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# UNIT 10 GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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## 10.0 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit introduces you to one of the often used selection process: Group Discussion. Employers resort to this, because they can find out many crucial attributes of a candidate through this process, which other selection processes do not permit. It is important for you to prepare well before the group discussion and perform in such a way that you draw the selectors' attention towards you. You are given many tips on how to conduct yourself in a group discussion.

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## 10.1 WARM UP

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Group Discussions (GD) when held as selection process always involves two parties: the selectors and the GD participants. The former plays only a passive role; they only watch the GD process and observe each participant. They seldom intervene or interfere. Their sole objective is to identify certain attributes in the participants which they could not easily identify by other means.

### Activity

- 1) What attributes of the participants do you think the selectors try to find out from a GD? Select five attributes out of the ones listed in section 10.2 and 10.4, which you think are most important.
  - i) .....
  - ii) .....

- iii) .....
- iv) .....
- v) .....

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## 10.2 WHY GROUP DISCUSSIONS (GD)?

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Group Discussion (GD), as selection tool, is gaining more and more importance for a variety of reasons. Usually GDs are conducted after the written test to shortlist candidates for the next stage of the selection process. GD also helps the selection panel to reject outright candidates because of their poor performance in the GD. This technique is being increasingly used by professional educational institutions, especially business schools, as well as by business houses to select professionals. GD allows the selection panel to observe, compare and form opinions about a large number of candidates in a relatively short span of time. GD gives the opportunity to assess certain traits and skills, (such as the following) of the candidates that are not possible to observe in a resume, written examination or an interview:

- leadership qualities
- quality of participation
- analytical skills
- problem solving skills
- oral communication skills
- ability to handle people
- team spirit
- non-verbal behaviour
- conformation to norms
- decision-making ability
- inter-personal behaviour
- behaviour in a group
- body language
- how much importance do you give to the group objective as well as your own
- how well do you listen to viewpoints of others and how open-minded are you in accepting views.

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## 10.3 CONDUCT OF GROUP DISCUSSIONS

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A Group Discussion is normally a formal discussion involving an invited group of participants. The number of participants usually will be around eight, but there is no guarantee it will not be fifteen! They will be given a topic, often a contemporary and debatable topic. The participants will be allowed a few minutes, about 10 minutes, to understand the topic and organise their thoughts. Then they will be asked to discuss the topic for about 20 to 25 minutes. The time available for the discussion will be communicated to the participants in advance. In such

GDs no one is appointed as the leader or coordinator. Everyone is treated at par by the selection panel, but it is not uncommon for someone to take the initiative and take on a leadership role.

A GD is normally not conditioned by such procedural rules as in the case of a formal debate. Here the candidates can say whatever they like and whenever they like on the subject under discussion. A candidate can speak in favour of the subject, against the subject or even follow a neutral path. Everything depends on the interest and ability of each member of the group. So the candidates are quite free to discuss the topic without any interference from the selection panel.

The entire discussion process will take place in front of the selection panel. They will be observing every action of each participant closely.

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## **10.4 WHAT DO SELECTORS LOOK FOR?**

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In a GD what do the panel of selectors look for? They will be looking for a variety of attributes in you, which they were unable to assess from the resume. These will include the following:

- Did you make any useful contribution at all?
- What was your level of knowledge about the subject?
- Did you communicate effectively?
- Were you a good listener?
- Did you unnecessarily interrupt others?
- How positive or negative was your body language?
- Did you exhibit any analytical skills?
- Did you provide leadership to the group?
- How good a team player were you?
- Did you look or sound “selfish”?
- Did you do anything to bring the group to focus on the topic rather than going outside it?

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## **10.5 GROUP DISCUSSION: THE DO’S**

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If you have a reasonably good level of general knowledge, that will come in handy in a GD. So also your proficiency in vocabulary, grammar, accent and so on. These help to draw the attention of the selectors towards you.

To bring out the best in you and to create the desired impact on the selectors, you need to adhere to some Do’s and Don’ts. These are:

- Listen to others attentively; you may even take brief notes.
- Enter the discussion at an early stage.
- Communicate with confidence.
- Make sure that your contributions are focused on the given topic.
- Try to speak something new which has not been said by the earlier speakers.

- If you find that any participant is not making her/his viewpoint clear, ask pertinent questions.
- Even when you oppose a view point, use dignified language.
- Try to make your contributions take the centre point for the discussion.
- If the discussion is going out of focus, try to point this out and bring it back on track.
- Use positive body language. Example, looking into the other person’s eyes when listening or speaking.
- Remain confident and interested throughout, whether you are speaking or not speaking.
- Conclude each argument at the right time and in the right manner.
- Collaborate instead of compete.

**Activity**

2) Out of the Do’s listed above; identify three, which are very important. Say why.

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**10.6 GROUP DISCUSSION: THE DON'TS**

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The selectors will be critically observing your every action while the GD is on, and will be making notes of the positive points as well as the negative points. While it is important to demonstrate strengths, it is equally important to work on your weaknesses. So please take note of the don'ts listed below:

- Don't appear or feel restless when someone is speaking.
- Don't keep silent for a long time; the selectors are there to hear you speak.
- Don't exhibit negative body language. Example, shaking your leg when speaking.
- Don't use abusive or objectionable language or gestures.
- Don't interrupt others when they are speaking.
- Don't impose your views upon others.
- Don't get irritated or lose temper if someone disagrees with you.
- Don't deviate from the subject given for discussion.
- Don't take anything personally.
- Don't give instructions to others in the group.
- Don't speak for the sake of speaking.

**Activity**

- 3) Out of the Don'ts listed above, identify three, which are very important. Say why.

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## 10.7 LANGUAGE FOCUS

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Here is some helpful language for group discussions:

- **Stating an opinion**
  - It seems to me...
  - In my view...
  - I tend to think...
  - It's obvious that...
  - I believe...
  - Clearly...
- **Interrupting**
  - Excuse me, may I ask for a clarification on this...
  - If I may interrupt...
  - Sorry to interrupt but...
- **Handling Interruptions**
  - Sorry, please let me finish...
  - If I may finish what I am saying...
  - Could you please allow me to complete what I'm saying...?
- **Moving the discussion on**
  - Can we go on to think about...?
  - I think we should now move on to consider...
- **Expressing Agreement**
  - I quite agree
  - I couldn't agree more
  - Absolutely / precisely / exactly
  - I think you're right

- **Expressing disagreement**
  - I think quite differently on this
  - I don't really think so
  - I'm afraid I can't agree with you there
- **Checking comprehension / reformulating**
  - To put that another way...
  - If I follow you correctly...
  - So what you're saying is...
  - Does that mean...?
  - Are you saying...?
- **Making a suggestion**
  - I suggest that...
  - We could...
  - Perhaps we should...
  - It might be worth...
  - What about...?
  - Why don't we...?

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## 10.8 VOCABULARY

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### Self Check Exercise

**Note:** i) Write your answers at the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.

- 1) Read the text and use the right form of the word in the bracket to form a word that fits in the numbered space. The first one is done for you as an example.

The **surest** (sure) way of antagonizing others in the GD as well as the examiner is to appoint yourself as a de facto \_\_\_\_\_ (**chair**) of the group. Do not try to impose a system whereby everyone gets a chance to speak in turn. A GD is meant to be a free \_\_\_\_\_ (**flow**) discussion. Let it proceed naturally. Do not ever try to take a vote on the topic. A vote is no substitute for discussion.

Do not address only one or two persons when \_\_\_\_\_ (**speak**). Maintain eye contact with as many members of the group as possible. This will involve others in what you are saying and increase your \_\_\_\_\_ (**chance**) of carrying them with you. Do this even if you are \_\_\_\_\_ (**answer**) a specific point raised by one person.

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## 10.9 LISTENING: HOW TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN A GROUP DISCUSSION

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Listen to a speaker telling you about how to be successful in a group discussion. Please note that the text of the audio has been provided in the answers section.

**Self Check Exercise**

- Note:** i) Write your answers at the space given below.  
 ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.
- 2) On the basis of what the speaker says, state whether the following statements are True or False:
- i) You must contribute towards reaching a consensus. ....
  - ii) In order to be heard you must speak for at least 15 minutes. ....
  - iii) You can make a meaningful contribution even if you do not know much about the topic being discussed. ....
  - iv) A fish market scenario is one where each one tries to talk at the same time and emphasize her/his point of view. ....
  - v) If you fail to contribute towards reaching a consensus it means you are not very good at team work. ....
  - vi) A good listener agrees with what others say. ....
  - vii) In the end you must summarize only your own point of view. ....

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**10.10 GRAMMAR: LINKING WORDS**

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In any piece of writing the sentences and the ideas in them are logically related by certain words or phrases that are known as linkers. These linkers have different functions and belong to different parts of speech. These may be pronouns, conjunctions, conditionals, determiners, etc.

Let us look at some of the linkers and their functions in the following table:

**Table 10.1: Linkers and their functions**

<b>Linkers</b>	<b>Functions</b>	<b>Examples</b>
And, as well as, moreover	Used to add new elements	This technique is being increasingly used by professional educational institutions, especially business schools, <b>as well as</b> by business houses to select professionals.
Or, in other words, alternatively	Used to express opposite ideas or an alternative choice	A candidate can speak in favour of the subject, against the subject <b>or</b> even follow a neutral path.
But, however, yet, still, on the other hand, on the contrary, even though	Used to express contrast	Slouching tells them that you are indifferent or you do not care, <b>even though</b> you might care a great deal!
Because, since, for, as	Giving a cause for a particular statement	And <b>since</b> you cannot see the listener in a telephone conversation, you need to confirm if important information has been correctly heard and understood.
Therefore, consequently, so, so that, hence	Used to express a result	Speak softly <b>so that</b> others around you do not get disturbed.
If, provided that, otherwise, unless, in case	Used to express condition	Do not telephone anyone at odd hours, <b>unless</b> it is very urgent.

**Self Check Exercise**

- Note:** i) Write your answers at the space given below.  
 ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of this Unit.
- 3) Complete the paragraph with the words from the box.

therefore	otherwise	or	who
and	if		

In most GD's the opening speaker is the person \_\_\_\_\_ is likely to get the maximum uninterrupted airtime. The reason is simple. At the start most other participants in the GD are still trying to understand the basic issues in the topic, \_\_\_\_\_ are too nervous to speak \_\_\_\_\_ are waiting for someone else to start. \_\_\_\_\_ the evaluators get the best chance to observe the opening speaker. Now this is a double-edged sword. \_\_\_\_\_ the opening speaker talks sense, naturally s/he will get credit because s/he opened the discussion and took the group in the right direction. \_\_\_\_\_ on the other hand, the first speaker doesn't make too much sense, s/he will attract the undivided attention of the evaluators to his shortcomings. She/he will be marked as a person \_\_\_\_\_ speaks without thinking merely for the sake of speaking. S/he will be seen as someone who leads the group in the wrong direction \_\_\_\_\_ does not make a positive contribution to the group. So remember, speaking first is a high-risk high-return strategy. It can make \_\_\_\_\_ mar your GD performance depending how you handle it. Speak first only \_\_\_\_\_ you have something sensible to say. \_\_\_\_\_ keep quiet and let someone else start.

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## 10.11 ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

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The participants of Group Discussions are evaluated by a panel of experts. Here are most of the areas on which they would mark you on their evaluation sheets. It would be extremely helpful to keep these in mind when you participate in Group Discussions.

- Command over spoken English – it should be logical, coherent, correct, appropriate.
- Knowledge base – authentic information – genuine facts and figures.
- Convincing power – cogent, decent and constructively forceful attitude.
- Discourse management – coping with twists and turns of arguments.
- Body Language – eye contact, body posture, attentiveness.
- Maturity – candidate must not 'bully' others or take undue advantage to prove herself/ himself a 'leader'.
- Listening – intelligent and analytical.
- Supplementing – responding and adding to what another has said before initiating a fresh turn.
- Initiative and Assertiveness.



### **Beneficial Team Behaviour**

- Initiate discussions.
- Seek information and opinions.
- Suggest procedures for reaching a goal / consensus.
- Clarify or elaborate ideas.
- Summarize.
- Act as a gate-keeper, direct conversational traffic, avoid simultaneous conversations.
- Subdue dominant talkers, make room for reserved and shy people.
- Keep the discussion from digressing.
- Be flexible and creative in resolving differences.

**A consolidated task based on the inputs given in this section is given in the speaking section.**

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## **10.12 SPEAKING**

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Practice your group discussion skills by arranging to meet with your study partners. Remember to apply the tips we have given you, the do's and don'ts as well as the formulaic language given in the Unit. Ask someone to assess you on the basis of the assessment criteria given in the Unit.

### **The topics could be:**

- i) Do we really need libraries, especially in the age of Internet?
- ii) Changing role of the librarian.

### **Suggested points for discussion:**

- Libraries are an integral part of any society.
- In a knowledge driven society, libraries can play a crucial role.
- Think of a situation when there will not be any libraries!
- Role of libraries have changed a great deal in the recent past.
- Besides providing books and periodicals, they also provide users information.
- E-documents, virtual libraries, online access to full-text etc., are new developments.
- Internet may appear to be making libraries somewhat redundant, but it will never replace books and libraries.

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## **10.13 SUMMARY**

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GD is being used by employers increasingly, because that gives the employer a chance to observe you in a group environment and evaluate your many crucial attributes, and compare with other candidates. You may be good academically and professionally, but if the selectors notice that your spoken communication or body language is not good enough, there is all possibility that you will be

rejected at the Group Discussion stage. You need to brush up your social skills before participating in a GD. Participate in GD in such way that the selectors take note of you!

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## 10.14 ANSWERS OF SELF CHECK EXERCISES

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- 1) The **surest** way of antagonizing others in the GD as well as the examiner is to appoint yourself as a de facto **chairperson** of the group. Do not try to impose a system whereby everyone gets a chance to speak in turn. A GD is meant to be a free **flowing** discussion. Let it proceed naturally. Do not ever try to take a vote on the topic. A vote is no substitute for discussion.

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## 10.15 ANSWERS TO ACTIVITIES

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- 1) Five attributes
- i) Oral communication skills
  - ii) Behaviour in a group
  - iii) Leadership qualities
  - iv) Body language
  - v) Ability to handle people.
- 2)
  - i) Listen attentively
  - ii) Communicate with confidence
  - iii) Positive body language.
- 3)
  - i) Don't keep silent for a long time.
  - ii) Don't deviate from the subject given for discussion.
  - iii) Don't exhibit negative body language.

Do not address only one or two persons when **speaking**. Maintain eye contact with as many members of the group as possible. This will involve others in what you are saying and increase your **chances** of carrying them with you. Do this even if you are **answering** a specific point raised by one person.

### **Text for the Audio: How to be Successful in a Group Discussion**

In order to succeed in any unstructured group discussion, you must define what your objective in the group is. A good definition of your objective is – to be seen to have contributed meaningfully in an attempt to achieve the right consensus. The key words in this definition are ‘seen’, ‘meaningfully’, and ‘attempt’.

Let us understand what each of these imply in terms of action points:

The first implication is that merely making a meaningful contribution in an attempt to achieve consensus is not enough. You have to be seen by the evaluator to have made a meaningful contribution to build the right consensus. In other words, you must ensure that you are heard by the group. If the group hears you, so will the evaluator. You must get at least some airtime. If you are not a very assertive person, you will have to simply learn to be assertive for those 15 minutes.

The second important implication is that making just any sort of contribution is not enough. Your contribution has to be meaningful. A meaningful contribution suggests that you have a good knowledge base, are able to structure arguments logically and are a good communicator. These are qualities that are desired by all evaluators.

One way of deciding what sort of contribution is meaningful, at what point of time, is to follow two simple rules.

First, in times of chaos, a person who restores order to the group is appreciated. Your level of participation in a fish market kind of scenario can be low, but your degree of influence must never be low. In other words, you must make positive contributions every time you speak, and not merely speak for the sake of speaking. The second rule is applicable when the group is floundering. In this situation a person who provides a fresh direction to the group is given credit.

The third implication is that you must be clearly seen to be attempting to build a consensus. Nobody expects a group of ten people, all with different points of view on a controversial subject to actually achieve a consensus. But did you make the attempt to build a consensus? The reason why an attempt to build a consensus is important is because in most work situations you will have to work with people in a team, accept joint responsibilities and take decisions as a group. You must demonstrate the fact that you are capable and inclined to work as part of a team. What are the ways that you can try to build consensus?

Firstly, you don't just talk. You also listen. You must realize that other people also may have valid points to make. You should not only try to persuade other people to your point of view, but also come across as a person who has an open mind and appreciates the valid points of others.

You must try and resolve contradictions and arguments of others in the group. You must synthesize arguments and try and achieve a unified position in the group. Try and summarize the discussion at the end. In the summary do not merely restate your point of view; also accommodate dissenting viewpoints. If the group did not reach a consensus, say so in your summary. You must carry people with you.

One last point, you must not agree with another participant in the group merely for the sake of achieving consensus. If you disagree, say so. You are not there to attempt to build just any consensus. You have to attempt to build the right consensus.

- 2) i) You must contribute towards reaching a consensus. True
- ii) In order to be heard you must speak for at least 15 minutes. False
- iii) You can make a meaningful contribution even if you do not know much about the topic being discussed. False
- iv) A fish market scenario is one where each one tries to talk at the same time and emphasize her/his point of view. True
- v) If you fail to contribute towards reaching a consensus it means you are not very good at team work. True

- vi) A good listener agrees with what others say. False
- vii) In the end you must summarize only your own point of view. False
- 3) In most GD's the opening speaker is the person **who** is likely to get the maximum uninterrupted airtime. The reason is simple. At the start most other participants in the GD are still trying to understand the basic issues in the topic, **or** are too nervous to speak **and** are waiting for someone else to start. **Therefore**, the evaluators get the best chance to observe the opening speaker. Now this is a double-edged sword. **If** the opening speaker talks sense, naturally s/he will get credit because s/he opened the discussion and took the group in the right direction. **If** on the other hand the first speaker doesn't make too much sense, s/he will attract the undivided attention of the evaluators to her/his shortcomings. S/he will be marked as a person **who** speaks without thinking merely for the sake of speaking, as someone who leads the group in the wrong direction **and** does not make a positive contribution to the group.

So remember, speaking first is a high-risk high-return strategy. It can make **or** mar your GD performance depending how you handle it. Speak first only **if** you have something sensible to say. **Otherwise** keep quiet and let someone else start.

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## 10.16 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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Furman. *Effective Group Discussion: Theory and Practice*. McGraw-Hill, 2003. Print.