



Keeping a Support Group Going: Five Things to Remember

Maintaining a self-help and mutual support group requires as much effort as it does to start one. Some would say more. Support groups face the prospect of constantly recreating themselves. Given this, group leaders and members are encouraged to remember the following.

1. REMEMBER TO SHARE - Although this sounds like advice a parent might give their child, it is also good advice for support groups. The concept of sharing is central to the development of a successful support group. Sharing helps produce a cohesive group. It produces ownership in the group. It sets the tone and establishes an atmosphere of openness and togetherness.

Examples of areas where sharing should be emphasized are:

- a. **Sharing responsibility for the group** - It is important to deliberately cultivate a sense of shared responsibility. Members should feel committed to the group and encouraged to contribute whatever skills or talents they have to share. Group structure and custom should communicate that member involvement is needed and welcome. Don't assume that members know this. Create a climate that encourages members to feel responsible for the group.
- b. **Sharing leadership** - Opening the doors of leadership to all members may never guarantee an efficient organization. It may prove more chaotic since it is often easier to get things done by doing it ourselves. Unfortunately, this does not produce member involvement and it can rob members of the benefits to be gained from assuming an active role. Discover the talents of group members and give them opportunities to exercise them. A major strength of a self-help group is that no one person must have all the skills or shoulder all the responsibilities.
- c. **Sharing rewards/failures** - Take time to acknowledge and praise members for their contributions to the group. Remember if you want people to participate, reinforce participation when it occurs. On the other side, when mistakes are made or opportunities missed, avoid blaming. It's of little value to dwell on what might have been or should have been. Rather, chalk it up to experience and own that experience as a group.
- d. **Sharing time** - It's not uncommon for groups, after a period of time, to dispense with or minimize the importance of sharing periods. Sometimes groups begin to rely on outside sources rather than on mutual exchanges between members. Some have learned the hard way that they abandoned the very reason their group was started--to share problems or concerns with people who share their problems or concerns.

2. REMEMBER TO BE REALISTIC - The group will not always be "successful" in its activities or with the people that come into it. Don't traumatize yourself or others with unnecessary accusations and charges. Although self-help groups are effective for many, they are not a cure-all. Avoid idealizing the group. Also, be realistic about members who eventually decide to leave the group. It doesn't mean you have failed. Characteristically, people move into groups, get their needs met and their questions answered, then they move on. Remember, most of these are graduates, not drop-outs.

3. REMEMBER THAT GROUPS DEVELOP IN STAGES - Self-help groups are like other groups in that they have developmental phases. In *Helping You Helps Me: A Guide Book for Self-Help Groups*, Karen Hill describes four stages of self-help groups. She suggests that

knowing the stage a group is in can help deal with the changes experienced as a result of that stage. Briefly, the four stages are:

a. **Forming** - This begins when people try to find others who share their problem/concern.

Meetings are characterized by no set behavioral patterns and discussions are not too open.

b. **Norming** - The group begins to consider developing relationships with other groups or helpers in the community. Meeting routines begin to develop. Discussion is becoming more open. Friendships begin to develop. Members begin to agree about the purpose of the group and what activities are needed to carry it out. Expectations about appropriate group behavior develop.

c. **Storming** - Some might call this the teen-age phase of a group. Disagreements about purpose, group activities, and expectations appear. It is a period of questioning.

d. **Performing** - This represents the stage when the group finally gets down to business.

Roles for members are set and usually happen without anyone having to orchestrate it. Expectations are clear. The purpose and activities of the group have been accepted. Greater trust has developed and discussions become more open. The group is not free from disagreements, but they tend to be less severe.

Over time and as the group continues to develop, a return to earlier stages may result. This may cause the group discomfort, but it should be remembered that this is also part of a group's evolution. These stages may also be seen at an individual level when new persons come into a group.

4. REMEMBER TO ASSESS AND REASSESS - Given the on-going developmental nature of support groups and the fact that some problems will normally arise, groups need to become more intentional in evaluating their goals and practices. Groups might set aside specific times to do this. Using typical problem-solving strategies, group members could become actively involved in assessing the effectiveness of their group. Groups also should periodically "take their temperature" to gain feedback and check on member satisfaction. Although there are risks associated with a practice like this, the long term benefits like increased member participation and goal clarification usually outweigh these risks.

5. REMEMBER WHAT SUPPORT GROUPS DO BEST - Remember support is your area of expertise. Research shows that one of the most consistent drawing factors of self-help and mutual support groups is the emotional support and sense of community they provide. Whatever else the group does, it must never become a substitute for mutual support. As our world becomes more impersonal and lives more complex, people facing problems and life-disrupting situations will be searching for a kind word, a sympathetic ear, or an understanding nod, and that is something support groups do and do very well.

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