Crossing the threshold

A facilitator's guide to running developmental and support groups

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Genesis

Earlier this year I was approached by my good friend, Gwen McKenna, to ask if I would help her produce a *brief* group facilitator's handbook for her organisation, the Family Addiction Support Network (FASN). The FASN provides crucial support to families experiencing the consequences of having one (or more) of their members in active addiction. It offers support groups that are facilitated by a dedicated troupe of volunteers: Gwen is forever seeking opportunities and resources to upskill this team – hence the handbook. Her view is simple: the better these group leaders are trained and nurtured, the more FASN staff and client families benefit. We agreed I'd put together a few short pieces, maybe 10,000 words in total. I envisaged it taking six weeks to produce at most.

Five months and circa 45,000 words later I appear to have overshot my targets. Moreover, I'm not sure the moniker of 'handbook' sits accurately with this text. While it is principally meant to be a practical support for those running groups, I also felt it was necessary to ground the document's practical considerations in a sound theoretical base. Moreover, groups are complex organisms: many handbooks offer clear and unambiguous advice as to what to do should X, Y, or Z happen. Groups are not so straightforward; it didn't prove possible to be as directive.

Most sections of this document contain reflective questions designed to get the reader to think about what they are doing, how they are doing it, and why. The text also contains many case studies – stories of real life scenarios - to give the reader a sense of the feel of a group and the issues that can arise therein. The case studies afforded me the opportunity to highlight the fact that we are most of the time thinking on our feet when running groups, and are often uncertain of our next steps. The trick is to be okay with that, to accept, as a character in a Friel play put it, that "confusion is not an ignoble condition". Indeed, sometimes it is the most appropriate reaction!

So, this is not a prescriptive document as I do not believe we can offer definitive answers or responses to the infinite variations of human situations and behaviours we encounter in groups. It focuses a great deal on the

facilitator's own growth and development, and the qualities and characteristics s/he might need to engage successfully with groups and surmount the range of complex and indeterminate scenarios we might encounter there.

Whilst this document is targeted at people who facilitate support groups in organisations such as the FASN, it is also aimed more broadly at those who run developmental and general support groups and who work with marginalised sectors of society. I hope you find it useful.

Note: In the various stories and case studies scattered throughout this text, names and certain details have been modified to protect the identities of those involved.

Acknowledgements

Writing is a solitary activity, yet it takes a team of people to produce a tome such as this. Gwen (McKenna) engaged two close associates in reading and commenting on the initial draft of this volume, namely Gerry Thornton and Brid Delahunt. My sincere gratitude to them both for their invaluable queries and suggestions; they helped me improve this document. Gwen has also taken on responsibility for the appearance and layout of the printed version of this manuscript, a task which I can honestly say would not be a strong point, so that is no small relief to me!

I wish to thank my friend and former manager Gerry McGrath. A man of decency and integrity, ever supportive and encouraging, Gerry created the space and opportunity for me to develop and roll out a wide variety of groups to the clients of our erstwhile organisation. Many of those experiences have backboned this text.

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Chapter One: Why Groups?

In many settings, groups are used to help people deal with overwhelming issues, such as recovery from addiction or mental illness; overcoming setbacks in life like unemployment or bereavement; learning new skills to improve one's prospects; and, in the case of one of the key themes of this text, helping families cope with the strain of having a household member in active addiction.

So, why are groups so widely used to deal with this broad range of issues and situations? What is it about groups that make them such effective vehicles for building strength, restoring self esteem, managing life better, or finding general support and understanding? Wouldn't it be possible to achieve such outcomes in a one-to-one scenario, or from a friend or partner?

The fact is, groups add a range of different dimensions, and it is essential to consider this before we enter a group at all. To be a good practitioner, we need to develop a rationale for what we do. All group facilitators ought to have tangible reasons for choosing to use groups as a means of working with others, rather than employing other methods.

What follows are some of the reasons why we utilise groups as a vehicle for developing or providing (a) acceptance and connection (b) support and recovery (c) learning and growth (d) refuge and safety. These views and answers of what groups offer largely come from students and practitioners who have undertaken training with Fusion Training & Development over the years:

Acceptance & Connection

- According to Nicola Diamond (2001), we are social and relational beings: we need groups. It seems to be our essential nature that we do not do well on our own. We instinctively feel sadness when we hear of someone experiencing loneliness: we know it is detrimental to their health and wellbeing. Research now suggests that loneliness reduces life expectancy by as much as smoking 15 cigarettes a day!

Groups provide the opportunity to be social, to belong, build relationships and friendships, to make connections and simply be with others.

- Valuing ourselves is intimately connected to being valued by others. Rogers declared when we are prized, we blossom (1961). Our continued good health, or our recovery, is dependent on being valued and held in high regard. In groups we can be prized and valued by many.

- Being found interesting. When we see we are being listened to by others it also signifies that we are interesting enough to be listened to. For people going through a difficult, isolating time, seeing that their fellow group members find them interesting greatly improves their self-perception.

- When people feel low in themselves, they lose sight of the fact that they can impact on others. Over time, group participants begin to see that they can positively impact on their fellow members. Seeing that they have the power to make a difference to others allows them in turn to feel that what they do matters, hence they matter.

- One of the central tenets of psychology is that people who are not listened to get ill. We need to express ourselves to others and be understood. If we do not receive this we atrophy. In a group, we can be heard and understood by a range of people.

Support & Recovery

- According to John McLeod, voice and power are synonymous (1997). We use the term *the voiceless* to describe those in society who are powerless and marginalised. One of the core aims of a facilitator is to *create the opportunity for voice without compulsion* (Sonstegard & Bitter, 2002). When people speak in a group, they are exercising their power, their right and capacity to speak. Many negative situations in life are silencing – the victim loses their voice and sense of autonomy (Herman, 2001). By recovering their voice, they recover agency.

- John McLeod also writes that what we are, essentially, is a story (1997). When we go through demoralising times, our story can get

'broken' and become negative, pessimistic and self fulfilling: if our story is bleak and hopeless, then so is our life. We can right this through positive group interactions, where we can repair and re-author our story, and restore an affirmative sense of ourselves.

- Foulkes believed that most human disturbance came as a result of not being connected to our groups (1974). Living in a family where addiction is a feature can be isolating. Active membership of a support group restores connection, boosting wellbeing.

- Johnson & Johnson state as our groups go, our lives go (1997). In short, how well our lives go, is intimately connected to how well we get on in our groups. For those who are struggling or isolated as a result of their circumstances, membership of a support group reintroduces the essential experience of being part of a functioning unit.

- Optimism: When people come to a group to seek support they are allowing the possibility that they can be supported, that all is not lost, that things can change. It is an optimistic act to enter a support group, regardless of how weighed down someone feels.

- Hope: According to Yalom, hope is one of the therapeutic group factors (2005). One of the great destroyers of hope is interminability – the sense that there is no end in sight to a bad situation (Herman, 2001). By coming to a support group, the member has the opportunity to rekindle hope by interrupting and altering patterns they may feel trapped in. Hopelessness leads to a collapse of health, of possibility. Hope, on the other hand, leads to optimism and resilience. Simply coming to the group is an act of hope.

- Cause and effect: when people live in turmoil, where events can seem to occur capriciously, they can lose sight of their capacity to affect their own lives: they become detached from the elemental life reality of cause and effect. This can be recovered in a support group.

- Self-efficacy refers to the belief that the quality and extent of our efforts affect outcomes. Someone with a high perceived self-efficacy believes that the more effort they put in, the better the outcome

they'll produce or achieve. Groups can help participants regain and/or acquire a higher perception of their self-efficacy.

Growth & Learning

- According to Rollo May, we get our sense of ourselves through our interactions with others (1975), which entails that we cannot truly know ourselves if we are not connected to others. A vulnerable person in a group may have a poor impression of themselves, run themselves down, and be harshly self-critical. A fellow group member may challenge their self assessment and point out some of their strengths and qualities. The self-critical person might seek to diminish this, but other group members reiterate the positive message and it becomes harder to dismiss it: s/he has to at least give it some consideration. Over time they grow towards a more positive version of themselves; they begin to see in themselves what the group sees in them. Groups help us to learn who we are.

- A group can help a participant 'correct' behaviour that is ultimately detrimental to them. Someone living in a difficult situation can be prone to seeing slights and put downs because that is what they have become accustomed to. A group may, for example, bring to a person's attention the fact that they may be overly sensitive, prone to seeing insult where none was intended. This helps the participant become more discerning, giving them the opportunity to consider their reactions and choose their responses.

- Purpose – when people are living in the wake of addiction, they can often feel like life is passing them by, that they are at the mercy of others, that they are adrift and unmoored. They find it hard to see the point of things, to persist. Having a group to go to injects purpose into their lives, providing a sense of meaning and direction.

- Albert Ellis believed that we tended to be at our best in pursuit of major life goals (1997). Victor Frankl wrote that having something he wanted to achieve in life helped him see beyond his internment in Auschwitz (2004). Groups are not only a great arena for setting goals, but also for reporting on progress and getting encouragement when

progress to a goal is floundering. They also provide an arena for celebrating the achievement of goals.

- The person who decides to come to a support group is exercising autonomy. They are making a decision that has a direct affect on their life: this is a core human need, to choose, to make decisions for themselves (Glasser, 1998). Frankl declared that making choices is our ultimate freedom: when we cannot change our circumstances, we are required to change ourselves. In groups people come to realise that they have the power and freedom to make choices around their own life, a liberating discovery (2004).

- Risk-taking: We cannot progress unless we develop the courage to take risks. As Andre Gide put it a century ago, "man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore".

- Learning: people who have gone through a prolonged period of challenge and difficulty, punctuated perhaps by traumatic episodes, become worn down by the experience. Invariably their confidence plummets which affects their belief in their capacity. Mezirow states that one of the most important things that adults learn is that they *can* learn, resulting in an improvement of self-perception.

- The acquisition of skills. Groups provide an arena for the use and development of skills. Very often group members become better listeners, because they experience the value of being heard. They become more understanding and accepting of themselves and of others. Outside the group they can offer their skills to their circle of contacts, reinforcing their own growth, and often making them hungry to continue their development. Support groups often act as pathways to further learning and advancement.

- Get 'road-tested' insight: In a support group, other group members sometimes share that they have gone through a similar situation to a fellow member and they found doing A, B or C helpful. The participant in difficulty is free to listen and decide for themselves whether they might try what others did in similar circumstances.

- Locus of control. When people live with circumstances that diminish or demean their sense of self, they can begin to feel a loss of power to

direct their own lives: in short, they develop an *external locus of control*. Through a group, they can practice and recover the sense that things happen in their life because of actions they have taken. This is labelled an *internal locus of control*, a healthier, more empowered position to operate from.

Refuge & Safety

- Living in turmoil and an unpredictable environment can erode our boundaries, which makes it difficult to function well: the structure provided by a well run group helps us recover and restore healthier boundaries.
- It is hard to function in society without *basic trust*. In groups we learn to trust again in relative strangers, and also that we are trustworthy ourselves.
- Structure. Studies conducted on the effects of unemployment show that the collapse of structure and routine is one of the most debilitating impacts of the experience (Delaney, 2011). For those whose structure is undermined by living in chaotic circumstances, having a group to go to that is regular and predictable gives shape to the week, and something to anticipate, plan for and organise around.

The above categories are not impermeable, nor is the list definitive, and it can assuredly be added to by anyone who has the personal experience of long-term support from a group. It is nonetheless sufficiently extensive to make us pause and consider the potential impact of any group we may be thinking of running.

Reflection Corner: How will you go about seeking to maximise the benefits of any group you might run? What kind of skills and qualities do you need to bring to the engagement in order to achieve this end? How many of those necessary skills and qualities do you currently possess? What do you do in order to maintain your own growth and development?

These and other questions require considerable thought and exploration, and are reflected upon in the following chapters. As we can see from our list, the group can have a profound impact on group members: there is a lot at

stake, and considerable personal responsibility resting on the shoulders of the group leader. Therefore, the ongoing growth and development of the group facilitator is an absolute necessity: as Corey says, group leaders are duty bound to live growth oriented lives (2000). This text aims to be a supportive tool in that process.

Chapter Two: Crossing the Threshold

"Most groups start cold, awkward and shy" (Benson, 2001)

Reflection corner: How does Benson's description strike you? Does it ring true? In what way? Why do you think it's true? Or is your experience different?

Think back to the first time you entered a developmental or support group... What was it like leaving home, making your way to the venue, and then entering the room? How did you feel as you sat there and looked around at the other group members? How did the facilitator strike you? What were the reasons you went to the group? What were you hoping for?

The answers to these questions provide crucial information for anyone thinking about facilitating groups. What it felt like for you when you first entered a developmental or support group as a participant is likely to be similar to how it is for someone who is joining a group that you are running. Your own experience gives you invaluable insight into theirs. If you have an idea of what it is like for them to come to the group, then you can begin to work out what it is they need from you in those critical early stages.

When they are asked what it was like to first enter the room, participants on groups I have run have in the main spoken of fear, anxiety and apprehension. Mixed in with these levels of trepidation are feelings of hope, and some measure of excitement; there is something new in their life, somewhere to go. Maybe they can make friends, build connections, get support and be understood by people who have endured a similar experience to themselves. Maybe they can learn new things that can be applied to improve their life. But the overriding feedback is that they are very fearful coming in: some even go so far as to use the word terrified. Again, to repeat, knowing this is crucial, as it informs how we are, or seek to be, when we meet new participants.

What is it that the participants fear? Quite a range of things, in fact:

- The unknown. According to Kirkegaard, *to venture causes anxiety,* (cited in May, 1975). Much as we like and need novel things, we also fear them.
- Fear of not being understood or accepted by the 'authority figure', or their fellow members.
- Fear of not fitting in, of being 'wrong' for the group.
- Fear of being 'found out', of being seen as not good enough, or not being up to some fantasised 'required standard'.
- Fear of being exposed, of 'making a fool of themselves' by saying something 'stupid'.
- Fear of not being able to speak, or of feeling they have nothing to contribute.
- Fear of not being able to understand the discussion or subject matter.
- Fear of their story being 'less worthy than' those of others, of finding out that everyone else has it worse than they do, making them feel fraudulent or insufficient.
- Fear of finding out that the other members of the group are handling their circumstances with an apparent ability they themselves feel they will never possess.
- Fear of the shame of publicly admitting that there are circumstances in their lives they cannot manage.
- Fear of change, of loss – will coming here make things worse?
- Fear of being overwhelmed by emotion and breaking down in front of strangers.
- Fear of finding out that they are beyond help, that their last option is exhausted

Some report feeling what Freud terms a 'nameless dread', a strong and almost paralysing sensation of fear in their body that they cannot attribute to any clear source. Some are aware that their level of dread is disproportionate to the circumstances: it is as if they are in the grip of all the fear they have ever felt, and they realise that something deep within them has been triggered.

As we can see, there can be a multitude of fears and apprehensions racing around the minds of new participants. It is essential for the facilitator to be aware of this, so that we may plan a targeted and appropriate response to these vulnerable newcomers.

Working with fear

Reflection Corner: How do fear, anxiety and self-doubt impact on your behaviour? How are you when you are reaching out for help, admitting to yourself and others that there is something in your life you are struggling to manage and cannot handle on your own? Do you go into your shell and withdraw? Do you attempt to conceal your vulnerability from others – and maybe even from yourself? Do you become over-talkative? Might you become a little bit snippy and aggressive?

All of these behaviours and more are seen in the early stages of groups. It is important to keep in mind the context of such behaviour: after all, we cannot separate behaviour from environment (Benson, 2001). By bringing their awareness to how it is likely to be for people entering the group for the first time, a facilitator is less likely to become ungrounded and anxious themselves, and thus better equipped to provide the stability newcomers need.

Those with experience of running groups will have observed over time that many newcomers are struck dumb at the start of a group and will go to considerable lengths to avoid speaking. For most people the hardest time to talk is at the start of the group, and the hardest topic to talk about is themselves. Which begs the question: why do so many groups begin with a variation of the following question - "let's all say who we are and what brings us here"!

The intention, of course, is benign, but putting the spotlight on a nervous person can be highly counterproductive and can reduce the possibility of their returning to the group. Yalom declares that the most important task of the facilitator is the physical survival of the group (2005). Therefore, we must do all we can to help integrate newcomers into the group: we must make contact with them in a way that helps reduce their fear and anxiety as

much as possible so that the likelihood of their continued membership is optimised, especially at the very start, when they are usually at their most vulnerable. It is simply not a good idea to expose or pressurise someone at this stage.

When we think of the fears that participants enter with, it is no wonder that *most groups start cold, awkward and shy*. Knowing why groups tend to start this way helps the facilitator contain their own anxiety at the apparent reluctance of the group members to participate. Yet, we must always bear in mind that one of the principle aims of the facilitator is to get the group involved, to get people talking. Why? Because voice is intimately connected to power (McLeod, 1997): when people speak authentically they begin the work of growth and the recovery of their power. When we have no voice, we are reduced to being passengers rather than drivers in our own lives. And when participants have no voice, they cannot express their needs, so their needs will remain unmet.

So, how do we, the facilitator, ease the fears and anxieties of participants so that they find the courage to speak? How do we build safety in the group?

We will discuss various answers to this question over the next few pages, but we have started with the approach that 'awareness is curative' (Perls, cited in O'Leary, 1992). When we are aware of a situation, we can plan our response to it, we can choose our approach.

Belonging vs. Autonomy

It is worth noting that at the start of a group, two of our strongest needs as humans collide with each other: the need to belong and the need to be autonomous (Benson, 2001). As social and relational beings we need contact and connection with others. To obtain it, we need to talk to those others, to share, to interact. Yet, as Nitsun puts it, "stranger anxiety is common" and trust takes time to build (1996: 48). As we largely "abhor uncertainty" we are generally quite hesitant to put ourselves 'out there' when dealing with a novel situation – we like to sound things out and chart the lay of the land (Yalom, 2005: 10). If everyone in the group is doing this at

the start, it makes for a hushed group. Indeed, one could question whether it is a group at all.

As Nitsun declares, a group becomes a group when people choose to belong to it (1996). There is an act of agency required by group members, a conscious decision to belong, that turns a gathering of individuals, mindful of their independence, into a group. For a support group to achieve its end, its members have to commit to the group. In doing so, we can feel something of a surrender of self-sufficiency. Instead of choosing solely for ourselves, we agree to bargain and negotiate, to pool sovereignty. In committing to the group, we elect to accept its norms and culture, its timetable, its essential interdependence, and so much else.

So, there are multiple factors for the facilitator to consider on how they go about supporting and encouraging the formation of a group, of soothing the qualms of those who fear the apparent loss of autonomy, of easing newcomers into an already established group. And the first point to keep in mind is to ask, as we have done above, what is it like for the participant to enter the room?

Desired outcomes

An equally important question to consider is this: if people come to the group feeling apprehensive and anxious, how do we want them to feel leaving it?

The facilitator cannot guarantee outcomes: they cannot control how a participant engages with the process. W*e* can only be responsible for what we can control (Glasser, 1998). Though we cannot command others, we do have considerable influence, and the members of the group look to the facilitator for guidance, particularly in the early stages (Benson, 2001).

With these caveats on the limits of our influence in mind – how would we like participants to feel about the group experience after they've attended enough sessions to give them a sense of the engagement? In response to this question, trainee group facilitators have listed the following desired

outcomes for their participants: the first set of outcomes concern the *participant's relationship to the group:*

- Committed to remaining in the group, seeing it as a significant support and resource.
- Feel that they belong to the group, are accepted by it and that they benefit from it.
- That the group is becoming an 'object of attachment', something they value, and would feel the loss of were it to end, or if they missed a session.
- They feel the group is with them even when they are elsewhere, as an active supporting presence in their mental life. They begin to realise that they are not alone.
- Having learnt from the other, more experienced group members.
- Start to realise that the group benefits from their presence.

The second set of desired outcomes focus on *personal benefits to the participant*:

- More comfortable speaking in the group, some sense of a recovery of voice.
- Able to see that what they do and say can impact positively on their peers.
- Hopeful that their life can be better/different, that there is light at the end of the tunnel.
- Feeling more appreciative of their inner strengths and qualities, not least their capacity to withstand the upheaval that addiction brings.
- A rise in self acceptance and self esteem.
- More resilience.
- A sense that they are 'good enough'.

The Facilitator

While it is true that we can only be responsible for what we can control, and that we cannot programme participants into thinking and feeling the above outcomes, we do have influence.

So, this leads to one of the most fundamental questions of all for a facilitator: what skills, characteristics and qualities do we need to possess to enhance the prospect of participants seeing the group in the most positive light, and gaining as many benefits as possible from their membership of it?

When trainees are asked to consider the question as to what they need to bring to the table, particularly in the initial stages, they usually generate a substantial and weighty list (as follows):

Skills and abilities

- Empathy - warmth and understanding.
- Flexible and adaptable, able to respond to needs as they arise.
- A good communicator – able to express an idea, clarify a point, speak in a language that does not alienate the participant and make them feel out of their depth, or does not patronise them.
- Good at eliciting, at drawing people out, at getting them to talk, but without exposing them to (unnecessary) embarrassment.
- A good listener.
- Good enough (Winnicott, 1964) – as distinct from perfect.
- Well boundaried.
- Able to challenge in a safe and growthful way. As Yalom writes, *never hurt anyone else's ego in the service of truth* (2005).

Personal qualities and characteristics

- Authenticity, trustworthiness.
- Courage.
- Well grounded, mature, able to keep things in perspective.
- Integrity. (The author once saw integrity defined as *doing the right thing even when no one else is looking)*.
- Resilience: not be overwhelmed by the stories they might hear.
- Non-judgemental: participants are often embarrassed by their circumstances, feeling that others manage difficulties better than they do. They are sensitive to feeling judged and greatly relieved when they see they are not.
- Fun and energetic.

- At ease in themselves, clearly self accepting, a good model.
- Self aware and actively working on their own development.
- Humility: the facilitator is competent, and is aware of it, but knows s/he is 'unfinished'.
- Stable and reliable, a must for people living with chaos and unpredictability.

Group centred

- Demonstrate an understanding of the circumstances of the group members.
- Genuinely interested in the participants and their story.
- Not using the group as a platform for their own issues.
- Hold the group and group participants in high regard. As Rogers put it *when we are prized, we blossom* (1961).
- Guided by the needs of the group.

Theoretical grounding (see also final chapter)

- Possessing of a solid theoretical knowledge in which to anchor/ground their practice.

When trainee group leaders look at their list of what they consider to be requisites for the role, they feel daunted. What must be remembered is that this is an ideal wish list: everyone starts at the start, with a few rudimentary skills and some knowledge, and we build and grow as we develop and gain more experience. Even at our best, we all have both strengths and growing edges – no one has it all.

It is also worth noting that in this list, personal skills and qualities are to the fore, coinciding with Yalom's view that *it's the relationship that heals* (1989). That is not to say that the knowledge a facilitator possesses is not important. Indeed, it is something that requires constant updating. However, knowledge in itself can only be part of the package. In fact, given that it is seen as synonymous with power (Foucault, 1978), knowledge that is not underpinned by a strong ethical sensibility can be dangerous: power can be used (for good), or abused (Sonstegard & Bitter, 2004)

Implied in some of the points above, such as having a good level of energy and being well grounded, is the position of Corey that one of the principal aims of the group leader is to arrive at the group not fragmented (2000), by which he means that the facilitator arrives at the group ready to go; that they are alert, calm and balanced, and able for the demands of the role. Facilitation is an intense practice, where high concentration levels are required. To do it well we need to achieve a level of wellbeing sufficient to the demands of the role. Even at our best, we have only so much focus on any given day (Gaffney, 2011), making it a resource we must nurture and harvest carefully.

This opens up another area of exploration: how do we tend to our own growth, in line with Rogers' view that it ought to be an ongoing process for those working on the development of others (1961).

Ongoing growth & development of facilitator

Reflection: What do you think of Rogers' idea that those working on the development of others ought to be in an ongoing process of development themselves (1961)? Or Corey's view that group leaders ought to live growth oriented lives (2000)? What do you think they mean when they state this view? If you accept their positions as reasonable, what are the implications for yourself? How does one engage in a process of ongoing growth and development and live a growth oriented life?

Here are some of the most common ways those working as facilitators tend to their own development.

Reflective practice: This involves learning from reflection upon our experience. It is very important that we learn to do this in a fair and compassionate way. We are wired to pay more attention to the negative (Gaffney, 2011), which is not a helpful disposition if we are seeking to review our work with a view to achieving ongoing personal growth. Imagine this scenario – you have completed a programme for a group of 12 participants. In reviewing their experience of the group, 11 say they found it wonderful.

The remaining member declares it was dreadful, an utter waste of time. What is in your mind as you head home?

Everyone I have asked this question gives the same answer - the negative evaluation! How is it we do this to ourselves? It is critical we be aware of this 'negativity bias' when we review our work, or we'll be in danger of never entering a group again. It is good practice to compassionately review a session and ask ourselves – how do I feel after the session? What went well? What am I pleased with? What skills did I show? If I were doing it again tomorrow, what would I do differently?

The facilitator must strive to put a negative incident in context, to see it as part of the session, almost certainly not the whole session. It is impossible to run a whole session and not have elements of it we wouldn't do differently were we to run it again. In truth, something 'going wrong' in a group can be fruitful. Indeed, through reflective practice we can come to see mistakes as the most useful learning experience of all, though of course we'd rather not make them. Having a stable and experienced co-facilitator can help one contain over-reaction to a perceived or actual setback.

Supervision is something all group facilitators should ideally have access to and is one of the most effective means of working on one's ongoing development. It provides the facilitator with the opportunity to go to a seasoned and experienced professional to examine and work through issues that arise in the course of their work. Supervision is a critical resource in helping the facilitator to achieve perspective. Just talking our concerns aloud to a skilled listener has the effect of dissipating our anxiety, reducing the 'drama' and affording us insight.

Receiving supervision from someone you report to is less than ideal as invariably there are scenarios you are unlikely to be fully open about as they may impinge on your employment in some way.

Ongoing Training and Development: As Karl Popper put it, *all we have is our current best thinking* (cited in Magee, 1998). This means we can never afford to believe ourselves to be in possession of definitive answers to the big questions, that we must keep searching and keep improving: thus the need

for lifelong learning. Popper's phrase takes the pressure of attaining perfection off the facilitator as it simply cannot be attained. It also encourages us to be open to question, which is easier said than done admittedly, but when we are open we have the prospect of further growth and change. If we tend to feel certain, and are prone to being adamant, then it is likely we see ourselves as right and others as wrong. This means that we are effectively closed to views that do not accord with our own, which means our growth is stymied. As Bertrand Russell rather bluntly put it; those who are certain are stupid (cited in Magee, 1998).

The feeling of certainty or destiny in our random universe is comforting and seductive, but it leads to simplification and a turning away from complexity and reality. To keep growing and developing, we must strive to remain open, and part of being open is simply continuing to do courses, attend workshops and other gatherings of professionals where knowledge is pooled and shared, received wisdom prodded and quizzed, and novel and challenging viewpoints encountered.

Reading: There will most likely be times in everyone's life when attending courses, workshops and supervision is not viable. At times like these, engaging in ongoing reading, listening to podcasts, exploring resources online are excellent ways of feeding our minds.

Writing: In this author's experience, there are two ways that above all others reveal to us our level of knowledge: when we try to teach it or write about it! Writing about a subject calls for considerable levels of research and accuracy, planning and structuring. It is well nigh impossible to write on a topic if we don't know our subject well enough.

Application: it is possible to read and do courses for the rest of our lives, but we also need to take the leap and engage in actual practice. There can be a considerable gap between the pristine and controlled world presented to us in a text, where the author has all the answers, and the messy, shifting complexities of a real-life group. Also, even though skills practice is usually engaged in on academic courses, you find you are practising with peers, people who may already have undertaken considerable work on their

personal growth and are entirely comfortable speaking in groups. This is not the case with many of our clients, who often struggle to articulate, particularly in the initial stages of their groups. We grow by taking risks and stretching ourselves, by applying what we have learnt to real life.

Managing our superego: according to Melanie Klein, one of the most important things we can do to further develop ourselves is to *build ego strength* (1988). In Freudian psychology, the ego is the thinking, rational part of the mind, the part that plans, strategizes and makes decisions. Unfortunately it is constantly harangued by the superego (inner critic), undermining its faith in its abilities. We build ego strength by recognising and owning our strengths, achievements, and qualities. When we grow this way, we are better able to push back against our inner critic.

Attend to our wellbeing: This will mean different things for everybody, and we all have different capacities, but the reality of group facilitation is that it demands sustained high levels of focus and presence, the achievement of which has clear implications for our lifestyle.

What is group facilitation?

The philosopher Karl Popper declared that clarity is always useful, but precision rarely so (1963). We are not going to try and offer a precise definition of group facilitation, as no form of complex human endeavour can be reduced to a single, definitive statement. Instead, we will offer what we hope is enough of a portrait to provide some clarity on the issue.

First of all, and most obviously, group facilitation is a way of working with groups. A facilitator engages with a group, helps and encourages them in the first instance to become a group, then offers a form of leadership to the group that results in the group utilising its innate capacity to resolve issues. The range of issues and areas in which a facilitator may work is practically endless, but underpinning the practice is a belief that the group has the capability to figure things out for itself, and is better for doing so. Such a belief in the group's innate power and competence has a limiting or

restraining effect on any impulse a facilitator may have to offer answers and solutions.

Those who practice group facilitation invariably see the experience, knowledge, intellect and needs of the group as a primary resource in the engagement. Therefore it is important to get the active involvement of the group members, so that they contribute to the content and fabric of the group. In reality, you cannot be a facilitator if the group opts not to participate.

Occasionally a group will seek to prostrate itself at the feet of the facilitator and declare that s/he has all the answers, so why doesn't s/he simply provide them. As a trainee facilitator once pleaded with me on a course "why do we have to spend weeks working this out? Why don't you just tell us the dos and don'ts of facilitation"? Once the group leader complies and becomes the font of all knowledge they effectively cease being a facilitator. It is not the case that the facilitator does not have opinions, or does not offer the fruits of their experience and learning; but how, when and why they do this is crucial. Once we go in with an agenda to reach a desired outcome, we inevitably become somewhat directive, which means we are steering the group to a predetermined outcome that we desire. In which case we are not working towards meeting the needs of the group: essentially, this is not facilitation.

Whilst there are many instances in groups where the group gathers to perform a task, a facilitator is generally more concerned with how this is done, with the process. S/he will seek to include all voices – or as many as possible – and will seek not to direct the group towards a pre-ordained objective, which can be a frustration to some funders who may want a very definite 'result'. Working authentically as a facilitator therefore requires a level of integrity and independent-mindedness.

Perception, self image, taking the next step

Let's go back briefly to the first time you entered a developmental or support group. After entering the group and sitting in the circle, what assumptions did you make of your fellow group members? Did you see them

as being just like you? Or way beyond you? How did you see the group leader?

Many members of support groups, when asked to cast their minds back to their first encounters with their group, recall having seen their fellow participants as being at a much further stage of advancement than themselves, so much so, they doubted their capacity to attain such a level. As a result, they doubted that they could fit in, or could have anything pertinent to contribute. When they looked at the group leader, they invariably report that they saw someone who was operating on a different plane to themselves, someone who 'has it all sorted', to quote one participant.

It goes to show, when we are low, we see everyone else as being above us.

If you have been a member of a support group and are now considering facilitating one, you need to pause and reflect on the journey you have made. You may be nervous at what you are about to embark upon. Your inner critic may well be furiously asking who you think you are! It probably asked you the same question when you first joined a group. It is a notable achievement that you have come this far, and you would not be facilitated to take this step unless you had gained the skills and experience to do so.

You will almost certainly continue to have moments of self doubt over the foreseeable future, but this is perfectly normal, and in fact it would be more of a concern if you just breezed in, thinking you could 'wing it', or that it would all work out. So, it is no bad thing that you are nervous, because it means you are taking what you are about to do seriously: it is appropriate that you do so. Hard work and persistence got you this far, along with your desire to make a positive difference to others who need your support. You have altered how you see yourself. You are now about to help others do the same. Well done, and best of luck.

Being true to self

In his book *A Way of Being* (1980), Carl Rogers presents a case study of a young woman who, from her earliest years, is criticised for her most

spontaneous, authentic behaviours, giving her the impression there is something fundamentally flawed about her. She is born into a privileged family which has strict, traditional views on how a female should behave. That ideal woman is very different from how 'Ellen' actually is, so she receives from the very beginning an unceasing stream of criticism and correction. Over time, so beaten down is she by the constant censure she learns to distrust her own organism, to the point that she loses touch with herself. In her search for approval and acceptance she develops an 'ideal' self, one sculpted by her critics. Not meeting her deepest needs, she becomes ill and does not recover. Eventually she dies.

It is a given in psychology that those who are not listened to become ill. While we need to be listened to by others, we also need to be listened to by ourselves (Gaffney, 2011). If we become so disconnected from ourselves that we cannot hear the messages our organism sends us, then we cannot know or meet our own needs (Rogers, 1961). We end up seeking to fulfil a vision ordained for us by others. As Ellen's case underlines, this is not the path to wellbeing.

It is invariably the case that living with someone who is in active addiction exacts a heavy toll. Addiction generally brings disorder and pain to a household. The truth is the addicted person may also be abusive and critical towards those closest to them, undercutting their self esteem and their confidence. Those in close proximity to someone in addiction often suffer serious physical and mental health difficulties. In the literature on trauma, living with a parent who is in addiction is regarded as an 'Adverse Childhood Experience', which can have pernicious long-term health implications (Van de Kolk, 2014).

It is safe to assume therefore, that those attending a support group run by organisations such as the Family Addiction Support Network (FASN) are experiencing severe difficulty in their life, may be experiencing trauma, and are feeling overwhelmed and under siege as a result of their circumstances. They are accustomed to life in the household revolving around the needs of the person in addiction. In short, meeting their own needs is often very low on their agenda. As a result, their health and wellbeing take a plunge and

they live on tenterhooks, often in a state of heightened anxiety. It is natural to feel resentful at the idea that one's life feels subject to the erratic behaviour of another, whose first and overriding concern is access to their drug of choice.

Support groups are set up to help the family member to not only cope better with their trying and unfortunate circumstances, but to bring awareness to the fact that quite often their own needs and aspirations have been put on the back burner. They enter a group knowing this at some level, often unconsciously. They are, in short, coming to the group in the grip of an existential crisis. They may be in search of meaning and higher purpose, of autonomy and self regard, but initially their main focus is likely to be basic health and survival. A group, run a certain way, can help them meet these core, fundamental needs.

What a privilege it is to be a facilitator of such a group, to get the opportunity to support and accompany these participants on their journey, on their recovery, on their regaining of their voice and their real Selves. And it is also a responsibility, because such participants are vulnerable and struggling and in need of a skilled, able and authentic group leader. They deserve and need our best efforts.

The Ripple Effect of Groups

'Paul' was a participant on a group I was running for particularly marginalised clients. He was in his late 40's, struggled with multiple addictions, and had experienced several stints in prison. I found him elusive and difficult to connect with. He avoided group outings and certain activities we were employing to facilitate non-vocal expression, such as Tai Chi. When he did speak, he largely tended to complain. Unlike his fellow group members, he didn't raise issues with a view to resolution, more it seemed, to bridle at how unfairly the world treated him. I found him quite challenging.

To be honest, he seemed so perpetually unhappy I couldn't see why he would come to the group. It ran three mornings a week, no small commitment, and he attended most days. He was at his liveliest during tea

break, where he often regaled his peers with tales of his criminal life. He struck me as having little remorse for his actions. I didn't see much prospect of him changing. When my mind drifted in this direction, I reminded myself that I had had such thoughts before, to be proven wrong.

A short while after the end of our programme, Paul was murdered. I was shocked, but not surprised. Unfortunately the rate of attrition on these groups was high, and Paul was not the only member whose life came to a premature end. I lamented the fact that I hadn't managed to connect better with him, that as a result of our engagement he had not taken a different route that might have led to a better outcome.

Three months after the tragic event, my manager came to tell me that Paul's bereaved partner had approached the organisation asking if it was possible to speak to 'the man who ran the groups'. We looked at each other; we both had the same dread thought – she had suffered a traumatic loss and might well be looking for someone to blame. My manager, always solicitous of staff welfare, asked if I'd like to put her off for now. And, to be honest, a part of me would have put the encounter off for good, but I decided I'd bite the bullet and asked him to arrange a meeting, if possible, for the following day.

I didn't have the best night's sleep. I was not expecting an easy meeting. I thought through how I felt I should handle things. I intended being warm and empathic, to expect tears and accusations, but also to explain that we had tried our best. There were certain things I wasn't going to say, but I said them to myself, to bolster my courage, such as the fact that someone who suffers multiple addictions, and is in and out of prison, is almost constantly at risk of untimely death.

The next morning reception informed me that I had a caller waiting to see me. Nerves fluttering, I made my way to the front desk. A woman rose to greet me with a warm, serene smile. I wasn't expecting this and I looked around to see if this was actually my caller. It was. We made our way to my office, introduced ourselves and sat down.

"I want to apologise for not calling sooner, but I just wasn't able. But I felt I owed you a debt of gratitude for all you've done" 'Helena' said.

Once again I was confused, as this in no way accorded with my expectations. Again, for a split second I wondered if I had the right caller. In fact I told her of my surprise and that I had expected that she might be a bit angry with those who had worked with Paul.

"No, no" she responded, "it's the opposite". Paul had been troubled for a long time, and she had often had to leave him for the sake of their children. "But since he started the group, the kids got to see their dad get up early every group day, see him get cleaned up and go out the door with purpose and energy. Then they saw him come home the same time as them, and he'd have news and gossip about what he had been doing. It was the first time they had experienced him as a normal dad. They'll always have that, even though he's gone. And that's down to the group".

I was overcome. I struggled to respond. Helena was alert to my surge of emotion and she smiled at me and we just sat there in warm silence. "I think that's the best feedback I ever got" I told her.

We never fully know the effects or consequences of our work, and never did this ring truer for me than when I sat there with Helena. If I had been asked before our meeting who I felt I had the least impact on of all my clients I would have answered Paul. And thanks to Helena's generosity this assessment was entirely transformed. Never underestimate the ripple effect of a group intervention (Yalom, 2005).

Chapter Three: The Evolution of the Group

"A group becomes a group when people choose to belong to it" (Nitsun, 1996)

Creating a Group: Cohesion

In developmental and support groups the group itself is seen as a therapeutic actor or force. Therefore, encouraging the gathered participants to become a group is an important part of their journey to growth and recovery. Essentially, one of the central tasks of any facilitator is the development and maintenance of group cohesion. Cohesion is synonymous with bonding, togetherness, safety and belonging, the sense of group members feeling they are a group.

As a word, cohesion is associated with Irvin Yalom, who regards it as one of the most important therapeutic group factors, by which he means that its presence in the group supports the growth and recovery of the participants (2005). On our first day in a group, we should probably see the development of group cohesion as our primary task. Without it, we don't have a group.

The benefits of cohesion

Cohesion is the bedrock of all groupwork (Ringer, 2002). Nothing of much significance can be achieved in a group without it. Members of a group that is cohesive feel they are part of something consequential. They experience a solid sense of belonging. They feel attached to the group and feel a sense of loss if they miss a session. Over time participants in a cohesive group come to see that they have a contribution to make, that they add to the group, and that the group is lessened by their absence. To see themselves in this self-regarding light signals a considerable improvement in their self perception.

For those unfortunate to be living with upheaval, a cohesive group is a safe space: as a result, risks can be taken, such as speaking and giving voice to one's story. Ultimately, it could be argued that the point of developmental groups is to facilitate voice and expression: it would be hard to imagine this

occurring in the absence of cohesion. Rogers declared that which is deepest to us is most universal (1961). The deeper the material that participants share the more cohesion grows in the group, which in turn spurs even deeper sharing: a virtuous cycle is established.

Being part of a cohesive group gives an isolated person the vital sense of belonging. It is a space where they can simply be: they can talk if they need or want, or simply sit and listen, and be accepted and not judged. It is hard to overstate the therapeutic benefit of being accepted, particularly if the participant has experienced harshness, judgement and oppression.

A group has a physical reality – people sitting in a room. But it also has a psychic reality and we can often find we are thinking of our group, and thinking of what we might say to our fellow members, even perhaps engaging in imaginary conversations and scenarios with them in between sessions. We start to notice things as we go through our day that we feel may be of use or of interest to a fellow participant. Once we are part of a cohesive group, we carry the group with us: we integrate it.

It is important to clarify that a cohesive group is not one where everyone is necessarily in agreement: in fact, it can be quite the opposite. It is one however, where the group is able to hold difference and disputes without sundering. The more a group surmounts the inevitable challenges and issues that it faces the more cohesive and resilient it becomes. So, cohesion is not 'groupthink'. A cohesive group is dynamic, challenging, safe and harmonious all at the once.

The generally dynamic nature of a cohesive group is a place where bonds are built and tested, where disputes are aired and settled, where members are challenged, and no one is maimed or belittled in the process. In this respect it presents an excellent demonstration to participants that it is possible in life to air and resolve disputes respectfully without either a serious falling out or more drastic consequences resulting. For someone having the ill fortune to live in a hostile or critical environment, this can be one of the more important lessons they can take from their group.

For a facilitator, it is not overstating it to state that the development of cohesion in the group may be the most important thing they do.

Reflection Corner: in which groups do you experience cohesion? How do you benefit from this? What do you contribute to your group that aids the development and maintenance of cohesion? What impact have you seen group cohesion make on fellow participants?

Building Cohesion

So, how do we develop cohesion? For a start, as mentioned earlier, don't begin the group by putting newcomers on the spot. Such an action hinders the development of cohesion. There are many things we can do to nurture its development. Think for a minute of what it allows: if people feel connected, they feel safer. When we feel safe, we can take risks, such as talk to each other. And that can be a good place to start, to pair people up at the start of a group, get them talking to each other, maybe agree on a list of topics to discuss, and instead of introducing themselves, they introduce their partner.

This is a simple exercise. Envision the first session of a new group. Bill is paired with Alice. They chat to each other to gain enough information to be able to introduce their partner to the group. As they talk, they find commonalities or things of shared interest, and may well venture beyond the confines of the assigned task – soon, they are no longer two strangers in a group. Bill is invited to introduce Alice to the group: in doing so he is talking in front of others, but not about himself, so it is less daunting. Moreover, he feels a responsibility to do justice to Alice and to show he has listened well. Bill tells the group that Alice has two children, that she works in an office and she likes to read in her spare time. He might also mention what has brought her to the group.

When Bill has finished his introduction, the facilitator might say "Alice, Bill tells us you like to read. Tell us a bit more about that. Have you come across any good ones recently?" Alice says a few words about her reading interests, which means, without fanfare, or hardly noticing, she is now talking about herself in front of a group of strangers. Then Alice begins to introduce Bill,

and the process is repeated. This activity can take time, so it is important to remember that we are not just performing introductions: we are developing cohesion, building interconnectedness; moreover, we are establishing the norms and culture of the group from the off.

Cohesion can be deepened by then moving on to activities that are conducted in groups of three or four. It is a useful idea to separate Bill and Alice (and every other pair) into different groups for this, so that by the end of the session, they will have engaged in conversation and discussion and worked with as many fellow group members as possible, and will head for home feeling they have got to know a few new people and will not therefore feel like strangers when returning to the next session.

We can often see people who struggle to talk in the large group getting fully involved in smaller groups. This is undoubtedly beneficial to the participant, and as they become more confident in small groups, they grow to be less daunted at the prospect of engaging more actively in the full group. As we stretch ourselves we broaden our prospects.

There are other simple approaches that help build cohesion in groups. The facilitator being there from the start, greeting participants warmly as they enter, and acting as a welcoming host helps to ease entry and get people connecting. Having refreshments at the start means people can gather to chat informally and get to know each other. A tea break half way through the session adds further opportunity to deepen connections.

Seating arrangements influence matters – most facilitators find sitting in a circle, without tables, to be the most effective way of facilitating connection. A decent room, large enough to fit the group, but not cavernous; comfortable, but not to the extent it induces drowsiness.

Then there are various games and energizers that can be employed. On the whole, I think it is best not to start a new group with a game. They are generally best employed after a break, to help people settle back into the group. Moreover, several of these games and activities involve movement as well as social interaction, so, as the name 'energizer' implies, they increase

the dynamism in the room. When a group starts having fun together it has arrived at a good place.

Becoming

The act of gathering a number of people in one room does not necessarily mean that they will become a group. Becoming a group, particularly a high functioning one, is a process that requires time and effort from the facilitator *and the participants*. The facilitator influences the outcome: s/he cannot simply will it to happen. As Nitsun's quotation makes clear, the group members have to decide to become a group. The facilitator's job, particularly in the early stages, is, through word and deed, to encourage them to do so.

This task is made easier if participants elect to come to the group in the first place, rather than feel compelled to attend. The process is also aided if the purpose of the group is clear, and acts as a draw to the participants. For example, if you are running a 'Support Group', you need to convey unambiguously to your audience what category of society the group aims to support. Some target groups may need more detail than others. If you advertise a 'Women's Group', that often is sufficient information to attract members. However, if you advertise a 'Men's Group', you may find that to a lot of men, this is amorphous and vague: they require more specifics, more 'shape', which is why the label 'Men's Shed' has succeeded where previous attempted interventions have often struggled in attracting participants.

One of my company's services is to run certified programmes on topics such as Group Facilitation, Train the Trainer and Conflict Management. These programmes are advertised, with the certification, course content and the necessary assignments outlined, as well as location, cost and time commitments. Moreover, it is indicated that the courses are interactive and participative in nature, and require of learners that they be willing to roll their sleeves up and get involved. Thus the purpose and required time, personal and financial investments are clear. Therefore, when people come along, I can expect them, to a fair degree, to be ready and willing.

What is not possible is to fully inform potential participants what the *experience* of the group will be like because you simply cannot know in advance: every group is unique. Nor can programme outcomes be guaranteed, because that depends at least as much on the participants and their application as it does on the facilitator. But potential participants can be given enough information about the programme to reduce some of the fears and anxieties that they might have and make them more amenable to actively choosing to commit to the group.

Conversely, I also run programmes that have aims that are more difficult to specify and where participants may feel under some level of compulsion to attend. I have, for example, run several groups aimed at progressing the long-term unemployed, or ex-prisoners. In both cases, it is not unusual that group members would have scant experience of being in developmental groups, and the language of programme content, aims and objectives might therefore be alien to them.

Essentially, in this case, we are attempting to run programmes where group members can see that their life could be different - should they want it to be - by engaging in different behaviours, by setting goals for themselves and taking steps to move towards said goals. To convey this purpose to participants of such groups, not least in the early stages, can be akin to speaking to them in a different language – which, literally, it is. They may therefore struggle to understand what you are proposing and equally unlikely to believe you if they did. As a result, and hardly surprisingly, group formation is often considerably slower with such target groups.

And yet, all these groups I refer to became groups. And in many cases, participants came to examine their life, consider if they were satisfied with how it was going, often decided they weren't, and made the decision to navigate a new direction and went on to achieve this: they effectively altered their perception of themselves, of their possibilities and their potential. Sometimes participants changed to a degree that astonished me, to degrees beyond which I could have imagined, which shows that the true therapeutic agent is the group itself. This therapeutic, growth inducing, regulating energy or quality is not something that's easily defined or

conveyed: yet to all experienced group workers, it is palpable. This was partly what Foulkes meant when he referred to the *Matrix* of the group (1974). When a group is infused with it, tremendous things can happen.

All groups are not the same

Every group has a distinct 'personality', a unique pace and culture. Groups respond in their individual way to questions, prompts and activities. Just because something works very well - or badly - in one group does not mean it will generate the same result in another. The same is true of a group's formation – it is different and distinct for every group.

There are various theories on the stages of group development that seek to chart the evolution of a group from its initial, generally hesitant opening, through its time of productivity and intensity, to its eventual ending. These 'step' or 'stage' theories are worthy and useful, but we must remember they are an attempt to reduce great complexity into a manageable, graspable schema. In that, they share a desire with all overarching theories to reduce the complex to something 'mappable'. Being able to categorise things makes us feel secure, and allows us to think that there is shape and design to our environment – a vain illusion according to Yalom (2005). Popper declares it wise to assume that all theories are somewhat flawed or incomplete, as they are "mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams and our hopes" (1963: 30). To reiterate, this does not mean they are not useful.

The initial and most well known theory on the stages of group development came from Bruce Tuckman (1965). It originally consisted of four stages – Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. He later added a fifth stage: ending, or adjourning. Over time, as is inevitably the case, it has come to be seen as overly neat and ordered. Nonetheless, it gives us a valuable prism through which to examine a group's progression.

What we can say, as per Benson's quote above, is that groups when forming *tend* to start cold, shy and awkward. This can make them uncomfortable places to be, which, understandably, hinders speech and expression, and heightens tension and unease. As the facilitator we can find that we do more speaking in the early stages of a group than we do when the group finds its

feet and becomes a less daunting place for participants. The great usefulness of knowing that groups start haltingly is that when it does happen we are not thrown: moreover, we can plan our activities and interventions accordingly. Furthermore, when people are uncertain and nervous, they look for safety and security: among the elements of leadership they probably need most from the facilitator at this early stage of the group are warmth, understanding, patience, presence and reliability.

There is not always an overt conflict stage, as per Tuckman's model, though there can be elements of testing and challenging, particularly of the leader, but also among the group members. Where there is explicit conflict, and it is handled well, it can greatly add to the depth and authenticity at which the group operates. The converse is also true.

I think it is a good idea to seek to establish group norms from the beginning, in the critical forming stage, because, as Yalom reminds us, norms that are established early can prove highly durable (2005), so it is worthwhile to seek to set conducive standards and expectations around participation, listening, respect, timekeeping, attendance and so on.

As participants begin to feel safe they begin to build connections to each other and the group begins to attain a level of cohesion. Cohesion is not a fixed state: a cohesive group can become more cohesive and less, just as a performing group can improve or worsen its performance.

The presence of cohesion, along with a clear sense of direction – goals – leads a group to begin to perform at its optimum. The experience of being in a group when it reaches this stage is meaningful, purposeful, and potentially life enhancing.

If over the course of its life, a group is not becoming deeper or more intense, then there most likely is an issue that needs to be addressed. Perhaps there is a feeling of 'lack of safety' in the group? Perhaps the group is focusing on issues that do not reflect the needs of the participants? It is well to put your observation to the group. Perhaps along lines such as:

- "I'm beginning to wonder how much we're getting of what we need from being here? If we're fulfilling the deeper purposes of this group? Any views"?

- "I want to check with you my sense that over the last while we seem to be skating on the surface a bit, maybe not going in to the issues that bring us here. Any views on this"?

Such questions are both a challenge and an invitation to the group, an attempt, through review, to steer the group back to its purpose and attend to the task it was established for. The group may not concur, which does not necessarily mean you are wrong, and may simply mean they are seeking to avoid going to the next step, perhaps out of a sense of vulnerability. This too can be addressed – "what do we need in order to take the next step? What might be holding us back from this? What would make it safe enough for us to do so"?

Role evolution

As facilitators we seek to meet the needs of the group and its participants. However, needs vary with each group, and, as stated, each group is unique. Nonetheless, groups aimed at certain populations will tend to have some common traits and features. Each ex-prisoner group shares a broad range of features with others of that cohort and, despite their differences, will most likely have more in common with each other than they would with a group aimed at Eastern European immigrants with a varied work and educational background who are seeking to progress in Irish society.

The mix of skills and traits that each group needs from the facilitator is different, so the facilitator has to be able to adapt to that shifting kaleidoscope. Moreover, as a group evolves towards becoming a high functioning entity, the facilitator's role develops in tandem. In the most basic sense, as group members grow in confidence and in comfort, they become more active in the group. They offer encouragement, support and understanding to their fellow members, they contribute questions and opinions, they make suggestions. In short, they take on many of the aspects of the role that, in the early stages, the facilitator provides. As a result, the

facilitator can relinquish some of these functions in order to facilitate participant growth. The more that group members take on, the more empowered they become – which is ultimately the purpose of support and developmental groups. So, in order for the purpose of the group to be achieved, the facilitator needs to be able to share power and take a step back. This is a gradual process, but it can actually be begun from the earliest stages. For example, when we employ pair work, and small group work, we are effectively taking the focus off the facilitator, however temporarily.

That is not to suggest that the facilitator becomes surplus to requirements. The presence of the facilitator makes the group 'official'. The facilitator supplies impetus and shape, s/he convenes the group, and ensures it is regulated: it is his/her job to see that the group pursues its purpose, that it is treated as a serious and hard-working entity. The participants meld more and more with their group, but the facilitator remains both present and apart, and that apartness is crucial to the group's functioning as it provides it with a caring but slightly distant, relatively objective 'conductor' – the word Foulkes employed for the role of group leader (1974).

Contracting

Contracting is a common – some would say essential - feature of group practice. There are good reasons for engaging in it.

- It offers the participants and the facilitator the opportunity to establish clarity about the purpose of the group and the respective roles and responsibilities of each party.
- It can be used to establish and embed participative and consultative group norms and forward the growth of group cohesion.
- It offers ownership and mutual responsibility for the group's being and performance to all members.
- By establishing clarity around issues such as expected and agreed behaviour it helps establish a sense of safety for participants.
- It highlights the mutual interdependence of all parties.

- The ritual of contracting declares seriousness of intent, signalling that the group and its leader are committed to goals, behaviours and courses of action.

A meaningful, authentic contract requires the active participation of the whole group in its construction, so the group has to have the capacity to articulate its hopes and its needs. This has a bearing on when the contract can or should be done: if it is undertaken too soon, there may be any number of participants who do not yet feel emboldened to speak; therefore they do not contribute. It is, nonetheless, generally something to be conducted in the earlier stages.

It is good practice to revisit and revise a contract. As people change, their needs and ambitions evolve. Participants might see new directions and possibilities not just for themselves, but for the group. Revisiting the contract offers an opportunity for the group to take stock, to review progress and re-examine objectives. This also has the benefit of flagging that the group is finite in nature – which can helpfully concentrate minds.

Naturally, a contract that's not upheld or honoured is little more than a box ticking exercise and counterproductive, undermining the seriousness of the group and particularly the facilitator. Too many organisations have mission statements they don't genuinely aspire to, and which are produced by HR departments without consulting with the rest of the organisation.

Many of us in the past will have sat in adult learning environments where the group leader announces a contract by simply turning over the page on a flipchart where they've previously inscribed a set of rules. That is not a contract. A contract is an agreement, and it requires the engagement and consent of all participating parties. Announcing a set of rules infantilises the group and undermines the purpose of facilitation.

As has been alluded to, it can take time for participants – and groups - to find their voice and reach a stage where they can engage in a participative activity such as contracting, so this has consequences for choosing the moment to perform it. Some client groups can be so highly marginalised, and developmental groups seem so alien to them, that finding a voice and a

sufficient level of confidence and self knowledge to be able to identify their needs and aspirations can take time.

In other cases, where one is facilitating a programme of learning, participants may already have been required to attain certain levels in self and educational development; they may have undertaken considerable work on their personal growth and development; they may know exactly what they are signing up for and have a good idea what is involved and is expected of them. When I am running certified Group Facilitation training programmes where such conditions are evident, and the group hits the ground running, I may not undertake a formal contract at all.

In practical terms, when contracting, I might address the group as follows:

"In order for our time here to be as useful and beneficial as possible, it might be worth our while to look at how we operate. So, I'd like to ask you some questions:

- What do you feel you (the participants) can reasonably expect or hope of me (the facilitator)?
- What can I (the facilitator) reasonably expect or hope of you (the participants)?
- In order to benefit from your time here, what do you expect or hope of/from yourself?
- To function well as a group together, are there any things we should/shouldn't be doing?"

There are a number of aims underpinning these questions: first of all, they are used to seek to establish a collaborative working environment; they underline the mutual and interactive nature of the endeavour; they signal the sharing of power and responsibility for the group; they allow the facilitator to clarify any misconceptions the participants may have about his/her role, not least the limits of his/her responsibility.

On the latter point, I have run groups for the long-term unemployed where some participants had the expectation that I would literally place them in a job. Their voicing this aspiration allowed me to clarify that I did not have

such influence or power, but my aspiration was to support them as best I could in their personal search for employment. In other settings, I have had occasional participants declare that they saw me as the teacher and they wanted to sit and listen, and not speak. This allowed me the opportunity to clarify that the evidence shows that adults gain more by being actively involved rather than passive attendees, so I would hope for and request their participation.

It is also useful to let participants see that the facilitator has expectations of them, such as time-keeping, attendance, and constructive involvement: also, that they be a resource and support to each other. The more one puts into one's group, the more one benefits, so by asking participants what they expect of themselves, they are being prompted to bring their best game.

Finally, without employing the word 'rules', with its controlling connotations, the final question does create space for issues such as phones, respect, timekeeping and attendance as well as confidentiality to be raised and discussed. It is important to clarify what is meant by confidentiality and to underline the fact that it is something that can be requested but not guaranteed. Though they are likely aware of it, agreeing a contract presents a valuable opportunity to underline the harm that can ensue from a breach of confidentiality.

Essence

The way the facilitator functions will evolve in a group, and from group to group, but their essential essence is more consistent. It evolves with experience and further development, but in a gradual manner. Rogers proposes congruence, or authenticity, as one of the core conditions that we seek to possess. We can, over time, become more authentic, usually by becoming better known to ourselves, and more accepting of ourselves. But over the course of a programme, whilst such progress can be made, it is probably scarcely discernible to the participants – and maybe even to ourselves. So, whilst we modify and adapt our way of working to the environment, at a more fundamental character level we stay much the same. Being consistent in how we fundamentally are is of importance to a

group, providing stability and predictability. For some participants, particularly those trying to cope with chaos in their lives, having a reliable and knowable presence in the group leader may be one of the few predictable elements of constancy in their lives.

Ending the group

Many of us are uncomfortable with endings, yet endings are a fundamental aspect of life, and unless we become better at this inevitable facet of living, we are left, according to Fritz Perls, with agitating 'unfinished business' (cited in O'Leary, 1992).

Think for a minute of someone who has experienced long-term unemployment. It is well recorded that unemployment undermines a person in fundamental ways. It denies them material comfort and acquaints them with relative poverty. It robs them of purpose and structure – all days can feel empty and similar. If they are skilled, they are denied a stage for their talents, and the sense of achievement that comes from same. Unemployed people become isolated, often through stigma and shame, but also because they simply cannot afford to engage in social activity. It is a pernicious experience, robbing a person of their dignity and self-worth, as well as the very skills they need to exit from it (Delaney et al, 2011).

Now imagine you are running a group for people stuck in this purgatorial limbo. Let's say the group meets twice a week. Let's call one of the participants 'Jim'. All of a sudden, a level of structure has been restored to Jim's life. He has regained some purpose. In order to attend the group he has to plan and organise. He needs to note dates and times, decide on his personal grooming, when he goes to bed the night before, consider how he gets to the venue, and how he'll get home afterwards. When he gets to the group, he is aware that participants are expected to contribute, so he has to give consideration to that, not only when in the group, but when anticipating the next sessions as well.

Over time, Jim begins to find his voice: he begins to recover confidence: he notices he is more alert, more able, more willing to try new things: he sees that he is changing, and he credits the group.

Gradually, Jim begins to feel a full member of the group: he participates, he offers support, he empathises with his fellow members. He begins to notice that he thinks of the group throughout the week, at various times of the day. Sometimes he sees or hears of something and it brings to mind a fellow member: he thinks of how he must be sure to pass the information on to them. The group has become an intrinsic part of his life. He has come to feel a true sense of connection. Jim slowly comes to accept that his being there makes a difference to his peers, that what he says and does impacts on and matters to others.

Jim feels he has just got into his stride, has just got to the point where he feels restored to his former self, and is upset to think of the group coming to a close. He has grown close to his fellow participants and is beginning to feel anxious at the thought of returning to his pre-group life of solitariness and isolation. His spirits drop and he can sense himself withdrawing.

When we are constantly running groups, and conducting scores of endings, we must guard against losing sight of what a group can come to mean for its participants; and how its ending can signify considerable loss. We must continue to flag the stage that the group is at – so that people do not turn a blind eye to the ending – as most of us tend to avert our gaze from realities we'd rather not contemplate. I find it useful, if running a long-term programme, to do periodic reviews and assess progress, check how people are faring, see if there are evolving or emerging needs.

I might open such a review by saying "I'm aware that today we are already one third of the way through our time together! I think it might be useful to ask ourselves a few questions:

- Regarding our original aims..... Are these still valid/useful?
- Are we benefiting from the programme – and if so, in what way? (In Solution Focused Therapy they might ask a somewhat more directive

question by enquiring 'How are we/in what way are we benefitting from the programme?')

- Are there needs coming up for people we ought to look at that we haven't?
- Looking ahead to the next few weeks, is there anything you feel we should be focusing on?"

These questions not only flag the inevitable ending of the programme, they also set out to make the content, direction and style of the programme a collaborative venture, as well as review the contract and working alliance. In the same vein, it can also be useful to conduct a 'Stop, Start, Continue' review: to ask the group "In order to get the most of our remaining time together, what do you think (a) we should stop doing, (b) we should start doing and (c) we should continue doing"? If there are sufficient literacy levels in the group, it can be conducive to pin three sheets of flipchart on the wall with these headings so people can walk around, chat and confer with each other before noting their views: this can create a sense of purposefulness and energy. The group can then discuss their findings, with the facilitator teasing out and further clarifying the how and what of their views.

Therefore, whilst many of us are uncomfortable with endings in life, we get to see that they serve a useful function: they focus the mind; they lead us to assess our direction, our needs, and our goals. They bring us to a point of choice, clarity and decision making. They add urgency and intention where, in its absence, there might be drift and complacency. Endings impel us to search for meaningfulness, purpose and substantial outcomes.

Goal set through

Another vital task for the facilitator of a group like Jim's is to support the group members formulate goals for the future beyond the group so that they are not simply stopping dead at its closure, without a roadmap for what comes next.

I have been asked at times to work with teenagers in YouthReach centres to seek to encourage them to focus on their next steps in life. They have often

proved resistant to looking to their futures, invariably saying that they would finish in the centre on 'xx' date, and then 'see what comes up'. This stance is a toxic recipe for unemployment and drift. Continually working on plans, focusing on what people want to do, how they will do it, what they'll do first, what comes after that... the more clarity and detail they can generate, the more likely that people will achieve their goals (Glasser, 1998).

It is a good idea to goal set 'through', and to have more than one goal – though not too many, as we only have so much focus (Gaffney, 2011). How many people in our society anticipate – for years – their retirement, and then find themselves at a spirit sapping loose-end when the long beckoned day arrives? They did not devote sufficient thought or time to the question of what they would do once they reached this haloed milestone. With long-term groups, it is a sound strategy to be continually working with participants on their next steps, through and beyond the ending of the group.

If Jim has some goals he wants to achieve over the course of the coming year, with his next steps and actions laid out, with some idea of their timing and sequence, then he is not being returned to his pre-group life. He will retain a sense of purpose, meaning and direction.

Finally, practically any plan is better than none: it is virtually always better to be doing something than nothing, as interminable nothingness crushes a person.

Harvest

It is fair to say that the ending of a group can bring sadness. However, it also offers the opportunity to engage in celebration, the acknowledgement of achievement, and the chance to assess and evaluate. Celebratory endings are ubiquitous in human society when a landmark has been achieved, so it is important that the participants get the opportunity to see their efforts in this light.

It is a central tenet of psychology that people grow and develop when they can identify and own their strengths and accomplishments, when they can

see and name the progress they have made: an ending ceremony is certainly a vital aid in helping participants to do this.

There is a mountain of elaborate ending exercises available online. I find this straightforward activity works well: It involves asking these simple questions:

- How did you benefit from being in your group?
- What did you get that you feel you can use outside of here, in the months to come?
- What did you contribute to your group to make it such a success?
- What contribution did you see from your fellow group members that you would like to mention? (There is the risk to this question in that not everyone might get an 'honourable mention' and be left feeling hurt, especially as there is limited opportunity to process same, so we need to be mindful and alert if employing such a question).

The focus of this ending activity is on the participant and their group. While group members will often award credit to the facilitator, which, naturally is gratifying, it is vital that they own their own achievement and the achievement of their group – of which they were an essential component.

Open groups

Much of the literature on groups tends to be centred on groups that have a start date, an end date, and a stable group of participants. These are called 'closed' groups. (The vast bulk of this author's experience is with groups of this nature). However, for the likes of recovery groups and support groups, the membership can vary at every meeting: these are called 'open' groups, signifying that people can drop in as and when they feel they need to. Nonetheless, in many such groups, while occasional members come and go, there is often a cadre of regular members. They can, in effect, demonstrate features of both open and closed groups. This creates a set of dynamics not easily represented by the theoretical models of the stages of group development as you can have new participants at the forming stage, with veterans at the performing stage. There may be a little bit of edginess between both parties, so there'll potentially be a bit of conflict to add to the mix. And, it is also possible that the addition of a sizeable number of new

members would be enough to radically alter the established norms of the group, creating, in effect, a new group.

This author spent a number of years running long-term groups for ex-prisoners. The groups met three times a week for a period of nine months. They had an average of 7-8 participants and were co-facilitated. They were set up to be closed groups: a set start and end date, a fixed group of participants. However, given that all the group members had experienced traumatic and chaotic lives, and were in and out of addiction recovery, the groups initially functioned in some ways as open groups. There might be four participants in attendance on Monday, and a different four on Wednesday, regardless of the assurances of Monday's quartet that they would attend the next session. This made it challenging to do follow through work: each session had to be self contained.

The participants on these groups also tended to lurch from acute to critical crises, the severity of which sometimes meant they needed to be immediately addressed: again, this would mitigate against the development of broader, longer term themes. Gradually the level of urgency would recede, and we would begin to resemble a group rather than an emergency department. Most of these groups eventually transitioned into the closed groups they were intended to be.

Participants of open groups have reported to me that they found it more daunting entering their group for the first time because they might well be the only new member to attend. In contrast, the first day of a closed group, while still nerve-wracking for most, sees everyone in the same position as a newcomer.

It is also important to be aware that long-established members can occasionally resent newcomers, and can sometimes feel that said novices are junior to them and should demonstrate deference. If 'veterans' can be encouraged to revisit what it was like for them to first enter the group, and consider what it was that helped them belong, they can be recruited into easing the incorporation of the new entrant. In fact, in this author's experience, they generally take on this role without much need of

encouragement. Senior members of an open group will most likely have seen participants come and go, and come to realise that new blood enhances the long-term viability of the project, making it in their own interest to help assimilate new members. It is also beneficial for them in other ways: as they work towards 'self-actualisation', they are presented with the opportunity to encourage and guide new members along the path they themselves have travelled.

The inescapable complexity of groups

Perhaps the only point we can make about the nature of the human psyche that most psychologists agree on is that it is complex and that there are a multitude of diverse theories, often radically different to each other, that seek to explain it.

Given the considerable complexity of the psyche of an individual, it is surely no surprise that we can confidently go on to state that groups are heightened, intense and febrile environments, and are "too complex to allow most mortals to 'know' what is going on at any one time" (Ringer, 2002: 19).

Nonetheless, as is the way with most human endeavours, the more experience we gain, the more skilled and expert we become. That does not mean we ever arrive at a place where we know it all, but we do become more comfortable and competent. Our challenge at that stage is to avoid complacency. One way of ensuring this is to seek to pass on our knowledge, through teaching, mentoring and writing. Another is to remind ourselves of the power that is invested in us by simply occupying the position of group leader and the sobering sense of responsibility that follows.

Ultimately we are group creatures: for all our insecurities and self doubt, we are, it would seem, innately skilled at groups. So, complex as groups are, they are also our most natural and necessary environment, where we are invariably at our healthiest and best.

Case study: In the rough

Jane was invited to run a facilitation training programme for a group of youth workers. Having had considerable prior contact with the sector, she was looking forward to the engagement. Her experience of this cadre was that they were open and enthusiastic. She generally found them more responsive to activities than theoretical discussion, so she factored that into her preparation.

Jane arrived at her destination in good time, went to reception and told them she was there to run the programme. The receptionist handed Jane a key and directed her to room 105. She made her way up, unlocked the door and immediately concluded there had been a mistake because the room was stacked full of material: it was clearly being used as a makeshift store room. Jane returned to reception to double check the arrangements. No, she was informed, it was the right room. Jane asked if the centre manager was about, to be told she was in a meeting and was not available. She explained that the room was clogged with bric-a-brac, and asked if there was another room available. No, she was told.

Jane returned to the room, scratching her head. At every other venue where she had been invited to deliver training, she was used to being greeted on arrival, escorted to the room, asked if the layout was suitable and if she needed anything else by way of equipment or resources: she was usually given a tour of the facilities, offered refreshments and so on. There was almost always tea and biscuits laid out to welcome participants as they arrived. She had never been directed to a store room before and simply left to get on with it. It didn't give her a good feeling, but she made the decision to clear a workable space in the crowded room as best she could.

As she was clearing a guy entered the room, walked up to her and asked if she was running the course. Jane confirmed that she was. He responded "I hope this isn't going to be one of those groups where we aim at the lowest common denominator. I want something that's really challenging. Just

thought I'd give you fair warning". At that he turned on his heel and walked out the door.

A bit bemused, Jane returned to organising the room. Not long after, another person entered the room. "Good morning," Jane said. If he replied, Jane didn't hear it: he walked past her to one of the windows, and stood with his back to her looking out. A bit puzzled by his behaviour, Jane wondered if he was in the wrong place. "Are you here for the group?" she asked him. "Yes" he replied. He returned to gazing out the window. By now, Jane was beginning to feel uneasy: she's often a little nervy starting a new group, but surely this was a bit odd? She sought to 'bracket it off', telling herself that she had had strange beginnings before, but things had still worked out fine.

Five minutes past the appointed start time, with the window gazer impatiently checking his watch and tutting his disapproval loudly, the rest of the group entered together, including the gentleman who had sought to be challenged. As they seated themselves Jane greeted them, and when they settled she began to give them a brief outline of her chief aims for the day, which was to work on group cohesion so everyone would feel and experience what it was like to be in a facilitated group.

Jane likes to get new groups into pairs as soon as she can and get them talking to each other to start breaking the ice, so she asked them "what things do you like to know about the other group members at the start of a new group. What are you curious about"? She does this in order to elicit a short list of topics – which usually includes name, where you are from, what you do, why you're here etc., which she then records on the flipchart – but on this occasion the group sat there mutely, not responding, despite her cajoling them to do so. She wrote some suggestions herself in order to get them into pairs and to try and infuse some energy into proceedings.

In dividing up the group, Jane tried to make sure that people were paired with someone relatively unknown to them. She asked the group if any of them were sitting next to someone they already knew quite well – again, no

one responded. She then said "guys, that was actually a question". She got a few muffled answers. "This", Jane said to herself, "is not going at all well".

One way Jane has of knowing that things are not going as well as she wants is when she finds herself making too much effort. Oftentimes she states this fact aloud: when met with silence she might make an ironic joke of it, such as "Ok, one at a time please: if you all talk at once I won't be able to get a word in edgeways". On this occasion the joke fell right off a cliff and went splat on the floor.

Jane felt a nauseating wave of self doubt. "Do they know all this already? Am I boring them?" she asked herself. "No, this is not what I'm used to. There's something odd here. This isn't about me" she deduced.

So, she persisted, getting people into pairs and asking them to interview each other with a view to introducing their partner to the group. Jane usually gives pairs somewhere around 10 minutes to do this activity – if they go into territory besides that which is written on the chart, that's fine with her, as her real focus with introductions is the building of bonds between group members.

After approximately one minute one of the pairs stopped talking and sat there in tense and stony silence. Jane went over to them and checked that everything was alright. Yes, one of them responded testily: he happened to be the guy who walked past her earlier and looked out the window. His female partner looked cowed and confused by his behaviour. Jane tried sparking some small talk to change the energy, but 'William' wasn't having it. Jane then noticed that her first contact of the group, the man who had demanded she raise the bar and not waste his time, 'Ray', was also sitting in silence. His partner for the activity looked as daunted by his behaviour as William's.

Even though considerably less than half the time she had planned on giving this activity had elapsed, Jane thought that she'd better recall the group. As facilitators, we aim for a good start, and to give a good first impression of ourselves and the programme, so having a third of the group sitting in mute silence is not ideal. However, Jane was also ambivalent about cutting things

short: she didn't want certain parties – Ray and William to be precise - to think they were directing her efforts.

Jane brought the group back into a circle and William immediately announced that he thought that "the activity had gone on a bit". "So did I" echoed Ray. The rest of the group sat there in stilled silence. By now, Jane was starting to feel distinct flickers of annoyance and frustration. She had met nothing but indifference and even discourtesy since she had arrived. And now, William and Ray seemed to be envisaging themselves offering a running critique on what she was doing. By placing themselves 'above' Jane, they were effectively according to themselves the position of group leaders. Unless they quickly stumbled upon a cure themselves, Jane would have to disabuse them of this notion, the question being how, and when.

Jane was also concerned at the general dullness and lethargy of the rest of the group – she had never met a group so flat and so apparently unenthusiastic. She had been expecting to meet a group of a very different nature and was struggling to adjust to this new reality. What was at the root of this atmosphere? How would she challenge it?

Jane had had sluggish starts before, only to see the group transform through the course of the day, so she told herself that things could easily take a turn for the better if she kept her focus, sought to apply and uphold the core conditions and 'trust in the process'. She therefore invited the participants to begin introducing each other. No one was in a hurry to go first, or second. Or third! Moreover, once she encouraged and coaxed them into doing the activity, pairs started going by rote, which is not a good idea, as its predictability saps the group of spontaneity.

Jane's usual technique (as outlined earlier in this chapter) is to get person A to introduce their partner, person B. Then, before person B presents person A to the group, Jane asks person B a few questions on what has just been learnt about them. If person A mentioned that person B likes sport, Jane might ask for more information – do they play sport; what sport: where and how often etc? This is done in order to get them used to speaking about themselves in the group, without the appearance of being put on the spot.

In this case, person A ('Mary') informed the group that person B ('Dave') had always been interested in youth work. So, seeing an opportunity to get Dave talking about himself Jane asked "what drew you to youth work Dave"? "Personal reasons", he brusquely replied. Dave then introduced Mary: it took him at most 15-20 seconds. Jane asked Mary "what are the things you enjoy about your job"? "The kids", she replied. "Can you say more?" Jane invited. "There's not much more to say" Mary replied.

Sometimes a dynamic develops in a group, and probably without intending to, or if left unchecked, all group members climb on board. Dave and Mary were not a whole lot less effusive than the rest of the group had been in the introductions conducted to date. Jane was really beginning to feel there was an active current of hostility running through the group. It was coming at her and was by now bordering on genuine disrespect, essentially making her job impossible. She decided then and there that she didn't have to, or want to, accept this behaviour. She had been invited to deliver a programme, and that meant she had legitimate expectations of the group: these included that she would be respected, that she would be accepted as the group leader - at the very least given a fair and reasonable opportunity to show she was capable of the role - and that the group members would make an effort. She felt instead like she was in a room with a group of truculent teenagers.

Jane had a notepad on her lap, where she was noting names during the introductions as an aide to memorising them. She dropped it – forcefully - on the ground. A still silence descended on the group, which Jane held for several seconds.

"I'm not sure why I'm here," she stated. "Or, more particularly, why you're here. I was invited to run a programme. And I've never experienced the start of a group like this before. It seems to me you don't want to be here. I feel you are having issues with me as the group leader, though I'm only in the door and we've never met. I feel we are at an impasse and I'm not sure where to go with this – actually, I'm going to leave that up to you. You have

decisions to make. If you're just not interested, we can call it quits. But I'm not willing to carry on with this".

The group sat there quite stunned. "At least they're listening now" Jane remembers thinking to herself. Then a few of the group rushed in together: "the group was going great" they proclaimed. They were "already learning so much and really enjoying it".

There is a strong impulse in probably all of us to rush in and rescue and avoid a tense and awkward scenario, and this, in Jane's view, is what these speakers were now doing. And she had to admit that part of her strongly wanted to go along with them, and pretend that everything was fine, but she had been in too many groups, and, trusting the value of her experience, she knew that this one was markedly different. This just wasn't working. And it wasn't down to her.

Jane responded "My view from this chair is not in line with yours, and I'm choosing to trust my gut on this. I've run a lot of groups, including highly challenging ones, and I've never had a group start like this before. This is just not working. I need to know if there's some problem with me, or maybe some problem amongst you that explains this state of affairs. I need to know why you're actually sitting here".

Jane was in the lucky position of being her own boss, of running her own business, and she felt perfectly free to give this group an ultimatum, or to walk away from the job if it was fundamentally wrong for both parties. What Jane felt she was confronted with were people who acted as if they were under compulsion, and as if she was an oppressive authority figure. Often, when one or two group members act out, other group members come in to attempt to turn things around – in short, the group seeks to attain equilibrium. In this case, everyone seemed to row in the same destructive direction, or remain indifferent, until the point where Jane named what she was experiencing.

A discussion amongst the group ensued: some announced that they did find the atmosphere heavy and strange, but had found it hard to find their voice, even though they had wanted to. However, now that things were being

named, they felt released and would endeavour to get their voice in and participate. They declared that they were genuinely interested in doing the programme.

They asked Jane what she needed. She explained that as a facilitator she could not function in that role without the group's active cooperation and participation. In order to operate as a facilitator the group had to accord her the position of group leader. She made clear that she was not claiming to be above criticism, but she felt she had been put under a rare level of censure before she even got going. In short, she had a set of minimum expectations that had to be met before she – or any facilitator - could fulfil her role. She needed to know if anyone had a difficulty with this.

No one came forward to announce that they had, and there seemed to be general concurrence that they could work together and that they would live up to their side of the deal. Jane was cautious not to overdo things but she checked once again to see if there were any outstanding issues, looking squarely and meaningfully at Ray and William as she spoke. Nothing was said. Jane then announced a tea break and said that on regrouping she would assume that all people that returned to the room were there because they wanted to be and were signing up to participate and learn.

Everyone returned and things improved thenceforth, though never quite to a point where the group was fluidly operating and strongly cohesive. Jane did feel most group members made a genuine effort, but what she discovered after another few sessions was that the group was composed of two separate organisations that were competing for resources. Moreover, there were staff and managers in the room, one of whom was William, and William's managerial approach was to act as an old style factory floor disciplinarian. (Jane learnt in time that his project experienced very high levels of staff turnover, which, to Jane, was no surprise).

Jane's challenge to this group was spontaneous – so much so she reported that she was nearly as taken aback by it as the group. However, she's unequivocally glad she did it. There was something in her challenge that was a gut declaration of a belief in her own right to dignity and respect: but it

also went beyond her and the moment in which it occurred. If some members of the group felt it was okay to treat their facilitator like that, then what might they do to vulnerable clients, of whom, no doubt, they had several?

Chapter Four: Questions and Answers

One of the key tasks of the facilitator is to listen to group participants. Being listened to, being taken seriously by another person is highly beneficial to the one that is heard. Being listened to and being understood conveys the message to the speaker that they are understandable and worth listening to, and, contrary to what they might have originally thought, that they are not so strange. Moreover, if we feel understood, we also feel accepted, which means to at least one other person, we are acceptable. To a person crushed and/or isolated by their experience, this can be a tremendous relief, and can significantly alter a person's sense of themselves (O'Leary, 1982).

In order to listen to someone, the facilitator first has to encourage that person to talk. In order to do that, the group leader usually needs to ask questions.

There is no small amount to consider in such a transaction. There is the structure of the questions themselves – are they open or closed? There is the timing of asking particular questions – is it too early and therefore too risky, or is the question too basic, one that the participant has grown beyond answering? Crucially important is the group atmosphere and the level of cohesion: is the group a safe enough space for the participant to answer the questions you are asking? There are many factors to weigh up, and because every group is unique, what can be offered here are general rather than definitive observations. Nonetheless, there is much of use that can be said.

Attunement and readiness

Much of what you do in relation to asking questions will come from the sense you have of the group in a particular moment: therefore, you need to be attuned and alert to the shifting atmosphere and nuances. This takes time, and mistakes will be made along the way: as a result, it is always important to keep Maureen Gaffney's advice to mind: always be aware of your positive intent (2011), as this helps us be merciful towards ourselves for our unintended slips and helps us to avoid catastrophising them. It is not

possible to work with a group for a whole session and not have elements you might consider could and maybe should have been done differently.

However, when you are working in the moment, open to whatever the group members need to discuss, you are essentially navigating without a map, trusting in the process. It is inevitable there will be matters that arise that with hindsight you might have handled differently: it will always be thus. We aim, in the words of Winnicott, to be *good enough* rather than perfect, because perfection is not within human capability (1964). We must trust that as we gain more experience we get better at this work, so we persist, aiming to do as well as we can.

Gaffney also reminds us that concentration and focus require a considerable amount of energy. In order to be able to harness our concentration and be as present as possible to group members, we need to be in good fettle, mentally and physically. We need to have good internal boundaries so that we can bracket off our own worries and concerns so that we can be as present as possible. This recalls for us Gerald Corey's declaration that one of the most important tasks of the group leader is to *arrive at the group non-fragmented* (2000). To do this we need to give consideration as to how we live our lives, and be willing to take active responsibility for our level of wellbeing and readiness.

Timing

As indicated, in relation to the questions we put to the group, timing is crucial. It is hard for most people to speak at any length or depth in the initial stages of a group, particularly if they are not accustomed to groups and are dealing with trying circumstances in the home. Therefore, more general and less threatening questions are typically called for. The beginning of a group is not the time to ask deep, probing questions that can often require considerable levels of self-knowledge, confidence, security and comfort to answer.

It can often be more effective to ask a question of someone who may already be speaking (or has recently spoken). By which we mean something like this: firstly, a general question is put out to the group; for example, the

group might be asked "how has your week been" or, "how are we right now"? A participant starts to answer and makes an interesting comment that the facilitator might think it useful to hear more of. This presents an opportunity to ask a follow up question, to draw the speaker out further. Such a question might be "say a bit more about that", or "what was it like when that happened", or "how were you feeling at the time"?

Questions like these can be interspersed with short comments that show you are listening – but these must be authentic and in proportion and not interrupt the speaker's flow. Moreover, the facial expression of the facilitator must be in accord with the sentiments expressed – congruent, in short.

It is generally better to have a speaker emerge than for the facilitator to pick one out; i.e. it is better to say "how do we feel about that" and wait for an answer from a group member (who might then be drawn out by some follow up questions), than to say "Kevin, how do you feel about that"? Inviting speakers to emerge at their own pace and readiness leaves group members with the autonomy to choose their moment – they feel invited rather than compelled to speak. This is more in line with the general aim of developmental and support groups – the nurturing and recovery of choice and agency in people who often feel they have had their personal power usurped or undermined by another. It is also more in line with a key philosophy underpinning the practice of facilitation; the idea that a person, given the right supports and environment, can develop the capacity to resolve their own issues (Rogers, 1961).

To ask or not to ask

One of our key jobs as the facilitator is to notice those who are having difficulty speaking and have not yet contributed verbally to the group. In spite of what was said in the last section, it may be the case that these people need a direct invitation if they are to find their voice. When so doing, we need to bear in mind an observation of John McLeod's, who declared that *people don't tend to speak unless they believe what they have to say is of interest* (1997). In other words, the quiet person may have quite a negative view of themselves and their silence may come from a deep rooted

belief that they have nothing of value to contribute. When we consider this possibility, it surely evokes empathy and compassion in us, and encourages us to be as gentle and caring as possible in addressing them directly. It also helps to keep the facilitator from interpreting the silence as a rejection or criticism of themselves.

Remember too that we don't communicate solely with our voice. Just because someone doesn't speak much does not automatically mean they are not engaged and participating. If we look closely, we might see that certain verbally quiet participants are listening intently, nodding at key moments, following attentively what is taking place. The expressions on their face show they are clearly attuned to what is happening and what is being said in the group. Such behaviour is a very different form of quietness to someone who is emitting clear signs of boredom and indifference.

It is also important to bear in mind that someone who struggles to speak in the full group might be quite active in a pair or a group of three: the facilitator needs to weigh and assess and be sure that a person is too quiet for their own good. The group leader also needs to be clear why it is they want the person to speak – to be aware of their own motivation. Yalom is strong in his view that the more a person participates in a group the more they benefit from it (2005). Similarly, McLeod equates voice with power: therefore, a person who is speaking and participating is utilising and/or recovering their personal power; they are asserting themselves. In short, as facilitators, we ultimately want people to come to group and express themselves and their needs, in the belief that this is how they both grow and recover from their challenges and ordeals.

We must also bear in mind that the facilitator is not the only one who is interpreting the silence of a participant. Other group members can be unnerved by the quietness of one of their peers, wondering if they themselves are being judged, so that it can end up spreading silence through the group. Therefore, in order to maintain cohesion and dynamism in the group, the best case scenario is that all members participate through speaking.

Eliciting

An example of seeking to draw out a quiet person could go as follows: The facilitator might put a question to the group, such as "what do you feel you are getting from coming here, from being with your group? It would be nice to hear from everyone".

Two things to note here – the group members are <u>not</u> being asked to reflect on what they are getting from the facilitator, or even from the programme (if it is a programme you are facilitating), but on what they get from being together, as a group. The question is fruitfully drawing attention to the power and benefit of groups. Group members generally are inclined to be supportive of their peers and their group when the opportunity is presented. Secondly, by saying you would like to hear from everybody, you keep the door open to all members: you are saying that everyone is of interest to you and you want to hear all voices: you are offering an authentic invitation. Moreover, to hear from everyone, it is necessary that no one person dominates the session, as hearing from everyone takes time. You are encouraging the development of self and group regulation, which every member has a responsibility for, and benefits from exercising.

Let's say participants begin to respond to the question as to what they gain from being in the group. Let's imagine 'Mary' says "I get so much from coming here". The facilitator might say "for example..."? Mary might respond, "I get such support! People are kind, they don't judge; I feel safe here". You might say "and what's it like to have that safe place in your life Mary"? Mary might respond "it's a life saver. I've not had this for so long: I had nearly forgotten what it was like. On the day of the group I get up and I feel lighter and more energized. I have somewhere to go and be ok. I can talk or just sit and listen. I am accepted by the group either way. And I go home feeling stronger, and better able to deal with my circumstances".

The facilitator can then turn to the group and ask them "what's it like to know you make such a difference to Mary, that she gets so much from you, her group"? It is always worthwhile taking the opportunity to highlight the therapeutic impact of the group to itself and to give due credit to the group

members. They are usually quite generous to the facilitator, and that's satisfying, but the group truly is the key therapeutic actor at play here and that needs to be underlined when the opportunity arises, as the group and its effectiveness is constructed by its members – they have formed this entity; it is them and nothing without them.

I may then turn to 'Joan', who is generally quiet, and ask "Joan, what's it like for you to hear Mary say she gets so much from the group"? Joan may go pale at being asked directly, but it is good timing for the facilitator to smile, show warmth and genuine interest, nod encouragement, and leave a space for her to speak. Joan may simply say "it's good". You might reply "yes, I think so too. And you come here every week, and I see you nod and listen so closely to everyone and be supportive. I know it's maybe not always easy to talk, but I'm wondering in what way is it good"?

Though the question/observation is a little lengthy, I think it useful and constructive to take the opportunity to affirm Joan, to state that her input to the group is important and seen, and to imply that as she attends every week she is obviously gaining from coming. Joan might briefly reply "I like listening to people". Depending on Joan's level of comfort, she can either be let finish here (with an acknowledgement of her contribution), or another encouraging follow up question could be employed, such as "what would you say you get from listening to the others, as I see you do every week"? Or, it could be turned back to the group – "Joan comes every week, we see how she listens so attentively. What's it like to know she gets so much from it".

Now, we ask the latter question if we are confident that at least one member will row in and say how much they feel the group benefits from Joan giving what she does. If we feel someone might carp at Joan, we most likely don't go that route. The only way to know is to be there, to be attuned to the group – which is not a guarantee you'll make the right call!

One could then go back to Joan and ask, "what's it like having your contribution seen"? Joan might go red, and we smile at her. She might say "it's lovely". You might say, with humour, "is it time to leave you in peace

Joan"? Joan will most likely agree, but you can say "it was lovely to hear your voice Joan. Thank you". And because it was lovely to hear Joan's voice, and because you are so happy about it, you will have no trouble conveying genuineness when you say it.

It is also worth remembering that if Joan says 10 words this week and 20 words the following week, then she has doubled her output. Progress must be seen where it occurs.

It is also important to bear in mind that shyness – so often seen as a problem or disadvantage in groups and in life - has many values. It gives us pause, so that we more fully apprehend the complexity of the new. As Whyte declares, "total confidence at the beginning of a new phase of life means we are misinformed" (2015: 210). There are times when shyness is a most apt response!

Reflection Corner: Have there been periods in your life when you felt silenced?

- *If yes, how did it occur? What were its effects?*
- *Did it take you long to find your voice in your support group?*
- *What were the factors that helped and supported you in this process?*
- *What was it like to be an active group member with a voice, how did it impact on your life outside the group?*
- *What skills do you think you possess that would encourage others to speak?*

Talking Heads

I have a number of general guiding principles when dealing with the issue of over-talking in groups:

- No one person can dominate a group if every member of the group participates.
- In the early stages of a group the facilitator is pleased to have talkers emerge.

- Someone who talks a lot on 'day one' may not be so dominant on succeeding days – group dynamics change, new talkers emerge as they find their feet.

- If we see 'over-talkativeness' as a problem, we need to be careful not to see the talker as the problem.

- If the issue of someone over-talking persists, we may have to take action to curtail them – it is important that we endeavour not to hurt them in the process.

- As participants grow into their power they can begin to 'call someone out' for frequently interrupting them, thus bringing the behaviour to the awareness of the interrupter – a well functioning group begins to self-regulate.

- There are different forms of 'over-talking'. Some participants over-talk because they are simply stimulated by the group environment. This is not as grave an issue as those others who are more tedious and sap the life from a group.

- As facilitators we are often aiming to manage rather than fix or cure something. Sometimes it can be good enough that the over-talker reduces their 'contribution' by a certain amount.

What to do....

I believe that the preliminary step is to take a 'prevention is better than cure' tack. Set out by seeking to create an environment that encourages all voices. Contracting offers the facilitator the opportunity to relay to the group the fact that if all group members actively participate, then no single voice can dominate. We can also underline the fact that the purpose of the group can only be achieved through the active participation of all group members. So, we flag mutual responsibility, without shirking our own, from the off.

Before taking action, it might be worthwhile giving consideration as to why a person might over-talk. Was it simply the norm in their home of origin? Could it be that they are not listened to elsewhere and cannot contain themselves when the opportunity to be heard arises? Are they simply over excited at being in a group environment? Or, on the other hand, is it an

unconscious form of passive aggression towards their fellow participants or the facilitator (Grosz, 2014)?

Also, it is important that we ask ourselves why we are making the challenge: what is our objective, what outcomes do we desire? A successful intervention can result in:

- A positive change in the behaviour of the over-talker.
- A signal to the group that you are up to the task of running it.
- A signal that you value the group and are willing to 'make a stand' for it.

At some stage or other we have probably all been a participant in a group where an over-talker was permitted free rein. It can be a deeply frustrating experience, and a failure to confront it can lead to the facilitator losing the respect of the group. If the over-talking of one or more participants becomes an undeniable issue needing direct intervention, there are some practical steps we can take to address and manage it.

- When putting a question to the group, I continually flag that it would be nice to hear from all voices, keeping a gentle pressure on all participants to get involved.
- If one person, 'Eileen', is overly dominant, I might put a question to the group and then say "Now, Eileen is doing a lot of the heavy lifting today. Let's give her a break and hear from some other voices". It has the effect of complimenting Eileen but also respectfully asking her to give way.
- If Eileen comes in by cutting across someone I may then have to raise the level of challenge to her by saying "One second Eileen, I believe Peter wasn't finished".
- If she does it again I may then choose to say "Eileen, you've come in again and Jane hasn't finished. I'd like to hear what they're saying please. I can return to you then".
- If she does it again then I may choose to say "Eileen, you're cutting across people quite a lot. I'm wondering - are you aware of that?" I might then explore with her the how and what of her behaviour.

- I might start to bring in other participants by name – "how about you Peter, any thoughts on that"?
- We can use small groups to give the larger group a break. In the small groups, the over-talker could be given the job of scribe and 'feedbacker', though it needs to be stressed to them that their role is to elicit the views of others.
- Be clear when addressing such an issue. Two decades ago I had a group with a serious over-talker. After much agonising, I finally addressed the group as follows *"Groups are arenas where we can experiment with different behaviour and encounter new aspects of ourselves. If for example, you talk a lot, perhaps you could talk less. If you talk very little, perhaps you could experiment by talking more".* What followed was unexpected! The quiet participants thought I was 'chastising' them for over-talking and as a result clammed up completely. The over-talker thought I was suggesting that she didn't speak enough, so she obligingly trebled her usual output! My own indirectness and timidity around group leadership caused me to be misunderstood completely.

It is important to bear in mind that there are varying levels of energy and effusiveness in people: humans are strikingly different; we are not trying to change the fundamental fact of their intrinsic diversity. A dynamic, extroverted person is sure to talk considerably more than a retiring one. We are not seeking to straightjacket someone, but simply to make room for everyone. It is ultimately to the benefit of the over-talker if they can curtail themselves so that they make space for others. It is in the quieter person's interests to claim their space – but not that they feel forced to talk as much as everyone else.

Some basics around questions

At its simplest, there are two types of questions: open and closed. Open questions are used to draw a person out, to get them to further elaborate. Closed questions elicit a yes or no answer: they can be counterproductive when seeking to encourage someone to talk. As with most things, the reality can be more nuanced than the broad descriptions portray. For a start, the

tone in which we ask a question is at least as important as how it is constructed. The group environment in which a question is asked also has an impact on its effectiveness, as does the demeanour of the facilitator. Moreover, one can look at a person in such a way - give a simple permissive nod, a lift of the eyebrows, or an open hand gesture - that they know they are invited to elaborate, and they may continue speaking, without a technical question having been put to them.

Nonetheless, it is certainly the case that open questions can be very effective in drawing someone out and helping them find their voice. When the questioner is trusted and his/her tone is genuinely warm and inviting, the speaker often feels compelled to give voice to their issues and concerns.

It is held to be the case that the best open questions begin with 'how' and 'what'. 'Why' has its uses, but it can also tend to lead a person to intellectualise, and move away from discussing their inner, emotional state.

"What's it like to be out of work at the moment" gets the person to focus on their personal experience, including their feelings about their circumstances. The same can be said of "how is it affecting you being out of work right now". However, were you to ask "why is it that you are out of work", the respondent might start talking about macroeconomic trends in the wider economy – issues over which they likely have negligible influence. Focusing on issues outside the group is generally seen as a way to avoid working on personal issues and leads to very little action or change.

So, let's look at a few open questions that can be helpful in opening up the group (e.g. Q.1); processing (e.g. Q's 2-7); or drawing people out (Q's 8-10).

1. *"How are we doing? How are we today? It would be nice to hear from everyone".* This can be a useful way of opening a group, by doing a check in to see how people are getting on, to see who needs some time, and just to establish the norm of the facilitator doing the listening and the participants doing the talking. Note the closing statement "It would be nice to hear from everyone". This is issued as an invitation, rather than an ultimatum, flagging that all voices are welcome.

2. *"What do you think about that"?* Generally, we come to support groups to work out issues around our feelings, but in the early stages this might be too exposing. Getting participants to talk is as much a goal as what they talk about.

3. *"How does that strike you", "How does that sit with you"*? These questions allow the person to address an issue with reference to their emotions or their thoughts, it allows them to decide which direction to take it. I tend to use these questions a fair amount in groups that are predominantly male.

4. *"What's that like for you"? "What was it like for you"*? After someone has described an experience, often a hard one, they can be helped process the experience by talking it through. We can also help a person own how an experience feels by saying "Sitting here, that sounds pretty harrowing. What was it like for you? How has it impacted"?

5. *"How do you feel about that", "How does that make you feel"*? Questions that really help us get deeper into a matter. When a group has been running for a while, participants get accustomed to such probing and eventually develop some comfort in speaking of deeper personal matters.

6. *"What is that bringing up for you"?* This might be asked when it is clear that an issue or a statement has struck a chord with someone – it validates their reaction and provides an opportunity for them to verbally express it and perhaps, to process and understand it.

7. If someone says they are sad, or anxious, or worried, you can ask "*what is it that makes you so sad*"? Or "*what is it that's causing you such worry*"? It can also be solution focused in approach to follow up with *"what usually helps you cope with worry/what do you usually do to feel better"*?

8. *"Say more"?* This is a great question, only two words long! "Say more" keeps the focus on the speaker rather than the facilitator. Someone may have shared that they feel sad/happy about something and you want to draw them out.... 'Say more....'

9. *"Because"*? A one word question! Let's imagine someone says "I'm very worried about my future". You might say "Because...."? This keeps your intervention as short as it is possible to be and encourages the speaker to continue speaking.

10. *"I'm wondering how that strikes the group"? "I'm wondering how the group feels about that"?* In the aftermath of a participant sharing something significant, it can be beneficial to get a group response to what has been said so that the group dynamic is kept to the forefront, and the group is explicitly active in the recovery/support process.

Closed questions.

Closed questions, whilst generally unhelpful in getting a participant to open up, nonetheless have significant uses. For example, they are very effective for gaining clarity, or for bringing something into the light. William Glasser begins a Conflict Resolution session with the simple but highly effective question "Do you want to resolve this"? He states explicitly to the parties that he needs an unambiguous answer, without pre-conditions attached (as in 'I'm in favour of resolving this provided she agrees to ...). If they don't want to resolve it, then he can't do much for them, as the resolution of a conflict can only occur if the disputants are willing: they still attain clarity, however, which at least leaves them knowing where things stand.

Closed questions are good for seeking buy in from a group. One might open a session by saying "I was thinking it might be useful to check in and see how you are getting on with the goals we have been setting recently. Does that sound useful"? By seeking the group's consent, you are sharing the decision making process. Groups are most effective when they meet the needs of their members so it is a good idea to keep checking with people that what you propose focusing on is something the group feels it worthwhile to spend time on. The above question elicits an answer that establishes buy in or not. (Of course, it is also a good idea to ask a group if there are issues that they feel would be worth focusing on, as in "what do you feel would be a good use of our time").

Get off that fence!

Sometimes, a closed question may be necessary to definitively establish if someone wants to be a group member or not. The author has occasional encounters with group members who, when asked "what brings you here" have replied "I was sent".

From a selfish standpoint, working with someone who feels sent to the group is not the most satisfying or fruitful. If they maintain this stance, they are unlikely to make productive, group-positive participants, and more likely to be a drag on the progress and efficacy of the group. I would tend to respond to such a statement as follows "Well, I honestly don't like being sent anywhere myself. So, how about we see how it goes for you today, and if you come back the next day I'll assume you're choosing to come".

Most participants respond quite favourably to this invitation, as it upholds their right to choose for themselves, and empathises with their position. But in making this approach I am also mindful of the rest of the group and, to be frank, of myself. Group facilitation is a highly satisfying profession, but there is nothing as tedious as working with a determinedly reluctant participant, especially if they seek to subvert the group. So, we need this resolved one way or the other for the sake of all parties. Ideally they will want to stay, but that is their choice, and they may choose differently. If they do, it may be for the best that they follow the logical conclusions of their choice and move on.

If they return to the second session I thank them for coming back and tell them I am glad they chose to return. At this point they might go one of two ways: say they enjoyed the last day and thought they'd give it a go, or, dispute the fact they have chosen to return and state they still felt compelled to do so. At which stage I will generally tell them that ultimately I can only work with people who want to be in the group. I personally am not compelling them to attend and if someone else is, then the issue lies between them. This point is not meant harshly: we are duty bound to remember that our primary responsibility as facilitators is to the wellbeing

and viability of the group (Yalom, 2005). Permitting one participant to undermine the group experience for everyone else is not appropriate.

So, to get to the point where things can be named and clarified, it can be useful to ask a reluctant participant;

"Do you think you might benefit from being here"?

"Are you interested in what we are doing here"?

"I'm wondering if you want to be here"?

All of this must be conducted with openness, warmth and invitation. The best outcome would be for the participant to elect to remain in the group and become an active group member. It can be immensely useful and hope inducing for a group to witness such change happen, or for them to see that conflictual situations can be dealt with without leading to an explosion: Or if there is an explosion, that it can be managed.

It is important not to jump in too soon with such an intervention: matters often resolve themselves over time. It is really quite rare for someone to persist, long term, in subversion of a group. Most either leave or modify their behaviour. Howsoever that may be, the facilitator's role is to be there for the whole group, not just one person, and their job is to do what they can to make the group work for all its members. A group becomes a group when people choose to belong to it. It is the facilitator's job to seek to positively influence that choice, and also, if necessary, clarify if that choice will or will not be made. For that, closed questions, as well as a clear sense of purpose, and some little amount of courage and leadership, help get the job done.

Chapter Five: Conflict in groups I

There is no doubting the paradoxical nature of humans. An extraterrestrial anthropologist could be forgiven for assuming we truly enjoyed endless dispute. In truth, we can be an insecure, self doubting and neurotic species, prone to dissatisfaction and squabbling (Harari, 2014). Yet what do we tend to do once conflict rears its head? Well, most people, and most organisations, run for cover, and ignore it in the hope it will go away. Unfortunately for the purveyors of this approach, conflict is an inevitable part of life; it will always be with us, so averting our gaze serves little purpose (Bowlby, 2005). In fact, conflict will *always be in us*, as most conflict is internal (Glasser, 1998).

As many of us dread conflict, we are apt, as indicated, to turn away from it. Or, no sooner does it start, than we find ourselves stuck in a replay of some endless argument, often with the person we value most, with neither party hearing the other. Martin Seligman declares that working with couples in conflict is the most dispiriting job of all, his goal simply being to teach them to have a different argument!

As facilitators, we will inevitably meet a level of conflict in groups. Some of it may be directed at us, some of it may occur between group members. If we can help resolve or even contain these disputes, participants can get to see that conflict does not have to be catastrophic or eternal. If we can handle this aspect of life better, it follows that our lives will improve.

To deal better with conflict, we need to resource/equip ourselves: one way of doing this is to develop a broader understanding of the dynamics of conflict, a more objective overview, which we aim to look at here. If we can gain such perspective, we will get snagged less often (Yalom, 2005). Our relationship with ourselves is of considerable import when we are in a conflict scenario: if we can develop a more accepting relationship with self we can manage conflict better. Also, the acquisition of certain skills and techniques arms us with the tools to respond more ably to discord.

In relation to perspective, it is worth bearing in mind that, aside from our darker impulses - like greed, envy and a desire for dominance - we are also social, relational and altruistic beings: we need relationships in order to maintain wellbeing. Troubled and disturbed as we might sometimes be, we are also anxious to get along with others, to be of help and service, to make good connections and live a peaceful life. This deep seated need to be social and amenable is to the advantage of the group facilitator; it is the motive force that drives the human desire to resolve and contain conflict. Even the most awkward group participant has a need to connect, and will often do so if the facilitator and other group members can ease the path for them. It is important to state that most participants come to support groups to meet others in a similar situation, to receive understanding and acceptance, to find peace, and discover new resources in themselves.

In contrast, there are few enough people who come to such groups with the primary aim of stirring things up and starting a row. And for any budding group facilitator, it is important to stress that while conflict can, naturally, occur in groups, most of the time most groups are peaceful, caring, and inspiring places, with group members actively supporting each other. We need to be alert that in preparing ourselves to better manage conflict, we don't unnecessarily generate it.

Effects of conflict

When I run certified training courses in Conflict Management, I often ask the group – what are the effects of conflict (a) on the person and (b) on the workplace? Given our paradoxical tendency to both spark and flee discord, it is worth highlighting the price of conflict to the individual and the organisation so that we may be more motivated to resolve it, or work to reduce its occurrence.

Participants believe the impact of conflict is considerable. In relation to the person, they believe it affects physical and mental health. It disturbs peace of mind; it affects sleep, causes worry and anxiety, and represses appetite. It leaves the person exhausted and prone to a succession of oversights, mishaps and illnesses. Moreover, it can cause isolation and the feeling of

being misunderstood or overlooked. A number of respondents revealed that it had led them to the point of depression: they felt they had lost purpose and meaning, and were mired in listlessness.

Others spoke of how it had 'infected' their home because it made them so difficult to be around: they were tired and temperamental. They could see the impact the issue was having on their loved ones so they felt considerable guilt and responsibility, which exacerbated their own lack of wellbeing. Some had the experience of relatively minor unresolved disputes escalating into serious and persistent conflict. These graver cases resulted in them feeling that they had lost their moorings, and that a single irrational issue had come to entirely oppress their lives.

Another aspect of conflict that received considerable mention was the level of embarrassment or disappointment that people felt with themselves in the aftermath of a strident argument. Some described how they felt they had over-reacted to what they could retrospectively see had simply been a query or observation, but which struck them as genuinely threatening at the time. They had, they felt, lost the power of reason, and seemed to be in the grip of a reaction they had no control over. Their response perfectly highlights one of the essential aspects of conflict – that when our organism feels under threat, our more ancient brain takes over and bypasses reason, so that we react reflexively.

Impact on the workplace

Reflecting on the impact of conflict on the workplace evoked many similar responses. People recalled that gut churning Sunday evening feeling knowing that one is entering into a toxic atmosphere the following day, not knowing if there would be strife or not. Even the most satisfying job lost its lustre when it was undertaken in an ambience of dread. It proved impossible to simply switch off and leave such issues at one's desk at day's end: they inevitably entered the home, affecting the wellbeing of the entire family.

Productivity suffered, paranoia and distrust became the norm and nobody was satisfied or contented. Some respondents spoke of working in organisations that seemed to be addicted to conflict – the minute they had

entered as a new employee they felt they were expected to take sides. In some cases conflict had lasted years, despite lengthy and costly attempts at resolution.

Everyone agreed that once conflict had taken hold of a workplace, it relegated issues such as output and fulfilling the organisation's mission to the margins. The conflict itself became the overriding focus for those involved. Those who had experienced such environments spoke of going to work feeling tired and distracted, their ability to focus diminished. Paranoia lurked in every nook and the levels of sociability nosedived. Absenteeism increased, identification with and pride in the company plunged. A rise in staff turnover inevitably followed. Practically everyone in all the groups I've run had experienced at least one such environment: toxic workplaces are not uncommon.

It is also worth mentioning that some, albeit a very few, did point out that workplace discord was not wholly or inevitably negative. It gave an opportunity to bring issues to light and/or to resolve an outstanding sore point or grievance. But all agreed that such issues shouldn't have had to progress to the point they did and that an open organisation, where issues could be raised and heard, could resolve potential disputes long before they got to a stage that risked lasting damage.

Causes of conflict?

As stated, conflict is an inherent and unavoidable part of life, "the normal state of affairs in all of us" (Bowlby, 2007:12). There are myriad causes, in truth, too many to work through, but, in the spirit of prevention being better than cure, it is worth mentioning some key catalysts, so that they may be anticipated, circumnavigated and/or averted. We divide the causes into two broad groupings: (a) internal/psychological and (b) social/economic.

Internal/Psychological

- ***Envy*** – Klein insightfully describes envy as someone wanting something that another person has, and, feeling they can't have it, destroying it rather than letting the other party keep it (1988). On

occasion the achievements of certain participants can spark envy and hostility in their fellow participants.

- **Under appreciation:** not being credited or appreciated for efforts and achievements can cause hurt, resentment and lingering anger.
- **Excess self sacrifice/self abnegation**: there are those in society who give an awful lot to others, but are less good at giving to themselves. They can then feel underappreciated, undervalued and unseen. And dissatisfied.
- **Not being listened to**: being denied a voice, being silenced.
- **Our past baggage:** we tend to meet that which we are expecting (Ringer, 2002). If, because of our past, we expect criticism and rejection, it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.
- **Projection and Transference:** these are psychological dynamics, first described by Freud. In the case of Projection, we ascribe to someone else (often negative) emotions we are feeling ourselves, largely because they are too distressing to own. With Transference, emotions are evoked in one scenario that more properly belong to another time or place.
- **"Being adamant is the main cause of human disturbance" (Ellis, 1997).** When we are certain we are right it is very hard to remain open to a counter argument. Certitude can lead us to being rigid and closed and deaf to alternative viewpoints.
- **Anger.** As Maureen Gaffney reminds us, when we are angry, we are certain (2011). We become convinced of the rightness of our position, and say things we often regret when we have managed to calm down.
- **Catastrophisation.** A word employed by Albert Ellis to capture the very human habit of blowing things wholly out of proportion (1997). Ellis considered this behaviour irrational, because it is bad for our peace of mind, our health and our relationships. A rational response to a setback is to be disappointed: an irrational one would be to be devastated. Catastrophisation needs to be guarded against in support groups and the overblown beliefs that fuel it need to be rationally challenged and brought back into perspective.

Social/Economic

- ***The pursuit of power/poor leadership***. Power and the quest for domination are deeply ingrained human traits. J. J. Lee, one of Ireland's premier historians, observed that in Ireland people tended to seek positions of power to be seen to be in charge rather than achieve or fulfil a vision; they wanted power for its own sake (1989). As a result, organisations and other groupings have too often been driven not by the needs of their clients or society, but by the egocentric demands of their 'leaders'.

- Disputes over ***scarce resources*** – be they of time, attention or material things; the sense that resources are scarce and that we may not get our share can spark confrontation.

- ***Competition*** can be seen as a healthy part of human nature but it has its darker side and can spill over into something more tribal and virulent.

- ***Greed***: some humans have an urge to possess more than they could ever possibly need, causing unrest, disputes, violence and poverty (Klein, 1988). For example, many of Ireland's richest figures are tax exiles. Despite paying no tax in Ireland, they keep all the rights of citizens and have access to the highest circles of power.

- ***Difference and diversity***, whilst deeply enriching societies, can also divide them. Nitsun tells us that "in ordinary life, stranger anxiety is common" (1998: 48), so that when different groupings are brought together it can initially result in fear, discrimination, and prejudice.

- ***Simple misunderstanding***: language is a blunt tool; words do not have fixed meanings; tone and posture can affect how something is communicated and perceived. Perception is highly individualistic; we hear and understand through our own unique filters. Conveying exactly what we mean is tricky: interpreting exactly what has been said equally so: as a result, misunderstandings are inevitable and one of the main causes of conflict.

- ***Unfairness/Inequality***. The perception that one is treated unfairly or unjustly is perhaps the most guaranteed spur to protest and conflict.

- *Change:* when we run groups, we are invariably promoting change. Simply put, wherever there is change, there invariably is resistance.
- *Zero sum.* In relation to conflict scenarios where the enmity is deep and long-term, one protagonist automatically believes they have lost if the other party is pleased with a development or proposal, even if they do not know what has been proposed. Northern Ireland became a classic zero-sum society.
- *Exceptionalism* - Those groups who see themselves as being above others tend to engage in exceptionalism – to tell themselves 'we're better than that lot'. It underpins the myths of many groups and nations, and is usually based on self-aggrandising delusions.

To recap: the purpose of looking at the causes of conflict is to ask ourselves - are there ways we can minimise or lessen the likelihood of discord in the groups we run? Or, if it does occur, perhaps we can resolve it more effectively by having some understanding of why it has emerged...

Reflection Corner: Are there other causes of conflict you can add to the list?

What things are most likely to lead you into conflict – what 'pushes your buttons'?

How do you feel during an outburst of anger? How do you feel afterwards, looking back on it?

How do you feel when confronted by aggression (a) in the moment (b) some time afterwards?

Stages of group development and conflict.

According to Tuckman's theory of the stages of group development (1965), conflict is a natural part of the process of group formation. Simply possessing this knowledge helps us to see it as habitual and predictable. Thus forewarned, we are less likely to be thrown when it occurs.

As noted earlier, the initial stages of a group are when people are most on edge. Participants feel uncertain and may be hoping to keep a low profile. Nonetheless, the job of the facilitator is to draw them out and get them to

speak, to "evoke... rather than force a response" (Ringer, 2002: 62). There is an innate conflict at play right there. Again, knowing this, we go as gently as possible, but it can be somewhat fraught for the participant regardless of how mindful we are. As a result, they may, out of nerves and anxiety, snap at the group leader. They may ask a question or make a statement more abruptly than they intended; they may challenge the facilitator directly.

Sometimes people can express themselves adamantly, which, as we've seen, can cause disputes. This, in my experience, is one of the more frequent forms of challenge I encounter – someone questioning something they are adamant that I've said, which either I haven't, or what I did say has been misinterpreted. When someone is entrenched it is hard to engage with them to establish clarity. It isn't a great idea to get locked into an 'Oh yes you did/Oh no I didn't' debate with one group member. In such cases I have often said "I feel that what I'm saying is not being heard: How do we move to resolve or clarify this?" and throw it out to the group. I have found that the challenger is far more likely to hear and register an explanation from another party, even if that person is simply repeating what I originally said.

In these early stages, I find it can be a useful technique <u>to address the content rather than the tone of a question</u>. When we are nervous, tense or frightened, we find it harder to control our tone and what we say can emerge sharper than intended. Understanding this means the facilitator can choose their response. How do we wish to respond? Surely in a way that soothes the speaker and the other group members, that at the same time conveys our capacity to run the group and encourages people to stick with the process, despite their nerves.

As a group settles into its rhythm, becomes cohesive and begins to perform, conflict can naturally still occur, but it generally tends to be less fraught, less personalised and more substantive, perhaps around a point of content or approach. The facilitator tends to be seen more as a whole person, rather than a representative or archetypal figure, thus reducing the reasons for becoming a target (assuming that he/she is competent).

Case Study: a challenge or an attack?

A number of years ago I was delivering a one day seminar for final year psychotherapy students. There were over 80 students in the room. It was the first meeting of a series of sessions I was scheduled to deliver throughout the year. We had not long started when a student raised his hand. I turned to him and gestured for him to speak. In a calm and impassive manner, he dissected my person, my performance, and lambasted me for my incompetence. He was so dispassionate and convincing that I nearly nodded my agreement. I was blindsided. I struggled to comprehend, let alone respond. In the middle of his dissection I remember looking at the clock, seeing it was ten to ten in the morning (we had started at a quarter to ten) and thinking with dread that I had another six hours to go. I remember holding on to the table for support as my legs turned to rubber.

Come four o'clock I wrapped up, got in my car and headed for home. It was a difficult journey: I savaged myself the whole way for my incompetence and failure to handle the incident.

Later that night, unable to find peace and in a state of exhausted agitation, I went to my study to see if there was any comfort to be found on the bookshelves. I came across a line in a book by Gerald Corey, which underlined the *importance of knowing the difference between a challenge and an attack* (2000). Reading this line gave me the first semblance of ease, and was the first tentative step in my recovery from the episode. How did it help me? It allowed me to see that I had not crumbled in the face of a challenge, but an attack, and a very public one. Once I allowed empathy for myself to enter the frame I then remembered how members of the group had spoken strongly against my treatment and how I had received an ardent round of applause at the end of the day, which I interpreted as both appreciation for my efforts, and even more so, as a rebuke to my attacker. My initial catastrophisation of the episode had led me to 'forget' the support of the wider group.

I attended supervision later that week and the work we did there further aided my recovery. After exploring in depth my own feelings on the

experience, we ended up focusing on what we thought might be the inner state of my assailant. What was going on for him, I asked myself, that he so precipitously and disproportionately came at me as he had in front of a large group of his peers. I left supervision feeling some empathy for him. I returned to the group two weeks later, a little apprehensive, but largely restored and ready, and it went as well as I had hoped.

I had taken a knock and it took me some time to recover. Had it occurred ten years earlier, my recovery would have taken longer. Experience, engaging in our personal development, and overcoming adversity makes us more resilient (Seligman, 2011). It is also the case that we usually need input and support from others to overcome setbacks. In my experience, attacks of this nature are very much the exception, and in over thirty years of working with groups I have experienced scarcely a handful of 'serious' incidents.

I also think it important to state that I think I would probably respond better and recover faster now – maybe not be as thrown, probably be more assertive, because I have continued to work on my own development and have gained more experience, including a handful of other challenging incidents. But I would not be impervious: I would be affected. I think this is natural and not something to hide or be ashamed of.

As a little postscript to the above: for a considerable time afterwards quite a number of students who had been present on the day contacted me in person or by email to tell me that they had learnt so much from how I had handled what they unambiguously saw as a very unfair attack. And every time they told me this I was bursting to ask them "please tell me, what did I do?", because I had virtually no memory of my actions during the attack or of the rest of that day!

It is instructive: we so often do much better than we think; our autopilot is usually far more effective than we realise. It also tells me that the yawning gap in my memory around the event speaks to how upsetting and even traumatic the incident was for me. But we can recover from these episodes, provided we get support and are able to own our feelings around it.

Chapter Six: Conflict in Groups II

Managing conflict: awareness and acceptance

Awareness, according to Fritz Perls, is curative (cited in O'Leary, 1992). When we become aware, we can make informed decisions and act on these in a way that best accords with our needs. So, a key starting point to managing conflict is to know how it affects us, and accepting that reality, rather than eviscerating ourselves for how we essentially are. Merciless self criticism stymies change and growth: self acceptance promotes it (Rogers, 1961).

Our entire personal history is with us when conflict rears its head. Someone who experienced traumatic levels of conflict in early life might be accustomed to simply going blank in the face of it - what is called dissociation (Herman, 2001). As a result, they may be deeply apprehensive at the possibility of conflict and may well do all they can to avoid it. In a group facilitator, this would not be ideal and could stymie the development of the group.

There are some, a rare few, who are quite comfortable in conflict: instead of feeling panic, or fear, or finding their reactions have turned leaden, they become sharper and quicker. They may handle conflict very well, and we may all covet their equanimity, but they might have difficulty empathising with those that crumble in the face of it: also not ideal in a facilitator!

It also seems to be the case that most of us are disappointed with how we respond to conflict. In its aftermath we think of all the things we wish we had said or done! However, in conflict we must realise and accept that parts of the mind, largely outside conscious control, become activated, and essentially run the show. Reflexes kick in: according to Cannon (1929) we have three such reflexive responses; fight, flight or freeze. In reality we may feel all of these impulses rush and jangle through our system at once in the midst of a fraught moment.

For this author, 'freeze' is the overriding – but not sole - reaction when confronted with aggression. I wish it were otherwise, and for years, in the

aftermath of conflict, I would slate myself for not having slickly answered a perceived insult or harsh comment. In reality, my mind simply slowed; I became dull witted and often went blank. I struggled to speak, or even to hear what was being said. I also felt surges of 'fight' and, when feeling threatened or disdained, I would speak more forcefully than I had intended – as if I had no control over my voice. It could then appear to others that I had overreacted and been aggressive, leaving me feeling embarrassed, and adding fuel to my self-recrimination. While the fight, flight or freeze model is useful as a tool of self awareness, it is not as simple as our experiencing a singular response: we can feel all at once, or each of them in quick succession, even if one does tend to predominate.

I have learnt that I am not alone in my underwhelming response to conflict: in fact, from speaking to others, I find I am quite typical. Most people reveal that they feel inadequacy and a sense of shame around how they react to conflict. Somehow it seems to be not ok to say that one is badly thrown, reduced to incompetence or frightened by conflict. Having to pretend we are other than we are is no help.

What use is self-knowledge in this regard? Well, for one thing, knowing we are similar to other people is comforting and of therapeutic value: Yalom calls it universality (2005). Also, if we want to get better at managing something, we need to know where we are starting from. Truly knowing ourselves requires self-acceptance. To quote Albert Ellis, *because we are human we are flawed: we may as well accept ourselves* (1997). Arriving at authentic self-acceptance is one of our great challenges, probably an ongoing, life-long quest for most of us.

So, if we are honest we can say that the vast bulk of us struggle with and fear conflict. In its aftermath we feel we have let ourselves down and we tend to consider ourselves uniquely hopeless at dealing with it. It should give us some alleviation to realise that most of us feel this way. The fact is, we cannot choose how we feel. Simply by accepting ourselves we can actually begin to manage conflict considerably better, as we feel less pressure to be something other, and are not diverting energy to maintaining a facade. Moreover, self acceptance leads to self valuing: I am more

assertive now in conflict because I believe it is not acceptable for someone to abuse me. I am worthy of respect: so is everyone else, beliefs that result in my being less defensive and aggressive.

We learn over time and through experience that there are a number of things we can do that make a difference at how we operate in a conflict situation, which we examine below:

Things we can consider doing to manage conflict better.

(a) *Broaden our perspective to better understand others - develop empathy*

Everyone yearns to be seen, accepted and understood; even valued and held in high regard. Invariably in support groups we encounter people who are faced with some of the following ordeals and challenges: chaos, uncertainty, lack of appreciation, intimidation, psychological and physical abuse. Living with such issues demoralises even the strongest. Living with fear and dread is physically and psychologically corrosive. Moreover, for participants in support groups, their experience often feels interminable, one of the most debilitating and undermining experiences of all (Harman, 2001). When you can't see the end of a bleak situation, then it becomes nigh impossible to sustain hope. Without hope, we are, to state the obvious, hopeless, which is a pernicious state to be stuck in.

Rogers declared that when we are cherished, we blossom (1961). If that statement holds true, then so does the converse – when we are despised, or held in contempt, we shrivel and wither. To flourish, humans need to be prized and encouraged. Ultimately this is what we try to generate in a support group, an environment in which the group cherishes each member. But for those who come in the door and have little experience of being valued, they may struggle to see it for what it is, and the process by which they come to do so will likely take some time.

We do not know, when we first encounter participants of a support group, what they are specifically dealing with in their domestic life, but we can imagine that they are dealing with considerable difficulty. People under such strain can hit out at the wrong target, because they need to hit out, and in fact may sense it is safe to do so in the group. (So, someone acting out in a group can actually be a positive sign). They are likely not doing it to 'get at' the group facilitator, but because they cannot contain all that threatens to overwhelm them.

When we see their behaviour in this light it can evoke an empathic and understanding response in us, so that we do not rush straight to the defensive, but seek to accept, understand and stay 'open'.

(b) ***Understand the limits of our responsibility***. We can only be responsible for what we can control (Glasser, 1998). What do we actually have control over? At best, no more than ourselves. We have no control over what others say or do - though as the group leader we can influence that. By accepting the limits of our own power and responsibility we take on less of what is not ours to take on: that represents good boundaries.

(c) ***Understand and counter the inner critic:*** In terms of the elements in our makeup that might make us more or less prone to getting into conflict, or undermine us during it, there is that part of the psyche that Freud called the Superego. Essentially, this is the internal critic. I ask most training groups that I run the following question: *where in your life will you receive the most criticism*? 99.9% of respondents say - from themselves. The singular .1% said her mother!

This is indispensable information; the overwhelming majority of us receive the fiercest, most constant and unfair criticism from ourselves. If you take time to stop and listen to your Superego you might notice the following:

- It is deeply unfair.
- It is highly repetitive, constantly reiterating the same criticisms and insults.

- It uses unimaginative, stunted language, e.g., you're stupid, a fool, a failure etc.
- Its favourite words are should and shouldn't!
- It ambushes us at our most vulnerable: particularly at the dread hour of 4.00 a.m.
- It never has anything constructive or affirming to say.
- It is quite boring! Don't look to it for inspiration or insight.

It is easy to ask, in some wonderment, why we pay attention to such a limited, mean-spirited entity, and to then go on and declare that we should simply ignore it.

What, we may wonder, is the evolutionary point of being saddled with such an ogre? Well, would we bother getting up in the morning unless this nag began to scold us for our laziness? Would we lounge around the house all day in our pyjamas if we weren't harangued by a brittle internal voice insisting that we look at the state of ourselves?

The Superego operates great influence over us and is highly effective at what it does. In fact, the Superego can not only keep us 'motivated' (albeit by badgering), it can give us pause when we are considering doing something foolhardy. It also conveys the voice of tradition that helps sustain community and society, which it achieves by asking or remarking 'what will the neighbours think'? Without it we would essentially be sociopathic (in which case, we wouldn't be too worried about what the neighbours thought).

So, what we need to do, rather than rid ourselves of our Superego, is to be less at its mercy. To do this, we need to be able to rationally rebut its comments. We need to bolster our sense of ourselves so that we are less vulnerable to it. We need to actively cultivate gratitude, in order to 'to build ego strength' (Klein, 1988). We need to do this because if we feel under pressure, or face criticism or aggression in a group, the Superego is the part of us that will enter the fray, tell us we are making a mess of things, and who did we think we were to run

groups anyway! It is important to state that the Superego is resilient. It can be lessened, but not eliminated. We must learn to live with it.

(d) ***Understand our own personal perspective: the Internal Working Model (IWM):*** Everybody perceives the world around them in their own unique way. No one is fully objective: we are all, to various extents, conditioned beings (Nagel, 1986). As we go through life, we gain experiences. We interact with family, community and society. We are taught by those around us how to interpret our surrounds – we are embedded in traditions and culture. All of this merges to form what is referred to as our Internal Working Model (Ringer, 2002). This, basically, is the lens through which we perceive our environment. If we have had a happy and secure upbringing, we expect to be treated kindly by others; we tend to be secure and optimistic. If, on the other hand, we have experienced aggression, violence and uncertainty in our earlier lives, we can come to expect to be criticised, found fault with and perceive the world as a threatening place.

We bring our IWM, which is largely unconscious, with us, wherever we go, including into groups. Therefore, it is important that we realise and accept that there is no view from nowhere; we are all looking at things from our own unique perspective. We all tend to make unconscious snap judgements: we look at a certain participant and immediately start making assumptions. Building our awareness around our perceptions is crucial if we wish to bring an open mind to our groups.

(e) ***Exercise choice over that which we can control***. Glasser breaks behaviour into four components: feeling, physiology, thinking and doing (1998). He states that we have little direct control over the first two, how we feel and how our body reacts, as these parts are not under the sway of the conscious mind, or, in Freudian parlance, the ego. However, we do have control over what we think and what we do. This echoes Frankl's observation that between stimulus and response is a space, and in that space we can choose our response (2004). Frankl considers this choice the core of our freedom, that regardless of our circumstances we do not lose this essential

autonomy. It is a reminder that even though we are beset by a reflexive reaction to a threat, we are not bound to that place for more than a short period, and that we can bring our thinking brain into play and work our way through a difficulty by choosing our actions.

(f) ***Do your best to stay in 'Adult' in any conflict***. Eric Berne's Transactional Analysis states that we have three ego states, which we continually flit in and out of: these are the parent, adult and child (1964). The optimal state for a facilitator to work out of is 'Adult', which is the rational, decision making element of the psyche. Being a 'Parent' to a group of adults is not a good idea as it potentially infantilises them and stymies their progression. If we work from the 'Child' part of our psyche, then who is running the group? A number of times, when at the receiving end of someone's ire in a group, this author repeated to himself as a mantra 'stay in the chair, stay in the chair', by which I meant, 'stay in your role: remain the group leader: do not forsake your adult state'. It has the effect of keeping me physically and psychologically in my role, and in an 'Adult' frame of mind – logical, problem solving, decision making, assertive, reasonable and responsible.

(g) ***Remember that you are the group leader.*** Many of us are uncomfortable with the notion of 'being in charge' but when fearful and apprehensive people enter a group they want to know that someone is at the helm to anchor the process (Benson, 2001). This gives them security, which reduces tension and lessens the possibility of conflict. We must step up to the mark and occupy the position, particularly in the early stages of the group.

(h) ***You are, and are not, of the group.*** The role of group leader sets one apart from the group, and that is where the leader must stay if they are to be effective. Though connected to the group, you are not a group member. Moreover, there is a difference between being friendly (good) and 'being a friend of' (not so good). In a dispute, you do not enter the fray, or you become a participant, and will be seen to have lost your authority and objectivity.

(i) ***Simply calling something a problem makes it so (De Shazar, 1988).*** Once we see something as a problem, then it is a problem, and we marshal our reactions to meet (or flee from) the problem. We arm ourselves, we gear up. A 'problem' has unavoidable negative connotations. We think 'oh no, a problem' and may go straight into crisis management mode (or panic). Maybe it's not a problem we are faced with but a challenge or a conundrum.... how we label a thing impacts on the response it evokes in us.

(j) ***Remember, most conflict directed at us is not actually about us.*** People are triggered by their fears, by bad memories, by the expectations they bring. They are also simply very likely to be dealing with a lot in their lives outside the group and are worn out and more vulnerable to an outburst. At unconscious levels, the facilitator can represent a parent figure, a teacher, or other authorities from the participant's past life, which can trigger a transference reaction. As uncomfortable as being the brunt of anger is, the real source of the anger will frequently be outside the group, or inside the participant.

(k) ***Give permission:*** Often, in the aftermath of expressing anger or other emotions, a participant can feel embarrassed. Reassuring the person that there is no need to feel that way, that they were simply upset, and that it happens to all of us, sends a signal to everyone that anger is simply an emotion, that we all go there and we can all come out of it intact.

(l) ***Clear, accurate, concise communication.*** As a rule of thumb, if you are engaging with someone who is angry and aggressive, it is important to try to be clear, accurate and concise in what you say. It is very easy when feeling under threat to start 'babbling'. If someone is intent on picking you up on things, you may find that your panicked words can be thrown back at you. Leave pauses for what you say to sink in; give the other party time to respond.

(m) ***Assertiveness.*** Give respect at all times: also give recognition to the fact that you are in the group to be of service, to make a difference, to be of support to the group members. You are giving of yourself: that also deserves to be respected, as do you. If you are not assertive, it

sends the message that abusive and/or threatening behaviour is acceptable. In a developmental or support group, it is vital participants see that abusive behaviour is unacceptable, in every setting.

(n) *Model the behaviour you promote:* The group leader is a model to the group members (Corey, 2000). To be authentic, we need to model that which we promote, such as respect, or openness to divergent views, and the expression of opposition or dissent etc.

(o) *Make use of your experience*. Reflective practitioners learn and grow from their experience. As a result, they can extend the range and level of their endeavours, which in turn widens the extent of situations that they encounter, and deepens their competence to deal with it.

(p) *Seek support* – be it in supervision, or the counsel of a valued peer. If we are affected by an experience of conflict, we generally need to talk it through with someone trained and experienced, to help put it in context, to grow and to recover from it.

(q) *Trust in the process:* Rogers encourages us when working with others to establish core conditions in the group, and then trust in the process (1961). When people feel they are receiving empathy, are meeting genuineness and are not judged, their position softens and any conflict can be more easily resolved. Moreover, in the presence of core conditions, conflict is less likely to occur.

(r) *This too shall pass.* Even those initiating conflict very rarely want to stay in it, and once they feel heard and understood their demeanour can quickly change. If we can stay grounded, empathic, open and accepting, a lot of heat can be extracted from a taut situation.

(s) *Build a cohesive group:* A group that is cohesive, where people feel a strong sense of belonging, becomes what Bowlby would describe as an 'Object of Attachment'; something the participants value and consider worth protecting. Conflict can be destructive, and I have often seen participants pull back from a conflict that might destroy their group because of the value of the group in their lives.

Resilience and recovery

Seligman cites research that shows that those who have overcome one trauma are more resilient than those who have not had to overcome any: those who have overcome two traumatic incidents are more resilient than those who have overcome one, and on it goes (2011). Resilience helps us cope with conflict and strife: it is the quality that helps us recover faster. There is an inherent positivity in seeing that setbacks can be used to build strength, that they can be character building.

Seligman and Gaffney both outline several ways to build resilience, which is achieved for example by developing a more positive mindset; building strong connection to others and being willing to ask for and accept help; overturning and pushing back on catastrophic thinking; consciously developing a sense of gratitude; engaging in meaningful activity; having the experience of achievement; and becoming aware of and utilising on a daily basis our 'signature strengths' (2011).

We also acquire resilience by having a strong sense of mission and being aware of our positive intent (Gaffney, 2011). Having a clear sense of purpose and clarity about what you want to achieve with your group enhances your staying power in the role. It helps us see beyond a conflict to the ultimate purpose of the group. Moreover, experience of many groups helps us see patterns, and inculcates the knowledge that conflict is to be expected, and grants us a certain degree of stoicism.

Tips and techniques

What can we do in the moment to defuse and manage conflict? Here are some suggestions...

- Listen to the aggrieved person. Let them know they are being heard. Reflect back what you hear so they feel understood. As a person realises they are being heard their sense of grievance often diminishes.

- If you don't know the person, find out and use their name; *personalise* the interaction.
- Validate their feelings; "I can see you're upset".
- Seek collaboration. Asking "how can we resolve this" flags that you are with the person in their travails: it also invites a person who may be angry or emotional to start making choices, thus bringing their thinking brain into play and making resolution a collaborative venture.
- Fractionate: if a person feels overwhelmed by a number of issues or grievances, ask them "which one is the most pressing right now. Let's start with that". This helps them to focus, to think, to choose. By choosing, they are taking responsibility and exercising agency. If one element of a range of issues is resolved, the remainder don't seem so daunting.
- Clarify: As Karl Popper says, clarity is always useful. Much conflict stems from confusion and misunderstanding: the simple act of clarifying can resolve issues early.
- Deal with/acknowledge the conflict. You might avoid it out of fear, but the aggrieved person may not know this and might assume you are ignoring them, thus exacerbating their issue.
- Challenge respectfully. Someone may have an idea that is simply mistaken or illogical. Respectfully dispute the mistaken belief to see if it can be dislodged/clarified/resolved.
- Establish mutual understanding. Carl Rogers (1961) advocates a technique when seeking to resolve a conflict between two parties whereby he asks them both to tell their story in each other's presence. He then asks each party to relate the other person's story to that person's satisfaction. This simple yet powerful technique encourages each side to understand the other to the extent they can vocalise each other's position. Empathy dissolves much conflict (Yalom, 2005).
- Solving circle: a technique developed by Wm Glasser (1998). He posits that in any relationship, there are three entities: the two parties, and the relationship itself. If the conflict is frozen and apparently intractable, with neither party willing to bend towards the other (yet both parties declaring they'd like it resolved), he asks them to do

something for the relationship, regardless of what the other party does.

- Establish willingness: Wm Glasser commences a conflict resolution session by asking both parties a closed question to which he wants an unambiguous answer – "do you want to resolve this"? If they answer 'Yes', both parties hear unequivocally that the other side wants resolution, which injects optimism and momentum. If they don't buy in, at least there is clarity for all sides.

- Change the system. Two people in a relationship constitute a system. In a conflict where one party feels aggrieved at the behaviour of the other, rather than change the other, de Shazar advocates changing oneself, that way the whole system changes. If you change one part of a system, the whole system changes (1988).

- Introduce uncertainty. De Shazar notes that a person being manipulated by another is often predictable to the manipulator. In a case study of a woman and an unfaithful partner, De Shazar advised her to toss a coin anytime he rang her to meet up. That way she was introducing chance and unpredictability into the system, meaning the 'manipulator' was no longer on certain ground and had to rethink, and hopefully amend his behaviour (1988).

- Be wary of labels. In a family system, it can come to pass that one member of the family takes on, or is awarded, the role of the troubled one, and the remaining family members get to be 'good' and reliable in comparison. Virginia Satir recommends changing the labelling and the stasis in the system. One family with a 'deviant youth' came to see her. The youth was presented as highly problematic. He had gotten his girlfriend pregnant, a blow to the self image of the family. Instead of disapproving, as the family expected, Satir turned to him and declared, 'well, we know you've got good seed'. She thus rejected the family's value laden labelling system, and it commenced a shift in the family dynamics (Hoffman, 1983).

- Fight fair: if there is a dispute between two participants, let them voice their issues, but ask them to be fair and respectful, to name the issue and how it makes them feel, rather than attack the other.

- Group awareness. If there is a dispute between two members of the group, bear in mind that the rest of the group is present and may be disturbed by what they are witnessing. It is important to check in with the participants by asking them to address how they feel.

- Seek to portray calmness. Where possible, the best stance for the facilitator is to remain calm in the face of friction or challenge, whether it is aimed at the facilitator or between group members. It is important to give group members the message that conflict is part of life and can be managed, not just by the facilitator, but by the group.

- Name it: Rogers declared that the facts are always friendly, because when they are out there, everyone knows where things stand and at least have a clear starting point (1961). Benson believed that showing the courage to name things was a positive group leadership trait that bred confidence and security in the group members (2001). However, we need to bear in mind Yalom's injunction to not hurt anyone else's ego in the service of truth (2005).

- What is the real issue? Sometimes the presenting issue is not the real issue. It can be useful to say to disputants "there seems to be a lot of heat over something that doesn't seem that big. Is there something under this"? Initially, this statement can be met with befuddlement, but if given time, a deeper issue, hard at times to articulate, can often emerge.

- Thou shalt not have favourites (Yalom, 2005). Conflict heightens emotions and sensitivity so it is important to present as neutral and equally available to all parties.

It is worth noting that models and techniques and stances are all well and good when we sit and contemplate what action we might take in a hypothetical conflict scenario, but when conflict kicks off we can temporarily lose connection with our rational mind and feel flooded with dread and fear. In these circumstances, it can be hard to summon our preparations, and we can leave the field feeling vanquished. At the risk of over repetition, the best strategy to take in relation to managing and responding to conflict is to continually work on one's own development, identify and grow our

strengths so that we are robust and strong when it comes at us, which, in some form or other, it will.

Chapter Seven: Conflict in groups III: Case studies

Outrageous slings and arrows: case study I

Dealing with casual remarks that truly sting can be tricky and can leave us self doubting and confused. We can be left wondering – is it me? Am I too sensitive? Did I cause this?

I was running a Conflict Management programme for hundreds of staff of a large public service entity and the most consistent piece of information I was hearing was that the organisation did not deal well with conflict. In fact, the perception of staff was that a troublemaker was frequently 'promoted out' rather than challenged or disciplined, appearing to be rewarded for their transgressive behaviour. This angered and demoralised staff. Moreover, to compound the sense of injustice, the view was widely held that the raising of a complaint served to highlight the complainant as troublesome, effectively stalling their career.

Needless to say, the organisation had produced top quality glossy brochures outlining in reams of detail their Dignity at Work Policy, and their Disciplinary Policies and Procedures.

'Grainne' attended one of these Conflict Management programmes and sensing that she was in a safe space, and could trust her group, she began to relate the following story of her experience.

Grainne occupied a role that she had spent many years training for and very much enjoyed. A female colleague at a more senior grade, though not Grainne's direct supervisor, began to direct snide comments at her. Initially taken aback and confused by this behaviour, Grainne did nothing, until she began to find the remarks intolerable. She screwed up her courage and told her persecutor she found the remarks upsetting and asked her to stop. Her tormentor derided Grainne for being too sensitive, and told her there was nothing intended by the remarks and that she should 'grow a sense of humour'.

The abuse continued on a regular basis and began to badly affect Grainne, upsetting her sleep, her diet, her exercise regime and all round contentment. After months of cutting commentary and remarks, along with two more (ignored) requests to desist, Grainne eventually approached her line manager to raise the issue. He treated the meeting like an informal chat, told her he was quietly confident it would soon blow over if she simply ignored it, and promptly went off on his tea break.

As a result of not being taken seriously, Grainne's self-doubt worsened and she berated herself for not being stronger or more assertive. She noticed that her oppressor appeared to make remarks to others too, but, as far as she could tell, no-one else seemed to be much affected by it. So, was she too sensitive? Was it all due to her personal failings? Was she too weak? Was she lacking a sense of humour, or a back-bone? Her self-doubt escalated.

Feeling miserable and deflated, Grainne felt she had no option but to transfer to another post on the complex, to move away from her 'ideal job' in order to escape her harasser. For a while her daily life was easier, but Grainne felt enfeebled by the turn of events, not least that she had had to forsake a job she enjoyed to work at something she found mundane and beneath her skill level. She blamed herself. Moreover, she felt particularly let down by her line manager and she worried for her future career prospects. She withdrew into herself and had increasingly less interaction with colleagues, who, she began to fear, saw her as stand-offish and unapproachable. She sat by herself in the canteen or spent lunch time walking the extensive grounds on her own.

Things unfortunately took a turn for the worse when Grainne went to work one day to find her tormentor had been transferred into her new workplace. Since her own relocation Grainne had passed her occasionally on the grounds of the campus and had suffered the occasional remark, but this was different; her persecutor was once more close at hand. The comments immediately resumed where they had left off. Grainne again asked her to stop, to no avail.

Grainne had shown courage to come to the group with this story. She felt at her wits end and asked me for advice and guidance. A facilitator must always be careful giving advice: we have enough difficulty figuring out how to live our own lives without thinking we can advise someone else how to live theirs. Moreover, most group leaders would accept Carl Rogers' dictum that if you put in place certain core conditions, people invariably develop the capacity to resolve their own issues for themselves. It essentially disempowers someone if you tell them what they should do; it cuts across their own capacity to work things out for themselves.

Moreover, Grainne had raised this issue in the group, and I felt from looking at the group that they were moved and affected by Grainne's tale. I felt that their support could be elicited so that Grainne would see that she was held in regard by her peers and not as isolated as she believed.

Though I trusted the group, I also felt it was important for Grainne's sake that she feel she had done the right thing in relating her story, and that she wouldn't second guess herself later that evening, when she would most likely reflect on her actions. She had mentioned that she felt tentative in raising her issue within the group for fear of it somehow making its way back to her tormentor. I wanted her to feel reassured on this point so I asked the group how it felt to hear her story. They replied, as I expected, that they were deeply affected and full of sorrow to see that one of their colleagues had suffered so much. This brought tears to Grainne's eyes, and to a number of those present. "I feel the same," I responded. "I think it very important we assure Grainne that we have heard her and been very moved by her and especially that her story stays between these four walls". All agreed with this. Grainne expressed her gratitude, and then asked us again what we thought she should do. I noticed that instead of just asking me, she had broadened her request to the group.

Reflection corner: What would you say to Grainne? How does her story strike you? Have you ever been in this position yourself? What were the effects on you? What do people in her position need?

I did not take the lead in responding to Grainne, believing it would be better that she get reaction from the whole group. Everything that I did consequently say to Grainne was framed by a number of principles, which I also sought that the group uphold in word and deed:

- Treat her with compassion and respect. Let her see we are taking her seriously, for she feels she has been ignored and overlooked up to now.

- Be aware of our own transferences: As an eldest child, the urge to try and fix and protect can be strong in me, as is the urge to put transgressors in their box. I need to 'bracket off' these urges: they're about my needs and life history, rather than Grainne's.

- Be aware of archetypes: One of the most constant motifs in human story is that of the gallant knight coming to the rescue of a damsel in distress. Jung in particular wrote of these unconscious archetypes that are activated by situations we encounter in life, and which impel us into almost pre-programmed action, in this case, that of the valiant rescuer. 'Rescuing' can just as often disempower the person it is intended to 'save' by cutting across the 'victim's' capacity to resolve their own issues.

- Make clear to her that we understand her situation and the toll it is taking. Receiving understanding conveys to the person that they are understandable, accepted and valued.

- Focus on strengths and actions, not on 'shortcomings'. Grainne does not need to hear anything that can be interpreted as a criticism, such as 'you should have said this' etc.

- If you always do as you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got (Glasser, 1998). If Grainne wants her circumstances to be different, she has to be encouraged to try new behaviour. This needs to be gently put, as victims of bullying can feel they have lost their power, and they may feel somewhat overwhelmed at the thought of exercising choice or confronting their abuser.

- Grainne may be hoping for a magic solution: that is not possible. Her situation is serious, it won't be resolved in an instant, and will require action, courage and fortitude on her part.

- Bear in mind Judith Herman's observation that all a perpetrator requires to succeed is for bystanders to do nothing (2001). Grainne feels deserted by those around her: she thinks it's personal, that people dislike her, but in fact it's a classic pattern. It is how abusers go about their work, they manage to isolate their victim and make it look as if they are the authors of their own misfortune. It would help if she could come to frame her experience this way.

- Recall Steve de Shazar's observation that 'if you change one part of a system, the whole system changes' (1988). Following on that, if Grainne sees herself or her circumstances differently, and acts on this, then her situation changes.

What did we do?

We listened, we empathised, and we expressed our concern. One member remarked that by simply raising the issue it was clear that Grainne wanted to change her situation and take back her power and she informed Grainne that she felt it could be changed, that she had encountered people in similar scenarios before and they had effected change.

Another participant asked Grainne what steps she was considering, or what she thought her best options were. Grainne felt, and knew, she would have to challenge her tormentor. If that didn't resolve matters, she needed to go to her manager. The group agreed with her. They believed her manager would not act unless Grainne could show she had ticked all the boxes of the organisation's policies and procedures, and if he could find an 'out', he most likely would. They also thought Grainne could approach things in a way that would make her tormentor more wary of her.

There are a lot of clichés about bullies, such as if they are confronted they will back down. That's not necessarily the case: it may in fact outrage them that their power has been questioned, and make matters worse. However, the group believed that bullies fear exposure, and like to operate covertly.

So, we agreed with Grainne that she needed to confront her persecutor again, and we collaboratively worked out that she should say to her something like: "I've asked you on a number of occasions now to stop making comments to me that I find hurtful. I'm asking you again to stop". If the perpetrator resorted once again to criticising Grainne for her sensitivity or lack of humour, we felt Grainne shouldn't engage with her any further. Then we asked Grainne what she thought of sending a post confrontation email to her persecutor stating something like: "For the record, I want to reiterate the request I made to you this morning at 10.30 a.m. to cease making remarks I find hurtful and upsetting. I also noted in our discussion that I had made this request before and was ignored on that occasion. Please comply with my request or I'll have no option but to make this an official matter. Yours etc"

We felt that by sending an email, in the style of language outlined, Grainne was signalling to her persecutor that events had entered a different stage, that they were entering the grave ante-room of policies and procedures. We expected that the aggressor might seek to deny the contents of the email – all Grainne had to reply was "I refer you to the contents of my previous email and I reiterate my request. Whilst I note your denials, I do not accept them, nor will I enter into debate as to what has or has not occurred. I have suffered from your treatment long enough: I formally ask you to cease your hurtful behaviour towards me".

Another group member recommended to Grainne that she might consider making a note of everything she could remember of previous episodes in a diary, as well as recording details of the planned showdown. If the perpetrator continued her behaviour, then Grainne had to bring it to her boss' attention, regardless of career consequences. If she did not act her health and wellbeing would likely suffer and her career would be the least of her concerns. We further discussed with Grainne the fact that her manager would also feel more impelled to act were he to receive a written record from her on the matter – it is harder to ignore or disavow a written account than a verbal one.

We then discussed for the benefit of the whole group a few steps on maintaining wellbeing in such challenging scenarios as Grainne's. We looked at some steps that could be taken to bring variety and some enjoyment back into our lives, even when overwhelmed by such a dominating issue. Taking an approach from Reality Therapy, I asked Grainne when she last had fun or joy in her life. She initially struggled to remember: I told the group that Wm Glasser regarded fun as a basic psychological need, and if we felt stuck in a toxic rut it would be constructive for our wellbeing to consciously choose to go and enjoy ourselves, preferably in company (1998). This would meet some of our most fundamental needs, to the betterment of our overall health. Grainne declared her love of walking in the hills with a fellow nature lover and resolved to make an arrangement to do so that weekend. She declared herself to be in much lighter spirits at the thought of it, and at being heard and supported by the group. As we approached day's end, a pair in the group who worked in the same locale as Grainne told her that they would be delighted if she would take her lunch with them, if she was of a mind to. They had often seen her walk the grounds and had mistakenly assumed that she was simply pursuing a strict fitness regime and had admired her discipline! Grainne happily accepted the offer.

Two months later Grainne wrote to say that she had followed the steps we had discussed in the group. Her tormentor had denied everything but had backed off and had stayed away from her. Grainne felt emboldened by her move and as a result went and talked to her manager, told him what had happened and handed him a detailed document outlining her experience, saying she did not want to initiate a formal grievance at that point but wanted to put on record what had happened, what she had done about it, and her unhappiness at how she had been forced from her ideal job, which she now wanted to return to. The manager, after some attempts at deflection, saw that Grainne was not for turning and eventually acceded. Shortly afterwards, Grainne returned to the laboratory where she felt such job satisfaction. Her whole life had improved, and she was in regular contact with her new lunch mates as well as a wider circle of both new and reinstated friends.

With Grainne's permission, I wrote up her story and used it as a case study in my remaining Conflict Management workshops. I travelled to every province in Ireland to deliver this training, and met staff from every county in the country. In every single workshop there were people who were adamant that they knew Grainne as "she worked in the same station" as them. This served to underline how pervasive such incidents were in the organisation, if everyone knew a 'Grainne'.

Reflection Corner: What do you think about the role of the group in this story?

Why was it important to Grainne? What would you say to or ask Grainne if you met her?

Are you surprised that abuses such as this occur?

Passive aggression

The facilitator can occasionally be met with remarks that sting, undermine and unsettle. When a camouflaged, barbed remark comes our way from out of left field, very often our first reaction is simply one of confusion, and it can take time to grasp or adjust to what has happened.

Some of these remarks can even be dressed up as compliments: a female colleague related to me how a participant had remarked to her, in front of a group she was facilitating, that she was "lucky to have such short legs" as it meant she didn't have to wear skirts.

We can also occasionally find ourselves damned by faint praise. A fellow facilitator had someone say to him "I think this might be one of the best courses I've done this year". It was early March when the 'compliment' was offered.

When called out on their remarks the 'offenders' often play innocent – or even the victim! 'They didn't mean it to be taken that way', they say, or they declare they've 'been terribly misunderstood': they may go on to mutter about the 'oversensitivity' of the other. While it's possible they are unconscious of the knife they are lodging between the ribs of their target, it

is, for the victim, difficult having to deal with this camouflaged aggression just at the point when we need our attention and energy to be focused on the group.

Such behaviour can be fairly labelled passive aggressive. We are often advised not to respond to passive aggression as it gives the aggressor what they are seeking. I'm not so sure that's the best option in groups. I sometimes think the best remedy is to name it as you see it – not aggressively, but in a calm factual tone (I'm aware that doing something calmly in the wake of receiving such barbs is easier said than done). On the one hand, it helps bring the behaviour to the attention of the actor: what they become aware of, they can learn to modify. On the other, they may be cajoled into altering their behaviour, to the benefit of the group.

I do think it may be best, where possible, to pay little heed to the initial comment, especially in the early stages, as becoming a member of a group brings about changes to behaviour that may ameliorate such conduct. It is also well to remember O'Leary's observation that those that are outwardly harsh invariably experience an even bleaker inner world (1982), so it is compassionate and appropriate to give the person time to settle.

Nonetheless, passive aggression that goes unchecked can make everyone miserable and on edge, and can subvert a group: and it ultimately thrives by not being addressed. (It must be mentioned that in William Glasser's training DVD's he ostentatiously ignores such behaviour, showing his disapproval powerfully but non-verbally. He, in effect, hands their behaviour right back to them).

I recall a participant on a group appearing to compliment a facilitation training programme I was running. He announced that "what we're doing here is great. It really is fantastic. And we've all done it before, again and again, year after year". What appeared to start as a compliment ended as a claim that he and everyone else were being given the same old same old – for the umpteenth time. His comment was not untypical of ones he was wont to make. I had let previous remarks pass, but this time I responded: "What I'm hearing is that you've covered this ground over and over again. I

certainly don't intend to do that. I'd like to check in and address this right away". As I spoke, P's face took on a look of sheer panic. I could also see a flash of glee cross other faces, as people who engage in passive aggression do not tend to make themselves popular.

P explained I had misunderstood, that all we were covering was important and wonderful. "But", I asked, "I'm still unsure. I need to check if you and the rest of the group have done it loads of times before". Everyone else in the group proclaimed that P's statement did not apply to them, that what they were covering was new to them, useful and exciting. P declared he had only meant that he believed people in the room had probably often covered the general idea of treating people well and doing our best for our clients.

I replied I was thankful for the clarification and noted how it was important to clarify things in groups. I also declared that I felt the misunderstanding highlighted the benefit of people speaking in the 'I', rather than the 'we' because I had thought it a possibility from P's phrasing that the whole group had met and discussed that they were covering nothing new. I was relieved to hear this was not the case, I declared.

P's behaviour changed from then on. I cannot say whether he was merely chastened rather than changed, but at least the group benefitted from the exchange.

Is this a dagger I see before me?

Feedback sheets can be where the passive aggressive participant has a field day. Here they can wield the knife without having to directly face their victim. Many facilitators I have spoken to have admitted that they feel vulnerable to the comments received on feedback sheets. As noted earlier, they broadly acknowledge that they pay far more heed to the occasional negative comment, than a whole ream of positive ones. What my colleagues have also reported is the capacity of the passive aggressive 'assailant' to strike, or even find, a raw nerve or unconscious sensitivity. A particularly well read and accomplished colleague came to me one day in a state of some agitation with an evaluation sheet. A participant on one of her courses

had written "this course was quite boring. The facilitator used a narrow range of sources and kept repeating them ad nauseam".

The most consistent piece of feedback this facilitator had received down through the years was that participants found the depth and breadth of her knowledge quite remarkable. In spite of the overwhelming evidence to the contrary, she was hurt and made vulnerable by the comment. How the participant managed to find the chink in the armour of her self-belief is intriguing and it captures the dark 'skill' of the passive aggressor.

At the end of a one day programme on Conflict Management, a participant, 'Mike', came up to 'Kay' to say how he had thoroughly enjoyed the course. Indeed, he couldn't remember a day of training he had found as useful or stimulating. He asked if she had a spare copy of the notes she had used. Kay handed him her notes. He then asked if she would sign them! A bit taken aback, Kay acceded.

The next morning, at ten past nine, the company's training officer rang Kay to tell her there had been harsh feedback from the programme. She was not expecting such a reaction and expressed her surprise. In fact she had looked over the feedback sheets before sending them, she told him, and from what she had seen they were strongly positive. Well, he hadn't received those yet, but someone called Mike had just been in to tell him how dreadful a course it was, a 'complete load of airy fairy nonsense'.

Her head reeling, Kay relayed the story of her interaction with Mike the previous afternoon. In spite of that, and though the feedback sheets truly were strongly positive, Mike seems to have made the more lasting impression as Kay never got work from that organisation again.

It can be hard to understand what motivates some people, but we have to learn to overcome such episodes, sting as they might, for our own sakes.

Case study II: challenging behaviour

The situation outlined here occurred in a group I delivered recently, which was made up of seven men working on an employment scheme, itself part of a bigger, city wide project. Their employer hired me to run a personal

development programme with the men. The participants had an average age of 55. I was due to be with them three hours a day, two days a week for eight weeks.

It wasn't until the second day that I came to fully realise the utter opposition of the group to what we were doing: they saw no point in any training whatsoever. Truth is they never expected to be in employment again: in fact, two of them were a few months short of retirement age.

I tried hard to gain their involvement and get them to voice their views on what they might find useful to discuss and explore, but they were having none of it. It slowly and indirectly began to emerge that many of them had had stints in prison, and they had a strikingly high level of distrust in authority, which was how at this stage they were viewing me.

All early school leavers, the men declared that they had no aspirations either career-wise or personally. They were 'grand as they were'. One participant, 'John', declared vociferously that all he wanted was to return to the dole and stay on it forever. Work was for idiots. Courses were useless. In his experience, facilitators were idiots! What did someone like me know of real life? All I knew about were books! What use was that?

Such was the hostile inertia in the group I began to consider the possibility that I could do nothing with or for them, and that working with them would demoralise me, or worse. On the other hand, and to be brutally honest, I had obtained the contract from a source that would likely lead to lots of other desirable work, so I was mindful of the consequences of precipitously pulling the plug.

I spoke with my supervisor: she proposed (to my horror!) that I might be exactly what they needed: A male, around their age, with a difficult childhood history that probably mirrored theirs. And, how many people had walked out on them? Were there ways I could stick with it but lessen the impact on myself? I told her that I found the three hour sessions interminable and exhausting. The group's level of interest and attention span was extremely low, and I was working far too hard, and fruitlessly.

There was no sense of flow, no cohesion, no participation. I was worn out, dispirited and self doubting after (and during) every session.

However, I decided to take her viewpoint on board and began to take some steps to see if I could alter the dynamic. First of all, whatever about the funder's views, three hour sessions were far too long for this client group. There is never any point trying to flog a dead horse: it is deeply counterproductive. So, I contracted with the group that we would start at ten, take a break at ten to eleven, take another break at ten to twelve, and then finish up at around quarter to one. In this way I effectively turned the session into something closer to a two hour engagement.

Moreover, it emerged that one member of the group, 'Ray', was proficient in Tai Chi: I encouraged him to do a session at the end of a morning and he was so good I immediately contracted him to take the last half hour of each day and teach us Tai Chi. It would improve participant fitness, potentially change the dynamics and lessen my load.

I also made connection between Ray and the funding organisation and they arranged for him to do some classes with staff on the site. He commenced both immediately and the group took to the Tai Chi with a mixture of scepticism and muted enthusiasm. The impact on Ray was pronounced. He had struggled over the previous few years with mental health issues that had severely constrained his world – now he was teaching, earning and showing expertise.

At the same time, John declared immediately that such activity was for various forms of 'undesirables' and he was having none of it. I informed him that if he wasn't taking part, he would have to leave the room for the duration of the activity.

My reasoning was that I had had experience in the past of just such a passenger, who sat in the room passing derogatory comments as people went through their work out, causing acute self-consciousness and resultant drop out. One thing I felt sure about John was that he would engage in similar behaviour.

John objected to being put out and declared he would stay. I informed him he could happily stay, provided he participated. I was not willing to yield, and thus far I had seen no capacity in John of having a reasonable discussion on any issue. I made it clear he could always return if he was willing to participate, but the only way he could stay in the room was by taking part.

I also approached the hosting organisation and discussed with their liaison officer the issue of compulsory attendance. She was surprised to hear that the participants felt compelled to attend and quickly concurred that if anyone didn't want to stay, they could return to their normal duties. This was a considerable relief to me. It is hard to function well as a facilitator if you have to meet short-sighted demands of stakeholders that go against the best interests of the group members.

Where it all left me however, was in an unfamiliar and uncomfortable position. John was doing everything he could to undermine the group. He never spoke to me, simply shouted: his every utterance was contemptuous of any material I introduced, and coarse and inflammatory in nature – his speech was strikingly racist, sexist, and dismissive of all viewpoints. By this stage a number of group members were – slowly - coming round, but John was busy casting scorn on anyone showing interest in our (attempted) discussions, thus having a chilling effect upon them.

Yalom declared that the physical survival of the group is our primary task (2005). John was, in my opinion, a real threat to the survival or sheer point or usefulness of the group. I decided I had to bring things to a head, but I was conscious that I was dealing with an explosive character, with a violent history to boot, so I needed to proceed with caution.

I was also conscious however that I was not in any real sense functioning as a facilitator – as Ringer states, a group becomes a group when people choose to belong to it (2002). You cannot force or command the formation of a group. Every time the group 'members' seemed to be on the point of opting in, John came roaring out to sabotage the momentum.

I began to feel I could easily over think the whole scenario and tie myself in convoluted knots, so I made the decision I would address the group. I picked

my day. I intended telling the group that I wondered whether what we were doing was seen by them to be of value. If they felt there was some merit to our endeavours, I would ask them to name the benefits. If they felt it was of no consequence, then I felt we should consider stopping. If they felt it was of value, then I would ask them to get more on board because I felt there was considerably more we could get from our engagement. To achieve this would require that they make more effort to participate.

I also intended making it clear that I wanted people in the room who freely chose to be there. Everyone had an idea by now of the work at hand, so they had enough information and experience of the group to make a decision. I would inform them that I had clarified with their employers that anyone who felt compelled to attend, or simply did not wish to be there, could simply opt out and return to their regular duties.

D-Day arrived: I entered the room and John, the only one there at this stage, approached me. By now we had had several vociferous 'discussions' – I felt it important not to allow myself to be cowed by him, so I braced myself to face up to another barbed exchange. John came up to me and declared "I have to say, for the first few weeks I just didn't get this. I couldn't see where we were going. But now I feel I finally understand. The people around me are telling me I'm a changed man. They've never seen me smile or be as relaxed as much as I have recently. I'm really benefitting from this. Does it have to end in a few weeks? Could we get it extended? I'd love if we could add another few weeks."

We are, according to Moreno, a multiplicity of selves (1947). I can certainly say I experienced a multiplicity of reactions to John's proclamation. I was bamboozled and thrown. A part of me was chuffed, especially for John – he genuinely did look grateful and happy! I was struck by the power of groups to absorb and ameliorate discontented participants. I was also lamenting the days of thought and preparation I had put into my plan for the day, where I was going to confront the behaviour that had been most forcibly and blatantly engaged in by John. I confess I also felt my heart sink – I can't get

him out now, I thought! And I felt joy that someone was declaring they had had a eureka moment and were declaring themselves profoundly changed.

There were other thoughts and feelings rushing around in me as well. I regretted that he had said this to me in private – it was a pity it wasn't a more public announcement. I briefly thought of asking him to bring it up in group, but I quickly decided not to ask lest he immediately revert to his default behaviour. I also felt cautious – I found the transformation hard to believe. I had in the past seen others declare significant shifts, but if what John was saying was true, it would have represented the biggest sea change I had ever seen, and it would have come as a bolt from the blue, whereas in previous cases a gradual alteration had been discernable.

Though still occasionally challenging, John gradually became easier to deal with. Around the halfway stage of our engagement, and following a hunch about the nature of his origins, I began to focus on theories of Adverse Childhood Experiences, and how such events impacted later in life (Van der Kolk, 2014). John was rapt. I had hit upon a topic that obviously spoke to him. I proceeded to explore attachment and other related issues in subsequent sessions. There were still a few explosions, though fewer than before and considerably less intense. Moreover, though he still baulked at joining our Tai Chi sessions, he actively recruited other colleagues from outside the group to join in.

On the final day of the group the client organisation arranged a ceremony attended by the group members, their supervisors and some senior managers. I noticed John and another group member approach the top brass – I leaned in to get a listen.

"How was the course?" they were asked. "Way too short. Best thing I've ever done" said John. "I'd recommend it for anyone, even yourselves. It would transform the place".

In spite of the change in John, working with him had exacted no small toll. Overall, on balance, I believe it also had an adverse impact on the other group members. However, this was mitigated by the fact that they increasingly challenged him on his disruptive behaviour, which showed they

took on a sense of ownership of the group and grew ever more assertive in response to his taunts and disruption. As to whether we were better to retain him or eject him from the group, I'm still uncertain. The affair brings home to me the truth of Bertrand's Russell's phrase, that the hardest thing in life to learn 'is to know which bridge to cross and which to burn'.

Reflection corner: *How does the case study strike you?*

What do you think you would have done in the scenario outlined?

How would you have looked after yourself working with this situation?

Have you had similar experiences in life or in groups where you had to contemplate a confrontation?

Chapter Eight: Some thoughts on Boundaries

We generally tend to think of boundaries in relation to breaches of what we call our 'personal space'. Most of us experience discomfort at people coming too close physically, especially if we don't know them very well, or dislike or fear them. We might take a step back in an effort to restore a more comfortable distance between us. We likely feel a mix of unease, confusion and alarm.

It is notable that the space we need in order to feel secure is larger than the space we physically occupy. This is presumably because personal boundaries serve as a mechanism to keep us safe by keeping threats at a remove, outside striking distance. They are a primeval survival mechanism, deeply embedded.

As we grow more trusting and less fearful of certain people, the space we require tends to reduce. Therefore, there is fluidity to the amount of distance we need, according to who we are with. Also, there are personal - as well as cultural - differences in respect of boundaries: for example, people who have experienced fear and trauma in their lives may need more space and may react more strongly if they feel this has been breached. People who grew up in an environment where their boundaries were frequently breached may naturally struggle to set healthy boundaries in later life.

Carl Rogers declared that our gut is our best guide (1961), meaning that our organism gives us a constant feed of information about how we are, what we need and what we don't want. Being able to tune in to this stream of information, being able to bring it to awareness and act on it is important to our healthy functioning. The gut is for many of us the primary area of the body that alerts us to a breach of our boundaries.

A healthily functioning organism can establish healthy boundaries for itself, though that does not ensure they will be observed or upheld by others. In our role as facilitators, one of the key elements of the position is to model, rather than merely advocate, healthy behaviour (Corey, 2000), so it is

incumbent on us that we be aware of our own boundaries, as well as observant and respectful of the boundaries of others.

Space invaders

When we say someone has poor boundaries, we generally tend to mean that they are prone to invading the personal space of others, by getting too close to them physically. We also use the term to describe comments, or indeed questions, that we find intrusive and 'go too far', in that they imply a level of familiarity, intimacy or permissiveness that has not, in our view, been established. People we consider to have poor boundaries strike us as being unpredictable and unregulated. They also cause us confusion, because our sense of alarm and unease is in conflict with the part of us that tries to be courteous and polite.

A group member asks for a hug – you know they are hurting so you may feel tempted to oblige and offer comfort. Also, you fear it might seem rude to say no. Moreover, they've just spent half an hour talking about how they feel rejected by everyone. The following session, and every other session thereafter, they seek a hug: you become more and more uncomfortable. Are they exploiting the situation? Is there something more than solace involved here? What do others in the group make of it? How do we wean them off this habit? Should we just override our own body's discomfort? Are we being precious? Should we have acceded to their request in the first place?

We have by now ended up in a tumble of self doubt. There is no shame in being confused; boundary breaches cause confusion. However, it is best to minimise such scenarios in the first place, knowing, however, that they can never be eliminated. Therefore, we seek to manage them as best we can.

In doing so, it would be a helpful support were our organisations to have clear guidelines on such issues so that its facilitators can refer to them when confronted with boundary challenges. A well functioning organisation has an accumulation of knowledge and experience which it is wise to harvest so as to guide and inform newcomers. By generating such policy, and covering it in an induction process, it raises for new facilitators the awareness that such things can come about and that it is best to be mindful and prepared. Such a

training programme could equip facilitators with some road-tested standard responses. When asked for something that may cause discomfort, such as a hug, or a personal phone number, the facilitator can then say "I'm sorry, that's not permitted by the organisation. I'll be in difficulty for breaching the rules". That way the refusal does not come across as a personal rejection.

Of course, depending on the client and their capacity to explore issues, and depending on the confidence and skillset of the facilitator, it can be an opportunity to bring certain behaviours to the client's attention, perhaps by simply saying "I'm a bit thrown by your request. It doesn't feel right for my role." This might be followed by an exploration of whether they make such requests of others on a frequent basis, and how they think this might be perceived.

One of the greatest benefits of groups is learning about ourselves through the feedback of others, and the making of inappropriate requests can be an opportunity to bring such behaviour to the group members' attention, to their long-term benefit. Any challenge must be done kindly and with positive intent.

Power

The facilitator provides a certain service to a group, and there are very necessary boundaries that come with this, for the wellbeing of all parties. It is important to bear in mind that the facilitator will invariably be seen as the person of power in the group. Power can be used benignly but can also be abused. Vulnerable people can be manipulated. Therefore, the facilitator is the one above all others who has to demonstrate and model good boundaries.

Many people who come to support groups have already probably experienced another person exercising power over them in detrimental fashion, so it is essential, critical in fact, that this pattern not be repeated in their group. However, those that grew up in a household where abuse, control or addiction was present can find it hard to know what normal is (Geringer Woititz, 1983), and may struggle with boundaries, making the

consistently self contained behaviour of the facilitator crucial to the growth, learning and recovery of the participant.

Over and under-boundaried

It is interesting to note that when we think of someone as having poor boundaries, we tend to automatically assume that they are poorly self-contained and thus under-boundaried. In fact it may well be they are over-boundaried. Participants in a support group need to feel the facilitator is warm and welcoming. If the group leader is cold and aloof, then participants are unlikely to warm to them and the group may fail to become a cohesive and secure entity. It would be hard to trust someone so distant, to take the risk of revealing one's hopes and fears, thus keeping interaction at a surface level and stymieing the development of the group.

So, we are essentially talking about balance when we talk about someone possessing good boundaries: we are referring to someone who is approachable, trustworthy and reliable, but someone who also knows how to separate themselves from their role when they have finished the session. Also, someone who knows that there are lines that ought not to be crossed in the group, for the integrity of their role and the protection and wellbeing of the group and its participants.

What are the lines that are not to be crossed? Well, in some ways the answer to this is limitless. Some of the most immediately important are that...

- The facilitator does not abuse their power to benefit personally in any way (other than in the form of fair and appropriate remuneration if group facilitation is their profession).
- The facilitator does not use their power to hurt and/or belittle group members.
- The facilitator minimises personal relationships with participants outside the group.
- The facilitator does not meet their need for group connection through facilitating groups.

- Whenever possible, the facilitator deals with matters that concern the group and its members in the group. Bringing people aside for personal discussions fuels speculation and uncertainty in the other participants and can be seen to create a hierarchy of worthiness among the members.
- The facilitator does not play favourites (Yalom, 2005): though there will be participants who are more engaging and personable than others, the group leader must seek to be equally available to and regardful of all members.
- The facilitator does not run a support group where friends or relatives are participants.

Rules and guidelines are relatively easy to draft: they are another thing entirely to implement. Life, and human interaction, is complex and nuanced. Different groups make different demands on the facilitator. Some groups are composed of participants who have spent very little time in environments that fostered healthy routines and structures. They might be all at sea in a support or recovery group and need things explained and clarified to a degree that would not be the case with others. They may be highly suspicious of any authority figure and have little belief in the prospect of their lives changing. It can be a challenge to establish conventional boundaries with such a group, which often needs considerable time to acquire the discipline necessary to be an effectively functioning group. Patience, encouragement and understanding are required, as is compromise.

There is an onus on the facilitator to acquire the equanimity to realise that there are very few one size fits all approaches to most of the big issues in life and they therefore need to be reasonable and adaptable: and, to hark to Victor Frankl, decent, because upholding rules for rules' sake when they are of precious little benefit to the group members can be a self-indulgence. As facilitators, it is fair to say we seek to uphold the spirit above the letter of the law.

Role changes & boundaries

Leading a group of your peers can be a challenge. The person leading a group is invested with the power of that role, and this inevitably alters peer relationships. This can cause a reaction amongst some group members, who can be resistant to accepting the elevation of a peer. They may, as a result, become obstructive and undermining of the new leader.

In support groups, it can arise that a member of the group decides they wish to further develop their progression by becoming a facilitator of such a group. This is a positive development, as it shows they have developed enough self belief to seek to make a difference to others.

However, it is probably for the best that they do not take on the leadership role of the group in which they have been an active member. There are many complexities in such a scenario. It results in a fundamental change in relationships and a consequent reordering of the previously established boundaries. Group members will likely have enough anxieties and issues aplenty in their lives outside the group before entering what is meant to be a nurturing haven, without having to navigate such complexity. It is not that it can't be done, but it probably is better and easier if the aspiring facilitator progresses to lead a different group, where there wasn't such a complex matrix of previously forged relationships.

Take one common enough scenario that might arise in relation to such a progression. It is often the case that a newcomer is introduced to a support group by a current member. They may be friends and travel to the group together. What if one of the pair, in time, puts themselves forward to lead the group? You could then have a scenario where a group participant travels to the group with the facilitator of the group. This would have the potential to be undermining of the whole group. Even if the pair contracted to not talk about the group while travelling, other group members could be forgiven for assuming that they discussed group matters while en-route. This might result in the other members feeling exposed and vulnerable, and concerned about issues of confidentiality.

If there is considerable resistance to the 'ascension' of a participant to the leadership role of their support group, so much so that the aspirant decides to step back from the role, then their progression will have been thwarted and the hurt could be considerable. Their confidence and self image could take a knock and might result in their not putting themselves forward again, thus undercutting the ultimate purpose of such groups. Furthermore, they may have been undermined by envy, one of the darker emotions, which will have consequences for both the perpetrators and their target. It is not that a support group is seeking to avoid dealing with hard emotions, but at the same time there is little to be gained by unnecessarily unleashing such a pernicious force as envy.

Time please!

Timekeeping is one of the most important aspects of good boundaries. I have noticed in the past that a small few organisations that work with the most marginalised and chaotic client groups can take on some of the behaviours of their service users, rather than seek to encourage them to aspire to better self regulation. I once interacted extensively with a number of organisations that offered support to one particularly marginalised group. I soon noticed that whenever we scheduled a meeting, representatives from said organisations usually turned up at least 45 minutes late. They would then interrupt the meeting to recount the latest disaster they had just managed to avert. They did this week after week, never altering their practice, each week dealing them a dramatic new emergency. Ironically, their clients were participating in groups, and were beginning to gradually acquire solid habits of time-keeping. In time, these participants began to complain of the irksome unreliability of their support workers! I had more than a little sympathy!

It really is important, and good boundaries to boot, to start and finish groups on time. A professional contact told me of a Personal Development programme she was a member of. It ran from 19.00 to 22.00 one evening a week. There were two group members who invariably raised the most pressing issues at approx ten minutes to finishing time every single week. And every week without fail the facilitator explored the issue in depth, so

that the group often finished closer to 23.00. It left the other group members seething. Resentment grew towards the two members, who were never going to learn good boundaries in this setting. As for the group facilitator, they saw him as being at the mercy of the two and therefore not truly the group leader. 'To everything there is a season', a time to start, and a time to end.

Reflective corner: *Think of a situation where you have had your boundaries breached....*

- *What did it feel like? Where in your body did you feel these sensations?*
- *How did you respond to the situation?*
- *How were you after the event, how long did you remain unsettled?*
- *What do you feel you could do differently should the situation re-occur?*
- *Can you think of ways in which you might recover your equilibrium more quickly?*
- *How would you rate yourself in relation to boundaries? What are your strengths?*
- *In what ways would you need to improve your boundaries?*
- *How do you think you are seen by others (in relation to boundaries)?*
- *Can you recall situations where you breached the boundaries of another?*
- *How did it impact on them? How did it impact on you?*

Case studies: Boundaries

'**Alan**' was the son of an abusive, addicted father who beat and verbally abused his mother. As a result, when Alan was two years old, his mother fled the house, abandoning him. He grew up in mayhem and violence. He rarely went to school and frequently there was no food or appropriate clothing in the house. In time Alan developed addictions and began to drift in and out of prison. His 'speciality' was the burglary of priest's homes. Alan attended a group I ran for ex-prisoners for a number of months. He was friendly with another participant, Bill, who came to the group one day in a fury. Bill had arrived home the evening before to find Alan inside his flat, the television

on, eating his food, drinking his beer. Alan had entered the flat by climbing up an external drain pipe. When Bill expressed his anger at Alan for breaching his privacy, Alan was perplexed, he could not understand Bill's rage. In his deepest self, he simply did not grasp boundaries, as he had never experienced them. Unfortunately Alan never returned to the group and we lost all contact with him.

'**Paul**' was a participant on an ex-prisoners' programme. He had serious addiction issues, was an early school leaver and had never partaken in formal employment or training. He had spent many years in prison for a variety of crimes. Nevertheless, despite the many obstacles, Paul began to make striking progress. He expressed an interest in mechanics, so, early in the New Year, Paul signed up and attended a night course on small engine maintenance. His agreed goal was to use this course as a stepping stone to a full time course which was due to commence in September of that year. Given his life history, this was an ambitious goal, but Paul inspired confidence and we felt he could make it. It would be a tremendous boost for all involved in the programme were he to succeed.

Paul came to talk to us one particular day and announced to our dismay that he would have to leave the country that evening. His former 'employers', a notorious drugs gang in his local community, were searching for him, believing he had double-crossed them. He believed he was at least in danger of a violent assault. He planned to go to Holland: he had a few contacts there, and felt he could get 'employment'. From our perspective, we felt we were looking at 4 months' progress and so much promise evaporating before our eyes. We had no doubt that if Paul left he would soon revert to drugs and criminality: the chances of him exiting such a life again were not high.

As we discussed the situation we formulated an alternative plan. Paul would move to a town with a reliable bus route a good distance outside the city, commute from there, and continue attending the group. Paul agreed, so we quickly searched for and located accommodation in a seaside town thirty miles away. Our manager sourced funding to help with his deposit and the cost of the extra bus fares. As a result, Paul was able to continue on the programme, taking the bus up and down to the city three times a week. He

continued to do well on the programme and we maintained contact with him until he settled in to his college course, where, surrounded by smoky, noisy engines, he thrived.

We engaged in all of this activity with Paul without the knowledge of the other group members. We did it with the approval and encouragement of the Oversight Group that we reported to, as well as our own personal manager. And most importantly, it felt right to us. We felt the subterfuge was necessary to safeguard Paul, which trumped every other consideration for us. We didn't suspect that another group member would deliberately endanger Paul, but we couldn't take the risk of it happening inadvertently. We also felt we couldn't passively accept Paul leaving and abandoning the progress he had made.

Chapter Nine: Guiding framework

We have reiterated throughout this text a number of key points: the facilitator is the group leader: the participants look to him/her for leadership and direction; security and safety; support and encouragement; knowledge and information; fairness and respect: and to be seen, heard and understood. In short, considerable power and influence is conferred on the person exercising the role. How the facilitator uses this power is perhaps the most crucial question they can consider. An awareness of the fact they have power conferred on them by virtue of the position; an awareness of why they are drawn to the position, and what they want to achieve while occupying it; an awareness of what they themselves gain; all are matters that the facilitator must give grave and ongoing consideration to, for that which is used can be abused (2004).

As a means of addressing such critical issues, The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) have produced best practice guidelines for those engaged in the running of groups. One of their central recommendations is that those leading groups be guided in their practice by an overarching conceptual framework (2008).

One example of such a framework would be the person centred approach as articulated by Carl Rogers (1961). Rogers espoused a humanistic philosophy, holding the view that given the establishment of certain *core conditions*, people would invariably grow in a positive direction. All living organisms, he declared, were possessed of an innate drive to reach and fulfil their potential – to self-actualise. In order to facilitate this impulsion, he believed that the nature of the relationship was a critical factor: to hark once again to Yalom – it's the relationship that heals (1989). These core conditions he listed as:

- Empathy: being able to put yourself in the shoes of the other, sense what they are feeling and experiencing, and communicate this sense to them, preferably in a tentative way. The person who receives empathy feels understood, and accepted.

- Congruence; which is another word for genuineness, authenticity and realness. We find it easier to believe in the integrity of someone who exhibits congruence, aiding the building of trust and connection. We feel safer with someone we see as authentic and are quicker to invest in them the power of group leader.
- Unconditional positive regard – being accepting and non-judgemental, involves, amongst other things, not seeing behaviour as the entirety of the person. It entails seeing and holding an awareness of the qualities and potential of the person even if they can't yet see it themselves.

If we can aim to establish these core conditions in the group we are running then invariably the group and its members will benefit. Norms that are established early are very durable, so we consciously seek to establish these conditions as promptly as we can, in order to maximise the impact the group has on its participants (Yalom, 2005).

The ASGW guidelines also strongly argue for group leaders to be actively, continually, engaged in developing their levels of self knowledge. Benson states that behaviour cannot be separated from environment: who we are is influenced by where we are from (2001). Some beliefs can be so ingrained in a culture or place or family, that we are barely conscious that we have imbibed and are guided by them.

Inevitably, some of these beliefs may serve us well as group leaders: others may not. It is therefore crucial to our practice to seek to become conscious of our most deep seated convictions and attitudes, as these will inevitably impact on the groups we run. Time after time, participants I encounter decry the fact that the most encouraged traits of their upbringing and formation were: be humble to the point of self-effacement; be obliging to the point of exhaustion; be obedient to your 'betters' and don't question. Moreover, even the merest level of self regard was seen as conceit and could lead to ridicule. I could go on and on: the point to underline is that someone who did not engage in a reckoning of the effects of such indoctrination on themselves could unconsciously promote these views and could well crush

the spirit of participants already likely to be living with endless, undermining put downs.

By the same token, it would seem essential that there would be certain beliefs it would be necessary to consciously embrace in order to engage successfully – and ethically - with groups. For example, a belief in the innate capacity of people to change and grow would surely be crucial. If people have, as Rogers declares, the capacity to resolve their own issues, then surely we, if we subscribe to the view, must restrain ourselves from offering solutions, but instead focus on building and harnessing and eliciting that capacity.

In conversation with a number of colleagues who run groups, here are leading examples of what they have indicated to be their guiding principles: like me, many report that they have then stitched and combined these together to form a guiding philosophy. These principles guide not only why, but how they run their groups.

Connection Focused

1. Yalom's axiom "it's the relationship that heals" resonated widely with group facilitators (1989). Superseding the theoretical approach we take, achieving progress ultimately boils down to how well we connect with the participants (and they with each other).
2. Nothing alters a person's perception of themselves as much as seeing they are understood by another. The simple intent to understand "is of value in itself" (O'Leary, 1982: 35).
3. Rogers' maxim that that which is deepest to us is most universal (1961). When a group member gets to a point where they can speak of their deepest fears, regrets, joys etc., is when they will most likely be met, understood and accepted by their fellow participants.

Group Focused

4. Every group is unique. It therefore requires a unique response and approach.

5. A group becomes a group when people choose to belong to it (Nitsun, 1996), brings home to us the dependence of the facilitator on the group participants.

6. Cohesion is the bedrock of all groupwork (Ringer, 2002). Unless we develop cohesion in the group, we do not have an authentic group and cannot function as facilitators.

7. As our groups go, our lives go (Johnson & Johnson, 1975). If our groups go well, then so do our lives: the converse is also true. If we can support participants to do well in the groups we run, they learn invaluable life skills that they can transfer to the other groups in their life.

8. Foulkes' idea that most human disturbance is as a result of our not getting on with our groups underlines the centrality of groups to humans and the overriding importance of generating positive group experiences for our clients.

9. Most groups start cold, shy and awkward (Benson, 2001): we can't expect people to engage at depth from the start: we must meet the group where they are at and work from there.

10. The most successful groups are those that meet the needs of the participants. Sometimes participants have been so undermined by their experience that they are unable to identify their needs: the task then is to support them to restore their voice so they can come to identify and voice their needs.

11. Always treat the group as important (Yalom, 2005). By the time they arrive at a support group, the self esteem of many participants is on the floor. As they have a dim view of themselves, they are initially unlikely to have a positive view of anything they are part of. Until they change their view, the facilitator has to espouse and uphold the view that the group is important.

12. The longer the period of adversity and marginalisation experienced by participants prior to the group, the longer the group intervention that is needed.

Facilitator Focused

13.   The group is established to meet the needs of participants – not the facilitator, though the facilitator can meet his/her needs for meaningfulness, for example, through their work.

14.   We can only help others to the extent we have grown as a person (O'Leary, 1982). A sentence that reiterates Rogers' point that those working on the development of others ought to be in an ongoing state of development themselves (1961).

15.   Always know your positive intent (Gaffney, 2011). Knowing why you are there, what you are trying to do, what you need to bring to achieve that, what you get from it yourself...

16.   Corey's idea that group leaders ought to live 'growth oriented lives' reminds us of the onus that is on us to continue to work on our own growth and development.

17.   Wm Glasser's view that we can only be responsible for that which we can control reminds us that we are not all powerful. It is also a useful nudge towards setting good boundaries.

18.   Karl Popper's view that "all we have is our current best thinking" underlines the dangers of being certain or adamant (Magee, 1998). Very few if any positions can be fixed or definitive: we need to be as flexible and open as we can be, and recognise our own inevitable fallibility.

19.   Steve de Shazar's adage that simply calling something a problem makes it so, reminds us to take care with how we perceive and label issues (1988).

Reflection Corner: *What beliefs underpin your practice?*

Why are you drawn to working with groups?

What do you gain from running groups?

What are you offering the groups you run?

Where do you need to improve and grow?

How open are you to further growth?

What internalised beliefs have you had to identify, question and dispense with in order to work better with groups?

What sustains you in your practice when you encounter challenges and difficulties?

What thinkers and theorists most inspire you?

The new normal!

When I began this text in the early days of February 2020 there were worrying reports of a mysterious illness that experts proclaimed had the potential to become a global pandemic. As it ripped a path across the globe, infecting and sickening millions, it began to dawn on me that I was writing a book about groups when social distancing was proclaimed the only effective treatment. Did this catastrophic event herald the end of groups as we knew them?

As highly absorbed as I may have been in my writing, something of the external world nonetheless penetrated. I was, for instance, invited to participate on a 'zoom' call, but having no idea what it was or how to go about it I was unnerved, made my excuses and ran for the hills. Anticipation of my first few zoom calls kept me awake the night before.

It became clear that face to face learning was in hiatus so I tardily signed up for some online courses. The first was on the topic of social media – aimed at beginners. It was not pleasant! I found myself way behind everyone else in terms of knowledge and felt an antique most of the time. The tutor whizzed through a multitude of screens and there was little opportunity for interaction and clarification. I was both exhausted after the two hour classes and dispirited.

I was writing at the time of how intimidating it can be for participants to enter a new group, and how as facilitators we need to always be aware of their anxieties. My own experiences of being a learner in these strange and novel times were strongly underlining this point for me.

I then signed up for a course on delivering online training. Leading up to the course I again found myself quite apprehensive. I feared I would once again lag behind everyone else. Or worse, that I would finish the course feeling that this new mode was beyond me and I would have to abandon the work I loved.

It went better: somewhat. Once again, I found the two hour sessions exhausting, and despite being more interactive, it was still quite stilted and

lacking in spontaneity and cohesion. The tutor reiterated these very points, advising shorter sessions, more breaks, more pre-group work etc.

Now, as I face into the autumn of 2020 preparing to grasp the nettle and run some courses online I remain quite apprehensive. I feel I have an awful lot to learn. As I progress I intend adding to this document. Observations are welcome from all and sundry, be it in the form of relating experiences or questions. O brave new world that has such creatures in it! Good luck to one and all

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