Stages of Group Development

Over the years, many authors have identified typical stages of group development. Although the terms for these stages vary from author to author, general characteristics of membership behavior are exhibited as group members pass through these stages.

Pre-group Stage

Before forming a group, the leader has to decide a method to prescreen potential group members. This **pre-group stage** can be accomplished in many ways. Some group leaders will have a pre-group group meeting with all potential members. Other leaders will provide potential members with thorough written or even videotaped knowledge of the expectations of the group in an effort to have potential members screen themselves out. However, probably the most effective and common method is the individual interview. Interview can accomplish many things, including (1) identifying needs, expectations, and commitment of the potential group member; (2) challenging myths and misconceptions of the potential member; (3) conveying information to and procuring information from the potential member; and (4) screening out (or in) potential members.

The Initial Stage

This beginning of a group is often highlighted by anxiety and apprehension by group members (and to lesser degree, by the group leader). Members are learning about the rules and goals of their group and are wondering whether they can trust the other members.

During the **initial stage**, group members are often self-conscious and worried about how others might view them. Because of this initial apprehension and lack of trust, group members will often avoid taking about in-depth feelings, and discussions are relatively "safe." Therefore it is common for conversations to be superficial, for members to talk about things not related to their lives, and for discussions to revolve around past feelings rather than current feelings. This is called "self conscious" as compared with an "other focus."

The major task for the group leader in this stage is to define the ground rules and to build trust. In building trust, the ability to set limits, to use empathy, and to show unconditional positive regard is crucial. As members become comfortable with the ground rules and as they begin to feel comfortable with one another, they move on to the next stage of group development.

The Transition Stage

During the early **transition stage**, group members understand the goals and rules of the group but continue to remain anxious concerning the group process. Issues of control, power and authority become increasingly important in this stage as members position themselves within the system. Hostility during this stage can be viewed as a type of resistance that gives members a way to avoid dealing with their issues. The leader needs to be aware of any scapegoating that could occur as one manifestation of this hostility. Although empathy is still crucial, the leader must actively prevent a member from being scapegoated or attacked. Therefore, the leader will often take an active role in preventing coalitions from forming and in preventing verbal attacks on members.

As this stage continues, group members begin to settle in and can focus more on themselves. This is highlighted by a sense of self-acceptance of the member's life predicaments. Members now demonstrate the ability to take ownership of their feelings, to talk in the here and now, and to not blame others for their problems. This is an important step toward actually making change that occurs in the next stage. As members move into this part of the transition stage and to begin to take more responsibility for their feelings and actions, the leader's role becomes much easier. No longer is it necessary for the leader to "protect" members, and during this part of the transition stage the leader can usually relax and let the group develop on its own.

The work Stage

As group members gain the capacity to take ownership for their feelings and life predicaments, a deepening of trust and a sense of cohesion emerge within the group. Now, group members experience a sense of readiness to work on their identified problem areas. During this **work stage**, the group has developed its own homeostasis. Now it is important that the group leader

prohibit members from becoming too comfortable in their style of relating because this can prevent change and growth. Members readily give feedback to other members, and as they identify problem areas, they begin to take an active role in the change process. At this point, members might attempt new ways of communicating, acting, or expressing feelings. The leader can best facilitate movement by asking questions, using problem-solving skills, giving advice, offering alternatives, encouraging feedback by members, and affirming members' attempts at change.

As members accomplish their goals, they begin to gain a sense of high self-esteem. This is a product of receiving positive feedback from other members as well as personal sense of accomplishment for the work that they have done. As members meet their goals, they are near the completion of the group process.

The closure stage

As group members reach their identified goals, there is an increased sense of accomplishment and the beginning awareness that the group process is near completion. During this **closure stage**, the leader will often summarize the learning that has taken place and begin to focus on the separation process. Because members typically have shared deep aspects of themselves, a sense of togetherness, cohesion and warmth has developed. Therefore, saying good-bye can be a difficult process for many, and it is important that the leader facilitate this process in a direct yet gentle fashion. Often this is done by members sharing what they have learned about themselves and one another, though expression of feeling toward one another, and by defining future goals for themselves. This important final stage in the group process allows members to feel a sense of completion and wholeness about what they have experienced.

In this stage, the leader might actively encourage members to express their feelings concerning the group process as well as their feelings about ending the group. Asking questions and encouraging members to express their feelings might accomplish this. Of course, using empathy to listen to members' feelings regarding the closure of the group is extremely important.