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*Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities*

## How to Build Shared Leadership

While most people agree that shared leadership is an important goal to strive for in self-help groups, there is little in the way of written guidelines and suggestions for how to achieve this elusive ideal. With an initial reminder that every group (and every person) is different, and that with every advantage there is some disadvantage or trade-off in group process, the following ideas might be considered among those that can distribute the sense of ownership and responsibility for leadership throughout the whole group, easing the burden on any one individual and ensuring both openness and continuity for the group.

### 1. Think "Shared Leadership" from the Outset

While the group is still in its earliest stages of formation, set the precedent of sharing tasks and resources, so that at the very least there are two people taking responsibility for what has to get done, and no one person does it all. In the short run it may seem easier to do things completely by yourself, but such a pattern is very easily set and quite hard to break: you then become the expert, and the "best person to do it" at the cost of mutual aid and joint ownership.

### 2. Rotate Leadership and Other Tasks

Once the group is up and meeting, change in a planned way (i.e. weekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually) the person who runs meetings, arranges speakers, sets up refreshments, etc. In the Twelve Traditions of A.A., it is stated that "anonymity is the spiritual foundation of all our traditions, ever reminding us to place principles before personalities." One way that the Anonymous groups have operationalized this is by having not just one group leader, but many, with a regular weekly change in who fulfills this group function. The principle of leadership is thus placed before the personality of any particular "leader."

Another way of handling this is for people to change roles bi-weekly or monthly. A co-leader can serve to help the leader during the first week or two of the designated period, and then take primary responsibility him- or herself, "breaking in" the best co-leader at the same time. This strategy is applicable to many tasks and functions, and in addition to promoting a nice flow of participation among the group, it can engender a sense of continuity over time.

### 3. Change Locations or Try to Meet in a Power-Neutral Place

Physical environments play a major role in how comfortable or secure people feel both from an aesthetic standpoint as well as from the standpoint of political and territorial dynamics. Always meeting in one particular person's home, for example, may "stack the deck" against certain group members taking leadership roles, based on their relationships with the host or hostess.

Consequently, it's a good idea to rotate among different people's homes. Even in neutral space, such as a church or hospital it is likely that some people's experiences there (or feelings about the institution) will adversely affect their ability to participate. While no place is perfect for everyone, shared leadership can well be served by keeping in mind how a particular space makes different group members feel.

#### 4. Occasionally Vary Meeting Times

While regularity of time (and place) is obviously helpful in developing group stability, there are some people who may systematically be excluded from attendance if the group only meets, say, on Tuesday evenings, Saturday mornings, or the third Wednesday of every month. Therefore it may be a good idea to have at least the first few meetings at different times during the week, so that as many interested people as possible can have a chance to attend.

#### 5. Adjust Seating Arrangements to Facilitate Sharing

When the seating arrangement is such that people are in rows facing the front of a room, where group leaders sit with everyone facing only them, the group's tendency is to deal only through the leader(s), rather than through a mutual exchange process. Less dependence on a leader will develop when all group members face each other in a circle or around a table.

#### 6. Integrate New Members by Words and Actions

In addition to verbally welcoming new people to the group, try to be aware of how the group is experienced by a newcomer and seat yourselves accordingly: distribute old-timers among the newer or less-known group members rather than clustering amongst yourselves. Similarly, share the history and knowledge of the group by making available to newcomers prior meeting minutes or summaries, and if appropriate, current members' names and telephone numbers. These strategies can help ease feelings of "newness" and further increase a sense of belonging.

#### 7. Broaden the Base Active Group Members While Identifying and Preparing Future Leaders

If one thinks of leadership as occupying one end of a continuum, the other end of which is non-involvement and ultimately non-attendance, then a general strategy for increasing shared leadership becomes moving people toward that high-involvement end of the continuum. Several ways to do this are:

- a. Based on comments made in the meetings, quietly and perhaps outside of the group, ask individual people to help you or other leaders with specific tasks and projects in which you suspect they might be interested. This gives them experience without too much responsibility, and links people who may not know each other.
- b. Build on already existing friendships in the group by asking pairs or trios of people to take on projects together.
- c. When looking for officers, suggest that two people become co-secretaries, or co-chairs, of some chairs, of some committee, and jointly take responsibility.
- d. Publicly acknowledge and express appreciation for work done by others; this not only pleases people (usually), but also helps others to realize just how much work is getting done.
- e. Tell stories and elicit stories about how a particular task was accomplished, and when appropriate, relate your own mistakes and lessons learned; this de-mystifies and makes more approachable both tasks and leadership.
- f. Have fun in and enjoy the group: people want to be involved and central in endeavors which are upbeat and make them feel good.
- g. Make room for others: by being sensitive to people's messages and signals, know when to step back or down and let others do the work. Be available for advice and support, but let others work!

*--Andy Bernstein*

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