of others can support individual learning in many ways, but it is also good to provide individuals with some personal time and space to reflect - away from the distractions of others. However, being alone is no guarantee of high quality reflection: when alone, attention can wander or people get stuck in a rut as they keep going through the same patterns of thought or visiting the same dead ends. But find the right setting or technique for individual reflection and you can help people see with fresh eyes, or lead them to 'aha' moments, or help them break out of 'same-old' thinking. Here are just some options for 'reviewing for one':

- **UNSTRUCTURED REFLECTIVE WRITING:** using log books, diaries, journals, notebooks.
- **STRUCTURED REFLECTIVE WRITING:** responding to a questionnaire or to a standard template of questions or headings following a particular sequence.
- **GRAPHIC REFLECTION TECHNIQUES:** creating diagrams, charts, graphs, maps, patterns, drawings, collages or photos to capture reflections.
- **SCAVENGER HUNT:** searching for symbolic objects that answer reflective questions
- **SOLO:** time alone without distractions and space to think, or to read feedback notes from other group members, or as a challenge in itself - to live alone and close to nature with time to reflect.

- **GUIDED REFLECTION:** listening to a monologue that includes pauses for thought
- **SILENCE:** context is all important, but well timed silences in suitable settings can result in deep reflection.
- **REFLECTION TIME** following a stimulating story, performance or experience.
- **THINKING TIME** before making a reflective statement about recent.
- **PREPARATION TIME** before making a presentation about personal learning to the group.

Some of the above individual reviewing techniques can work surprisingly well, but often the best way to make a breakthrough is reviewing with another person...

REVIEWING FOR TWO: ROLES FOR REVIEWING IN PAIRS

Talking things through with another person can be more dynamic and productive than being left with your own thoughts. Sometimes the other person is just a listener, but there are many other useful roles the other person can adopt - such as a sounding board, a summariser, a buddy, a coach, or even a devil's advocate. There is no guarantee that the other person will be good at assisting the process of reflection. The other person may be too intrusive or challenging, or may stumble into 'no go' areas, or offer insensitive advice. There is always the risk that the other person (even a skilled facilitator) will spoil, distort or disrupt the process of reflection. The risk of ending up with an 'unhelpful' listener can be reduced by providing clear briefings and by providing an easy way for the 'speaker' to change the rules or opt out if they find the process is not working well.

Here are a few helpful roles that the 'other person' can play when reviewing in pairs:

- **LISTENER:** just listens - giving the 'reflector' the opportunity to think aloud
- **SOUNDING BOARD:** listens and responds to any questions the reflector may ask
- **SUMMARISER:** repeats key phrases, summarises, asks for clarification

- **BUDDY:** notices, empathises, supports, and possibly advises
- **COACH:** agrees objectives, provides feedback, and asks questions that assist reflection
- **INTERVIEWER (with a script):** asks set questions or follows a certain review sequence
- **CHILD:** just keeps asking 'why?'. The reflector can stop the process at any point.
- **DEVIL'S ADVOCATE:** tests and challenges what the reflector says. This needs careful briefing to ensure that the challenges are provided and perceived as being part of a helpful process.

REVIEWING FOR TWO: WALKING AND TALKING

Something that goes particularly well with paired reviews is 'walking and talking' - especially if you have a suitable outdoor location. 'Walking and Talking' can be combined with any of the above roles. A classic problem in paired reviews is that one person dominates and the time is not well shared. One solution is to divide the total time into two halves by having a clear 'swap over point' at half way (see 'Out and Back'). Another solution is to have a turn-taking system in which there is frequent swapping of roles (see 'Chat Cards'). These and other variations of 'walking and talking' are described next:

- **OUT AND BACK:** 'Out and back' helps to ensure that the time is divided equally between each person. Pairs walk out to an agreed point, swap roles and walk back in their new roles. (See previous section for ideas about 'roles'.) Ideally, each pair heads for a different point to avoid distractions from other pairs.
- **CHAT CARDS:** Each card has a reflective question. Each person takes it in turns to answer as they walk. One question per card helps people to focus on one question at a time. Just one good question may be enough for some pairs, but other pairs may need a plentiful supply of questions to keep a reflective conversation going. It is better to have too many questions than too few.
- **SCAVENGER HUNT:** Pairs work together to collect symbolic objects that answer reflective questions.
- **WALKING ROUND THE ACTIVE REVIEWING CYCLE:** As pairs walk through each stage the cycle, they focus their reflective conversation on the stage they are walking through. In practice this takes two or three minutes in each stage, so you either need a huge cycle or people simply stop and talk until they are ready to move on to the next stage.

REVIEWING FOR TWO: CHANGING PARTNERS

Another style of paired review is where people have a series of brief meetings with different partners. The speed of this process means that people do not get stuck in partnerships that are not working. There may not be very deep reflection during brief meetings, but a quick succession of paired reflective conversations can quickly add up to a lot of reflection from various angles in a short space of time. Your choice of methods will partly depend on how important it is that everyone meets everyone else.

- **MILLING ABOUT (for one to one feedback):** Find a partner, give each other one positive statement about their contribution to the team exercise, find a new partner and repeat, etc.
- **BRIEF ENCOUNTERS (questions and partners keep changing):** Each person starts with a unique question on a card and finds a partner. Each person answers their partner's question. They swap cards and each finds a new partner.
- **SURVEYS (small groups specialise in one question):** Subgroups scatter throughout the whole group conducting brief one to one interviews on the topic in which they are specialising. Subgroups meet together again to collate the answers and report back their findings to the whole group.
- **MAD HATTER'S TEA PARTY:** Two lines face each other. People talk with the person standing opposite. At a given signal, everyone moves one to the left and starts talking with their new partner. The facilitator announces a fresh question at each move. If the group is too big to complete a full cycle, set up a suitable number of smaller groups.

- **CONCENTRIC CIRCLES:** This is much the same idea as the Mad Hatter's Tea Party, but is a little easier to set up and manage. This structure does not allow participants to have conversations with people in their own circle, but it does provide an effective way of meeting and learning one-to-one with everyone in another group
- **MATRIX MEETINGS:** Each individual has a list of everyone's names. They place a mark beside the name of anyone they work with on a paired reviewing exercise of (say) five minutes or more. From time to time they also enter this information on a single group matrix that builds up a picture of who has worked with whom. A number or letter code can be used to give basic information about who took which role during the exercise (e.g. L=learner, F=facilitator, S= shared). If the target is to complete the matrix, remember to provide enough opportunities for paired reviewing for this to be achievable.

Not all pairings work well - one person can dominate, trust may be low, pairs may decide to take easy options, or just go through the motions or may even opt out. Group facilitators may try to avoid the risks of paired reviews not working well by keeping everyone together under their own watchful eye for whole group reflection. But whole group reflection has its own risks and disadvantages (such as lack of personal space, less personal attention and less airtime for each individual). The challenge is to find the right mix (and sequence) of different group sizes (including reflective time alone) so that there is a good balance between these different 'social settings' for reflection.

REVIEWING FOR THREE: ROTATING THREES

'Threes' allows a third person to listen and observe a two person review. This adds an extra level of reflection and helps to ensure the quality of paired work - overcoming some of the problems described in the 'pairs' section above.

Roles are switched so that all have a turn at the three different roles. It is the observer who has the key role, because after observing the paired discussion, they will facilitate a brief review (of the paired review) before everyone changes roles.

An example of rotating threes.

A group of 9 people have just carried out a group activity together. They are divided into

three groups of three. Within each three, there is a person A, a person B and a person C. On the first round, A is the reflector, B is the facilitator and C is the observer.

First 5 minutes: B asks A to describe their role and to explain how and why it changed (if at all) during the activity. B may ask supplementary questions about how satisfied A was with their role and performance, and to consider whether there are any questions they would like to ask the whole group of 9 when they are back together.

Second 5 minutes: C reports back on what they observed. If C comments mainly on B's role as a facilitator, this helps to counterbalance the focus of the previous 5 minutes on A's role in the group. Both A and B should have an opportunity to respond to C's observations before moving on.

For A, B and C to take on each role (reflector, facilitator and observer) the whole process will take $(5 + 5) \times 3 = 30$ minutes. When the whole group of 9 meet back together, at least another 10 minutes will be needed for the asking of any questions arising from this first thirty minutes.

Reviewing in threes is scalable for groups of 6, 9, 12 ... 99 or more. Any group size that is divisible by 3 can use this structure. In very large groups, there will be limited opportunities for useful sharing when they get back together. If sharing beyond threes is important, this can be achieved by meeting up with another three rather than meeting up as a huge plenary group. Reviewing in threes (in which there are three roles to rotate) takes around 30 minutes plus any sharing time needed at the end. This is true for a group of 9 or 99.

REVIEWING FOR SIX INCLUDING TASK-BASED REVIEWS

Quiet individuals are more likely to sit back and not get much involved when groups reach five or six. Groups of around six can operate well informally but some facilitation is probably necessary. There may be no obvious need for a group of six to divide up into smaller units, but even groups of six can benefit from some reviewing alone, in pairs or in threes. Some rotation of roles can help to ensure that the group does not settle into one way of operating in which the same one or two people take the lead all of the time.

Task-based reviewing is particularly suited to groups of five or six and upwards. The review can be set up as an independent task to be achieved within a given time scale - just like any other group task. The task can have a businesslike feel to it or it may involve creative or dramatic aspects that challenge people to extend their normal ways of reviewing and reflecting and presenting their findings.

Some suitable tasks for a group of six:

- **STONES:** Make a sequence of five arrangements of stones showing how the group dynamics have developed since the beginning of the programme. Create a sixth arrangement that shows how you would like the group dynamics to be over the next few hours.
- **SKETCH MAP:** Create a sketch map showing the journey (real or metaphorical) that the group has taken since the start of the day.
- **GIFTS:** In two subgroups create gifts for each individual in the other subgroup. These gifts should reflect the talents of that individual and should include features or items that will be of value to them in the future.
- **REPLAY:** Prepare to re-enact five significant events in the development of your team.
- **REPLAY PLUS:** Prepare to re-enact three events that each demonstrate how your team is progressing, and three events following which you have felt wiser after the event. Act out the real and 'improved' versions of these events.
- **PERFORMANCE:** Write and perform a news report about your team, using interviews, flashbacks, 'reading the news' or any other TV inspired method to tell the story in an engaging way that reveals how and what you are learning.
- **NEW RECRUIT:** Create an advert and person specification for a new recruit to join your team.

There is plenty of scope in any of these task-based methods for a more dynamic form of plenary feedback to a larger group. If the main working group is a facilitated group of around 8 or 12 people, you can divide the group in two and conduct the review by setting independent reviewing tasks for each half of the group. If each half has an identical task it is interesting to

compare similarities and differences. If each half group is given a different task, this creates a different kind of interest and can provide some useful time-savings because it allows you to split the reviewing agenda with (say) one subgroup focusing on leadership while the other focuses on team development.

REVIEWING FOR TEN (OR THEREABOUTS)

This is reaching the upper limits for many group reviewing processes. If staying as a whole group for a review discussion, people in a group of ten will on average be speaking for 10% of the time and listening for 90%. High quality facilitation is needed to maintain high levels of involvement throughout the group and to ensure that reviewing is an efficient and productive process. Around half the time may well be spent in smaller units (alone, in pairs, in threes or in half groups). Giving individuals or pairs some thinking time will help them to express their thoughts more clearly to the larger group.

How you choose the best balance between reviewing as a whole group and reviewing in smaller units depends on the nature of the particular group. Even where whole group reviewing works well, there are still significant benefits to be gained from doing some reviewing in smaller units.

If reviewing with a group of ten or more it is important to work out what really must be done as a whole group and what can be done in smaller groups. If there is only one facilitator available, what has to be done as a whole group falls into two categories: (1) What the whole group needs to be present for, and (2) What the facilitator needs to be present for.

1) What the whole group needs to be present for:

- **BRIEFINGS FOR REVIEWING TASKS.** But these can also be briefed via representatives, or by written instructions, or by the facilitator visiting each group one at a time.
- **NEGOTIATIONS AND DECISIONS.** These are usually best managed in the whole group, but the option of using a representative democratic structure is also a possibility.
- **GROUP FACILITATION.** Where the facilitator wants to develop a trusting learning culture within the group as a whole and/or needs to tackle whole group issues. But see next ...

- **GROUP BUILDING.** It is usual to build groups as a whole unit. But groups are also a collection of one-to-one relationships. So lots of useful group building can be achieved by building one-to-one relationships and by getting people working together in smaller units - ideally with ever-changing subgroups so that everyone ends up working with everyone else. If group building is always attempted in the whole group some individuals may remain relative strangers to each other. On the other hand, rarely meeting as a whole group does reduce the chances of community building at the whole group level.
- **PLENARY REPORT BACK.** Following independent subgroup reviews it is often useful to meet as a whole group to share something of what happened in each group. This sharing may take the form of a display or presentation and is not necessarily in the form of a report. An alternative structure for reporting back is '4x4' in which all subgroups are re-mixed into new groups that each have at least one representative from each original subgroup. This effectively means that everyone is reporting back within their small representative groups. There may be a lesser sense of occasion, but there will be a greater sense of involvement and responsibility.

2) What the facilitator needs to be present for:

- **FISHBOWL** and other large group processes that require skilled management and facilitation.
- **FEEDBACK** sessions such as **WARM SEAT** which need skilled and sensitive facilitation.
- **DIFFICULT ISSUES:** Where there are difficult issues to be dealt with or where the group is not yet strong enough or skilled enough to work well on their own, the facilitator may prefer to work with the group as a whole. The presence of the facilitator reduces the risks inherent in difficult issues being reviewed in unfacilitated subgroups. On the other hand, bringing together a weak group that faces challenging issues is also a risk. The decision to meet as a whole group should not be an automatic one - especially if you can create a subgroup structure in which people behave more responsibly and sensitively than in the whole group arena. This may be turning things upside down, but if the problem really only exists when the whole group is together, there is certainly some logic in working at a smaller group size

if people are more responsible, sensitive and productive when working in smaller units.

REVIEWING WITH 16 PEOPLE

For a group of 16 people, much of the time can be spent in smaller units - probably twos or fours. The larger group would mainly be for headlines. 16 people may be quite a small group for classroom teaching, but only having airtime or individual attention for 1/16th of a review session (and listening for 15/16ths of it) would be a severe limitation and distortion of the principles of participatory experiential learning. And this simple calculation does not take account of the facilitator's airtime, nor of the fact that patterns of participation become increasingly uneven as the group size grows.

REVIEWING WITH 24 PEOPLE

For a group of 24 people, the main review groups can be subgroups of six or eight people with the large group of 24 used for briefing and sharing rather than for the main reviewing process. Of course, reviewing in groups of six or eight people can include some reviewing time in even smaller subgroups. But it is difficult to manage this well without having a facilitator working at this intermediate level and alive to the needs and interests of their particular group.

REVIEWING WITH 30+ PEOPLE

As the size of the main group increases, the chances are that the facilitator will split the large group into twos or threes because this instantly allows everyone to have a say and need only be a brief interlude from reviewing in the main group of 30+

REVIEWING WITH 100+ PEOPLE

With very large groups you will need different communication systems for announcements - either a public address system (microphone, music, projector etc.) or a well organised system of communicating via representatives. You will also need to allow more time for changes from one group size to another. Working at a large scale almost certainly means a loss of quality unless you have a team of facilitators working with smaller groups. There is no getting away from the basic calculation that the larger the group, the more trained facilitators you need.

REVIEWING WITH ODD NUMBERS

What about prime numbers that are indivisible? What if you have a group of 7, 11, 13 or 17 people and you want to use (say) a small group exercise for 'rotating threes' (described above)?

If the odd group is a smaller group

If it is a group of 11, you have three threes and a pair. One option is that you or your co-worker join in to make the pair a three. Another option is that the pair review their 5 minute discussion without the help of an observer. If the odd group is a smaller group, your solution for the smaller group is unlikely to inconvenience the other groups.

If the odd group is a larger group

If the odd group is a larger group (e.g. when a group of 17 is divided into three fours and a five) the chances are that the larger group will need extra time if everyone is to have a turn. To prevent this happening, find a volunteer from the group of five to lead the next whole group session. You then spend time with this individual helping them to prepare. Another option is to find a volunteer from within the group of five to be a facilitator for the group rather than a participant.

LINKING THE FLOW AND ENERGY OF REVIEWING

Running reviews in any size of event means that the facilitator will need a varied tool kit of reviewing tasks and activities that small groups of 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 6 people can carry out independently.

The outcomes from these small group reviewing sessions will often be shared in the larger facilitated group, but sometimes the process will end in the smaller group. For example when the whole group experience leads stage by stage to individuals setting personal goals, it is not always necessary or appropriate for these individual goals to be shared in the whole group.

On the other hand, when the final part of the reviewing process takes place in the whole group it tends to be more honest, insightful and significant if it is the result of high quality small group reflection rather than being the spontaneous ramblings of dominant individuals in the large group. Almost by definition, the first to talk are not likely to be reflecting much before they speak and are therefore unlikely to be setting the right tone for a reflective discussion.

This is why preparatory work (alone or in smaller groups) can add so much to the overall quality of reviewing.

Wise facilitators appreciate the value of working in a variety of different group sizes, so they will often split a facilitated group into smaller unfacilitated units. The challenge is to link these processes together in ways that produce a bubbling flow of energy and questions and discoveries as learners move to and fro between the central arena of facilitated group reviewing and the intensive involvement of reviewing in smaller groups.

FURTHER REFERENCE

Many of the reviewing techniques outlined in this article are described in more detail in the author's Active Reviewing Guide at <http://reviewing.co.uk>

RELATED ARTICLES

Reviewing with Large Groups
http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/large_groups.htm

Reviewing to Scale
http://reviewing.co.uk/toolkit/archives/art/6_2.htm

The Art of Reviewing
<http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/the.art.of.reviewing.htm>

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