

Basic principles underpinning the planning of successful group management

A NEED FOR RHYTHM



Humans have a profound need for structure and rhythm. This need for structure and rhythm apparently is part of our biological inheritance as human beings.

The rhythms of our lives include both long and short-term cycles. Music is the most obvious everyday association we have with short-term rhythms but even a brief, well-told story or joke will have a minute rhythm that plays with and rewards our delight in cycles of explanation or development.

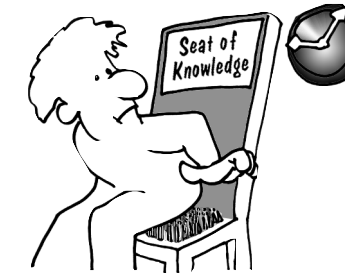
If you want to know more about our built-in rhythms read Bernard Gittelson's 'Biorhythms'. He outlines evidence not only for the most obvious rhythms, like the daily sleep/wake cycle and the monthly menstrual cycle in women, but also many more subtle ones.

These include the approximately monthly cycles in our physical, intellectual and emotional lives. Gittelson's ideas were adapted from research about how to maintain the consistent high performance required of airline pilots.

We will be drawing from more cycles than the rhythms he describes. We will examine the rhythm cycles that apply to the relatively short time spans of a group session or an individual piece of work as well as the life of the whole group.

If you are running a group that is more than a month in duration, it might be worth your while to look at the longer cycles and assess their effects on your group structure, so that you can use them to maximise group learning.

Examples are seasonal changes, significant social events and the annual cycle of holidays and festivals. I won't cover such effects in this program as we will deal with information which holds true for all groups, no matter what length.



THE BIOLOGICAL HOUR

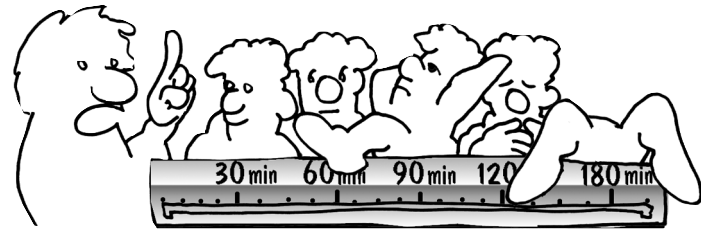
It is important to know that humans operate from a biological 'hour' of approximately 1.5 hours of clock time. This is consistent with the cycle first noted in sleep research. Most people cycle from dreaming to deep sleep and back to dreaming in about 1.5 hours.

Your group members will cycle from inattention to concentrating effectively and then back to inattention in approximately that length of time. They need a break or at least a major change in activity at least every biological hour but preferably every 45 minutes, or half that 'hour'.

The implications for planning a group are obvious. Group sessions need to be about 1.5 hours long, or broken up into segments of approximately this length. Often it works to halve that time and make each session approximately of 1.5 hours into two equal segments or to run sessions of 45 minutes with a significant break after two sessions.

(The fifty minute hour of individual psychotherapy certainly makes sense in the light of this information.)

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Over the years, I have attended many courses where this basic fact is unknown or ignored. Corporate training activities and professional seminars seem to be the worst offenders.

Perhaps in both situations, the organisers unconsciously or consciously think that it can't be good medicine unless there is some unpleasantness or suffering attached. You too have possibly sat through lengthy sessions which become endurance tests rather than opportunities for learning. As the session or the day wears on the likelihood is that nothing except stoicism is being learned.

If you want your participants to work effectively, give them breaks after every 1.5 hours and vary the nature of the experience within that time.

If you need variety and change so does your group.

There is one exception to this rule. You may wish to break down your group members' defenses by exhausting them. As people become tired, their defenses tend to decompensate i.e. to stop working. I personally dislike using such a strategy. I believe it forces people to venture beyond where they are ready to go. In my opinion this is disrespectful.

The first exercises are to help you get some practice in identifying and using the biological hour. They are best done as part of your preparation for a real group or program. You can then test your skills in the best possible way, by actually running the group and seeing how well the ideas work in practice.

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Exercise 1 The Biological Hour

Observe a group, course, program or meeting that you attend, either in your personal or professional life, where the times do not conform to the biological hour. Watch the other people there. Notice their:

- i. **Attention**, as shown by non-verbal signs such as body cues (leaning forward, sprawling back, pen tapping etc) and verbal ones (talking to neighbours, making inappropriate or distracting comments, asking questions of the leader etc), and
- ii. **Participation**, including asking questions, offering comments, joking etc.

NOTE THE RESULTS OF YOUR OBSERVATIONS OVER TIME ON THE TABLE BELOW.

Time	(a) Attention Non-verbal/Verbal cues	(b) Participation Questions, comments, other
EXAMPLE:	SHUFFLING TO GET COMFORTABLE /SILENCE	APPROPRIATE RESPONSES, JOKING
15 min		
15 min		
30 min		
45 min		
60 min		
75 min		
90 min		
105 min		
120 min		
135 min		
150 min		