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Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities

STARTING A SELF-HELP GROUP: SOME IMPORTANT DECISIONS TO CONSIDER

The first decision behind the start of every self-help group begins with a decision to do something about the problem or concern. Once this is made and the intention to do something takes the form of developing a self-help/mutual-help support group, then several other important decisions are necessary. The following identifies and discusses five of these.

Function - The function of a group refers to the primary purpose for which a group is created. Most support groups fit one of three models: (1) emotional support, (2) educational or (3) social action or advocacy. If the group's goal is to promote coping, offer mutual aid, and foster individual change, then emotional support is probably the model to use. If the goals are increased understanding of a problem and information dissemination, then the group should function as an educational support group. Lastly, if the group focus is concerned about how others or "the system" treats or views the affected person then a social action/advocacy model may be more appropriate. Mixing the models may not be a good idea because the dynamics and tasks associated with each are different. Also understand that the function of a group will affect its composition. People will tend to select support groups which are consistent with the needs they are currently experiencing. A good rule of thumb is to select the model that is most consistent with the primary interests and goals of the group.

Composition - Who will the group serve? Is it only for persons directly affected by the problem or concern? What about family members and friends of the affected person? Will the group be only for a specific type of problem (e.g., cataracts) or a broad, general population (e.g., visual problems). This is an important decision point because there is evidence suggesting that support groups are more successful with members who come from similar backgrounds and experiences. At the same time, however, other factors may necessitate a group having to combine differing problems and populations into one group. Some groups begin by serving a very broad population and then narrow their focus as the need arises.

Leadership - How will group leadership be handled in the group? Formal or informal leadership? Elected officers? No officers? Shared leadership? Some groups do quite well with a vertical leadership structure--formal, elected officers who serve for definite periods of time with very specific duties. Other groups, like those that use a 12 Step model (e.g., AA), prefer a flat structure where all members are considered equal, with none having any ascribed rank over the others. Whatever model is chosen, one thing is clear. Groups that actively develop and practice shared leadership fare better, are more successful in fostering member participation and do a better job of preventing leader burnout.

Duration - Most self-help groups tend to be either time-limited (e.g., six two hour meetings for six consecutive Mondays) or ongoing in duration (e.g., third Thursday of each month). Groups dealing with crisis type situations (e.g., divorce, bereavement, etc.) may prefer a time-limited format. In this format, members cycle through the group, receive information and support and then move on. In some cases additional support is required. Individuals may wish to repeat the group experience or find an ongoing support group that can address needs not met by the time-

limited group. A problem with time-limited groups is that they may not be available at the time when they are needed. When the problem being addressed by the group is lifelong, chronic and not likely to go away, then having regular, ongoing meetings is probably a good format to adopt. For many, this format offers hope and regular opportunities for social interaction and support. Ongoing groups, generally speaking, require more energy due to the pressing needs of a changing membership and the drive to sustain the effectiveness of the group over time. There is, however, no ideal format. Duration of the group, like all the other decision points will be governed by the felt needs of the people seeking the services of the group.

National Affiliation and Community Connections - Many self-help groups choose to affiliate with a national or model self-help organization that addresses the problem or concern of interest to the group. Some, however, prefer to remain independent. There are pros and cons for each option. Individuals should carefully consider and investigate both options. Groups also need to make a similar decision with regard to involvement and affiliation with community programs and agencies. Groups should seek to develop positive relationships with all community social service and health organizations. At the same time, these relationships may come with certain strings attached. Some groups actively seek sponsorship of professionals and community agencies; others favor neutrality and self-sufficiency. Whatever the choice, groups should try to find ways to develop acceptable linkages and relationships with professional helpers and professional helping systems. A common reason some support groups falter is they become too isolated and insulated from the very community resources that could and would assist them.

Individuals having questions or desiring more information regarding these and other group development issues are encouraged to contact the Wichita State University Center for Community Support and Research (CCSR). CCSR is a resource center and clearinghouse on self-help and mutual help groups in Kansas.