

## A simple model for facilitating small groups

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### INTRODUCTION

Facilitating small groups is a skill that is difficult to develop but once mastered, makes learning in small groups effective, and enjoyable for the facilitator. The difficulty is in developing the required skills. Although the small group approach to adult education has long been recognised as a key method, a simple approach to help inexperienced facilitators develop both their confidence and essential skills does not appear to exist.<sup>1,2</sup>

Small group adult education is commonplace on most vocational training schemes and there is ample evidence for its effectiveness.<sup>3-5</sup> A key point is that adults learn best when they have a good reason to learn and are involved in the planning and assessment.<sup>6,7</sup> A good facilitator will be aware of this and use it to the group's advantage.

This paper proposes some basic rules and a simple model that will help inexperienced facilitators to become more confident, and more experienced facilitators to improve their skills.

### ATTRIBUTES OF A GROUP FACILITATOR

There are no rules to say that a facilitator should behave in a particular way, nor that they must have particular qualities, but in my opinion there are some attributes which help and are therefore worth developing.

- Facilitators have to be aware of a plethora of detail while the group is running, so that in Belbin terms it is useful to have the skills of a Monitor/Evaluator.<sup>8</sup>
- The need to observe and analyse fairly quickly means that the optimal Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) preferences would be Sensing, Thinking and Judging.<sup>9</sup>
- The need continually to analyse and evaluate what is happening means that in Transactional Analysis terms the best ego state is Adult.<sup>10</sup>

### Basic rules

Rules for the function of the group, such as confidentiality and honesty, will help the group's progress, but the following rules are specifically for the facilitator.

- 1 Listen carefully. Listening carefully implies developing an understanding of what is being said and what is going on in the group.
- 2 Watch the non-verbal cues. Non-verbal cues will help understanding but need to be interpreted correctly.
- 3 Be objective. Being objective is important when facilitators are reflecting behaviour to a group. This means avoiding putting any value judgement on the comments being made so that the group can make its own interpretation of the behaviour or circumstances involved. It also helps the facilitator to remain independent of any conflict or other issues.
- 4 Say little. The role of the facilitator is to facilitate and not to dominate the group. This can be achieved by saying little, but facilitator input is usually necessary and the meaning of this rule is to say *as little as is necessary* to facilitate the group.
- 5 Avoid involvement. This is similar to rule 4 and is easier if that rule is followed. It means not becoming embroiled in the group discussion or activity. If this does happen the facilitator stops being a facilitator and becomes a normal group member.

- 6 Address conflict. Dealing with conflict in a group can be very difficult and is not the subject of this paper. However, unresolved conflict inhibits a group's progress. Addressing conflict involves recognising it and then deciding when and how to deal with it.<sup>2</sup>

By following these rules, group facilitators may find themselves feeling outside the group but this may well be appropriate. The advantage is that these rules will help facilitators to develop their skills.

### Group behaviour

Tuckman's seminal paper describes the four major steps in group development (forming, storming, norming, performing) and is very helpful for facilitators in understanding what is going on in their group.<sup>11</sup> For example, it is really useful to know that most groups will go through a 'storming' phase and that this is normal. Inexperienced facilitators can feel uncomfortable during this phase, when they may feel criticised by the group. However, this is a subjective feeling and the group is usually questioning its own role rather than being aggressive towards the facilitator. In situations like this it is useful to remember rule 3, so that facilitators are actually objective with themselves and analyse their personal situation and response.

Groups that have not been allowed to go through the 'storming' phase will often not function very well afterwards and it is important to realise that for good group work this phase is usually necessary.<sup>12</sup>

As a group progresses through Tuckman's four stages and becomes more autonomous, it is likely to need less guidance from the facilitator.<sup>13</sup> This is similar to the one-to-one teaching situation when a trainer may move from the 'didactic' to the 'heuristic' teaching style.<sup>14</sup>

Group behaviour is affected by the nature of the group. Sometimes the group meets to carry out a straightforward task,

but at other times the *process* of the group is more important. When a group's process is more important, the facilitator needs to help the group understand individual and group behaviour. However, even with a task-orientated group, there will still be process behaviours affecting its function. Adair has identified the three main areas on which group facilitators should concentrate as:

- group task
- group process
- group individuals.<sup>15</sup>

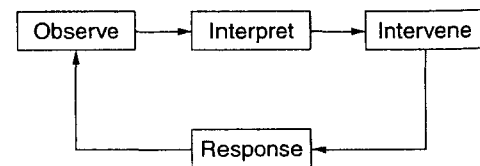
### A SIMPLE MODEL

Based on these concepts, I propose a simple model as outlined in Figure 1. The model has four phases for the facilitator.

- 1 Observation of what is happening in the group.
- 2 Interpretation of the observations.
- 3 A decision whether or not to intervene in the group process or discussion.
- 4 A response to the intervention.

An intervention is defined as a deliberate attempt to influence the group's activity. For example, the facilitator may wish to help the group to identify and analyse particular behaviour or encourage the group to resume dealing with a task or topic from which it has strayed.

Interventions do not necessarily have to be by the group facilitator, and will fre-



**Figure 1** Basic group facilitator's model

quently be by group members. In such instances the model still applies, as the facilitator will be observing someone else's intervention.

I shall now discuss each phase in more detail.

### Observe

This phase involves the skills of hearing, listening and watching. There is a significant difference between hearing and listening and the most important thing for small group facilitators is to ensure they understand what they hear, which is what listening is about.<sup>16,17</sup>

It is also important to observe non-verbal cues, not only physical behaviour but also what is said and the way in which words are spoken. For example, it is possible to say, 'What did you say?' in at least four different ways by emphasising a different word each time. The meaning each time will be quite different and will have a different effect on the group.

Observation also involves being aware of the direction of the group, whether it is keeping to the task or topic that is most helpful to it or whether it is avoiding difficult issues.

There is no overt group facilitator activity in this phase, and the key behaviour for a group facilitator is to remain silent and be watchful. Observation will help the group facilitator to identify topics that are important to the group or that may be useful during later discussions. Topics will usually involve the 'knowledge' and 'skills' domains of Bloom's taxonomy.<sup>18</sup>

### Interpret

Analysing the observations made is something that inexperienced facilitators may find difficult. There is so much going on that it is not possible to be aware of everything that is happening, but it is important to be aware of the general trend of behaviour and activity in the group.

Facilitators might find it useful to ask themselves questions such as:

- Why is this happening?
- What does it mean?
- Who is involved?
- How are they involved?

An extremely useful technique for interpreting what is observed is to use Transactional Analysis.<sup>10,19</sup> This gives the facilitator a model that can be used to explain any interpretation objectively to the group. It is also a useful confidence booster for a facilitator as it is a well-recognised working theory.

Another useful tool for analysis is MBTI and even a basic understanding of this approach can be helpful.<sup>9</sup> MBTI is also valuable in helping to understand people's behaviour.<sup>20</sup>

The only way for a facilitator to increase their interpretive skills is to practise in a safe environment. This usually involves working in a small group that recognises the development of facilitation skills as part of its function. In groups like this facilitators can practise their interpretation and ask the group if they are correct or not. Clearly this depends on such a group being honest.

Interpretation will help the group facilitator to identify issues that are relevant to the group, which it may not have identified for itself. Issues will usually involve the 'skills' and 'attitudes' domains of Bloom's taxonomy.<sup>21</sup>

### Intervene

This is perhaps the most difficult part of a group facilitator's role. The effect of interventions by the facilitator will depend on his or her skills and the accuracy of his or her observation and interpretation.

Why intervene? Why not let the group continue the course it has chosen? The two most common reasons for intervening are:

- 1 because there are topics or issues that the group may not have identified, discussion of which would be beneficial for the group or for individuals in the group
- 2 the commonest way of dealing with conflict in a small group setting is to avoid it, unless the group is particularly skilled. Such avoidance may not be helpful nor appropriate.

The type of intervention will depend partly on which Tuckman phase the group has reached and partly on which of Adair's areas is more important.<sup>11,15</sup> The type of intervention could be linked to one of the teaching styles of Hersey and Blanchard or the RCGP.<sup>13,14</sup>

Intervention will help the facilitator to guide the group and Box 1 lists some useful intervention techniques. Such approaches to intervention are intended to help the group develop by encouraging interaction within the group. It is quite acceptable for the facilitator to keep assessing the group, looking for non-verbal signals, and to use non-verbal communication to encourage or even discourage contributions.<sup>22</sup> The facilitator should also demonstrate support and value for group members, particularly when redirecting the group or a group member.

**Box 1** Some useful intervention techniques for group facilitators

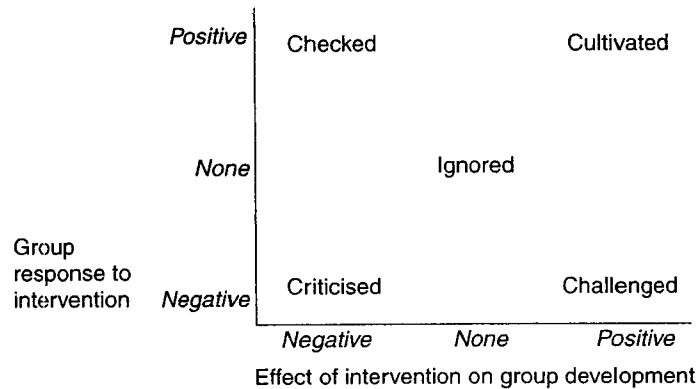
- Open up discussion by:
  - avoiding eye contact
  - making notes (moving 'out' of the group).
- Use models like Transactional Analysis to point out group behaviour.
- Reflect questions/statements (encourage the group to work on their problems themselves).
- Use 'allies' – 'I think there are people in this group who disagree'.
- Use constructive criticism, but always be objective.

Facilitators may also find it useful to ask themselves the following questions.

- 1 What is likely to happen if I don't intervene?
- 2 What is likely to happen if I do intervene?
- 3 What do I want to happen?

**Response**

A model showing the possible range of reactions to an intervention is outlined in Figure 2. It is based on how the group ack-



**Figure 2** Effect on group development of responses to an intervention

**Box 2** The 'four Cs'

Checked	A positive response but group development is inhibited/checked by mutual admiration or a collusion that everything is going well.
Criticised	Group members and whoever made the intervention are critical of each other.
Challenged	The result of a negative group reaction that is used to bring about constructive criticism and progress.
Cultivated	The group develops in a positive and supportive way.

nowledges the intervention (positively, not at all or negatively) and whether the effect of the response is positive or negative in terms of group development.

If there is no acknowledgement of the intervention, the facilitator or group member has been ignored and there is no effect on the group. Sometimes the intervention may just be acknowledged with no other reaction and so no change to the group process, again effectively ignoring whoever has made the intervention.

The 'four Cs' describe the other possible responses (see Box 2).

Facilitators normally intervene to guide the group in its development, with interventions broadly based on the group's stage of development and its aims. Interpreting the group's response to an intervention, whether it is by the facilitator or a group member, involves moving around the model once again with observation followed by interpretation and possible further intervention.

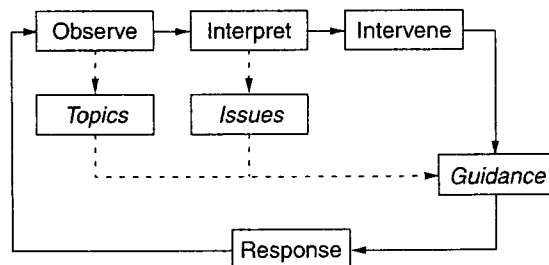
**The full model**

Figure 3 shows the full model described in this paper.

This model is designed to be useful for both inexperienced and experienced small group facilitators and with the detail outlined in this paper can be of benefit in developing both small group facilitation skills and communication skills generally.

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**Figure 3** Detailed group facilitator's model

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