

Key attitudinal tasks that leaders attend to at the commencement of a group

Andrew King

groupwork
SOLUTIONS

0437 546 560

info@groupworksolutions.com.au

www.groupworksolutions.com.au

Working with the emergent interaction

A group leader works with the emerging interaction when they focus on the new and subtle behaviours that are appropriate for a group. This puts the group leader in touch with the vital essence of the group (Clayton, 1996). The group commences before participants arrive as people prepare for attending a group and think about its usefulness for them.

The first few minutes of a group provides an important window for group leaders to develop new insights about the group. What do people do when they arrive; where do they sit; who do they talk to; and what do they talk about. "Once the interaction between group members has begun to develop it is best for the group leader to relate to that interaction, to perceive its significance, to investigate it and to generate hypotheses about how the relationship could be further developed" (Clayton, 1996, p.79).

When members of a group enter into playful styles of conversation, it is important for the leader not to ignore it. At the commencement of the group, say: "This type of conversation is important as it demonstrates that we are being more creative and playful in the group. This will have a good impact on how we meet other challenges in our lives. Let's build on this and continue to use it throughout the remainder of the time that we are together. What does our group need to focus on now?"

Overcoming an isolationist tendency and a skewed perception

Helping professionals are often problem solvers and solution finders. At the commencement of groups they can over focus on the problem areas of peoples' lives rather than on how people are presenting themselves in the here and now.

When group leaders use a tightly prepared curriculum, with little flexibility to make modifications, they can isolate themselves and develop a skewed perception about who the group members are and what are the actual issues that concern them.

If a group leader "focuses her attention on the life in her, if she focuses her attention on the adventurous spirit in her that is uplifted by venturing into the less known path, she will more and more find that there is an inner guidance system. This is a guidance system based on intuition and imagination, not on intellect" (Clayton, 1996, p.84).

Development of a positive atmosphere

A positive atmosphere is created in a group when the leader “maintains an appreciative attitude toward the first group member to be interested and involved in a positive way whether that interest is expressed non-verbally or verbally” (Clayton, 1996, p.84).

It is important to convey to the group members a sense of what is possible in a session and by responding to the positive self-expression of other members.

Development of credibility

“Group leaders do well to establish their credibility as soon as possible in the life of the group. This increases the sense that something significant can and will occur. Group members then bring forward material that is of great significance to themselves” (Clayton, 1996, p.86).

Credibility is developed in a group when the group leader starts interacting with the group members. It is important for the leader to be conscious of developing a purpose for these interactions. The use of stories that connect with the group theme are useful ways to foster curiosity and interest amongst group members.

Creation of links between members

“The development of strong links between individual group members assists the emergence of adequate and creative expression, the willingness to enter unknown areas and the development of new functioning” (Clayton, 1996, p.90).

Stronger links are established by (Clayton, 1996):

- group members speaking directly to other group members.
- developing lengthier conversations between participants that allow individuals to further express themselves.
- group members being more warmed up to other members (see Topic 3 on page 42) as they are likely to be more spontaneous.
- the group leader or group members responding directly to other group members, rather than responding to the leader or talking to the whole ‘group’.

As these links are developed, there is an increase in individual expression concerning aims and outcomes, a greater openness and honesty, and a greater likelihood for positive changes to occur.

A group leader continually enlarges their concept of another person

Group leaders are “trusting explorers” who support group members to make necessary changes in their life. They are able to support group members in developing a curiosity and reflection that develops new learning. A key aspect of this is for group leaders to tune in to what is emerging in participants.

“The ability of a group leader to relate to the real purposes of group members and also be responsive to the emergent realities requires a high level of spontaneity” (Clayton, 1996, p.91).

A leader generates unifying concepts

“A unifying concept is one that makes positive sense of different and divisive expressions by group members and at the same time brings about a focus of attention for all the group members. It causes group members to develop a perspective on events which enables them to see their positive significance” (Clayton, 1996, p.92).

Through the use of unifying concepts, group members:

- identify links between their similarities and differences
- maintain a focus on the here and now
- remain conscious of their immediate perceptions, their experience and learning
- appreciate the potential for change that exists in the group situation

A group leader opens up possibilities and let's go of stereotyped predictions

Through experience, group leaders try to predict reactions or responses from different types of participants or groups. The group leader may think “I thought that this would happen”. The danger with this is, what is predicted will usually occur!

For example, in an advanced driving course, an instructor remarked: “if you are about to have an accident and hit a tree, don't look at the tree! Look at the gap between the trees”. This is more likely to ensure your safety, as you are more likely to maneuver the car through the gap. It is quite accurate to conclude you achieve what you focus on!

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