The Effective Groups Reading List
Why this reading list?
People often ask me for recommended books for the Effective Groups course and associated resources, and I really struggle because there are so many books, for so many different purposes. So I have put this list together to cover the different areas. Personally I find reading lists deathly boring, so I’ve put it together in this way to try and make it more visual and engaging and to give a sense of each book.

One of the key messages of the Effective Groups course is that there are no quick fixes or single answers that will make a group or organisation work effectively or be really successful. This reading list attempts to reinforce this message by providing a range of books that will do a variety of things, in a range of different situations.

It depends what type of situation you are in, what kind of culture you have in your group, what the dominant values are and particular tensions are in your group, as to what approach will best work. It also depends on your own personal preferences, values, learning styles etc. as to which type of book or approach to working in groups will work for you.

How is it arranged?
This list lays out a range of books organised by different approaches. Some may be very interesting to you, some may want to make you throw up or lose the will to live, but all are probably useful in some ways, but not all necessarily to you. Some of the books are specifically for collaborative groups, others more for organisations more generally and others for businesses more specifically. This is an area full of overlaps since organisations and businesses are full of groups, and innovative practices in businesses could make social change groups much more effective. So some translation between contexts may be required, and very useful if you are willing to make the effort.

Part 1- Skills for working in groups
The first pages 4-12 are specifically about the skills, perspectives and approaches which can help people work more effectively in groups, teams and organisations. Where relevant, I have linked parts of this reading list to specific tools or areas on the Effective Groups Canvas.

Part 2- The larger context- complexity, resilience, sustainability, enterprise, economic ecosystems and the cosmos
Then I couldn't resist putting books in about the larger context within which our groups and organisations exist, since they are all so shaped by the context. So pages 12-15 are about larger contexts of complexity, resilience, sustainability, enterprise, economic ecosystems and the largest context of all- the evolution of the cosmos.
Drawn from Starhawk's considerable experience of working with collaborative groups, this book is a very helpful guide for people wanting to work more collaboratively - with values such as co-operation, participation, social justice, equality, inclusion, building shared understanding, consensus power - with rather than power-over structures. Includes lots of insights, tips and practical activities, within a framework rooted in her characteristic blend of spirituality and activism, as well as an entertaining story woven through the book.

A guide which covers all aspects of working collaboratively to create an ecovillage or intentional community project. Its included here as most of it can be applied to building collaborative social change groups. Again, expressing similar values to the Empowerment Manual. Its drawn from the experience of the 10% of ecovillage/community projects which have been successful in setting up, in contrast to the 90% who didn't make it.

The definitive text on Sociocracy. This is a new system for organising ourselves in groups, communities or organisations around the people and our needs/wants/preferences. It provides a complete and integrated system, as opposed to the above two books which are more of a collection of tools. Its based on people working together with the principle of 'consent'. Created by an engineer and some people find the system a bit technical and difficult to understand.

The first text devoted completely to the application of permaculture principles to how we live/work/coexist together. Founded on the collaborative principles and values similar to the other books, but baked into a systems approach. This approach is less engineering and more models how natural systems work. Quite deep and far ranging, with lots of activities to deepen a group and make it more effective.
Collaborative & Participatory Facilitation

A large collection of articles about all aspects of facilitation from the International Association of Facilitators. Its a big book, quite theoretical, heavy and expensive. Only to go near if you are deadly serious about learning facilitation skills.

The IAF Handbook of Group Facilitation

A fun collection of participatory tools. Lots practical of tips, pictures, activities for groups which are easy to pick up and try.

The Complete Facilitator's Handbook

A collection of lots of icebreakers and warmups to make meetings more fun. Its not great, but an example that there are lots of them out there!

201 Icebreakers

Rather theoretical, this dives into what needs to happen inside me, and what I need to be aware of if I am to become 'complete' as a facilitator. An interesting framework, some find hard to digest.

Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision-Making

A handbook for a course which is about creating conflict resolution with young people. Lots of good ice breakers, games, packed with activities to deal with conflict in creative ways.

The Skilled Facilitator Fieldbook

The book from which the 'Controlling' & 'Collaborative' Communication models used in the Effective Groups course are drawn. It takes a systemic approach to groups and teams and suggests ways of working with them based on this understanding. Used more in a corporate context, but still useful and applicable for groups working in social enterprise and change.
A standard, solid textbook on group theory and group skills. Leaning towards collaborative and participatory groups, it provides theory and activities to do with groups. Designed for people on a course to learn about group skills with proper learning objectives! If you are new to this territory and want a good introduction and are prepared to read a textbook, this is a good first step, which will then probably help you find out where you want to go next.

A mind-boggling collection of over 60 tools, methods, processes, activities to do with groups to facilitate collective change. Methods grouped into categories: Adaptable Methods, Planning Methods, Structuring Methods, Improving Methods Supportive Methods. Includes World Cafe, Open Space, Consensus and many more. The challenge of this book is knowing which tool to use when, and it does give some guidance about that.

A dive into the theory and practice of 'Dialogue'. An approach to communication which develops skills for people to be more conscious and constructive. For example: helping us identify assumptions that we and other people are making: suspending our judgements so we can fully understand what someone else is saying before responding.

The source text for the Open Space method of facilitation which has been picked up by so many people and not used that well, in my opinion, thus diluting the potential power of this method.

A short book giving an introduction to Appreciative Inquiry. This is a method which helps people identify what is already working, and then build on that to develop and find solutions. Its a very positive approach! Not enough on its own, but can be useful in the right place at the right time.
This book uses the differences between a starfish and a spider as a metaphor to talk about 'leaderless organisations'.

When a spider’s head gets cut off, it dies. When any part of a starfish gets cut off, it can get regenerated and grow back.

Hierarchical organisations and groups are dependent on their leaders in the same way that a spider is dependent on its head. While organisations which can self-organise, are not reliant on a leader are better able to adapt to a changing environment and are more likely to be effective in the fast-changing, unpredictable 21st century.

Holacracy calls itself a new operating system for organisations. There isn't a book about it yet, this is the folder from the Certification Training that I went on for it.

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This book is about the Viable Systems Model created by Stafford Beer. It identifies the essential functions which need to happen at each level of an organisation as: operations, coordination, management, development and strategy. Then shows how an organisation can be structured so that these are replicated at every level, in a fractal pattern. This means that the organisation, more like a starfish, can self-organise and replicate, adapt to change. Some people find this system quite technical and hard to understand and communicate.

'Lean' is a methodology for running organisations pioneered by Toyota, in which unnecessary bits are sought out, leaving the minimum structure to allow maximum flexibility, adaptability and agility. This book applies these principles to start-up enterprises.