



## Advancing Groups: Practical Ways Leaders Can Work Through Some Problematic Situations

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Groups develop, become productive, and advance or they stagnate, become dysfunctional, and deteriorate. Leaders can help groups grow in dynamic and healthy ways. The specific actions they employ increase group fluidity and focus while dealing with difficult situations and behaviors. This digest examines two representative problems in groups and suggests some universal, practical strategies leaders may take in regard to them.

In working with groups, it is important to realize that groups differ in form and function. Indeed, the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) has defined four basic types of groups: task/work, psychoeducational, counseling, and psychotherapy. Regardless of the structure or emphasis, groups have common hurdles that must be resolved especially in regard to handling problematic behaviors. There are multiple ways of addressing these matters but one approach is to use some universal solutions that are appropriate regardless of the group. The two specific problem situations examined here are balancing content and process within the group and handling disruptive or inappropriate behavior.

### Balancing Process and Content

*Process* (the way in which information is handled) must be balanced with *content* (ideas and facts) if a group is going to function well and move forward. Leaders can use two sets of questions to guide the interplay between these two vital aspects of a group (Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, & Donigian, 2001). Content questions include:

*What do we have to do?*

*What do we need to do to accomplish our goals?*

Process questions center on:

*Who am I?*

*Who am I with you?*

*Who are we? (p. 9)*

The ideal balance between content and process can be seen in a bell-shaped curve in which these two entities look like a single thread even though they are separate fibers (Hulse-Killacky, Schumacher, & Krause, 1999).

When process and content are out of balance, a group may not function well and its members may become disappointed or disillusioned. For example, when there is an over emphasis on process, members may be left wondering what they learned in the group or they may be hesitant to join another group. Such an occurrence can happen when an experiential activity that does not tie in with the rest of the group session is used to get members emotionally involved and then not tied into the purpose of the group. In an unbalanced scenario like this, the activity of representing oneself as a snowflake or an animal with

unique personal qualities is then never connected to the work of the group.

The opposite of such a situation is for a group to stay focused on content. This type of arrangement occurs frequently in task/work groups in which members may be driven by the leader to produce a product or an outcome with little attention paid to interpersonal dynamics. In a content-dominated group, process is inhibited and members often withdraw from the group mentally or physically because they never felt a part of it.

Therefore, groups that work well are those in which leaders consciously and consistently help the group and its members balance content and process. One pragmatic way of ensuring such a balance is by allowing enough time within the group for members to give the leader feedback on how they are thinking or feeling in regard to the mission of the group. Such a discussion opens up the group to new ways of acting and focuses everyone's attention on attaining a state of equilibrium. Another way of balancing is for the leader to make notes about the group and send these impressions out to members as a way of soliciting their ideas on how the group could function better. As with open discussions in the group, this method releases new ideas and ways of working into the group and gives individual members, as well as the leader, possible methods for keeping the group moving forward. Either strategy enables the leader to make necessary and constructive changes while empowering the group to take responsibility for its success.

### Problem Behaviors in Groups

Problematic behavior that leaders must deal with can arise in any type of group. Among the possible problems two are most common: 1) outright disruptiveness; and 2) a hesitancy or reluctance by members to engage with others. Groups that advance have leaders who actively deal with both forms of problematic behaviors through pragmatic actions.

#### *Disruptive Group Behaviors*

Cases of outright disruptiveness in groups are more common if the level of group member maturity is low or if there is a lack of trust within the group. Disruptiveness can range from passive aggressive actions, such as refusing to participate actively in the group, to overt belligerence, such as attempting to pick a fight with another group member.

One way of combating disruptive behavior is to go over the rules of the group with members during the first meeting so that the inappropriate conduct does not occur. A second constructive way of preventing such activity is for the leader to build trust within members of the group. The task of fostering trust is one that takes time and effort. Members are not likely to have confidence in the group until they feel safe in it. Security of this

type usually comes over time and with experience as the group moves from forming through storming to norming. Group leaders must keep this fact in mind. A third way of addressing disruption is by having the group leader talk with a disruptive member directly. A conversation between the leader and member may take place within the group if the behavior is severe and includes everyone present. This attention to immediacy allows members of the group to constructively discuss the situation without scapegoating the person. While such times may be filled with tension, they usually provide insight for everyone and are helpful. Finally, as a last resort, the disruptive person can be dropped from the group. However, taking this radical step will negatively affect the group's dynamics and the ability of group members to work together because whenever someone enters or leaves a group, members usually feel less secure and trusting (Donigian & Malnati, 1997). In addition, dropping a person from a group requires the leader to follow-up with the ejected member to ensure his or her well-being.

#### *Hesitancy of Group Members to Engage With Others*

Reluctance by a member to engage with others in the group can be a result of underdeveloped verbal skills, social ability, or fear. Sometimes, members want to act productively but simply do not know how or are scared. In such cases, engaging the problematic member either within the group context or in a leader-member conference can correct the situation. During these encounters, the underlying issues can be addressed and motivation of the member to make positive changes can be determined. For members who lack skills and ability, modeling and encouragement are recommended. These proficiencies may be learned either outside or inside the group. In the latter case, the leader may pair a more competent member up with one lacking skills and a direct member-to-member teaching process may occur. Otherwise, members who are deficient may become more competent by observing and imitating what they see others doing constructively.

With members who are fearful, remedial action may be challenging. The reason is that this behavior has had time to build up. Therefore, breaking it down requires considerable energy and effort. Focusing on the immediate nature of what is happening to the person in the group is one way of helping. In this method the leader invites a fearful member to give his or her opinions or ideas in a few words or sentences. Linking people, who have common opinions or interests, together is also recommended for bringing fearful group members out and making them feel connected, accepted, and comfortable. A leader may increase hesitant members' engagement in the group as well by having them serve from time to time as observers of the group and giving them time at the end of the group to report what they saw and heard.

#### **Conclusion**

There are a number of difficulties in conducting productive groups and making sure they advance. On the macro-level, difficulties may arise in balancing process and content. On the micro-level, problems can arise in the form of disruptive and withdrawn behaviors. Prominent ways of preventing such occurrences from inhibiting the group's progress include but are not restricted to (Gladding, 2008; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005):

- staying aware of the need to keep content synchronized with process
- prescreening members to make sure they are appropriate for the group
- limiting the number of members allowed into the group to prevent subgrouping
- employing group facilitation techniques such as linking and drawing out
- framing and explaining rules for the group in a positive and concrete way
- talking privately and individually with members whose actions warrant it
- discussing with the group as a whole what is happening within it
- working with the group to make corrections or modifications where needed
- removing members from the group as a last recourse

Group leaders may also seek supervision or have a group expert come to assess what is happening within the group and give the leader feedback about the dynamics observed as well as suggestions for resolving difficulties. Regardless, it is important to remember that groups do not advance automatically. They progress because of planned and direct interventions.

A group that advances may do much good. Its individuals usually grow in insight and ability. In addition, the accomplishments of the group as a whole live on in terms of intra- or inter- processes and products. Therefore, leaders must not only be aware but also take care to prevent problems or correct them. By doing so, the group benefits on multiple levels as do the individuals and systems associated with it.

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