GROUP BEGINNINGS

Most problems in group treatment come from patterns and processes that are established in the earliest stages of group development. Absenteeism, drop outs, lethargic group members, scapegoating and other troubles all have their beginnings in the group beginnings. It is critical, therefore, to understand how to tap the power of the group early so development can be helpful. This involves attending to two primary concerns about the group, concerns relating to people in the group and concerns relating to structure and purpose. If the leader attends to both sets of issues, the group should be fairly successful.

CONCERNS RELATING TO PEOPLE IN THE GROUP.

There are three groups of issues relating to people in the group. These include: assuring acceptance, building relationships and establishing data flow/interaction patterns. Each of these sets of issues contain questions carried by the client and a set of worker activities to resolve the questions.

Assuring Acceptance

People coming into a group will have normal anxiety about how they will be treated by the other members. This anxiety is typified by the following questions that are in the minds of most new members.

- ❖ Who are these people?
- ❖ What are they like?
- ❖ What will they think of me?
- ❖ How will I fit in?
- ❖ Do I have anything in common with these people?
- ❖ Why should I come back?

Acceptance questions are extremely tentative because the new members do not decide that they want to be part of the group until they know how they will be treated in the group. How these questions get resolved will dictate how the members, and also how the group progresses.

If members feel that they are not going to be accepted in the group, commitment to the group and to each other will be superficial. One will see absenteeism and a lack of contribution by the members. From week to week priorities and topics discussed will change as there will be no clear purpose to the group. Often members will have secondary purposes (such as sports) that will take priority over the assumed purpose of the group meeting. Leaders often feel that they are fighting with the group to bring them on track or get them to participate. If members feel so little acceptance that they fear rejection, they will not speak in the group and will not likely return if they have the choice.

If members feel accepted, ties start to develop leading to cohesion and bonding among the members. Cohesion is critical to the group because it leads to the members starting to identify with each other as a unit. This starts to develop through members speaking increasingly to each other rather than through the leader. Members also begin to remember each others names and follow up on past discussions with each other. Over time, as cohesion matures, the influence of the members will exceed the influence of the leader.

It is the leader's job to help the members resolve the critical questions that they carry into the group. If the leader does not succeed in this mandate, the group will not develop and people will not receive the help they are seeking. If the leader is successful in helping members resolve their questions, the group will develop and become increasingly more self responsible.

To help members answer their questions, the leader must keep the questions alive in his/her mind and watch for them in the group. The questions can be seen in the group atmosphere. The group atmosphere refers to the mood in the room. This is picked up through the members' hesitancy, avoidance of eye contact, lack of disclosure and superficial types of conversations.

1. Say it First	If you know (of suspect based on observation) that some feeling or anxiety is going on for the group members, it is important to try to speak that on their behalf so they feel accepted an understood. Almost any question lends itself well for that purpose.
2. Share own Anxiety	Leaders, like members, often have the same questions in their minds. If the leader speaks to their own anxiety, the members can identify with the feelings and begin to explore their own emotions since the leader has set the tone.
3. First Impressions	There are many activities such as "Finders" games etc. that begin helping group members to share their initial impressions of each other. Such activities help members answer the questions regarding what others think of them. Once such questions are answered the members can relax and get to know each other.
4. Commonality Search	Especially in groups focused on specific skills and problems, it is important to allow members to discover what they all have in common. Activities and discussions to find the common themes can help move members toward increased acceptance of each other and of the work that needs to occur through the group.
5. Contracting	Along with exploring the variety of personalities and trying to explore potential fits, it is important to explore agreement among the members as to how they will treat differences that come with the variety of members. If the leader has information that has also been touched on in the group, it is vital to highlight some of the differences and how they might fit or not fit depending on group reactions. From this warning, the leader should begin to explore some agreement about how members will treat differences.
6. Begin Continuity	To develop an acceptance among the members and a sense of shared history, the leader summarizes the activities and individual contributions of the members at the end of each group. In this summary, it is important to touch on the themes of each member so they can carry the experience home. At the beginning of the next group meeting, reflecting on some of the themes helps to validate previous experience and set the stage for the new group.
7. Prep Changes	If there are changes in membership or changes in attendance that must occur during group development, leaders should introduce these changes ahead of time so they are not misinterpreted or personalized by the group members. Leader lateness, absences, changes in personnel and changes in membership will be interpreted as a lack of acceptance if not discussed prior to the change,

8. Validate Difference	Whenever there are changes in the group or marked differences among the members, group leaders need to validate and underscore the differences. If one feels that the differences might interfere with the group, one needs to mention the difference and the potential problems concurrent with having the group explore how problems might be averted. This is particularly true when members are absent as absence is a possible indication of problems. Often asking who is missing and then soliciting understood reasons is enough to begin the process. The danger of not exploring absences is that the leader transmits the message that members and attendance do not matter in the group.

Building Relationships

After group members begin to feel that they are accepted by the group membership, they begin to focus on getting to know something about the other people. Just like acceptance by others, the acceptance of others contributes to the decision about whether or not they want to continue in the group. The most common questions about building relationships with others are listed below. A brief perusal of these questions indicates a need to begin relating to at least one other person and the leader and then begin developing common interests with others. These concerns lead on logically to concerns about the key members in the group and how each person fits with these members.

❖ Do I want to spend time with these people?
❖ Who can I fit with?
❖ Who seems most like me?
❖ Who has similar concerns?
❖ How do I fit with the key members in this group?
❖ How do I fit with the leader?

To resolve these questions, it is important that each member feel some connection with the others early in the group. This requires sharing some information with each other about interests, likes and personal life such as school and clubs. This provides some areas for members to start connecting with each other.

If the leader is not able to build member-to-member connections in the group, members will lack trust in each other preferring to talk to the group leader. The contributions of members who might have potential solutions to member situations will be largely ignored and over time members will start to feel like they do not really matter in the group. This is likely to diminish commitment to the group and increase absenteeism and the drop out rate.

If the leader is able to develop member-to-member relationships an atmosphere conducive to mutual aid will develop. Initially, members will appear enthusiastic in the group. Members are more likely to remember the details of each others' lives and ask questions. The initial tendency to want leader attention will diminish rapidly as the members begin to turn to each other for input and advice.

After building initial connections, the leader needs to help members deepen the relationships to develop mutual aid. Most already have a model for relating to the leader through clubs and educational ventures. They will consequently relate to the leader as some form of authority figure. Even in authority defiant children, there is a model present. The model for relating to each other in a mutual aid relationship is often missing for incoming group members. Consequently, the group leader must work hard early in the group to promote open and mutually helpful relationships among the members. This often must occur at the dyadic, subgroup and full group levels so that sharing and relating can be developed at all levels of the group.

1. Safe Disclosures   To promote mutual aid, group members need to start disclosing and sharing feedback with each other. Typically this requires the leader to explore areas that people thing are important to know about each other and then having members include such information in their introductions to the full group membership. This begins the act of sharing as well as helping to answer relationship-based questions.

2. Symbolic Disclosure   There are several activities used to begin disclosures in a group that use active or symbolic means. Drawing family crests, pictures, animal families and family sculpting are but a few such methods that use activity to get information out to the membership.

3. Dyad Building   To build slightly deeper relationships, leaders often have members meet with one other person to engage in a mutual interview. This allows fuller exploration of each others' families, interests and reasons for being in the group. It is sometimes helpful to have each person report what they have learned to the whole group.

4. Subgroups Meetings   In contracting, it is often useful to have smaller groups of members meet to discuss what they would like to see or not see occur in the group. After the meeting, these members are often required to report back to the whole group for a fuller discussion and ratification by the whole group. Such activities are useful in connecting several members to each other early while promoting input into the group.

5. Deferring to Group   When a member raises an issue or situation, it is useful if the leader first solicits input from the group before attempting to address the situation. This provides the opportunity for mutual aid to begin through promoting member responding.

Establishing Data Flow/Group Interaction Patterns

The flow of information among the group members is instrumental in setting the norms for the group. Norms are the general expectations of how things will go without having to discuss the expectations each time. While the norms occur on the group level, each member is faced with certain questions that they must resolve in their own mind. Questions include:

- ❖ How will I participate?
- ❖ Can I tell the truth about my life and what I think?
- ❖ Who will speak to me?
- ❖ Will they talk about what I say to others?
- ❖ Is the leader going to tell us how to fix things?
- ❖ Who controls what we talk about?
- ❖ What will I be required to talk about?
- ❖ Who controls how we speak to each other?
- ❖ Will they listen to me?

How the questions get resolved dictates how each member will be in the group. The resolution of the questions, in-turn, is controlled by the manner that the leader shares information and allows the group to explore the information needed to accomplish their task.

If the leader allows members to contribute and generate their own ideas, information flow will come from the members and each member will feel some ownership in the group. Feelings that one has ownership, or a stake in the group, makes the group more cohesive. This is important if one wants group members to trust each other and share personal information. A feeling of ownership also helps group members develop a commitment to the group. This will be reflected in strong attendance and participation in the group program. Communication patterns will be open with few facades as feedback is levelled directly from member to member.

If the leader does not promote information flow from the members, the group often will become passive and dependent on the leader to start and maintain group discussions. Additional dependence can be expected to focus on rules and structures so members will know what to expect. Trust will be low as false assumptions will be based on the little amounts of information shared among the members.

Communication and data flow problems escalate if the leader tries to operate as an expert (e.g., listening to problems and then giving group members advice) or is too controlling. The group will respond by giving their power over to the leader and will not develop leadership capacities within the group. Participation will tend to become forced and flow through the leader rather than flow freely among the members. Given that the leader will become central to the group, absenteeism will increase because the members are not invested in the group. Members will also compete for the leaders attention and dynamics similar to sibling rivalry can occur. Attempts by the leader to engage the group around solving attendance and participation problems will fall flat because the group is not used to such engagement.

The above two paragraphs talk about establishing norms in the group. Norms refer to patterns of behaviour and interaction that can be expected to occur among the group members. The norm in the first paragraph (two above) is a norm of sharing and having input into the group. The norm in the second paragraph (one above) is a norm of leader directedness. Norms are formed early in the group as the questions in the minds of members are beginning to get answered. It is consequently important to make the first few sessions the model that one expects to have for the group.

Leader Activities

1. Invitation

Early in the group and in a consistent manner group members must be invited to participate. Statements such as: "does anyone else have any thoughts on that..."; "what do you guys think about that..."; and "ask the group if anyone can give you a suggestion..."; are typical invitation lines. Often this is awkward at first as people are used to deferring to the authority figure for answers. This is particularly true early in a children's group because the group leader is viewed very much as a teacher.

2. Contracting

The manner that people treat each other in the group is very important. In the first or second group it is important to discuss how people will act with each other and treat information shared. Out of the discussion, agreements should be reached about:

a.   confidentiality - Decide whether of not one can talk about group members and content with people outside of group. In this discussion, issues of mandatory reporting to CAS should be discussed so the group knows the limits of the contract.

b.   responsibility - Explore how members need to take care of themselves in the group by not sharing information that they don't want other people to know.

c.   leader role - it is useful to explore with the members how they want the leader to intervene and what the members would like the leader to bring to group (e.g., activities, games, snack). It is also useful to discuss how the leader should intervene with conflict and difficult behaviour so the group might be preserved (note: evicting children does not preserve the group and sets up dangerous precedents).

3. Defer to the Group

Typically, when issues arise in a group, leaders feel somewhat compelled to take responsibility for the solution. Interaction can be greatly enhanced by avoiding this trap and letting the group solve its own problems. This is, of course, once one has survived the long silence waiting for a member to respond. As the group mobilizes to solve issues that arise, members get to use skills and strengths in service of the group. This creates investment and helps members feel competent in the group interaction.

4. Shaping Comments

Sometimes one can help group members disclose information or arrive at a solution through shaping comments. These comments often are reflective on another situation that is similar. If group members grasp the similarity, often they can move toward a solution. An example of such a comment is "You know, the last group I worked with was worried that people might hit each other in the group....What do you think of that?"

5. Normalizing

When people experience feelings such as anxiety or frustration, interaction and information flow often shuts down creating a stuck point in the interaction. Sometimes one can help re-kindle communication through reflecting on what is normal in the group reaction. For example, if people do not speak much in the first group one might say "I find first group meetings kind of scary and awkward because when people don't know each other they don't know what to say....Does anyone else find that?"

6. Gossip Hooks

Often one can start group sharing through generalizing from one member's statements to hook others into a discussion. Gossip hooks involve commenting on the members statement to another member to get them involved in discussing the first disclosure. For example, if one member complains about a teacher, the group leader can expand the discussion by saying to another member "It seems that John is getting peeved with school. You know something about that feeling don't you?" This can also be used to comment on behaviour.

7. Process Comments	Sometimes, patterns of interaction in the group are not consciously meant as they happen but they set up repeating patterns or processes. A group leader can make them clearer and start to change the process by describing the pattern to the group and engaging them in a discussion. For example, if a group of adolescents, every time one young man tried to draw attention to himself, a second young man would tell him to "shut up". The leader described this repeating pattern and asked the group what they thought. This lead to a discussion of how the two members were always competing for attention.
8. Interactional Coaching	At times one must provide concrete guidance between two or more members to help them through interactional sequences. Interactional coaching does this by helping each member to formulate and speak their words to the other member. If there are co leaders often the second leader works with the other member to formulate responses.
9. Rounds	Rounds is a strategy that solicits input from everybody in the group in response to an issue. One simply starts with soliciting feedback or a commitment to change from the first member and then proceeds around the circle. This is useful when behaviours interfered with the group by having each member pledge to work on doing one thing different. Usually members can identify a behaviour to make such a commitment. If not, other members are often eager to help.
10. Activities	Activities and aids using dyads, subgroups or the whole group can be useful in promoting group input and interaction. These are very useful when difficult feedback must be shared (e.g., having the females tell the males how they feel about certain behaviours). They can also be useful in getting people connected into the group quickly. One must be careful, however, because the overuse of activities can be harmful to the members and the group as they can elevate emotion without attending to relationships.
11. Change Seating	Sometimes information flow and interaction can be influenced by where people are seated in the group. Hyper or combatant people should not sit next to each other. Empty seats can also inhibit interaction. Taking out such seats, moving one member or having a leader sit strategically can often impact interactions and head off potential problems.

CONCERNS RELATING TO THE GROUP STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

The second critical issue for beginning a group is establishing the structure and purpose of the group. Insufficient attention to this issue results in group programs that are directionless and unfocused. Such outcomes interfere with goal attainment and group member satisfaction. There are three dynamics in this area of concern: setting the goals; establishing role expectations; and establishing decision making patterns.

Having goals is a critical feature in almost all groups. Groups without goals cannot gel and remain a collectivity of individuals. As members come into a group, they are seeking to understand the goals. This becomes the reason for attending and the measuring stick for success. This is important that the goals become central early in the group so members can make clear decisions about attending. If people do not see the purpose at the first meeting, they are unlikely to attend or commit to the program. There is also the risk that members will feel that they are committing to activities that are not necessarily part of the program. For example, if one does crafts in the first meeting, members are likely to expect and craft and recreation type of program. Any attempts to focus on other types of work will be resisted because they violate the initial contract. Specific questions include:

❖ What is this group set up to do?
❖ What is in it for me?
❖ Can this group meet my needs?
❖ Will my concerns be taken seriously?
❖ What can we achieve?
❖ Is there a common purpose for being here?
❖ Can we all agree on why we are here?

If clear goals are established and adhered to, one will see a gelling of the group through the common purpose. Even when the group goes off topic, the goals serve as an anchor to bring members back to the purpose of the group. This minimizes the energy wasted through petty competitiveness and conflict. Feelings of worth and accomplishment in the group can evolve from task accomplishment. Consequently, attending the group is less frightening because members know why they are there and can measure accomplishment according to the goals rather than seeking affirmation by pleasing other members through their hidden agendas. Over time, there will be a decreasing need for structure, increased acceptance of differences and easy transitions between work and play.

If the goals of the group are not clear or are subjugated for hidden agendas, problems can be predicted. The group will quickly lose interest and direction. If one cannot identify why they are coming, they can not justify their presence in the group. Side agendas will become common without a focal goal. This can be observed through members starting with withdraw and become passively resistant. When people start to express themselves in the group they will be met with persuasion, advice giving and at times coercion. The atmosphere in the group will tend to be competitive with high levels of rivalry, jealousy and favouritism. There will be a loss of clear responsibility, need for structure, status and approval.

Leader Activities

1. Highlight Commonalities   To set the stage for getting the goals and purpose of the group in the open, it is useful to stress the commonality among the members very early in the group. This provides a common theme among the different personalities, equalizes the members and introduces the focus for future work.

2. Introduce Change   As in highlighting commonalities, if the group is formed to change specific aspects of what is common (e.g., curbing violent behaviour), it is important to begin discussing the changes that are required in the behaviours. In this discussion it is useful to explore who wants the changes and what benefits changes in behaviour might yield.

3. Negotiating Group Goal

From the above two discussion themes, the group must formulate some agreement that the group will focus on some sort of change or contract. All members need to have input into the agreement and must ratify the final goal statement. It is often useful to write this down so members can see it and have an opportunity to assure it is worded in a manner that is comfortable for them.

4. Touch Individual Goals

After a group goal has been developed, it is useful to personalize the goal by tying it to the individual issues and goals established by the members. For example, one member may fight at school and another only at home. In response, the group leader can affirm that the group goal will require the first member to make plans because there are so many provocations in school. The second member may be encouraged to explore difficult situations that will need to be explored about the home situation for them to realize the group goal.

5. Explore Mutual Aid

In the exploration, it is useful to explore the role of the group and the other members in the achievement of the goals. Some members may want advice about situations while others will want to learn strategies. Just acknowledging that the members will all be helping each other begins for focus the work and the relationships that are forming in the group.

6. Input on Activities

As the goals and parameters are being explored, members should be allowed to provide input into the types of activities that the group will use to achieve the goals. Be advised, however, that many members will seek passive options such as watching movies. While these can be useful, they will not build skills so the worker will need to be active challenging the members to consider a full range of options.

7. Setting Parameters

As the goals and methods of using the group program to meet the goals take shape, how members will act in the group should be discussed. Issues of attendance, goofing around, aggression in the group and other behaviours that might distract from goals should be explored. In this exploration, the members can generate rules and parameters through which the group will operate. In this discussion, it is important to soften any kinds of punitive positions such as evicting members for misbehaviour. One cannot help a child who has been evicted. Rather, the experience is likely to be more damaging than helpful. Members will need to understand this impact. Often positive motivators such as extra snack can be more powerful in shaping behaviour.

8. Contracting

As the group makes the decisions about goals, use of the group and the way the group will work together, it is useful to write down the decisions on a flip chart so it can be placed on the wall and used for reference in future groups. If someone new enters the group, the chart can be used in introducing the new member to the work and structure of the group. This allows the old members to take a role in indoctrinating the new member. Such carts are also useful in resolving problems later in the group when violations occur.

Establishing Role Expectations

Given the variety of people and needs in a group, there are many roles that people can occupy. Some roles are useful and some can hinder the work of a group. When first entering a group, members have questions in their mind about what their role might be and what roles some of the others might fill. There is a tendency, because of nervousness, for people to initially occupy roles that they are all ready comfortable with such as helper or tension reliever. For people to get the most help out of a group, it is important for them to be able to explore many roles that are new. The leader must create an atmosphere for this to occur. Part of creating this atmosphere involves helping the members to answer the list of role related questions that they carry into the group in their minds. These include:

- ❖ What will I be expected to do
- ❖ Who can help this get going?
- ❖ Am I a student or what?
- ❖ What are we going to do?
- ❖ Who will be doing what if I join this group?
- ❖ What is the difference between us and the leader?

As the role related questions are answered the members discover how they will contribute to the group's goal accomplishment and making sure that the group works well together. If the members pick up roles in the group, the group becomes fairly autonomous and able to work well as a unit. Alternately, the leader retains important roles and the members become dependent on the leader. This alternate is not desirable as it limits the roles of the members. Ideally, the group leader makes it possible for members to try out many roles that serve the group's needs. There are certain roles that groups need to function properly. It is important that these be present in the group or functioning at the group level will be impaired. These roles are most often referred to as task roles and group maintenance roles.

Task roles operate to move the group forward to achieve their goals. Without these roles the group will become sidetracked and bogged down and never able to accomplish anything. Maintenance roles work to keep the group members operating as a group. Without maintenance roles, the group will become divided and unable to resolve differences. There are also destructive roles that hinder group development and task accomplishment. Examples of the three types of roles are included so help understand the array of roles. Not all of the roles are necessary at any given time, however, the roles must emerge as the needs of the group dictate.

It is important to intervene early as roles are developing to support functional roles and dissuade dysfunctional roles. This requires immediate attention for if the group begins to ignore the problematic roles of a member this can solidify the member into the difficult role. Sometimes one can avert a problem through setting up more positive roles for the member. Other times, however, one must explore the need for the role and how to introduce new behaviours.

If a member gets locked into a role it quickly becomes a group issue. Initially other members will try to ignore the difficult member. However, eventually ignoring will stop working and the group is likely to react somewhat angrily. Over time, if there is no change, it is likely that the member will be scapegoated by the group. At this point the group is just as invested in the role as the member and the dynamic requires a who group exploration.

The following leader activities describe interventions initially from the preemptive position and then more intrusive strategies for when the member is locked into a problematic role.

1. **Model Roles**   Early in the group, it is important for leaders to model the role behaviours (associated with task and maintenance) that they wish the members to adopt.

2. **Appreciate Roles**   When members contribute or otherwise engage in positive roles (task or maintenance) it is useful to describe what you observe and express appreciation for each member's contribution. (NOTE: this is different from labelling as it is descriptive).

3. **Reflect on the Group** At the end of a session, it is sometimes useful to reflect on some of the positive role behaviours observed in the members and project success if such actions continue.

4. **Label New Roles**   When a member who is prone to negative roles engages in positive behaviours, leaders can reinforce the new role through labelling the observed role (e.g., "you know...you are quite a helper").

5. **Pre-empt Roles**   If it appears, either in the screening or in early meetings, that a member might adapt a problematic role, the leader talks to the member about the potential for problems and contracts ways to prevent the member moving into the problematic role.

6. **Assign Positive Roles** Sometimes, if someone has only recently adopted a problematic role, one can assign positive roles (e.g., can you help me serve snack) that can balance out negative behaviour. It is important to validate the member for performing the positive role.

7. **Role Building**   Structured activities can be used to help members learn new role elements and practice new roles. As these tend to be somewhat superficial, afterward it is useful to explore how they can use the new role behaviours in the group.

8. **Tie Roles to Goals**   Often the difficult roles that people adopt are the same roles that brought them to group. In such situations it is sometimes helpful to point out that controlling the role is part of the goal that they are trying to achieve. This allows for one to focus on the goals each time the role is enacted.

9. **Make the Role a Request** If negative roles persist, it is useful to try to understand what the member gets out of the role. If one can understand the function of the role, one can voice the function as a request when it is enacted in the group. For example, "John seems to be asking you to stop talking about painful experiences". The makes the motivation more conscious for the member and opens the door to new ways to express oneself.

10. **Process Comments** When a role emerges as part of a standard pattern of behaviour in the group, it is useful to describe the pattern and all those who maintain the pattern in the group. This can give rise to fruitful discussion about how people are interacting in the group.

11. **Express own Feelings** Sometimes problematic roles weigh heavily on the group members as they often have feeling associated with the role. Leaders can support those members and begin some change process by clearly articulating their emotional reactions to the role. It is important in doing this to assure that one explores the members reaction to the disclosure and resolution to the impasse before ending the exchange.

12. **Explore Personal Lock** Often when someone is locked into a role there is some personal investment. This often needs to be explored with the member so everyone can engage in helping toward change.

13. **Explore Other Locks** Usually when a group member is locked into a role, there is a convergence between their investment and the investment of another person who actively sets up opportunities for the expression of the role. Exploring the contributions of this other member is useful in helping a member escape a difficult role.

14. **Explore Group Lock** When a role becomes entrenched in a group, eventually the group has some investment beyond the two members discussed immediately above. It is helpful to explore the payoffs and benefits that other group members receive from the role lock so they can re-focus energy in helping the member let go of his role.

Establishing Patterns of Decision Making and Control

The patterns of decision making and control are vital to accomplishing goals and knowing how things will happen in the group. Anyone who has attended group functions where control shifted from meeting to meeting knows the frustration of not having established patterns. The nature of the pattern is also important. If decision making is in the control of the leader, members will not invest at the same level as when they have significant input. Alternately, if the goal is to run a program, too much input results in anarchy.

When members come into a group, they have several questions in their minds about how decisions and control will be organized in the group. Often they worry that they will be made to do things that they don't want to do or that they will not be listened to by the others. This provokes anxiety through the following questions.

- ❖ What will I be made to do?
- ❖ How will this group operate?
- ❖ Will I be hurt?

- ❖ How are things decided?
- ❖ Do I have a say in how things go?
- ❖ Who has the power in this group?

In reading these questions one can see that the leader is central in helping answers to develop. If members are able to resolve the questions, they can relax and participate fully in the group. A pecking order of influence will develop and people know who can influence which issues and how the leader will respond to the members. If members have reasonable autonomy, they will often have fairly free-flowing discussions about group issues. If not, they will tend to channel conversation through the leader.

If members are not able to resolve their questions as they begin the group, interactions are likely to be somewhat shallow as they will question the value attached to their input. One can also anticipate fluctuating power struggles given that there is no standard system for deciding issues. This is most prevalent when members try to assert their opinions around invested topics.

Leader Activities

1. Solicit Input

Early in the group, it is important for the leader to survey or solicit input from every member when making a decision. Even non-verbal members can agree or disagree through nodding their head. This sets the norms for input and begins resolving some of the control questions common to members.

2. Consensual Norms

In making decisions, it is helpful to develop a system of consensual decision making. This promotes full discussions among members and allows for many problem behaviour to emerge where they can be worked on. To develop such a system, leaders must fight the temptation to have members vote. A vote works against cohesion through creating two groups; one that wins and one that loses.

3. Re-Direct

In making group decisions, one often finds the group backing off the decision through changing the topic. It is the leader's job to bring the group back when it seems they are avoiding or moving into a distracted mode. This is sensitive as leaders will need to balance between allowing a broad exploration and being a controlling task master. This balance occurs through leaders balancing every diversion against the goals of the group. If the tangent promotes the goals, allow it to proceed until it drifts too far away from the decision being made.

4. Frame Issues

Prior to decision making, the leader often has to restate the issue in a way that allows the members to define the problem or understand what needs to be decided.

5. Coach Problem Solving

As group members attempt to reach consensus, make decisions or solve problems, they will be entering into a problem solving sequence (define, explore alternatives, assess options, choose an option, and evaluate). This provides the worker with an opportunity to coach them each step of the way. With coaching, they will soon become autonomous in their ability.

6. Summarizing

In decision making and problem solving, a lot of content and process is discussed by the group. The leader often has to help ground the group members by summarizing

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what has been accomplished. This provides the platform for more work and affirms progress among the members.

7. Ratify Decisions

As a decision is made, sometimes portions of the group appear to be somewhat unsure or seem lost in the process. At these times, it is important to ask members to affirm their decision so they can move on.

8. Coach Implementation

After decisions have been made, the leader often has to coach the members in how to move from the decision to implementing the plan. This often requires having the group break down the decision into component steps and resources so the members can select roles and tasks to implement the decision.