

Was the solution satisfactory? What other solutions might have worked? *Third*, be sure to “de-role” after the role playing has ended. Some participants will have trouble getting into their role and other participants will have trouble getting out of their role. Announce clearly that the role play is over and that participants should reflect on and analyze the role play, not continue it.



LEARNING HOW TO BE A PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER

What Is a Participant-Observer?

A **participant-observer** is a person who is skilled enough to both participate in group work and observe group process at the same time (Figure 2.2). When a group is working, a distinction is commonly made between:

1. **Content:** What is being discussed in order to achieve the group’s goals
2. **Process:** The sequence of group members’ actions that take place over time and are aimed at achieving the group’s goal

Ideally, a competent group member actively participates in the group’s work while also observing the process being used to achieve the group’s goals. To do so, a group member must function on two levels—as participant and as observer. Periodically, the group should stop its task work and discuss the process being used. Members continuously improve the group by (1) discussing the quality of the process

GROUP PROCESSING

Receive feedback
Analyze and reflect
Set improvement goals
Celebrate

being used, (2) reflecting on its effectiveness in achieving the group’s goals and maintaining effective working relationships among members, and (3) setting goals for improving the process. Such reflection and discussion are aimed at (1) streamlining the group’s process to make it simpler (reducing complexity) and (2) eliminating unskilled and inappropriate

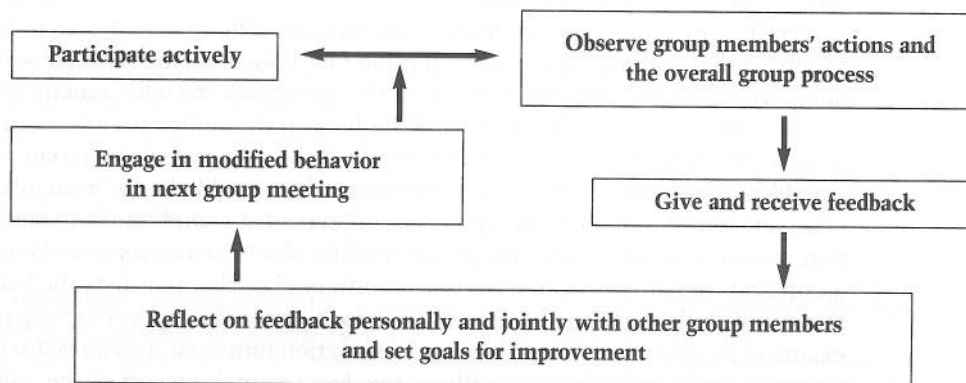


Figure 2.2 Participant-observer.

actions (error-proofing the process). The process a group uses to achieve its goals includes setting clear goals that create positive interdependence, communicating effectively, providing leadership, using appropriately decision-making procedures, resolving conflicts constructively, and so forth. A person highly skilled in process observation can participate in group work and observe group process at the same time, thus becoming a participant–observer. The steps in developing competence in being a participant observer are:

1. Observing
2. Giving and receiving feedback
3. Reflecting and setting goals for improvement
4. Modifying behavior in the next group meeting
5. Repeating the cycle over and over again automatically in every group you are a member

Learning How to Observe

Learning how to be a participant–observer begins with learning how to observe the process the group is using to achieve its goals. The process includes goal setting, communication, leadership, use of power, decision making, and conflict resolution. You gain competence in observing by consciously engaging in formal observation methods (discussed following) that focus on each part of the process. You do this hundreds of times on a wide variety of observation schedules until the observation procedures become internalized, that is, until they become an automatic habit.

Observing is aimed at describing and recording behavior as it occurs. From the behavior of group members an observer can make inferences about the group process—the way in which the group is functioning. The problem with observation is the potential for lack of objectivity by the observers (Hastorf & Cantril, 1954). Each group member is biased in ways that may affect his or her perception and assessment of what is taking place in the group. A solution to the problem of bias is the use of structured coding systems, which require observers to categorize each group behavior into an objectively definable category. Doing so at least ensures that observers are looking at the same behaviors on the same scale.

Four steps usually are involved in observation. The first step is to prepare for observing, and it requires a bit of planning and forethought so the actual observation produces useful results. Step one starts with the group deciding which member behaviors, actions, and skills are to be observed. Refer back to the guidelines for creating effective groups shown in Table 1.1 for a refresher; it details aspects of the group process that should be observed. At this point, the group also should choose a member to be an observer. If more than one group is being observed, a sampling plan should be made that describes in what order the groups will be observed and for how long. Next, the group finds or constructs an observation form or checklist that lists the behaviors, actions, and skills the group wants observed for a particular aspect of group process. For example, a group may choose to use an observation form that measures discussion, participation, and feedback specifically in the decision-making part of the group process.

FEEDBACK

Feedback

Is feedback

Is feedback
in student

Is energy
and solving
performance

Do students
take action

Numerous observation sheets are included in this book. The observer should be shown the form so the best results are generated.

In step two, the observer watches and records how often each member performs the specified behaviors. When there is more than one observer, each may be able to focus on only some of the group members. *In step three*, the observer looks at how often group members engage in the specified behaviors and then infers how well the group is functioning in that aspect of group process under observation. Step four is to summarize the observations in a clear and useful manner and then present the summary to the group as feedback. The group then can use the feedback as a jumping-off point for discussion and revision of group process.

When you observe a group process in action, the results are reported back to the group members in the form of feedback. **Feedback** is information on actual performance that individuals compare with criteria for ideal performance. When feedback is given skillfully, it generates energy, directs the energy toward constructive action, and transforms the energy into action toward improving the performance of the team-work skills. Member performance improves, and the discrepancy between ideal and real performance decreases. Members tend to feel empowered and become even more effective the next time. The feedback checklist included here may help in assessing the effectiveness of feedback.

By the time you finish this book, you will have developed skills in observing the group process. At first, the observation tasks specified in the exercises might seem difficult, but gradually you should find them to be easier and more helpful as your skills develop. Because effective future behavior depends on awareness of the nature and consequences of current behavior, there is no substitute for direct observation in developing skills and group effectiveness. Simply put, by observing what is happening today, you can avoid repeating the same mistakes tomorrow. Any effective group member must be aware of the group process while participating in the group, and it is through observation practice that such skills are developed.

FEEDBACK CHECKLIST

Feedback	Yes	No
Is feedback given?		Was not given or received; start over.
Is feedback generating energy in students?		Students are indifferent; start over.
Is energy directed toward identifying and solving problems so that performance is improved?		Energy used to resist, deny, avoid feedback; start over.
Do students have opportunities to take action to improve performance?		No, students are frustrated and feel like failures; start over.