

The Key to Group Counseling Effectiveness

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Abstract

To unlock the power of group counseling the leader must first believe in the process of the group. This belief leads to the willingness of the leader to use group counseling and which often reaches and helps clients change where individual counseling may not otherwise be as effective.

Examples of leader facilitation comments are include from a fellow in the specialists in group work. Six case examples are given where the group process was the means of creating change in the client. Growth and client change occurred because the power of the group process was used.

Text

Some group counselors who maintain they are doing group counseling are actually doing individual counseling in a group setting. What is the difference in group counseling and counseling individuals in a group setting? The first task of the group leader is to build trust and cohesiveness and a sense of belonging for all group members in this early developmental phase. The leader must resist the desire to get into individual member issues too soon before building trust and cohesion of all members: then and only then should the work phase begin to focus on specific goals of individual members. Group goals must come first and trump the individual member concerns while building trust. The key to group counseling effectiveness is to believe enough in the group process to allow it to work by releasing the power of the group through belongingness, cohesion, trust, meaningful self-disclosure, feedback, reality testing, modeling, conflict resolution, positive reinforcement and using the social structure of the group to provide a testing ground for new social behavior practice.

It is important to bring all members into the group with a sense of belonging and usefulness to one another. In the required pre-counseling interview with each member, personal goals are set by the participant so they might be accomplished in group. Another commitment is obtained to assist other group members by listening to them. This is done by giving honest helpful authentic feedback when requested by being a role model if appropriate and by helping with problem-solving role-plays and psychodrama. During the transition stage, the group demonstrates its willingness to deal with and work through conflict. Once the group feels confident that it can successfully deal with conflict, it can begin work on individual goals.

Group leaders also teach group members to speak in the first person and relate how other comments and behaviors impact them. Group members are taught to make statements rather than ask questions, interpret other statements and behavior or attempt rescuing other members. Members are taught to talk about the present instead of the past and to share comments about

what is happening in the group “right now” especially with themselves. The leader helps members make contact with each other. Everyone is heard. The leader ensures that any and all issues can and will be dealt with and protects the belonging of each member. Confidentiality builds trust. The leader gets a commitment that no group member will repeat anything said in group unless it concerns only himself. Closeness comes before unmasking and the leader intervenes against too much attack.

Here is a specific example of using the group to provide useful feedback: A male group member had been asked by his wife to attend group therapy to learn how to be more involved in their marriage and to be more communicative and supportive. When he said that he was doing well in these areas in the group, the group leader asked the other group members how they would feel being married to this man based on the amount of communication, support and involvement he had displayed in the group thus far. The feedback was very enlightening and did not confirm the progress that he thought he had made.

The leader asks members to focus and reflect on the process. Group leaders are creative and willing to take risks themselves thereby modeling what they want from their clients.

Robin Daniels,(1999) suggests these opening lines be used by the group leader:

- Does anyone have a “brag” this week?
- Did anyone notice some change this week?
- What do you want to change about you today?
- Who wants to work?

Peg Carol (1985) a Fellow in the Specialists in Group Work did a video series, “*Group Work: Leading in the Here and Now.*” Here are some of her comments from that series showing how she taught the group to work together in the here and now:

“I’d like to hear each of you on this.” (Getting participation from everyone)

“Who are you talking to?” (Teaching members to direct their comments to each other)

“Now, can I stop you for a minute? You are asking Jean a question, but I think the question has more to do with you than Jean. Can you talk about yourself, and talk to Jean in relation to that?” (Getting members to stop asking questions and expressing how they are feeling about something or someone.)

“I hear two different issues going on, and we have not heard from everyone in the group. I would like to hear everyone respond. Who would you like to hear from, anyone?” (Including everyone in the early phase of group)

“Is Jenny the only one you’re feeling camaraderie with, or is there anyone else you are identifying with as well?” (Building links between members)

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“Have we heard from everyone in the group?” (Essential involvement in the early phase of the group)

“Is there anyone here that you’ve talked to that could help you with that?” (Using the group to help a member talk about an issue)

“Where are we with all of this? Can we move on? Where are we?” (Keeping everyone together and to check if they are ready to move on)

“Would you like someone to talk to? What would you like to do now?” (Checking to see if they would like to talk to someone in the group about an issue)

“I am glad that you could say it to me, that I am an authority and that I have a lot of power.” (Dealing with one of the early issues in dealing with the authority and power of the group leader)

“Who are you feeling comfortable with? Could you talk to anyone you feel comfortable with?” (Getting members to talk to each other and not always talking directly to the leader)

“What I’d want to find out right now is where you are, where is the group right now? Would you tell who you are connecting with in the group, anyone you connect with?” (Linking and building alliances and risk taking)

“Can we hear from all of you?” (Keeping everyone involved in the early going)

“Could I help you? Could you talk to Mary Ann when you say that?” (Teaching group members to speak directly to each other)

“What is it that you want to ask Ginny, ask of Ginny, or find out?” (Getting group members to speak directly to each other and take risks)

“Can you talk about you only? I am not sure you can speak for everyone else.” (Teaching ownership of statements and directing the group to stop editorializing and speaking for other members)

“What is it that you want to happen?” (Getting members to express their wants and desires to other members of the group)

“Talk to them and not to people.” (Direct feedback to the group)

“What else are you experiencing inside?” (Getting members to take deeper risks and share their true self or that part of themselves that is not known to others)

“What is it that you are saying to Art?” (Getting a member to be more forthcoming about what they truly think or feel about another member of the group)

“You’re going to keep fighting; you thought you didn’t get any feedback.” (Facilitating further feedback in the group)

“We’ve heard from Mary Ann, and Ron, and Danuta. I’m wondering if the rest of you can in one word say where you are, what’s the feeling word that you have?” (Keeping all members of the group involved and giving feedback)

“Can you talk about you, Ken?” (Emphasizing ownership of one’s message and the willingness to talk about oneself rather than about a topic or about others)

“Lucy, wait a minute, please remember not to ask questions. Are you having trouble in terms of where you are? What is it that you want to say to Jean? What is it you’re saying about yourself?” (Keeping feedback going from what one feels and is experiencing instead of asking questions.)

“Brenda, did you get the sense that Jean required rescuing?” (Asking the group for feedback)

“People have said, Jean I don’t know you. Do you know her?” (Asking for feedback from other members of the group for reality testing)

Six Examples of Effective Group Leadership

The following six examples demonstrate effective group leadership. In example #1, the belief in the power of the group helps the leader work the group process to ensure success. In example #2, genuine feedback from a younger sibling in a family group helped to archive success with the family. In example # 3, the counselor worked with a peer group to prepare them to help an outcast friend to feel welcome in the group again. Considerable effort occurred before the identified problem child was ever actually invited to rejoin the group. In example #4, the group was used to get a member to participate in group, and by so doing, won everyone a fishing party. In example #5, a lonely misbehaving boy was invited to join a Boy Scout Troop, which helped meet his belonging needs, and resulted in a better behaved and happier youngster. The last example, #6, is how the teacher was assisted by a counselor to conduct a classroom discussion building understanding, which led to acceptance of a boy with a physical handicap. Acceptance is usually preceded by understanding. Therefore, group discussions in the classroom council and family council lead to acceptance, which is a form of social interest. Rudolph Dreikurs taught to build social interest by conducting these types of discussions.

Example #1: A fellow member of the Association of Specialists in Group (ASGW) whose belief in the power of the group becomes self-fulfilling

A few years ago I was attending the ACA conference. I was looking for a session to attend because the one I wanted to attend had been changed. I bumped into James Trotzer an old friend who was busy preparing a room for a session. I told him of my bad luck and he invited me to the ASGW Fellow Symposium. ASGW was going to induct two new fellows to ASGW. I was pleased to be invited because I surmised that this was a closed session for ASGW Fellows and new inductees. I listened to the two inductees talk about their group work and then I asked myself this question: "What do they know that I do not know?" It was very obvious; they believed in the efficacy of the group process more than I did. And because of that belief, they relied on the group process to work its power. One of the inductees had been invited to lead a group in a high school for girls with serious problems such as aggression, mood disorders, and non-attendance. He went slowly at first helping the girls to feel ownership of the group. As they got to know one another a Hispanic girl said she was a great baker and the other girls challenged her; so the next day, and every session thereafter, she brought something she had baked. She said, "I make the best brownies!" The other girls teased and taunted her, but when she brought the brownies, they stopped their teasing. One of the girls was chronically absent from school and her mother and school officials had tried without success to get her to attend more regularly. When she was told that the girls group might be cancelled because she was not attending school, she said, "OK I will come to school if our group will not be cancelled."

The girls felt ownership of the group because the group leader would always turn problems over to the group and ask, "What shall we do?" The leader cannot have a high degree of control or need for order; rather the leader empowers the group members by having them take some responsibility for their group. He accomplished great things with that group of girls because they felt it was "their" group and he believed strongly in the group process as an agent of growth.

Example #2: The use of a sibling in family group meetings to give helpful feedback

Rudolph Dreikurs taught counselors to use the group. When a counselor, teacher or parent was trying to win a child's cooperation Dreikurs would say, "You cannot do that by yourself, you need to integrate the child in the group and have the group help you." Sometimes a group of children could influence another child to be willing to eat a worm. The desire to belong can motivate group members to do amazing things. The family is a group. There can be cohesion in a family or just the opposite. Dreikurs believed that siblings have a responsibility to be their brother's keeper. Vicki Soltz said the most important question to ask in the family council is, "What can we do about it?" This question evokes social interest and a plea to participate in finding solutions for the misbehaving sibling.

Many times I could not reach a client by myself, but by involving the family, often a sibling, feedback, empathy and emotional support set the stage for progress to happen. A recent

example of this was when I invited (and insisted) that a sister attend family session with her brother and parents. The school had mandated family counseling for drug possession (by the brother in a school locker). The parents said they did not think that the sister should have to attend because she did not have the problem. I told them that might be true, but that I needed her help and input. Her feedback was often different than that of her brother and parents, and it provided the reality testing that the family needed to deal with family issues and her brother's drug violation. I thought of her as a co-therapist and encouraged her to go into counseling. She was in eighth grade at the time, and her brother was a high school senior but her maturity and helpfulness truly impressed all of us.

Example #3: The use of a group of peers to create a feeling of being wanted again

In a middle school an African American student had been retained while his buddies were all promoted to the next grade. He became reclusive and would not play with his old friends but taunted them and picked fights with them. They banded together for protection and told him if he wanted to fight, they would give it to him. The boy often would get in two or more fights a day. The principal would give him licks but they did not decrease the number of fights the boy got into each day. He was not doing well in reading and did not seem to be trying very hard in school.

The new school counselor had been asked to work with him and change his attitude but she had tried and was not getting anywhere with him. He was surly, reclusive and aggressive. The reading teacher did not know how to motivate him.

The school counselor sought my help and supervision to reach this child. I quoted Dreikur's statement to her, "You cannot do this by yourself; you must use the group." She said the only group he ever identified with was now in a grade above him, and it is with them that he picked fights.

I told her she needed to meet with them and use the crisis intervention model of preparing them to work through their negative feelings toward him, thus preparing them to integrate him back into the group.

One of the first group exercises I asked her to use with them was the group exercise called "breaking in." I told her it would be important that she chose the leader and most popular person in the group to be the one who would try to physically break into the group. Then I asked her to privately tell the rest of the group to lock arms and legs in a tight circle and resist letting the chosen person break into the group. Then, when frustration ran high, she was to ask the person trying to break in to discuss with the group what it felt like to be on the outside trying to break in. Even though it was an exercise, this popular boy chosen to be locked out of the group got angry and very frustrated. He told the other boys he was going to "punch their lights out." This set up the dialog about feeling left out or excluded and how this might relate to anyone they might know. They mentioned the boy who used to be part of their group but who

was retained and now their enemy. This exercise was helpful in developing sympathy for his position.

I asked her to ask the group if they would like to see a miracle happen. If they said “yes”, she was to challenge them to invite him to be part of their group again and not stop asking, even if they got multiple rejections. We hypothesized that it would take a dozen or more invitations before he would feel welcomed again.

The group had to first express and work through their anger toward this boy in a simulated role play and then deal with their skepticism about the boy feeling wanted by the group again. In this crisis intervention model the group members were asked to role play inviting this boy to rejoin the group and in the role play to anticipate resistance and keep making the request anyway. It became obvious to the counselor that if she had not practiced many role-playing scenarios of group members inviting the ostracized boy back into the group, it would not have worked. When they worked through their animosity and resentment, the boys were successful in integrating the boy back into a sense of belonging to the group. At first he resisted their offers to be a part of the group, (which was now one grade ahead of him). But when genuine offers kept coming, like this one “We want you as part of our group again,” the offer was finally accepted and he enjoyed playing with his old buddies before and after school once again.. He was also invited to the homes of group members to play and hang out.

The counselor was converted to the power of the group. The group accomplished a sense of belonging and a feeling that he was wanted. The reading teacher reported to the counselor that this student was making excellent progress and that she was glad that her reading program had “turned this student around.” The principal reported to the counselor that all the spankings had “finally paid off” because the boy was staying out of fights. The counselor smiled and knew the source of change in the boy. It was not the principal’s spankings, the reading teacher’s reading program, or individual counseling that turned this student around, but rather the use of the group to integrate this student back into the fold. Once a feeling of belonging was restored, academic achievement and cooperation were accomplished.

Example #4: The group socialized a group member and got him to participate

Billy was not involved with other children. He had been referred to the school based mental health summer program. It soon became obvious to the counselor why the student had been referred. He was a loner, non-cooperative and quite depressed. He would not participate with the other children in the group process. The only thing he wanted to do was go fishing.

That activity seemed to capture the interest of the other students as well. The counselor told the group that if they could get him to participate in the group counseling sessions, they would win a fishing trip for all of the children.

They took the challenge and coaxed Billy to participate in group. The counselor took a picture of the group at the fishing party outing that Billy had won for the entire group. The children were in a big pile on top of Billy and he loved it. No longer was he an outsider.

An amazing transformation had occurred with Billy that summer. The teachers and parents noticed a big difference in him. Billy had become a special friend to the students that summer.

I asked the counselor if she had heard of Lee Cantral's group modification technique of rewarding an entire classroom with a party if a child got a mug full of marbles for on-task behavior.

The student would get a marble in the jar each time he was seen to on-task and performing or acting appropriately. The entire class knew that they all would receive a party when the mug became full of marbles. The entire class became a cheering squad for that student.

Example #5: Integrating a lonely boy in special education into a fun group of boys

I was asked to counsel a boy in the 6th grade. He was in special education and was doing poorly in school. His social studies teacher would not individualize materials or requirements for him even though the special education coordinator had given the teacher materials the student could read and understand. The student was in Special Education classes 4 hours a day. Social studies was the only academic classroom in which this student was mainstreamed. He was reading on a second- grade eighth-month level (2.8). He could not do the work asked of him. He had a degenerative neurological disorder. He had no close friends. His only sibling, a sister, was eight years older than him. He liked to push, shove, goof around with other students, and even with his special education teacher. She did not like it and referred him for counseling. He attended a small rural church with no one in his age group or even close to it. I recommended to the mother that she get him involved in a club or a Boy Scout troop. He needed a peer group with whom he could play and goof around without getting into trouble. She said she would like to do so but she did not know how or where she could find such a group. I told her I did and I would get back to her. I met with the boys in my Boy Scout troop and explained his special needs. I told them he needed a group of peers with whom he could "horse around" and not get into trouble. I explained his neurological disease and low reading level. I told them if they voted to let him into the troop he would most likely bring down their scores in Camporee troop competitions. I left the decision up to the boys and told the senior patrol leader to meet with the troop and take a vote and give me their decision. They unanimously voted to ask him to join our troop. He could hardly contain the excitement of being part of that troop of scouts.

His behavior in school improved because he got the shoving and goofing off out of his system in the weekly scout activities. There was already one scout with a physical handicap in the troop so the boys were used to making accommodations for one of their own. The boy literally became a "happy camper." He lived for scout outings. Because he now had a peer group who included him in their fun, he was happier and his acting out at school diminished to almost nothing. I asked my son recently what he remembered about this boy in our scout troop twenty

one year ago. He said he was proud to be able to give this boy the opportunity to participate in the troop. My son is an Eagle Scout, but he said that this fellowship of boys helping boys is more important than any scout rank. I glowed with pride.

Example #6: Classroom discussion for building understanding that led to acceptance

Tommy had Vodders Syndrome. He had short arms, no thumbs and now in 6th grade he had a colostomy reversal. He still wore a diaper because he was learning to control his bowels at age twelve, and he did not always make it to the bathroom on time. Sometimes he smelled bad. The other students did not want to sit by him, and they were unkind and critical of him. The teachers asked me for help. I said that they needed to have a classroom discussion to help the students understand this boy's challenges and special needs. I explained that new understanding often helps students accept another classmate; understanding precedes acceptance. After explaining what Vodders Syndrome was, and about the recent colostomy reversal, the teacher answered all of the children's questions. Tommy was absent on the day the teacher conducted this discussion, but he noticed a new acceptance and friendliness from his classmates. He asked the teacher if she had talked to the students about him because they were a lot nicer now. He could feel and experience the group's effort to be more understanding. With their approval he tried harder and excelled academically and socially.

Conclusion

By believing in the group and using the group process, these group leaders were able to accomplish therapeutic movement that could not have been achieved in individual counseling. Remember, children can get other children to eat a worm. To unleash the power of the group counseling process one must first believe in the efficacy of that process and then utilize that course of action.

References

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Biographical sketch

R. Blair Olson is professor and Chair of the Department of Counselor Education at Henderson State University. He is in his twenty ninth year at Henderson. Group counseling is one of his favorite courses to teach. He and his wife are the parents of four children and twelve grandchildren.