

OBSERVING

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Introduction

An effective facilitator is constantly alert to the spoken and unspoken needs, reactions and behaviours of individuals and the group.

In these windows we look at the nature and purpose of observing, the process of observing and its implications for facilitators, and some reflection tasks for your own practice.

7.1 What is the role of observing?

A keen sense of observation is essential as a way of gaining information and understanding that will inform you and provide you with constant feedback on how the process is going.

Awareness is essential - awareness of yourself, of the individuals in the group and of the group as a whole. Is the group achieving its task? How is the group interacting? How are you connecting with the group? What does your intuition tell you?

You will receive a good deal of feedback from the group, both spoken and unspoken, if you are open to receiving it. For example:

Shuffling in chairs, eyes downcast, fiddling or doodling with pens could signal it's:

- ✓ uncomfortable in the room – too hot or too cold
- ✓ uncomfortable in the group – sensitive issue emerging

You may perceive this behaviour without clearly understanding what it signals. You may choose to describe your observation to the group "I notice that several people are looking uncomfortable - would you like to share what you are thinking now Joe, Mary, Jill?" allowing group members to say how it is for them. If you misinterpret the behaviour and for example, respond by calling time for a break, you may risk cutting across a critical moment.

observing

7.1 *continued* What is the role of observing?

People reveal their feelings in their body language, facial expressions, the words and the tone of voice they use, as well as what they do not express, their silences. The purpose of observing is:

Seeing

*What do you see happening ?
What effect is it having?
What are you going to do about it?
Is anyone else seeing it?*

Feeling

*What are you feeling?
What effect is it having?
What are you going to do about it?*

Hearing

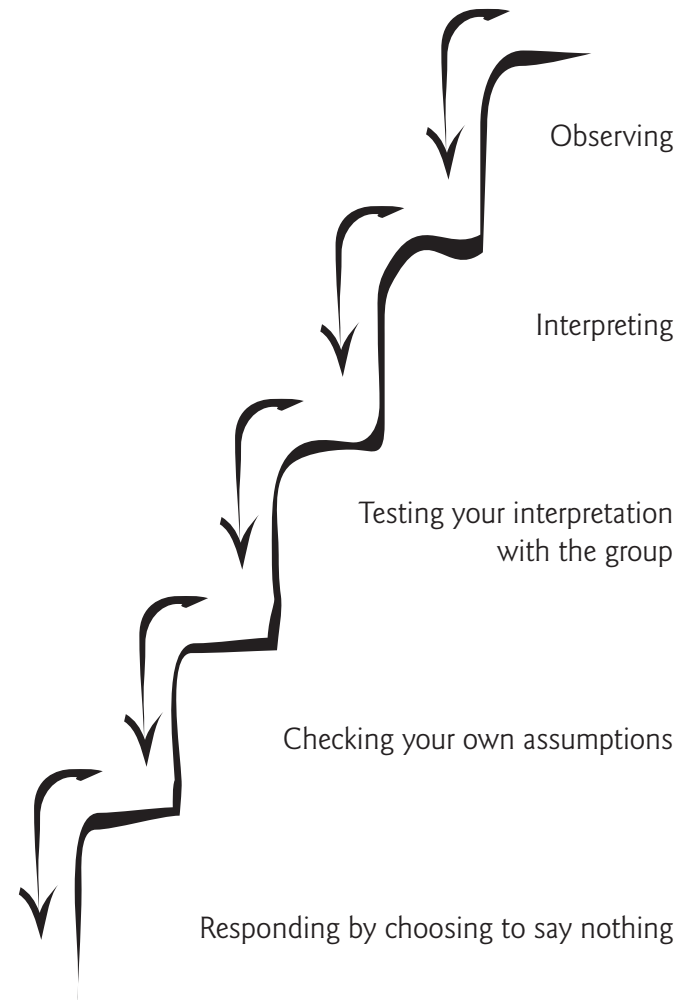
*What are you hearing?
What effect is it having?
What are you going to do about it?
Listen for the thoughts and feelings
behind the words.
Listen to what is not being said.*

Energy levels

*What do you perceive about the
group's energy?*

7.2 The stages of observing

The steps involved are:



7.2 *continued* The stages of observing

7.2.1 ACTIVITY

Observing

You will need to observe the group constantly, and your own actions and reactions.

Next time you are in a meeting, class or at the family dinner table take a moment to separate yourself from the topic of discussion and note how the people are expressing themselves. Jot down some of your observations and talk to the people about what you observed. How accurate were your observations? What can you do to sharpen your powers of observation?

7.2.2 Interpreting

Interpretations are the meaning we make from our observations.

Your observations will be filtered by your own world view, your personal perspective, which can colour your interpretation.

It is detrimental to observe behaviour, infer meaning from the behaviour and act upon it without testing your interpretation.

7.2 *continued* The stages of observing

When to use interpretation

Your intuitive and analytical skills will increase because you will continually be observing and interpreting what you see.

You can do this by describing your interpretation to the group and asking for comment.

“We seem to be stuck on this item, and I can’t pinpoint what misgivings there are - would anyone like to describe their reason for hesitating?” “Would anyone like to suggest why we’re stuck?”

If you reflect on your observation- *the group is stuck*, and the interpretation is - *unwillingness or inability to move forward if you feed this back to the group*, they may reject your perceptions, either because you are mistaken or because they are in denial. It’s important to accept others’ views of the world instead of making them fit yours. There are risks associated with exposing your own thought processes for the benefit of the group, but if you have a good grasp of your own thoughts, emotions and ability to relate to others the risks are minimised. Your observations will help the group members to learn about themselves and to decide whether and how to change their behaviour.

7.2 *continued* The stages of observing

7.2.4 **ACTIVITY** Checking your assumptions

What assumptions are you making about what you observe?

How will you test your assumptions?

It is easy to jump from observing to interpreting to acting upon your interpretation, but beware - your interpretations will be underpinned by your assumptions. You need to be aware that your assumptions may only be valid for you and are not an objective lens for observing the group.

Once you are aware of your underlying assumptions you are more adequately equipped to test them. You may only become aware of your assumptions after deep reflection. Your own biases will be on display. An open admission of your inner process will serve as a model for others.




When to check your assumptions

Whenever you are at odds with what is happening in the group process, spend some time reflecting on the source of your discomfort. Your own biases may be colouring your interpretation.

There may be times when you clearly observe an aspect of the group's functioning that needs attention. Your choice is whether to draw the issue to the group's attention or not. You may choose to say nothing if you judged it better for the group to see it for themselves. This may be frustrating, as the issue may take time to bubble to the surface, however the potential for learning is greatly enhanced when the issue is identified and owned by the group themselves.

7.2 *continued* The stages of observing

You notice the group has poor time-keeping abilities. Tasks are not achieved in the given time frame because some individuals take up more than their share of airtime or distract the group. Do you:

-  feedback your observation to the group?
-  employ a question or intervention strategy?
-  wait patiently until one of the group members notices it and brings it to the attention of the group?

7.2.5 Responding by choosing to say nothing

When to say nothing

Choosing to say nothing about your observations may be appropriate when:

- ✓ the group is in an early stage of development
- ✓ there is a risk of getting bogged down in process issues
- ✓ there is a high level of risk for you or others
- ✓ the learning is critical and needs to come from the group to have maximum impact.

7.2 The implications of observing

7.3 What are the implications of observing for my role as facilitator?

As a facilitator you will be constantly observing both the task and the process the group are engaged in. You will need discipline to stay centred within yourself, alert to the group, focused on their needs, and non-threatened. You will need to remain honest and transparent. In order to do this you need to be aware of your own biases and know your weaknesses.

When facilitating you need to be more alert and muster more focused concentration than at any other time. Some facilitators find it quite exhausting. Your senses will all be working to maximum capacity as you see, hear and feel for the group's mood and energy. Your ability to observe others is dependent upon your level of self awareness. Your ability to interpret your observations is closely aligned to your level of defensiveness. A high level of self awareness and a low level of defensive behaviour are goals for a facilitator to work toward. Facilitation may stretch your comfort zone beyond known boundaries. Your actions and reactions will be continually observed by those you are working with, providing wonderful opportunities for personal and professional growth.

There is no single right response, no recipe for success other than empathy, concentration and willingness. You will probably make errors of judgement, timing and interpretation and reflecting on these will yield fruitful learning, but don't browbeat yourself. Be open with the group, admit any mistakes, and model non-defensive behaviour.

7.4 Hot tips and Pitfalls

7.4.1 **HOT TIPS**

You will be observed by the group and each member in it. Any potential nervousness and lack of confidence may show unless you mask them well.



Appear confident.



Go well prepared and at the same time be flexible enough to work with what emerges from the group.



Do not stick rigidly to the process you have designed if it is not meeting the needs of the group.



If you don't know what to do next try opening up to the group *"I'm not sure where we should go from here, does anyone have a suggestion?"* shows you acknowledge the group's wisdom and your own capacity to be open to possibility.







You may be criticised for not knowing what to do - expectations and projections will be aimed at you, and sometimes missiles too.




Come prepared with a thick skin!

7.4 continued Hot tips and Pitfalls


 Observation is related to memory. As you observe the group you will begin to see patterns emerging:

-  this happened last time
-  he said something that had a similar effect last week
-  she is often disruptive
-  the group avoided discussing this topic once before.


These patterns sometimes elude the group, especially an individual's patterns, and the objective facilitator can do the group a service by reflecting what is observed. Unacknowledged issues may surface in this way and the facilitator can assist the group to table and recognise an issue they are avoiding.

 Be on the lookout for defensive behaviour, you will certainly encounter it. It may be tempting to take the easy option and ignore it, but that will only prolong the disruptive behaviour.

 Tact and diplomacy are essential qualities.

 Treat each person with respect especially if they are attacking you or the process you are introducing.

 Unpacking statements, decisions and assumptions can often lead to enhanced understanding and increased group cohesiveness.

 You may occasionally feel marginalised when the group ceases directing their words to you in favour of addressing one another, however you will have achieved the essential role of facilitation – assisting the group to move forward.

7.4 *continued* Hot Tips and Pitfalls

Remember:

- ! The aim of facilitators is to render themselves unnecessary as the individuals in the group take full responsibility and grow more facilitative in their approach to learning and interacting with their peers.
- ! You can encourage group members to improve their skills in group process observation by appointing a process observer who reports back to the group and leads reflection sessions.
- ! Use sensitive language when describing your observations to the group.
- ! Your powers of observation will improve with practice so will your level of comfort in describing your observations, and your ability to think on your feet.
- ! *Go with your gut feeling, trust your intuition.*

7.4.2 **PITFALLS**

- Never forget that each person's perspective is valid for them - there are many versions of reality.
- Don't fall into the trap of thinking you can accurately read body language - test your interpretation before acting upon it.
- Beware of pushing your own agenda - even if you believe it to be in the group's interest.

7.5 Facilitator's checklist

ACTIVITY

Self Assessment

To test your skill in observation, interpretation and sensitivity to others you really need to be very brave and seek feedback from your partner, trusted friends and the colleagues you work closely with. Ask them to rate your self awareness, level of defensiveness and your ability to correctly observe and interpret from your observations, as well as any suggestions they may have on how you could improve.

Below is a process observation checklist you might find useful

Process Observation Checklist

- Did the group remain focused on its purpose?
- Did the agenda help or hinder this?
- Was the agenda achievable?
- Was time managed effectively?
- Did everyone have adequate opportunity and encouragement to participate?
- Was constructive feedback given and received?
- Were decisions made by consensus, majority, or another method?

7.5 *continued* Facilitator's checklist

- Were alternate viewpoints actively sought?
- Were there any signs of groupthink?
- Were there distractions?
 - lack of punctuality
 - lack of preparation
 - side conversations
- Was responsibility for maintaining ground rules shared?
- Was there any behaviour that:
 - enhanced the group's effectiveness?
 - detracted from the group's effectiveness?
- Was there a balance between task and process?
- Was there conflict?
- Was it avoided or confronted?
- Who spoke, how often?
- Who remained silent?