

Chapter 4

Working: Dynamics and Leadership

In the middle phase of group, members have developed rapport, feel more comfortable with one another, and are able to do more work. Whether the goal of the group is to learn new information, develop new skills, support one another, or change feelings or behaviors, the middle stage is focused on goal achievement. In this phase, certain components of groups, such as group dynamics and leadership techniques, become especially important. The group's hard work is often accompanied by certain challenges and conflicts that should be addressed in this phase of the group process.

Every social work group leader must develop his or her own leadership style. As leaders gain experience and recognize their own strengths and weaknesses, they become more aware of the style that fits best for them. Leadership in groups often involves striking a balance between being too directive and not directive enough. Without leadership, the group is likely to be unproductive, at best, and, at worst, the most outspoken group members are likely run the group by default (Doel, 2006). On the other hand, group leaders must make sure they do not completely take over the group but instead empower group members and leave room for the group to form its identity and take charge of the change process. Doel suggests leading on behalf of the group; by this he means that leaders can take charge and lead the group until the members are ready to take a more active leadership role. The middle/working phase of the group is often a good time for the leader to begin relinquishing some control or authority and handing it over to group members who are now ready to do the work.

In leading groups, the social worker must decide when to join with the group, participating as a member, versus when to direct the group. The social worker, by virtue of being present in the group at every session, is a part of the group, but participation in activities or sharing should be carefully thought through and may seem more appropriate at certain times than others. For example, if each member sitting in the circle is sharing about his or her hopes for the group, then it may be appropriate and even necessary for the group leader to also share his or her expectations and hopes. Conversely, if all group members are sharing about their challenges with self-doubt, the group leader would probably choose not to join in. While the leader may have feelings about the topic being discussed, or even personal experience, sharing in group should only be done when the leader truly feels that sharing will benefit the group and its members. In situations where it is not appropriate for the group leader to share personal information, he or she can still act as a support and offer knowledge and skills to the group.

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Social work group leaders often find it difficult to remove their own emotions from the group when sensitive or personal topics are discussed. However, group leaders are challenged to recognize these emotions and set them aside and focus on the needs of the group. As in other stages of group, the leader continues to reflect on his or her role in the group process. By understanding how his or her own beliefs and emotions can help or interfere with the group, the group leader is more purposeful in interactions during the group process (Northen & Kurland, 2001).

Group cohesion is an important aspect of group dynamics during this working phase. Having used the beginning stages of group to test their ability to trust and confide in the group, members are likely to start feeling they are a part of a cohesive unit. Groups feel especially cohesive when individual members see similarities with one another and when they associate membership in the group with security, resources, and positive outcomes (Toseland, Jones, & Gellis, 2004). As the group becomes more cohesive, it takes on an identity of its own, and this cohesion can lead to more honest and productive communication.

Conflict may arise between group members as they let down their guard and start to deal with difficult issues. Now that group members are less concerned with whether others in the group will like or accept them, they are not afraid to express their differences and talk about serious issues. Group members may disagree with each other's perspectives on problems or might object to others' approaches to problems. The group leader should try to use this conflict as a natural and productive component of group work. Conflict offers an opportunity for the group to problem solve in order to reach resolution, utilizing skills emphasized in group work (Northen & Kurland, 2001). Certain skills are especially necessary for the group leader, including paraphrasing and clarifying members' statements to increase clear communication and mediate disagreements between members (Brandler & Roman, 1999).

In the working phase of group, leaders may confront group members more often than in previous phases of group. Leaders may use confrontation when members are denying their problems, are stuck and not making progress toward their goals, or are providing advice to others but not applying it to themselves, or when they say something offensive or hurtful to another member. Regardless of the reason for confrontation, it is often uncomfortable for social work group leaders. Leaders might feel mean or worry that the group might not like them or trust them after they use confrontation. However, being confronted on an important issue can be a real catalyst for change, and without confrontation, some members may not make progress. Confrontation between group members can be powerful and should be encouraged; however, the leader may be responsible for taking the risk of challenging group members.

The working phase of group can be a very exciting time in the group process. Up to this point, much has been done to build the group's comfort level and set the stage for goal achievement. Now a more cohesive group can challenge its

members to make individual and collective progress. This phase of group can be spread out across numerous sessions and may continue until group members complete their goals or until, due to a predetermined group length, the termination process begins.

Exercises

The Purpose of Communication

Objective

To develop your awareness of the motivation for people's verbal and nonverbal communication

Writing and Reflection

Understanding communication is essential for beginning a group. People in groups communicate to address important interpersonal concerns. In this sense, most communication can be understood as designed to meet some psychosocial need. In this exercise, you will explore examples of how people communicate to meet these needs. Please provide examples from your own practice or personal experience, times when you have exhibited or witnessed examples of the types of communication listed below. Provide examples of both verbal and nonverbal communication that are indicative of attempts to meet each communication need.

1. Attempts to demonstrate understanding
 - a. Verbal

 - b. Nonverbal

2. Attempts to understand another's feelings toward you, or how he or she perceives you
 - a. Verbal

 - b. Nonverbal

3. Attempts to persuade someone to meet one's needs
 - a. Verbal

 - b. Nonverbal



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4. Attempts to gain or maintain power in communication

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal

5. Attempts to defend oneself from others

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal

6. Attempts to provide feedback to others

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal

7. Attempts to make an impression on others

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal

8. Attempts to develop or maintain relationships

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal

9. Group members' attempts to express cohesion and unity

a. Verbal

b. Nonverbal



Co-leadership

Objective

To develop a personal understanding of the benefits and potential pitfalls of co-leadership

In-Class Exercise

Leading a group with another social worker or helping professional can be both helpful and difficult. This exercise is designed to help you understand some of the advantages and difficulties of co-leadership. Form groups of five to eight students. Pairs of students will co-lead the groups for ten minutes. The other group members will play the roles of members of an inpatient drug and alcohol treatment group. The group members will be asked to discuss issues related to their most recent relapses. The group leaders' job is to facilitate discussion. Normally, co-leaders should do considerable planning and discuss potential issues before they lead a group. For the purpose of this assignment, however, the leaders will go into the group cold. The co-leaders should try to support their co-leaders and help facilitate the discussion.

Class Discussion

1. What were the difficulties of co-leading the group?

2. What were the advantages of co-leading the group?

3. Based upon this experience, what issues would you have liked to discuss with your co-leader prior to leading this group?

Writing and Reflection

1. What was it like for you when your co-leader did something you disagreed with? Were you able to accept and support him or her? Did your verbal or nonverbal behavior suggest disagreement? If so, how?

2. Did you feel supported by your co-leader? Did he or she do anything that made you feel unsupported? If so, what?

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3. How may your own personal issues related to power and control affect your ability to co-lead a group?

4. What do you feel are your strengths related to co-leading groups?

5. What skills do you feel you need to continue to develop in order to be an effective co-leader?

6. List and discuss several steps you will take to improve your co-leadership skills.

Communication and Interactional Patterns: Sending and Receiving Messages**Objective**

To develop an understanding of how messages can become distorted in the transmission between sender and receiver

In-Class Exercise

One of the most important ways group leaders facilitate the creation of positive group dynamics is by facilitating healthy patterns of communication. Distortions in communication between the sender and the receiver of the message are common. In this exercise, you will work together in triads, taking turns playing the role of the client, the group worker, and an observer. The client and the worker are to have a dialogue that could occur in a group. The goal is for the student who is role-playing the worker to reflect back to the client, as best he or she can, the meaning of what the client has said. You may use the three scenarios listed below or invent your own.

1. A treatment group for Latino men in an outpatient substance abuse program. Jose just learned that he lost his job, and has been feeling like drinking.

2. A psychoeducational group for new mothers. Linda, a nineteen-year-old single mother, is discussing her fears of losing the best years of her life to a new baby, and the shame of having these feelings.

3. A community group for neighbors to discuss their feelings about a new group home for homeless mentally ill men that is being planned for the community. Mac is a fifty-year-old man who has lived on the block his whole life.

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He is angry the home is being built on his street but has some empathy for the men.

Writing and Reflection

1. In the role of the worker, what was it like for you when you were not able to fully understand your client?

2. In the role of the client, what was it like for you when you were not fully understood by the worker?

3. In the role of the observer, what behaviors did you witness that facilitated clear communication?

4. In the role of the observer, what behaviors did you witness that seemed to lead to communication problems?

5. Reflecting upon this experience, what behaviors or skills would you like to develop?

6. List a few action steps that you will use to develop these new behaviors.

Group Dynamics Case Example

Objective

To develop an understanding of group dynamics

Case Example

Jim is a social worker at a community mental health program in a large city. He provides individual and group therapy in an outpatient forensic program. Most of Jim’s clients have significant histories of committing violent crimes. The majority of them have spent time in prison. The purpose of the program is to help clients cope with their mental health and substance abuse issues, which are factors that have played significant roles in their violent criminal behaviors.

One of the groups that Jim leads is for female offenders with histories of violent behavior. The group consists of ten members, although Jim prefers his groups to have eight members. Even though these clients are mandated by the legal

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system to comply with all treatment requirements, including attending group, rarely do all members show up. The group started five sessions ago and is open ended, although actual turnover in the group is anticipated to be relatively low. On most days, between five and seven women show up to the group. A core group of four have attended each of the first sessions.

Jim starts each week by asking the women how they are doing, and if anyone would like to share what happened during the week. He believes that this helps the members of his group take ownership of their own treatment. For the past two weeks, members have not spoken in response to his invitation. He got the sense that Carol wanted to share, but that something stopped her. He remembers a few weeks prior, when Carol was sharing about her incest, she suddenly stopped sharing in the middle of her story. When she stopped, she averted her eyes from one side of the group. One of the members of the group appeared to be staring at her very intently, with a smile on her face that Jim perceived as odd.

Jim decided to conduct a check-in round to see how the members were doing, to get them to share at least some information, and to break what he perceived to be tension in the room. Jim decided to start his round so that it ended on Jill, the woman who was staring so intently at Carol while she spoke of her incest. Jim asked the members to rate how they were feeling and doing this past week on a scale from 1 to 10, 10 being fantastic, 1 being terrible. The majority of the women in the group reported numbers between 3 and 6. Tomika, an African American woman who suffers from bipolar disorder, reported a 2. Jill reported a 9. When the round ended, Jim asked Tomika if she would like to share about why she scored her week so low. Scanning the group to gauge the responses of the members, Jim noticed that several members were looking at Jill, and that they were shifting uncomfortably in their chairs. Tomika seemed to look at Jill before deciding if she wanted to share or not. Jill immediately said, "Well, I don't think we should talk about people who had bad weeks. I mean, I had a great week, and I think I want to talk about it. Why do we always have to focus on the garbage? I mean, I had a messed up week in some ways, but that's life, why should we talk about it, you know?" Jim thanked Jill for speaking up and told her while he understood her feelings about discussing negative events, and that it was sometimes very painful, he believed that sometimes people need to get things off their chests or get feedback about things so they can change them. Betsy, a young African American woman with a history of sexual abuse, started to laugh uncontrollably. She said that she had the funniest thing happen to her during the week, and something Jill said had reminded her of this. She got up from her chair and quickly started to do an impression of a friend. As Carol began to cry, Jill started to get up and leave the group. Jim asked for everyone to sit down and relax for a few minutes. He said that he felt that the group was going through a hard period, and that it was important to figure out what was going on. He first asked the group if they would take a few minutes

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to sit in silence and try to “get ourselves together.” Jill and Betsy sat down and the group slipped into momentary silence.

Writing and Reflection

Describe your sense of the group dynamics of the preceding case example. The following questions are designed to guide you in your assessment.

1. What can you tell about the nature of the communication and interaction patterns in the group?

2. Describe your sense of the group’s cohesion.

3. Describe the norms of the group.

4. Describe the rules of the group.

5. Discuss various roles different group members play.

6. How would you describe the culture of the group?

7. What would it be like to lead such a group?

8. How might the group leader intervene in order to alter some of the dynamics of this group?

Role Reversal Exercise**Objective**

To develop creative skills in group work

In-Class Exercise

This activity can be used in treatment, psychoeducational, and other types of groups when it appears that any group members have blind spots affecting the way they interact interpersonally. This technique is helpful when a group member seems to have little awareness of how someone else feels or how he or she comes across to others. Try this activity in small groups in your class.

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The group leader initiates the role reversal between two group members by saying something like, "Barbara and Janie, would you be willing to try something different for a few moments? I would like for you two to switch chairs and for a few minutes reverse roles to see how it feels to be the other person." It is important for the group members to switch chairs, or they will get confused as to who they are (Sheafor et al., 1994). Once they are in the role of the other person, the leader can steer the topic to an area where one or the other exhibits a self-defeating behavior, such as repeatedly saying, "Yes, but . . ." to good options offered by the group members. Other self-defeating behaviors that can be acted out are defensiveness, difficulty making decisions, unrealistic mistrust, and feelings of inferiority. Sometimes clients with these self-defeating behaviors greatly benefit from seeing how they interact and react demonstrated for them by a fellow group member. This activity is only effective if the leader keeps the atmosphere lighthearted and no one takes the task too seriously. This helps prevent group members from feeling made fun of. The two people who changed roles should switch back to their original chairs and process what they have seen and learned about themselves by seeing their behaviors and typical verbalizations played out before them.

Writing and Reflection

1. How did you feel about taking on the role of one of your classroom peers?
How did you act during the role reversal?

2. How did your peer react to your portrayal of him or her?

3. How were you portrayed by your peer?

4. Did the role reversal give you any insight into how you present yourself?

5. Were you and your classroom peers able to keep the atmosphere light-hearted? If so, how?
