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Group Dynamics

Basics and Pragmatics for Practitioners

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UNIVERSITY PRESS OF AMERICA, ® INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Toronto • Plymouth, UK

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University Press of America,® Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard
Suite 200
Lanham, Maryland 20706
UPA Acquisitions Department (301) 459-3366

Estover Road
Plymouth PL6 7PY
United Kingdom

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Printed in the United States of America
British Library Cataloging in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2011936044
ISBN: 978-0-7618-5697-9 (paperback : alk. paper)
eISBN: 978-0-7618-5698-6

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Chapter Three

Steps in Forming a Group

In this chapter some important steps in forming a group are presented and discussed.

1. Determine and clearly articulate the purpose and goals of the group you are planning to form (what you would like the participants in the group to learn and achieve).
2. Determine the kind of group that would best address the purpose (counseling group, support group etc.).
3. Decide if you would like to have a closed or an open group.
4. Decide on the size of the group.
5. Decide how you would recruit participants for the group.
6. Select participants based on the goodness of fit between the goals of the group and the participants' needs and abilities to contribute to the group. You must use good clinical judgment and/ or use some form of screening mechanism.
7. Get written consent from participants or from parents or guardians of participants who are below the age of consent (18 years old).
8. Host the group in a private, comfortable and safe place.
9. During the first group session establish a sense of safety and trust by creating a welcoming climate. Use an icebreaking activity to relax and introduce/reintroduce participants and discuss and assure confidentiality.

STEP ONE: DETERMINE AND CLEARLY ARTICULATE THE PURPOSE AND GOALS OF THE GROUP YOU ARE PLANNING TO FORM.

As simple and as obvious as it may seem, the first step in forming a group, that is, identifying and stating the group's purpose and goals, is far too often overlooked or not given adequate attention. The purpose is a general statement about what the group is being formed to accomplish. The goals emanate from the purpose and are more specific statements about what the group is designed to achieve or what the indicators of group success would look like. Goals break down the purpose into more assessable units or outcomes. It is important to very clearly state the purpose of the group so that the goals can be clearly aligned with the purpose and the activities of the group can be aligned with the goals. The goals should be stated in measurable terms so that the progress of the group can be measured and monitored. Having goals allows the group designer and/or leader to assess the effectiveness of the group during and after the group process.

For example, assume that you are interested in forming a group to address a problem of overeating and under-activity among a group of overweight teenagers. The purpose of the group may be stated as: *to help the group of overweight teenagers consume fewer calories and become more active.* The goals may be stated as: to help the group of overweight teenagers: (1) eat fewer sweets, (2) drink fewer high calorie drinks, (3) snack less during the course of the day, (4) exercise for at least half an hour each day, and (5) reduce the amount of time sitting in front of a television or computer. In this example, the purpose is a general statement about fewer caloric consumption and higher levels of activity. The goals more specifically indicate measurable ways to achieve the group's purpose. Notice that the goals did not include any mention of weight loss because the purpose did not mention weight loss, although the ultimate aim is obviously weight loss. So for example, if the purpose is stated as: *to help overweight teenagers lose weight*, then the goals would be stated differently such as: to help overweight teenagers (1) monitor and manage their weight, (2) control their eating of foods that contribute to weight gain, (3) lose at least one pound each week, and (4) lose at least 10 pounds by the end of the group. As another example, assume that you are interested in forming a group for children of parents who are separated or divorced. The purpose of the group may be stated as: to help children of parents who are separated or divorced adjust well to the new family situation. The goals of the group can be stated as to help these children (1) recognize and express their emotional response to the change in their family situation,

(2) show that they understand that although each situation, such as their own, is different that they are not alone, (3) show that they understand that they are not responsible for their parents' problems, and (4) demonstrate that they accept the change in their family situation.

**STEP TWO: DETERMINE THE KIND OF GROUP
THAT WOULD BEST ADDRESS THE PURPOSE AND
GOALS (COUNSELING GROUP, THERAPY GROUP, SUPPORT
GROUP, WORK GROUP, FOCUS GROUP,
PSYCHO-EDUCATIONAL OR SENSITIVITY GROUP).**

The kind of group that is planned, designed and formed is determined by the purpose and the goals identified in step one. A counseling or therapy group, for example, would be appropriate to address goals that involve attitude and behavior change, life skills development and adjustment and adaptation to a changing situation. A support group would be appropriate to address goals that involve coping and acceptance. A work group would address goals that involve task completion. A focus group would address goals that involve data and information gathering on attitudes, preferences, perceptions and behavior. A sensitivity group would address goals that involve self-awareness, personal growth and interactions with others.

**STEP THREE: DECIDE IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO
HAVE A CLOSED OR AN OPEN GROUP.**

The decision to form a closed or an open group would depend on the purpose, goals and kind of group. For example, most counseling groups are closed, that is, once the group begins no other individuals are allowed to join and those who have joined are expected to attend consistently. Most support groups are open. That is, there is no formal membership and individuals are allowed to attend as they wish. A good example is Alcoholics Anonymous.

STEP FOUR: DECIDE ON THE SIZE FOR THE GROUP.

The optimum size of a well-functioning and effective group ranges between 5-10 members. There are advantages and disadvantages in having a smaller sized group or a larger sized group. The smaller sized group has the advantage of greater involvement and participation by each member of the group.

However, it offers less diversity of the membership attributes including ideas and feedback. The larger sized group has the opposite advantage and disadvantage. With a larger membership, the advantage is that there is more likely to be more diversity among members. The disadvantage is that each member may participate less. The decision about size should be determined again by the purpose and goals of the group and is influenced by the kind of group that is being formed. For example, a counseling or therapy group may be usually smaller in size than a focus group or a support group. This is so because a counseling or therapy group is designed to produce change in members' attitudes or behaviors and requires a depth of personal commitment, involvement, sharing and feedback among group members that a focus group or support group may not require.

STEP FIVE: DECIDE HOW GROUP MEMBERS WOULD BE RECRUITED.

The methods used to recruit group members are important because how members are recruited determines who the members are and to a large extent the health and effectiveness of the group. Far too often the recruitment of group members is done haphazardly with insufficient attention paid to the goodness of fit between recruited members and the purpose and goals of the group. Not everyone who wants to participate in a group or is referred to a group is a good fit for that group. In fact the inclusion of some individuals in a group may endanger the group's viability, effectiveness and success. For example, in some instances, individuals with personality disorders or social and emotional problems should be excluded from participating in groups and may be better served in individual counseling or therapy sessions. In other instances, however, recruiting such individuals may be appropriate for therapy groups whose purpose is to address those personality disorders or social and emotional problems, with very experienced and skilled clinicians. Groups are not to be used as places where children with discipline problems are sent to free a classroom of disruptive children if the group is not designed for that purpose. Misuse of groups is a far too common problem that needs to be prevented, addressed and discontinued when identified. A screening interview and a screening checklist or questionnaire can be helpful in determining whether or not an individual is a good fit for a group. Below is an example of a screening checklist that may be used.

Using the checklist in table 3.1, an individual will be ruled out for group participation if that individual does not receive a check for each criterion or a score of 10 out of 10.

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Table 3.1.

Criteria	Check	Comment
1. Is the appropriate age for the group		
2. Does not have a personality disorder that may impede the work of the group or limit the benefits of the group experience		
3. Does not have emotional problems that may impede the work of the group or limit the benefits of the group experience		
4. Does not have social problems that may impede the work of the group or limit the benefits of the group experience		
5. Does not have physical challenge that may impede the work of the group or limit the benefits of the group experience		
6. Is facing an issue that fits with the purpose and goals of the group		
7. Is willing and able to participate in group interactions including giving and receiving feedback		
8. Is willing to sign a group participation consent agreement or can have a consent agreement signed by a parent or guardian		
9. Is willing and able to attend the required number of group sessions		
10. Accepts and is willing to abide by all preconditions specified by the group facilitator		

STEP SIX: GET WRITTEN CONSENT FROM PARTICIPANTS OR FROM PARENTS OR GUARDIANS OF PARTICIPANTS WHO ARE BELOW THE AGE OF CONSENT (18 YEARS OLD).

A group facilitator should clearly explain the purpose and goals of the group and receive written consent from each group member before the group begins. This helps to ensure that each group member understands the group's purpose and goals and the responsibilities and expectations for group members. Below are examples of group participation consent and assent forms that can be used to document that group participation is done willingly.

**CHILD'S GROUP PARTICIPATION
PARENT OR GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM**

I freely and willingly give consent for my child_____ to participate in the _____ Group that will be facilitated by _____. The purpose of the group is to _____. The goals of the group are _____.

I understand that all information discussed or shared by participants in the

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group will be treated with strict confidentiality and that no information will be disclosed or shared with others outside of the group except when absolutely necessary to protect the safety of group participants, including myself, or others, or if mandated by a court of law. I understand that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time that I may choose.

Signature of Participant's Parent or Guardian

Date

ADULT GROUP PARTICIPATION ASSENT FORM

I freely and willingly consent to participate in the _____ Group that will be facilitated by _____. The purpose of the group is to _____. The goals of the group are: _____

I understand that all information discussed or shared by participants in the group will be treated with strict confidentiality and that no information will be disclosed or shared with others outside of the group except when absolutely necessary to protect the safety of group participants including myself, or others, or if mandated by a court of law. I understand that I am free to withdraw this consent at any time that I may choose.

Signature of Participant

Date

STEP SEVEN: HOST THE GROUP IN A PRIVATE, COMFORTABLE AND SAFE PLACE.

The location that is selected for hosting group sessions is just as important as the other steps discussed above. Location can impact group members' comfort level, feelings of safety and security, sense of confidentiality and privacy, and their willingness and motivation to fully engage in the group process. In some cases, such as in some schools, space limitations impose a challenging situation in finding an appropriate space to host groups. Careful negotiations to identify a space that meets the following criteria should be conducted with the school principal or person in charge of assigning space for such activities. An appropriate space for groups should be:

- private,
- protective of confidentiality,

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- comfortable in terms of temperature, furniture, and lighting,
- arranged in a manner that facilitates eye contact among all group participants and free flowing communication and interaction,
- available on a regularly scheduled basis at a specified time,
- free from interruptions or disruptions by human traffic or noise from various sources,
- accessible to all group members.

Some time ago two group co-leaders wanted to facilitate a group in a middle school. There was some difficulty in identifying an appropriate space. The principal offered his office as a place to host the group. After the first two sessions the location had to be moved to a corner of the media center. The principal's phone rang constantly. There were frequent knocks on the door and the principal himself was in and out several times during the time the group was being held. The change in location went relatively smoothly but the disruption and location change had a noticeable impact on the comfort level of group members and the dynamics of the group.

STEP EIGHT: ESTABLISH A SENSE OF SAFETY AND TRUST DURING THE FIRST SESSION BY CREATING A WELCOMING CLIMATE, AND REINFORCE THIS CLIMATE DURING SUBSEQUENT SESSIONS.

When a group is formed, a new experience begins for all members of the group. During the first session members tend to be uncertain, anxious, lacking confidence that they may do or say the right things and depend on the assigned leader for direction and guidance and to derive a sense of inclusion. Using an icebreaking activity to relax and introduce/reintroduce participants and discuss and assure confidentiality, can be extremely helpful and is highly recommended. As the name suggests, icebreaking activities break the ice, reduce the feeling of coldness or coolness that group members may be experiencing, and create warmth and establish comfort. Icebreaking activities with specific examples are further discussed in chapter five.

Activity # 4: Forming a Group in a School

You are working in a school as a specialist in your field. You discover that there are students in your school who can benefit from group counseling services. You consult with the principal who gives you the go ahead to offer group counseling to students. Please identify an issue based on your interest,

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knowledge or experience for which students may need counseling services. Follow the eight steps above and discuss how you would go about establishing a counseling group.

Or

Activity # 5: Forming a Group in a Mental Health Setting

You are working in a mental health facility as a specialist in your field. You discover that there are clients in your facility who can benefit from group counseling services. You consult with your supervisor who gives you the go ahead to offer group counseling to clients. Please identify an issue based on your interest, knowledge or experience for which clients may need counseling services. Follow the eight steps above and discuss how you would go about establishing a counseling group.

