Patterns for Group Leadership
Ofra Homsky

Introduction

We all accept for granted the alchemy that creates a group out of a collection of individuals. A group, being comprised of individual people, takes on an additional identity, a collective identity – a team, a task force, a tour group, a class.

There are many factors that influence the general mood in the group – external factors, such as group’s success, national events that influence the mood, and internal factors that come from within the group itself, created by the social relationships among group members.

The following patterns refer to some of these changes and are part of what I hope to build into a full Pattern Language.

The target users of these patterns are group leaders: teachers, guides, managers, instructors, and coaches. They are the ones who have an overview of the group: its assignments, tasks, abilities, composition, and goals. Consequently, the group leaders can influence and streamline the group conduct and disposition.

These patterns should combine with other patterns and pattern languages referring to group work, in the sense that together with the preparations of and for the program, group leaders should bring into consideration these “mood change” factors and integrate these suggested patterns into their program.

Context

In a group that has worked some time together, where the excitement and enthusiasm of the beginning of work has past, and group members are well into working, getting into routine.

Once routine sets in there is a considerable drop in energy: Hardships both in social and work context begin to show; people become disappointed with the monotony; interpersonal friction appears and as a result performance and discipline begin to drop. Sometimes there is need for an occasional “pep talk” to get things back in order.

At these difficult stages, it may seem like “nothing works”, like there are more problems then solutions, like you’ll never get over the hardships. The bad mood damages both program and group effectiveness and productivity.

In such context, there is need for the group leaders to take action to diffuse tension, boredom and despair so they won’t affect the group productivity.

Shine up the Corners pattern suggests a way to mitigate one of the de-motivating factors - the long stretches of routine work.

Jiggle pattern suggests a way to inject a little excitement to the group life, to help manage the tedium of monotony in the working routine.

Safety Valves pattern deals with relieving interpersonal tension within the group.
Shine up the Corners

Problem
With the general low mood and listlessness, between program milestones, during the time of routine work, people as individuals and the group as a unit loose sight of the project progress. People become absorbed in their own efforts, and feel that they are working very hard but do not get any results or achievements. There are many events and milestones that are critical to the success of the project and may be hidden from group members’ awareness.

Forces
People need individual achievements; some people can align their individual goals with those of the group and can be rewarded by group achievements, but not everyone. Without encouragement people may feel not contributing and left out of the progress. People need help to keep track of all project events and milestones. There are people who don’t ascribe achievements to themselves and need help connecting their personal work to the group progress. Not always there is progress or special events. Your own credibility and reputation is linked to the import and value of acknowledgement. Too many reports of success can create a misleading rosy perception of the project.

Solution
Create mechanisms to help shine up good events and milestones that happen in the group, both in the social context and in the work context, such as achievements, accomplishments or events that show progress where it was least visible. Promote personal sense of achievement by making the overall group advances more visible and connect individual efforts to visible achievements.

Precautions
What is presented as achievement should be consistent and recognize the most valued effort, since this can create criteria for future reference. Be very careful not to let this turn into an empty "ritual". If you see this is not creating the good-natured interest in the group, consider changing the content or the format. Dignity of group members is at stake, so you should be careful not to let this turn into a whip-lashing event for a person or group that didn't do as well as the others. In certain weeks there are snags that prevent advancement all through the group. Those are good openings to shine up different corners, such as the good relationships in the group, a rewarding concept in itself or special extra-curriculum activities that group members participate in. Using this pattern will not produce instant improvement in moral.

Known Uses
* In telemarketing groups there is a board with a list of closed sales, sometime showing the sales during the last hour, during the week, or during the month. At times there is a personal competition in listing how many sales each person made.
* Gold Star pattern in Joseph Bergin’s Pedagogical Patterns is a specialized application of this pattern.
* In learning groups and in tour-groups there are daily and weekly summaries of activities and learning achievements that also serve to stitch together the concepts tying the activities throughout the program. These both remind group members of activities done and help give a meaning to the whole program.

Resulting context
People who lost sight of the overall target of the group get to see that while they may feel stuck, they belong to a group that overall does achieve and progresses. This, along with other measures, encourages group members to continue their personal efforts to promote the group success; to align their goals with those of the group and thus draw personal achievement from the general, group achievement. It also reinforces a sense of group values that (hopefully) will motivate group members.
Safety Valves

Problem
In every group working together over time misunderstandings crop up, both interpersonal and work related. While you may implement many tools to prevent this, there is an accumulation of aggravations. If one of the group members offends the group, the group needs means to mend the breach between the members.

Forces
Interpersonal differences cause friction between individuals and sour interpersonal and group relationship.
People may not be aware of what causes them frustration.
People may not know how to handle frustration and negative feelings.
Accumulated aggravation, aggression and other negative feelings damage the group performance.
Some People avoid direct conflict while others encourage it unnecessarily.
The group needs the member to admit their fault and redeem him or herself.
To complete the correctional action, communication is imperative.

Solution:
Organize events and mechanisms that will give group members a periodic opportunity to vent frustrations and aggravations in an organized and orderly fashion.
To bridge the gap caused by the offense, structure these events to include four parts: an acceptable expression of the aggravation, an admittance of doing wrong, a group discussion of the events and a way for the offender to redeem him or herself.
Still, if the same offence repeats itself, you probably need to find together another solution and streamline it into the working process.

Precautions
This may be a cultural-dependent pattern and it may not work well everywhere.
It is important to have strict rules of how “venting” is handled so this remains a constructive activity to the group and it’s work and not used to pursue personal vendettas.
Group leaders should also determine the effective size of a group (see No More Than Ten pattern, Coplien & Rising) and effective nature of such activities, determined by context, method and group character. For example, in a small cohesive group of long time acquaintance, the activity can be of a more personal nature, such as mentioning a mistake done by one of the members or just the opposite if the group members developed a tendency to get into personal quarrels. And in new groups it may be better to choose an anonymous nature of bringing up problems.

Known Uses
*In the Israeli Air-Force there is a custom that the person who was late to a meeting is the one to bring refreshments to the next meeting. Of course this allows everyone joke at the expanse of that person, thus reprimanding him in a socially acceptable custom, the person admits their wrong, and has immediate means to make amends.
*Paint-ball games are also a chance to both have a group event combined with the opportunity to relieve pent-up frustrations and aggressions. Often times, a particularly aggravating manager may come out covered with paint from this group fun activity. A smart manager will trigger a talk to understand what offends the group and to correct the situation.

Resulting context
With regulated opportunities to vent and process aggravations and negative energies without jeopardizing relationship with their colleagues, people can manage frustrations much better, and interpersonal as well as group relationships can improve, or at least not be carried to a break down.
Also, such opportunities may bring up issues that need to be dealt within the work schedule.
Jiggle

Problem
Since the program is getting into a routine there is a drop in energy. Without breaks in monotony people may react badly, their attention and creativity drop and group performance may be damaged.

Forces
Routine spells of work are inevitable. People tend to become listless and their attention drops because of routine. Distraction help to break mental loops and enhance performance and creativity. Listlessness and boredom effect performance and creativity negatively. Distracting activities use up time from the program. Too many interruptions damage progress (Tom De Aarco and Tim Lister showed that it may take a programmer up to 20 minutes to return to work after interruption). Positive distraction stimulates energies, attention, and good will. Group positive distractions promote social cohesion.

Solution
Introduce small positive distractions (jiggles) to break routine. Encourage events, major or small ones, for people to wait for, things that happen in the middle of the work day/week. Introduce an “expected surprise”, a recurring jiggle to stimulate attention, group life and break creativity blocks.

Known Uses
* Throughout the High-Tech industry in Israel there is a custom of a weekly “Cake”: an informal meeting of a team, with light refreshments and soft drinks (duty shared by rotation between team members themselves) normally accompanied by some kind of leadership presence – e.g. the group leader will talk about events related to the entire organization.
* Afternoon game session as introduced in the PLoP conventions. These sessions both help members freshen-up before going into tedious sessions and strengthen the social cohesion between group members.
* Annual party. Corporations and active groups have a tradition of an annual party that is prepared for months in advanced and referred to and recited in the months after.

Resulting context
When people can expect relief from tedium at a known time they cope better with their routine. Also, positive distractions activities shared help to maintain the social cohesion of a group, thus reinforcing group members’ commitment to their peers and to their group’s goals. Moreover, such jiggles can help to break creativity blocks.

Be careful though to spread the jiggles activities over time; don't waste them in one wash. Remind the skeptics that the lost time over these positive distractions activities is compensated for when group members go back to work with renewed force and ideas. The enforcement of social cohesion is a boon that both enhances the benefits of this pattern and can be utilized in further contexts.

(Gerald M. Weinberg introduced the jiggle in ‘Secrets of Consulting’)

Thanks
Linda Rising, Jens Coldewey, two wonderful shepherds, and Jim Coplien all encouraged me, and had valuable suggestions to help me break out of stalemates. Shlomit Baruchi, a long time friend and colleague, was always willing to help and invariably knew what I meant. Joe Bergin was not flustered by my very wobbly first version and gave me hope that I might make something of it. Amir Raveh was a wonderful sounding board with good advice. I also wish to thank the EuroPLoP 2002 Committee members for their patience and generosity.