

MODULE 19

FACILITATING SMALL DISCUSSION GROUPS

Discussion skills can be used with small groups in a variety of settings. They can be used in schools for one of the prevention approaches to substance abuse, sexuality issues, health issues, value clarification, and so forth. Discussion groups have been used in business in "quality circles" to help employees be more involved in the business and assist the business in higher productivity and profit. In organizations in all settings (school, church, agency, business) groups are often used to help individuals make decisions concerning different issues. Research indicates that group decisions are often better and more creative than are individual decisions. Sometimes organizations have "rap groups," where the focus is more on what the group wants to discuss. There is no set curriculum or message, there is no decision that must be made. The rap group approach has been used to assist group members in solving problems in their daily lives.

Generally a good discussion leads toward a better group product than that which an individual might initiate. Group discussion often leads to one reexamining own feelings. It also teaches listening skills to participants and develops better interpersonal relationships. At times, group discussion can lead to problem solving. Individuals are often more able to deal with controversial matters in a group discussion as well as with persons of different backgrounds.

Pitfalls do exist in a discussion group, for example, when facilitators try to impose their own ideas. At times this is appropriate—when it is a specific subject. Sometimes the group experience becomes a free for all, and at times, when a quick decision is needed, the group experience takes too long.

Before starting this module review your basic skills because they will be needed to facilitate groups effectively. For example, the skill of **attending** is needed so that the group participants feel that the facilitator is interested in them. The skill of **empathy** is needed to hear accurately what each person is saying. The skill of **summarization** is important in

terms of capturing the essence of what is being said in different words with the effect of adding meaning or clarifying meaning. **Questioning** is important to stimulate thought and action and to avoid a question/answer pattern between the facilitator and the group members.

The skill of **genuineness** often is very facilitative in a group, especially when the facilitator can share how they are feeling in terms of how they feel relative to the here-and-now occurrences in the group. **Confrontation** at times is important for challenging the members in a direct way on discrepancies in such a manner that they will tend to react nondefensively to the confrontation. The use of **assertiveness** is important infrequently to bring order to the group and more toward resolution. If the group's purpose is to problem solve and come up with a decision, then the skills of **problem-solving** are important.

The skill of facilitating a small group discussion is obviously a combination of skills that can be used in a variety of settings. As a facilitator you need to understand the purpose of the group. Is it to facilitate a rap group? Facilitate a topical group? Facilitate a problem-solving group to complete a task? or If for some other purpose, what? Think in terms of which of the three classifications the small group discussion is—**open-ended**, (e.g., life problems group), **specific topic** (e.g., subject matter group), or **task** (e.g., problem-solving group).

Use. This module could be used along with the Leadership Module. Many of the group projects of the peer counselor need to have this training before starting the projects. This can be used with junior high through adult and senior citizen levels.

Exercise 19.1 (Continued)

CHECKING SKILL LEVELS

- Key** 3—I do this most of the time with high competence.
2—I do this some of the time with average competence.
1—I do this rarely with low competence.

- 1. **Attending.** Completely focusing on the group. The body language of the facilitator is tuned in to the group.
- a. How well do you have eye contact with the group?
 - b. How open is your body language to the group?
 - c. How able are you to mirror some of the expression of the group members?
 - d. How well are you able to model attending skills as the different individuals talk?
- 2. **Empathy.** Helping others to understand by listening accurately to others in the group so that they feel understood in terms of the content of their message and their feelings.
- a. How able are you to reflect accurately feelings?
 - b. How able are you to reflect accurately content?
 - c. Do your reflections help members to clarify what they are feeling and thinking?
- 3. **Summarization.** Explaining the meaning of the message within a different context.
- a. How able are you to pull the loose ends together?
 - b. Are you able to tie the various themes together for the group?
 - c. Are you able to summarize what more than one person said?
- 4. **Pulling the Group Together.** The ability to link group members together.
- a. How able are you to demonstrate that two individuals are similar?
 - b. How able are you to get the group members to help each other?
 - c. How able are you to get the group members to volunteer to talk?
 - d. How able are you to get the group members comfortable with each other?
- 5. **Questioning.** The ability to ask "How?" "What?" "Would?" kinds of questions.
- a. Were the questions open-ended?
 - b. Did the questions help to clarify the issue?
 - c. Did the questions facilitate the group toward understanding and problem solving?
- 6. **Genuineness.** Willingness to share with members' personal feelings about the group and behavior.
- a. Were you able to identify your feelings during the group session?
 - b. Were you able to share your feelings with the group?
 - c. Were you able to model appropriate self-disclosure?
 - d. What impact does your genuineness have on the group?

Exercise 19.1 (Continued)

Name _____

Date _____ Hour _____

- _____ 7. **Confrontation.** Challenging members in a direct way that points out discrepancies.
- a. How did you confront members?
 - b. Were you sensitive to timing the confrontation?
 - c. Was the confrontation about specific behavior rather than judgments?
 - d. Did the confrontation facilitate the group?
- _____ 8. **Assertiveness.** This is the ability to state how you feel about specific behavior of the group and moving them to more productive behavior.
- a. Were you able to redirect inappropriate behavior?
 - b. Were you able to move the group toward a decision?
 - c. Were you able to stick with the norms of the group and did the group stick with the norms?
- _____ 9. **Problem-Solving.** Resolution of an issue or completing a task.
- a. Were you able to help the group to explore the problem?
 - b. Were you able to help the group to brainstorm solutions?
 - c. Were you able to help the group to examine possible solutions?
 - d. Were you able to help the group to come up with the best solution?
 - e. Were you able to help the group to put the solution into action?
- _____ 10. **Group Control.** The ability to intervene when a group member behaves inappropriately to another group member.
- a. Were you able to keep the group on task?
 - b. Were you able to redirect inappropriate behavior?
 - c. Were you able to block counterproductive behavior in a firm manner?
- _____ 11. **Starting and Ending the Group.**
- a. Were you able to set a comfortable stage for the group?
 - b. Were you able to help the group members to know each other?
 - c. Was the climate of the group healthy?
 - d. Did you help to bring the group to a close?
- _____ 12. **Guidelines for the Group.** The opportunity for the facilitator and group members to set up guidelines when appropriate.
- a. Were you able to establish a code of confidentiality?
 - b. Were you able to establish the goal of the group?
 - c. Were you able to get all of the group members to participate?
 - d. Were you able to complete the task, lesson, or goal?

Exercise 19.2 (Continued)

GROUP FACILITATOR FUNCTIONS

1. Establishing the Climate

- a. Make sure that you know the purpose of the group.
- b. If materials are needed, please have them prepared.
- c. Check the room for comfort—ventilation, lighting, and seats placed in a circle.
- d. Introduce the group members either through name tags, brief introductions, or other means.
- e. Try to have the introductions relate to the purpose of the group.

2. Clarifying the Topic for Discussion

- a. If you have established a topic, write it on the board.
- b. If it is open-ended, write this on the board.
- c. If it is a task group or problem-solving group, write the task or problem on the board.
- d. If there is an agenda, write it on the board.
- e. Make sure that the purpose is clear to the group members.

3. Norms of the Group

- a. Discuss the norms that the group wants.
- b. Confidentiality.
- c. Recording information.
- d. Participation.
- e. Being drug free.
- f. If the group is expected to make a report, ask for a volunteer to write the notes.
- g. Listen to each other.
- h. Other.

4. Statements with Which to Open the Meeting After Introductions

- a. "What do you want from today's group meeting?"
- b. "Last time we left off here _____
What reactions do you have about it?"
- c. "Did anyone think about anything after the last time?"
- d. "I would like everyone to complete this sentence:
'Right now I am feeling _____'"
- e. "I would like to share some of my thoughts and feelings about the last group meeting."
- f. "Could we have a report about the progress of the group?"
- g. "Do you have any issues that you would like to pursue?"
- h. Additional phrases.

5. Dealing with Difficult Group Members

a. Dominating.

- (1) Offer privately feedback to a dominating person.
- (2) Suggest privately ways for the dominating person to contribute without taking over the group.

Exercise 19.2 (Continued)

Name _____

Date _____ Hour _____

- (3) Ask directly questions of other group members.
- (4) Begin your discussion with comments of other group members.
- (5) Break in on long comments by dominating the person; thank them for their ideas and then elicit comments from others.

b. Hypercritical.

- (1) Emphasize the importance of considering all ideas.
- (2) Emphasize the importance of respectful communication.
- (3) Recognize the value of the content of the criticism (if honest), but disapprove of how the criticism was stated.
- (4) Offer feedback to the hypercritical person.
- (5) Encourage criticisms to be stated specifically, with suggestions for alternative approaches.
- (6) Remind the members that they can "get along" for the short time the sessions will last.

- c. Silent members—Call on them, ignore them, pay attention to nonverbal messages.
- d. Monopolizer—Talk privately, confrontation.
- e. Storytelling—Genuineness, stick to agenda.
- f. Angry member.
- g. Blocker.
- h. Joking, assertiveness. "Now, let's get down to business."
- i. Other.

6. Suggestions for Closing the Group

- a. "Before we end today, is there anything anyone would want to say?"
- b. "What did you learn today about _____?"
- c. "If each of you could summarize the point of the group, what would it be?"
- d. "Please complete this sentence: One thing I need to practice outside of the group this week is _____."
- e. "Please complete this sentence: My assignment is _____."
- f. "Does anyone want to give any feedback?"
- g. "Are there any changes that you would like to suggest for next time?"
- h. "How do you feel about the decisions that we made?"
- i. "I noticed that you were withdrawn today. Could you share with the group what's behind this?"

Exercise 19.3 (Continued)

SKILLS OF THE GROUP DISCUSSION LEADER

The building blocks of a good group leader are acceptance and listening.

When the facilitator is going to meet with the group, it is important to get them into a circle as quickly as possible. The circle can be on the floor or in chairs, but participants must be in a circle. Why a circle? Everyone has equal status; all of the members of a circle can see and communicate with all of the other members. Now that the circle has been established, the leader must understand that in any circle discussion two things should be occurring—acceptance and listening.

Acceptance

1. A process of accepting on the part of the leader the group members.
2. In the process of accepting, serious interaction needs to be taking place.

The facilitator needs to take as much as possible contributions with unconditional acceptance. This means developing the ability to accept honestly as worthwhile and valid every contribution that any member of the group makes. You must attempt to get over to the participants this acceptance of them that they are okay. You are expressing to them that you like them as individuals and accept them just as they are. In group procedure, when a facilitator has been able to develop this attitude of acceptance, the members will participate more freely and will discuss their genuine concerns.

Listening

As the facilitator, you will serve as the model. You will set the stage by listening carefully to both nonverbal and verbal methods by which to indicate to the members that you are listening. Some examples of nonverbal behavior are:

- The way you sit.
- Your facial expression.
- Your hand motions.

Your verbal methods can be

- Restating their questions.
- Reflecting on what they have said.
- Encouragement of the quiet members.

The verbal and nonverbal methods you utilize will indicate to the group members that you are listening. They will model after you, and also will begin to listen.

Organization

Let the group know the agenda by announcing ahead of time, giving them a written agenda, writing on the blackboard. Have the information needed for the group members ahead of time. Keep the group on task.

Exercise 19.3 (Continued)

Questions That Clarify

Ask questions that help the facilitator clarify in his/her own mind what the experience was or what the feeling was. Some examples of these types of questions are as follows:

1. What did you do when it happened?
2. Do you think that many people feel that way?
3. What do you think about that?
4. Do any of you have any questions that you would like to ask Joe?

QUESTIONING SKILLS

Open Invitations to Talk (Open-Ended Questions)

An *open-ended question* encourages individuals to explore themselves and the concern held. Through the use of the open-ended question, the facilitator also communicates a willingness to assist the group members in the exploration. Open-ended questions help to

1. Begin a conversation.
2. Get the person to tell more about a point: "Could you tell me more about it?"
3. Facilitate the person understanding better: "What do you do when you get angry?"
4. Focus on the feelings of the person: "How do you feel about your assignment?"

A *closed question* often emphasizes factual content as opposed to feelings; it demonstrates a lack of interest in what individuals have to say and frequently keeps them in place. Closed questions can be answered by a few words or with a "Yes" or "No."

Basic Ways to Keep the Discussion Going

1. Raise pivotal questions.
2. Turn back questions to the group.
3. Allow silences for reflections.
4. Show acceptance by nodding, using positive words, or emphasizing key words.
5. Have the participants respond to each other rather than to the discussion leader.

SAMPLE LEADERSHIP TOPICS

1. The committee has \$500 to spend in the next month. We need to decide by this meeting how it will be spent.
2. Discuss your feelings about the military draft.
3. Discuss ways to be supportive of someone trying to lose weight.
4. Discuss whether or not the proposed XYZ Committee should be allowed to form.
5. Assume that the group is a family, and discuss whether or not the offer to purchase a family home should be accepted.
6. Assume that you are the Publicity Committee within a local service club and are meeting to decide committee projects for the year.