

Group dynamics in twelve angry men

[Experience](#), [Anger](#)



The movie "12 Angry Men" is a fascinating and insightful examination of a diverse group of twelve jurors who are uncomfortably brought together to deliberate the "facts" of a seemingly open-and-shut murder trial. The premise is the trial of a frightened, teenaged defendant accused of stabbing and killing his father. However, there is an underlying sense that the jurors, themselves, and the American judicial system, are on trial as well. The trial by jury system is supposed to produce a unanimous decision in an objective, fair and unbiased manner.

This film takes more than a glimpse behind the closed doors of a jury room and reveals that it's anything but what we would expect. So, what went wrong? In order to answer that question, we must examine the twelve jurors and their personalities, their ability - and often inability - to communicate clearly, and the positive and negative aspects of their conflict management processes. The jurors are a group of predominately middle-aged white males. That's about where the similarities end.

Their personalities, prejudices, weaknesses, socio-economic and cultural differences, priorities, ignorance, and fears often cause them to avoid the true issues of the case. The foreman of the jury (Juror #1) is an assistant high school football coach but lacks any natural leadership skills. Throughout the proceedings, he tries to keep the proceedings formal but is easily frustrated and sensitive when his "authority" or control is threatened. Juror #2 is a meek and mild bank teller who seems to try to avoid conflict at all costs. Juror #3 runs a messenger service and is a rude bully.

He is extremely opinionated and biased, loud-mouthed, intolerant and temperamental. Although defiant to the end, it's later discovered that his own personal conflicts greatly influence his behavior. Juror #4 is a stockbroker. He's very logical, self-assured, and rational. It's apparent early in the movie that he has an amazing recall about the evidence introduced in the case and has kept meticulous notes. Juror #5 is a reserved and quiet man. He is apparently ashamed of his slum-dwelling upbringing and hesitant at first to speak up. It's possible that he has a Hispanic heritage, but this is only speculation.

Juror #6 is a blue-collar painter. A natural follower, he seems to have difficulty in making his own decisions. He's intolerant of disrespect towards the older juror. Juror #7 is a salesman whose main interest is getting to a baseball game that he has tickets for. He lacks any compassion or concern for the defendant's life. Juror #8 is a patient and thoughtful architect. A natural leader, he often persuades others through his calm logical reasoning. He is focused on the gravity of the case and is able to separate others' personal prejudices from the task at hand. Juror #9 is the eldest man in the group.

He's at the twilight of his life and has uncanny powers of observation and perception. Juror #10 is an intolerant, racist, and angry man. He uses no logical reasoning skills and tries to force his emotional and bitter opinions on others. Juror #11 is a recent immigrant to the United States. He is well-spoken and has a much deeper respect for the American judicial system than the rest of the group. He is polite and occasionally clever, but also resolute

and open-minded. Juror #12 is a superficial advertising man. He seemingly lacks any real convictions about anything as evidenced by his constant swaying to others opinions.

These men all have obvious strengths and weaknesses. And, they each have their different and unique individual life experiences and attitudes. But it's precisely those differences that affect how they are able to interact with each other (although often ineffectively) to work through the task that's been given to them. Further, the only way to convey those differences, those things that are important or unimportant to them, is through communication. As is often the case, how we communicate with others determines the results that we achieve. If we communicate effectively, others can easily grasp our ideas and intentions.

If, however, we utilize poor communications skills, our true objectives become confusing, misinterpreted, or lost altogether. Twelve Angry Men gives excellent examples of both clear, concise, and reasonable communication skills as well as inadequate, appalling, and exasperating ones. Henry Fonda (Juror #8) was far and away the most effective communicator of this group. Perhaps this is why he was able to eventually achieve the unlikely feat of swaying the other eleven jurors. After the initial vote was taken, the emotionally charged group immediately became insolent.

Fonda was able to not only convey his intentions of not emotionally pre-judging the young defendant, but did so in such a way that was not directly confrontational. He openly admits that he doesn't necessarily believe the

boys story, but tries to refocus the group towards the legal standards set forth by the judge. He suggests that the group spend just one hour discussing the case and weighing the facts, rather than sending the boy off to die without at least some thought. Throughout the movie Fonda is able to argue and counter-argue his doubts with a rational, thoughtful cool-headedness that made it difficult for the other jurors to deny.

Juror #4 (E. G. Marshall) was also an effective communicator. His arguments for guilt were clear, concise, and matter-of-fact. However, he often presented arguments in a smug, conceited manner. I think it was only Fonda's appeal to his logical side that eventually won Juror #4 over. On the other side of the coin, it was the total lack of communication skills that seriously hampered the arguments of Juror #'s 3 and 10. Juror #3 (Lee J. Cobb) was abrasive and blustery. He was a bully in the worst sense of the word. He had no rational arguments of his own, and tried to use others as a springboard for his emotional personal attacks.

He obviously felt very strongly about the boys guilt, (albeit for the wrong reasons), but was never able to forward any coherent reasoning to express that. Instead he used insults, assaults and threats to make up for his lack of coherent discussion. Juror #10 was just plain offensive. He was not capable of issuing any arguments, only violent outbursts of ignorant prejudice. It was precisely these types of communication and personality types that served to most influence the group's dynamics throughout the movie. Even though the initial vote was 11-1 for guilty, it can be contended that the group was possibly more divided.

Six of the jurors, (Juror #s 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, and 12), raised their hands for a guilty verdict almost immediately. Yet, five of the remaining six (Juror #s 2, 5, 6, 11, and 9) were initially hesitant with their vote. They raised their hands only after seeing how quickly the others raised theirs. This is what Forsyth (1999) probably would have called compliance, " Compliance occurs when group members privately disagree with the group, but publicly express an opinion that matches the opinions expressed by the majority of the group" (179).

This assumption could be reinforced by the order in which the jurors changed their votes. The five jurors originally hesitant were the first ones to switch their votes to not guilty as the meeting progressed. The foreman's inability to lead effectively was another major component of the group's dynamics in this case. Juror #1's deficiency caused the group to be more responsive to Juror #8's natural leadership skills. The acceptance of Juror #8's leadership facilitated the unlikely transition of the group from a guilty verdict to one of not guilty.

Forsyth (1999) explains, " In general, the greater the perceived competency and group-centered motivation of the individual, the more influential the minority" (185). Juror #8 gained idiosyncrasy credits with the group as the meeting progressed and slowly developed his credibility. " These credits accumulate during the course of interaction, typically as a member contributes to the progress of the group toward desired goals" (Forsyth, 1999, p. 186). Twelve Angry Men is a movie about conflict and conflict

resolution. When Juror #8 raises his hand to cast the only not guilty vote he throws the group into conflict.

But, it is this same conflict that enables the group to intelligently complete their task. According to Forsyth (1999), "Exposure to others" positions, in addition to providing additional information and prompting a more thorough analysis of that information, can also cause group members to reinterpret, or cognitively restructure, key aspects of the issue" (191). After the initial vote, tempers flared, votes changed, divisions were created, emotions were exhibited, and prejudices were displayed.

Throughout the rest of the movie though, the group, perhaps unconsciously, moved towards conflict resolution. Persuasion gives way to arguing, emotions take place of logic, and the once unified group splits into factions and coalitions. This period of conflict escalation is, in most cases, followed by a reduction in conflict and, ideally, conflict resolution" (Forsyth, 1999, p. 237). "Insofar as conflict is resolved successfully, it has stabilizing functions and becomes an integrating component of the group relationship" (Forsyth, 1999), p. 263). These twelve jurors began with conflict, proceeded through often-heated conflict escalation, and eventually came to resolution.

They may not have bonded emotionally together, but they were able to produce the best results with the tools they were given. It can't be said for sure if the experience would have changed their attitudes permanently, but it is unlikely. However, it is hoped that those of us who view the film will not be so quick to judge after seeing the "facts" in our own situations. To convict the young man based on their prejudices, emotions, or apathy would have

been a travesty of justice. But, with group observation, discussion, and logical reasoning, (even if forced by conflict), we can all make better decisions.