Stages of group development

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William Schwartz (1975) identified four task stages. These phases are useful for understanding changes in a group over a series of weeks or during a single session. The stages are:

- tuning-in phase
- beginning phase
- middle phase
- termination phase

These will be outlined in the sections below.

Tuning-in phase

The tuning-in phase occurs before the group commences. It is the period of time when a group leader prepares for the commencement of a group session. It encompasses the basic preparations that leaders complete before the onset of the group. It also involves the leader's warm-up to the subtle cues and life experiences and type of language that may be used by a particular target group.

As the group leader warms up to the group members he or she develops empathy for understanding about the needs of the participants. A similar process occurs in the group members as they prepare themselves for the start of the group. In any event, the group leader tunes in by using their prior knowledge to anticipate clues about issues that group members' life experience.

Beginning phase

The beginning phase commences at the onset of the group. Emotionally the group members are usually cautious, tentative and dependent on the leader. The group leader needs to provide guidance, boundaries, a clear purpose for the group experience and supports the members in embarking on a learning and change process together.

The key tasks for the leader in this phase are to:

- clarify the purpose of the group and the expectations that are held by the organisation that employs/contracts the group leader (if relevant)
- clarify their own role as the leader of the group
- obtain feedback from the group members to clarify their expectations
- clarify the group contract. This is a combination of the initial group purpose, the organisational expectations for the group and the group members' own individual interest and purpose
- outline the learning materials, session plans and house-keeping issues
- develop a shared set of rules for the effective operation of the group. This is usually called the *group rules* or *group values*. In groups with young people, however, it may be more

useful to use the term *'group values'*, instead of rules, to avoid an anti-authoritarian reaction.
- commence a process where group members learn about similarities and differences between them and other group members.

If applying this phase to a single session of a multiple session group, the beginning phase will involve the period of time when the group series commences initially or the start of each group session.

Like a child on the first day at school, group members and leaders tend to:
- feel inadequate (but may not show it)
- feel tentative, but often need to appear fairly certain
- be watchful
- feel a lack of control over the new group environment
- act superficially and reveal attitudes and opinions that are socially acceptable
- scan the environment for clues about what is appropriate, for example clothes, tone of voice, vocabulary, who speaks to whom, an exit strategy
- be nice, certainly not hostile
- try to place other participants in pigeon holes so that they become comfortable with them
- desire structure and order to reduce their own pressure to perform
- wonder what price it will take to be accepted and whether the rewards are worth the effort
- find it difficult to listen and look beyond their own immediate needs.

Middle (working) phase

The middle phase is the workhorse of the group experience. It is the period of time when the group works on achieving its purpose. It occurs when the group is operating best or dealing with difficulties. The group makes a deliberate choice to achieve a certain purpose. At this point the leader has to make "accurate judgements in identifying when work is going on, what it is about, when it is being avoided, where it runs into obstacles, and when the group is remobilising itself" (Schwartz, 1971, p.16).

Key tasks for the middle phase include:
- balancing the collective needs of the group with the individual needs of the group members
- detecting and challenging obstacles that block a group from achieving its purpose
- providing group members with an opportunity for receiving feedback about how the group is progressing
- giving appropriate self-disclosure, as the leader
- contributing ideas, facts and values from their own perspective that help the group to deal with obstacles
- acknowledging the limitations faced by group members when dealing with problems or issues
- ensuring that the group has adequate time to achieve its work, and also enough time to meet the overall requirements (and/or course material) for the group.

The skills used by a group leader are similar to the set of skills used for individual counselling, except the group environment involves a much broader system. There are multiple relationships within a group, with each member bringing along their own family system. It is likely that a group leader will see a mirror image of group members' family relationships as they examine the relationship system that members adopt within the group. Sometimes group leadership is like being a chef, where 10-12 pots are all boiling (or not boiling at all!) at different temperatures on the stove.

Termination phase

The final phase of work is termination, separation or ending.

Often it is the beginnings and endings of a group that are the most difficult times for members. At termination, two reactions may occur amongst the participants:

- Last minute therapy - is where a group member discloses significant material about themselves just before the end of the session or before the group ends completely.
- Anger exit – a group member leaves the group before the final session as the ending is too difficult or they introduce conflict to make that ending more justified.

Key tasks for the group leader in the termination phase:

- acknowledging the ending of the group, prior to the final session, in order to help the group members prepare for the group's completion
- appreciating the achievements of the group members
- recognising the challenges for group members as they face the completion of the group
- having the group members provide some feedback about the group experience that evaluates the effectiveness of the group
- identifying future resources and supports for group members.

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