



the
Self
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Connection

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The Role of Leaders

In many situations, the role of facilitating or leading a group, meeting, or discussion is not the responsibility of only one person but is the responsibility of several in the group. This is not always the case, and therefore, it is important for leaders to keep in mind that with the leadership role comes a certain amount of responsibility to other consumers/survivors. People often turn to leaders for assistance, guidance, and sometimes see them as mentors or someone they trust and "look up to." As a result, leaders should maintain a degree of "professionalism" when working with other consumers/survivors and be aware of their responsibility to:

- Use good judgement when working with a group or issues that arise in that group.
- Share a common goal with the group, be passionate, have integrity, and be trustworthy.
- Pursue self-knowledge, accept responsibility and blame no one.
- Help members feel comfortable and get to know each other.

- Be sure the speaker has finished describing his/her problem before offering advice.
- Listen carefully and considerately when another member is speaking and discourage side conversations by others in the group.
- **Promote positive comments and new viewpoints**, that is, keep the discussion positive and upbeat so the discussion doesn't deteriorate into a gripe session.
- Notice silent people in the group and encourage them to participate.
- Participate in the discussion by sharing problems, and offering ideas and advice.
- Let individuals talk openly about negative or angry feelings. Often this must be done before positive advice can be given and received.
- **Make a commitment to the group**, contributing whatever talents, skills, resources or information that are necessary to make certain that the group is successful.

- Set goals, plan programs, identify jobs that need to be done, recognize and carry out the jobs that keep a group going.
- Keep the group on topic and briefly restate what individuals have said.
- State/summarize all sides of a dispute or argument.
- Help individuals evaluate how they are doing and to figure out how to improve things.
- Suggest ways to solve a problem.



Leadership Styles

Leadership is best shared among many individuals in a group. There are several ways this can be done.

Shared leadership

This style of leadership reduces the stress and demands of leadership by involving all members of a group. Members of the group share the responsibilities of leadership by matching their skills and experience with specific tasks or duties. If leadership is to be shared, the group will have to decide:

- How can individuals contribute?
- What are the skills, knowledge and resources necessary to do the job?
- What kinds of contributions will help the group?
- What can the group do to improve the ability of individuals to contribute?

Team Approach

Some consumer/survivor groups take turns planning and leading various parts of meetings. Teams can be rotated to encourage various individuals to take on responsibilities and give everyone an opportunity to learn new skills.



Executive/Committee Leadership

When groups decide to become more formal, as is often seen in social action or advocacy groups, leadership often becomes more concentrated around one or several individuals. The group then frequently becomes incorporated (becomes a legal body) through the Joint Stock Company Act and elects a slate of officers (i.e., President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Committee Chairpersons). Groups who have incorporated indicate that this takes a lot of work and caution that group members should be ready before they incorporate.

Facilitation

One of the main responsibilities of a group leader is facilitating group meetings. Facilitating meetings means assisting with group process or functioning; that is, making the functioning of a group easier. Facilitation includes the following tasks:

- Helping the group stay on topic
- Introducing each part of the group session or agenda
- Keeping track of time
- Summarizing the content of discussions
- Noticing anything that disrupts the group (interruptions, jumping from topic, withdrawing)
- Encouraging everyone to participate
- Helping make transitions between topics
- Encouraging individuals to provide support, information, and problem solving skills

- Helping establish group purpose/goals/objectives
- Helping establish group guidelines

Facilitation of the group may be done by one or two facilitators from the group or shared by many members in a rotating fashion. Shared facilitation takes the pressure off one individual, allows more people to share responsibility for a group, and provides individuals with an opportunity to develop new knowledge and skills.



Mediation

Mental health consumers/survivors can bring many different perspectives, opinions, experiences and reactions to a group, and learning to accept these differences can be challenging. Consumers/survivors can also bring many emotions to the group; they may have feelings of denial, anger, depression, fear, guilt, resentment, and insecurity. Try to remember that everyone in the group is there for a common interest (e.g. emotional, practical, or social support; employment support; education; advocacy; etc.). Conflict or a clashing of ideas, values, or feelings may arise and can lead to growth and change, but should not be permitted to the extent that differences lead to continuing struggles that can damage or upset the group or individuals in the group.

Although conflict can disrupt or destroy groups, there are positive aspects to conflict. It can open up issues, release feelings, lead to communication, build a sense of togetherness, and solve problems. On the other hand, individuals may not want to deal with conflict because they fear anger, feeling bad, and hurting others. Learning how to deal with conflict is an ongoing process. Mediation, or working to resolve or settle a problem, becomes an important skill for facilitators/leaders to possess in order

to appropriately handle conflicts when they arise. Mediation techniques that can be used to resolve conflict in a group include:

- Encourage individuals involved to work it out amongst themselves.
- Use the assertive caring technique (see the following section).
- Provide a choice between several appropriate solutions.
- Set boundaries/guidelines for behaviour that is acceptable in the group.
- Ask the group for possible solutions.
- Take members aside and away from the group to calm them down.
- Evaluate meetings periodically so you see potential areas of conflict, and nip it in the bud.
- Facilitate some role plays where members act out conflicts by switching roles to get a sense of how the other member feels.

- Make the issue of conflict the topic for an evening.
- Use the direct approach -- deal with the conflict then and there.
- Get conflict out into the open.
- Conduct problem solving, meditation, or relaxation exercises with the group.



Assertive Caring

Assertive caring is a technique used to handle or modify a group situation in a positive, honest, direct way by being assertive while showing that you care. It consists of four steps: providing a statement of understanding, setting limits, suggesting an alternative, and checking for agreement.

How to use assertive caring

When giving your comments or suggestions to someone, it is important to explain to them how their behaviour affects you and possibly others in the group. Attempt to settle a dispute/conflict gently and gradually, without being critical or judgmental. Try not to say or do anything that will embarrass someone.

Be alert, be sensitive. When to interrupt or intervene is a judgement call. Ask yourself: Is this behaviour consistent, or is it only one incidence? If it is the first time a shy individual has ever shared, you might decide to give them the floor for a while. On the other hand, if it is someone who takes control over all discussions, act quickly and be clear. Use "I" statements to give feedback, to capture what has been said, to offer a new point of view, to give

encouragement, and to summarize or pull everything together for the group. Below are the steps to follow when using assertive caring.

Providing a statement of understanding lets the individual know you care, that you understand, but that you need to correct or modify the situation (e.g. "I understand that you are angry...").

Setting limits lets the individual know that you need to change the situation and why you need to change the situation. (e.g. "The group is finding it hard to concentrate").

Suggesting an alternative allows you to modify or change the situation (e.g. "Maybe we could talk about this more after the meeting").

Checking for agreement makes sure that the alternative that you have suggested is agreeable to the individual and/or group (e.g. "Is that ok?" or "What do you think?" "How does it sound?").

When to use assertive caring

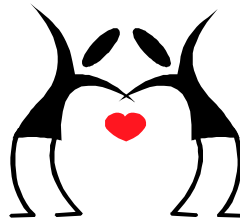
- When one individual in the group talks too much.

- When frequent interruptions are made by an individual with irrelevant and/or inappropriate talk.
- When someone in the group frequently responds with "yes, but" for everything suggested by others.
- When an individual continually arrives late to group meetings.
- When an individual appears to need professional help.

An Example of assertive caring

When an individual is always interrupting...

I understand that you want to share your experiences right now, and we really want to hear about it, (provides a statement of understanding), but I'm finding it difficult to listen to two people talking at once (sets limits). Let's give Beverley a chance to finish, and then we'll give you a chance to comment (suggests an alternative). Is that O.K. with everyone (checks for agreement)?



Active Listening

Part of being a good leader is being a good listener. Listening carefully to the speaker builds trust, rapport, and interaction that is so important if individuals are to share in an honest and open way. Active listening involves listening until an entire situation is explained or understood and is very important in creating a respectful atmosphere within a group.

To promote active listening, don't judge or give advice, maintain eye contact, lean forward, and be attentive. Avoid distractions. Use "reflections," that is, after listening carefully, repeat what you've heard to the speaker using some of the signals listed below. Reflections will help members to feel understood, and listened to, and will also let the speaker know the listener is comfortable talking about the topic. Here are some examples of active listening signals:

- Sounds like...
- I get the sense that...
- I hear you saying that...
- Seems as if...
- I wonder if...
- What I seem to be hearing is...

Boundary Issues

Boundaries are "barriers" that allow us to define our personal space and limits. Establishing personal boundaries encourages us to think about what we need to feel safe and comfortable within a group. Setting individual boundaries, and/or group boundaries, can help to create an atmosphere where members feel safe to express their thoughts, experiences and emotions. Boundaries are about needs and self-awareness, they can be solid or they can be changed. Boundaries help members of a group to grow together peacefully, safely, respectfully, and with enough space.

Creating boundaries can be an individual or group process. You may want to think about or discuss boundaries and what you and each person in the group needs in order to feel safe and secure. The following is a list of suggestions that may help in creating personal and/or group boundaries.

- Think about or discuss what boundaries you need in order to
 - ✓ feel present, safe, and comfortable
 - ✓ to experience feelings

- ✓ to sort out and clarify thoughts and feelings
- ✓ to express wants and needs
- ✓ to show who you are to others
- ✓ to know where you stop and others begin
- ✓ to define your values
- ✓ to be in your body

- Think about or discuss in a group: What do I need for me to be aware of my mind, my thoughts, my images, my beliefs, and to share them if I choose to?
 - ✓ Are we compassionate with each other and with ourselves?
 - ✓ Do we need some silent time to tune in to ourselves?
 - ✓ Is there time for sharing?
 - ✓ Does the group make room for spiritual expression?
- Give to yourself before expecting others to give to you.
- Recognize and accept your right to feel.
- Be willing to express yourself.
- Recognize cultural differences.

- Give yourself time and space to prepare for situations.
- Remember, setting boundaries starts with self-acceptance and self-respect of your own needs.
- Make a list of your boundaries to remind yourself.
- Model behavior of others that you would like to have.
- Meet the other person half-way.
- Don't let your walls become overbearing. Lower your wall and if you don't like what happens, let the wall go back up.

Sample Boundaries

The following are some examples of boundaries created by mental health consumers/survivors from various groups.

- I need time to get to know others in the group before I feel comfortable sharing my experiences.
- I want to be respected and not criticized for my thoughts, values, or beliefs.

- I need a quiet, comfortable, non-threatening place to share my feelings and experiences.
- I need to be able to leave the room when I feel upset.



Handling Difficult Situations

Don't ignore problems in a group, they may increasingly become worse. Handling difficult situations quickly and efficiently is important and respect and consideration is required. When people are under the stress of dealing with a serious illness or life event, they may have a hard time listening and learning. Whether it is agitated depression, hypomania, or poor interpersonal skills, members' behaviours and/or difficulties can disrupt the group (e.g. arriving late, using foul language, controlling the discussion, interrupting frequently, talking about irrelevant things, fidgeting, rattling paper). A group may also have to cope with more serious difficulties such as an individual in crisis, helping a peer access professional help, handling stigma, or resolving various conflicts within a group.

It is important for the leader to create an atmosphere where people can get emotional support and practical help, and therefore, the facilitator or leader should try to prevent some difficulties within meetings by:

- Focusing discussions - keeping the group on topic
- Making sure to include everyone in discussions
- Encouraging quiet individuals to participate
- Recognizing problems and looking for solutions

Below are some other strategies that leaders can use to prevent or minimize difficult situations that may arise within groups.

Establish Guidelines

Leaders can facilitate group functioning by establishing guidelines or rules for how members should behave and interact within the group. For example, establish guidelines around air time, group responsibilities, confidentiality and/or respect. Restate these guidelines until they are part of the group culture and explain why they are essential to the functioning of the group. Ask members to respect the guidelines or leave the group. Below is a list of sample guidelines that you may refer to or adapt for your group.

- We listen, explore choices, and express our feelings. We do not prescribe, diagnose, judge, or give advice... we suggest.
- We know what we share is private and is meant to be kept confidential.
- We each share the responsibility for making the group work.

- We each have the opportunity for equal time to speak or the right to remain silent.
- We avoid interrupting. If we do break in, we return the conversation to the person who was speaking.
- We have the right to take part in any discussion or not. It is important that we listen carefully when someone is talking and avoid having side conversations.

Be Prepared to Cope with a Crisis

If people are in a group that will be sharing personal stories and experiences, either the person sharing the story, or other individuals in the group hearing the experience, may experience distress or feel troubled. While you can discourage behaviors that trigger fear, you can't always predict what will trigger distress.



If the group is frightened or overwhelmed by a distressed person's behaviour, the best thing to do is let more experienced group members (members who have experienced similar situations in the past) handle the situation. In some instances, you may need to seek help from outside the group or from a trained professional. Some tips for preparing for a crisis situation before it happens include:

- Develop an action plan for dealing with a distressing situation before it happens. Have it available and follow it.
- Form relationships with community service providers (e.g. psychiatrists, social workers, etc.) and the police, and educate them about your group, the special kinds of problems that can arise, and how they might be handled.
- Invite a trained professional to speak to your group about strategies for handling distress/crisis situations.
- Know the limits of your group. Some problems require other forms of intervention. This is not a failure on the part of the group, it is responsible decision making.

Learn More About Handling Stigma

People may deny problems out of fear and shame. People seeking help may fear others will turn away from them or that they will lose their children, their jobs, or their homes. Such fear of shame or embarrassment may keep people from seeking help or attending consumer/survivor groups. Stigma exists because people do not want to talk about certain things, such as abuse, or even admit they exist.

Mental health consumers/survivors can deal with the issue of stigma in different ways. One group might keep secret who's in the group, where they meet, and what's said in the group. Another group might deal with stigma head on by courageously going public with their concern. Here are some general tips for dealing with stigma that may be used within your group or within the community.

- Build positive attitudes within a group. Educate yourself about your concern and then speak out, break the silence. Develop a sense of community and get to know members of similar groups and act as role models for each other.
- Bring together a group of consumers/survivors to fight stigma. Identify other related groups or

individuals who are treated cruelly or unjustly, get the facts, then educate each other and the public about your issues.

- Answer "critics" or "naysayers". Acknowledge their point of view, give them the correct information about the group, and then invite them to see for themselves. Be courageous, identify yourself as a group member and say, so what? It doesn't bother me, so it shouldn't bother you.
- Try to maintain your sense of humour and use it to weaken hostility.

Learn How to Help Members Access Professional Help

Groups can help members through trying or hard times, but sometimes the problems of a member may be beyond the range of the group. A person may be looking for more than emotional support or practical coping tips. They may have noticed a change in their health and have turned to a self-help group when they are in need of medical attention. Keep a list of phone numbers for information or services in the community, such as helplines/hotlines, hospital emergency rooms, psychiatric emergency services, counselors who specialize in the issues your group

addresses, community health centres, police. Bring it to your meetings. Keep a copy next to the phone and make copies available to group members. Listed are some ways that your group can help members access professional help.

- Attend workshops or bring in resource people to train leaders and/or group members on how to handle members who may need professional help.
- Educate the group about rights, responsibilities, and limitations.
- Take the person off to the side. Don't embarrass them or intimidate them in front of the group by suggesting they may need professional help. This could be devastating to someone in emotional pain.



Mobilizing the Grass Roots

Beyond self-help or other types of consumer/survivor group activities or meetings, consumers/survivors should be encouraged to pursue grass roots activities within the community. Mobilizing the grass roots means organizing a group of citizens to take action on an issue or concern. It is often the "leader" who organizes such activities, however, these activities should be goals of the entire group and all members should share the responsibilities of these activities. Grass roots activities include such things as *advocacy* (speaking out on behalf of yourself or another individual or group); *networking* (meeting with and getting to know politicians, other consumers, representatives of community organizations, etc.); *public relations* (promoting a favourable public image of mental health consumers and issues); *public education*, and *policy development* (working to influence government decisions regarding mental health).

The goals of consumer/survivor activities such as these are to:

Strengthen the consumer/survivor movement and ensure that the consumer/survivor voice is being heard. There is strength in numbers! Consumers/survivors can work together on resolving a common problem or concern.

Networking also helps to increase awareness among consumers/survivors of programs and services that exist in the community and of consumer issues.

Lobby government, that is, try to influence government for improvements in the mental health system and/or for increased funding for mental health programs and services in their communities. Consumers/survivors can also encourage the development of policy and/or the enforcement of current legislation/laws that protect consumers'/survivors' rights and freedoms.

Educate the public and government about mental illness and consumer issues. Increasing knowledge and awareness among the public about mental health, mental illness, and consumer issues can help to reduce stigma.

Advocate or speak out on behalf of other mental health consumers/survivors to ensure that their rights, freedoms, and dignity are protected. Consumers/survivors may choose to engage in self-advocacy, advocate on behalf of someone else, or on behalf of a group or organization of consumers.

