Twelve Angry Men: An Analysis of Group Effectiveness

The Infrareds

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Introduction

Twelve men with diverse backgrounds are sequestered in a room and are unable to leave until a decision, a weighty one that will either condemn a young man to death or set him free, is made. The twelve strangers are bound to each other, trapped within the confines of four immovable walls, until the goal is achieved. They melt in the humidity of middle summer, which is exacerbated by the room's stuffiness and by the stress of their task. We, the audience, sweat as they grapple with each other and with the responsibility that is theirs to fulfill.

One could spend a great deal of time debating if the jurors who comprised the cast of “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957) were a group or a team. One could, and we will, cite definitions and descriptions from the literature to justify one conclusion or the other. The questions that are more interesting to us, and that constitute the thesis of this paper, are these: Were the jurors an effective group (or team)? And what factors contributed to group effectiveness?

Schwarz (2002) has proposed a Group Effectiveness Model that provides facilitators who work with dysfunctional groups a road map, a way to identify where groups have gone wrong. Schwarz identifies three criteria for judging group success: performance, personal and process. If what the group produces meets or exceeds expectations (performance); if group members grow and develop through the group experience (personal) and if the group learns to work together (process), then the group has experienced some success. In addition, Schwarz identifies elements that are essential to the group work itself. These are group context, structure and process. In this paper, we will examine the twelve jurors' effectiveness as a group by comparing them against Schwarz's Group Effectiveness Model. Most notably, we will identify the elements of group
effectiveness most clearly demonstrated in “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957) and measure the group’s success against Schwarz's criteria.

In some cases, we will examine Schwarz's elements of group effectiveness from a slightly different angle, a different perspective that references the ideas of notable experts in the field of group dynamics. In particular, we will incorporate the works of Levi (2007) and Smith and Berg (1987).

**Group Context**

Group context is defined as the setting in which the group operates and the elements that support its work. In Schwarz's (2002) view, it is important that effective groups have a clearly stated mission; a supportive, broader organizational culture; appropriate rewards; information and feedback; a physical environment conducive to the group work; and other supports such as training, technology and necessary resources. For the purposes of this paper, group context is the category on which we will focus the least, however we do offer the following comments on the context in which the twelve angry jurors operated.

Groups operate best when their mission is clear and the members share a vision with the broader organization (Schwarz, 2002). In the case of “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957), the broader organization could be considered the U.S. justice system. While there were several instances of involved parties reminding the jury of their goal (the judge reminder before the jury retired for deliberation; the foreman repeated their purpose during deliberation), the jury members clearly struggled to embrace their mission (why do we exist?) and share the vision (how do we look?). As eloquently described by the international juror who had recently become a U.S. citizen, the vision of the American justice system is built upon a jurisprudence tenet that all people deserve a fair trial and are innocent until proven guilty. Most of the jury members
were motivated for many reasons to act in a manner inconsistent with the implicit mission and vision, and it was only through group process and development over time that they fully accepted their responsibility associated with that mission. Perhaps by the end of the movie, a shared mission and vision could be articulated. Certainly at the beginning, it could and was not.

We would argue that there was little external support provided to the jurors beyond basic instruction on their assignment. Training was not provided prior to the trial and consultation during deliberation goes against the intention of assembling an objective and untainted peer jury.

An effective group needs access to valid information in order to perform a task (Schwarz, Davidson, Carlson, and McKinney, 2006). Not only was the jury provided with testimony and evidence with which to deliberate, but the group itself generated a great deal of knowledge based upon pragmatism and experience. This ultimately helped them evaluate the veracity of testimonies. An example of evidence that generated knowledge was the knife: The architect successfully demonstrated the possibility that the murder weapon was not unique, and that another person could have possessed the exact same knife. One of the most powerful scenes was that in which the intellectual had a change of heart once he related his personal experience wearing glasses to the witness who was short-sighted. He realized that it would have been impossible for the witness to verify beyond a shadow of doubt that the defendant had committed murder.

The impact of the physical environment is discussed later in the paper. Suffice it to say that the room in which they worked met the needs of the group in many ways. On the other hand, the hot and humid weather had a negative impact on the level of comfort experienced by the group and sometimes served as a catalyst for the already high tensions to explode, at times, into utter ugliness.
Group Structure

In Schwarz's (2002) model, group structure consists of clear mission and goals, shared vision, motivating tasks, appropriate membership, clearly defined roles, group norms, sufficient time, and effective group culture. In “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957) the goal of the group was clear, but as we have noted, the group struggled to clarify their mission and failed to articulate a vision for themselves until the movie’s end. For most of the jury, the motivation at the beginning was to complete the task so that they could go home. Over time, as the validity of the evidence became questionable, the motivation of the group changed from this short term and selfish view to a longer term view of providing the defendant a fair trial.

Although the members of the jury group were all white men, their backgrounds were quite diverse and this helped to bring different perspectives to the group. While the diversity and different background seemed to contribute toward conflicting views, it also enriched the group with a broader worldview. To this extent, the diversity of the group membership helped make the group more effective in achieving its goal.

The jury had been given nearly unlimited time to arrive at their decision. At one point when the vote was split, the group gave itself a time limit to reach their goal before they would declare themselves a hung jury. The abundance of time seemed to help focus the group and provide the space necessary to consider things more deeply.

The roles in the jury were not clearly defined and many roles developed informally. The only stated role was that of the foreman, who could be said to be a nominal leader in that he suggested how the group would sit and that there should be a vote from time to time. However, he did little to lead the group explore whether the boy was guilty beyond reasonable doubt. The foreman also became a note taker and sometimes a mediator. At one point he became
uncomfortable with this role and tried to pass the responsibility elsewhere but the group rejected it.

When the jurors began discussing the case, eleven of them considered the young man to be guilty and one dissented. It was this man, the architect, who first stepped into a leadership role and this happened in an informal manner. In an examination of the group's dialogue, the architect could be considered a facilitative leader of the Skilled Facilitator Approach (Schwarz, 2002). The core values of the Skilled Facilitator Approach are: valid information, free and informed choice, internal commitment, and compassion. The architect sought out valid information for the group to consider, advocated his point of view and inquired as to differing perspectives and additions to the debate. As the story unfolded, more valid information was uncovered by various members of the group and members of the group changed their votes to not guilty. They became quite committed to the architect’s approach and many of them began to share the role of the Skilled Facilitator.

Levi (2007) notes that group members can hold various roles within the group, which may create conflict within the individual and the group. Jury members moved between roles of information givers and information seekers. Other examples of multiple roles include: the baseball fan was a critic but became a follower; the little guy with glasses (John Fielder) was inquisitive and a compromiser through most of the film; the immigrant was an information receiver and also reminded the group of the seriousness and significance of their duty as American citizens; the ad man was compromising, the painter was a harmonizer and the bigot remained a critic. The internal conflict experienced by the individuals as they moved from role to role was acted skillfully, and sometimes resulted in extreme displays of emotion and even catharsis when the role change was precipitated by internal struggle.
The group norms of the jury evolved as well. In the beginning it was acceptable for group members to harass and denigrate the architect for his vote and questioning. The anger and harshness of the angry man and bigot were tolerated. As the group spent more time together and learned more about each other, they no longer accepted negative or abusive behavior. An example is when the painter told the angry man to respect the old man and threatened to "lay out" (Lumet, 1957) the angry man if he spoke negatively again. Another powerful example of group norms was near the end of the movie when the bigot once again exploded in a prejudicial rant about how "those people" (Lumet) were always negative. At this point, the majority of the group left the table and turned away from the bigot, silently expressing disdain for his behavior. What was once accepted was now shunned.

We would like to make one last point about group structure in relationship to the debate over group versus team. Levi (2007) and Schwarz (2002) both use the terms interchangeably. Teams are often classified as specific kinds of groups with special characteristics. For example, Levi cites Forsyth's (1999) definition of teams as groups with common goals, coordinated efforts and mutual accountability. At times, teams are thought of as groups with members that have specific functions, as in sports teams. Levi further cites Hayes’ (1997) emphasis on a team’s power to operate. Given these definitions, we conclude that the twelve jurors perhaps began as a group but ended as a team. It is clear that the group was empowered to make a decision from the beginning--one that the judge, a representative of the judicial system, would accept without question. However, the individuals did not demonstrate a sense of mutual accountability to each other except over time and through dialogue. Mutual accountability for a fair decision and to do right by the defendant was gradually embraced as individuals listened to questioning, contributed to the discussion, and re-evaluated the evidence. Efforts at the beginning of the deliberations
were coordinated towards the path of least resistance: an easy guilty verdict. By the end of the session, efforts were coordinated towards a shared group mission and vision. Lastly, each of the individuals contributed a perspective that was unique to his experiences. Once the juror was able to relate his experience to that of the testimony and evidence, he was also able to acknowledge doubt. In this way, the individuals complemented each other such that the team was enriched.

Group Process

*The paradox perspective.*

Schwarz (2002) proposes that the elements of group process include problem solving, decision making, conflict management, communication and boundary management. Boundary management, decision making and conflict management can be viewed through a lens of a different kind, one that elucidates the paradoxes associated with each. Smith and Berg (1987) describe four paradoxes of belonging. Of these, boundary and identity are closely associated and two that were clearly demonstrated in “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957). An understanding of these paradoxes within the context of the movie provides insight into the group's behaviors around boundary management and decision making, and helps us to identify the source of some of their conflict.

The concept of boundary can be articulated in both physical and non-physical terms. Smith and Berg (1987) wrote that one of the functions of boundaries is to provide a way to contain group anxiety associated with group membership. The container effect is heightened when the boundaries are rigid and impermeable. In the movie, the physical container was the room in which the twelve jurors deliberated and ultimately decided the fate of the defendant. The invisible container was the work assigned to the group: to achieve a unanimous decision of guilt or innocence. The clearly defined group mission represents a rather unyielding container for the
anxiety of the twelve men: in order to achieve the group goal successfully, each individual had to weigh a great deal of information (evidence) and come to a decision of guilt or innocence; the group had to reconcile the differences between individuals and come to a unanimous conclusion of guilt or innocence. Achieving the group decision was the only way out for the group both physically (of the room) and metaphorically (of the group and its task), unless a hung jury was declared. Because the physical and non-physical boundaries of the group were so impermeable, with few safety valves to release the anxieties associated with the task of the jurors, we observed extreme emotions of men under a lot of pressure, symbolized in one way by the very angry and threatening character played by Lee J. Cobb.

When boundaries are too rigid, the group is at risk of exploding because there are few valves or vents to release individual anxieties associated with group membership (Smith and Berg, 1987). Throughout the movie, we observed individuals looking for a way to escape both their physical and non-physical containers quickly. The group could have negotiated such an escape through a quick conclusion of guilt. Thus, we observed the baseball aficionado pushing the group to a unanimous guilty vote so that he wouldn't miss his baseball game, the intellectual using factual evidence to rationalize why the defendant deserved a conclusion of guilt, and the bigot using his prejudice to justify that the youth has a guilty verdict coming to him. Herein lies the paradox of boundaries and the experience of the twelve angry men: the physical and non-physical boundaries of both the group location and the group mission were nearly suffocating in the lack of flexibility and permeability, and elicited a great many escape attempts by its members; but those boundaries were ultimately necessary in order for the group to learn to work together and to accomplish its most difficult task.
The jurors may well have exploded or imploded under the weight of their own anxiety if not for some relief, which primarily occurred in two ways: retreat to the bathroom or move away from the table, which was the focal point of debate. The bathroom symbolized a quiet refuge from the anxieties of the group and this was observed at the beginning of the movie, when the old man delayed the group deliberation. In another scene, the bathroom became the place that some individuals attempted to influence the decision of Henry Fonda, the deviant and most resistant to the group norms and direction. Jurors moved away from the table and looked out the windows, which were also symbolic windows to freedom. Henry Fonda's character pensively looked out the windows as the movie opened; Lee J. Cobb's angry character spoke to the group while looking out the window at the end of the movie before he finally acquiesced and declared the defendant's innocence.

Ironically, the very anxieties that group boundaries contain are manifestations of the individual's struggle within him or herself as much as they are the result of conflicts between group members. This struggle speaks to the paradox of identity. An individual's identity within a group is often experienced as what he or she will need to give up in order to belong; conversely, the group speculates if it can accomplish its task with the current membership (Smith and Berg, 1987). Thus, individuals seek groups that will not force them to overly compromise their identities and groups seek individuals that will conform and contribute maximally to the group. Group norms are one way that groups establish identities and keep individuals working towards the good of the group.

We have already discussed some of the group norms that kept the jurors in check. One example of the struggle between group and individual identity occurred within the first ten minutes of the movie, a scene in which Henry Fonda's character offered to sacrifice his
uncertainty (which is an expression of individuality) if the rest of the group collectively voted guilty in a second, secret ballot. The old man voted not guilty and the struggle between the group and the non-conforming individuals began in earnest.

During the course of the movie, and one by one, the jurors exposed to themselves and the others their biases, pains, tragedies and hidden agendas that drove each of them to initially condemn the defendant. In the process of revealing their true, complex identities, the individuals committed themselves to the real work of the group: to decide guilt or innocence based upon a presumption of innocence unless proven guilty beyond a question of doubt. As individuals allowed themselves to be more authentic, the group became more genuine as well. Herein lies the paradox of identity: while individuals perceive that they must give something up to belong to a group, and groups behave as though individuals must conform in order for them to be good group members, the truth is that the complex process of revealing to the group one's true identity with all its contradictions, and the difficult process for a group to accept behaviors and thinking outside of its norms, causes each to be stronger and to gain insight (Smith and Berg, 1987). At the end of “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957), each juror gained knowledge about himself, the others and the nature of groups as a result of wrestling with the contradictions and complexities of the decision they had to make

*The group development perspective.*

Group process can also be viewed from the perspective of group development theory. The Tuckman model (as cited in Levi, 2007) is a stage development model and is one way in which to view the maturation process that the jurors experienced. Tuckman proposed that groups go through four stages and since his original proposal, a fifth one has been added. These stages are forming, storming, norming, performing and now adjourning.
The first stage, forming, began when most of the members of the group tried to get to know each other by briefly chatting about the case, the view of the building, and the surprise of the locked door. The men were polite with one another; for instance, the baseball fan offered chewing gum to two of the members and offered to help open a window. Moreover, there was a sense of being uncomfortable and constrained, demonstrated by the architect who separated himself from the others as well as the jurors who sat silent and did not engage in small talk.

The socialization of the group began during the forming stage. Socialization is an important component of groups, helping to crystallize the group norms and to develop connections. Socialization is the process by which individuals begin to understand their relationship to the group and the group’s relationship to others. Levi (2007) defines social identification as the group identity as a whole existing on their own, an “us versus them” mentality. Social representation is the shared beliefs within the group on how they see the world around them. Most in the group initially felt bound together against the defendant, superior to the individual on trial. Via raising the question of doubt and rejecting what appeared to be irrefutable evidence, individuals in the group accepted the ambiguity of the case and at least some of them became more empathetic to the defendant.

Levi (2007) writes that socialization is a process starting with an individual questioning, evaluating and then deciding whether or not to join the group. Each of the jurors did just that, based upon his differing point of view and life experiences. For example, the Jack Klugman character had grown up in a slum; he was able to identify with the defendant and shared insight on the use of the switch blade. As communication and dialogue amongst members continued, they began to shape each other’s opinions. The group ultimately developed a new perspective of the case that was cultivated through the socialization process.
The storming stage, which is depicted by discord and division among members of a group, was observed in the movie when each juror took a turn to explain why he thought the young Puerto Rican man was guilty. This exercise created a division in the group, pitting two jurors against the rest. Hostility between jury members ensued: The architect defended the possibility of the boy’s innocence and the bigot said, “Oh boy, there’s always one” (Lumet, 1957). Another example came after the secret ballot revealed a second not guilty vote and the angry man said, “Why don’t you drop a coin in this collection box” (Lumet) in reference to the man born in a slum. He had mistakenly assumed that Jack Klugman's character had voted not guilty.

More disagreements over procedures were noticed when the bigot wanted the architect to talk out of turn in direct contradiction to a group agreement. There was confusion of roles, as demonstrated when the architect took on the role of enforcer by grabbing a piece of paper that was used to play tic-tac-toe by two people. As the discussion evolved, the group realized that an agreement on the verdict of the case has become more difficult than anticipated.

The norming stage is characterized by organization to work together, and was reached when some of the jurors developed rules of order, got the discussion flowing and stated what behavior was acceptable or unacceptable. At the performing stage, in which members are concentrating on the task and make collective decisions, the jurors ruled out every piece of evidence presented and entertained that the eighteen year old man could be innocent.

The adjourning or dissolution stage occurred hastily for the twelve jurors. We can surmise that their social relationships were not strong enough to carry outside of the deliberation room.
We’d like to offer two different group development perspectives as alternatives to the Tuckman model (as cited in Levi, 2007): the unilateral control model (Schwarz, 2006) and the punctuated equilibrium model (Gersick, 1988). As a part of group process, the theory-in-use of the group initially followed the model of unilateral control. Behaviors of the unilateral control model are to always win and control; to advocate our views; to not inquire about others views; to make negative inferences about others; to ignore that there is a problem and to display defensive behavior (Schwarz). As the group became more cohesive and group norms began to form that supported a more open and curious stance, the jury began to demonstrate mutual learning behaviors. Mutual learning is characterized by behavior that provides data to support ideas, inviting inquiry, being open to rigorous testing of theories, the possibility of conflict, and low defensive behavior (Schwarz).

Evidence of the unilateral control model can be found in the behavior of the angry man and the bigot. The angry man often acted as if it was a competition and he wanted to win rather than lose. He was not really open or curious about different viewpoints and often made negative inferences about others when they expressed a view contrary to his own. An example was when the old man on the jury began to question the motives of the old man who testified. The angry man yelled at him and put him down. The bigot also often made negative inferences about others and tried to control others and advocate his own view. He also frequently demonstrated defensive behavior.

Early in the jury's deliberation, the architect exhibited behaviors of the mutual learning model. At the very outset he said that he wasn't sure the boy was guilty and wanted to hear what the others thought. Often when he presented information, he said he wasn't sure about the outcome, but that the points he presented led to his doubt about the guilt of the boy. He had low
defensive behavior and often inquired into the other jurors reasoning and intent. He focused on his interest of not being convinced beyond a reasonable doubt and was not really fixed on any position. He just wanted to talk about the evidence presented and reexamine it. He also advocated his ideas and inquired about what others thought about them and invited them to share their thinking. The mutual learning behavior of the architect provided a model for others in the group to follow and gradually the group began to demonstrate mutual learning behaviors and work more effectively.

A second alternative theory of group development exhibited in the movie is the punctuated equilibrium model proposed by Gersick in 1988. This model explores how groups work over time and suggests that groups work in phases. The punctuated equilibrium paradigm suggests that "systems progress through an alternation of stasis and sudden appearance -- long periods of inertia, punctuated by concentrated, revolutionary periods of quantum change" (Gersick, 1988, p. 16). Gersick's study found that groups demonstrate a distinguishing approach at its first meeting and then stays with this approach through a period of inertia (tending to stay in the same condition) for about half of the time of the given deadline. There is then a major transition period where groups discontinue old patterns, connect again with outside managers, develop new perspectives on their work, and make remarkable progress.

The behaviors of the jury in “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957) supports the theory of punctuated equilibrium. The jury's deliberation which found the boy guilty eleven votes to one set the tone for the first half of the movie. The not guilty vote by the architect and the resulting frustration and anger of the group set the tone for a long period of stasis. During this time, the majority were still quite fixed in their guilty verdict and not very open or willing to consider other points of view. The only other not guilty vote during the first half of the film was the old
man and he did this to support the architect's resolve to talk it out before making such a serious decision.

A significant transition took place when the old man supported the architect's questioning of the validity of the testimony. At this point the discussion the man from the slum, played by Jack Klugman, changed his vote. This was right at the midpoint of the movie and soon after this the tone of the conversation of the group began to change markedly. The unwillingness to consider other viewpoints and anger towards the architect that characterized the first half of the deliberation shifted gradually to a process predominated by a more curious approach that sought valid information.

Following the midpoint transition, the second phase was marked by more skillful dialogue and genuine curiosity. The group moved towards a firmer conviction that the boy was not guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. Ultimately, even the most recalcitrant of the jurors changed their views when either the validity of the evidence was shown to be questionable (the intellectual) or their strong personal biases were so exposed that they were no longer valid reasons to maintain a guilty vote.

Conclusion

In examining the group dynamics of the jury in “Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957), there are many characteristics of groups and teams that become evident. Based on the Group Effectiveness Model (Schwarz, 2002), we judge the jury to be an effective group. The three criteria of an effective group are performance, process and personal. In considering performance, the jury met or exceeded the expectations of the judge and the U.S. judicial system: They arrived at a unanimous decision and helped provide the defendant with a fair trial. Regarding process, the jury learned to work together over time, developing group norms and eventually
engaging in skilled dialogue and behaviors of the mutual learning model. We further assert that
the jury members began as a group, with no mutual accountability to each other and for
accomplishing their mission; and finished as a team with a shared and noble mission and group
identity. Finally, when considering personal growth, the individuals in the group learned about
biases, pain and experiences that stood in the way of conducting the work they were tasked to do.
Ultimately each was able to put aside his selfish motivation and damaging perspectives and
engage in objective and fair deliberations as a member of the group.

Other factors of the Group Effectiveness Model were also demonstrated through group
structure and group process. Of these a clear goal, information, the evolution of group norms,
group development, the facilitative leadership of the architect, the method of decision making,
communication, problem solving and boundary management were most prominent as evidence
of an effective group.

When considering the development of the group, there is evidence of both Tuckman’s
Their social relationship evolved which led to a more cohesive group at least for the time they
were conducting their work. At the same time, their problem solving approach evolved into a
method by which the group discovered valid information, freely made their choices and were
internally committed to the conclusion.

While the jury of “ Twelve Angry Men” (Lumet, 1957) ultimately developed into an
effective group, this occurred almost despite themselves. These men would have benefited from
an understanding of Schwarz’s (2002) Group Development Model, Tuckman's stage model (as
cited in Levi, 2007), and Gersick’s (1988) punctuated equilibrium model. The twelve angry men
may have been just a tad bit happier with such knowledge at their disposal.
References


