

What makes an effective group leader?

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The following list (based on Jacobs, Harvil, & Masson, 1988; and Clayton, 1996) is an ideal to which group leaders can aspire. No one leader will possess all the following qualities. The leader, through being honest and acknowledging their own learning, can manage many difficult moments in a group situation.

Experience with individuals

A good leader has had exposure to a wide range of people. This will include people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. It is important to be able to appreciate and see similarities and differences in the experiences that a range of people face.

Experience with groups

Good leadership skills will naturally increase as facilitators lead more groups. It is advantageous to have experiences with a range of group situations such as educational, group counselling and group therapy. When a leader has little experience it is better to run shorter and more educationally focused groups. Access to co-leadership opportunities and supervision are recommended for inexperienced group leaders.

Planning and organization skills

Group leaders coordinate the whole group so that participants can relax and gain the most from the experience. Adequate attention needs to be given to organising the venue, collecting resources, structuring appropriate roles, setting agendas, overseeing program development, dealing with the housekeeping issues, organising evaluation material and managing the advertising.

Knowledge of topic

Many groups demand a good working knowledge of a particular topic area. Sometimes group leaders draw on their personal experiences to supplement this knowledge. This does not mean that a drug and alcohol counsellor needs to have had an addiction, or a parenting education facilitator needs to be a parent. However, each leader needs to develop a confident knowledge base about the particular topic area by reading, reviewing research, listening to other people's reflections or reflecting on their personal life experiences.

A good understanding of basic human conflicts and dilemmas

A group leader needs to appreciate the emotional challenges that are part of peoples' lives. They need to be prepared for and aware of, issues such as guilt, grief and loss, anger, self-worth, fear of failure, addictions, love and relationships and key transition periods that people experience.

A good understanding of counselling theory

Group and counselling theories share a lot of common history. It is useful for a group leader to know many of the counselling theories and the type of interventions that they utilise. This will include the Adler tradition, behavioural and cognitive approaches, Gestalt, Transactional Analysis, solution focused and narrative theories.

A lover of life

An effective group leader loves life! They appreciate the special small or incidental experiences that happen in life. They look forward to new experiences, are likely to read a lot and enjoy listening to and learning from others. They will take care of themselves physically as they model to others what it means to live life more fully.

Respect for human beings

An effective group leader has a healthy respect for other people from a range of social classes. It is valuable to identify the strengths that others face. It is a privilege to share the intimate experiences of a group of individuals. This reverence for people has a strong effect on the outcomes for the whole group. The participants feel valued and know that they will not be pushed beyond their capacity. (Clayton, 1996)

Healthy sense of authority

Some people in society have a negative view of authority. Either they place authority on a pedestal or it is continually challenged. Group leaders need to be able to adapt their role to deal with the group members' different perceptions of authority. Other challenges can be doubt, inadequacy or inferiority. (Clayton, 1996)

Maintaining the leader's level of self esteem

The maintenance of a healthy level of self-esteem is essential for effective leadership (Clayton, 1996). It is important that the group leader's positive experience of themselves is developed before the group commences and does not rely on the good will of the group for sustenance.

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