

GROUPWORK

Managing Problems in Groups

If all is okay then all is okay

When groups are running well, then all is good and nothing is required. Ways of doing things, roles, rules and expectations develop and all of this is fine. And this is all happening whether set up formerly or not. None of this is problematic in any way if a group is going well, people are enjoying themselves and/or it is meeting their needs. The purpose is clear, the way of doing things is acceptable to all and things are getting done. Sometimes though groups start to lose their spirit, become less interesting to people, meet people's needs less, or even become conflictual. These things too might just be weathered but if these elements start to become a problem for people in some way, newcomers want to join and are excluded or made to feel unwelcome; or disagreements develop in the group when someone tires of things and wants to make a change; or someone leaves and relationships start to alter in ways which disturb people, then some action usually needs to take place. Otherwise group members will start voting with their feet.

At these moments, it can be of value and sometimes necessary for the survival of a group, for someone to take on the job of working out what happens next. This usually means that someone becomes active, and often takes a leading role, at least for a period of time, in helping the group revitalize, become something else, or sometimes come to an end. If there is a designated group leader, it is usually up to this person to do something.

A problem is only a problem when it's a problem

What constitutes a problem varies enormously. Tensions and differences of opinion are a normal part of all relationships and groups are a collection of relationships. If these normal tensions are managed properly they do not constitute a problem. A problem is really simply anything that is disrupting a group in some way and is something that the group leader and/or group members are finding difficult to manage. This could be anything at all.

Three general approaches

The following three ideas collectively represent one way of thinking about managing problems in groups. They rest on the idea that at times it is really useful to discuss things openly in groups and work out a way ahead. Equally though, there are times when something is simply noticed and acted on and requiring no discussion. Who does the 'acting on' will depend on the group. Though often in a group where there is a designated group leader, presenter, facilitator...whatever description we use, it is the job of this person to make a decision and carry it forward.

1. Manage the group process

If group process is managed well, whether formerly or informally, problems are less likely to arise. Meaning, managing the relationships between group members and the way in which the group develops and does what it was set up to do. This means making sure that

people's needs are being met, and that people are mostly happy with the way things run. It means anticipating and heading off tensions or dealing with them as they arise. It means the group making sure it is on track and doing what it was set up to do, and being reenergized over time. It means that if the content has some serious aspect to its purpose, there needs to be an eye kept on the balance of playfulness and seriousness. It means that there are strategies in place, formal or informal, for making sure that any newcomers are welcome (if it is an open group), and making sure there is some way of monitoring or checking that all is going okay as the group develops. These things may be formerly built into the way the group works or someone is given the role, or takes on the role of doing these things. Or they may just happen informally.

2. Manage the issue but do not name it

A group may lose momentum, it may lose its direction, new members may turn up and the overall needs change, there may be some conflict between members. Again whether the group does this naturally or whether someone has the role of doing so, a group can proceed by asking if it is meeting people's needs? How can it best do so? How can everyone stay motivated? How does everyone make sure they are feeling part of the group and welcome?

3. Name an issue and manage it

Some serious thought needs to be given to whether a problem is named or not. Sometimes naming something can make it seem more important than it is, more worrying, more serious, or make it actually grow bigger.

Language

As a general rule, in attempting to work out any dispute, conflict, tension, it is more productive to talk in terms of what you want to have happen rather than what you DON'T want to have happen. People are usually more responsive to a discussion about being respectful of each other rather than being told they are being rude. People are usually more responsive to the idea of discussing ways in which everyone can be heard, make a contribution rather than being told they are dominating a group. Doing or saying things which anger or insult people, is rarely productive. The truth can be described in many truthful ways.

The way we think about something, and the words we use to describe something, will determine - as much as what we actually do - the outcome

We can say:

- This is really boring....or we can ask....how do we make this really exciting?
- This group is really uncomfortable....or we can ask....how do we make sure everyone is comfortable here?
- There is too much conflict...or we can ask...how can we make sure we handle the inevitable tensions that will come up?

Once words are said, they are said. Coming back from them can be a long road. It can be useful to think about: What do we want to have happen here? And then choose the best words to make this happen.

Specific problems...and solutions

Some of the more common difficulties that arise for groups are listed briefly below together with a comment on how they might be managed.

Someone talks more than seems their fair amount

This in itself is not a problem but may become so for the group. It can be managed by people working in small groups and pairs, and constantly changing who is in which group or pair. Hence the whole group is able to respond in turn to the person. Doing non-verbal activities, writing, drawing and reflection can also help as talking is limited. Invariably it is the personality and skill of the facilitator which will be able to turn this characteristic into no problem at all.

Someone talks less than seems their fair amount

Talking and participating are not the same thing. Talking is a skill and a preference, and some people are shy or simply less verbal. Everything that applies to the above applies here: pairs and small groups, as well as activities which do not require much talking.

Tension in the group

This again may simply be part of an interaction and requires nothing from the facilitator. On the other hand if it in any way disrupts a group, a facilitator may choose to take it up with the whole group by a discussion of the dispute itself. It may be taken up in terms of how the group would like to run and each person's role in the group. There may be some general discussion as to where tensions might lie and how they might be handled in the future.

People arriving late

This is a tough one and there is no definitive answer. In some groups this will not matter at all. However where the group is sensitive and needs to build and create emotional readiness for something, people arriving late can be disruptive and seen as unfair by the rest of the group. Having someone present whose presence is resented or who is emotionally disconnected from the group really is unworkable. So there are really only two options. People need to be either welcomed into the group and become part of it emotionally and in terms of its content, or else be absent. The former can take place by discussion with the newcomer, by members replaying their ideas about what has happened, the newcomer possibly taking some sort of risk to catch up with the others, by playful and serious exchanges.

Someone introduces issues outside the group's purpose

Someone coming to a political discussion group because they are lonely and seeking company is a perfectly reasonable reason for attending a group. This in itself is not a problem but may become so for the group if it becomes clear the person is less interested in politics and more interested in personal connection. It can be managed again by people working in small groups and pairs, and constantly changing who is in which group or pair. Hence the whole group is able to respond in turn to the person. Doing non-verbal activities, writing, drawing and reflection can also help as talking is limited. It may be the case that someone reminds the group of its purpose and asks that it stay on track and stick to what has been agreed on

Mismatch between group goals and personal needs

Almost the same as the one above but not quite. Sometimes a person actually thinks a group can give them something that it can't. And the person will become disappointed and frustrated and possibly convey this to the group. A person may come to a yoga group in the hope that their sadness about a life loss will lessen. And yoga may meet this need. But equally it may not. Often at such moments it helps for someone to take a lead and talk with the person about just what the group can offer and what it cannot. This is respectful and productive as the discussion helps clarify the needs of the person and how they can match with just what the group can offer. The chat of course, may well help the person identify ways in which their greater need might be met.

Extra issues accidentally find their way into the group

Related to the above comment, a person may come to a group fully intending to be part of it for the stated purpose of the group, but once they arrive find themselves distracted by their own thoughts and feelings, which in turn find their way into the group. Members may be understanding for a time, but may well also start to think that this is unfair. Again, the group, formally or informally can remind people to stay on track and focus on what the group is here for. It is often the case that one person will take on or be asked to take on, this kind of facilitator role.

External tensions brought into the group

There may be histories of personal, familial, communal or cultural tension which can find their way into a group, whatever the reason for the group. Decisions start to be made along loyalty lines, ideas or individuals supported or opposed according to relationships external to the group. Those who can cope with this or actually get something from it, will stay. Others are likely to just quit. It may be useful on such an occasion for one or two people to actively take on the role of facilitating some discussion about how the group is going, is it doing what people want it to, how people continue to get to know each other, how they stay on track in the future, and the group overall can move forward and flourish.

Equipment failures

These are frustrating and yet pretty much inevitable. The simple solution is not to rely on technology and to have a plan that can be followed if it ALL fails, as it may well at some point. It can really ruin a group to have someone trying to repair equipment and taking up half the group time to do it! Breathe and do something else! Always have a Plan B.

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