COACHING SKILLS
(Ragg, 2010, Garvin, 2011-2012)

When we operate from a coaching role we occupy a unique position vis-à-vis the group. Coaching, as the name implies, occurs from a role outside of the action. We observe the action and then provide feedback and input to the client. To work from this position there are five critical skill sets. These include:
1. *Scanning*. We begin by observing and monitoring the client in action.
2. *Timing Input*. As we monitor we identify moments when we must intervene with the clients.
3. *Setting Up Feedback*. As we begin to intervene we must set the focus for input.
4. *Delivering Feedback*. We provide the client with suggestions and instructions to improve their performance.
5. *Disengaging/Reactivating*. After intervention we return to scanning mode so we don't interfere with the client activity.

Scanning Activity. Because we coach from a position external to the ongoing action we must first ensure that we are positioned as an observer rather than an active participant. This requires us to withdraw from active participation in content of discussions or activities. As we shift to a less active role, we focus on the action without feeling that we must contribute content. Rather, we monitor the dynamics and flow of the action comparing it to intervention goals (Davis & Butler, 2004; Somov, 2008). We remain in the scan mode as long as the group is proceeding toward the goals. There are two core skills associated with scanning.

- *Participant Observation*. To be able to observe the group we must first disengage from the content of ongoing discussion. However, we remain involved and invested as we monitor the interactions. To remain as an observer, we direct members toward active roles using the following strategies.
  - *Redirecting the Focus*. When member shift their focus to us we respond by directing the focus back to the interaction or task at hand.
  - *Encouraging Activity*. When members appear unsure or appear to need reassurance it is important to support their efforts as we encourage them to continue in the activity.
  - *Prompting Activity*. When the flow of the activity breaks it is important to prompt members to reengage in the activity.
- *Mental Focus*. After we disengage from the ongoing activity we shift our mental focus to the dynamics and processes occurring among the members. Inherent in this focus we monitor progress using knowledge and/or performance criteria associated with the activity. For example, we consider the stage of development, purpose, and membership as we monitor the group's performance. There are often three areas of scanning.
  - *Comparative Assessment*. We monitor the performance and compare it to what might be expected given the members, problems, goals, point in treatment etc. In evidence-based practice there are often criteria provided in the treatment manual to guide our scanning.
  - *Focus Monitoring*. As we monitor the ongoing activity we track the focus of the members to ensure that they remain on task. If they diverge we may continue to observe allowing an opportunity for self-correction or we may redirect them depending on the purpose of the activity.
  - *Safety Monitoring*. It is important to consider issues of harm and safety when scanning group activities. If interactions escalate or the group may engage in activity that will have negative repercussions we prepare to intervene.

Timing Input. As we monitor, we balance the need for group members to find their own way with our goals and objectives (Davis & Butler, 2004; Somov, 2008). If we are too quick to intervene we interfere with autonomy and learning through experience. Alternatively, if we fail to intervene the group members may have strayed too far making intervention futile. This is sometimes a difficult balance requiring high levels of self-awareness so we respond based on group needs rather than our anxiety. The following skills are important as we attempt to master this balance.

- *Identifying Redirection Points*. When our scanning indicates that the activity appears to be off track we move from scanning mode to intervention mode and prepare to provide instructions. If the members cannot refocus the activity on their own, we may need to redirect the process to bring them back on track.
- *Identifying Stuck Points*. There will be times when member feelings, thinking distortions or other events disrupt the activity. When the process seems stuck we help the group clarify the immediate situation to reorient members to the activity. If the situation escalates or safety is a concern it is important to intervene immediately.
- *Identifying Growth Points*. As group members interact there are moments where they need additional instruction to continue development. As we monitor the action we monitor for these points so we can reinforce movement.
- *Identifying Strength Points.* There are often moments in the action when group members display strengths and admirable qualities. At those moments we often want to reinforce the members with brief comments and observations.

Interrupting the Exchange. As we prepare to intervene we shift our focus from scanning to identifying opportunities to re-insert ourselves into the action. This can be difficult because the members are engaged in activity and we are not in an active role. Consequently, we must find openings for re-inserting ourselves into the action to deliver input. To set up the coaching moment we must first interrupt the action then focus our prompts.

- *Interrupting the Action.* As we move from scanning into intervention mode we interrupt the action. This requires redirecting attention away from the activity toward our input. Common interruption strategies include:
    - *Gesturing.* Sometimes hand gestures reaching toward the source of interaction can distract clients and draw attention to you.
    - *Verbal Interruption.* Frequently we must verbally inject ourselves into the action by announcing our presence (e.g., "I need to interrupt for a moment here…").
    - *Moving.* There may be times when you must stand up or move your chair to garner attention. If you must stand up in a situation with several clients in interaction move calmly toward the person who you want to engage with so their attention is immediately secured.
- *Focusing the Input*. It is sometime necessary to focus the group on the identified concern. Consequently, we often focus on dynamics or interpersonal processes prior to input.
    - *Process Illumination* (Yalom, 1995). We often focus the group's attention on patterns of interaction among the members. This is a descriptive moment were we describe what we observe occurring between people (e.g., "What tensions have you noticed between the intake team and the group work team?")
    - *Focused Set Up.* In groups there are many dynamics and interactions occurring. Consequently, when we want to set up a coaching moment we must often focus the attention of the multiple members. This usually requires us to describe the element on the table that we want to use (e.g., "Tom said something important when he pointed out how the board might react badly to our suggestion…")

Delivering Input. After we have the members focused, we briefly provide input to guide their activity. Whether we are exploring thinking patterns with an individual, running a group, or conducting a meeting, we use brief prompts, instructions, and comments to move the activity toward our goals. Our comments activate the members to assume a new direction. To promote activation we provide brief, clear, and simple comments. Common delivery strategies include:

- *Process Commentary* (Yalom, 1995). During interaction between members there are often interpersonal processes that go unnoticed. While these processes are not conscious, they often contribute to the problems. Practitioners often want to raise the process to a conscious level so members can explore and change the process. This often begins with describing the process then encouraging the clients to work with the new information. For example, "Notice how whenever Tom speaks Jamie says something that is the opposite of what Tom said. What do you think is going on between Tom and Jamie?"

- *Providing Encouragement*. When individuals are engaged in an activity or interaction with others they often hit a point of hesitation. During these moments the member is often experiencing a thought or feeling that causes them to partially withdraw from the activity. At these moments practitioners want to encourage them to continue in the activity rather than run the risk of losing the potential benefit. At these moments practitioners often use encouraging prompts such as "Stay with it Tom. Find the thoughts going through you head."

- *Guiding Interaction.* Often we must help members to focus their interaction by prompting continued discussion (e.g., "Tom said something important when he pointed out how the board might react badly to our suggestion. Try to develop a plan for handling their reactions…")

- *Reinforcing learning.* As members interact they use skills and concepts associated with prior discussions and norms. Coaching often monitors for concepts and norms to emerge and then reinforce and strengthen how members are using skills and concepts. This allows the members to adjust or integrate the skill (e.g., "I know you have resolved this kind of issue before. Use those skills from Janice's argument with Fiona.")

Reactivation and Integration. After providing input we need to reactivate the group. This reactivation builds on the prior activity by asking the group to reengage in their discussions or activities while applying the new directives. There are two common reactivation strategies:

- *Rekindle the prior activity*. If our input is sufficiently brief we often redirect the group back into the activity that was interrupted with a directive to integrate the feedback into their exchanges. For example, "try that again without using the YOU statements."

- *Direct new activity*. If the group has progressed to far in a non-fruitful direction, we often direct them into a new activity or discussion. For example, "You did well on expressing frustration, now let's use the five stages of problem solving. Start by getting an agreement about the problem. Discuss the situation among yourselves and define exactly what needs to change."