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# GROUP SUPERVISION OF GROUPWORK

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by  
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If you are the designated leader in a group, then in one sense you are isolated: you are the only one of your kind in sight. Doing any job all alone leaves you without bench-marks, not seeing other people's standards, problems, habits, styles, and using their experience to enhance your own. So I recommend very strongly indeed that all small-group leaders at least occasionally meet others, for peer, or led, supervision time.

There are advantages to both kinds. But many institutions do not find the time or money for supervision: so you may decide to try peer supervision for cheapness as well as anything else.

Most of what I say here is aimed at peer supervision groups. I see more health in letting leadership be a function, be what-happens, than a role, a who. So if you experiment with working as a group of peer-leaders, you may later set up other groups which give more validation of the leader in every group member.

A supervision group is a species of Like Group - which is what I call a group where what is like between them is more important than what is unlike. At worst it may be a florid sibling rivalry group.



An American consultant I know calls this activity Measuring Cocks. All the statements in it add up to 'Mine's Better Than Yours'. Everyone feels tense, knowing that if one person wins and has the Biggest or Best, everyone else has lost.

To change tack takes courage and honesty. Certainly, I am not overfond of admitting to my peers that I am feeling dull and stupid in one of my groups, or that I have fallen into the elephant-pit carefully dug by a hostile group member. I don't want

to seem the skill-less ignoramus. But I do want to deal with my anxieties, and hear other people freely do the same.

So the next caveat is against letting a peer group turn into an Ain't-it-Awful? session, with people capping

each other's anecdotes of the ghastly moments they have lived through in their groups.

One way to bust through to the useful aspect of an Ain't-it-Awful story is to focus on the speaker's role in what she is telling.

This ghastly woman just took over, telling jokes and gabbling away---



Where are you in that story?  
What's your problem with her?



What makes you tell that now?



What do you need from us at this moment?



I think that one of many valid answers might be, 'I just want to get rid of some of my irritation with this woman'. If members stay aware of what they are talking for, they are self-monitoring, and are less likely to go into vertical take-off, lost in the content of their story.

### A Bad Supervision Conversation

Well I wouldn't allow it in my group. Oh, you always get one or two like that.

Why not ignore her?  
Have you tried . . . ?

\* Here is a potted supervision conversation, to show a decently tough way of letting a member get to the core of her own difficulty, rather than be subjected to the 'Well if I was in your shoes', or 'Have-you-tried-X?' advisory approach, which can be very tempting, but is not always to the point. S is the person

being supervised, G is any other group member.

- S: Well I can't just tell her to be quiet.  
G: You can. It's possible.  
S: Well I don't want to.  
G: Why?  
S: It would be bad for her. Quite damaging.  
G: What are you saying about you?  
S: That I don't want to hurt people.  
G: What would happen if you hurt her?  
S: She might walk out.  
G: And what does that do to you?  
S: I'd feel terribly guilty. Powerless.  
G: Perls says that guilt is resentment turned back on yourself.  
S: Well I certainly resent her.  
G: She makes you feel powerless? Sit on that chair and be her. Pretend you're her, talking to you as the group-leader.

\* Another way of working on S's problem member is to ask her to play the role of that member, while someone in the supervision group plays the role of S. People can take turns playing S. In the other role, S. will find the effect of different interventions, at least on her, and from that may see other ways of approaching her problem person next week.

\* You may also gain insight from a more elaborate lead-in to this role-swapping. The person presenting a problem, Cecil, sets up the scene he is talking about, in this way. After a **brief** outline of what is bothering him, he goes and stands behind someone he would like to become a central character. He puts his hands on, let us say, Janet's shoulders, and speaks as if he is the person Janet is to play. For instance: 'I am Rebecca. I am 50 and divorced and Jewish, and lost over 40 members of my family in the holocaust. I suppose I am terribly angry. But all I let out is a sort of dominating sweetness, and I talk and talk through every group session'. Even doing this, Cecil is likely to make more empathic connection with Rebecca than if he talked about her in the third person. He places other people to play other significant characters, in his group or in Rebecca's life, as he sees fit. Then he casts someone to be himself. 'I am Cecil. Looking at Rebecca I feel rebellious, that I won't let her take over. Then I'm guilty for what she's been through'. The person being en-

formation questions

about Cecil, using the first person. 'Do I see Rebecca as my mother in some way, and de-skill myself that way?' When all are briefed, Cecil watches while the group enacts next week's meeting, or at least a few minutes of it. He has told what is not going right, and the ways people behave. They do their best to stay true to what they were instructed, while the new Cecil works to bring a fresh solution. If there is time, others can take Cecil's role, too. Then you all talk over what has happened and what Cecil has learned. He is likely to have taught himself a good deal.

A good deal of time is likely to be passed in such ways, in reviewing particular difficult moments for different members. As in any other group, you need to watch the balance, and check that you are not bewitching yourselves into noticing nothing but your difficulties. A round of telling moments you are proud of in your recent groups, could be the antidote.

As well as all the important fine detail, some large questions are usefully dealt with in a supervision group.

What are people really about?  
What am I really up to when I'm leading a group?

Questions as vast as this are bound to occur to you. Hearing other people's answers as well as your own can enlarge your view, and make you more assured.

You may be fortunate if you have people in your supervision group who work in different ways, from differing assumptions. I have for two years been in peer supervision with colleagues who could be labelled a Freudian, a psychodramatist, an existential-phenomenologist and a gestaltist. In that time we have recognised many likenesses between our assumptions and ways of working. We have learned something more of each other's formal methods. And we have seen too that there are some clear differences between what each of us sees as pre-eminent from moment to moment. I cite this, to encourage you to hold on to what you value in your own way of working, as well as learning from each other. An older, dominant or successful member may otherwise foster the idea that her way of doing things is the way to which you must all conform.

It looks to me as if it is just as hard for professional counsellors, therapists and group-leaders to broach the subject of what goes on between them, as it is for anyone else. In a peer or led supervision group, the out-there issues of your other groups may after a while become a very safe topic indeed. Yet there is a great deal to be learnt too from what is going on between you in the supervision group. Who gets the most talking time? Who keeps being interrupted? Who becomes Joker, Worryguts, Little Professor? You are stacking up frustration, and missing a chance to learn, if you do not give some time to some of this right-here work.

One development from spending time on the here and now of the group, can be gradually to turn it into an inter-personal or counselling group. That may be what the members need. But they need supervision too. Maybe another time for supervision has to be found.

All I have said assumes that you can find some colleagues with whom to form a supervision group. For some workers this is not possible. So what do you do?

At the very least, I suggest you find a partner with whom you have a regular meeting, even a working lunch, with a clear agenda. Half the time the attention is with one of you and her work, half with the other. This, and an occasional day's or weekend's training to stimulate your ideas, may be what you have to settle for.

As well as supervision outside your group, I see huge benefits for everyone concerned, in asking the group you lead to give a little time each week to monitoring you and themselves.

I know groups where there is a formal Chinese Self-Criticism half-hour at the end of each session, in which the task is to evaluate, rather than carp. The rule is that each person starts by focussing on evaluating their own part in what has been going on, rather than telling each other how the other could have been more this or that.

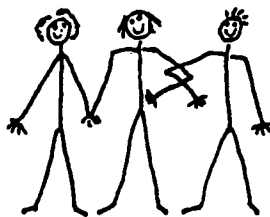
As leader asking to be evaluated regularly, you challenge the members of your group to use their best judgement, and you are likely to hear some very insightful comment, from which you need to learn. As leader, too, you may at time need to listen carefully, to find whether people are avoiding the discomfort of confronting you.

This aspect of supervision, right at the coal-face, is very important indeed. It is a way of checking from session to session, on what everyone sees the group to be about, what they, and what you, expect you to be doing, and whether you are doing it

effectively. I have often heard group-leaders explain that this is a fine idea, but that it would not be suitable for the groups they work with.

I have never yet found a group incapable of commenting on my work in a way I could learn from.

So, this form of supervision is always available, and I recommend, should always be used. Outside supervision is very important too. It may not be easy to set up, no. But do something. You need monitoring, and encouraging, in what can be taxing and subtle work.



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*This article is one chapter of a book she has just published, **The RED BOOK OF GROUPS**. It is available from bookshops, or direct from Gaie Houston, 8/9 Rochester Terrace, London NW1 9JN, at £2.50.*

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