

THE BLUE BOOK OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS



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What and Why of Group Discussions

“Without knowing ‘What I am’ and ‘Why I am here’, life is impossible”

—Leo Tolstoy

The first question that you as a reader would ask is, “What is a Group Discussion and why is it conducted by institutions/organizations while selecting candidates?”

A discussion is not something new to any one of us. Since our childhood we have seen people having discussions now and then. These discussions may be between two persons or more. The discussions may be quite serious and intellectual at times, while humorous and hilarious at other times, very formal and peaceful in some cases, while very heated and dangerously charged at other occasions.

Group discussion, as being practiced for selection of candidates, is an activity wherein 8 to 12 persons interact on a given topic, issue or case for around 15–20 minutes in a controlled environment. It is designed to provide

opportunity to the members of the group for exchanging their thoughts and ideas freely amongst themselves on a particular subject so that a comparative assessment of certain personality traits of members in the team can be done. It is a simulated competitive situation where candidates are able to display their potential as well as their skills. It is an opportunity for a person to present his/her personality more holistically without the limitations of only reacting to the questions asked or the situation presented by the evaluators as is the case in interviews.

Institutions and organizations have been using this tool for screening and selection of candidates for positions that require team working.

“HERE & NOW” OF TEAM-WORKING

We know that work in an industry or an organization is done by teams and every employee works with teams either as a leader or as a follower. It is an established fact that people behave differently when they are working alone and when they are working in groups. How do members interact amongst themselves in a team is a very important factor for overall performance of the team and consequently performance of the organization. Moreover, managers have to work in various teams and get best results out of them. Group Discussion is a tool to evaluate your group behavior i.e. how you function as a part of any team. That is why, generally, management institutes include GD as a component of their selection procedure. This is also the reason why defense services have group tasks in their selection methodology.

If you have ever participated in a GD or have observed the proceedings in a GD, you will appreciate that “Group Discussion” creates a “Here & Now” situation of group behavior for the participants. It means that behavior of members in a closed room group discussion is a very similar representation of their behavior in real life situations. Many people try hard to exhibit some learnt behavior that is more socially acceptable than their actual behavior in life. But, interestingly, it has been seen that in most of the cases, no matter how much of pretension is done, the real self of a person comes out during high intensity GDs. The reason is very simple.

When we are interacting with people in a group, the conversation is not confined to just between two persons. There are many others in the group.

Thus, kind of fear psychosis develops in a person's mind regarding his or her social position within the group. Naturally, the person tends to react with basic instincts of fight for survival.

THE PROCESS

Generally, a pre-selected topic, situation or case is given to the group members in a Group Discussion. Rules of the session are informed to the group members in advance. Two to three minutes time may be allowed for thinking and preparation. Then, either a signal is given by observers to start the discussion or in some cases it is expected that the group starts the discussion on its own at expiry of the preparation period. It is also possible that even topic is left to be decided through a small discussion by the group.

A time-period of 15–20 minutes is allocated for the discussion. Generally, there is no interference from the observers/facilitators till the end. At the end, a signal is given to close the discussion. There can be various patterns which are used by different organizers for conducting Group Discussions. Sometimes, just before the end, a signal is given to indicate the remaining time period. Also, observers may intervene during the process to bring in discipline, set some rules, ask some people to give their views or ask the group to derive a conclusion of the discussion.

While the discussion is going on, a team of experts from various fields observes the process. They are the observers/evaluators/facilitators/assessors. As a practice, they sit at a distance from the group in such a way that they can see and hear activities of the group clearly. Generally, they do not disturb the participants or become part of the discussions.

The evaluators keep noting their observations about each candidate during the discussion on various factors. Broadly, the factors include initiative, communication skills, points presented, logical thinking etc. At the end of the Group Discussion a consolidated comparative table is prepared that indicates ranking of each member in the group. We will deliberate about these factors at a different stage in this book.

GD is quite an objective method of evaluation of personality traits of candidates. However, subjectivity cannot be ruled out completely. Also, societal factors like upbringing, schooling, medium of education, mother-

tongue, social-background etc. have a lot of impact on performance of participants in a GD.

HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT OF PERSONALITY

A lot of people believe that being able to speak freely, forcefully and convincingly is either a God's gift or a personality trait of so-called extroverts. Due to this, many less talkative and so-called introverts find themselves handicapped in being able to make their presence felt in a group. However, in the given context of a Group Discussion, it is a misconceived perception. Once we are working in a group, we need to communicate with fellow members of the group to get the task accomplished. Let's also remember, here, that we are not talking about performing on the stage as a stand-up comedian or addressing a gathering of a thousand people in a stadium. Here we are interested in talking convincingly within a group in a closed room, on a focused subject, for a limited period. Thus, it is a situation where a person with even basic communication skills and social etiquette can perform with confidence just by using certain well founded techniques and some practice.

Group Discussion has certain advantages over Personal Interviews as a method of selection. While personal interviews (PI) give selectors an opportunity to assess candidates one-by-one, Group Discussion enables them to assess the candidates in a comparative setting. It is not only a methodology to screen prospective candidates in a very short time, it also brings out some of the personality traits that are difficult to observe in a personal interview. Group behavior, attitude towards a situation, potential to lead, reaction to crisis, self-esteem, tolerance, flexibility of thought, respect for others etc. are some of such traits. It helps in choosing few from many, socially suitable amongst academically equals, and team players from probable aspirants.

Any GD session would look for the following skills/traits in the participants:

- Communication – Verbal & Non-verbal
- Interpersonal Behavior
- Leadership

- Proactive Approach and Reaction to a Situation
- Team Working
- Analytical/Logical Analysis
- Reasoning ability
- Lateral Thinking
- Participation
- Contribution
- Decision Making Ability
- Cooperation – Collaboration
- Conflict Resolution
- Assertiveness
- Flexibility
- Creativity
- Responsiveness and many more!

We will work on developing these traits amongst ourselves step-by-step as we move ahead through the book. All of us have these characteristics in our personality in different quantities and in different combinations. We may be aware of some of them and some may be completely hidden from us although present within us. During the progression through different chapters of the book and during your practice sessions you will be able to explore your hidden strengths and hone up your existing characteristics to be able to use them to your advantage.

“For good ideas and true innovation, you need human interaction, conflict, argument debate.”

—Margaret Heffernan

“Believe you can and you’re halfway there.”

—Theodore Roosevelt

Self-Assessment

Now you know what a Group Discussion is and why it has become an integral part of selection process, both for admissions to management schools as well as for managerial positions in corporate world.

1. List the situations when you would generally engage yourself in a discussion either personally or professionally.

2. Make an assessment of your skills that are required for participating in a group discussion and list them under the three categories;

- a. Skills that you are excellent at:

- b. Skills that you are good at:

- c. Skills that you need to work upon:

3. Assess your speaking abilities as per the following chart:

	Poor	Average	Good	Very Good	Excellent
English Language					
Fluency					
Grammar					
Vocabulary					
Voice					
Audibility					
Response to distraction					

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