

# Group Process on Steroids

We often describe our work to others as “group process on steroids.” It’s like organizational development, community organizing, and other related practices done really, really well. Except that it’s also somewhat different.

What exactly does that mean?!

It means doing whatever you can and leveraging whatever tools are at your disposal to enable groups to work skillfully together, to help them come alive.

Where exactly do the steroids come in?!

(My business partner, Kristin Cobble, took a pass at this question a year ago. [Start there](#). It’s taken this long to respond with my own thoughts, because I’ve struggled with how to articulate it clearly, and my thinking has continued to evolve. Bear with me.)

There are a lot of people who know a lot about group process. Some of those people are even consultants! (More on this below.) We don’t do anything fundamentally different from what all of these other people do. I just think we’re less distracted when we practice it.

I mean this in two ways:

- People in our field are overwhelmingly focused on meetings.
- People are overwhelming distracted by technology’s potential role in group process.

## Meetings

On the one hand, meetings are incredibly important. People spend an inordinate amount of time in meetings, and the vast majority of them suck. If we could somehow magically make all

meetings just one percent better, imagine how much better off the world would be?

It's of great value to be able to hold great meetings and to be able to help others do the same. I take great pride in our ability to do both of these exceptionally well. I also know of many others who do these things well, and I am constantly learning from them.

On the other hand, focusing on meetings is not enough. As much time as we spend in meetings, we spend much more time outside of them. The notion that group work equals meetings is troublesome, yet it feels pervasive both in our field and the world at large.

One reason consultants fixate on meetings is that they're easy. It is so much easier to work with a group when everyone is in a room. The problem is that it's not always practical to get people into a room for a meeting, and many times it's not even desirable.

So what do you do? How do you catalyze groups when you don't have everybody in a room together?

## Technology

The answer is *not* technology. Technology is amazing, but it's only valuable to the extent that it brings people alive. Because technology is so magical, we often forget that. We orient ourselves around the technology as opposed to the other way around.

Our ability to skillfully leverage technology in group process requires that we have an [uncomplicated relationship with technology](#) and that we stay conscious of the system as a whole.

I have had the great fortune to work with some amazing technology. I [worked with](#) computer pioneer, [Doug Engelbart](#),

who was my inspiration for doing this kind of work in the first place and who taught me the importance of a people-first mentality. I led the [Wikimedia strategic planning process](#), a year-long, open process that had over a thousand people from all over the world participate.

People sometimes look at these projects and say, “We want that.” And after asking some questions and listening to them, we often respond, “No you don’t.” This is usually because they’ve conflated the tools with the outcomes. It’s so easy to fall victim to technology’s shininess and lose focus on what you really want to achieve.

For example, people often approach us with questions about de-siloing their organizations. It’s not an easy problem. There are some fundamental structural and human reasons for why silos form in the first place, and it can be tremendously challenging to overcome those barriers.

Which makes it all the harder for me to offer them the following two-step process for de-siloing their organization:

1. Identify someone in a different silo.
2. Go buy that person a drink.

It might sound trite, but I am completely sincere when I say it. The keys to effective group process are being absolutely clear about our goals and focusing on fundamental human drivers, such as our basic need to connect with other people. I, like many, am blown away by the potential of things like mobile devices and social networking applications to help us do that. Despite my fascination with these possibilities, I still have yet to discover a better tool for connecting with others than breaking bread.

## **Group Process on Steroids**

“Group process on steroids” is not about new tools or technology. It’s not a methodology. It’s a philosophy and a

practice. It's about focusing on what's essential: People. This is easy to say, and hard to do.

There's a growing literature that describes this approach in a way that's accessible and actionable. (For organizations, start with my friend, [Dave Gray's](#) recent book, [The Connected Company](#). Howard Rheingold's book, [Net Smart](#), is framed around digital literacy, but it's ultimately about *human* literacy, about navigating our relationships with people, information, and ourselves.) We try to write about our own experiences here on this blog.

Furthermore, there are a lot of people who are already practicing "group process on steroids" skillfully in this crazy, connected world.

Most of these people are *not* consultants. In consulting, it's easy to fall in love with your tools, your frameworks, your processes, so much so that you forget the reason you're doing your work in the first place. I say this knowing full well that I have fallen into this trap many times. It's one of the reasons why the [field of collaboration practitioners itself is so siloed](#), why so many people in this space are not learning from each other. It's probably the fate of any field that becomes [professionalized](#).

"Group process" on steroids is about [countering our obsession with tools and processes](#).

The best practitioners are everyday people embedded in organizations or working in their communities. Most of them have [never heard or uttered the term](#), "group process." We all need to identify these folks, celebrate them, and listen to and learn from them, if only to remind ourselves of what matters most: Bringing groups alive.