

### **Gibb's strategies for supportive versus defensive climate in group work:**

Helping to create safety and a supportive climate are important tasks for everyone in the group but the facilitator has particular responsibility for leadership in this area and for dealing with any difficulties that crop up despite everyone's best efforts. The work of **J.R. Gibb (1961)** is a particularly useful resource for creating and then maintaining a supportive climate, for reducing defensiveness to manageable levels when it does appear and for restoring a supportive climate and safety when they are temporarily compromised.

Based on an eight-year study which looked at audiotaped recordings of small group discussions, Gibb identified six categories of behaviour that are characteristic of a supportive climate in groups (first item in each pair below) and six alternative categories that are characteristic of a defensive climate (second item in each pair). It is not difficult to guess which set of categories describes the stereotype of the "traditional" authoritarian teacher.

1. **Description:**

Non-judgmental presentation of perceptions, feelings, events; genuine requests for information; descriptively reflecting opinions and direct observations of visible behaviour back to the other person; avoiding terms like "good" or "bad".

**Evaluation:**

Passing judgement; blaming, criticising or praising; questioning motives or standards.

2. **Problem Orientation:**

Collaboration; mutually defining and solving problems rather than telling someone what to do.

**Control:**

Doing something to other people; telling them what to do or how to feel or think.

3. **Spontaneity** (flexibility):

Freedom from "hidden agendas" or other deceptions; straight-forwardness; the ability to respond to events and people with flexibility (spontaneity should not be construed to mean lack of organisation or absence of plans and structure).

**Strategy** (hidden agenda):

Manipulating through the use of tricks or hidden plans; hiding intentions.

4. **Empathy** (involvement):

Willingness to become involved with others; identifying with, respecting, accepting, understanding others.

**Neutrality** (indifference):

Indifference, detachment, aloofness; other-as-object-of-study attitude.

5. **Equality:**

Willingness to participate with the other person, to mutually define and solve problems; de-emphasis of differences in power or ability. Equality does not deny differences in knowledge or ability, rather it recognises the contribution and worth of each individual.

**Superiority:**

Failure to recognise the worth of the other person, arousing feelings of inadequacy in the other, communicating that one is better than the other.

6. **Provisionalism** (tentativeness):

Tentativeness, open-mindedness, willingness to explore alternative points of view or plans of action.

**Certainty** (dogmatism):

Dogmatism, resisting consideration of alternatives, emphasis on proving a point rather than solving the problem.

To develop and maintain a supportive climate - and thereby open the way for learning or change - consciously employ description, problem orientation, spontaneity, empathy, equality, and provisionalism and avoid as much as possible evaluation, control, strategy, neutrality, superiority, and certainty (as defined by Gibb). This is the framework we turn to first whenever difficulties of any kind arise that we aren't sure how to handle. We find this framework particularly useful as a means for coping with defensiveness and distrust whenever these attitudes appear in learning or health care settings.

Creating a supportive climate is however more complex than simply using supportive and avoiding defensive climate behaviours. The level of defensiveness already present will influence the degree to which the various categories will generate defensiveness or supportiveness. If the group has developed a supportive climate then participants are freer to make and more easily tolerate comments in any of the categories. On the other hand, if defensiveness begins to block learning, intentionally go back to using the supportive categories. And certainly these are the preferred starting points in all unknown or new situations.

Although the definitions of the defensive categories focus on their negative side, these categories are not always inappropriate. Evaluation and control are appropriate under some circumstances regardless of the defensiveness that may result.