

Process Observation

By definition, “process observation” is exactly what one might expect: observing what happens during the process of a group meeting. A process observer, then, focuses not on the content of what is said, but on group process itself.

The things I note when conducting process observations are: who talks when, who interrupts and who yields the floor, who speaks and who doesn't, and how decisions get made. I also note nonverbal communication (sitting forward, arm-crossing, hair twirling, and the like). Although I make notes to myself about possible areas of inquiry, I do not interpret what I see—I simply log observations.

A typical segment of a process observation log might look something like this:

- 12:15 pm. “Everyone leaning forward and looking quite animated, but for Tim.” [Note: Is Tim disinterested? If so, why?]
- 12:30pm. “Tracy lays out the ground rules for how to format this discussion. Tim stands up. [Note: Standing after a facilitator lays out ground rules might be construed as a non-verbal challenge to the facilitator. Is there tension between Tim and Tracy?]
- 12:45 pm. “Andy makes a joke, and everyone smiles and laughs, but for Tim who is reading notes.” [Has Tim heard this joke before? Does he think there's too much ‘fooling around’ at this meeting? Is he preoccupied with other concerns?]
- 1 pm. “People are sitting forward, smiling, except for Tim, who is sitting back with his arms crossed.” [Note: Sitting forward indicates engagement; sitting back with arms crossed may indicate disapproval and/or resistance to what is being said. Check this out.]

Using the log above, I could investigate whether and why Tim seems disconnected from the group. I can explore whether Andy is perceived to be a beloved jokester in the group, a goof-off who slows down the process, or is perceived somewhere in between. And as an interesting aside in the example above, Tim was not a disgruntled employee, but was managing very bad back pain that day—causing him to shift positions frequently and be more disengaged in the proceedings.

Process observation is about “stating, not rating” behaviors, and using the observations as a springboard for inquiry and discussion. By watching the process the group undertakes in conducting its business, the effectiveness of the group can be more clearly seen with regard to goals, participation, feelings, leadership, decisions, trust, creativity and growth. Using process observations, the group can begin to

- Notice and solve difficulties with leadership
- Acknowledge and support strengths in leadership
- Draw out the opinions of quieter members
- Keep the more vocal members from dominating meetings
- Explicitly state when there is disagreement and
- Acknowledge when unexpressed emotions are interfering with group functioning

Process observation can be a great tool for helping a group see itself as if from the outside, thus enabling the group to use its internal resources and regulate its activities to best effect.

Process observations are most useful when done over time. I find that process observations are most effectively taught when I as the consultant conduct the first one, and then group members take turns being process observers in subsequent meetings. Over time, the benefits to the group can be dramatic!