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Facilitating Groups   Handout

Introduction

This handout summarises some of the key areas for a group convener or facilitator to consider. It covers quite a lot, briefly and you may want to follow up in specific areas, so there are a small number of references included.

You may notice that I sometimes refer to groups as if they are an entity in themselves. This is intentional as I find it helpful to think about a group as having its own consciousness, character, needs and wisdom.

We all have a wealth of experience of a wide range of groups, typically through our families, schooling, social activities, work and interests. However, there is a significant difference between, for example, a social grouping that is developing naturally without any intentional facilitation and a more deliberately convened group with a clear purpose. The focus of this handout is on the latter.

Dimensions of Facilitation

John Heron (1989) developed his dimensions of facilitation in the context of non-traditional educational programmes, both at the University of Surrey and the Institute for Development of Human Potential (IDHP). His dimensions offer a useful framework for facilitation in a variety of contexts.

1. Planning

What is the purpose, or what are the goals, of the group? Do we come together to support one another, to learn, to develop our awareness and understanding, to practice specific activities, to achieve particular outcomes, or for some other purpose?

How will we conduct ourselves in order to achieve our purpose, what approach will we take and what activities will we undertake together?

When the purpose of a group is unclear misunderstandings can arise, or members may find themselves pulling in different directions.

Membership

Within the planning dimension the issue of participation or membership is very important. Will Schutz (1979) suggests that the questions of 'who is in?' and 'who is out?' are of particular significance in the early stages of any group's life. A 'closed' group generally has a fixed membership. In a closed group it is important to understand whether there is some process by which a new member may be invited to join and how that decision is reached. An 'open' group generally allows new members at each meeting.

It is helpful to be explicit about who is and who can be a member, or in an 'open' group what criteria there are for attendance. It is uncomfortable to have a discussion about whether someone may stay, once they have arrived!

Ground rules

These are concerned with how the individuals in the group will behave. Depending on the nature and purpose of the group these may address such matters as what (if any) information can be taken outside the

group sessions, how participants look after themselves, expectations of behaviour towards one another and sometimes what is expected in terms of contact between participants outside the group sessions.

Typically ground rules are negotiated with/by the membership of the group as this is thought to increase the level of commitment to what is agreed by the group members.

Practical arrangements

These include where, when and for how long the group will meet. Sometimes the time or place where a group meets becomes part of its identity – the Friday afternoon group or the Fox and Hounds back-room group. Some groups successfully rotate where they meet or vary meeting times, but typically that takes more effort and can lead to confusion or disruption when the arrangements for a meeting unexpectedly need to be altered.

Other practical arrangements include domestic practicalities such as refreshments, room preparation and tidying up afterwards. Sometimes individuals are pleased to take on these simple tasks of service, but it is also possible that tasks such as washing up the dirty mugs or vacuuming the floor can become a source of resentment or conflict.

2. Meaning

This is the cognitive aspect of facilitation and is concerned with how participants will understand or give meaning to their experiences in the group. How do the participants think about a group and the activities it undertake? What language is used to describe and discuss what takes place? The language and the concepts and perspectives taken will significantly influence how participants will give meaning to what occurs.

Facilitators can have a significant influence upon the meaning that participants ascribe to their experience in a group, through the perspective from which they make interventions. For example a disagreement in a group between two participants might be viewed in a number of ways, including:

- From a functional perspective – how do they reach an understanding or compromise so that the group can proceed with its tasks?
- From a socio-political perspective – does this argument reflect wider conflict between those from a socially privileged group (in terms of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc) and those from a socially oppressed group?
- From a therapeutic perspective – what is each individual bringing to this conflict from their psychological material?
- From a transpersonal perspective – how does this conflict reflect the current stage of spiritual development of members of the group?

3. Confronting

This is the challenge aspect of facilitation.

This can involve naming aspects of group life that the group needs to address, yet appears to be avoiding or resistant to tackling. In essence this means giving feedback to the group, rather than individuals within it, in a manner that is both clear and loving.

It may also mean challenging the behaviour of an individual member in a group, for example if they are pulling the attention away from the agreed focus or not following one of the agreed ground-rules for the group.

To confront, or challenge, is not the same as criticising or putting an individual down. Rather it involves naming what is observable behaviour or being experienced and invite group members to address what is occurring.

4. Feelings

This is concerned with responses to the feeling experience of the group.

At one level this includes how the group responds when a member is in an aroused emotional state. Does the group offer supportive attention to that individual immediately and for as long as they want, are they encouraged to contain their feelings while other matters are addressed, is there a process of negotiation about how the group's time will be divided? These are decisions for a group to make.

It is in the feeling dimension that I find it particularly helpful to think about the group as if it is an entity in itself, because a group appears to have a feeling life of its own, separate from yet interacting with the feelings of individual group members. Thus each individual group member will, at any given moment, have an emotional or felt response to what is taking place in the group. Alongside this the group may be expressing itself dynamically through the manner in which it affects the feelings of the individual members.

It is not uncommon to experience anxiety, tension, excitement, arousal, contentment and sadness as an underlying 'mood' within a group. Learning to distinguish between personal emotional responses and group 'mood' is one of the tasks in the development of facilitation skills.

5. Structuring

This is concerned with how the group structures its time and activities in order to meet its purpose and goals. The structuring dimension overlaps with the planning dimension, but is more concerned with the detail of what the group will do, whereas planning is more concerned with how the group will manage and conduct itself.

For groups with an experiential, awareness or development purpose it is often useful to have a brief check-in round at the start of a session. This helps participants bring their awareness into the present and also alerts the group to any individuals who are particularly aroused or distracted by external matters. However, it is easy for 'check-in' to take up increasing proportions of the group's time if it is not clear how much people will say and what, if any, responses others will make, beyond attentive listening.

Other key structuring questions include; what core activities will the group undertake and how and by whom will those be led? How are those activities linked to the purpose and goals of the group? How will the group review its experience and reflect on whether the activities are serving the purpose and meeting the goals of the group?

The question of review also brings to the foreground the question of whether the group has achieved its purpose, met its goals and therefore fulfilled its purpose. This is particularly relevant to groups that do not have a pre-determined length of life.

6. Valuing

This dimension is concerned with how a supportive climate can be created and maintained within a group in which members feel respected and accepted for who they are. Such a climate enables group members to feel safe enough to disclose their experience honestly and openly, anticipating that their contribution will be valued and their needs acknowledged.

Arguably the valuing dimension distinguishes groups concerned with the experiential learning and development of its members from other types of groups which may have a more functional or political value base.

Contract and review

Any of the aspects of the above dimensions can form the basis of the group 'contract', which is the working agreement between those who come together to form the group. Whilst it is not necessary to have a written agreement, in groups that take place over a period of months or years it can be helpful to have some notes about such matters as purpose, goals, ground rules, membership, structures and practical arrangements.

Such notes provide a basis for regular reviews of a group. These periods of reflection can result in new goals being agreed, offering periodic opportunities for members to leave the group or new members to join, structures to be changed, new activities introduced or for a group to be brought to an end.

Leadership & facilitation

Groups appear to naturally develop leadership from amongst their membership, when this is required to achieve significant objectives and the group has not been formed with a leader in place. Even a social group of friends who meet for lunch will only meet if someone takes the initiative to make necessary arrangements. Groups with more complex purposes will typically create a leadership structure intended to ensure that those purposes are achieved effectively and within the agreed timescales.

There are a wide variety of models of leadership, from the traditional hierarchical, those where leadership is shared among the group members for different time periods or tasks, through to groups where decision making is by consensus and 'leadership' belongs to the group rather than any individual member.

The role of facilitator is common in certain types of groups or situations. Thus you may well find a facilitator in a group that is concerned with addressing interpersonal tasks, learning tasks through largely experiential (as distinct from didactic) approaches, therapeutic tasks or where it is felt important to have someone assigned to focus their attention on the 'process' of the group rather than the specifics of the content. In team and organisational consultancy a facilitator may be brought in to help the team or organisation explore (and consider changes to) how they do things.

Responsibilities of the facilitator

It is helpful for a facilitator to be clear in their own mind and, as appropriate, clear with the group about what aspects of the life of the group they will be responsible for. The dimensions (above) form a basis for clarifying these responsibilities.

A facilitator may experience an unspoken pressure to take on additional responsibilities. When this is experienced, or when the facilitator realises that they have done so without realising it at the time, then this may be something about which the facilitator chooses to confront the group directly, alternatively they may prefer to propose a structure or activity intended to address the matter more indirectly.

The presence and behaviour of the facilitator will have significant impact upon the experience of members of the group. When the facilitator is able to be relaxed, open, in Hara, holding a loving and listening attitude towards the group members, that will encourage a calm supportive mood within the group.

Group Dynamics

This term can seem daunting or mysterious. Essentially it refers to the flow and movement of energy, relationships and development that is a natural part of group life. The challenges for the facilitator, and the group, arise when the energy gets stuck, relationships become fixed or development becomes blocked at a particular stage or level.

Relational dynamics

This term is commonly used to describe a range of aspects of the life of/experience within a group. One aspect is a function of the numbers of relationships within a group. In a group of five people there are 10 relationships in the room, in a group of ten there are 45 relationships and in a group of twenty there are 190. There is a mathematical formula to calculate this, in case you are interested! Thus there is rapidly increasing inter-relational complexity as a group increases in size.

Groups tend to deal with this to some extent through the formation of alliances; pairings and sub-groupings. Over time these alliances can become fixed, which can reduce the flow of energy, emotion and thought within the group. Using structures to invite people to spend time with a variety of people in the group is one of the ways to ease this when it occurs.

Developmental dynamics

Another component of group dynamics relates to the developmental stages in the life of a group; the process of group maturation. One of the most commonly known is that devised by Tuckman (1965), the final stage added later:

Form > Norm > Storm > Perform (> Mourn).

Heron (1989) writes about:

Defensiveness > Working through defensiveness > Authentic behaviour > Closure.

Schutz (1979) applies his 'Basic Dimensions' to group development:

Inclusion > Control > Intimacy > Control > Exclusion (ending).

What each has in common is anxiety and uncertainty at the outset, a process of working through that, seeking increasing trust, collaboration and shared understanding, reaching a productive place where the group functions well and then a process of ending involving reflection, often sadness mixed sometimes with a sense of satisfaction if the aims of the group have been achieved.

Unconscious dynamics

The relational and developmental dynamics may be conscious or unconscious, depending on whether facilitator and group members are aware of them taking place. In addition there are a number of other unconscious dynamics that have been described, in particular by Wilfred Bion (1961). These include dependence on the leader, pairing and fight-flight behaviour. It can also be argued that all the unconscious processes that can occur between individuals. For example projection, transference, counter-transference and projective identification, can all occur in a group.

It is not necessary to consider dynamics from an unconscious perspective, however it is wise to be aware that dynamics can take place at this level and for facilitators to have access to supervision with someone experienced in leading groups to help explore what may be occurring at a variety of levels.

Content: process balance

Groups have a purpose, based on identified goals. These goals are worked towards by undertaking relevant activities and tasks. In order to meet the group's purpose, therefore, it is important that the majority of the group's time is spent on those activities and tasks. Alongside this, it is also important that the group develops in a healthy and constructive manner and members conduct themselves in ways that support the purpose and the successful completion of tasks.

Therefore it is helpful to have a healthy balance between time spent undertaking the tasks, which I think of as 'content', and time spent maintaining the health of the group, which I think of as 'process'. It is particularly important to give sufficient attention to 'process' matter early in the life of the group when critical developmental stages need to be navigated.

There are a number of simple ways in which the facilitator can assist in maintaining this balance:

- by reminding members what they are going to do during a particular group session, perhaps linking that explicitly to the group's purpose,
- by commenting on process issues as and when they emerge in the group,
- by modelling behaviours that support the groups endeavour, for example giving constructive feedback to members,
- by encouraging a short review of how the group has conducted itself at the end of each group session,
- by encouraging more detailed reflection on the life of the group at regular intervals.

Supervision

There is little doubt that groups are complex! It is therefore very useful to be able to reflect on work with a group with someone else who is experienced in facilitating groups and also in the process of supervision. Ideally supervision should occur at regular intervals, so that reflection is a natural part of the work of the facilitator. It is also useful to be able to contact your supervisor between planned supervision sessions if particular complexities arise in a group you are facilitating.

References

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