

# ATTENTION COOPERATION PURPOSE

An Approach to Working in Groups  
Using Insights from Wilfred Bion



Robert French and Peter Simpson



ATTENTION, COOPERATION, PURPOSE



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*For  
Wendy, David, Clare, Isobel, Simon, and Laura*

*Helen, David, Charlotte, Tom, Katie,  
and Jean*



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## PREFACE

Every group, however casual, meets to “do” something.

—*Bion*, 1961, p. 143

Most people spend a fair amount of their lives working in groups. For some it is a generally enjoyable experience; for others just an ordeal to be tolerated. However, our emotional responses can mask a more important evaluation. If we come away from a group event thinking only about whether it was enjoyable or not then we have probably missed the point. There is a more significant question: did the group achieve what it set out to do? It is easy enough to say the phrase “working in groups” but actually *doing* it can be quite another matter. It can even be hard to know whether a group really *is* “working”. This has been our experience in all types of group, small or large, formal or informal.

At every moment, each one of us can contribute to helping the group work at the “something” it is meeting to do. Too often, however, we do not do so—for reasons that may be conscious or unconscious. For example, the discussion moves away from the agenda and onto other, sometimes trivial, issues: why do I say nothing? Similarly, in one organisation that we know well no meeting ever starts on time. Rather than

challenging this habit everyone has merely adjusted their behaviour and turns up late to every meeting. New members soon learn to arrive late or to tolerate waiting for others to arrive. Why is this pattern of behaviour not addressed?

In many such group settings we can find ourselves compelled to compromise our beliefs and to do things we would rather not do; it is as though we have no choice. We stay silent in the face of decisions or behaviours which, when we think about it, we believe are inappropriate or even wrong. There are many reasons why we do not speak up: fear of conflict, apathy, a tendency to compromise, the desire for an easy life, the pressure to collude or conform, or worry about our own competence, and—underpinning all of these—the anxiety that these states of mind tend to evoke. Equally common is to become blind to what is happening: we are so used to the way the group works that we no longer think about it and just assume that this is the way it has to be. Surely, however, it would be better to assume that the group should actually do what it is meeting to do.

### *Overview*

Our purpose in writing this book is to describe an approach that we have found can indeed help individuals and groups to work more effectively on what they meet to do. We draw upon the insights of the English psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion (1897–1979) to guide our understanding of group dynamics. The approach that we describe relies on the use of attention by group members in order to cooperate in pursuit of their common purpose. It can be summarised in two questions: Are we attending to what the group is meeting to do? If not, have we become distracted from the actual purpose and begun to behave as if we are meeting to do something else?

The idea of attending to the group purpose is so simple that it might seem as though there is little else to say on the matter. However, there are two reasons why this is not the case. First, the deceptively simple notion of “meeting to do something” is in fact complex and problematic as a result of its constituent parts: the complexity of defining the “something” that the group will do, its purpose, and the complexity of “meeting”. This sets up a broad range of dynamics that stem from the interplay of multiple factors, such as emotion, motivation, individual histories, patterns of behaviour, power relations, and politics.

Second, the idea that I can simply attend to what the group is meeting to do is not simple at all because of our remarkable capacity to deceive ourselves. Our relationship with the truth is complex. To pursue the truth and to make sense of what is happening in a group requires both courage and the insight to see beyond self-deception. For example, if it appears to me that a group is doing the wrong thing, who is to say that I have not just misunderstood the situation or missed something that was said earlier? If I speak up I could look a fool which might have implications for being taken seriously in the future, for friendships, or even for my career. However, others may in fact be thinking the same thing but also staying silent and so the group continues in its error and deception.

**Chapter One:** We start with an explanation of the state of mind we talk of as *attention*. A key moment in our writing came when we recognised that we were working with two forms of attention: “evenly suspended attention” (Freud, 1912e, p. 111) and focused attention. The exceptional quality Bion brought to his endeavours seems to have come from his ability to work with both forms simultaneously. With a contemplative eye he was able to work with evenly suspended attention, constantly open to the truth of the moment; this he combined with a scientific eye, giving focused attention to what was happening and concentrating on specific elements of individual and group behaviour.

**Chapter Two:** *Distraction* is the state of mind that can take over when attention is lost and the group purpose forgotten. This usually occurs because strong emotions, especially anxiety, throw the group off track.

**Chapter Three:** To pursue *truth* is to be “on track”. Bion was writing from within a tradition going back at least to Ancient Greece, which firmly gives the search for truth through the contemplative gaze precedence over action or even thinking: “the beginning of it all is contemplation”. (Pieper, 1990, p. 72) Because evenly suspended attention remains open to the truth of the moment it can have a transformative impact that leads to the development of new knowledge, although it may feel more like intuition than certainty.

The remaining chapters describe Bion’s insights into the aspects of working in groups that require the application of *focused attention*.

**Chapter Four:** The ability to *cooperate* is fundamental to the experience of working in groups. We draw on Bion’s idea of “groupishness” to explore the tensions that arise from the fact that each group member is a unique individual but also a part of the group. This individual–group

tension is not only embodied in our external relationships but is also an ever-present tension in our internal worlds between the desire to belong and the desire to be separate.

**Chapter Five:** We have already alluded to the pivotal role of *purpose*—the “something” a group meets to do. Effective cooperation requires attention to a complex interplay in each group member’s experience of purpose. The quality of attention given to purpose will influence each member’s ability to maintain a more or less clear sense of their own purpose, and to manage any tensions and conflicts that may exist between that and the common purpose of the group.

**Chapter Six:** We turn to what is almost certainly the best known aspect of Bion’s theory of group dynamics, namely, the three fundamental *forms of interaction* that he observed in groups: dependency, pairing, and fight–flight.

**Chapter Seven:** One of Bion’s most significant contributions was to insist on the unconscious dimension of the dynamics of attention and distraction. *Learning the work of attention* is a complex undertaking and we finish the book with two examples where groups were working specifically on this task. The final example is from a so-called “group relations” event, an approach to learning that was directly influenced by Bion’s work.

### *Insights from Bion*

The approach that we describe draws on a range of Bion’s writings but the most relevant is the theory of groups that he introduced in his book *Experiences in Groups* (1961). For those who are familiar with Bion’s work, it is worth noting from the start that we do not share his focus on dysfunctional group behaviours. Whilst we give great importance to dysfunctional states of mind, our main focus is on the way attention can help groups to work effectively on what they are meeting to do.

Bion’s ideas on groups were developed whilst working with colleagues to help soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, with so-called “leaderless groups”, and then as a psychoanalyst at the Tavistock Institute. Although he had faith in the general robustness of groups, his primary interest was in identifying and describing the factors that undermine effective group functioning. Most of what others have written that draws on *Experiences in Groups* has tended to focus in a similar way on dysfunctional behaviour. We are seeking to redress the

balance by giving equal weight to factors that are evident when groups work well.

In focusing on working in groups we have in mind different possible meanings of the word “work”. It can mean labour or effort, as in “hard work”, but it can also mean functioning OK, as when we say, “It may be a bit old and battered but it still works fine.” In work contexts it is all too often assumed that groups function OK through lots of work-as-effort, but it is not as simple as that. Sometimes trying really hard to make a group work can get you nowhere while at other times people can work amazingly well together but seemingly without effort—more like play than work.

The approach we describe here does indeed require a high degree of application—hard work. However, attending to what is important *in the moment*, which is central to the approach, depends on more than just the positive capabilities that express themselves in decisive action. It also requires a state of mind that has been called “negative capability” (Keats in Bion, 1970, p. 125), which depends on the capacity to listen, wait, absorb, reflect, and to remain relaxed yet alert before moving to action (see [Chapter One](#)). The fact that a group sometimes works with apparent ease, but at other times puts in huge amounts of effort to no avail, may in part be explained by the presence or absence of a quality of attention rooted in negative capability.

The approach has developed out of our experience of using Bion’s ideas in many different capacities—as group members, managers, leaders, teachers, consultants, and researchers. We hope our approach will help make his ideas accessible to readers with a general interest in understanding how to work in groups, as well as to those who are already familiar with Bion’s ideas. In this regard it is relevant to mention that throughout the book we use stories from our experience to illustrate the ideas and their implications for practice. All of the stories are true even though some combine elements from more than one event. The identities of all individuals and groups have been disguised.