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Functional Perspective on Group Decision Making:

Making Sense of a Confusing Frontier

Randy Hirokawa and Dennis Gouran's functional perspective attempts to make sense of the complex process of collective decision making. The two professors believe that a group setting has the potential to bring out the best solution to any problem because of the mutual collaboration that it emphasizes. In order to come to the most effective decision, claim Hirokawa and Gouran, a group must adequately address each of four different functions: problem analysis, goal setting, identification of alternatives, and evaluation of positive and negative results of such alternatives. While the order is not crucial, as long as a group covers each of these areas, promoting progress toward these areas is of high importance.

I saw the implications of this theory at work during my past summer's internship as a youth pastor. In order to finalize plans for a water park trip, I presented some information about lodging and scheduling options to the entire youth group. After 15 minutes of deliberating about our accommodation options and an additional 30 minutes of voting on dates, we came to a decision that nearly half of the group was dissatisfied with. Although I typically associate this theory with groups of less than 20 people, I understand that our decision was a direct result of our method.

The problem analysis was simple enough: we must determine when and where to stay two nights in the Wisconsin Dells. Goal setting, however, was very limited. We skipped straight to alternatives and made our decision based on a variety of standards, motives, and persuasive peers. Thus, positive and negative benefits were shouted over a crowd, whispered to a friend, or never even mentioned. My youth group's failure to address Hirokawa and Gouran's four functions (and its disposition toward disruptive communication) led to its low-quality decision. In the future, decision-making groups that I am a part of will feel the effect that the functional perspective has had on my life.

Although all of the theories that we have studied thus far are applicable to everyday life, the functional perspective is particularly so. It details a step-by-step process to arriving at sound judgments. The utility of this theory comes from its simplistic rationale. Each step is so logical that I cannot help but be reminded of it every time I get together with a group. Just recently I was placed in a group for an ethical decision-making activity. Gouran and Hirokawa's theory proved accurate and effective in the situation, and the group arrived at a high-quality solution. I cannot emphasize enough how this theory has become a valuable tool in my "communication toolbox." I hope to employ it more and more often in the future.

On the whole, I find Hirokawa and Gouran's functional perspective to have great value. It does lack in some areas, like its disregard of group history and its problematic coding system, but it still holds weight in the practice I've seen. In a way, I find my fondness of this theory ironic. I lean toward the openness of many interpretations (except regarding the absolute truth of the Bible), but I am drawn to the social scientific approach in the functional perspective. But as always, a good theory is a good theory. I can't argue.