



What's going on under the water

TN49 Training Notes series: Management

These notes were first published on the website in August 2009 and last updated in July 2023. They are copyright © John Truscott. You may download this file and/or print up to 30 copies without charge provided no part of the heading or text is altered or omitted.

Anyone responsible for any kind of group (from a whole congregation down to a team of three people) needs two sets of eyes. With one you watch the 'agenda': what the group is supposed to be doing. That is straightforward.

With the other you watch the 'sub-agenda', or what is *actually* going on in the group. Most people need to be trained to see and understand this (and, in general, men need more training than women). These notes seek to help you get started.

Think water. The agenda is what is floating on the surface – it is visible. For a Sunday service you might say it is to meet with God and each other. For a business committee it should be to get decisions taken (literally, the agenda). For a home group it might be to study and apply the Scriptures and support each other. For a family living together well, you decide.

But underneath the surface lies a fascinating and different world that is not so visible but explains a great deal of what is happening up top. These short notes seek to help you open your eyes under the water.

Try it out at your next service on Sunday, at Monday's committee, Tuesday's small group, or Wednesday's party. In fact, anywhere where two or more people gather together. Best if it is a service you are not leading, a meeting you are not chairing or a party you are not hosting – you are too focused on the surface agenda otherwise.

Go on, take the plunge! This is what you need to look out for, expressed as 20 questions to ask yourself, four under each of five headings.

1 **Check the basics**

This section concerns what you can see from just above the surface. You need to start here before you go underwater.

How big is the group and what is the space allocated to it?

People's behaviour is dependent on the size of group they are in. For example, you cannot hide in a small group. But the physical space and layout are also important: consider one congregation of 100 meeting in a large building that seats 1,000 in pews, and another meeting in a modern building with 105 chairs.

What is the group's purpose and where is it seeking to go?

The reason for its existence, and whether this is shared by all or left vague, is another close-to-the-surface factor that needs to be known. Vision too, based on this purpose. Many church groups are not clear on these points – which may explain much.

How is it set up and who belongs to it?

Elected groups behave differently from selected ones. Membership groups similarly from open ones. Other factors that are important include what stage of development the group has reached, who belongs and who is the stranger, and how diverse it is in terms of gender, age and experience.

What about its culture, its rules and its spiritual norms?

Congregations differ: some are wildly charismatic, others quietly contemplative. Some business meetings play their discussion strictly by the rule-book, others are laid back and informal. Some groups invite God to join them, while others much prefer him to leave the room.

2 **Focus on each person**

Let's now go just under the surface. These next three sections help you view each person as just that, a real and immensely complex human being who has many 'agendas' apart from the one you are interested in. So, as far as you have knowledge about them (and this will vary in amount and, probably, accuracy), consider the following.

What factors define their personality and background story?

The way they behave in this gathering will depend on both their make-up and their experience of life. These factors might explain how they react to a particular type of sermon, or to a motion at a business meeting, or to the announcement of a party game. They may be very different from you!

What kind of position are they in today?

But it is also today's situation that will affect their mood. There may have been a family row to cope with before coming out, a hidden illness that is causing distress, or worries about unemployment. Some will come with practical needs (they have not had time to eat since getting home), some with emotional ones, and some needs will be spiritual.

How well and where do they fit into this group?

They may feel in a minority: the one man with ten women, the one 20-something in a group of over 40s, the new Christian in a group of Theological College graduates. On

the other hand they may be the real power-base in a group, even though they hold no official office.

How healthy are their relationships with each other person?

There may be all kinds of complex issues with either the group as a whole or just with individual members within it: jealousies, over-reliance on a parent figure, or just that others are strangers.

3 Use your eyes!

So far the points have depended on background knowledge. Now consider features that are visibly obvious with your under-water eyes, once you have trained yourself to keep them open.

Where do people place themselves?

Look at where each of them sits or stands, if they have a choice: next to the leader, hidden behind a pillar, etc. Then see who moves their seat (if possible) to give more space. Check on sight lines: who can see whom, and whose face is hidden from whom? Who is erecting barriers and who is breaking them down?

How do they look?

Observe their bodies: upright and expectant or slouched back and uninterested? Are their arms folded in defence or left open? What might it mean if you sat or stood like that? What do you think it means for them? Is there anything to note about their clothing and (if applicable) hair and make-up?

What are their faces saying?

Are they making eye-contact with the speaker or others, or are they looking away or at the floor? Watch their facial expressions as they listen to what is going on – some people just cannot hide their internal reactions while others are more difficult to read. Are they actually listening to the present speaker or have they switched off?

What is their involvement?

It is not hard to spot passion or lack of it, those who seek conflict and those who avoid it, those whose minds are far away and busy with another task, such as reading a notice-sheet or writing a shopping list.

4 Use your ears!

Much of what is going on beneath the water-line can be seen once your eyes are attuned to the watery environment. But some sonar equipment comes in useful too.

What are they really saying?

With the context of sections 1-3, you can rethink the meaning of what people are saying out loud. Perhaps they want to fade into the crowd so take the path of least resistance, perhaps they are protecting their position, perhaps their silence is speaking loudly, but about what? Fear? Disconnection? Feeling of little value?

Who are they talking to?

In some business meetings the vote is taken and then the discussion goes on unofficially in the car park afterwards, but with very different views expressed. So it is worth noting who is talking to whom before and afterwards (and, perhaps, *sotto voce*, when the group is officially together).

What role do they play?

Most groups have some pretty standard role-playing going on: someone acting as the joker to keep things from getting too serious, someone as the shocker to try to inject some life, someone as the spiritual anchor to keep it all Bible-centred.

How vulnerable are people prepared to be?

Are people really saying what they think? Are they prepared to let the mask slip and reveal something of their inner being? Or perhaps the service or meeting or party is all about keeping up appearances. So who is hiding what and who is uncomfortable?

5 Observe the whole group

One more good look round, some of it a bit deeper, before you return to the surface.

How well is the group listening to each other?

Observing behaviour during times of disagreement is educative. When people speak, have they listened to what has come before in the conversation or are they intent on getting their point across?

At what level could the group be said to love each other?

This does not mean that the group has to be inward-looking. But it does mean that, as it worships or parties or does business, people really care for the concerns of each other. And that needs are known and, where possible, met.

Are status and success issues here?

Observe as far as you can whether people are valued as people, or only because they hold office or have been members for a long time. It is instructive to note the reactions when the group, or individual members of it, fail. Then try to work out where power is held in the group: it may well not be with the leader.

How well is the leader helping the group to be healthy?

Over time note how the leader or leaders (Minister or Elders for a congregation, chair for a committee, host or study leader for a small group) is helping people understand the underwater stuff. What happens when the group erupts in conflict and how is it sorted?

So there are 20 sets of questions to set you thinking in under-water mode. Now try it out – but be aware that being part of a group may never be the same again!

These notes are available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Training-Notes-index> then TN49. See also Article A45, *How to lead a team at church*, plus Training Notes TN41, *What makes a group a team*, TN71, *Seatings for meetings*, TN79, *'One another' teams*, and TN127, *Identify your church's groups*. With the boot on the other foot, try TN94, *Becoming self-aware*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of a training event on group- or team-work.

Cartoons are by Micki Hounslow for filing categories of Leadership, Management, Structures, Planning, Communication and Administration. File TN49 under Management (with a link to Communication).

John Truscott, 24 High Grove, St Albans, AL3 5SU

Tel: 01727 568325 Email: john@john-truscott.co.uk Web: <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk>