HELPING SELF-HELP GROUPS TO HELP THEMSELVES

by

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There was a time, not so long ago, when I seemed to be spending most of my evenings sitting in a circle in someone's living room in a group without an obvious or acknowledged leader. Call them self-help groups if you like - they were concerned with co-counselling, with disarmament, with the environment or the third world, with writing letters to political leaders, with developing psychic or spiritual awareness.

I joined these groups because I wanted support from others in doing things that mattered to me, but did not want to be organised and disciplined by a political, religious or therapeutic hierarchy. The other members were there for the same reason. We enjoyed the groups, but sometimes it seemed that the more we enjoyed them, the less progress we made with the things that had brought us there. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem of many peer-groups-with-a-purpose, as self help groups could well be called.

Why is it? I think it's a problem of - please don't jump on me too hard! - of leadership. There, I've given myself away, have uttered the forbidden word. Groups don't need leaders - but collective activities do. Only, because our culture has provided us with such an impoverished idea of leadership - all mixed up with domination and being better than the other person - we can't allow ourselves either to lead or to be led, and so some of our genuine peer-groups fizzle and founder.

The opposite problem to lack of leadership is lack of ownership. This is the problem that plagues pseudo self-help groups that are set up by one lot of people for the benefit of another lot. Mothers' groups, tenants groups, disabled groups, set up by social or community workers. Unemployed self-help groups set up by local councils, colleges, churches. Patient self-help groups set up by health workers. And also groups in which one or two committed people take over the reins, and then complain about the "apathy" of the other people who leave it all to them.

When we started up the "Self Management Programme" at Brunel it seemed an obvious idea to include a workshop for people trying to work in Self Help Groups. We have now run five of these two-day workshops, with a lot of appreciative feedback from participants. Over this time a fairly clear pattern has emerged.

First, the workshop is described, and run, as a self-help group. "Running" a self-help group sounds a contradiction in terms, so I'd better explain. The title is "Self Help for Self Help Groups", and the brochure says that the participants will define their own objectives and agenda and decide how best to use the available resources. And that is exactly what happens:

Suppose a dozen people are gathered in the room, most of them strangers to each other. (In practice our groups have ranged from 8 to 15). We start with the name game - go round the circle repeating the other people's names, till we all know them. A little bit of an introduction about the "programme" (non-existant as yet), the process, some "ground rules", such as owning our statements (say "I", not "one"), talking about actual people and events, taking responsibility for getting our needs met, freedom to opt out, confidentiality. Some groups have found these ground rules very important and have made a lot of use of them, others have nodded politely and never referred to them again.

I use a three stage process for people to introduce themselves:

1. Talk to óne other person in a pair
2. Help each other to produce "posters" about ourselves, on large sheets of paper, using words, pictures, diagrams, as we wish.
3. Introduction in the circle, each person holding up their poster, talking about themselves, answering questions.

This means that the introductions take a long time - the best part of the morning in fact. Excessive for a two-day workshop? I don't think so. People get to know an enormous amount about each other, are amazed how much they have in common, how interesting the other people are, how much experience they have between them and have the chance to feel themselves valued as members of the group. I have found that groups that have gone through this process have gelled more quickly, have established unusually high levels of openness and trust by lunchtime on the first day, and are able to do good work together.

In one group two of the members were blind. We nevertheless used the posted procedure, with the other person in the pair drawing both posters. One of the blind people said she'd found the process an "eye-opener" - usually people didn't bother to introduce themselves to a blind person and tended to ignore them, she felt more seen by the group.

After the introduction we have a brief review - take three minutes to reflect on what's happened so far, jot down a few notes if we want, then go round the circle and say what we feel about it. These reviews are suggested at the outset as being part of the learning process, and they are repeated at intervals, usually after each half-day.

The next stage is the most difficult, but also I think the most important part of the workshop - deciding what we are going to do and establishing an agenda. This is where very task-oriented members, used to working in more structured settings like committees, can get very impatient. In the early groups it was not unusual for the whole of the first day to be taken up by introductions and agenda building, leaving only the second day for actual "work". In retrospect however it was obvious that some of the most important learning took place during this process. The problem at this stage is to achieve full ownership of the process by everybody there. There has to be a chance for each person to clarify their own aims and to fully take in the aims of other people. I have tried a number of methods and the one that seems on the whole to be the most satisfactory is one where people first clarify individual aims in small groups, e.g. four groups of three, then come together into larger groups, say of six, to combine agendas, then combine the resulting agenda in the whole group with people explaining and asking questions to ensure that every item is fully understood.

What we have at this stage is a list of problems and issues which people want to work on, not a programme. We take the list and go through it by a simple voting procedure picking out the two most popular items at a time, working through those, and then going back to the list to pick the next two. Sometimes we don't get through the whole list, but find that the points at the end have been dealt with in other ways.

This is the stage when participants need to start taking over the workshop, and the facilitators' role needs to change to a residual, genuinely "facilitating" one. But while it is easy enough to select issues to work on and to get volunteers to lead the group, we find that something more is required. Often group members are at a loss as to how they can lead us, other than by chairing a discussion group. Six discussion groups in a row can become rather wearing. So what we do nowadays is to provide people with a "tool bag" of methods that can be used to facilitate work on particular problems. A typical list we might give them is shown in Figure 1. We find we can run through a list like this in less than half-an-hour, explaining the more unfamiliar methods, and that participants can't wait to have a go at leading the group, once they realise the many different ways it can be done.

Having voted on the first two issues to be worked on, we ask for two volunteers to facilitate each, one to

Figure 1.

Some Tools for Working in Groups

Information Sharing

Posters   Overhead Projector
Statements on Cards   Cassettes
Talking Wall   Slides
Flipcharts   Video

Aids to Discussion and Decision Making

Pairs
Small Groups
Round
Conch
Reflecting/Paraphrasing
Open Fishbowl - Empty Chair
Summarising
Devil's Advocate

Finding Answers

Brainstorming
Checklists
Survey and feedback
Collecting experiences
Prepared inputs
External Sources of Information (libraries, experts, etc.)

Looking at Relations and Feelings

Process Review
Role Play
Role Reversal
Group Task
Rotating Leadership
Fishbowl
Experiential exercises/games
Empty Chair or Cushion
"Co-Counselling" in Pairs

take the lead, and one to help. We then give them a little time - ten to fifteen minutes - to prepare a process for leading the group. According to the time available and the number of topics, we will agree a time to be allowed for each, typically half-an-hour to work through whatever activity is proposed and another fifteen minutes to discuss it, before passing on to the next topic. From this point on things go with a swing and we all enjoy ourselves while getting through a lot of work. As we go through the list picking two topics at a time, finding volunteers to facilitate, and working through the problems, we stop every now and then for a general review of the process and of what we have learned. There has never been any problem in finding enough material to work through till the end of the workshop. Usually we try to leave about quarter-of-an-hour at the end for some form of wind-up. This may take the form of brainstorming a list of learning points and action poings, or some kind of group evaluation and final process review. By this time people are feeling tired but satisfied and aware that they have done a lot of useful work and got many new insights.

Here are some examples of activities that have been facilitated by participants:

A role play of a self-help group with a social worker in attendance providing first authoritarian, then "laissez faire" leadership.

A "depressives anonymous" group welcoming two new members in a fish-bowl setting (to look at the issue of member involvement).

A brain storm on methods of attracting new members to a group.

A group task of producing a set of guidelines on maximising involvement and ownership of members of a self-help group.

A role-played meeting of a town council transport committee on providing transport for about 1000 disabled participants in a large conference on disablement being held in the city. (This was a way of tackling the issue, raised by members of disabled self-help groups, of providing cheap transport for disabled people).

A "survey" of people's most "motivated" experiences in groups.

Because the workshop is a self-help group, what people learn from it is what they want and need to learn, rather than anything we try to teach them. Some gain the confidence to start a new group, others an understanding why an existing group is failing. Most people pick up new ideas and methods for facilitating their groups over specific issues. And over and over again people learn - not by being told, but out of personal experience - the lesson of ownership, so boringly obvious and so consistently forgotten: that group members have most energy for the things they help to initiate and that satisfy their needs.

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