Problem Solving

Ecology

Interdependent

Counseling Groups

Growth

Social Justice

Task Groups

Support Groups

Psychoed Groups

Circle

Interpersonal

Processing

T-groups

Cohesion

Strengths

Group

Preventing

Rainbow

Climate

Helping

Work

Change

Diversity

Group Dynamics

HOW TO SELECT AND APPLY CHANGE STRATEGIES IN GROUPS

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Ed Jacobs

SAGE

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How to Select
and Apply Change
Strategies in Groups

Other Books in the Group Work Practice Kit

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Brief contents _____

_____ Detailed Contents

1

Introduction

If you are reading this book in sequence and have read the first four books of this series, you should have considerable knowledge regarding the importance of groups, how to plan and form a group, and how to establish the right environment for change to take place. The knowledge gained from the first four books is vital for setting up and conducting an effective group. In this book, we discuss the essential skills necessary for using change strategies that lead to meaningful group sessions. One editorial note: Throughout the book, we rotate "he" and "she" instead of saying "he or she," just to make for easier reading.

Leading effective groups is difficult. Johnson and Johnson (2013) say it simply: "Leadership matters" (p. 162). To lead groups well, the leader needs to be competent in group dynamics and in group leadership. Just as there are essential skills in individual counseling, there are essential skills in group counseling. The focus of this book is on the specific leadership skills necessary to facilitate change in group members. Stockton (2010) noted that although his students understood what intervention might work in a given group situation, often they could not perform a specific intervention with proficiency . . . they had not developed the art of group leadership. In this book, we focus on the art of leading and the skills necessary for selecting and applying appropriate change strategies in groups. The skilled leader is always thinking about whether a change strategy can be employed to better engage the members or to take the group to a deeper, more thoughtful level. We discuss essential leadership strategies regardless of the kind of group, although more emphasis will be placed on skills for counseling and therapy groups.

The application of change strategies is the essential element in what makes groups valuable—thus the inclusion of this book in the series. Once a group is formed, the primary goal is to bring about some kind of change. To do that, the leader uses a variety of strategies, many of which are discussed in this book. We define a change strategy as anything that the leader does or uses to get the members to think about or change something in their lives. Change strategies that are directed at the entire group, most of the

members, or just one or two members may be implemented. Change strategies are used primarily during the middle phase of the session but may also be used during the closing phase or even during the warm-up phase.

Theoretical and Conceptual Support

Our group leadership model is built on the principle: "People don't mind being led when they are led well" (Jacobs, Masson, Harvill, & Schimmel, 2012). Among leading group educators, there is a debate regarding how much leadership the leader should actually provide. Yalom (2005) believes that the leader is more of a facilitator and the members are primarily in charge of what gets brought up in a session. Milsom (2011) sees leadership style as a continuum of low control to high control. Corey, Corey, and Corey (2010) encourage leaders to look at all contemporary theories to determine what concepts and techniques fit their leadership style. Being a leader and exerting leadership takes skill. According to Johnson and Johnson (2013) leadership skills are those skills that allow you to help the group achieve its goals and maintain effective working relationships among members.

The art of group leading is often referred to as group facilitation. Facilitation implies that, according to Corey (2012), group members "assume increasing responsibility for the direction of the group" (p. 41). Leadership, on the other hand, refers to a more structured approach to group leading. Additionally, according to the Association for Specialists in Group Work's (ASGW) *Best Practice Guidelines* (Thomas & Pender, 2008), leaders should always strive to lead to the degree to which they were trained to do so, because "group workers are aware of personal strengths and weaknesses in leading groups" (p. 112). According to Thomas and Pender, group workers "choose techniques and a leadership style appropriate to the type(s) of group(s) being offered" (p. 113). Leaders should lead the group to the degree necessary to make the session productive (Corey, 2012; Gladding, 2012; Milsom, 2011). We advocate that the leader in most groups needs to be active, although different types of groups demand specific styles of leadership (Wilson, Rapin, & Haley-Banez, 2000). Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, and Donigian (2001) and DeLucia-Waack and Nitza (2011) emphasize an active leadership model in regard to task groups. Southern, Erford, Vernon, and Davis-Gage (2011) state that psychotherapy group leaders must be active facilitators. Psychoeducational groups are structured, leader-centered groups (Aasheim & Niemann, 2006; DeLucia-Waack, 2006; Steen, Bryan, & Day-Vines, 2011).

We encourage the use of many change strategies, especially in the initial sessions, when members are getting used to being in a group and sharing with others. Throughout the group sessions, the leader is the one most often responsible for initiating change strategies. This is not to say that the members have no say in the direction of the group—the members absolutely

should be involved in determining what happens in the group. The leader should always be concerned about what the members want and need. Most groups, however, require that the therapist offer a greater degree of structure or leading; that is, therapists direct the group or see themselves as conducting the group as opposed to simply facilitating—or, in other words, allowing the group to progress in an ambiguous direction.

Evidence Base and Supportive Research

Research in the area of group effectiveness is difficult due to the variables involved (Burlingame, Fuhriman, & Johnson, 2004; Corey et al., 2010; Gladding, 2012; Stockton, 2010). With regard to this book on change strategies, research has found that structured activities help build trust and cohesion (Caple & Cox, 1989; Stockton, Rhode, & Haughey, 1992).

There is little research aimed at evaluating specific change strategies. The group research being conducted focuses on the overall outcome of a group or on group dynamics. Erford (2011) does a thorough review of group work and concludes that, although more is needed, the research has shown group work to be effective. Stockton (2010) agrees: "While I strongly believe in the need for our work to be informed by solid research . . . those of us who lead groups or supervise group leaders are able to see the positive results of our efforts" (p. 327).

More emphasis is being placed on research, as evidenced by the recent offering of a preconference workshop on conducting group research at the ASGW National Conference. The seventh book in this series (by Maria T. Riva and Robin Lange) focuses specifically on research and how to design and evaluate research projects pertaining to groups.

2

Essential Skills for Effective Implementation of Change Strategies

S ome essential skills are involved in applying change strategies in groups. Each of the skills is needed to maximize the change that is possible in groups.

Choosing the Correct Change Strategy

Numerous considerations are involved in choosing a change strategy for a group. It is important to consider the stage of the group, composition of the group, the members' level of commitment, and, most important, the purpose of the group. The amount of time left in a session is also important with regard to picking the right change strategy.

Stage of Group

Consideration must be given to the stage of the group (beginning, working, or closing; Jacobs, Mason, Harvill, & Schimmel, 2012) when deciding on an appropriate change strategy. Exercises during the initial stage of the group (beginning stage or first two or three sessions) are often different from those used in later sessions (working or closing stage). In most instances, members will be more comfortable in later sessions, so exercises that require more trust are best conducted during the working stage of the group rather than during the beginning or warm-up stage. In the beginning stage, interactive, less intense exercises are used to get people engaged and comfortable sharing with one another.

Who the Members Are and Their Commitment to Growth and Change

To choose the correct change strategy, the leader should always be thinking about the members' needs and their level of commitment to change. There are times when members are forced to be in groups, so their commitment is very low. Leaders use different change strategies for groups with dedicated, eager members than for groups with involuntary, mandatory, reluctant, or negative members.

The Purpose of the Group

When choosing any change strategy, the leader always has to consider the purpose of the group. Some exercises and activities are fun and "light," and some are thought-provoking and "deep"; so the leader always needs to consider the purpose of the group. Leaders of psychoeducational and task groups often choose different change strategies than do leaders of counseling or therapy groups, where the purpose is introspection and personal growth.

Time Remaining in the Session

A skilled leader is always aware of how much time remains in the session. Change strategies can take anywhere from 5 minutes to more than 30 minutes, so time should always be considered when picking an exercise or activity.

Timing

Timing is also important with regard to the use of change activities. There are times when a movement exercise would be appropriate, because members are starting to lose focus and getting them moving could help them refocus. There are times when a written activity would be valuable, because members need time to collect their thoughts. There are times when the use of a creative prop may be helpful to generate energy. At other times, an interactive change strategy (e.g., dyads, triads, or a round) may be best, because members need to interact with one another.

Flexibility

One skill that group leaders need to master is that of flexibility (Kraus, 2003). Quite often, change strategies will result in members discussing something relevant but not anticipated. The leader must quickly adjust. There will

also be times when a change strategy fails to engage the members in the way the leader had hoped; in these cases, the leader needs to be flexible and try something else instead of insisting that members relate to the given activity. The goal of any group leader is to get members engaged and thinking and should never be to make a specific change strategy work.

Using Engagement Skills

Keeping most or all of the members involved is essential for effective leadership. Specific skills help keep members involved and engaged. Skillful leaders make sure that the exercises are relatively brief, relevant, and interesting. Good leaders know when to use writing, movement, multisensory techniques, or even group voting techniques. Good drawing-out and cutting-off skills are essential for keeping members engaged. Getting members to share at deeper, more meaningful levels always helps keep them engaged. Throughout this book, we discuss many different engagement skills and techniques.

Asking Good Questions

One of the most effective skills a leader possesses is the ability to ask good, thought-provoking, engaging, interesting questions. The unskilled leader asks informational questions that often invoke storytelling, whereas the skilled leader asks deeper, more engaging questions. Questions in and of themselves can be change strategies, or they can serve as a way to get members focused on a change strategy. Asking good questions is essential for effective group leading.

Examples

Elaine: (*Has been talking for a couple of minutes about a recent incident*) And then he yelled at me and pushed me, and then there was a big scene in the street with neighbors trying to help.

Leader: Elaine, it sounds horrible. You've told us two or three times about scenes like this. How can we help you so that you don't have to keep going through this?

A question such as this is much more therapeutic than asking, "And then what happened?" or "How did the neighbors help?" These questions elicit more of the story, whereas the first question is an attempt to see if the member wants to go deeper into herself and seek help from the group. Granted,

there may be instances when gathering more of the story may be necessary, but the skilled group leader recognizes when to obtain more of the story and when to engage the group on a deeper, more therapeutic level.

Leader: What impact did your childhood have on you? How were you shaped by the events and people of your childhood?

This question is more therapeutic than "What was your childhood like, and what are your favorite memories?" Other effective questions include the following:

How can the group help you resolve this issue?

What strategies have you tried before that seemed to work for you?

Has there ever been a time when this was not an issue for you?

Growing up, what messages did you get about _____ (marriage, love, parenting, etc.)?

Awareness of the Use of Eyes

The leader's and members' effective use of their eyes is essential, yet many leaders are unaware of how important this skill is. Leaders need always to keep in mind that they should periodically scan the group with their eyes, even when working with an individual. This is necessary to see the reactions of all the members. If the leader fails to do this, he does not know how the members are reacting. So often, the leader locks in on the working member and misses vital information from the other members. We encourage leaders to tell the members that they will be scanning the room and that this action is a signal for them to look at the other members and not just the leader. The members' natural tendency is to look at the leader, so the leader has to train them to look at others. The leader does this by signaling the members with his hand, telling them to look at others, or by looking away so that the members will look at others. We encourage leaders to talk about how the members can be more effective and connect better by looking at one another rather than just at the leader. During the early sessions of a group, the leader will most likely have to remind members to look at their fellow members and not just focus on the leader.

Effective Use of Voice

In groups, the leader's use of her voice is essential because she is always try-ing to engage and motivate members. The leader who does not project car-ing, confidence, and enthusiasm often leaves members unmotivated and disinterested. Take a minute and think how motivating you are when you are