

2nd
Edition

Cave Without a Name

Theoretical
Background



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An Excerpt from the
Facilitator Guide

2ND EDITION

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Background Information

HOW CAVE WITHOUT A NAME WAS DEVELOPED

The development of *Cave Without a Name* began with a visit to the Guadalupe River Ranch near Boerne, Texas. The actual Cave Without a Name is located about five miles from the ranch. A group of trainers toured the cave and were so impressed by its beauty that they returned several times to experience the wonders of being “safely” underground.

After the decision was made to construct a team-building activity, I conducted a traditional literature search to gain information about caves in general. Following that, several more visits were made to the cave, including conversations with the cave owner, Eugene Ebell.

The activity has been tested and evaluated by more than 200 participants in a 2½-day team-building event. Their comments have contributed to the revision of the activity and led to its present form.

WHY GROUP DECISION MAKING?

There is a commonly held belief that decisions made by groups are better than decisions made by individuals acting alone (Michaelson, Watson, & Black, 1989). Group decision making can be a powerful organizational tool. Groups working together to reach consensus can produce decisions that are far better than the individual decisions of group members. This is because group decision making has several advantages over individual decision making.

First, groups bring a greater sum total of knowledge and information to the discussion of a problem. Individuals making decisions are limited by their own knowledge. When groups of individuals get together, group members can fill in the gaps in knowledge of the individual members; each group member may be able to supply a different piece of the puzzle. Knowledge and information can be purposefully increased in group decision making by composing the group of individuals who have different information or by having each group member gather a different piece of information relevant to the group’s decision.

Second, groups bring a greater number of approaches or perspectives to the problem. Each group member possesses a unique perspective that is the result of his/her personality, training, and experiences. For example, a marketing person will probably focus on producing a decision that is appealing and can be “sold,” whereas an engineer will concentrate on how the solution can be applied. The combination of these differing perspectives enables the group as a whole to produce a more thoughtful and critical decision than either the marketer or engineer would make alone.

Third, allowing groups to make decisions increases the understanding, acceptance, and commitment to those decisions (Maier, 1967). When a decision is made by an individual alone, he or she often relies on others to carry out the decision. The process of persuading others to carry out the solution is filled with problems. The individual decision maker must first communicate the reasoning behind the decision and then influence others to accept the decision. On the other hand, when a group is allowed to make the decision, group members understand the possible solutions and why that particular solution was chosen. They are committed to the decision because they participated in making it.

Lawler and Hackman (1969) conducted a study in which a group of workers decided on a pay plan. The plan was used with the group that devised it, but it was also imposed on another group that had no say in the decision. Lawler and Hackman found that the plan was much more effective in the group that helped develop it than it was in the group on which it was imposed.

Given the potential benefits of group decision making, it is no wonder it is so popular. In order to obtain these benefits, however, it is necessary to institute group decision making carefully and with adequate understanding. Group decision making, like any other tool, has its pitfalls.

Avoiding the Pitfalls of Group Decision Making

Although groups have the potential to produce great decisions, they sometimes fall short of that goal. Research indicates that while groups typically outperform the average individual group member, they often do not outperform the most knowledgeable member of the group (Michaelson, Watson, & Black, 1989). When this occurs, the group is falling short of its potential. Steiner (1972) calls this group phenomenon “process loss.” Steiner sees actual group productivity or quality as equal to potential productivity minus losses due to faulty process. In other words, group relations and the process by which decisions are made can sometimes subtract from the full potential of the group. For example, when a knowledgeable group member outperforms the group, it means that somewhere in the group discussion that member’s knowledge was lost.

Process loss can be avoided. In order to get the most out of group decision making, a critical exchange of ideas and perspectives must take place within the group. If each person shares fully his or her perspective, then the group can exceed even its best member. Stasser (1992) points out that in order for group decision making to work, unique information must be shared and absorbed by the group. It is a two-step process, with both steps holding equal importance. For example, if an engineer identifies potential design flaws in a product, unique information has been shared. But if that information is not acknowledged and discussed, then the unique information has not been absorbed, and the group’s decision may not be the best it could have been.

Making Group Decisions by Consensus

Cave Without a Name offers groups an opportunity to experiment with or practice consensus decision making. You may wish to take time to explain what consensus means before the group begins its discussion. Contrasting consensus decision making to other ways of deciding is helpful. For example, a unilateral decision is one that is made by a single person for the entire group. When this happens, groups usually resent or rebel against this kind of decision making. Unilaterally made decisions in an exercise like this are clearly inappropriate.

In some cases a few people band together and push the group toward their desired decision. In other words, a minority of the group makes the decision for the entire group. This approach has the same drawback as a unilateral decision; it breeds resentment and lowers commitment to the group's efforts.

Groups often believe that voting will produce the most democratic decision. Majority rules in this case. Unfortunately, majority rule may leave out a very large minority, and the group may find itself in the same situation as with unilateral decisions or those made by a minority.

Of course, groups would like easy unanimity. Sometimes that happens, but not often. There probably will not be time in this exercise for 10 unanimous decisions. Occasionally groups reach quick unanimity on a decision. When this happens, the group should be suspicious and check to be sure that people really do agree and do not simply want to move ahead.

For the purposes of this exercise, and teamwork in general, consensus should be the preferred decision format. While consensus usually falls short of full agreement, the end result is a reasonably effective decision that everyone can support. The support comes because sufficient opportunity has been provided for each group member to give his or her opinion before the final decision is made. Jay Hall (1980, p. 324) defines the condition for consensus decision making as: "No judgment may be incorporated into the group decision until it meets at least the tacit approval of every group member." This condition does not require the complete agreement of each group member but does require that enough discussion has occurred so that everyone is willing to give the decision a serious try.

TEAM SYNERGY

Perhaps one of the most useful purposes of survival exercises is their ability to demonstrate the concept of synergy in a convincing way. The prefix “syn” means together. The energy generated by group thinking and discussion can exceed the energy generated by one person working alone. Synergy is the combining of one element with another to achieve a greater total impact than the mere sum of the parts. Through the process of discussion, people can release their creative energies and achieve a significantly greater result. As Jay Hall (1980, p. 322) put it: “The synergistic effect is equally available to all groups; its realization depends upon the way the group works, on the creation of conditions for commitment, and on the utilization of conflict as a springboard to creativity.”

Authors of survival exercises define synergy differently. Sometimes it is defined as producing a team score that is lower than the average individual score in the group. We define synergy as achieving a team score that is lower than the best (lowest) single individual score on the team. In other words, to achieve a synergistic result, the team must incorporate the best thinking of its best resource and, through discussion, go beyond that best resource. While this may be harder to achieve in an exercise such as this, we believe it is a more accurate way of describing synergy. Why would a group want simply to do better than the average of its members? Why not aim for exceeding the best efforts of its most knowledgeable member?

ABOUT HRDQ

HRDQ is a trusted developer of soft-skills learning solutions that help to improve the performance of individuals, teams, and organizations. We offer a wide range of resources and services, from ready-to-train assessments and hands-on games, to facilitator certification, custom development, and more. Our primary audience includes corporate trainers, human resource professionals, educational institutions, and independent consultants who look to us for research-based solutions to develop key skills such as leadership, communication, coaching, and team building.

At HRDQ, we believe an experiential approach is the best catalyst for adult learning. Our unique Experiential Learning Model has been the core of what we do for more than 30 years. Combining the best of organizational learning theory and proven facilitation methods with an appreciation for adult learning styles, our philosophy initiates and inspires lasting change.

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