

My Way of Facilitating a Group

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For a long time I thought that I would like to write a paper on "The Facilitation of Encounter Groups". But the more I thought of the differing styles of the many leaders I have known, and of the co-leaders with whom I have worked, the more I despaired. Any such article would be so homogenised that its every truth would also be a falsehood. Knowing that there are many effective leaders, utilising vastly different styles, I was blocked.

Then I realised if I narrowed my sights, and wrote simply about the way in which I work with an encounter group, this might have a far more releasing effect upon the workers in this field. It might stimulate others to write about the style of facilitation which suits them. Even more importantly, it might give the younger worker more freedom to believe that he can ultimately develop a style which is truly his own, and hence is most effective for him. So with no sense of apology or egotism, I am going to write as honestly as I am able, about what I see as my strengths and weaknesses in facilitating encounter groups, and those areas in which I am unsure.

Background of Philosophy and Attitudes

I trust the group, given a reasonably facilitating climate, to develop its own potential and the potential of its members. For me, this capacity of the group is an awesome thing. It is perhaps a corollary of this that I have gradually developed a great deal of trust in the group process. This is undoubtedly similar to the trust I came to have in the process of therapy in the individual, when the process was facilitated rather than directed. To me the group seems like an organism, having a sense of its own direction even though

it could not define that direction intellectually. I am reminded of a medical motion picture which made a deep impression on me. It was a photo micrographic movie which showed the white blood corpuscles moving, in a fashion which could only be described as purposeful towards a disease bacterium. As they approached it they surrounded it and gradually engulfed and destroyed it and then moved on about their business. In the same way, it seems to me a group recognises the unhealthy aspects of its process focuses on these, clears them up or eliminates them, and moves on toward becoming a healthier group. This is my way of saying that I have seen the "wisdom of the organism" exhibited at every level from cell to group.

I have no specific goal for a particular group and I sincerely want it to develop its own directions. There are times when, because of some personal bias or anxiety, I have had a specific goal for a group. When this has happened, either the group has carefully defeated that goal or has spent enough time dealing with me that I have truly regretted having had a specific goal in mind. I have stressed the negative aspects of specific goals because, at the same time I hope to avoid these, I also hope that there will be some sort of process movement in the group and I even think that I can predict some of the probable generalised directions, but not any specific direction. For me this is a very important difference. The group will move, of

this I am confident, but it is presumptuous of me to think that I can or should direct that movement toward a specific goal.

I believe that in no basic way does my approach differ from that which I have adopted for years in individual therapy. However, as will be clear in the pages which follow, my behaviour is often quite different in a group than it would be in a one to one relationship.

I am not ordinarily concerned with how my style of facilitation looks to another person. In that sense I feel simply competent and comfortable. On the other hand, I know from experience that I can be at least temporarily jealous of a co-leader who seem to be more facilitative than I am.

I hope gradually to become as much a participant in the group as a facilitator of the group. I want to move back and forth easily between these two functions in a way which is comfortable to me. It does sometimes create a certain amount of conflict as to whether I should be listening to others or listening more intently to what is going on within myself.

I believe that the way I serve as facilitator has importance and significance in the life of the group but I believe the group process is much more important than my statements or my behaviour and will take place if I do not get in the way of it.

In any group to some degree, but especially in a so-called "academic course" which I am conducting in an encounter group type of fashion, I want very much to have the whole person present, both in his affective and cognitive modes. I have not found this an easy thing to achieve since I believe that most of us chose one mode rather than the other at any given moment. Yet it still remains a way of being which has much value for me. I hope to make progress in myself, and in groups I facilitate, in permitting the whole person, with his ideas, and ideas permeated with feelings, to be fully present.

What I do in a Group

Climate Setting Function

I tend to open a group in an extremely unstructured way, perhaps with no more than a simple comment: "I suspect we will know each other a great deal better at the end of these group sessions than we do now," or "Here we are. We can make of this group experience exactly what we wish." In a recorded group session with a group of other facilitators I think I stated this view rather clearly:

"Partly because I do trust the group, I can usually be quite loose and relaxed in a group even from the first. That's overstating it somewhat, for I always feel a little anxiety, perhaps, when a group starts, but, by and large, I feel, 'I don't have any ideas what's going to happen, but I think what's going to happen will be all right,' and I think I tend to communicate non-verbally that, 'Well, none of us seems to know what's going to happen, but it doesn't seem to be something to worry about.'" I believe that my relaxation and lack of any desire to guide may have a freeing influence on others.

I listen as carefully, accurately, and sensitively as I am able, to each individual in the group who expresses himself. Whether the utterances are superficial or significant, I listen. I want to make the individual who speaks feel that what he has said is, to me, worthwhile, worth understanding, and that consequently he is worthwhile for having said it. Colleagues who have observed this say that in this sense I "validate" the person.

There is no doubt that I am selective in my listening, and hence "directive," if people wish to accuse me of this. I am centred on the group member who is speaking, and I am unquestionably much less interested in the details of his quarrel with his wife, or the details of his difficulties on the job, or his disagreement with what has just been said, than in the meaning these experiences have for him now, and the feelings which they arouse in him. It is these meanings and feelings to which I try to respond.

I wish very much to make the climate psychologically safe for the individual. I want him to feel from the first that if he risks saying something highly personal, or absurd, or hostile, or cynical, that there will be at least one person in the circle who respects him enough to hear him clearly, and to listen to that statement as an authentic expression of himself.

There is a slightly different way in which I wish to make the climate safe for the member. I am well aware that I cannot make the experience safe from the pain of new insight or growth, or the pain of honest feedback from others. I would like, however, for the individual to feel that whatever happens to him or within him, I will be psychologically very much with him, in moments of pain or joy, or the combination of the two which is such a frequent mark of growth. I think I can usually sense when a participant is hurting, and it is at those moments that I give him some sign, verbal or non-verbal, that I perceive this and that I am a companion

to him as he lives in that hurt.

The special Role of Acceptance of the Group

I have a great deal of patience with a group and with an individual in the group. I believe that if there is one thing I have learned and relearned in recent years, it is that it is ultimately very rewarding to accept the group exactly where it is. So if a group wishes to intellectualise, or discuss very superficial problems, or is emotionally very closed, or is very frightened of personal communication, these tendencies rarely bug me as much as they do some other leaders. I am well aware that certain exercises, certain tasks set up by the facilitator, can practically force the group to more of a here and now communication, or more of a feeling level. I have observed leaders who have done these things very skilfully, and with very good effect at the time. However, I am enough of a scientist-clinician to have made many casual as well as organised follow-up studies and I know that frequently the lasting effect of such procedures is not nearly as satisfying as the immediate effect. At its best it may lead to discipleship (which I happen not to like): "What a marvellous leader he is to have made me open up when I had no intention of doing so." It can also lead to a rejection of the whole experience. "Why did I do those silly things he asked me to?" At its worst, it can make the person feel that his private self has in some way been violated, and he will be careful never to expose himself to such a possibility again.

So for me, I have found that it "pays off" to live with the group exactly where it is. Thus I have worked with a group of very inhibited scientists, mostly in the physical sciences, where feelings were rarely expressed openly, and personal encounter at a deep level was simply not seen. Yet this group became much more free and innovative, and showed many positive results of our meetings.

I have worked with high-level educational administrators probably the most rigid and well defended group in our culture, with similar results. I am not saying it is always easy for me. In this group of educators there had been much superficial and intellectual talk, but gradually they had moved to a deeper level. Then in an evening session the talk became much more trivial. One person asked, "are we doing what we want to do?" And the group answer was an almost unanimous "No." But almost immediately the talk again became luncheon table chatter about matters in which I had no interest. I was in a quandary. In order to allay a considerable early anxiety in the group, I had stressed in the first session that they could make of this group exactly what they wished, and operationally they seemed to be saying very loudly, "We wish to spend expensive, hard-won, weekend time talking of trivia." Consequently, to express my feelings of boredom and annoyance seemed contradictory to the permission I had given them. After wrestling within myself for a few moments, I decided that they had a perfect right to talk trivia, and I had a perfect right not to endure that trivia. So I simply walked quietly out of the room, and went to bed. After I left, and the next morning, the reactions were as varied as the members of the group. One felt rebuked and punished, one felt I had played a trick on them, one felt ashamed of their time-wasting, others felt as disgusted as I at their trivial interchanges. I told them that to the best of my awareness, I was simply trying to make my behaviour match my contradictory feelings, but that they were each entitled to their own perceptions. At any rate, after that, the interactions were far more meaningful.

Acceptance of the Individual

I am willing for a participant to commit or not commit himself to the group. If a person wishes to remain psychologically on the sidelines, he has my implicit permission to do so. The group may or may not be willing for him to remain in this stance but personally I am willing. One sceptical college administrator in a recent group said that the main thing, he had learned was that he could withdraw from personal participation, be comfortable about it, and realise that he would not be coerced. To me, this seems a valuable learning, and one which will make it much more possible that he will actually participate at the next opportunity.

I am willing to accept silence and muteness in the individual, providing I am quite certain it is not unexpressed pain or unexpressed resistance.

I tend to accept statements at their face value. As a facilitator (just as in my function as therapist) I definitely prefer to be a gullible person. I will believe that you are telling me the way it is in you. If you are not doing this you are entirely free to correct your message at a later point, and you are likely to do so. I do not want to waste my time being suspicious, or wondering, "What does he really mean?"

I respond more to present feelings than to statements about past experiences but I am willing for both to be present in the communication. I do not like the rule: "We will only talk about the here and now."

I try to make clear that whatever will happen from the choices of the group, whether those choices are clear and conscious, gropingly uncertain, or unconscious. As I become increasingly a member of the group, I carry my share of influence, but I do not control what happens within the group.

I am usually able to feel comfortable with the fact that in eight hours we can accomplish eight hours' worth and in forty hours we can accomplish forty hours' worth, and in a one-hour microlab or demonstration session we can accomplish one hour's worth.

Empathic Understanding

My attempt to understand the exact meaning of what the person is communicating is the most important and most frequent of my behaviours in a group.

To me, it is a part of this understanding that I try to delve through complications and get the communication back onto the track of the meaning that it has to the person. For example, after a very complicated and somewhat incoherent statement by a husband I respond, "And so, little by little, you may hold back things that previously you would have communicated to your wife. Is that it?" "Yes." I believe this is facilitative, since otherwise some of the group members might ask questions about, or respond to, some of the complicated details he has presented.

When talk is generalised or intellectualising, I tend to select the self-referent meanings to respond to out of this total context. Thus I might say, "Though you are speaking of all this in general terms of what people do in certain situations, I suspect you are speaking very much for yourself in saying that. Is that right?" Or, "You say we all do and feel thus and so. Do you mean that you do and feel these things?"

At the beginning of a recent group, Al said some rather meaningful things. John, another member, started questioning him about what he had said, but I heard more than questions. I finally said, to John: "O.K.: you keep trying to get at what he said and what he meant, but I think you're trying to say something to him and I'm not sure what that is." "John thought for a moment and then began to speak for himself. Up to that moment, I think he was trying to get Al to voice his (that is John's) feelings for him, so he wouldn't have to voice them as coming from himself. I find this quite a common pattern.

I very much want my understanding to extend to both sides of a difference in feeling which is being expressed. Thus, in one group which was discussing marriage, two people held very different views. I responded, "This is a real difference between the two of you because you, Jerry, are saying, 'I like smoothness in a relationship. I like it to be nice and tranquil,' and Winnie is saying, 'To hell with that, I like communication'." This helps to sharpen and clarify the significance of differences.

Operating in Terms of my Feelings

I have learned to be more and more free in utilising my own feelings as they exist in the moment, whether in relation to the group as a whole, or in respect to one individual.

I nearly always feel a genuine and present concern for each member of the group and the group as a whole. I can't give the reason for this. I just know that I do. I value each person, but this valuing carries no guarantee of a permanent relationship. It is concern and feeling which exists now. I think I can feel it more clearly, because I am not saying it is or will be permanent.

I think I am quite sensitive to those moments when an individual is feeling a readiness to speak or a closeness to pain or anger. Thus I might say, "Let's give Carlene a chance," or "Your face looks as though you are really troubled about something. Do you wish to let us in on that?"

It is probably particularly to hurt that I respond with empathic understanding, as I tried to describe above. This desire to understand, and psychologically stand with the person in pain, probably grows in part out of my therapeutic experience.

I endeavour to voice any persisting feelings which I am experiencing toward an individual or toward the group. Obviously such expression would not come at the very beginning, because my feelings are not yet persistent ones. I might, for example, take a dislike to someone during the first ten minutes the group is together. It is unlikely that I would voice such a feeling at that time. If the feeling persists, however, I would voice it.

I trust the feelings, words, impulses, fantasies, which, emerge in me. I feel that in this way I am using more than my conscious self and I am using some of the capacities of my whole organism. For example, "It suddenly came to me that you are a princess, or would like to be a princess, and that you would love it if we were all your subjects." Or, "I sense that you are the judge as well as the accused, and that you are saying sternly to yourself, 'You are guilty on every count.'"

I wish to be as expressive of positive and loving feelings as of negative or frustrated or angry ones. There

may be a certain risk in this. I recall one group where I think I hurt the group process by being too expressive, early in the sessions, of the very warm feelings I felt toward a number of members of the group. Because I was still perceived as the facilitator, I think this made it more difficult for others to express some of their negative and angry feelings.

I find it difficult to be easily or quickly aware of angry feelings in me. I deplore this. I am slowing learning in this respect.

I like my functioning best in a group when my "owned" feelings, positive or negative, are in immediate interaction with the feelings of a participant. To me this means that we are communicating on a deep level of personal meaning. It is the closest I get to an I-thou relationship.

If I am asked a question, I try to consult my own feelings. If I sense the question as being real and containing no other message than the question, then I will try my best to answer it. I feel no social compunction, however, to answer a question simply because it is a question. There may be other messages in it far more important than the question.

A colleague of mine has told me that "I peel my own onion." That is, that I express continuously deeper layers of feeling as I become aware of them in a group. I can only hope this is true.

Confrontation and Feedback

I tend to confront individuals on specifics of their behaviour. "I don't like the way you chatter on. I wish you would stop when you've completed your message." "To me you seem sort of like putty. Someone seems to reach you, to make a dent in you, but then it all springs back into place as though you hadn't been touched."

I would like to confront another person only with feelings which I am willing to own as my own. Such feelings may at times be very strong. "Never in my life have I been so pissed off at a group as I am at this one." Or, to one man in the group, "I woke up this morning feeling, 'I never want to see you again'."

I do not want to attack a person's defences because that seems to me to be judgmental. If, however, what I perceive as his coldness frustrates me or what I perceive as his intellectualising irritates me or if his brutality to another person angers me, then I would like to face him with the frustration or the irritation or the anger. To me this is very important. If I say, "You're hiding a lot of hostility," or "You are being highly intellectual probably because you are afraid of your own feelings. I believe such judgements and diagnoses are the opposite of facilitative.

Often when I confront someone I use very specific material, given previously by the participant. "Now you're being the 'pore lil old country boy' once more." "Now it seems to me you you are doing it again, the very thing you described, being the child who wants approval at any cost."

If a person seems distressed by my confrontation or by that of others, I am quite willing to help him "get off the hook" if he so desires. "You look as though you have had about all you want to take. Would you like us to let you alone for the time being?" I am guided by his response, learning that sometimes he wants the feedback and confrontation to continue, even though it is painful to him.

Expression of Own Problems

If I am currently distressed by something in my own life, I am willing to express this in the group. I do have some sort of professional conscience about this, however, because if I am being paid to be a facilitator, then if my problem is severe I feel that I should work it out in a staff group or with some therapist rather than taking the time of the group. I believe I am probably too cautious about this. I think of one group, a slow moving group meeting once a week, where I feel I really cheated them. I was very much upset about a personal problem, but I felt the problem did not concern the group and I refrained from talking about it. As I look back on it, I think nothing would have facilitated the group more than to express my upsetness. I believe it would have helped them to be more expressive.

Avoidance of Planning and "Gimmicks"

I try to avoid utilising in a group any procedure that is planned. I have a real "thing" about artificiality. If we are going to try any planned procedure I think the group members should be in on it as fully as I am and should make the choice themselves as to whether they want to utilise the procedure.

On rare occasions when frustrated or when a group has seemed to reach a plateau, I have tried to use what I think are gimmicks but they rarely work. Probably this is because I lack faith myself that they are really useful.

I am sometimes willing to suggest a procedure to a group but what happens is up to them. In one apathetic group I suggested that we might try to get out of our doldrums by forming one inner circle and one outer circle with the person in the outer circle prepared to speak up for the real feelings of the individual in front of him. The group paid absolutely no attention to my suggestion and went on as though it had never been expressed. However, within an hour, one man picked up the central aspect of the device and used it saying, "I want to speak for John and say what I believe he is actually feeling." At least a dozen times in the next day or two others used it, in their own spontaneous way, not as a device.

To me nothing is a gimmick if it occurs with real spontaneity. Thus, I have used role playing, bodily contact, various other procedures when they seemed to express what I am actually feeling at the time.

Avoidance of Interpretive or Process Comments

I make comments on the group process very sparingly. It seems to me such comments make the group self-conscious. I think they slow the group, make the members feel that they are under scrutiny. I prefer to have such process comments come naturally from members of the group, if at all. To me, the experience of feeling competitive, for example, and experiencing that feeling openly, is more important than to have the facilitator put an intellectual label on his behaviour. For some reason, I have no objection when a participant does something of this sort. For example, a faculty member was complaining about the students who always want their questions answered and who keep continuously asking questions. He felt they just weren't adequately self-reliant. He was insistently asking me what to do about such behaviour. A group member finally said, "You seem to be giving us a good example of just what you are complaining about." This seemed very helpful.

I tend not to probe into nor to comment on what might be behind a person's behaviour. To me, an interpretation as to the cause of an individual's behaviour can never be anything but a high level guess. The only way it can carry weight is when an authority puts the weight of his expertise behind it. I do not want to get involved in this kind of authoritative behaviour. "I think it's because you feel inadequate as a man that you engage in this blustering behaviour," is not the kind of statement I would ever make.

Physical Movement and Contact

I express myself in physical movement as spontaneously as I am able. I think my background is not such as to make me particularly spontaneous in this respect. If I am restless I get up and stretch and move around. If I want to change places with another person I ask him if he is willing to do so. I may sit or lie on the floor if that meets my physical needs. I do not particularly attempt, however, to promote physical movement in others. I have observed facilitators who can do this beautifully and effectively.

I have slowly learned to respond spontaneously with physical contact when this seems real and spontaneous and appropriate. When a young woman was weeping because she had had a dream that no one in the group loved her I embraced her, kissed her, and comforted her. When a person is suffering, and I feel like going over and putting my arm around him, I do just that. Again, I do not try consciously to promote this kind of behaviour.

Trust in the Therapeutic Potentiality of the Group

In very serious situations which arise in a group, when an individual seems to be exhibiting psychotic behaviour, or is behaving in a bizarre way, I have learned to rely on the members of the group to be as therapeutic or more therapeutic than I am myself. I think that sometimes as a professional I get caught up in labels and feel, for example, "This is straight paranoid behaviour!" As a consequence of this, I tend to withdraw somewhat and deal with the person more as an object. The more naive group member continues to relate to the troubled person as a person and this in my experience is far more therapeutic. So in situations in which a member is showing behaviour which is clearly "pathological," I rely on the wisdom of the group more than on my own, and am often deeply astonished at the therapeutic ability of the group members.

Some Faults of Which I am Aware

I am much better in a group in which feelings are being expressed, any kind of feelings, than in an apathetic group. I am not particularly good in provoking a relationship. I have real admiration for some facilitators I know who can very readily provoke a real and meaningful relationship which then continues to develop.

I am often slow to sense and express my anger. As a consequence, I may only become aware of it and express it later.

Probably I am a product of my generation in finding it somewhat difficult to be loose and expressive in

physical ways. I admire the younger people I know who are much freer in this respect.

A Special Problem

In recent years I have had to deal with the problem which is special to anyone who has become rather widely known through writings and through having been taught about in classrooms. This means that people often come into a group with me with all kinds of expectations, ranging from the expectation of finding a halo over my head to the expectation of finding me sprouting horns. I endeavour to dissociate myself as rapidly as possible from these expectations. In my dress, in my manner, and by expressing my wish that they get to know me as a person, not simply as a name or a book or a theory, I endeavour to become a person to the members of the group. It is always very refreshing to me to find myself in a group, for example a group of high school girls, or sometimes a group of businessmen, for whom I am not a "name," and where I have to "make it" all over again simply as the person I am. I could have kissed the high school girl who said challengingly at the start of a group, "I think this is kind of a risky thing. What are your qualifications for doing this ?" I replied that I had had some experience in working with groups, and that I hoped they would find me to be qualified, but that I could certainly understand their concern.

Behaviour Which I Believe to be Non-Facilitative

In writing this section I have profited by discussion with many individuals, but particularly Ann Dreyfuss and William R. Coulson.

Though I stressed at the outset of this paper that there are many effective styles of working with a group, I also know that there are a number of people who conduct groups whom I do not recommend, because some of their behaviour seems to me to be non-facilitative, or even damaging, to a group and its members. I cannot conclude this discussion in an honest way without listing some of these behaviours. Research is in such an infant stage in this field that I do not pretend that the opinions expressed in this section are factually based, or supported by research findings. They are opinions and conclusions which have grown out of my experience:

1. I believe a facilitator is ineffective when he pushes a group, manipulates it, makes rules for it, endeavours to direct it toward his own unspoken goals. Even a slight flavour of this type of behaviour can diminish or destroy the trust of the group in the facilitator, or even worse, make the members his worshipful followers. If he has specific goals, he had best make them explicit.
2. I do not like a facilitator who judges the success or failure of a group by its dramatics, who counts the number of people who have wept, or those who have been "turned on." To me this leads toward a highly spurious evaluation.
3. I do not recommend a facilitator who believes in "attack" as the sine qua non of a successful group. I have a great deal of respect for Synanon, and the effectiveness of their work with drug addicts, but I am repelled by their hastily formed dogma that unrelenting attack, whether based on real or spurious feelings, is the criterion by which a group is to be judged. I want hostility to be expressed when it is present, and I want to express it myself when it is present for me, but there are many other feelings which exist, and they have equal importance in living, and in the group.
4. I do not recommend as facilitator a person whose own problems are so great and so pressing that he needs to centre the group on himself, and is not available to, nor deeply aware of, others. Such a person might well be a participant in a group, but it is most unfortunate when he carries the label of facilitator.
5. I do not wish as facilitator a person who is frequently giving interpretations of motives or causes of behaviour in members of the group. If these are inaccurate they are of no help, if deeply accurate, they may arouse extreme defensiveness, or even worse, strip the person of his defences, leaving him damaged and vulnerable as a person, particularly after the group sessions are over.
6. I do not like it when a facilitator introduces exercises or activities with the attitude that, "Now we will all" This is simply a special form of manipulation, but it is one which is very difficult for the individual to resist. If exercises are introduced, I think any member should have the opportunity, clearly stated by the facilitator, to opt out of the activity.
7. I do not like the facilitator who withholds himself from personal emotional participation in the group, who holds himself aloof as the expert, able to analyse the group process and the members' reactions through his superior knowledge. To me, this shows both a defensiveness in himself, and a deep lack of respect for the the participants. Such a person denies his own spontaneous feelings and provides a model for the group which is the complete antithesis of what I believe in. The model he provides is that of the

coolly analytical person who never gets involved. This is what each participant will naturally aim to achieve, and this, as I say, is the opposite of what I hope for. It is non-defensiveness and spontaneity, not the defensiveness of aloofness, which I personally hope will emerge in the group.

Let me make it clear that I do not object at all to the characteristics I have mentioned in any participant in the group. The individual who is overinterpretative, or totally attacking, or emotionally aloof, will be very adequately handled by the group members themselves. They will simply not permit such behaviours to persistently continue. But when it is the facilitator who exhibits these behaviours, he tends to set a norm for the group before the members have learned that they can confront and deal with him, as well as with each other.

Conclusion

I have tried to describe the manner in which I would like to facilitate a group. I do not always succeed in following my own personal aims when I am with a group, and then the experience tends to be less satisfying to the members and to me. I have also described some of the behaviours which I regard as non-facilitative. I sincerely hope that this presentation will encourage others to speak for their own styles of group facilitation.