

## **GROUPWORK - INTEGRATING THEORY AND PRACTISE**

By Carl Webster

Text prepared as part of a workshop given at the national Probation and Community Corrections conference (PACCOA) held in Brisbane, July 2000.

Although I've done a fair bit of group work in the past, I must admit that I felt some nervousness in beginning offender management programs last year. Some of that was connected to the fact of having to design the programs to start with, but nevertheless, working in Anger Management, Personal Development and Domestic Violence with our client group was a definite challenge. I'm pleased to say that I feel much better about it now -in many ways because I've had to work with integrating the theory with the practical aspects of what makes groups 'tick'. It is my work over the past year, together with some research, including a survey of some 25 facilitators and co-facilitators in NSW that I conducted in June, 2000, that informs this paper.

With the focus on 'evidence-based or 'best' practise', the major impact on group work programs in NSW is an emphasis mainly on effective methods (read cognitive-behavioural, skills-based'); and program integrity', which includes using a program manual with clearly specified objectives, targets and methods, appropriate staff (read competent and committed), and evaluation and monitoring. There are also issues about a greater focus on higher risk clients and matching client needs with appropriate interventions.

Now I must admit to being in favour of Best Practise, but I believe that to work successfully in groups, there are some factors which do not so easily lend themselves to measurement. Generally I think it is easy for us to think about what to do in groups, i.e. the content, but it is less easy though equally important, to think about how we go about working with offenders -especially for higher risk clients. These issues are basically to do with how we relate to our clients, which is vital to successfully motivating and engaging clients in the group process. As we know, offenders often, if not generally come from backgrounds of abuse and neglect and can be extremely sensitive to how they are treated. Relating well with them requires superior listening, empathy, assertiveness, negotiation and creative skills, as well as maintaining a non-judgmental attitude and what Carl Rogers called "an unconditional positive regard", (something which from my own experience is not so easy when confronted with the aggressive or passive aggressive client).

To quote from a well researched UK Home Office publication entitled Evidence Based Practice (1998), not only does 1/46.effectiveness depend(s) upon the

individual's active participation in the process of change (p 57) but the worker's style of intervention and quality of relationship with the individual have been identified as critical to both change and resistance." (p 58).

Groupwork, as well as being about learning objectives, is essentially an environment founded on relationship and a major reason for its effectiveness is that it provides a (hopefully) safe social environment which mirrors (often unconsciously) our past and present social groupings. It can be a powerful melting pot for change since it often touches on or reactivates how an individual was socialized/cared-for in early life and provides real-life scenarios for working on changing thoughts and behaviours. I am not advocating therapy, but rather that there is, I feel, some risks in blindly adopting a 'formula' or groups-by-manual approach to group programs. Such an approach, while giving appropriate emphasis to learning tasks, must be balanced out I feel by flexible facilitation which recognises and uses the dynamic, spontaneous and human qualities that are demonstrated in groups.

So, what works in groups?

Research over the last 10-20 years has validated the use of offender management programs (OMP's) in reducing offending, providing they emphasise the acquisition of skills (eg assertiveness), address cognitive deficits (eg change false logic, improve problem solving ability) and involve and motivate clients. (Gendreau, Cullen and Banta (1994), Gendreau. and Qoggin (1996), McLaren (1996) ). While the learning objectives are relatively clear, what motivates and engages clients are some basic underlying principles which are more to do with how the group is run.

Lets look at some survey results. Responses from experienced (NSW) facilitators about what why groups work included answers such as, "share more readily in a group", "people relate and learn from each other, receive encouragement and support, sense of belonging". We can summarise these factors by saying that a good group:

- creates an atmosphere of support, encouragement and belonging acknowledges the dynamic nature of group learning (ie group sharing)
- fosters self expression

Note that at the moment we're not talking content here, but more some underlying themes or patterns that experienced facilitators like to create in order to motivate and engage clients. If we look at groupwork theory we see a similar list. Irving Yalom, in his book, 'The Theory and Practise of Group Psychotherapy' (1970)., identified a list what he called "curative factors", which can be

summarised as: interaction, instillation of hope, altruism, cohesiveness (feeling accepted and valued), being authentic, taking responsibility for self and self understanding.

Let me say again that I do not see probation groupwork as psychotherapy, but I do believe that in any group situation, all members need to feel safe and be assisted in expressing themselves, (including acknowledging emotional issues), feel they are a part of the groups decision making process (i.e. what they do and how they learn), while at the same time learning to take more responsibility for themselves and their learning. For facilitators I believe it is important to realise that we also need to feel safe and express ourselves and that the difficulties faced in working with coerced clients may often press our buttons and lead us to avoid rather than really engage with them.

A story from my very first Anger Group may illustrate. John was a manual worker, aged around 40 years and had got into trouble around alcohol, and relationship problems leading up to some assault convictions. Having been in gaol for short periods, he related to and teamed up in the group with another guy called Frank, who had just been released from gaol after seven years. They were both argumentative and difficult in the group and John would keep interrupting and cutting across conversations. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that my worries about how the group was going and -I would go, were being magnified by these 'difficult' clients. Goddamn it, they weren't helping!

After a few goes at negotiating with John, at one point I interrupted him, saying something like "just hang on". Looking back, I recognised that my body language and tone of voice was basically saying "shut up!" I think everyone in the group was a little shocked and were keen to see how John would react. Would he 'lay one on me' as one member said afterwards? Well, shut up he did, but he proceeded to act sulky, hurt and resentful and withdrew from any participation in the group.




As you can imagine, the group atmosphere did not improve and all efforts on my part to negotiate with John and get him back 'on side' ended in failure and the group ended on what felt like a fairly negative note.

Now one could argue that well, if he was getting sulky, that was his problem and maybe that was one of his strategies to get what he wanted and stay in control. Maybe all I needed to do was to point that out to him, let him stew on it and hopefully get over it. However, I realised that I didn't feel great about my own handling of the situation and I thought about the incident in detail over the next few days and questioned how I had been feeling at the time and how I was feeling now.

I recognised that I had been becoming irritated with John's behaviour, (not unreasonably I think), but that I had been rude, I had not brought the issue out into the open (ie made it a group issue), and given John a chance to take responsibility and make some choices about his behaviour. I decided to apologise to John and did so at the start of the next group, (to his credit he turned up), explaining that I had felt stressed at the time and also explaining that I was keen for the group to communicate well with each other, but that that could only happen with one person speaking at a time. John listened quietly and said, "Fair enough". His way of relating did start to improve in the group, he began to improve his listening skills and he went on to complete two anger programs successfully. He later told me that hearing me give a public apology had made an impact on him, his ability to listen and begin to take some responsibility for his behaviour.

I hope you can see that the incident touched on and allowed modelling of a number of issues that have been identified as important (and are also often mentioned in relation to criminogenic factors), namely attitudes, pro-social-modelling, listening and self management as well as disclosure and changing of thoughts and behaviour. A facilitator modelling desired behaviour does have an impact on group members and such interaction is made even more powerful if it happens in a here-and-now incident.. As one survey respondent said, "sometime something spontaneous is more effective - particularly if it comes from group members." By the bye, I've also noticed that some men, especially in anger groups, find it extremely difficult to say 'sorry' and I admit that I was not in a hurry to do so myself. But, on reflection, I have to say that I think the apology was well worth it, both for myself, for John and the subsequent progress of the group.




## The need for supervision and support

Such incidents are common for any facilitator especially with coerced clients and it requires great skill and sensitivity by a facilitator to maintain both their own and the groups' welfare and progress in an ongoing and dynamic learning situation. I believe it is important not to underestimate these --demands, (especially on inexperienced facilitators), and to recognise that learning to be a skilful facilitator takes considerable commitment, time and energy. I feel strongly that facilitators need ongoing support and supervision (in a consultative sense), from a more experienced groupworker. In the survey of NSW facilitators (62% of which had more than three years experience), 70% described groupwork as challenging, 30% difficult and 25% exhausting, showing I think, in the context of other probation work, the potential for burnout. The majority of them also ticked the words 'enjoyable' and 'stimulating' as well, which is obviously the reason that people are prepared to keep on doing it. However, less than 12% of facilitators received any regular supervision or debriefing and 50% felt that this was 'inadequate' or 'not-enough' and that they would like more. Nearly all respondents said they would like access to further training run by skilled groupworkers. To quote from one facilitator, " groupwork is demanding and in order to maintain energy and enthusiasm (I do )need some debriefing and supervision.":

NSW Probation and Parole Service has had a pool of groupworker talent to draw on but in trying to get more officers to take on groups, I believe that there is a great need for some ongoing support and supervision (as opposed to the basic four-day, train-the-trainer type course that is currently offered.) Unless you have had experience of leading a group I sometimes think it is easy to miss the fact that the work is much more involved than the hours are spent in the group itself. Preparation time and debriefing time are essential parts of the work and add to the burden of probation officers who are generally committed as well to casework and report writing together with the never-ending paperwork.

Interestingly, responses from co-facilitators, many of whom were working with 'outside' facilitators, indicated that not many achieved much debriefing and not many were taking an active role in the group. My own experience of working with an outside facilitator demonstrated that they did not see it as their role (and moreover they are not paid to) in any training sense, and that it was up to me to initiate discussion about group and facilitation issues.



Taking a leadership role in any group situation will often arouse feelings of anxiety and nervousness for the inexperienced. Questions of 'what if I fail?', 'what if they don't listen?', 'how will I deal with resistance/conflict?' are reasonable and real issues to be faced. If these feelings are not acknowledged (not necessarily to the group though), the facilitator may decide to take refuge in an authoritarian and controlling style. One anecdotal story from a client told me about one OMP-group he had been to where the group largely consisted of filling in handouts with the threat of breach action if there was any argument.

Competent and regular supervision and ongoing training and development is I believe extremely important in encouraging new or less experienced facilitators, who need to be supported to look at their own ways of communicating, as well as learning to deal with their own projections and feeling issues that arise in often demanding group situations. Moreover, the skill required in supervision generally required the skill of a specialist - or at the very least an experienced and willing groupworker, preferably with some counselling and/or psychological background. Unfortunately, I don't see the skills required as being within the general ambit of the average unit leader or manager, although there are exceptions of course.

### The introduction of Core Programs

In NSW Working Parties have been designing on Program Manuals and they are in the process of being rolled out to District Offices. Along with what I have been saying with regard to the importance of facilitation style (and the need for support and supervision of facilitators), I believe the way these manuals are used is critical in both their effectiveness with offenders and also in their becoming user-friendly for facilitators. Manuals will not assist officers in learning to deal with the dynamic, empathic, authentic, flexible and spontaneous qualities required of a good group facilitator. It may provide directions, exercises and an overall guide for presentation and learning objectives, but it cannot address the quality of relationships that a good groupworker needs to model, teach and nurture in an effective group. As part of the process of becoming accountable and using evidence-based practise, Core Programs have an important role to play, not least in maximising the effort that goes into their delivery and focussing the group on the learning objectives. While adhering to the focus and outcomes of the manual, I believe it is also important and necessary for facilitators to find their own way of working with the manual in order that the program objectives can be meshed with the needs of the group.

In other words, being too rigid with the program material as specified in the manual will not work in terms of effectiveness, in the same way that being too lax with the program material (or allowing the group focus to wander) will also not be effective. In order for this to happen, it is important for facilitators to be supported in using the programs and given the continually dynamic nature of groupwork, (every group is different and even every session can be very different), such support should be of an ongoing nature -it cannot I believe, be addressed adequately simply by a one-off workshop. This support can also form a part of the important process of monitoring and evaluation of offender management programs which has its own challenges -again in ways which can be viewed from a 'what do we do' and a 'how do we do it' perspective.

## Summary

So to summarise, my aim with this paper is to highlight the subtle or process aspects of groupwork, involving the quality of relating in the group. In the same way that a good officer will pay close attention (if they have time of course), to a client's 'hidden' or underlying feelings and issues that are related to offending behaviour, so a good facilitator will pay close attention to the quality of communication in the group - how they relate to the group, how the group relates to them and how the group members relate to each other. Not only has OMP related research highlighted this aspect but if we look at research into groups, or even counsel or client relations, the nature of the relationships, how genuine and honest they are, is an extremely important factor in a successful outcome.

Some might say that this is paying too much attention to relationship and that there is a danger that the learning objectives may get lost along the way. I agree entirely that this is a danger and it can happen. However I would argue that a good facilitator has to do both, namely encompass, plan and direct the rational, learning tasks of the group, while at the same time, paying close attention to and nurturing the quality of relations in the group. Failure to do this will generally result in fostering greater resistance, increasing passive-aggression and withdrawal create a difficult atmosphere for everyone to work in. On the other hand, if close attention is paid to these process issues, especially in the first few group meetings, the experience can be one of a reasonably well-bonded group who is willing to engage in learning tasks. The facilitator must allow themselves some creativity and spontaneity and not be afraid to use their intuition in addressing both the content and process aspects.