

(Ragg, 2010, Garvin, 2011-2012)

THE MIDDLE PHASE IN THE GROUP

In the middle stages of group development the group becomes more autonomous and requires less active shaping on the part of the worker. The worker spends much more time scanning the group as members interact to assure that members work effectively together. Effective work is reflected in group members achieving their shared goals while concurrently achieving individual goals.

During the middle stages more positive affect is shared among the members and support is more evident. People are willing to give up individual strivings for the good of the group and take on different roles to ensure success.

Most worker intervention is focused at the group level with less one-to-one interactions. Basically, the worker scans and intervenes only when the group appears to be unclear, unfocused or moving in a counter-productive direction. There are four common types of intervention during the middle stages.

These include:

1. Developing group cohesion and functioning.
2. Developing group self-direction and autonomy.
3. Helping to balance group and individual interests.
4. Maintaining the purpose of the group.

Developing Group Cohesion and Identification

If worker interventions have been effective in the earlier stages of development the group should have patterns of interaction that promote direct discussion among the members and openness. During the middle stages of development, the worker intervenes to build on these dynamics allowing the group members to support and help each other achieve their shared and individual goals.

For the group members to effectively help each other, they need to have some sense that the relationships in the group are special and potentially beneficial. This sense comes through building cohesion and a sense of safety in the group.

Using Inclusive Language

One of the simplest interventions for building cohesion is the promotion of inclusive language by the worker. Workers who use words such as “we” and “us” convey boundaries around the group and distinguish group members as being somehow different from people who are not in the group.

Promoting Active Inclusion

One of the ongoing tasks of the worker is to ensure that all group members have input and influence over the group direction. This requires the worker to scan the discussions and identify people who may be marginalized. The worker then solicits input from these people so they remain active in the work of the group. Comments such as, “I haven’t heard from Charlie, why don’t you check with him”, or “You guys are talking like you have a decision but there are two people who haven’t spoken yet”, promote full inclusion in the group’s work.

Developing Group Rituals

A quick method for making the group appear different from other areas of the group members' lives is to create group rituals or patterns of behavior that are unique to the group. Opening ceremonies, repeated activities and other forms of patterned behavior (e.g., affirming the agenda, introductions, prayers, meditations, lighting candles) create meaningful punctuations that mark the group experience as being different from all other aspects of life.

Reaching for Consensus

One powerful method for increasing cohesion is to ensure that decisions are consensual. This requires all members of the group to agree to any decision or direction. While this is very tedious at earlier stages of the group, over time, it helps all members to feel equally valued and important in the group. To reach for consensus is to facilitate shared agreement about activities and directions checking to see if most of the participants are in agreement both the process and the outcomes. This is critical when the group discussions have been heated or potentially conflicted.

Make sure acquiescence and abdication are challenged so meaningful consensus can be reached

Building on Connections and Strengths

When members have made connections with each other and have demonstrated areas of strength, workers need to find ways to use the relationships, unique qualities and group strengths when considering activities or helping individual members. Group leaders are always looking for ways to use such group qualities. When members find that the group leader has recognized their unique contributions, they commit to the group more strongly.

Reflecting on Group Growth

To enhance the group's cohesion, workers often must comment on the group's current level of functioning. In such comments, the worker often identifies changes in the group processes and historical benchmarks to illustrate movement. Comments such as, "I notice how easily we now make decisions, you guys are working very well as a team", can promote a sense of accomplishment among the members. This promotes a sense of continuity and growth across time.

Reflecting on Shared Feelings and Internal Processes

One method for increasing cohesion among the group members is to identify and reflect on shared feelings, beliefs and other internal processes. In using this type of intervention workers monitor the expressed feelings, thoughts and values expressed by the individual members. When opportunities arise through one member expressing an internal process, the worker can make statements such as, "That is very interesting, last week Bob said something very similar to what you are expressing. Bob, do you have any insights for Joan...". Such comments increase the identification that the members have for each other concurrent with enlisting active support. Over time, all members find common values and feelings with the other members which increases understanding, sharing and support among the members.

Reaching For A Feeling Link

One way to promote cohesion is to help the members identify with each other on a feeling level. This is accomplished through asking individuals within the group to identify with a feeling being expressed by one of the members. In using this strategy the worker identifies a feeling expressed by one of the members and then invites other members to identify with the feeling through statements such as, "Tom said that he felt pretty powerless when his worker refused to give him emergency aid...have other people in the group felt that way when they don't get what they want from their workers?"

Promote Group Self Direction and Autonomy

Concurrent with promoting cohesion, one must also promote effective action by the group members. Effective action is action that is not dependent on the group worker. Workers must help the group to function independently to maximize all of the skills and strengths inherent in the membership. Consequently, group members should have significant input into the group direction and be able to achieve the direction using the resources within the group.

Many group members are not used to assuming leadership functions or taking responsibility for their own success. Workers must consequently help them find the skills and strengths within themselves to achieve success. Some of the more common strategies for achieving this task include:

Redirecting Energy to Promote Mutual Aid

Often group members try to engage the worker as the source of help in the group. Workers must resist the impulse to respond directly and engage group members as the sources of help. As issues are expressed, defer to the group allowing members to help each other. For example, when John makes a statement such as, "I am too nervous to ask my boss for a raise, I don't know how to approach him", the worker might respond, "Who has any ideas that might help John?" The group leader can then summarize and reinforce the input of the various group members to affirm their input and stress potential solutions. For example, "John, when you said you didn't know how to ask for a raise many ideas seem very strong. Betty suggested watching to see if your boss was in a good mood, Anthony suggested writing down your thoughts and Tonja offered to role-play the conversation for practice. It seems that any or all of these will be really helpful. How do you think you might use the group's input?"

Redirecting Messages

Similar to engaging mutual aid, workers often want to reinforce direct communication in the group. When messages are indirect (e.g., a message is stated that appears to be meant for a particular member) the worker redirects the message. For example, if a person makes a statement such as, "We should have rules about bringing candy to group" when they notice someone eating, the worker can respond, "Do you have feedback for Jeremy about how you experienced his behavior?" The worker may then help the person to provide direct feedback and negotiate their issues directly with the other group member.

Providing Opportunities for Success

While workers promote success through deferring to the group, sometimes they must become more active in providing such opportunities. Often workers bring challenges and activities to the group that will build experiences of success through the group members' combined efforts. Such opportunities can be predetermined exercises or can evolve out of the group members' spontaneous expressions. For example, in a group of developmentally disabled sex offenders a couple of members stated that they wanted to do something for victims. The group leader picked up on the statement and challenged the members to do chores and tasks around their neighborhoods and bring the money into group. When the money reached \$100.00 an anonymous donation could be made to a program that served victims. The group members engaged in individual activities first to raise money and then started do group activities such as car washes.

Preserving Group History and Continuity

To ensure that the work of the group is maintained from week-to-week, workers often must provide comments to promote continuity across group sessions. The worker is the agent who provides continuity at the start of a

session, refers to past history periodically. Workers often link the current session to the previous one by referring to an event or discussion that ensued the preceding week. This brings the focus of the past week into the current session. Workers also help members reflect on past experiences and events that can enhance current functioning (e.g., pointing out past successes, reflecting on past problems).

Helping to Balance Group and Individual Interests

One of the challenges of this stage is making sure that individual needs are met concurrent with group needs. A common problem faced by nearly every beginning group worker is that in attempting to address an individual's concerns within the group they find themselves conducting individual casework in a group setting. This is perhaps particularly true of those workers whose early roots lay in providing individual counseling. In this process, each individual presents his or her concerns to the group worker in turn expecting an individual response from the leader. The fellow participants within the group are not viewed as offering support or guidance but rather are expected to wait their turn and listen. When the initial individual's concern appears to be addressed, the worker then moves on to deal with the issues of the next individual as the others patiently await their own "turn".

Such individualized approaches are in direct contrast with the actual intent of group work practice which seeks to mobilize mutual aid for the client by involving the other members. However, mutual aid processes may be uncomfortable given the lack of predictability. Often inexperienced group leaders manage their anxiety by conducting casework within the group. In reaction, many workers then make a second error by vowing in the next session to wholly concentrate on the "group" aspect of group work. In swinging too far to the opposite end of the pendulum, the worker then may miss a valuable opportunity to elaborate on an individual's stated concern for the benefit of the group.

For example, an individual in the group presents his concern, "It's really hard to raise teenagers these days, what with all the changing values." The worker, in an attempt to avoid being drawn into an individual conversation with the member, quickly may ask if any others in the group feel the same way. As others provide their comments, the discussion becomes overly general and superficial while the first group member remains anxiously waiting for an opportunity to discuss his specific concerns about a particular struggle he faced with his son the night before.

If overly involved in dealing with individual concerns within the group, the group worker risks conducting casework within the group. If concentrating solely on the group itself, the worker may inadvertently encourage a generalized and somewhat circular discussion. Both of these common patterns reflect the group leader's difficulty in conceptualizing the group as a system for mutual aid and the importance of recognizing and identifying the connections between the concerns of the individual members and the work of the group.

Schwartz (1969) describes this process as the need for the worker to pay attention to the "two clients" i.e. the individual and the group while the actual work is concerned with the interaction between the two. Therefore instead of focusing attention to either the individual or the group i.e. the "one" or the "many", the function of the group worker is to mediate the engagement between the two.

In order to maintain an appropriate focus within the individual-group communications, the worker needs to concentrate efforts within the early stages of each group meeting on assisting individual members in presenting their concerns to the group. Thus, the beginning of each group session should seek to "feel out" the emotional climate and issues for the group. The task of the worker, then, is to determine which member or members are attempting to capture the focus of the group for their own individual concerns and secondly, how these issues may

represent a theme of concern for the group. Some of the following strategies are commonly used to balance the individual and group concerns.

Reflect on Group and Member Qualities

When possible reflect on both positive individual and group qualities trying to balance the amount of reflection in both areas. Try to identify areas where the group is doing well and reflect back what this indicates about the group and how the group can better achieve their goals. It is also useful to celebrate the unique qualities of the group. Similarly, one must also reflect on individual qualities and what they mean to the group.

Explore Differences without Losing Commonalities

When differences occur in the group, it is important in the middle stages to acknowledge and explore the differences. Many clients will struggle with the meaning of differences and may take opposing opinions as some sort of threat. When individuals take a differing approach in a group, often they become scapegoated or otherwise negatively sanctioned by the group. Providing the member is not assuming a destructive role where differences might become entrenched, it is important to explore the differences and people's responses to expressions of difference. As the differences are expressed and explored, use the group purpose and common ground to find room for the difference in the thinking of the group.

Reaching For Difference

When it appears that acquiescence is occurring or people are squelching expressions of difference, one often must generate discussions of difference by reaching into the group to find someone who has an alternative position. To reach for difference is to help the group participants to see the situation from various angles, reviewing alternative viewpoints. The intention is for the individual to explore and examine alternative choices and perspectives on issues raised by the group. By raising differences of opinion, the worker helps the members appreciate the diversity of the group and capitalize on new perspectives.

Ping-Ponging Feedback

When providing feedback to either the group or the individual, it is important to ensure that the ramifications for both the group and the individual are reflected. Consequently, one will end with some reflection on the meaning for the group when providing feedback to individuals and vice-versa.

Maintaining the Purpose of the Group

The worker's task in the early stages of the session should address the question, "What is the group working on in this session?" This is true regardless of whether the concern originated with one member or several. A common error for beginning group workers is to "jump in" with their own agenda if the initial contributions of the group appear unclear. By the same token, it would be an error to assume that because the group had agreed during the previous session to tackle a particular issue that this would remain the focal issue for the following session. The worker needs to monitor the conversation in the early part of the session to determine whether the group is truly committed to addressing the earlier agreed upon issue or whether they are simply complying and "going through the motions".

It is imperative that the worker believe that "even though the conversation may not appear to be directed toward the group's purpose, it is always purposeful." In each case, the worker needs to remain focused on "How does this member's conversation connect to the work of the group?" or "What is troubling this particular member". In doing

so the worker remains focused on the inter-relationship between the individual issues of the members and the concerns and tasks of the group.

In many groups, particularly those involving children, the client will be reluctant or unable to articulate his or her concerns through verbal means. In these cases, the client may act out using behavior as a means to express or signal concern. If the behavior itself is regarded as the issue or problem the underlying communication can be completely missed. Behavior within the group is often the child's expression of pain, guilt, rage, fear and any one of a myriad of emotions. It is the child's manner and attempt to identify and raise an issue. To ignore the behavior is to fail to recognize the message sent by the group member. Similarly, to "punish" the behavior does not allow the individual an opportunity to address the underlying emotion behind the behavior or to try out new and more adaptive patterns of relating with others. Chances are that the child has been referred to the group because of this same maladaptive manner of dealing with his/her feelings. By missing the cues, the worker may inadvertently replicate the manner in which significant others have responded to the child in the past. In missing the child's communication, the child has little option but to escalate the intensity of the signaling of the message. In other words, the child will increase the level of acting out behavior until she or he feels heard.

Identifying Necessary Roles

As the group takes on more responsibility for achieving their own goals, members must adopt new roles and assume increased leadership functions. Often the members may not have experience in negotiating such roles. Workers must consequently help the group identify roles that are needed to achieve the group goals so the members can rise to the challenge of filling these roles. Comments such as, "You are talking about doing a car wash but I haven't heard anybody volunteer to talk to the gas station owner...do you think that might be important?" help the group identify and confront the need for new roles and functions.

Supporting Self-Directed Positive Action

Often workers scan and monitor the group for self directed action. When the group appears to be setting its own direction, the worker does nothing given that self-direction is evident. However, self-directed action may at times diverge from the purpose of the group. In such situations the worker must intervene to redirect the situation. When redirecting the group workers tend to use questions and cautions to assure that action is consistent with the goals of the group.

Checking In

A frequent method for maintaining continuity and the group purpose is using a check-in procedure. Checking-in provides an opportunity at the beginning of each session for members to bring forward elements of the previous session that were important in the intervening period between group meetings. This activity allows the worker to hone in on individual issues as they relate to the work of the group. One must be careful when using check in procedures to avoid creating a series of individual disclosures or sessions within the group meeting. Check-ins should be brief and focused so the work of the group from previous sessions is brought forward. Avoid standardized check-ins such as telling the best and worst events of the week because they are individualized to the point that a group focus is often lost.