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Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE SELF-HELP GROUP LEADER/FACILITATOR

Have you ever wondered how some support group leaders and facilitators make it look so "easy?" What's their secret? Although it's no secret, there appear to be some key characteristics common to these individuals. Based on observations of and experiences with these individuals, it would seem that effective support group leaders and facilitators:

Are knowledgeable of group behaviors/leadership - They tend to have some familiarity with or past experience as a group leader. It is very useful to understand how people behave in groups and the helpful things one can do in group settings. Many effective leaders and facilitators have picked up some of their skills through books on group leadership or have taken classes to help them gain these skills.

Possess a basic commitment to the self-help process - Leading an effective support group begins with a commitment to three basic assumptions: (1) that each member can make a contribution to the group, (2) that each member is the ultimate authority on his/her needs and what will work for him/her and (3) that communications will be open and honest to promote positive group experiences.

Are capable of distinguishing/controlling personal views - The effective leader/facilitator is able to separate their personal needs from those of the group or member needs. Those having their own agenda or "axe to grind" can end up promoting their views and opinions over the group's. It may be necessary, at times, for the leader or facilitator to step out of their role for the purpose of expressing personal needs and opinions.

Are willing to work toward the group's goals - The effective leader or facilitator is enthusiastic about the goals of the group and is quite willing to work for their accomplishment. They see themselves as a part of a team and are emotionally and physically committed to the team's success. Also, they actively and creatively look for ways to give members the opportunity to participate in the process of setting and carrying out the goals of the group.

Have the ability to initiate activity - Every leader or facilitator seeks to develop shared responsibility and leadership for the group. There will, however, be occasions when no one else is capable, ready or willing to do what needs to be done. In these instances the leader or facilitator must be prepared to get the ball rolling. This must, however, always be balanced against the need to generate member participation and the need to protect the leader or facilitator from burnout.

Are comfortable with the expression of emotion, tension and conflict - There is no escaping the fact that emotion, tension, and conflict are likely to arise in a support group. It's important that you are comfortable with this, not only as it occurs in others but in yourself as well. You need to expect that conflicts within the group will appear and that criticism will be directed toward you as the leader or facilitator. Learn to look at criticism objectively and try to

avoid taking it personally. Leaders and facilitators would be wise to learn some basic communication skills so they can better deal with the emotions that may surface in the group.

Are committed to the welfare of the group and all its members - The commitment of an effective leader or facilitator lies with the group--how to make it succeed, how to meet needs, etc. This will sometimes require a willingness to look for the forest and not be blinded by the trees. A good leader or facilitator will focus upon building a sense of community, group cohesiveness, and consensus decision-making within the group.

Value and respect each member as an individual - Although the leader's or facilitator's focus is upon the group, they do not lose sight of the individual. They view each member as unique. Members tend to be seen as equals, deserving mutual respect and consideration for the values they hold as individuals. They see all members as potential teachers, having a reservoir of knowledge and experience from which others may benefit.

Emphasize the positive aspects of the support group - Unfortunately, it's all too easy in a support group to focus on the negatives, the sadness and/or depression generated at having to deal with the demands and consequences of the problem. An effective leader or facilitator attempts to put a greater emphasis upon the positive aspects--education, learning successful coping strategies, the support of others who really understand, etc. This is not to say that the negatives are avoided, only that they do not become the group's primary focus.

Encourage members to identify/evaluate alternatives for themselves - The effective leader or facilitator does not decide what is right for the members. Each member is encouraged to examine problem solving strategies and potential solutions for themselves. Leaders and facilitators provide a process by which members explore options and alternatives and they offer their support as the members carry out this process and their respective choices.

Someone has said that good leaders are born, not made. We at the WSU Center for Community Support & Research (CCSR), however, believe that a little training can be helpful to persons who have undertaken the task of leading or facilitating a support group. To this end, we encourage you to call for consultation, workshop offerings and training provided by CCSR.