EFFECTIVE GROUP LEADERSHIP: INSIGHTS OF A PRACTITIONER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Effective Group Leadership

Insights of a Practitioner

Gerard Fitzpatrick

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my mother, Mary Fitzpatrick; moreover, to the memory of Maudie Glynn and Corena Crowley.

INTRODUCTION

AUDIENCE

Sartre proposed that every piece of writing has an intended audience (Eagleton, 1983). My sense of this imagined reader is worth reflecting upon. How do I want to be seen by them? Genuine, insightful, interesting?

I desire a response from others, but this is effectively outside my control. Naturally, I hope for a positive reaction – I might get no reaction at all, or a highly critical one. I find it a vulnerable position.

I feel somewhat similar starting a new group: Will the participants like what I do, find the group useful, have regard for me? Or consider what I deliver a disappointment? I feel the truth of Kierkegaard's observation: "to venture causes anxiety" (cited in May, 1975). I find my anxieties and fears instructive. I want to feel safe: I also want to grow. I am conflicted. To grow, I have to venture beyond my everyday routines: As Gide put it, "man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore".

Jung wrote that the aspects of ourselves we do not want the world to see we put in the 'shadow', which is part of the unconscious (Johnson, 1991). Much of what we are ashamed of goes there, our vulnerabilities, our doubts. However, Jung also said that the shadow is 90% gold – our qualities and gifts are there, our aspirations as well, because we are at least as likely to hide our better selves and our dreams as our darkness (ibid). In writing this work, I have to acknowledge something I've mostly kept hidden; my desire to write and my belief I have something useful to say.

There is a strong connection between voice and power; of feeling one has something to say that is interesting enough to be heard by others (McLeod, 1997). It is the cornerstone of personal development groups – people become empowered through finding their voice. In writing, I am projecting my voice further than heretofore. I do not find it a smooth or easy process. Yet I realise that my own development and integrity as a growth-promoting facilitator require it.

I can accept that the discomfort I feel is beneficial and instructive: as a group leader I am forever asking questions aimed at eliciting participants'

voices. This invariably causes group members varying levels of discomfort. As group-workers we must regularly take doses of our own medicine, so as to stay in touch with the taste of it. Many participants I work with struggle to use their voice; they fear exposure and ridicule. I feel kinship!

Just as I am asking myself why I am writing and what do I want to achieve, this volume puts related questions to the reader. Why do you work, or want to work with groups? What are you trying to achieve? What is your 'positive intent' (Gaffney, 2011). How do you yourself benefit from it? What motivates and maintains you in this work? What sustains you through setbacks? These questions are put to you because facilitation involves working with hopes, dreams and vulnerabilities. It asks a lot of us as practitioners. It is one of those occupations that call out for the practitioner to have a clear belief system, an overarching vision, a sense of mission: A manifesto!

This volume assumes that the reader is someone who works with or desires to work with groups – certainly someone who has experience of participating in groups. The purpose of such groups may vary, but I assume that those of you drawn to this text will see the development of your participants as a desired outcome, that you will see groups as fertile and growthful places that allow us to take part, share, know ourselves and occasionally be at our best – and our worst. Places where we learn deeply about ourselves and others, where we can make profound decisions about the direction of our lives and be supported as we change.

You will also likely uphold Rogers' dictum that those working on the development of others ought to be in an ongoing process of development themselves (1961). This work exhorts you, the reader, to hark to your own growth and development, to explore your strengths, your *growing edges*[1], your beliefs, your motivations. I share as much as I can summon: I tell stories to illustrate my points. Narrative therapists believe we understand life and communicate and connect through stories (McLeod, 1997). Some of the stories tell of incidents where I could, upon reflection, have done better: thus I learn and seek to improve.

The lives of others

What we do in the role of group leader matters greatly. Every interaction we have with a person, or with a group, can have an effect on how the other party feels and sees themselves. Through our decisions and our actions, we impact, often quite significantly, on the lives of others. This is

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[1] The term 'growing edges' is employed to denote areas that need attention in our practice.

no light matter. There are responsibilities and ethical aspects to this reality on which we must make choices. I am not original in stating that we are duty bound to do our best for those who participate in the groups we run. This is surely true for all who work with groups, but is implicit in the role of facilitator, with its connotations of empowerment, participation and inclusion. As groups can bring great gains to their participants, we must seek to do our best work so that those who come to our groups benefit as much as possible. This volume is about identifying and taking responsibility for that which we can control and impact upon in our role as facilitators, so as to achieve the best outcomes.

The axis around which this book turns is the entry of participants into the group. Clients enter with a range of needs, some universal, others unique. Group leaders seek to authentically 'encounter' these participants, enter into a relationship with them and facilitate their becoming full members of the group, so that they work towards clarifying, articulating and meeting their needs in concert with their fellow participants. Ideally, they will leave having actively engaged in the group process and grown from the experience.

Those who join groups bring with them hopes, fears and vulnerabilities. Along with our humanity, we seek to bring certain skills and qualities to the encounter. Just as importantly, we bring beliefs, aspirations and an overarching purpose. The more conscious and confident we are of what we bring and what we want to achieve, the better for all concerned.

For our participants to grow and embrace their voice we must undergo a similar journey ourselves in order to lead and guide the process. Like all humans, we have the capacity to grow and improve. By so doing, our clients benefit. Thus we have a clear, ethical obligation to attend to our own growth and development.

There are a number of recurring threads woven into this work – the impact of marginalisation and issues such as unemployment greatly inform the text; The idea that we never achieve a definitive or ultimate knowledge, which challenges us to deal with ambivalence and to keep growing; The view that vulnerability and even flaw is intrinsic to our humanity and that this can be as much a source of strength as weakness in forging connection; The idea that we may well grow most by making mistakes – so long as we reflect and are honest with ourselves; The use and misuse of power; The importance of vision and clarity of purpose for group leaders; The individuality and unique development of groups. The stories and voices of participants, as well as the experiences of the author, feature throughout the text in an effort to highlight the atmosphere and dynamics of groups. (I have changed names and, where necessary, other details to maintain confidentiality).

This work argues that we become better facilitators by becoming more self-aware, more self-accepting and more accepting of others; by broadening and deepening our skills and knowledge. We become better facilitators by working with more groups, ideally a range of groups – the more we experience, the more we grow. We become better facilitators by attaining greater comfort with diversity. We work more effectively when we understand and accept the reality of our influence. All of this is implied in the term 'reflective practitioner'.

For a facilitator, the point of theory is to make us better practitioners rather than better readers. While this offering is underpinned by theory, it is heavily grounded in practice; it takes much of its direction from the issues and questions that have arisen in my encounters with a wide range of groups, including marginalised, often silenced groups, as well as the questions and challenges that arise while training facilitators.

It starts by looking at our motivation as facilitators. It proceeds to examine participant growth and empowerment and its manifestation in the finding, or recovery, of voice. It continues in Chapter 2 to look at the skills, qualities and beliefs required to support participants achieve these ends. It then focuses in Chapter 3 on the vital issue of the facilitator's own personal growth and development. We look at aspects of the nature of groups themselves in Chapter 4. Dynamics are always present in groups, whether we choose to ignore them or work with them: the more we understand group dynamics, the more effective we can be. An important area of group dynamics – conflict – is explored in Chapter 5. We then explore diverse issues as working to needs, the challenge of working with diverse stakeholders and the challenge of conducting meaningful and effective evaluation. Finally, we look at a number of groups in operation in the section called Case Studies, where we explore diverse client groups such as: a women's empowerment group; progression of the long-term unemployed, including the application of positive psychology techniques to such groups; and diverse stories of participant change.

CHAPTER 1

KNOWING OUR POSITIVE INTENT: MOTIVATION, VOICE AND POWER

Why do we work with groups?

Clarity, according to Karl Popper, is always useful (1992). All facilitators need to work towards a clear, informed and ever evolving answer to the crucial question – why do we work with groups? What benefits do we get from working with groups, what needs are we meeting in ourselves? These questions are critical because when we work with others, we often meet them at a vulnerable moment and they (usually) place their trust in us. By virtue of being group leaders, power is invested in us (Yalom, 2005). Even if participants are not particularly vulnerable, a person in a position of power and trust can do harm. To exercise power benignly, we need a keen awareness both of our influence and of our motivations (Corey, 2000).

In order to be good practitioners it is necessary to understand ourselves as best we can (Ringer, 2002). If we concur with Rogers' view that those working on the development of others ought to be in an ongoing process of development themselves (1961), then part of this self-development is the understanding of our motivation and the benefits and growth we get from working with groups. Glasser opined that all behaviour is geared towards meeting needs (1998). What needs of our own are we meeting when we work with groups? Clarity on this issue allows us to work better.

What do we get from groups?

So, what benefits accrue to you, the facilitator, through your engagement with groups and what needs are you meeting? There is a broad range of potential answers. For example, we are relational beings and grow through connection with others. Our brain is wired to interact – this is evident soon after birth (Diamond, 2001). According to Bowlby (1989), one of our principal drives is to form attachments – in order to succeed

in this, we possess traits and characteristics that make us 'attachable'. We benefit when we have positive, healthy bonds and decline when we don't (Yalom, 2005). Maslow (1954) and Glasser (1998) talk of our need to belong, to form relationships. Seligman also views having positive relationships as a requirement of flourishing (2011). So, when we run groups, we, in a sense, belong to a group; we form attachments and relationships in it.

But the facilitator is the leader of the group, plays a distinct role and is not a member in the sense that participants are. Her job is to seek to meet the needs of the group members, or to facilitate their development so they meet their own. The group is not established for the purpose of meeting the needs of the facilitator, and a facilitator who loses sight of this has a boundary issue.

In few other work environments is one called on to be so present. There is no switching off when facilitating a group, it is intense. We are trying to understand and hear all that is being said – and not said. There is a demand for all aspects of us to be present and available, to present "a total organismic sensibility" (O'Leary, 1982: 18). I often find I lose track of time and on the best days I feel deeply connected to the pulse of the group and experience the sensation of flow. Seligman refers to this as engagement, a component of flourishing (2011).

When others share with me their thoughts as to whether facilitation is something they want to do, they often cite the intensity as something they consider challenging, either in an attractive or in an off-putting way. Gaffney sees 'challenge' as a component of flourishing (2011). The challenge of the position does not just occur in the room. When working with groups, we have to engage in ongoing reading, training and reflection, and all other aspects that go in to being a developing, effective professional. This provides us with long-range, goal-driven activity, enriching our lives (Ellis, 1997).

There is a great joy to be had in groups – things happen that can strike us as deeply life-affirming. To see someone own an aspect of themselves – be it a skill, a dream, vulnerability; to see the courage people show in groups, to witness and experience altruism and unconditionality, to receive respect, to facilitate a person's growth simply by listening – can be deeply impactive. When I see participants grow and flourish, I feel uplifted, optimistic. Seeing others grow is in itself growthful for me.

I have also met with the deepest sorrow in groups, encountering people distraught with loss, despair and hopelessness. To see a group row in, in solidarity, behind someone at a time like this is inspiring.

Underpinning my work as a facilitator is that deep human need that our lives and activities have meaning (May, 1975). I am enriched by my work

with others; I feel love and joy, sadness and pain: I am affected constantly by my work with people. I feel I matter in these moments. I see it making a difference to others that I try. This drive to experience meaning, to see meaningfulness in one's activities is fundamental to well-being (Seligman, 2011). I touch participants' lives as they touch mine. I am listened to, my opinion valued, as I listen to and validate in turn.

Returning to the question – why groups, what draws you, what do you get from working with groups? Every group facilitator is duty bound to explore this question, and to go on exploring it because the answer will surely continue to evolve.

Overarching vision

The Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) propound that a group leader ought to have an overarching theoretical framework to direct their practice (1998). A framework of this nature provides a guide and an anchor, not least when things become challenging. Facilitation is broadly underpinned by humanistic ideals – the view that given core conditions people develop the capacity to learn, grow and resolve their own issues. If we genuinely uphold such views, we find they bolster our own effectiveness.

A guiding vision is of benefit when we are confronted with hopelessness. If an element of our beliefs is that a person has the innate potential to develop, we are less likely to be daunted by apathetic behaviour and more likely to be resilient with regard to our aims and effort. If we encounter hopelessness in others, we persist because we believe it can pass.

We bear in mind that the person's capacity to grow and change is there whether the person themselves can yet see this capacity. It can take time for a group member to become open to the idea of their potential, let alone seek to harness it. It can also take considerable time for a participant to consider themselves "worthy of being helped" (Bowlby, 1988: 162).

Humans do not thrive when standing still – hence the phrase 'life is passing me by'. Nature tends to be merciless to life forms that have lost momentum. As a result, part of my belief system is that people are invariably better off doing something – moving – than standing still. This strengthens my resolve to support people take steps, gain momentum and recover hope. Deeds are the offspring of hope (Erickson, cited in De Shazar, 1988: 49).

If I believe that people have the capacity to resolve their own issues, then it will lessen any impulse I have to give 'solutions' and I will understand that giving solutions is counterproductive. If I subscribe to Kant's idea that we cannot know 'ultimate reality' (Magee, 1997) then I am further restrained from giving directive advice. If I believe the capacity and

impulse to grow is innate and life-lasting, then I will seek to run interventions that facilitate learning and growth for all age groups.

If I believe that most aggression results from internal discomfort and 'ill at easeness' then I feel less threatened when confronted by anger. By not responding as if I am under threat, but with compassion and understanding, I can facilitate the participant to work through the feeling and out of its grip, and even perhaps to understand its genesis. If I concur with Popper that all we have is our current best thinking (1992), then I will not see any position as fixed or definitive and will aspire to keep moving and keep growing – and I will believe it is in everyone else's interest and capacity to do so. Having an overarching vision underpins our practice. It can function as a mission, motivating and inspiring. Others will sense it from you and be more inclined to accept you as a group leader.

In existential terms, having a guiding vision concerns agency, purpose and meaning. We only have so much life, so much time, we are better for knowing what we want to do with it and to choose to do that as best we can, so we can have that comforting and life-enhancing feeling that what we do matters, that we are living as best we can. If we know our larger purpose, all those around us benefit, including ourselves. If we don't – and I imagine most of us are familiar with the occasional feeling we are not living as we should, or up to our expectations of ourselves – then we feel phoney when working on the development of others and cannot do so as effectively or congruently.

Voice and power

A sizeable portion of the experience that this writer has gathered has been with what might be termed marginalised or disadvantaged groups, such as the long-term unemployed, people in recovery from addiction, ex-prisoners, travellers, people with disabilities, immigrants, young people who have not thrived in mainstream education, among others. Furthermore, many of those who attend the training programmes that I deliver work with much the same client base. As a result, these '*voices from the margins*' echo throughout these pages.

In contrast, as a mature student in university I found myself among a population who enjoyed what might be termed comfortable, structured, professional, middle-class lives. The bulk of our skills practice was conducted with our fellow students or people of similar background. As we engaged in practice and in reflective discussions, I noticed that everyone for the greater part participated and stayed focused and engaged in the proceedings. An entry requirement on all such courses was that people had already done and would continue to undertake ongoing personal and

professional development – this was largely evident. When engaging in practice sessions there were few topics that might be considered too deep or sensitive for the group to work on – depth, after all, was our chosen field. In general, the level of confidence and self-esteem of group members would have been that commensurate with people who were 'advantaged' and relatively self-aware. On postgraduate-level courses, a certain level of linguistic and intellectual capability can be assumed, as well as a capacity to sustain concentration for long periods. If probing questions are asked, there is the competence to reflect upon and respond to the discussion.

Naturally this is not to claim that my fellow students and I did not experience serious life problems – no-one is immune from same. And there were plenty of probing questions we did our best to deflect. But I did feel that, in the world outside of the university, I was working with the disadvantaged, while conversely training with the advantaged. The clients I worked with did not generally possess fluidity of speech (indeed, some struggled to talk at all), had little or no experience of personal development and were often suspicious of same – they did not know the codes my peers and I had spent many years immersed in.

Much of the writing about groups "is couched in the third person" (Ringer, 2002: 47) and written from the vantage of a perfect facilitator who seemed to have the benefit of working with clients not unlike my university peers. This volume is written by an imperfect, evolving facilitator, who has learnt from engagement with disadvantaged clients.

The most disadvantaged groups I have worked with to date have been ex-prisoners and Irish Travellers. The difference between working with these groups and the range of college groups I have been a member of is stark. All of the ex-prisoners I have thus far worked with have experienced extreme marginalisation with its attendant symptoms. The great majority suffered from addictions, largely came from shattered homes, had frequently experienced homelessness, left school early and since then have had very little experience of employment or further training. They have rarely been members of clubs, teams or societies. They have had little or no experience of lasting intellectual engagement, thus denying them the opportunity to build concentration and sustained focus. They have rarely had the experience of applying consistent effort to tasks, undermining their opportunity to build resilience or to have learnt the fundamental truth that sustained effort greatly affects the likelihood of a desired outcome. Probably as a result, their concentration was generally poor. In fact, the act of concentration was often felt by them to be intolerable, for the experience of taking substances taught the toxic lesson that one could be gratified instantly, that there was a shortcut, an easy pleasurable path that avoided effort, tedium or pain.

I feel much of my training and much of the literature on groups is not always (readily) applicable to working with the 'voiceless' because it largely assumes a capacity to identify and voice needs, feelings and aspirations. This is contrary to my experience of working with most marginalised clients for whom being asked to verbalise their inner experience is more than uncomfortable. Moreover, I have come to believe that clients who have experienced long-term disadvantage simply would not work in non-directive groups á la Rogers; they would find them intimidating, directionless and not at all empowering. We proceed therefore by looking at the issue of voice and power.

Telling tales: the participant as author

One of the primary purposes of developmental groups is to facilitate participants find, own and use their voice to express themselves: to connect with and relate in a meaningful way to others: to clarify and tell their story. The field of Narrative Therapy regards telling stories as a fundamental human activity, used to make sense of our world and our selves (McLeod, 1997). One of the great advances of psychology was to discover the health-enhancing effect of listening. Conversely, if denied the opportunity to tell their story, people get ill (Pennebaker and Harber, 1993). They struggle to get to know themselves, with potentially devastating consequences (Rogers, 1980). McLeod asserts that one of the distinctive features of the modern world is that "there is little space in the dominant social narrative of progress, development and improvement for stories of loss" (1997: 153). Silencing is a pervasive cultural phenomenon, thus the terms 'marginalised', 'voiceless' and 'excluded'. It is a primary tool of perpetrators (Herman, 1992), of those who dominate and control others (Said, 1993).

There is an implicit power in 'authoring' (White & Epston, 1990). Mishler (1986) equates empowerment with speaking in one's own voice. Inviting participants in groups to talk, to tell their story, presents group members with the opportunity to fulfil the need to be listened to, accepted and understood. As McLeod states, "for many people, the mere opportunity to tell their story, and to have that story received and valued, is an immensely affirming experience" (1997: 105).

The function of story

In hearing stories, the facilitator and group participants are offered the opportunity to get close to the sense of identity experienced by a person through the stories she tells about herself (ibid). These stories reveal much

about the storyteller's inner world and her self-perception (ibid). The narrator will usually leaven her story with self-revealing asides, judgements and opinions (Riessman, 1993). In order to be listened to, the teller will choose a story that she expects to be of interest to her audience, which again is revealing of her perceptions (McLeod, 1997).

Story represents the chief means by which people organise and communicate the meaning of events and experience (ibid). The 'storying' of experience provides people "with a sense of continuity and meaning" (White & Epson, 1990: 10) as it allows people to see or detect a 'plot' in their lives which makes sense of the past and appears to provide momentum and direction into the future. Thus, stories give our lives not just structure, but direction, meaning and purpose. This overarching life story provides humans with a way to understand and present themselves.

Stories are thus synonymous with identity. Our self-narratives reveal what we count as important (Bruner, 1986). No narrative can encompass the full range of our lived experience. As we go fitting our experiences into our narratives, we select, edit, exclude and suppress those elements that do not fit (White & Epston). The stories we tell about ourselves do not merely explain to us our selves or our environment, they influence our interpretations, actions and reactions: we act in accordance with our story. As Riessman writes, "individuals become the autobiographical narratives which they tell about their lives" (1993: 2).

Audience is a critical consideration in the development of stories. While stories are shaped by our respective perceptions, they are also shaped by audience (McLeod, 1997). There is interaction between teller and listener. The story is inevitably influenced by this engagement, as the storyteller gauges listener expectations, and responds to observations, body language and questions (McLeod, 1997). Moreover, as narrative is inevitably a self-representation (Goffman, 1959), then modifications to a story must result in changes in the self-image of the storyteller. With every performance, "persons are re-authoring their lives" (White & Epson, 1990: 13): the "performance itself is constitutive" (Bruner, 1986: 11), which makes the role and power of the listener a live and vital element. In the act of narration, all constituent elements engage in a dynamic process of change.

Changing the story

If we accept the idea that people are their story, then it follows that the story they construct to make sense of themselves and their experience has a crucial bearing on the course of their lives – for good or ill. We do not always construct self-enhancing stories. People can relegate to the

'shadow' qualities and strengths as much as things they are ashamed of (Johnson, 1991). Many participants in disadvantaged groups have a starkly negative self-perception, a 'broken story'. They struggle to see and accept their strengths and qualities.

Happily, stories are capable of being re-authored by the narrator. The attitude of the listeners to the story teller is vital, as their response and reaction to the narrative becomes an element in its construction. Research indicates that group participants regard learning about themselves from the reactions and feedback of other group members to be the most important therapeutic group factor (Yalom, 2005). In a group, a participant is presented with reactions that challenge or affirm their story. They obtain the opportunity to see themselves as others see them, gain new insight into themselves or on qualities they have edited out or not integrated. The feedback they receive from other group members becomes raw material for re-authoring. Participants of groups I have facilitated have likened the process of acknowledging, integrating and voicing their story to a rebirth. It is at the very least the authoring of a new chapter, with myriad twists and possible endings.

Redemption song

One of the great joys in the working life of a facilitator is witnessing the re-authoring of a story of bleakness, failure and low self-regard into a tale of possibility and redemption. The ingredients that facilitate this transformation are factually straightforward. As Rogers makes clear, those who feel understood by others begin to feel they are understandable (1961). Feeling understood fundamentally implies being accepted, as well as being seen. Acceptance and encouragement from another (or in group settings, others) supports the process of self-acceptance and seeing oneself in a fuller, more generous way. Those who accept themselves can in turn go on to accept and see the qualities in others (ibid). A virtuous cycle is developed.

When group members feel safe to reveal themselves in a suitable group environment they see that their negative view of themselves is not shared by others whom they perceive as trustworthy. As their previous self-narrative does not stack up, the process of seeing themselves anew, of re-authoring, commences. When they give voice to this new narrative and see that their story is accorded credibility, their own belief in it is strengthened, giving it narrative truth. New possibilities are born.

Empowerment

Rappaport (1984), described empowerment as "a process: the mechanism by which people, organisations, and communities gain mastery over their

lives" (p. 3). Similarly, Lee and Gaucher (2000) see the goal of empowerment as increasing clients' "personal, interpersonal and/or political power so that they can take action to improve their situation" (p. 56).

Berger (1997) describes the goal of empowerment groups as being to enhance the coping skills and sense of competence of participants. Scott (2002) describes the goal of her youth empowerment group as raising participant awareness of their culture and its values, and promoting sociability and social networks. Elsewhere, Powe (2002) links empowerment and knowledge, recalling Foucault's axiom that power and knowledge are synonymous (Danaher, Schirato & Webb, 2000).

In a study conducted by Racine and Sévigny (2001), the opportunity to speak and be listened to by others empowered the participants. This resonates with Mishler's view that empowerment is being able to speak in one's own voice (cited in Richardson, 1996). Inherent in an empowerment process is the encouragement of personal responsibility and accountability for outcomes, an ownership of oneself (Brunson & Vogt, 1996).

A synthesis of the implicit definitions of Berger (1997), Scott (2002), Racine and Sévigny (2001), Powe (2002) and Brunson and Vogt (1996), portrays empowerment as a process rather than a destination. It involves people learning about themselves and others, feeling better about themselves, feeling more autonomous and competent, more able to interact with others and developing the ability to be able to speak in their own voice.

It is reasonable to assert that central to the philosophy of facilitation is the notion of empowerment – that growth and development; the acquisition of self-knowledge; the acceptance and integration of this knowledge; the altering of self-perception to a realistic, positive view of the self; the capacity to give voice to who one is, are all aspects of empowerment and outcomes sought by a facilitator.

Empowerment and efficacy in work teams

Empowerment is related to self-efficacy and an expectation that effort will lead to desired outcomes (Bandura, 1995). Within work organisations, the evidence suggests that people in teams perform better when they feel empowered (Koberg, Boss, Senjem & Goodman, 1999; Pescosolido, 2001, 2003; Jung & Sosik, 2002). Performance in turn enhances self-efficacy and expands an individual's power, resilience and self-regard.

According to Spreitzer (1995) empowerment of workers in a team setting has been shown to affect overall organisational effectiveness (cited in Koberg et al., 1999). Koberg found that workers who feel empowered experience increased job satisfaction and effectiveness and are more likely

to stay in their organisation. Feelings of empowerment are more likely in a work group headed by an approachable leader who encourages and supports the work of the group and facilitates group effectiveness. Group decision making, sharing of responsibilities and problems openly, and intra-group trust are found to be factors that enhance empowerment. These findings echo the contention of Shipper and Manz (1992) that for members of a work group to feel they exercise influence over themselves they must be put in a situation of increased autonomy and decreased control.

Pescosolido (2003) writes that group efficacy has the potential to affect a group's commitment, how its members work together and how the group responds to trial. He shows that high levels of group efficacy lead to a greater desire to continue working as a group, increased openness to learning from other group members, greater opportunities to lead the group and increased opportunity to work independently within the group.

Those with high levels of self-efficacy tend to have a more internal locus of control, believing they have more control over events (Bandura, 1995). They tend to be relatively less anxious, better able to cope if things go wrong and more willing to continue their task in the face of setbacks. What goes for individuals goes for groups (Pescosolido, 2003). A group's perception of its level of efficacy is related to its success in performing tasks. This in turn dictates the goals it will set (Baker, 2001).

The literature on work group efficacy shows that groups that are open, competent, with an approachable leader, high intra-group trust, and where members feel they have input into decisions and are trusted with autonomy, rather than controlled, are more likely to result in members feeling empowered, less anxious, achieving higher outcomes and staying longer with the group.

Empowerment in the education process

Work by Brunson and Vogt (1996) in an educational setting shows that empowerment is enhanced by active participation in an experiential learning environment. The authors report on a project – a group dynamics and leadership course – that employed an empowering educational philosophy derived from the work of Dewey and Freire. The approach aimed to promote trust, collaborative learning, and tolerance for ambiguity.

They found that participants moved towards an empowering orientation at different rates. Coming from an education culture that was directive, rational and empirical, some participants did not find an atmosphere of trust and collaboration easy. The authors refer to Freire's observation that there can be a fear of freedom and autonomy in some students. Such

students are more comfortable and accustomed to a focus on outcomes over process. These Freire labelled the 'good lesser' and the authors concur with Freire that ambiguity can be used to frustrate the 'good lesser' in their drive for outcomes and aid their creativity.

The authors noted that the approach required a surrendering of traditional teacher power, and a move from a role of redistributing information in favour of one that facilitates the acquisition of learning. To play the role fully, the facilitator needed energy, adaptability, ingenuity and tolerance for ambiguity, creating a parallel between facilitator requirements and what the programme sought to encourage in participants.

The literature on empowerment in an educational setting bears similarities to that concerned with a work setting. In both cases, empowerment is seen to result in improved results, higher levels of self-efficacy, and more autonomy and independence from the leader. Moreover, the role of the manager or educator is seen to be one of surrendering traditional power in favour of increased autonomy of learner/worker – in short, being facilitative rather than directive. Trust, communication and participation in decision making are seen to be key elements in both fields, leading to similar results.

Resistance to growth and empowerment

Research indicates that those who have power will attempt to hang on to it and will respond to perceived threat by closing ranks (Sachev & Bourhis, 1991; Grant, 1992; Dovey & Mason, 1984). In fact, the more power a group has, the more discriminatory it will act towards those with less (Sachev & Bourhis, 1991). As humans are relational beings, change in a group participant can impact the lives of members of their circle outside the group – power relations and established norms are disturbed, and resistance and undermining can result.

In a study on women returning to education, Berger (1997) reports on the resistance experienced by group members from their partners, parents and children. Berger designed and ran the programme to help participants "enhance their coping skills and sense of competence" (21). One of the key difficulties faced by participants was the fact that significant others tried to corral them back into old routines. One of the positive outcomes of the group was that it helped members develop strategies to manage such resistance. The group served as a mechanism that mutually validated participants' capacity to do things for themselves instead of allowing others to control them. Through such support, members felt they became better at limiting the demands of others, gaining time for themselves, and overcoming feelings of guilt so that they could legitimise their own needs.

While the women experienced anxiety around failing, they also feared too much success lest it impact negatively on their relationship with husband or partner. Some reported their husbands feared they might begin to consider themselves superior and end up leaving the marriage. Others reported their husbands supported them in principle, but complained when the level of attention they were accustomed to receiving declined. Whether through a desire to hang on to power, maintain a status quo, or fear of losing a loved one, Berger's study demonstrated that resistance to empowerment can be motivated by a number of factors. It also suggests that such resistance is easier to manage by use of a group process, where members are offered the opportunity to share their concerns, receive support, as well as focus on and validate their activities and achievements. Through the group process, guilt and anxiety diminished, and the participants gained a broader perspective on their own lives and needs.

The role of groups in combating social exclusion

Research by Lee and Gaucher (2000) reveals that the causes of disempowerment are not confined to significant others and can be societal in origin. The authors report on a study they conducted on an empowerment group for adolescents who suffered developmental disabilities and behavioural and/or psychiatric problems, a group often excluded from mainstream society, with their families generally lacking power and resources. As a result, the programme directors considered it necessary to develop a two-fold approach: to offer effective group treatment for the dually diagnosed adolescents and to concurrently empower their families.

The framework of the programme was built around the concept of social competency, mastery and empowerment. The authors cite a list of principles of empowerment relevant to people with developmental disabilities: gaining awareness of one's social and political situation; emphasising strengths and potential over deficits and limitations; actively participating in community organisations to foster skill, knowledge and collective action. Furthermore, relations with professionals should be collaborative rather than hierarchical.

In order to achieve their objectives, the facilitators felt it necessary to provide a social context for members to interact and begin to acquire social competency and enhance self-efficacy. Networking was encouraged, which might necessitate training members to use the phone: social events were held weekly, with members' families actively involved in the organisation. Regular outings were organised to expose members to social situations and test newly acquired skills such as ordering food and paying

at restaurants. Physical challenges and outings necessitated team work and gave members the opportunity to gain more confidence in their abilities. Most activities were group based, which fostered a sense of participation and collectiveness which "is also a significant element of empowerment" (Lee & Gaucher, p. 63).

Parents were utilised as in as many ways as possible, letting them experience their capabilities to mobilise, initiate activities and negotiate life events. Such activity provided them with a networking opportunity, countering isolation and frustration. Parents reported experiencing their "resourcefulness, potential, self-determination, competency and self efficacy" (p. 64). The evaluation revealed that the empowerment of parents was seen as a major component of the success of the programme.

The findings for the group members indicated significant improvement in social skills. Significantly, those parents who were most active reported most improvement in their children's social skills. The authors speculate that improvement in such skills is likely to be attributable to learning through activities, increased exposure to a range of social contexts, and curative factors operating in the group process. Citing Yalom, they list these latter factors as the feeling of belonging and acceptance; the experience of being like others in similar situations; and the opportunity to help each other, to observe similar behaviours and to learn from interpersonal action. The process of empowering the members and their parents mirrored each other in ways. Both groups were facilitated to come together and form a cohesive 'mini-community', to take on practical and achievable goals, to take on responsibility and act as a support for each other.

Resistance to empowerment can be cultural in nature and deeply embedded. A study on an empowerment group for divorced Chinese women reports that Chinese culture is highly patriarchal, wherein women are dependent on their husbands for social standing (Chan, Chan, & Lou, 2002). Divorce can mean a loss of role, identity, and security, leading to hardship, poverty, violence and social and emotional problems. Despite its prevalence, divorce is regarded as a highly undesirable option, regardless of the state of the marriage, and divorced women are isolated and their chances of re-marriage low: with divorce rates approaching the 'western' norm of 40%, the number of women in this predicament is rocketing. As a result of social isolation, the feelings of hurt, fear and betrayal that may accompany divorce are not expressed – not being the cultural norm – often leading to poor health.

An empowerment group was set up to help women in this predicament to recover, by adopting a holistic body-mind-spirit approach. The results showed that the intervention helped reduce stress, increase energy levels,

promote better health, gain greater satisfaction in life and obtain a sense of personal mastery. The participants transformed from passive victims into active people, advocating for change and social justice. They served as a social support to each other and developed a new focus, from individual sense of failure, to concern for the collective well-being of all other women. They provided for each other that which their culture withdrew from them: a sense of community, belonging, purpose and identity. Listed first among the activities the women found helpful and enjoyable was 'small group sharing', an environment in which they could speak of their hurt, be listened to, find acceptance, belonging and comfort.

A study by Scott (2002) explored the impact of a model delivered to young inner city African American females who lived in extremely difficult environments, and were often witness to sudden and appalling acts of violence. As a result, these teenagers were filled with insecurity, anxiety and hopelessness, and often reacted with aggressive and disruptive behaviour.

Scott described the immersion of these young participants in a cohesive and clearly defined cultural and communal setting, which aimed to restore pride in a wider sense of identity. The programme was rich in ancient African tribal lore, customs, traditions and language and aimed to provide participants with a history, a sense of culture and belonging. Being culturally rooted, they could move forward equipped with a stronger sense of self. Their self-narratives gained a positive and wider context, enriched by enhanced cultural and individual awareness.

Members demonstrated marked improvement in self-esteem, in their ability to put words on feelings and in negotiating conflict respectfully with peers and adults. Scott concluded that the culturally relevant values were fundamental in establishing a group culture in which the members grew more resilient, positive and skilful.

Telling stories and empowerment

A study by Racine and Sévigny (2001) on homeless women in Montreal details the creation of a setting that allowed a traditionally unheard group, the female users of a homeless shelter, to recount their life stories. Workers at the shelter devised a board game that gave participants the opportunity to portray how they dealt with the complications of their daily lives and to demonstrate their skills and coping strategies. The game helped participants share experiences and have their resourcefulness recognised; it encouraged dialogue among participants; it validated feelings and fostered solidarity. It gave participants a rare opportunity to recount their story and

be listened to, to focus on their strengths rather than their crises and difficulties. They were able to share their knowledge, learn from others and reconsider their way of acting or thinking. The players reported that it was powerful to tell and be believed.

The authors state that for these women the game was a first step in producing a version of their experience that could sustain their life story in positive ways. In essence, the women engaged in an activity that allowed them to validate their story and even consider developing another.

For the women it was novel that others were interested in their knowledge and not just their problems. Moreover, they felt their lives could be something to be proud rather than ashamed of because dealing with such difficult lives required skill and resourcefulness. The game, and contact with others, helped engineer a new perspective, and a new sense of self-appreciation and appreciation of others.

A study conducted by Gilbert and Beidler (2001) into chemically dependent participants on a residential programme, used a narrative approach to help members understand their lives and the situation they were in, help them support and educate each other, develop skills, empower themselves and resolve problems. The use of narrative enabled participants to "give meaning to their pasts, explain their present realities, and create options for their futures" (Gilbert et al., pp. 101–102). The approach allowed participants to see patterns in their lives, explore how they have come to be where they are, and work out where they are likely to go – particularly if they don't change behaviour. It offered participants the opportunity to develop an alternative self-narrative.

Themes that emerged from the stories told were – powerlessness, no sense of self, no joy, no honesty, no trust, no sense of community, no attention span, and no words for feelings. By telling stories in the group, the women, normally isolated, were able to connect with others, receive understanding and validation, support and lay claim to their individuality, yet also become conscious of what they had in common with their fellow residents.

Simply telling their stories was empowering for the women. They decided what to include and omit; they were in control of how they presented themselves to the others. In taking control of her story, the teller moved a step closer to taking responsibility for it. In sharing, she was also binding herself to the group. The audience would identify with different elements of the story, building cohesion, commonality and safety. In telling her story, the woman could begin the journey to rebuilding herself as a sober woman, practise honesty and trust, feel more connected to others and put some of her feelings into words. Her acceptance by an 'audience'

helped her accept herself, and she began to see herself as less a pariah than she feared she was.

Narrative games were also used, where women could interrupt stories of the spiral of addiction and invent different endings. This sharing helped supply the women with a bank of words to express feelings and helped them identify themselves as women in recovery. This alleviated feelings of powerlessness in the face of addiction – a different ending could be imagined, the women, as authors of their own lives, could write the ending they chose.

Conclusion

The studies reviewed herein view empowerment as a desirable thing, leading to the growth, progression and betterment of individuals, community and society. The literature also reveals that certain groups and cultures in society suffer disempowerment, the causes of which are varied – the end result being exclusion from the mainstream and the silencing of their voices. One of the key functions of their respective groups is to offer participants what they are denied elsewhere – the opportunity to be listened to, tell or develop their story and feel connected to a community.

The presence of certain factors aids the process of empowerment – being able to voice anxieties in a sharing, intimate and accepting environment helps alleviate stress and increases participants' efficacy in dealing with their problems. The rules created by a group of traumatised African American adolescents reflect the group environment they feel they need: no bossing, good listening and being positive and non-judgemental regarding others (Scott). Being encouraged to speak and being believed is experienced as self-enhancing (Racine & Sévigny). Collaborative and non-hierarchical relationships between leaders and members are consistently portrayed as helpful.

In terms of creating a conducive environment these studies have a lot in common. They all portray people in difficulty being facilitated to band together to listen to each other, seek and give validation, and begin to attain a level of self-acceptance. They do so in an open, safe, participatory environment.

Many of the groups surveyed have suffered what McLeod (1997) and Herman (2001) refer to as silencing. In McLeod's view there is little tolerance in the dominant culture for stories of failure. The unheard are not only excluded and marginalised, but a basic human need is denied them, with negative implications for their health and well-being.

The studies describe the establishment of fora in which people generally silenced are brought together and provide an attentive audience for each other, with very positive results. The wider cultural narrative has cast these people as either deviants, or of little consequence. Given the chance to speak of themselves in a positive light, supported to take responsibility for their lives and being accepted and validated by others has, in all the groups reviewed, resulted in increased empowerment for the participants.

Overcoming silencing is not, in some cases, merely about providing someone with the opportunity to talk. Some people lack the words to give voice to their story and are helped to acquire sufficient vocabulary to name feelings through interaction with others. In the study conducted by Scott (2002) we encounter a marginalised group that is unaware of its culture: the intervention described provides them with a knowledge of their tradition and history which allows them to construct positive self-perceptions. They have been given a framework in which to locate their self-narrative.

Looking more positively on their culture and community allows them to look more favourably on themselves. Without this framework their lives are fragmented. There is a clear link between their acquisition of personal and cultural knowledge and their consequent empowerment. In the study conducted by Gilbert & Beidler (2001) the participants lack words with which they can describe their feelings – they cannot author without words. Through connecting with others they acquire the words with which they can give voice to their pain, their strengths and their stories. In authoring, they acquire some element of control and begin the process of taking responsibility for their actions.

Providing people with the tools and environment to tell their stories, and be heard by others, is an affirming and empowering process.

The studies reviewed have portrayed a variety of marginalised and disempowered people who are denied this opportunity. As a result, they live isolated, destructive lives. An empowerment group, to be effective, has to have as objectives the establishment of conditions wherein participants have the opportunity to develop the tools to construct and tell their story and be listened to. Mishler (1986) equated empowerment with being able to speak in one's own voice. As has been seen, a group intervention can provide the platform to facilitate such an action. A group intervention can facilitate change, growth and autonomy and help counteract resistance.

The facilitator's role is to midwife this process. She is there to provide the necessary conditions, bringing expertise and qualities, the belief it can work, a knowledge that the group members are better doing that which

they are able to do for themselves and that they can build the capacity to extend their competence. It is a powerful and sensitive position (and a privileged one) requiring vision, respect and skill. It also requires of the facilitator that they be clear about their own motivation and that they be committed to their own ongoing growth and development. The skills and qualities she needs to bring in order to achieve her goals are considered in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2

FACILITATION: SKILLS AND QUALITIES

Influence rather than control... evoke... rather than force a response
(Ringer, 2002: 62)

Leadership

The question of leadership is of considerable import for facilitators. Corey refers throughout to facilitators as group leaders and states they need to "live growth oriented lives" (2000: 20). The facilitator is the formal leader of the group and will be seen as such, regardless of how egalitarian, non-hierarchical, or participative her approach. She sets the culture and heavily influences the norms (Yalom, 2005). She will be looked to for guidance and expertise. While Rogers advocated non-directive group leadership, this way of operating is usually something that a group can attain for periods in the later stages of a group's development. In the early stages, particularly when working with disadvantaged groups, participants need and want a group leader (Ringer, 2002).

As the group facilitator is the formal leader of the group, questions around power, responsibility and motivation arise for her consideration. Why is she drawn to a leadership position? What is her ultimate or overarching purpose? Writing at a time of grave economic crisis, the eminent historian Joe Lee reviewed the performance of the Irish state in a number of fields over the course of the 20th century, in an effort to understand the torpid society that independent Ireland had become. He found great flaws in the exercise of leadership in the state and opined that those who aspired to leadership seemed to be motivated more by a desire to be seen to be in charge than to achieve a goal or fulfil a vision (Lee, 1990).

This echoes sentiments expressed by Freud in his work on narcissism, where he wondered what led people to want to be in charge of others (Edmundson, 2007). Allied to William Glasser's view that power is one of our basic psychological needs (1998), it is clear that active consideration of

the fact the position of group facilitator has power and influence invested in it is of considerable moment, never more so than when dealing with vulnerable groups.

What are the traits of an authentic leader? The question is worthy of a volume in itself. One could take two very different leaders and find few things they have in common, but one point of commonality, the defining one surely, is that they have a vision, something they want to achieve, allied to a belief that they are suitable figures of leadership. While the possession of vision and confidence are a necessity in order to lead groups to achieve its goals, history shows these traits need to be tempered by a strong ethical sensibility.

What is it you want to achieve when you lead a group? What is your vision? What are the skills you need, the beliefs and characteristics that you will require if you are to succeed? Under the principle that there's nothing good that can't be improved upon, where do you need to grow to achieve your ends? The power invested in a facilitator by the group members is a soft power concerning influence rather than control. When you are leading a group, just bring attention to the fact that when the group enters the room they look to you for direction: they rely on your leadership (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). The group leader establishes the style of working, the tempo, and much else besides. How these matters are conducted has an undeniable impact on the effect of the group on its participants. By gaining clarity and awareness around our vision and our relationship to power, we not only give ourselves a source of guidance, and a way of growing and improving, but most importantly, we lessen the likelihood of using the group to meet our own needs and doing harm to participants.

Occupy the chair

How do you feel about being seen as the group leader, about being looked to as the one who provides guidance, direction and expertise? It is probably the aspect of facilitation that trainees struggle with most. A reluctant leader can be as bad for a group as a facilitator wanting to be in charge for reasons of self-aggrandisement.

The leader has a right to expect certain things from the group: the group cannot function as envisaged unless the group members confer the power and status of group leader on to the facilitator. If the leadership of the facilitator is resisted – which can happen for myriad reasons – the group leader has to confront this reality perhaps by initially naming what she is experiencing. The simple act of naming demonstrates leadership and sets the stage for resolution of the impasse (Benson, 2001).

It is part of the dynamic of groups that the group leader be challenged, as participants work through the process of finding the balance between being part of something (belonging) and being autonomous. Being challenged is not the same as being unseated or disregarded however. Being in groups can generate responses and patterns that develop in early life and are often unconscious to the participant – the evocation of these responses can be bewildering to the group and the individuals themselves. Moreover, the leadership figure in the group can act as a lightning rod that draws forth participants' 'Internal Working Model'[2] regarding authority figures, providing them with an opportunity to bring their unconscious assumptions to awareness (Ringer, 2002). An ambivalent facilitator will stymie such developments and create insecurity (Benson, 2001). A leader who is intimidated by these natural occurrences or is daunted at the prospect of challenging anti-group behaviours makes the group an insecure place for participants (Nitsun, 1996).

As stated, leadership is often the element of group facilitation that is found most intimidating for a novice facilitator and where confidence can sink most quickly if things are not going as planned. It can take time to grow into an acceptance of oneself as group leader. I recall seeing in the faces of group members their acceptance of me as the group leader when I still had doubts myself! But it is vital to occupy the position, particularly in the early stages. The role modifies as the group develops, the exercise of leadership becoming more subtle and less directive (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004).

As referenced above, there are also group leaders who are attracted to the role because they want to be in charge. There is a difference between being the group leader and being the boss: the former serves the group, the latter serves themselves.

Starting a group

Most likely, as someone drawn to work with groups, you have had at least some and maybe considerable experience as a group participant. From the vantage of this personal experience it is worth pondering the question – what is it like entering a new group for the first time? Your answer can greatly inform your practice.

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[2] Our Internal Working Models consist of the assumptions, expectations and predispositions we develop over the course of our lives: they influence how we perceive and what we expect and anticipate in any situation. Developed from our earliest moments, they are highly durable.

I like to ask a new facilitation training group this question – what was it like to come here today? Some will say they were looking forward to it, they were getting out of the office, breaking their routine, had heard it would be useful etc. Others may say they were fine, they had no problem coming – though the question was not worded in terms of problems. Invariably someone will take the plunge and declare that they were nervous. I probe a bit more – they were maybe more than nervous, quite apprehensive in fact. They were entering the unknown: who would be there, would they fit in with others, would they be accepted, would they be able for the programme, would they be older/ younger than their peers, would they be put on the spot, exposed? Others join in and a tumble of self-doubt and even fear begins to emerge.

I ask the group – what's behind this range of apprehensions? Invariably the answers tend to be reducible to a fear that they will be found out, seen as lacking, an imposter, not up to it. They fear their greatest self-doubts will be confirmed and that this humiliation will be public and excruciating. I ask them 'what's it like revealing these fears'? They reply that it isn't easy admitting to such levels of uncertainty and insecurity: invariably, however, they speak of relief they are not alone in their acute self-doubt. Someone may say that they look at others in the group and see their competence and can only wonder at how these others possess the same doubts as themselves. The others in turn express their surprise that the speaker would be so insecure given their obvious ability...

I ask participants – what use is it to us, as a facilitation training group, to have this knowledge of how it is to come in on the first day? Participants quickly see the universality of their own feelings; that being put into a new situation raises vulnerabilities for the great bulk of us, though we may be slow to admit it. The knowledge they possess can help them see things from the viewpoint of their participants. If they are relatively inexperienced as facilitators, they are usually forcibly struck by the insight their own experience has afforded them.

Presenting needs

Putting ourselves in the shoes of our clients allows us to ask – what is it the participants need from the facilitator in the initial stages of the group? Contemplating this question affords us the opportunity to consider the skills, qualities and beliefs that a facilitator aspires to bring to these initial engagements. It also evokes our empathy for the participants' presenting position.

It is natural that an experienced facilitator would anticipate some needs with confidence. We can feel safe stating that generally, when working with an unemployment group, there may be anger and bewilderment,

but also some levels of depressiveness and a degree of hopelessness in the early stages[3]. From the first moment, we can aspire to create an environment that aims to counteract such effects of unemployment. By having it as an aim we can immediately make choices and take actions that seek to mitigate said effects.

I also like to ask facilitation training groups – how would you like people to feel as they go out at the end of the session? Group members usually answer that they would like their participants to leave feeling confident, hopeful, respected and heard; feeling the day had been worthwhile; feeling better about themselves for having achieved; feeling secure and that they belonged; feeling they were able for the level of the group; feeling they had something to gain and contribute and finally, feeling it was worthwhile and they would consequently return to the next session greatly eased in their fears.

To facilitate people to move from their starting position to the desired state on exiting – what does the facilitator need to bring to the table? What does the facilitator seek to do on the first day to support the movement from point A (entry) to point B (departure)?

Asking ourselves these questions brings to awareness the potential influence of the facilitator. Putting herself in the shoes of the participants as they enter, considering her desired outcomes from the encounter, she can make informed choices to seek to influence the outcomes participants get from the off. However, as the process is interactive and collaborative she cannot dictate or guarantee such outcomes.

If we believe (as we surely do) that groups bring benefits to participants we must ask – what are those benefits? How do we maximise these benefits? For me, these are core and essential questions for the facilitator: they capture practically all elements of the role. It is important to recall not only Yalom's work on therapeutic group factors (2005), but also to remind ourselves, with a nod to Martin Buber, that ultimately it is the relationship that heals (Yalom, 1988). Few, if any, benefits accrue unless one can connect and form trusting relationships with the participants: And they are unlikely to reveal their needs or other aspects of themselves otherwise.

Initial presence

The initial stages are when the facilitator needs to look most to evincing the leadership and nurturing aspects of her role. In the case of the former – she

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[3] See the case study in the final chapter for a more extensive examination of the effects of unemployment.

needs to exude sufficient confidence and presence, as well as direction. An unsure leader will cast doubt at the very moment participants seek security (Ringer, 2002). In the case of nurture, the time when participants are most anxious is when they need most encouragement, warmth and reassurance. An 'absent', over-formal or apprehensive facilitator does not contribute what is needed. It is at moments of uncertainty that we search for an attachment figure – to transitionally be that figure is part of the facilitator's role in these early moments. Such presence may be required until the group begins to achieve elements of cohesion and self-direction – after this the facilitator can begin to divest herself of more directive power lest the group members become overly-reliant on or cowed by a strong leader.

Speaking

Most participants report that among the most daunting aspects of entering a new group is the idea of being put on the spot, either by being asked a difficult question or being asked to introduce themselves cold to a group of strangers. The facilitator's dilemma is that the more we can get people involved, the more they benefit, so we actively seek to hear the voice of each participant (Yalom, 2005). We seek to create an "opportunity for voice without imposing the requirement of voice" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 101). If people feel exposed or unduly pressured to talk it will be counterproductive: in fact, silencing.

When possible, it is a good idea to utilise pair work and small group work on the first day. It can also be useful to get the group members in a training group to tap in to their own experience of being in the group to use as material: questions such as 'what is it like to come to a new group'? 'What is it like working in a small group'? (Usually members confide that it is easier to talk in the small group – that talking in front of the full group is more daunting). Such questions not only help develop a focus on the group process, but also highlight the fact that the experience of each group member is of value in building knowledge about being in and working with groups. This helps achieve one crucial objective in the early stages – letting it be seen that everyone has something to contribute. Moreover, it embeds the practice of reflecting on experience from the start.

Going places

An aspect of feeling secure is having a sense of where one is going. It is important to give participants some sense of the direction of the programme. This is not always straightforward. Many groups I have worked with are composed of participants who may have little or no experience

of groups and/or very little experience of learning environments. Their often high level of initial apprehension affects their powers of comprehension – frequently leading to some confusion in the early stages. Some participants want a level of information and certainty that could only be given in a rigidly structured, directive programme. Others want to know precise outcomes – a facilitator is not in a position to guarantee outcomes as she has no control over participants' level of engagement or capacity to learn. These queries are mostly a result of anxiety so I give as much information as I reasonably can, in as concise a fashion as possible. After a period of time, when anxieties settle and a culture of participation has been established it becomes possible to discuss, negotiate and contract many elements of the group, including goals, direction, desired outcomes etc.

What is facilitation?

Facilitation is variously defined: I do not propose to attempt to formulate an exact description, heeding Popper's view that precision is rarely helpful (1992). Facilitation involves working with people in groups in a way that is inclusive, participatory and egalitarian. Facilitation is very much working in the moment, in 'the now', being spontaneously responsive to groups that are live and evolving. People often use the word organic to capture their experience of it.

Embedded in the Latin roots of the word is the concept of 'making easy'. A facilitator works with a group to achieve outcomes that are usually negotiated and agreed. She acts as a catalyst, a conduit, an elicitor, a clarifier, a model, an instigator and much more. It is a role that demands considerable skill, certain qualities and traits, and an overarching vision. Done well, it can look deceptively easy (Ringer, 2002).

The job is about making things happen for a group, including the process of becoming a group. John Hume once said that what humans most have in common is their diversity. This fact, allied to the human drive to be autonomous, can militate against the formation of groups (Benson, 2001): conversely, humans are relational, social animals, seeking groups, desirous to attach and belong (May, 1975). A facilitator seeks to ease the negotiation of these divergent drives so that a successful group is formed without the negation of individuality or the sterility of conformity (Benson, 2001).

A facilitator seeks to elicit knowledge a group may already possess but can't quite voice or express – or may not be consciously aware of its possessing. It is a *way of doing things*, with a strong focus on *how* the group works, on the process – the interaction of the facilitator and the members and the members with each other; the ongoing development of the group

as it grows in cohesion and effectiveness; the phenomenological 'here and now' life of the group and its participants (Yalom, 2005). A facilitator leads a group to become an effectively performing entity that can call on the energy, knowledge, experience and creativity of its members to achieve outcomes and perform tasks that go beyond the sum of what its individual members might achieve. Crucially, facilitation sees the group process itself as growthful, therapeutic and meaningful to group members, so a facilitator seeks to maximise the benefits that accrue to them, which go beyond the tangible outcomes achieved.

Many of the beliefs most facilitators operate from could broadly be described as humanistic, with its central tenet that people have a natural disposition to fulfil their potential given a conducive environment. If we believe that people possess this capacity for development, this in turn will influence how we work – clearly the role involves 'facilitating' or serving this process of growth. Sometimes, as a facilitator, it becomes clear to me that a group is working so well that my chief objective is not to get in the way of the process, to witness and maybe hold it, occasionally tweak or channel its flow, but not to obstruct it, principally by the intrusion of egotistical needs for attention or from an anxiety to be seen to do something.

There are many aspects of the role, and while its overall thrust is unambiguously benign and helpful, a facilitator may have to be challenging and dogged. While a broad range of skills and qualities is required, perhaps the most important aspect is the presence and intent of the facilitator.

Rogers believed that in the presence of core conditions people could develop the capacity to resolve their own issues[4]. A facilitator seeks to be a conduit for these core conditions. In order to succeed in this – which is a challenging place to reach and an even harder one to sustain – a facilitator must continually reflect on their practice and seek to grow and improve, realising that it is often the case that the primary limits to such growth are those imposed by ourselves.

As someone who theoretically adopts an integrative approach to facilitating I seek to implement Rogers' core conditions, but I also look to a wide range of theorists for as many techniques and ideas as I can find. However, the critical work is working on my relationship with myself. Yalom (1989) wrote that it's the relationship that heals – it's also the relationship that promotes growth, learning and progression. I can relate

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[4] In his 1961 publication, *On becoming a person*, Carl Rogers set out what he labelled the Person Centred Approach. He proposed that if core conditions of empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence (authenticity) were established in a counselling or helping relationship, the recipient of these conditions would develop the resources to resolve their own issues.

better to others when I can relate well to myself: Gaffney (2011) declares connectivity to oneself as being an essential element of flourishing. It is certainly a core aspect of working effectively with others. It is something participants detect in a facilitator and trust; it builds confidence in the whole endeavour.

A facilitator is always a work in progress, seeking to continuously move towards fulfilling their own potential, so that they can model that which they encourage in their participants.

What I look for in a facilitator

When I join a group as a *participant*, I enter with the hope that it is a place where I can comfortably be myself. As I begin to find my way into the group, I let more of myself be seen. I accept that it would be unusual to be able to be fully myself in a group, that there is always some compromise or accommodation that has to be made to fit into a collective (Yalom, 2005). Being human, I neither know nor embrace all aspects of myself: moreover, there are aspects of myself I am not likely to reveal unless I am with a group for a considerable period. But I still hope that fundamental elements of how I am will be accepted and received by the group. Surely the main draw of a group is to be with and connect to others, yet the territory of seeking attachment, or allowing ourselves to be seen, or admitting we need others, can be where we are most vulnerable. It isn't easy to share dreams and enthusiasms, or express loneliness or feelings of failure or despair, universal though they may be.

The presence of the facilitator is a critical factor in how far I feel I can belong to the group. As a rule, the more I feel I can become an active participant the fuller and more satisfying my experience will be. I need to feel safe and be able to trust the facilitator if I am to get deeply involved.

What else am I hoping to find in the facilitator? With the example of the best facilitators I have had the luck to meet in my mind's eye, I hope for something like wisdom and self-possession: I find these bestow a level of calmness and equanimity, a capacity to handle the inevitable frictions, tangents, challenges and disruptions of a group without feeling overly threatened or undermined, or losing their sense of themselves or of the purpose of the venture.

I need her to see and hear me, to accept me, to offer understanding and empathy. I know that receiving these latter is a balm to the troubled spirit. If I feel exposed or vulnerable as a result of sharing, I may need her to recognise and support me to manage myself until I recover my equilibrium and autonomy.

I need a facilitator to have the presence to be able to hold the waxing and waning of the group, particularly in the early stages as it forms, but also to keep it on course as it hits its stride. I want her to be a leader, to not be afraid to intervene if the group strays into sterile territory.

Understanding, interest, acceptance are things I seek when I share. I want to be reassured, I want to feel safe and valued and I need the facilitator to convince me of that – she needs to be authentic; I want to be able to feel I connect with this person at a gut level, that she gets me. And I want her to be human, to have clearly looked into herself and grown. I want her to be a model for what she advocates or represents.

I remember a philosophy tutor I had, Julie, who connected with her students on this level, without ever losing her sense of herself, or of anyone misinterpreting her intentions. She possessed deep and boundaried warmth. She was blessed with humour, serenity and a deep sense of fairness: she seemed able to connect with any and every one. Thirty years afterwards I still remember her presence and the confidence I took from her at a time of personal doubt and uncertainty.

If I see these things in the facilitator, I can trust, I can belong; I can risk, learn about myself and grow. As we progress I watch the facilitator in operation, seeking to glean ideas on how to be (and how to facilitate better). I look to her as a model or guide for more authentic being – I learn from watching others' way of being and I learn most from those who do it well. Importantly, the facilitators I learnt most from and was most inspired by did not hide their vulnerabilities, frailties and struggles. They nevertheless found the courage to go on. I felt uplifted in their humble, understated, presence.

How does a mere mortal facilitator achieve all of this? And maintain it? As a facilitator myself I see my own wish list as daunting and I feel self-doubt as to my capacity to offer what I ask for in others. I remind myself that it is a wish list and that it is something I can seek to grow towards: everyone has their unique range of skills and qualities. Meanwhile, having the list as a goal gives direction to my ongoing development. I can continue to strive – to go on, in spite of all.

Co-facilitation

Working with a co-facilitator can be a tremendous boon. It provides many advantages: collegiality; a sense of mutual endeavour; someone to share triumphs and setbacks with. It presents each partner with a sounding board to test new ideas. Such an arrangement can be a considerable support in terms of one's further growth and development once both parties are

mature enough to give and receive constructive feedback. Reviewing a group session with a co-facilitator is a profitable element of a facilitator's working life. It is also a vital support in comprehending something that has gone awry within the group. A good co-facilitation relationship provides us with a trusted peer with whom we can process an experience with even if they were not present at the time.

When working with groups with considerable presenting issues, where there may be higher levels of anger or upset in the room, a co-facilitator shares the load, can step in when one partner struggles and take the lead, will see things the other might miss and offer another perspective. With two facilitators in the room, participants have the benefit of having two group leaders to connect with and receive core conditions from. For any issue that might be surfacing for them, the chances of their sharing and engaging increases as they are more likely to trust at least one of the pair.

Each partner in the relationship brings a different skill set and range – through combining these both parties get the opportunity to not only learn from each other, but to work across a broader range of groups. As a unit, a co-facilitating team will likely connect with a wider range of participants than a single facilitator.

To achieve an effective and fulfilling co-facilitation relationship requires an investment of time, energy, honesty and integrity. Humans are competitive by nature (Gaffney, 2011): while competition can drive standards on, a group is not a place to be competitive with your colleague. Equality and respect, mutual regard, caring for the other – all are aspects of co-facilitation: as are good boundaries and a capacity to respectfully challenge.

In the initial stages of such a relationship, planning and structure can be useful as a way of fostering and establishing equality in the partner-ship. Each individual might take turns in the leadership role with the other supporting. It can help if people start off at a place of relative equality in terms of experience and training. As people become familiarised with each other's style and areas of strength and interest, then things can become more organic, less plotted. Constant reviewing is important, to hear and give space to the concerns of each partner.

There are certain groups I prefer to co-facilitate. Ex-prisoner groups are demanding and I think the load is best shared. I personally find youth groups challenging and I prefer to co-facilitate them.

It would be unusual for disputes not to arise. Airing these in group is a bad idea as it can unsettle group members. Pair supervision provides a contained space where any festering resentments can be brought to the surface – once raised, they have the potential to be resolved or managed.

Trust, respect and equality are the cornerstones of a good co-facilitation relationship. Knowing that someone has your back provides reassurance and security and allows a certain freedom in working. In my experience the most effective element in developing a fruitful co-facilitation relationship is having a common purpose, or an idea or cause that both parties can rally to, some form of unifying belief. Within this of course there must be room for to and fro. Co-facilitation can be an intense shared experience – as alluded to earlier, boundaries need to be appropriate, neither too lax nor too uptight. Working with high-need groups, I have always considered it liberating – and safer – to feel I was working with someone I felt a deep trust in.

I have experienced co-facilitation partnerships that have not worked – it has usually occurred because my co-facilitator and I could not attain the level of flow and the mutual ease with each other that such a relationship requires. Working so closely with another requires both parties to have undergone considerable personal development – to give and receive constructive feedback, to trust and be trustworthy, to be assertive and accommodating, to be loyal but not blindly so, to act with integrity, to be constructive... all these factors and more require considerable self growth and maturity.

It is a long journey developing a top class co-facilitation partnership, with lots of bumps and turns. Like most things that are worthwhile, consistent application of effort and willingness is required. This is to be expected: as Kant put it, "*out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made*".

Listening

Much has been written about the power and efficacy of listening and the therapeutic and transformative benefits that follow from being truly listened to. It is hard to think of a more important function of the facilitator – if one is seeking to elicit from the group, then this occurs through putting questions, drawing out participants, encouraging, showing genuine interest, probing. All this effort comes to naught if we don't actively listen to what emerges.

We signal we are listening with our whole being. We nod, pay unambiguous attention, maintain eye contact. We summarise or paraphrase to show that we have heard. We seek to let the speaker know we are truly engaged, present and available. Writers such as Egan (2002) have gone into painstaking detail on the technique of listening, the best angle to face the person one is listening to, the positioning of chairs and so on. In effective listening we seek to demonstrate empathy so that the speaker feels they are understood; we aspire to be non-judgemental so as to not hinder

the speaker saying all they need to say – surely nothing stymies a person's flow as comprehensively as the sensation of being judged. We encourage the listener through our genuine interest, our congruence. We cannot feign interest we do not feel for long – once group members are speaking from an authentic place themselves, what they say is invariably interesting.

Understanding

If someone feels truly listened to, they invariably feel understood. Rogers declares that the experience of being understood by another is the most effective device we know of to facilitate change of self-perception in another (O'Leary, 1982). Being understood grounds the person in humanity – if they are understood it means they are comprehensible to others, part of the human family. Experiences like unemployment or being part of a marginalised or outcast social group can bring a person to feel that they are alien or strange. Being understood, and accepted (and both are closely linked) creates an opportunity for the person to turn this acceptance back to themselves, to become self-accepting. This, in turn, makes easier the acceptance of others.

One of the mysterious aspects of listening is how the act of being heard can transform and diminish a problem – many group participants report how being heard can result in the problem dissolving by the mere act of naming or acknowledging it in the presence of an active listener. Simply speaking is not enough – if we are not heard the problem can in fact be aggravated. There is a mysterious and transforming dimension that being heard and understood by another brings (Rogers, 1961).

The very essence of isolation is that one is alone; there is no one to talk to or receive understanding from. Someone who is marginalised is by nature of the term on the outside or on the verges. Not affirmed, accepted or understood by others, not having contact and connection, leads to our diminishment as humans (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). This underlines the critical importance of listening to participants – it might be a rare opportunity for the client to experience connection and receive understanding. The beauty of a group is that this vital experience can come from a range of sources, not just the facilitator. Developing a culture of listening and understanding in a group is therefore vital.

Listening to ourselves

Listening effectively to others begins with listening to ourselves, our ability to tune into and connect with our own organism. We initially learn to distinguish our own needs though the reactions of others, principally

the mother figure, whose response to our infant and childhood cries and sundry communications develops our awareness of what ails and pleases us (Winnicott, 1964). First we are interpreted, then, ideally, we learn to interpret ourselves, to read our own signals, to begin to know ourselves. As May put it "we get our original experiences of being a self out of relatedness to others" (1975: 28). We cannot know or accept ourselves without learning to listen to our organism. It is the path to growth, to ultimately 'individuating', to employ the Jungian term for becoming what we are.

The challenges begin early. Many of our impulses are silenced as we grow, often through disapproval and censure. Some of this is unavoidable if we are to learn the codes of the society we live in – as Freud put it, the price of civilisation is repression (1991). We need society, we need groups, without them we cannot know who or what we are (May, 1975). Yet there is a price to entry, a certain degree of conformity – things to do and not to do, things to say or repress if we wish to be accepted and approved of, and for the society itself to achieve a necessary level of cohesion. Families and societies have their norms, their opportunities and restrictions.

However, if we are subject to constant, excessive criticism for our interests or enthusiasms, we 'learn' that we are not right, that we do not fit. We then begin to distrust our own communications to ourselves. Writing of the case of Ellen West, Rogers recounted the story of a woman who, from childhood, was upbraided whenever she expressed an enthusiasm or interest of her own (1980). Raised to a strict social convention, the cumulative effect of incessant correction was such that Ellen learnt to distrust the messages from her own organism, so that the external silencing of her needs became an efficient internal mechanism. Unable to hear her own needs, Ellen's health deteriorated, leading to her untimely death. It is a core tenet of psychology: people who are not listened to become ill. People that do not listen to themselves, cannot know themselves.

There is a natural connection between being able to listen to ourselves and our capacity to listen to others. The more we listen to, know and accept ourselves, the less we judge ourselves and others (Rogers, 1961). We see how knotty life can be; we develop tolerance. We see that we are complex beings and aspects of our inner life can be disturbing. Simplicity and certainty are comforting, but surely illusory. Klein's work showed the attraction of certainty: she did not see it as a psychologically mature place (1988). Moreover, certainty does not make for good facilitation; not if we keep thinking of clients as good or bad, right or wrong.

It is not unusual to meet people in groups who thoroughly distrust themselves, who find it hard to distinguish one feeling from another or a feeling from a thought. Most everyone has learnt to repress – some may have

learnt and been required to do so more than others. Truly accepting the parts of ourselves we have hidden away is obviously difficult and it is probably impossible to know how much of ourselves we have repressed. However, owning and recovering aspects of ourselves we have learnt to find shameful has the benefit of reducing our inclination to judge others. Listening to and accepting ourselves increases our self-ease and makes us more accepting of others.

Inner chatter

The biggest challenge I face in trying to listen well to another (or myself) is my own inner chatter – this is also the chief response I get when I ask others what is their biggest barrier to listening. This underlines the importance of presence and of training one's focus. I might be distracted because I enter the group in a tired or unsettled state – perhaps events outside the group are more pressing than usual. I have to work to bracket it off. As Corey puts it, being present "means that leaders are not fragmented when they come to a session" (2000: 29).

I can also find listening a challenge simply because I am stimulated by what I am listening to and wish to respond or join in. However, one of the clearest and most annoying signs of poor listening is when it's obvious the listener is eager for you to finish so they can launch into their own story. We need to constantly bear in mind the role we are playing. It is inevitable that there are times we struggle to listen well – it is an issue we must continually strive to resolve.

Activity: the power of listening

I often ask groups to do a simple activity. I set a scene –

They are burdened with an issue, something pressing heavily on them that disturbs their tranquillity, affecting their sleep and preying on their mind. What do they need to do?

Invariably they say they need to talk to someone. I then ask – what factors are involved in deciding whom to approach? They mention trust, prior experience of talking to the person, safety. I ask what is it like as they go to meet the person, what goes through their mind? They feel uncertain, hopeful that they will be received; fearful they might be judged or rejected. They are taking a risk – they are apprehensive. I then ask them to work in small groups and discuss and describe, from their experience: (a) what it's like to be listened to and (b) what it's like not to be listened to.

Under the heading 'listened to' the most common answers are: relieved, accepted, understood, happy, valued, affirmed, unburdened, human, connected,

lighter, appreciated, joyful, powerful, empowered, respected, validated, more confident, stronger, more hopeful & optimistic

Under the heading 'not listened to' the most common answers are: worse off, burden doubled, rejected, hurt, frustrated, angry, misunderstood, judged, condemned, alone, lonely, abandoned, stupid, not likely to risk again, withdrawn, depressed, isolated, disconnected.

Groups frequently evince surprised at the depth and consequence of the words that they generate in a short activity. They are sobered by the power invested in the listener to do good or ill. Some are a little daunted by their findings. Yet it is knowledge they have generated from their lived and felt experience. They invariably report that they feel more keenly aware of the power invested in a group leader, or anyone who works with people. Awareness of this influence raises the question of choice, ethics and responsibility – do you choose to do good by others or ill? Once one is aware of the effects and power of listening, there's no turning away from the responsibility.

I also ask trainees – 'what's it like to really listen to someone'. They speak of the honour of being chosen or trusted – when they see they are making a difference, they feel proud and good about themselves. They are in no doubt that they, the listener, also benefit greatly from the activity.

Finally, I ask them: how well do you listen to others – how well do you listen to yourself? Invariably they reply that they find it easier to listen to others than to themselves. Gaffney (2011) holds that one of the keys to flourishing is developing connectivity, not just to others, but to ourselves. Though our well-being and efficacy would seem to rest on it, my interaction with others (and myself) would suggest that many of us could look to improve in this regard.

Eliciting

As facilitators, we seek to elicit that which we believe is actively or latently present in every participant – we midwife a group member put their thoughts, beliefs, emotions or needs into words, to speak to us of themselves, so that we hear their voice. There is something in human beings that tends to respond by opening up to a presence that is warm, authentic and understanding.

Expressing ourselves is essential to our well-being, to affirming our existence. In a group setting, when the one that speaks is listened to and accepted by a number of people, the resulting benefits are manifold. So are the risks and fears that need to be overcome in order to give expression, meaning the sense of achievement is greater as well. The reward for those

listening is to be there when a person finds the courage to overcome their fears of being noticed and accept they have something to say. Aside from sharing a significant moment, they see it can be done, and grow more optimistic. Furthermore, it is not unusual for those coming to a group with a negative self-perception to believe they have little to offer anyone else – to see someone with this belief rise to the challenge of supporting another is affirming and altering of self-perception.

There are moments when a facilitator has to make sure they do not obstruct the process through excessive interjection. Nor must the facilitator impede other group members offering support to each other as they share. It is important for a learning facilitator to accept that *presence*, being there to hold the group, is at times all and exactly what is required. The urge to do, or to be seen to be doing, is a natural discomfort and (largely) internal pressure we experience.

Why do we seek to elicit? Ultimately the practice stems from a belief that through active listening the group and its participants possess the knowledge and capacity to come to an insight or solution to their issues and concerns. In order to actively listen, we employ a range of questions, constructed in such a way as to present group members with the opportunity to explore and own aspects of themselves.

Questions and answers

One of the great benefits of a group over one-to-one work is that a number of people can share a moment together and reflect on it in the here and now. In a recent group a participant shared how coming to the group was strongly influencing how she lived and worked. She was working with people in recovery and dreaded her job as she felt undertrained for the role. For a number of years, she had been living for the weekend, and every Sunday night she would feel sick at the prospect of work the following morning. She was exhausted and dispirited. She had felt compelled by her employer to come to the programme and to her surprise had found it stimulating and engaging – so much so she had tried out some of the ideas and found they had radically shifted the dynamic in her groups. She was feeling enthused and renewed by how much things had changed.

I asked "tell us about the difference to your life"? 'Barbara' spoke of how she was lighter, happier, more optimistic, easier to be around and much else. While this is bringing the benefits she has received to her own awareness and deepening her integration of them, it is also saying to other group members – 'look how possible it is', thus generating hope. In order to elicit what it was she had gained from the programme so that she and

the other group members could deepen awareness of their own process I asked "what has this group given you that you have gained so much"? This question asked Barbara to focus on both herself and the group. When she said it gave her belief I asked "say more", keeping my intervention as brief as possible so as to not obstruct her flow.

I followed up with, "What's it like to be in a group that gives you this"? This question gives credit and brings awareness to the power of the group – often participants place the credit with the facilitator and while that's pleasant, there is more to be gained from letting group members see that they have the power to impact positively on their peers.

I also asked Barbara "what is it about you that you can be open to receiving this", to draw attention to her own healthy response to support and her capacity for growth. I find a series of short questions can help things flow, such as "say more (about that)": Barbara at one stage said "I feel really good being here", to which I replied "because"? This one-word question is highly effective for further eliciting.

The dimension of the group can then be exploited – "what's it like to hear Barbara's story"? Usually the group will talk of how uplifting it was and how pleased they are – as well as more hopeful and optimistic. "What is it that makes you more hopeful", gets people to focus on what they feel they can receive from the group – by naming it they are bringing it to awareness and simultaneously asking for it. "What's it like to know you have given so much to your colleague" seeks to bring awareness to their own generosity and altruism – and that being this way is good for their colleague and themselves. So by now the group is focusing strongly on its own process and working in the here and now. The exploration can be rounded off by asking what people feel they are giving and receiving, so that they can see the power and importance of their group and of active participation.

It is worth reiterating that facilitators ask questions in order to draw out participants, include them in the group, bring their needs and/or issues/contributions/capacity/fear/hopes etc. to awareness and have who and what they are spoken by them in their own voice. Naturally, having asked, we can do nothing more important than listen as best we can.

Boundaries

Boundaries are essential for structure, clarity and ethical practice: with good boundaries we know where we begin and end. Boundaries keep us physically and mentally safe and intact. Facilitators with poorly developed boundaries become enmeshed and are vulnerable to becoming

over-involved in the lives of participants. However, one can also be over-boundaried and remote to participants.

In a recent training group an attractive and engaging female participant spoke about the fact that her current employment contract was due to end in two months. Having experienced prolonged stretches of unemployment in the past anxiety had begun to stalk her; it was affecting her sleep and well-being. She wept as she spoke. Moved by her distress, I felt a strong desire to comfort her. In the days after the session she was on my mind and I felt an urge to make contact and offer my support. However, I had to ask myself, would I feel the same urge if she were a man? Was my response to the person or to some archetype of a damsel in distress? What impact would my actions have on the dynamics of the group? My self-questioning and reflection on my boundaries and underlying motivations is vital to my effectiveness as a facilitator, to the welfare of my clients and myself.

Healthy boundaries and their maintenance require an awareness of what is happening inside of ourselves, an ability to see through our own rationalisations and a capacity to sense what is going on in others. When someone breaches our boundaries it feels threatening. Being group leaders, it is incumbent on us to respect and value the boundaries of others. We can learn a lot from when we feel participants are breaching ours.

I have very occasionally had participants who would listen to an observation of mine and either congratulate me on it – in a tone I can only call superior – or offer correction, in a tone usually employed in reprimand. They come to the group as a student but, following Eric Berne's PAC[5] model (more expansively covered in the section on conflict) they exhibit the ego state of Parent (2010). I may find I have to catch a surge of irritation, a feeling I am being disrespected or misrepresented. I note a desire in myself to 'put them in their box', to assert the fact I am the facilitator. In other words, my parent state wishes to upbraid and correct them for entering their parent state! Or I may feel cowed, self-doubting, judged, on the point of being 'found out' and feel myself wishing to please or appease – clearly acting from my child ego state.

Or I might encounter a participant who sees in me a critical parent or authority figure. I once commented in a group that facilitating people suffering from

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[5] In *Games People Play,* Eric Berne presented a useful ego state model of Parent, Adult, Child: PAC. He proposed that when two people interacted a transaction occurred during which the initial speaker's ego position elicited a response from the other party from whatever ego state is triggered in them. The rational, thinking part is the Adult and we generally try to work out of this place as facilitators, but we can be triggered into the other states in our transactions with participants.

depression can be challenging and tiring for the facilitator because the energy in the group can be quite low. It was put to me – in a sharp tone – that I was being "very judgemental". Soon afterwards I was accused by the same participant – 'Jane' – of being a typical man, followed promptly by a claim that a technique I was demonstrating had the effect of singling people out.

My initial reaction was one of frustration as I felt I was being misconstrued and misrepresented. I found the participant's manner of challenge was undercutting, even emasculating me in my role. After a period, I began to wonder if the person made contact through argument and if this was how they sought and gained attention. I wondered if by replying patiently to each remark was I rewarding – and thus encouraging – the behaviour. I also didn't want to hurt or offend Jane by ignoring or dismissing her. I pondered the reaction of the group to my accepting, challenging or cutting off her behaviour – I could see their restlessness increase. By pondering these questions, I was back in the facilitator's chair, buttressing my boundaries, returning to an adult ego state.

What's interesting to me is that someone portraying (to my mind) poor boundaries can lead to me having a struggle to maintain my own. My reactions in these situations give me material to look at and work on. If I don't, I might overreact and be in a position where I preach good boundaries and contradict myself with my actions. I might also react in a way that causes hurt to others – the most abrasively presenting participants are frequently the most vulnerable (O'Leary, 1982). So it was with Jane, who needed a bit more time and space to satisfy herself that she could belong to the group and be both safe and vulnerable in it.

I see the usefulness to my development of these challenges, but the emotions I experience in the moment are at a remove from gratitude. I can feel undermined and threatened; it can be difficult not to react. A wider consciousness of my role and consideration of the intent and consequences of my actions helps boundary my own reflexive reactions to feelings of threat. I seek to remember that the participant's reactions are generally to the role I occupy rather than my person. I also heed Frankl's proposition that between stimulus and response is a period where we can choose how we proceed (1959): realising and accepting my responsibility to model the veracity of this idea supports me maintain my boundaries and respond rather than react to real or perceived undermining. The place to unpack my own reactions is in supervision, not in group.

There is a simple Boundaries Awareness Activity I like to undertake with training facilitators:

Split the group into pairs, have all the pairs face each other with a distance of approximately ten feet between them so there are two lines facing

each other, line A and line B. Ask line A to walk, with awareness, towards their pair in line B, maintaining eye contact, stopping where and when they feel they need to. Ask line B to bring awareness to how they feel as line A walks towards them. Then ask line A to return to its starting position. Now ask the members of line B to walk towards their respective pairs in line A, stopping where they feel it is right for them – each pair maintaining eye contact with the other and bringing awareness to their organismic reaction. Process the activity

- What was the experience like? What brought you to stop – what were the factors you took account of? How did it feel when your partner was walking towards you? How did you feel about where they stopped? Where did you feel it? What has been your learning?

What participants in this activity are given is the opportunity to bring the tangible feeling of their personal boundaries into awareness. In processing this activity with various groups what strikes me is that most people take their pair into account when deciding where to stop, as if they regulate their own boundary by reading signals from the other party as well as themselves, or by putting themselves in the shoes of their pair and feeling that they should stop in the particular spot they choose. Thus, there appears to be an interpersonal, empathic element in the establishment of boundaries, an unspoken, scarcely conscious set of negotiations.

Naturally, what we often read into the reactions of others are our own projections and perceptions. On occasion, in the exercise outlined above, it is possible to see people not moving their feet out of politeness but beginning to lean backwards as they clearly feel their peer is coming too close. People reveal that they are slow to tell another that they're too near for comfort: we appear willing to tolerate some level of boundary discomfort rather than risk causing offence or conflict. People also note that someone can be over as well as under-boundaried and report feeling hurt or confused if they feel their partner in the exercise stopped 'too far away'. Though their partner may have had the intent of not crowding them, they felt rejected, hurt and confused in the moment.

We use the term 'invading space' to describe a boundary breach. I find it interesting that a psychic event is accompanied by visceral sensation, or that our sense of the space we require is larger than our physical size, and the less we feel safe with a person the larger the sense of space needed tends to be. I ask people what it would have felt like to walk a little further than they did – invariably they answer that it would have felt nigh impossible. Moving into a psychic space they perceive as wrong for their partner or themselves

strongly registers as a physical sensation in the body. When we are self-aware, our body can tell us if our boundaries have been breached and we can also sense when we make others uncomfortable.

I'm ok you're ok

As facilitators we strive to be warm, open and welcoming. We strive to connect, to build relationships with group members. It is inevitable when extending warmth and in seeking connection that boundary issues emerge.

The most common mistake I encounter when working with trainees, is that some facilitators seek to be friends with participants. If a facilitator is truly themselves, genuine and empathic, then it is likely an open group will see them in a positive light. But some facilitators simply need to be liked more than respected and therein lies potential danger. They may be tempted to go beyond the role to win approval. If the draw to the role is that it confers attention or power on the practitioner, then boundary issues are likely to emerge.

An important part of the role of a group facilitator is respectfully challenging group members. If a person's primary concern is how popular they are, how much are they liked, then this aspect of the role will be a challenge for them. Or if the facilitator is too 'retiring' then coming forward with a challenge can be difficult.

I had a participant in a facilitation training group who did not speak in group sessions. As the programme was aimed at training facilitators to work with marginalised groups I felt I had to raise my concern that someone so quiet was considering entering a group setting as the group leader. I also agree with Yalom that those who participate least in a group gain least from it (2005). I put some open questions to 'Eliza' that elicited minimalist, evasive answers – which I named. I could see Eliza felt uncomfortable, but I had real concern for her and her future group participants if she did not show more of herself.

As I challenged Eliza I could sense the discomfort of other group members. One or two sought to intervene with compliments so I asked them to wait. Afterwards I asked them about the need they felt to intervene. They began by fulsomely praising their fellow member. I turned the discussion on the urge to rescue, which might be benign in its intention but I wondered what it said of our perception of our colleague? Did people feel she was unable to speak for herself? The interveners owned that by seeking to rescue Eliza they were effectively silencing her and implying by their actions that she needed rescuing – in short, that she could not resolve her own issues. They were bringing about the opposite to what they wished to

achieve. The urge to rescue may have positive motivations but someone who is continually rescued will assuredly lose their autonomy and agency.

Boundaries can be blurred when a facilitator struggles with the idea of being the group leader: the notion of being 'in charge' can cause discomfort to some. Quite simply, a group has to have direction. Some who aspire to the role of facilitator fear they will be seen as power hungry so they seek to exercise none. An absent or unwilling leader is not a style; it is a failure to take on the demands of the role. For some, the notion of leadership breaches their idea of equality or democracy. Yet as group members enter a room on the first day of a new group their eyes scan those present to see who is leading, who is anchoring the group, giving it security, structure, direction and momentum? That is the need of the participants, particularly in the crucial early stages. That is when they need to be met with someone who can inhabit the role of leader and assuage doubts and fears. If not, there is no sense of containment of the group, making it unsafe.

Responsibility

In the very early stages of my facilitation career I recall a female participant telling me I was the first person that had ever truly listened to her. She described the impact of being listened to, of being understood and accepted. It awakened in her the need to grow and develop, to be herself. Her eyes filled with tears as she outlined the impact this change was having on her family, on her relationships with her children and her husband. For the first time she had begun to say what she really felt and believed, and was finding that her husband was reciprocating. She described it as her first experience of an adult relationship, and anchored and buttressed by this, she felt herself expanding in other areas of her life. When she went out socially, she found herself initiating conversations, voicing personal rather than borrowed opinions. Instead of dreading contact, she had begun to anticipate it with pleasure. I could see tears glisten in the eyes of other participants.

My own emotions as I listened were complex and diverse. I felt really good, I had listened to her and profound change had followed. I felt a surge of pride, potency and well-being. I was also deeply moved and saddened – almost overwhelmed in fact. This woman was approaching fifty – she had never truly been listened to before. How could this have happened? I felt a surge of love for her and wanted to hold her. At that stage of my career, it was something tremendous to be thanked for being the first person that had ever listened to someone.

I was seeking to contain these sensations and listen to the profound message being relayed. I became conscious of the power of the process – it struck

me forcibly that deep listening had facilitated this change in another. After the session my joy for 'Alice' remained, along with a heightened respect and awareness of the power and responsibility a group leader can have. I also had a felt knowledge of Rogers' core conditions working through me – I was not them, they were not me, they only worked if I was an effective enough cipher, and harm would follow any abuse of them.

In working with others, Yalom wrote of the centrality of relationship in any growthful or therapeutic interaction – Buber used the term 'encounter' in an attempt to frame the potential momentousness of the coming together of two people. If we cannot convey warmth and a sense that we are there for the person, then connection and relationship is not likely to happen. We are slow to trust those we do not see as warm and genuine, particularly with sensitive or intimate information. But we must call to mind Rogers' term – *non-possessive warmth*, a phrase that conveys the importance of being there for the other but being boundaried as well, sometimes for the other, until they build the capacity to be self-contained.

Challenging participants

That which cannot be expressed is often repressed, hidden from view, to re-emerge from suppression charged with virulence and energy. That which is expressed can be debated, challenged and perhaps modified. Challenging is a delicate and important part of facilitation, best done with tact and good timing (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). Good leadership can involve saying things group members may not wish to hear (Corey, 2000). Done with authenticity it can lead to growth: done poorly it can undermine safety in the group and perhaps humiliate the challenged group member.

Qui bono? (Who gains)

At times in group I hear participants express views that I consider objectionable. I have frequently heard xenophobic comments about immigrants, how they have come and stolen jobs, have the best of housing, higher welfare payments, free cars and so on. I do not like these comments, not only because they are factually incorrect. It is sadly ironic, though hardly novel, that marginalised groups can see each other as the source of their respective woes. I have rarely heard a participant fulminate about wealthy tax exiles.

I have often felt surge up in me an urge to scold or 'correct' views I find objectionable. However, as a facilitator, I must remember my role and purpose. My ideal outcome is that all group members stick with the

group, attend with regularity, begin to see themselves in a more constructive light, become more positive and rational about the world, and take progressive steps. Ultimately I would like the group to be a place that is safe to air views and where such views can be explored and/or disputed. To achieve all this can be a long and difficult journey for highly marginalised groups. Dropping out because they feel scolded means they are not going to achieve it by means of the group.

While it's critical that my aim is not to reprimand or humiliate participants, or threaten their continuation in the group (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004), that is not to say I don't or won't challenge. My aim is to seek for participants to begin thinking in a different way. Judging group members for their views and rebuking them might allow me to feel more sophisticated, but at what price? Challenging is an essential element of the practice of facilitation. We must seek to do so with awareness of our positive intent and mindful of the vulnerability of others.

If someone who has little experience of education, work, or groups attends and sticks with a programme, it means they are having needs met and have to some degree bought in to the process. With ex-prisoners I am aware that their time with the group may represent the longest period out of prison, off addictive substances and in a sustained engagement that they have achieved. Most likely, these participants have had fingers wagged at them all their lives: it has brought few benefits. The facilitator must not risk, wherever possible, the existence of the group or the continued attendance of 'offending' participants unless it is unavoidable. If one of the participants drops out because he has been scolded for expressing views that I don't like, the consequences can be severe for him: and not for me. Yet I must also be true to myself or I lose congruence. There is a difference between being authentic and giving voice to my superego however! I once asked participants what they had been working at before immigrants came. When they answered "nothing", I didn't have to force the point – no one had taken a job from them.

Why challenge?

If participants hold the view that immigrants had taken 'all the jobs' then implicitly there is no point looking for a job because there are none left. The situation is hopeless, so they don't have to take the risk of hoping, or of *failing*. There is no point in even trying and there's someone to blame as a bonus! By directing blame or contempt at a target group, they are spared directing it at themselves (May, 1975). With such belief systems, nothing is going to change for the better. The group becomes a treadmill of futility and will lose energy and purpose: the participants remain stuck.

By challenging these beliefs, the aim is to reinforce an internal locus of control – where participants construct a different narrative – *if I try to get a job I can succeed, if I want things to be different I have to do something different*. Challenging irrational beliefs can inculcate in participants a more realistic frame of mind where they learn to work things out for themselves, rather than recite received opinions.

The underpinning aim of challenging is to develop what Freire labels *Critical Consciousness*, to test the validity of such received (often restrictive) beliefs and transform them into more self-validating and liberating ones (1970). What we believe profoundly affects our responses and actions (Ellis, 1997). If we believe something is possible we feel we have choices. If we believe a situation is hopeless, there's no point even trying – any effort we muster will be at best half-hearted.

Most people would accept that racist or xenophobic views are founded on irrational beliefs and fears. If people with such views can come to see this for themselves (rather than be told so through scolding) they can go on to examine other beliefs and assumptions that they hold, not least about their own capacity and potential. Of course, no facilitator comes without her own sets of beliefs – the idea of the reflective practitioner is to test ourselves, to continually examine what Popper labels 'our current best thinking' (1992). If we think someone else's thinking is wrong, it implies we assume our own thinking is right! To promote growth in others, we need "to live growth oriented lives" ourselves (Corey, 2000: 20): we must challenge ourselves as vigorously as we challenge others.

I'm too old

Most humans carry a range of self-hindering beliefs (Ellis, 1997): what we "already believe sets limits" (Ringer, 2002: 59). I have found from working with unemployment groups that participants begin to see themselves as 'over the hill' as a consequence of their experience – regardless of their age. *No one will employ me at my age, I'm too old*: I've heard this refrain expressed countless times.

It is clear that if someone persists in holding such a view it will curtail their efforts and they are less likely to progress. Therefore, it is important that a participant be facilitated to test their view. I recall several clients announcing there was no point looking for work because employers 'were not going to give men our age a job'. I have found that the expression of this sentiment can flatten the energy in the group – little wonder, as it is a 'hope-less' statement. I also notice that the speaker often voices the sentiment in the plural, speaking on behalf of others in the group. It would

be important to challenge this restrictive view. Moreover, quite often the speaker is a regular attendee, so their actions and their expressed sentiments are not in accord.

What is important is not to get tangled up in an argument by seeking to cajole the participant into seeing that he is wrong. I need to be alert to the risk that those he is seeking to recruit in his statement might join him if I push the wrong way – his challenge has the capacity to derail the group. Moreover, I do not believe there is a definitive, all-purpose response to the speaker: each situation is unique and exists in its own unique moment. I simply find that being as open, empathic and honest as I can usually leads to some shift.

Furthermore, I understand the speaker's position because I have experienced periods of unemployment myself and at the time my views on age were close to his. I see that his experience has undermined his hope and that he may be full of despair and pessimism. His challenge may be abrasive and it may even challenge the existence or point of the group, but he is expressing something that others may be thinking. His voice is important.

There are several possible responses and no definitive one – it is the *manner* of the response that is critical. Someone who holds such a belief is not in a good place – I might simply say 'that sounds like a tough place to be'. Depending on my read of the group I might ask 'what's it like hearing this view'? It is of course better if other group members challenge the negative assertion (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). I might ask the group 'how do we find the strength to keep going when times look bleak', which gets the group focusing on their innate strength and resilience. Frankl believed we could deal with any 'what', when we had something in our lives for which we wished to keep going – if the group could be facilitated to approach this subject it would be an effective piece of work. On some occasions, when I felt I was sufficiently established with the group I looked to the challenger with full sincerity and informed them that I wouldn't be able to turn up for the group if I shared his belief, though I appreciated that everyone had to make up their own mind. I would also share that in previous groups those that stayed and tried the most got the best outcomes.

I recall one participant, 'Paul', saying his holding the view he was too old had been modified over the course of weeks by the energy and purpose of his fellow participants, by the very fact they refused to share his belief and were undaunted in their job search. I found Paul a difficult participant, forever challenging my position as group leader and any message of hope I sought to convey. He also liked to speak on behalf of the group. I would simply invite him to speak for himself. Over time the other members began to challenge Paul, telling him they felt he was describing

them in ways that were constraining. To his credit, he listened, engaged, disputed and gradually modified his views. It was enough to work with – Paul is currently employed after a period of four years out of work: almost despite himself, he upholds the dictum that "change is facilitated by the emergence of hope" (ibid).

A recent participant on a facilitation training group shared her initial fear that she would be a lot older than her fellow participants. She felt as she was only starting out as a facilitator she would look out of place by being in a younger group composed, in her mind, of people who knew much more than she did. It would bring home to her the waste she felt she had made of her life. She had experienced a very traumatic and complex loss which had taken her several years to begin to recover from. I brought the focus of the group on 'Angela's' story of recovery – how long does recovery take, what, given her experience, are the factors needed to aid recovery? I then asked the group – what have we learnt from Angela about the process of recovery? What could a group leader do to enhance recovery? Angela was able to see that the experience of her collapse and gradual recovery were of benefit to others, that her life experience brought something unique to the mix which aided the growth and development of her fellow participants. She spoke with gratitude of how the group had shown her that she could be useful and how her self-perception had greatly improved as a result.

I've wasted my life

People recovering from addiction can be prone to seeing the years spent in dependence as a black hole, as life irrevocably squandered. It can result in their feeling distressed, self-critical and grief stricken. It is natural and rational they would feel grief – in truth, a swathe of their lives has been lost: people who have experienced long-term illnesses or long-term unemployment often feel similarly. A group that sees one of their fellows stricken in this way often feels a strong urge to rescue her and soothe her grief – they often do so by pouring compliments on her. The compliments are rarely believed, so the resultant impact can be the opposite of that intended.

Coming to terms with loss is part of life and grief is a natural response to loss. Spending years in active addiction inevitably mean a person will be left with difficult issues to work through when they enter sustained recovery – the feeling of having wasted a large part of their lives can be acute.

What matters most is what they do thenceforth, it is the only territory they can now influence, but it can be hard to look forward to the future

until one makes some peace with the past. This includes acknowledging hurts caused to loved ones and loss of the currency of life – time. Not many things in life are tied up neatly with a bow, there are few if any lives that are lived without regrets. A healthy human accepts and works through their regrets.

It is a sign of a cohesive, performing group that they can begin to make space for loss and regret. The challenge for the facilitator is to make space for grieving, minimise rescuing, but also maintain an eye to future possibilities. Someone experiencing grief in the now is doing something healthy, something that can free them up to advance less burdened into the rest of their lives.

Too subtle by half!

Attempts at subtle challenges can by strikingly counterproductive. In my early years as a facilitator I was uncomfortable with direct challenge and prone instead to dropping large hints. I remember one group that became dominated by an incessant talker, 'Janet', who's every second contribution was off the point and lengthy. She also impulsively cut across every other speaker whenever a thought struck her. I struggled to intervene. I remember coming up with this convoluted intervention: "Groups give us an opportunity to experiment with new behaviours: it would be good today if anyone talking a lot took the chance to sit back a little and try a different aspect of themselves – like get in touch with their quiet side. And if you're not talking a lot it would be good to hear more from you". I looked everywhere but at the intended target.

The next day in group, the incessant talker seemed to be on amphetamines. Another group member – 'Laura' – generally quiet and contemplative to begin with, now looked downcast and pale and seemed to have retreated completely. The atmosphere was muted. I asked Laura if she was alright: she confessed she was very embarrassed and had found it hard to return to the group after she had been 'chastised' for talking too much. Then another quiet member revealed she thought she was the one accused of talking – then another. Then the non-stop talker intervened to say she was worn out from trying to talk more – she felt she was among those 'accused' of being quiet!

What I have attempted to do in such situations since is be clear, but seek to be neither hurtful nor offensive. If people take hurt I can tell them honestly that I had no intention or reason to hurt them. There can be a gulf between what you say and what people perceive you to have said (Yalom, 2005). This must be anticipated, but not allowed to constrain

the facilitator from speaking authentically. Authenticity is not a synonym for bluntness however.

In such situations now I tend to say something like "ok guys, Janet is doing all the work, let's give her a break and hear from some others". I might turn to someone else and directly invite them to speak. I also tell groups that if everyone contributes then no one can dominate the group.

If someone is speaking and someone else cuts across, I tend to simply say "sorry Janet, I think Laura wasn't finished, let me come back to you". If the behaviour persists, the challenge gets stronger. I might either ask Laura what it's like to be cut across or ask Janet if she is aware of her practice of interrupting. This can lead to an exploration of whether this is how she behaves generally, and what she imagines the impact is on those around her. She also gets the chance to see how her behaviour impacts on group members, one of the most fruitful benefits of group membership (Yalom, 2005): tact and consideration must be the tone of such feedback to minimise hurt.

My experience as a participant tells me that there are few things that undermine faith in a facilitator as much as a failure to challenge. As outlined above, a mute or ambiguous challenge can have decidedly unforeseen consequences and is ultimately a failure of leadership.

Hard tackles

I recall a group of youth workers I once worked with. Given their training and chosen profession, I expected to be met with an open, positive group – my overriding experience of youth workers. On arrival at the venue one member approached me to inform me of his hope that I wouldn't disappoint his high expectations by aiming the group at the lowest common denominator. The next arrival rebuffed my attempts at small talk and stood looking out a window as I arranged the room.

The group eventually gathered – late – and sat mutely. As I was seeking to draw people out, build some cohesion and develop some sense of the group's needs, I paired people off for an introductory activity, expecting it to take ten minutes. Very quickly, I noticed an unusual number of pairs sitting in silence. I recalled the group earlier than I usually would to be met with a complaint that I had left the activity run on a bit – this was seconded by another member. In my experience it is unusual to be so challenged early in a group. I looked at the clock: twenty-five minutes gone out of a three hour session – it was going to be a long morning!

I continued working (too hard) to try and achieve some engagement, and get a sense of the group and their expectations. I was floundering. The

atmosphere was tense and stilted and I found the most routine questions were being stonewalled or reacted to as if they were highly intrusive. Inside I could feel my self-doubt rising – 'I'm not up to this, I'm boring them, they know all this already, I have nothing to offer'. Such internal chatter was not helping my situation. It's what we tell ourselves when we are in difficulty that most matters to our state of mind (Ellis, 1997). I was beginning to feel unmoored. I internally responded to my inner critic that I had been here before, I was experienced, I knew my area, I had a good track record... I started to breath, to calm and accept the position I was in – it was what it was, it was difficult, bordering on hostile: It was not of my making.

I asked a participant what drew him to youth work and he tersely replied 'personal reasons'. I asked him to say more. He stonewalled me. I went to the next participant and asked a similar question. Stonewalled again. I asked – 'what do you enjoy about the work'. She responded 'the kids'. I stopped. I announced that I didn't understand what was happening but I was not able to facilitate the group as things stood. There was an atmosphere I didn't understand and I was finding the group uncooperative. I was a facilitator and I couldn't function without participation. I told them I needed their cooperation in resolving this as I felt perplexed and stuck.

I was met with initial silence. Then some members began to speak of how much they were enjoying things, they were already learning a lot. But I stuck to my guns, I wasn't imagining things, I trusted my gut, my best guide (Rogers, 1961). I stated that the group were not engaging with me and I felt I would be wrong to continue under those circumstances, I couldn't and didn't want to force people to work with me. A facilitator cannot facilitate if the group refuses to be a group, refuses to participate – "there can be no group unless people belong to it" (Nitsun, 1996: 46). To persist in such circumstances would be to deny reality.

I later came to understand the multiplicity of reasons behind the myriad tensions and hostilities in the group. Things did improve somewhat after my challenge and the programme was considered a success by the participants. I do not remember the overall experience fondly, but I was pleased I took the action I did. I feel I defended myself as a facilitator and I issued the necessary challenge demanded by the circumstances. I can honestly say if it had been my first group it might well have been my last.

Who's the leader?

Occasionally a participant will come to a group and challenge the facilitator's leadership of the group. They may comment, correct or congratulate the facilitator on some intervention she makes and continue in that vein,

from a position equal to or above the leader. Some throw down a challenge straight away, sometimes before the group even starts, to mark the facilitator's cards (as above). Yet others are innate leaders and sometimes act more like a co-facilitator.

While we seek to facilitate the empowerment of participants, we must bear in mind that an unofficial co-facilitator is not what the other participants have signed up to – it's not unusual to see someone in this vein begin to question and challenge other participants, sometimes cutting across the facilitator at sensitive moments. If named, it allows the aspiring leader the opportunity to explore and understand a trait that may well be outside their awareness.

It must be stated that the facilitator is the formal group leader. When a facilitator enters a group they have accepted a contract to lead the group towards achieving agreed/negotiated goals. A facilitator cannot achieve their contractual aim if their role is continually disputed, contested, undermined or if they abdicate their position.

There is a difference however between leading a group and being in charge. It can be very productive if leadership tasks are delegated among all group members – it builds confidence and skills. The leadership role the facilitator plays naturally evolves as group members grow into a sense of their power – it is our job to accommodate and facilitate this development (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). However, this cannot happen for all group members if one or two seek or assume control.

Some challenges to the leader's position can be a threat to the group and to the ongoing development of its participants. Where leadership is challenged in this way it is necessary to respond – tactfully at first. In a work by Nitsun called *The Anti-Group* (1996), the author discusses the negative and disruptive elements which threaten to undermine and even destroy the existence of the group. As Freud showed, such nihilistic or destructive tendencies are part of the human psyche so their surfacing in groups is natural (1991). It is important to respond to existential threats to the group – such as attempts to decapitate the group by undermining or supplanting the leader.

Role of perception

I have experienced challenges wherein the challenger insisted I had said something that I simply hadn't or wouldn't say – words would be put in my mouth, sometimes forcefully. The sheer fervour of the challenger's insistence that I said something I didn't can be revealing – as if it is a replay of a battle from some other place. Challengers often gain an ally, regardless of the inaccuracy of the charge. While I make space for the

group to contribute to the discussion I feel it is important for me in these circumstances to be clear about my position, that I have not been heard correctly and did not say that which was attributed to me. That does not mean that people do not believe that I said it – it can be their genuine perception that I did.

An interesting conflict I experienced involved a misperception that I believe is illuminating. I was working with a group that represented Travellers, some of whom were Travellers, running a facilitation skills training programme. I was discussing with them an idea from solution-focused therapy, that simply calling something a problem makes it so (de Shazar, 1988). As I sought to generate discussion about the idea I noticed 'Bridget' withdrawing and looking upset. I checked if she was ok and was met with a blistering riposte in which she declared that people were always saying the issues faced by Travellers were not problems, that they were faced by racism everywhere they went... She went on for some minutes, driven by pent up rage and frustration. I hadn't said that Travellers did not face problems – they face dreadful problems. I was having sentiments attributed to me that were incorrect – in fact I wasn't talking about Travellers at all. I felt it was essential I clarify that I was misunderstood, but Bridget was so upset she couldn't hear me. She asked me to simply carry on with the session, but I had to reply that I couldn't. First of all, Bridget was clearly upset and psychically absent from the group – this was drawing the attention of the other group members and splintering cohesion. Moreover, I couldn't let an implication of prejudice – even racism – on my part go uncontested. I also felt that Bridget was not going to hear me. I asked the other members of the group what they had heard. They were perplexed at the interpretation that had been put on my words. This helped clarify the situation as Bridget was able to hear them.

As the incident was resolved, one of the participants spoke of how valuable the episode had been to her. She spoke of her own fear of challenging and how she often let misunderstandings go rather than confront them. She had seen the value of challenge and would try it the next opportunity. Another member felt it was instructive to see that the formal group leader had facilitated other group members to resolve the issue, to lead the group out of the impasse. Bridget shared that she believed she wouldn't have been able to hear my clarification and that its coming from a peer made it more accessible.

Challenging the facilitator

When running groups, we seek to create an environment where participants feel safe to challenge the facilitator, and to feel safe challenging

their fellow participants. For some, challenging a group leader can be a daunting idea because they may see the facilitator as a powerful figure. We can create an environment in which we can be challenged in ways that are safe for the participant, though it may not always be comfortable for us. The purpose of the group will likely include the idea of increasing the agency and autonomy of participants, of their becoming more self-directed and responsible: invariably this means developing a capacity to be assertive, to challenge where necessary. We facilitate this growth by accepting their challenge and responding calmly and empathically to it. Just as it is important to be able to distinguish between an attack and a challenge (Corey, 2000), it is also essential that we not see a challenge as an attack.

Purpose of challenge

There is a purpose behind what we do as facilitators. We challenge for a variety of reasons. We challenge inveterate talkers to talk less, we challenge quiet people to talk more. We challenge participants who hold self-limiting beliefs to reassess them and open up to their potentialities. We challenge participants who doubt the point of a group not just for themselves but for others. We challenge participants to trust themselves, trust the group and 'trust the process'[6].

When we don't challenge where we should, we lose credibility in the eyes of participants. This makes the group a less safe place; it undermines the deepening of cohesion.

The more I believe in groups and the more I feel grateful and admiring of participants for their attendance and participation, the more I feel a need to protect the process, to stand by it. If I am training facilitators to work with marginalised client groups, then I have to hold those groups in mind as I seek to encourage and develop the requisite skills in trainees: if they are falling short in ways that have repercussions for the vulnerable then it is incumbent on me as the facilitator to respond with appropriate challenge.

I aim to challenge in a way that is authentic, non-judgemental and respectful. My challenge might not always be perceived that way – I cannot control how I am seen by another. At best, as I can only exercise control of my own input, it is vital that I am clear as to my purpose.

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[6] Carl Rogers proposed that when Core Conditions were in place, we then placed our trust in their efficacy, leading to movement and growth for participants.

Surviving trial

Hardship and trial bring benefits, so long as we survive them! The last ice age made much of the world an inhospitable place for humankind. The challenge of survival resulted in tremendous social and technological change. People combined and collaborated in bigger units; there was increased specialisation in skills and technology. As resources became fewer and climate harsher, people had to rely on their circle to a greater degree, become more organised and more watchful of perceived outsiders. It is postulated that people had to become smarter, do things more efficiently and effectively. They were confronted with an extraordinary challenge and they adapted or died. The fear of attack from man or beast was very real – those that weren't primed to respond perished.

The average life expectancy of the majority of humans for most of the history of mankind was scarcely thirty years. For the vast bulk, to employ Hobbes' phrase, life was poor, nasty, brutish and short. We became programmed to seek out fatty, high calorific foods to get us through the scarcity of winter. The instincts and responses we developed throughout our long hunter-gatherer phase were designed for very different circumstances to those we live in today. For example, if a loud, sudden noise assails us, our body reacts as if our lives are threatened. The reaction will be one designed to heighten our chance of surviving danger in a perilous environment. Our body will flood with hormones, our physiology changes, we are primed to counter the threat and overcome it or flee (Goleman, 1995). The fact that the noise is caused by a door slamming in the wind enters our consciousness after our body has responded to a scenario it cannot in the moment know is not life threatening. For much of humanity's existence, a wait to confirm or rule out the approach of a large predator might have had deadly consequences.

We are primed to react to perceived threat in a way that is largely excessive in contemporary society. We speak of homicidal rage, road rage, insane jealousy. How do societies feel so threatened they will commit genocide, and rationalise it as an appropriate and justified response? How do we explain the greed and hubris that brought our (Irish) society to the brink? Or the lionisation of greedy tax exiles as virtuous figures we should all aspire to be?

Under fire

All of this is important when it comes to behaviour in the group that we find difficult or threatening. I have not often been attacked (by which I mean verbal attack) in a group, but it is (with considerable hindsight!) an interesting, thought provoking experience. In the instance I may tell myself "this is

not about me, this is a projection or transference at work". My body how-ever feels all sorts of surges – run, kick, punch, and lash out. My job in the moment is to contain my reactions, to choose not to act consistently with my feeling. I remind myself to breathe. I have become more adept at handling these rare moments, of restraining myself and staying connected and respect-ful. But I do feel a splitting in me – the rational part of me telling me how important it is to stay with this, to listen, to show myself as open and accept-ing. Concurrently, a more primal part surges from fear to rage, wanting to run from or vanquish the perceived enemy. I may also fear that others will join the attack and I can feel an impulse to move things on quickly, but the trained reflective professional in me knows I must seek to curtail this impulse as best I can. Then I feel another, deeper part of me bringing forward the knowledge that it will be alright, whatever happens it will be alright – I now hear this part more clearly than I used to. Some would call this part the Self.

For the rest of the session, my body often feels the effects of the trig-gered hormones. I have to work harder to listen and stay grounded. I feel flutters of anxiety. But somehow I also know it is alright, and allowing in this belief has an anchoring effect. Nevertheless, the anxiety returns after the group – did I handle it well, did I model good facilitation? And in the days afterwards I might worry about returning to the group. Will there be a repeat 'attack'? Under the fearful thoughts is the question – am I safe, am I a competent person? Doubts about my ability creep in – I ask myself 'why am I so affected, wouldn't another facilitator have shrugged this off by now, or have handled it better than me'? This is where supervision is so critical – to go to someone and talk it through, probe my fears, explore my perception of the 'attacker': gain perspective – what is the worst that can actually happen and how bad is that really? Is the worst case scenario really likely to happen?

As I write here of vulnerability and doubt I feel a twinge of fear that in doing so I leave myself open to derision. Yet what is a human if not vulnerable? Am I so different? I believe not.

Recent research shows that overcoming ordeals and fears makes it eas-ier to deal with further challenges and trials (Seligman, 2011). I fear, but I choose to persist. I would, however, love more strength and courage. It seems it can be grown. In the wake of a difficult engagement I usually long for imperviousness! In calmer moments I realise this is a longing to be something I am not.

Dealing with crises

Is there any bigger challenge for a group facilitator than dealing with the death of a participant? An untimely death through accident or natural

causes leaves a group stunned and reeling. Even harder is the death by suicide of a group member, which is a terrible and challenging event for a group to deal with because questions are left for the group – was it something they did or didn't say? Should they have seen something?

On one occasion I was running a group where a participant – 'Jim' – led the group in a session on "the reasons we go on living". The following day he took his own life.

The effect on the remaining group members was devastating. Some wondered if they had provided better answers to his question might they have averted his death. Others were angry, feeling they had been set up to fail and had been left with an unfair burden of guilt. Still others had struggled for many years with the same mental health challenges as the deceased and felt both bereft and undermined in their own recovery. Members questioned themselves, the facilitator and the group itself. The following session was dedicated to marking the death and expressing grief – all voices were heard and at the end a candle was blown out to acknowledge Jim's passing. The group decided that it would send a wrong signal to devote more than one session to someone who had decided to leave us, however deeply they regretted his decision and his manner of leaving.

By facing and dealing with the issue so comprehensively and autonomously the group reached a deeper level – it had been dealt a devastating blow, questioned its own existence and decided to take the blow, express its loss and hurt, and then continue. A sombre mood prevailed for a time. 'Jim' was recalled with sadness and fondness in the last session along with all the other significant elements of the story of the year-long group. Some group members who had struggled with depression and had in the past survived an attempted suicide, shared how the effect of 'Jim's' death on their fellow group members had brought home to them the devastation left behind – they considered it a sobering and life-affirming lesson.

In my experience, the attrition rate on ex-prisoner groups is high. Many participants have addiction issues with all its attendant dangers, many live in unstable circumstances, often sleeping rough for periods. It is not uncommon for these participants to feel they are in imminent danger of attack from people they have crossed swords with. Chaos, anxiety and the eruption of sudden and serious levels of violence backdrop many an ex-prisoner group I have facilitated.

In the cases of deaths, I have invariably been left with instances of wondering – could I have done more to reach them or to engage more fruitfully – would it have been possible to get them into a safer/healthier place more quickly? I think it important and natural I ask myself the questions, but I am also glad I haven't tended to stay with them overlong. Ultimately – at best

– we can only control our own actions. I ask myself if I sincerely tried – I do not ask myself if I did a perfect job. I am an imperfect facilitator; I can do no more than my imperfect best. With all of the deaths I needed to see my supervisor to help me deal with the event. I needed to acknowledge the pain, the permanent sundering of a relationship, the untimely loss of a life that intersected with and touched mine. It is the utter waste that I struggle with most – all that potential and hope obliterated in an instant.

At least some losses could be averted were sufficient and cohesive services in place. Social injustice and inequality play a part in some deaths, but in the case of a few, those who lost their lives seemed driven by a dark urge to behaviours that ultimately proved fatal. These poor souls make me ponder Freud's idea of Thanatos; that dark, destructive drive that leads us over the precipice (Cohen, 2005).

Breaches of trust

It is a given that as facilitators we contract on confidentiality when working with groups where high levels of sharing are expected or necessary. Optimal functioning in groups largely rests on the degree to which people feel free to participate, and this in turn rests on safety and trust. In a cohesive group environment, confidences are shared and risks taken. Being part of a group that works at depth is invariably life enriching. It can become a core element in people's experience, enhancing their lives. Participants stretch themselves in ways they may have thought beyond their capacity. They form relationships with their fellow members and feel a sense of belonging and ownership of their group. They reveal long, deeply hidden dreams and fears, joys and sorrows. Therefore, a breach of trust can be devastating and participants are left feeling unsafe and doubting their judgement. It can be difficult to re-establish trust.

There, are, of course, different levels of breach. But there are no good breaches – what can seem inconsequential to one can be devastating to another. A facilitator can only ask a group to respect confidentiality – she cannot guarantee that a breach will not happen. It is wise to make this clear to members at the time of contracting: we can ask for but not command compliance with the contract.

Unfortunately breaches of trust are an aspect of life. Helping a group manage its reaction to a breach is important – groups can recover from such disappointments. I find it best if participants simply state how they have been affected by the breach. Initially, as with many an upset, there may be considerable levels of heat and distress. Some participants invariably overreact, proclaiming they will never again speak in the group. Ellis

would label such a reaction 'catastrophising', and consider it irrational and unhealthy as the person is denying themselves something that benefits them (1997). Provided people feel heard, the initial intensity usually subsides, often followed by disillusionment and a keen sense of loss. This is quite a healthy reaction, to feel hurt, to pull back and be more careful about disclosure. It is also healthy to seek to overcome a setback, and doing so in the group builds participants' capacity to transfer this durability to other areas of their lives.

Essentially breaching confidentiality comes down to boundaries. Naturally, people are boundaried to different degrees. Sometimes it can be hard for the 'breacher' to even see they have transgressed. If they can be supported to find the insight or courage to look at the consequences of their actions, it can provide them with an important opportunity for awareness and growth. Sometimes when confronted with the consequences of their actions the 'breacher' can go through stages of denial, counter-attack or, regrettably, flight from the group. As a result, it can be useful to ask participants to speak on how they have been affected, how they feel about the event, rather than pounce on the offender. I have seen groups react with empathy to genuinely contrite offenders as they struggle to explain and understand their behaviour.

Having listened fully to how people have been affected, it helps to simply ask "how do we proceed now, aware of what has happened, but striving to overcome it"? The act of harnessing the group to overcome it sets it a positive, constructive task and increases the likelihood of the breach being a setback to overcome rather than a roadblock.

CHAPTER 3

OWN GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

Our current best thinking

Karl Popper is widely upheld as the great philosopher of science (Magee, 1997). He developed the idea of falsifiability, wherein any position proposed had to be presented in such a way that it could be challenged, tested, and either upheld or disproved. The implication was that no position could be viewed as being above question.

On surveying the history of science, Popper observed that many of the positions that had been arrived at, and been regarded as definitive, had been undermined by subsequent scientific developments. Even Newton's Laws, regarded by many as the greatest individual intellectual achievement of humanity, were partly undermined by the work of Einstein (ibid). Popper proposed that even erroneous understandings could still be of enormous benefit to mankind. What we have – all we could have – is our current best thinking (Popper, 1963). It only made sense to look for the way to improve, rather than pursue ultimate answers. All positions had to be open to challenge, and societies that were open were always going to succeed in a contest with those that were closed. Closed systems cannot change or grow: they see questioning as heretical and treasonous. As a result, they cannot evolve and will invariably atrophy.

As with societies, so with individuals and groups: a group that is open to testing its beliefs and questioning its attitudes is one where the group and its constituent parts can grow, learn and advance. Openness is not easy, it can be deeply uncomfortable: Popper himself was quite averse to being challenged (Magee, 1997). Our beliefs about who we are and what we can and cannot do can constrain us. Things we accept as immutable truths can act as barriers to our fulfilling our potential.

We see it constantly in disadvantaged groups – those who experience disadvantage frequently develop self-limiting beliefs that hinder their progression. Without challenging and amending these beliefs they find it difficult to progress. The longer and deeper the experience of disadvantage,

the lengthier the intervention required to facilitate participants change their self-perception.

Popper's thesis argues that we do not and cannot reach definitive positions, that there are no absolute truths. While absoluteness is "one of the main causes of human disturbance" because it allows no leeway or deviation (Ellis, 1997, 2), it is also, paradoxically, comforting because certainty is a bulwark against the anxiety that follows the realisation that we live in a random universe.

 The position that all we have is our current best thinking counsels our holding (none too tightly) a series of flexible positions, and advocates that we must always be open to ongoing question and challenge. It is not necessarily an easy position to embrace. We arrive at a point similar to that endorsed by Rogers and others – we must continually work at our own growth, explore and test our beliefs, discover and employ our strengths, accept our genuine limitations, knowing that our current stage of development is not fixed: we are on a journey, there is no end point other than death or mental dissolution. It is best that we embrace this challenging reality.

Popper's thinking relieves us of aiming for unattainable perfection or the pressure of producing definitive answers for anxious clients. It is more fruitful to support participants develop tolerance for ambivalence and uncertainty and help them to see that "needing to be right is always a compensation for feelings of doubt" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004), and an ultimately futile attempt to control that which cannot be.

Reality and choice

One can be forgiven for thinking that a realistic view of life is sometimes viewed as commensurate with pessimism. Granted, to be incessantly weighted down with anxiety and worry is not a healthy place to be, and, Ellis would argue, not rational either (1997). However, relentless 'upbeatness' is similarly out of kilter. It is healthier and more realistic to accept that life is a struggle for most of us at times, and for some, for considerable periods of time (Layard & Clark, 2015). That does not mean life is not a wondrous thing. And, even in the darkest troughs there are periods of exception (De Shazar, 1988). Moreover, could we appreciate the good without the contrast of the less good?

Life ends in death. We do not live with this incontrovertible fact firmly at the forefront of our consciousness – it would likely overwhelm us if we did (May, 1975). If we are honest, many of us spend a lot of time getting excited about the ephemera of life – probably in an unconscious effort to suppress existential angst (ibid). Yet death brings things into focus, not least

regarding the question of time and how we use it. Existentialists propound that its finiteness gives life its urgency and ultimate meaning: it compels us to make choices, to act, to use what we have as best we can (Yalom, 2005). We don't all have the same potential or capacity: such is life. But we can choose to make the best of what we have – or not (Ellis, 1997).

Darwin wrote "many more individuals of each species are born than can possibly survive" (Darwin, 2011). There is an inbuilt brutality in life: it can be harsh, unforgiving and governed by chance. Some attend scrupulously to their health and die prematurely. Others flagrantly abuse themselves and live into cranky old age, grinding down those around them. People experience poverty, illness, isolation, loss, unemployment.

Life is what it is, and what we choose to do with it is of the utmost consequence to us. "I guess it comes down to a simple choice really, get busy living or get busy dying": this line from *The Shawshank Redemption* has often been cited to me as inspirational by people struggling with depression. What we choose to do with our lives is the essence of freedom and our unique responsibility (Frankl, 1959).

Frankl has shown how in even the most hellish of environments there is choice. Of all the harrowing incidents portrayed in the literature on the death camps, one of the most illuminating is Primo Levi's description of his decision to stay his hand and not rouse a fellow prisoner from a nightmare, as no dream could be worse than the reality to which he would awaken (Levi, 1999). How often do we hear of something appalling or inspirational and think with some regret of the time we waste fretting about insignificant matters, things often outside our control?

Ellis advocated that to live meaningfully and rationally we should adopt a strategy of long-range hedonism (1997). We should set out to enjoy life as much as possible for as long as possible. In order to do this, we have to attend to our health and well-being and use our time fruitfully. Moreover, there is no gain to be had from bemoaning that which cannot be different: this we are better facing with a stoical attitude.

A level of meaningfulness and contentment is within most everyone's reach, whatever our circumstances (Ellis, 1997). Even if we fall short of our dreams, we can still experience considerable life satisfaction by choosing to live authentically (May, 1975). But we can also know misery, and if we elect to stay in misery ultimately we have no-one to blame but ourselves.

Everyone faces obstacles and barriers on their life journey, some external and some internal. Nevertheless, in our society it is possible for virtually anyone to get an education and earn their living doing something meaningful. Not everyone has the same degree of access or opportunity, granted, as there are inequalities. But with enough determination the

fundamental claim stands up. Our society is flawed and unequal, but there is the precious freedom to 'choose our response' (ibid). We can pay a terrible price if we do not do so. And there are many countries whose people do not have this freedom or opportunity, whose people are willing to risk their lives to join our society.

Most of us will work for a living, and that work will occupy a considerable amount of our time and attention. In Freud's view, the more satisfying we find work, the better our life will go (Storr, 1989). Work that draws on and develops our aptitudes and abilities, work that is meaningful and engaging, will benefit us greatly. By choosing to work with others to facilitate them to increase the level of meaningfulness, contentment and self-direction they achieve in their lives we can experience deep satisfaction for ourselves. As Frankl puts it, contentment ensues from our dedication to a meaningful cause (1959). It is better to choose our cause than inherit or acquire one by default.

As our groups go, our lives go

We are relational beings that are driven to form attachments, achieve connection and intimacy (Diamond, 2001). We need others in order to develop and know ourselves: "a self is always born and grows in interpersonal relationships" (May, 1975: 88). We are rarely out of groups (Sonsteggard & Bitter, 2004): even if we are not in the physical presence of our fellow group members we spend considerable time engaged in the psychic reality of our myriad groups (Yalom, 2005). Several times a day family members, friends and colleagues will likely flit through our minds, our relationship to them ever modifying and subtly shifting as we reflect on our various transactions. Unemployed people fret that the postman won't come, even to deliver a 'brown envelope', because his visit signifies one is not excluded from the wider group that is society. We need to belong and we constantly check for evidence that we are not overlooked and for any subtle changes to our place.

Some of the groups we belong to go to the core of our identity. Family, community, work: we are in many diverse groups and it is fair to claim as our groups go our lives go (Johnson, 1991). The better we function in groups, the more fulfilling and satisfying our lives will be. Membership of a group "almost automatically evokes mutual support" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 9). To become effective and comfortable in groups has a decisive impact on the quality of our lives.

Naturally we differ in the extent to which we need groups. Some people have higher belonging needs than others (Glasser, 1998). Some are highly

group-centric and keenly attuned to all the currents occurring within them – they may be part of countless groups. Others are more comfortable with fewer and more intimate groups (ibid). A person who is without access to groups is identifiable as lonely and we instinctively feel they will suffer from lack of contact. Less obvious, hiding in plain sight, is the person who is never alone, always immersed in the lives of others, who may have difficulty relating to themselves.

Being part of groups is fundamental in developing our sense of self – in fact, without others, we doubt our very selfhood (May, 1975). Unemployed people find the groups they belong to narrows – they feel lessened and diminished as a result (Delaney, 2011). Finding acceptance in a group "is therapeutic in and of itself" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 125) and can reverse the undermining effects of marginalisation.

For the isolated, entering a new group will likely be daunting: they need a gentle entry, a chance to settle, an opportunity to find their voice without being pressured to do so (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). Leaving groups is a pattern for some, many of whom leave through fear – more than likely fear of exposure or rejection – so they opt out before they are put out, something they phantasise[7] might happen. Those who opt to stay will likely develop the skills and confidence to join a wider range of groups, enhancing their life.

Facilitators have their own questions to consider. Do you always play the facilitator's role in your various groups? Can you be a participant? If we always seek the role of group leader, are we holding ourselves apart from connection, intimacy and risk? Are we using the role to be in a group but still apart? Our own development requires that we ourselves belong to a healthy variety of groups and that within these we develop the capacity to be fluid in relation to the roles we play.

Challenges: good enough

I sometimes find myself drawn to responding to challenges in a defensive manner. I perceive threat, react, then lacerate myself for not being sufficiently contained. As human beings we tend to jump to conclusions and once a conclusion is reached, we can be very resistant to changing it, indeed, feel quite self-righteous acting out of it (Kahnemann, 2012: Gaffney, 2011). This propensity to rush to a sometimes unyielding

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[7] Klein used the 'ph' spelling when employing the word phantasy to portray powerful, often unconscious urges and wishes, to distinguish them from the more everyday flights of fancy suggested by the word 'fantasy'.

conclusion behoves me to understand myself better. Not everything we learn about ourselves is pleasant and generally we will judge ourselves harshly for how we are. If we do not enter into active debate with our inner critic it can severely undermine us. How often in groups I hear people voice tremendous and crippling self-doubt! Albert Ellis declared that because we are human we are inevitably flawed, so we may as well accept ourselves (1997). Easier said than done!

Nonetheless, it is an immensely important sentiment, echoing Winnicott's idea of the 'good enough parent' (1964). Essentially Winnicott found that perfect parents were harmful to the development of their children. The perfect parent tries to anticipate every wish of the infant – feeding it before it feels hungry, changing it the instant it needs and so on. Such a child never gets to experience frustration, nor develop the ability to self-soothe, tolerate discomfort or differentiate one feeling from another. The offspring of perfect parents would have high expectations of the world and would find it difficult to comprehend setbacks or refusals. Their ability to tolerate frustration would likely be compromised.

As a result, Winnicott concluded that the best parent was the one who was 'good enough'. A 'good enough' parent makes mistakes, does not seek to anticipate every need, allows the child make mistakes and provides the space for it to develop the capacity to self-soothe. Such a child grows up more resilient, more independent, and more realistic. Winnicott's views have similarities to Bowlby's views on healthy attachment (2005). Parents that are consistent and reliable, but not smothering, give their children the security to explore their world, knowing their parent will be there if needed.

As with parents, so with facilitators! The perfect facilitator is flawless, invulnerable, an intimidating and distant figure to the group members. She is above the group. She cannot lead by example because no one could possibly follow the example of one so perfect. The facilitator's role is to encourage and nurture the development of the participants – make space for them to shine, for their voice to be heard. If the facilitator is the star of the show, all others are dulled by her glory. We do more service to group members by being 'good enough' – being human, in other words. It is to the benefit of all that we aspire to be as good as we can be, knowing this will be imperfect, but overall, hopefully, good enough.

Good enough facilitation in crisis

It can be daunting to begin facilitating, putting oneself in front of a group of people as the group leader and have all faces turn to you expectantly. The

group members have a right to expect that you possess certain skills and abilities and the competence to run the programme. They will look to you for leadership and will make many assumptions of you. Put yourself in their place – what can a participant expect of the facilitator? This is a question I often ask a training group. Participants are often taken aback at the assumed demands they have of facilitators – they can find it sobering, because what they expect of me, their participants will in turn expect of them.

As well as more obvious things such as skills, knowledge, acceptance, there are also unconscious demands. Regardless of how democratically we run groups, we will be seen, at least by some, as the authority figure, the expert, the one with solutions. Participants can see in the group leader things that more accurately pertain to other situations. Affection or hostility might be directed at the leader for no immediately apparent reason, the roots of which lie elsewhere.

I remember an attack that was launched at me fifteen minutes into working with a new group of psychotherapy students. It was astonishing not only for its vitriol, but for how calmly I was dissected by my attacker. My initial reaction was complete surprise – shock in fact. I could not believe it was happening and only later did I realise it actually was an attack. Klein talks of the human propensity to split off the things we don't like (1988): I could feel part of me closing down and I struggled to hear what was being said. I felt weak at the knees and light-headed. While this was happening, I was struck by how impressive the attack was – it was so convincing I felt like nodding agreement. I was simultaneously aware of the importance of staying in the moment, of showing I was in role, that it was alright for participants to question me. Concurrently, I was starting to understand that the attack had very little to do with me, I was being shredded by someone who knew me for all of 15 minutes. I began to concentrate on taking some breaths and holding my ground. I told myself to let him speak, remembering from hard earned experience that if I attempted to shut him down it might be seen as an abuse of power. In a moment of crisis, I was able to receive support from my experience. Ironically, the topic of the day was projection and transference[8].

What was interesting for me about this experience (admittedly in retrospect), was how I was aware of my feelings reacting in one way and

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[8] Projection and transference are ego defence mechanisms as described by Freud. In the former, people split off aspects of themselves they dislike and 'project' it on to another, along, often, with their dislike of the characteristic. In transference, a situation or person evokes in us a reaction from an earlier stage of our lives and we may feel warmth or antagonism towards them though they may be of recent acquaintance and not familiar to us at all.

my thoughts in another. My 'reason' had a difficult job working with and countermanding a strong impulse to hit back. I was also struggling to keep my body upright and in place. My hearing was clouded. I wanted to fight, I wanted to flee, and I also froze (not able to hear). One inner voice told me I could simply leave – another told me I would lacerate myself for it.

A verbal attack is certainly not pleasant. Done in front of a large group on a first day of a course it feels tremendously exposing. But in light of the many grievous things that can go wrong in life, it's not critical in any objective sense. Nonetheless, I have to admit I felt as bad while it was happening (and in its aftermath) as I did during many of the worst things I have ever experienced – my organism reacted as if it were under existential threat.

In spite of being rocked back on my heels and the inner turmoil roiling inside me, I got through the day, made it to supervision the following week and returned to the same group a week after that, somewhat anxious but ready[9]. I felt, in time, that I had done 'good enough'! I felt it was reasonable to be so rocked by such a fierce attack. I was able to forgive myself for my fear, my anger and my confusion – all were reasonable reactions in the circumstances. It took time however.

The flawed facilitator

I take comfort from Albert Ellis's observation that we humans are inevitably flawed, because I know it to be true for me. It comforts me in the same way as Winnicott's observation that being a good enough parent is better for the child than a perfect one. It releases me from the pressures of not making a mistake. If I make a mistake I am better able than I used to be at acknowledging it to myself and righting it, or parking it, and moving on. I am a flawed facilitator – how could I not be?

Sometimes I go into group feeling tired or stressed or I have issues in my personal life that are preoccupying me. Yes, I do what I can to arrive in the group in the right frame of mind, rested and healthy, grounded and present – that is my aim. But I am human, and we all have particular sensitivities (buttons) which can get pressed. I am less inclined to be

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[9] My supervisor engaged me in Gestalt empty chair work where I eventually sat in my 'assailant's' place. Upon doing so I was flooded with fear and a sense of confusion and isolation. Returning to my own chair I felt empathy for my assailant and my fear and anger dissipated. I was able to enter the group in a different frame of mind. Because I worked on the dynamic of our relationship, the nature of the relationship shifted. We greeted each other cordially the following session and worked well together thereafter.

annoyed than I used to be at people presenting as apathetic, or people who work so hard to block the progress of the group rather than move forward. I am aware that these are dynamics that present again and again, and wishing them away is futile and self-deluding, as well as a failure to come to terms with the nature of things, with things as they simply are.

When I doubt or lacerate myself I seek to hark back to Ellis and Winnicott. As long as I am working on my own development, trying to grow and improve as a facilitator, then I can be easier on myself for my flaws. No human is perfect: as Jung put it, where there is light there is also shade. It is ok – indeed, it is helpful to have flaws. It is ok to be less than perfect – there is no harm in working to be the best you can be. As Popper said, all we have is our current best thinking. Something is similarly true of our work efforts.

Awareness and change

Reflective practitioners realise that their thinking evolves as they test their beliefs through application and then reflection on the outcomes. It is a process that leads to change and growth: "any real change must start with awareness" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 104). It is a logical and crucial component in a facilitator's philosophy of working with others that a group leader must "constantly develop who he or she is" (ibid: 115). So, the facilitator's commitment to building and developing herself is viewed as central to her effectiveness (ASGW, 1998). It is not a simple undertaking: in the search we will invariably meet aspects of ourselves that are less than noble. Self-awareness is a journey that requires courage, long-term commitment and resources; it is not a concrete destination, nor do we cease to be vulnerable beings.

Like most everyone I know, there are aspects of myself I don't like, that I have wished I could excise and have done with, that I see no obvious or immediate benefit from. Thus, I find myself in the anomalous position of working to give acceptance to others while being intolerant towards elements of myself. All humans have their struggles, regardless of the persona they present. It helps me to know that I am not uniquely foolish and fearful. Yet I still, occasionally, feel resentful that I am the most skilled of all at diminishing myself.

I am grateful to the prodigious Martin Seligman for revealing that when he wakes up at the dread hour of 4.00 a.m. he berates himself for not having done enough! Apparently Nobel Laureate Seamus Heaney was wont to experience considerable self-doubt. Fellow Laureate Samuel Beckett was forever prone to successions of disabling illnesses and prolonged neuroses and depressions (Knowlson, 1996). I am comforted that these luminaries are

no different from the rest of us: self-doubt and frailty are part of the human condition. Moreover, how else could Freud write so knowledgeably of the merciless inner critic he labelled the Superego if he was not so personally well acquainted – after all, his first analysand was himself! Part of being 'good enough' is having self-doubt, feeling fearful, realising our vulnerability. However, it is also knowing and looking to our strengths and experience when doubt assails us.

The seeking and fleeing of attention

I need, as best I can, to know my blind spots when working with groups. All humans need attention to such a degree that if people feel they do not get it they may become ill, or engage in unhealthy behaviour – any attention, even censorious, is better than none. If I do not see, or, for reasons I'm unaware of, do not want to notice someone in a group, then they are denied some of the attention that being in a group offers. Often, as facilitators, we might find our attention straying to a 'star' participant, or to a difficult one. I remember instances of being a participant in groups where certain group members demanded more attention of the group leader, often by taking the group off on tangents. I remember my sense of annoyance about this, my sense of feeling cheated, my desire to interject and complain, my fear I might damage myself by doing so – my agitation at the crux I felt I was put in by the 'selfishness' of another. Inside, I raged against them! Why couldn't the facilitator deal with this, I wondered; why don't they bring us back to the point? It makes me wonder now at the dynamics that surely occur under my radar in groups that I deliver.

In a past facilitation training group a participant – 'Martha' – took a lot of attention by repeatedly saying she didn't understand. The more this position was explored, the more confused she presented, speaking in a progressively younger voice. My first approach was to start with the assumption she probably understood more than she believed, that her confidence was low and if something confused her she tended to exaggerate it into a belief that she understood nothing. She frequently hinted at being silenced and not listened to in her life but withdrew if asked to say more. When she did speak she usually did so with a hand over her mouth. When her attention was brought to this gesture, she apologised, as if she had been found fault with.

Martha was employed by an organisation that ran addiction recovery programmes, with a view to her delivering group interventions. This work was not for the faint-hearted – Martha struck me as among the most faint-hearted I had met in quite a while. In a previous meeting Martha had asked

me to model a group training session as she and the other participants had to demonstrate practical skills as part of the certification requirements. After the demonstration, which I felt had gone well, we began processing, breaking the session down into its parts, highlighting the techniques employed, the stages we had gone through, the theoretical underpinnings and so on.

There was strong, active group involvement, barring Martha, who had requested the demonstration, so I sought to include her. I asked her if having seen what she requested had helped clarify matters. She answered, 'I don't understand, I don't understand what you mean'. As ever, she spoke in a childlike voice. I felt a flash of irritation – I sought to catch the sensation and bracket it off. I took a moment to breathe and repeated the question more slowly. I was met with further perplexity – Martha again saying 'I'm confused'. I asked 'what's your confusion about'? 'Everything,' she answered. I asked, 'When did it start?' 'I don't know. I don't know what my confusion is about or when it started,' she replied. I was getting confused myself and I told her I wasn't sure what she was confused about – could she help me get clarity. She replied 'I don't know what you mean'.

I felt another surge of exasperation, but knew it would not be helpful to express it (Yalom, 2005). Curiously, I felt I was the recipient of some aggression. I felt like I was being slapped. I took a breath and considered trying again. I was trying to balance and hold several things. I was annoyed and frustrated. I could also sense a frightened child in front of me and felt empathy. At the same time, I was running a course designed to certify facilitators: a child does not make an ideal facilitator!

I was conscious of stirrings in the group; I was reading it as frustration with the impasse. At practically every discussion and every explanation Martha had announced her confusion – in the earlier stages people had sought to help her, but they had begun to talk over her. I decided to say to her that she kept presenting as confused, which was confusing me. I asked if we could sort out the confusion, because she was looking to work in groups, so it would be a good idea to look at what looked like a default position. I kept my words as simple as I could. I knew she was uncomfortable with the attention, though she had sought it out in the same way as before. I checked that out with her – yes, she was uncomfortable. But I couldn't simply move on and leave her with it. I felt stuck, which I named.

I voiced my view that someone running groups needed a certain level of confidence, clarity and presence – they also needed a level of decisiveness and her ongoing confusion concerned me. Martha declared – somewhat breezily I felt – that she wouldn't be confused when running groups. I told her I was not convinced and I put it to her that my concerns were reasonable

and I felt they needed to be answered (as I was responsible for certifying students).

Suddenly Martha flared with anger. She sat up, her body straight and erect, her hands on her lap. It wasn't her fault, that's how it was, she told me, in a decidedly adult voice. She was sick of being told she wasn't up to it. This wasn't what I had said: I asked 'where did you hear that'? She stopped and would say no more: I didn't press. I told her it was good to see her looking so strong. I felt others in the group nod in agreement. She looked like an adult and I no longer felt so stuck.

For me an important issue here was my own reaction when dealing with Martha. I was annoyed at her helplessness, I felt like prodding, like demanding of Martha that she speak up. In my mind I wished she would grow up. I was irritated by her passivity, her childishness. Now, I wonder if she evokes those emotions in others and if it leads to her being bullied? Is she unconsciously evoking behaviour or reactions in others that have their origins in her early life? In her anger Martha found some power – but did she stay with this or lacerate herself with doubt later?

I am also obliged to ask myself why her passivity annoyed me so much. I can think of a significant other in my own past who spent much of her life being door-matted by a bully. She too continually presented as confused, as helpless, as incapable of taking action. What's interesting and sobering for me is that I felt an impulse to badger someone presenting as 'helpless'. I felt like swearing, shaking them, shouting at them 'answer', 'stop being weak', 'do something'!

If I can hold this reaction and see it as something that is evoked in me, for a complexity of reasons – transference, counter-transference, projection... then I might be of some use to the person, even if I can gently tell them what is coming up in me. Clearly there are layers of dynamics in the interaction between myself and Martha. Much of it may well be unconscious to us both – this means that we may never really know the full picture, and the best we can do is to try and do our best. That doesn't mean we'll get it right, but we might, to borrow from Beckett, 'fail better'.

Postscript*: In the final days of the group, when participants engaged in practical skills demonstrations, Martha took centre stage and facilitated her practical piece as proficiently as any student I have seen. She exuded far more confidence as a group leader than as a participant. Afterwards she spoke of how she had thoroughly enjoyed listening to people and feeling she had 'permission' to draw them out. Martha was given feedback by all group members – to a person they noted their surprise at how well she had done, her ability outweighed the level she had presented herself*

at in the group. Some went so far as to own that her previous helplessness had become wearisome. They told her how uplifting it was for them to see her in all her power and hoped she wouldn't ever again retreat into the timid and confused person she had previously shown. Martha accepted their feedback with maturity and declared herself very happy and proud of herself.

Self-evaluating

As facilitators, we often run groups on our own. At the end of an engagement we reflect on the day and how it went. Things we might have done differently come to mind, things to consider for the next day, or the next group. We ponder what we are pleased with and what interventions worked. Invariably, given human nature, anything 'negative' tends to be uppermost for many of us. A brief, negatively charged interaction might be the dominant aftertaste of a whole day's work. It is essential that we work to get any such event into perspective. We also need to bring our focus to what we did well, what activities worked, what we are pleased with.

There are days when I feel I might have been a little too hurried, too brusque, that I must be mindful to be more contained or grounded the following day. I may wonder, did I overlook anyone – was there a quiet group member I failed to see? Did I answer a question I might more usefully have put back on the group? Or I might feel, looking back over the whole day, that the energy was a bit low and that I might come in with more interactive material, perhaps involving physical movement the next day. It is vitally important that I be able to review my day with some level of composure and fairness (not least to myself), that I not catastrophise a perceived error, or become overwrought about something that could have gone better. With many years' experience behind me, I can count on one hand the incidents that could be categorised as serious.

Inexperienced facilitators are generally more likely to over-blow a minor setback or mistake. I see it as my role when leading training groups to bring attention to this tendency. We can grow from mistakes – provided we can put them in context and perspective. After a practice session I like to process the event with the trainee before they are offered any feedback from others. We must strive to be the best judges of our own performance that we can be, so we must become adept at reflecting on our own practice, which vitally entails being able to recognise our strengths as well as growing edges.

When a trainee is finished their practice I ask them how they are. How did it go for them? How satisfied are they? Invariably learners talk of their

nerves. I enquire how their nervousness affected them: where in their body did they feel this nervousness? I ask, "*Did the nervousness reduce*"? I then seek to guide them to identify when it passed or decreased (it almost always does) and what was happening when it left them. Invariably the nervousness seems to leave trainees when they make eye contact and engage with the group members. They often report that if they look down at their notes or break contact in other ways, their nervousness returns. By exploring the question, participants develop awareness around their own needs, their own inner dynamics and grow more accepting of the fact they are allowed to be nervous, that it is natural, and not a sign of incompetence or weakness. In fact, it is a sign, they realise, that they are taking the task seriously; it is important to them so they invest themselves in it: little wonder they are nervous. Also, it is relieving and uplifting to know that it does pass, usually when they connect with the group.

When I ask what they feel they did well I invariably get an initial reply that heaps credit on the group members and away from themselves. I often have to persist and ask what they feel *they* did well, for sometimes a facilitator can work very well but not get all they wish for from a group.

Being able to state what we did well is the nub of the matter. I meet few enough trainees who are able to give sufficient credit to their good work. I often have to work hard to keep them from flipping the question over and offering what they feel they didn't do well – as Gaffney shows, we are wired to pay more attention to the negative (2011). I never miss the opportunity to point out to the group the stubbornness of the super-ego, its endless capacity to jump up and deliver a good laceration even when explicitly not invited! As a facilitator I am seeking to facilitate the growth and development of group participants. We grow when we can identify and own our qualities and strengths, bringing to awareness – and integrating – our achievements. We need to actively do this to counteract the very human tendency to see outsized flaws, particularly in ourselves.

After trainees sufficiently own the strengths and qualities they have portrayed, I ask them what they might do differently were they to repeat the session. It is good, of course, to be constructively, reasonably critical, to see opportunities for improvement – these will always exist. But the critical gaze must be fair, measured and proportionate, not lacerating.

To the rescue

In one such supervisory session I was working with a young woman who had just co-facilitated the group on the topic of working with the unemployed. 'Tara' was in her mid-thirties and in recovery from addiction. Over the

course of the programme she was wont to cry for periods. Her tears usually occurred whenever the group engaged in discussion and names or facts were mentioned that she perceived were known to everyone but herself. She felt her years in addiction had resulted in her knowing less than others because she had been 'absent'. In such situations she felt exposed and vulnerable, as well as regretful.

Tara found the attention of others difficult, or found it hard to understand that others saw her as a peer, but after a while she grew easier in accepting both. Tara's confidence grew with each session. Her contributions were original and penetrative; she had a quick and keen mind. She found it easier to accept commendation from the group members than from me: as they were not shy in doing so I practised restraint.

Tara's capacity for self-doubt was considerable, yet she participated in every session. She announced one day that being in the group was the best and worst thing – she was proud of herself but also terrified. By attending she felt she was undertaking something of considerable importance, marking her progress and recovery, something she found highly stimulating and enjoyable. However, she was haunted by the fear she would mess it up, as she felt she had always done with that which she valued. Her presence in the group afforded other group members the opportunity to see how daunting it could be for someone coming from a difficult place to attend a group and see something through.

During her training practice Tara adopted a junior role to her co-facilitator: as the session progressed she withdrew from any notion of equal delivery. I could see her confusion and doubt surface, the sense she should be doing something coupled with her fear of getting it wrong. She had started well, but as the session proceeded she seemed to shrink before our eyes.

In commencing to process her experience post-session, Tara's first action was to cry. Simultaneously, some of the group members began to tell her how wonderful she was. I asked them to hold their feedback and enquired of Tara how the comments struck her. She didn't believe them, she said, they made her feel worse. It must have been a disaster if people had the urge to tell her nice things. For Tara, her colleagues' words did not accord with her inner experience, so they worsened it.

I asked her how she was. Sobbing, she confirmed that she saw the whole session as a disaster and was completely unable to see any merit in her work. She couldn't speak, her mind was blank. Sensing Tara was practically dissociative I asked if she could hear me. She confirmed that she could barely understand what I was saying. I knew that any idea of processing the session was not feasible. All we could do at that moment

I felt was to be with her, to accept her tears and upset. The atmosphere in the group was as warm as could have been wished for. Tara cried a while then asked us to move on from her. Another group member asked her if it would be alright if she tried a grounding exercise she wanted to test – she felt it would be a good time. Tara and the group agreed. After it, many group members went and hugged Tara, connecting with her.

In the next session we made great use of the human impulse to rescue and how it could achieve the opposite of what it sought.

Buttons

Melanie Klein used the term *persecutory anxiety* to describe that primitive, deep seated reaction we experience when we feel threatened (1988). She believed this response develops in the first three months of life. She postulated that an infant feeling dread or neglect can experience a literal fear of annihilation. A sense of intense persecution can spark an annihilating rage and hatred towards the perceived persecutor. It is a 'total', fundamentalist position – rage is rarely clouded by doubt (Gaffney, 2011). All humans experience these feelings, but they are uncomfortable to own, leading to the psychic phenomena of splitting, denial, projection and projective identification – that which we don't like to own about ourselves we seek to place elsewhere, usually either onto someone else or buried in our unconscious. We may then see this part of ourselves in others and hate them for it.

We might relate to the sensation of fear or anger that a threatening look can induce. People often report these feelings are sparked when they feel they are overlooked or dismissed. In such situations our impulse might be to ask – 'why are they doing this to me'? The feeling can be lightning fast and extraordinarily powerful. It may be followed by indignation, maybe we consider jumping up and teaching our persecutor a lesson. Mostly – hopefully – we pause, take a breath and our thinking begins to kick in – 'they don't know me, it's not me they're targeting... they must be pretty angry and frustrated themselves...' When we talk to ourselves in this way, allow ourselves connect with our reason, we can come down from the heightened state. We might employ our capacity for empathy to bolster the process – 'what is happening in that person's life that they feel so angry? Maybe they're not ignoring us but just can't see us? Who knows what troubles they're dealing with'?

However, there is that split second where our perception of being threatened can bring us to a state where we feel an urge to lash out. To use common parlance – a 'button' has been pushed. We are all vulnerable

to this and we have our individual triggers. Moreover, we react this way when we *perceive* we are being threatened – whether we actually are or not

My pattern, if I feel slighted or insulted, is to feel a surge of anger. I do not like it when I feel slighted and I spontaneously interpret someone not acknowledging me when I let them into traffic, for example, as a contemptuous dismissal. I feel it first in my gut, a seemingly instantaneous rush. If your thought on reading this is 'that's childish', you would be exactly right – in fact, it would be more accurate to label the reaction infantile.

While what is ultimately interesting to me is why I should feel slighted, my 'there and then' reality is simply that I do and I can feel a swell of persecutory anxiety and anger – sometimes rage. Though I know this is my pattern and have observed it in myself before, it still surges forward, which suggests to me that reactions of this type originate from 'wiring' established long before we acquire reason – thus their seeming imperviousness to 'change your thinking' approaches.

It is very rare for this feeling to last all the way into action thankfully, though sometimes my hand may have hit the car horn before I am aware of it happening. My reflexes strike out – apparently from the amyglada, a primitive part of our brain – bypassing my thinking centre. Mostly, thankfully, the heave of anger spikes, then quickly subsides. I realise that the situation is not really about me, this person cannot even see me and they are locked in their own inner world. I breathe and make a decision to turn my attention elsewhere – I consciously choose to redirect my focus, and I even feel a sense of well-being and self-appreciation for letting the matter go before it had a bigger impact on my day. I exit the black and white state that Klein labelled 'paranoid-schizoid' and enter the 'depressive position', a state where we can cope with ambivalence and shades of grey (Klein, 1988).

We all have our buttons. The things that trigger a strong reaction in us provide opportunities for us to learn more about ourselves. For example, when I began working with clients I used to find apathy in others hugely irritating and mystifying. I would barely be able to restrain my frustration when confronted with a client who sat in front of me, seemingly not willing to speak, with no apparent reason for coming. As I worked more with people, and began to develop an awareness of issues like depression, I began to see the picture in an altered light. I was left with a responsibility to examine the original strength of my reaction and what it was telling me about myself. What was it I feared and loathed about apathy, where did it originate, did apathy spark some deep rooted anxiety in me? How did I perceive my own bouts of apathy?

Beneath banality

> "*Everyone's always talking about the banality of evil – what about the evil of banality!*"

<div align="right">T Wolfe</div>

I recall working with someone in a training group where every time he spoke I found my concentration wandering: in truth, I found 'Kieran' quite banal. His key topic of conversation was health and fitness. He was respectful and helpful to others, but I found him utterly tedious to listen to, his every contribution ending up in impersonal, technically precise detail. I soon found I was rebuking myself every time he spoke for my drifting attention: 'Come on, pay attention, don't let it show' I'd admonish myself. As time passed I could increasingly feel irritation rise in me at Kieran. I found he didn't pause where others normally would, so I found it hard to interject and when I did he usually had just recommenced speaking, with the result I appeared (I felt) to be cutting him off. Moreover, his stories seemed structured in a different way to others, not building to a moment or a natural ending, so I never knew when (or whether) he was nearing a climax.

I knew I had to sit and reflect on what was going on for me whenever Kieran spoke. I was aware that he had been through a tough few years and had really lost his self-esteem – I desperately did not want to harm him further. If I could understand my reaction, which was clearly outsized, I would, I hoped, be in a position to be more present and more accepting. I also wondered about him – was he interested in what he himself was saying?

I asked myself – what's my feeling when he's speaking? I was bored and frustrated: employing the technique of free association[10] I pushed further and soon saw I felt resentful, angry, robbed, violated! As I let the thoughts and feelings drift I saw them enter stronger and darker territory. I realised I felt Kieran was an aggressor, imposing himself, impervious to the effect he was having. I felt furious! What was going on for me here? I was interested (and amazed) at my strength of feeling – my bodily reaction was equally strong, I could feel my pulse raise, my energy soar, my focus narrow and sharpen: I was primed for battle!

This level of feeling was not in me when I entered the group – was it actually my feeling or was it a projection I was picking up from Kieran? Did he

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[10] A Freudian technique for exploring unconscious elements underlying an issue: it can be useful to consider an issue that bothers us and write down any thoughts that float to the surface. Any time we pause and feel we have ended signals we are approaching something that we may not wish to bring to awareness, so we press on. I have often been astonished at what has surfaced when I employ this technique on myself.

feel rage he wasn't expressing? Depression has been described as anger or rage turned inwards – was Kieran in a state of rage that he was repressing and projecting onto others? He did present as very flattened, his voice had few inflections, he droned. I felt there was something in this – he was a young man, very fit and healthy in appearance and the female members of the group were not bashful in their appreciation of his physique. However, he did not seem to have a libidinal response to this reception.

Still interested in my own strength of reaction, I realised my response to Kieran was not unlike my feelings towards people who were habitually late for meetings. I have learnt over time that my attitude to lateness was as a result of two things, firstly, a perception that the latecomer was disregarding me, completely unconcerned that I was left sitting waiting for them. In short, I felt like they were robbing me of time, of life. Time is the currency of life and they were tossing mine in the bin. Secondly, I've always felt that if someone habitually lets someone else wait they are implicitly claiming to be more important and are signalling that you are less so and less worthy of consideration. Having spoken to latecomers I've learnt that their tardiness seems more to do with an entirely internal incapacity to be organised.

So, when Kieran is boring me I feel he is squandering some of my life. I have from a relatively young age been acutely aware of the finiteness of life and when I am hard on myself it is usually along the lines that I've not done enough and that time is running out. In working with Kieran I hypothesise an entanglement has occurred between his repressed anger emerging in passive aggressive form by boring others and my obsession that being bored is somehow time murdering and life threatening.

More aware of my own reaction, in the next session, when Kieran begins a laborious technical explanation of a gym routine, I say to him that I realise the gym is important to him but that I find it curious that I see no energy in him when he talks about it. I ask him how interested he really is in health and fitness. He looks confused at first and then says the gym is very important to him. I reiterate that such was my clear understanding, but when he talks about it his energy is noticeably low. Usually when people talk of their interests they perk up and become animated. How does he feel talking about his interest?

He admits he is wary. He then begins to talk of how he was often silenced when young and how he felt silenced again by his experience of unemployment. He talked of how he was enjoying the group because he was listened to – he felt he found it hard to stop at times and kept expecting someone to cut him off as he was unused to being heard. I asked what it felt like to be cut off and he said it hurt him and made him angry. I asked Kieran what it was like to be heard by the group. He said it made him feel

warm and wanted. For the whole interaction, he spoke with animation: I felt warmth and interest and let him know.

By working out my reaction and understanding my own personal 'button' regarding death and the passage of time, I was able to engage with Kieran without fear of my own issue erupting. Our responses to others are largely predicated upon our own patterns in relationships, established and embedded from our earliest moments and mostly out of our consciousness (Ringer, 2002). We bring ourselves and our entire history and way of being into the room with us. As Moreno put it, we are a multiplicity of selves: not all of them are known to us (Moreno, 1947). I reiterate: it is worth the effort to increase our knowledge of ourselves for our clients' benefit and for our own.

Catastrophising and the power of beliefs

Albert Ellis looked to the ancient Stoic philosophers for perspective. They proclaimed that it was not happenings in themselves that upset us, but what we made of them. In between an event occurring and our response to it was, he proposed, a belief about the event. It was the belief that dictated how we felt, rather than the event itself – the 'activating event' as he termed it (Ellis, 1997). As our beliefs differ, it is clear that our response to the same experience can vary widely (Ringer, 2002).

What we believe influences what we pay attention to, what we consider important and how we react: people "act according to their evaluation" (Ellis, 1997: 23). Therefore, what we believe deeply matters. Where we get our beliefs from can matter just as much, because our deepest beliefs are imbided from the earliest stages so that we scarcely conscious of them (Bowlby, 1988). If we come to believe we are of little consequence, we are usually effective at proving and upholding the idea.

People can overreact to setbacks. To get highly upset is not good for our organisms, though we cannot of course go through life avoiding disturbance. Ellis believed that a healthy reaction to a regular setback was to be disappointed. To be distraught was an overreaction, unhealthy and irrational, because it undermined our well-being. He used the term 'catastrophising' to describe such a reaction (1997). Research increasingly shows that being in a regular state of upset is harmful to our well-being (Seligman, 2011: Gaffney, 2011). It is wearying and brings us closer to the edge, so that a small event can be perceived by the already frazzled person as being of greater import than is the case.

In an unemployment group this may take the form of a participant failing to get a particular job saying he will never apply for another job

again. Clearly this is an overreaction and not at all good for the disappointed applicant. It may be that he has to amend his application, perhaps by strengthening his interview skills, or bolstering his CV by gaining more skills and experience, but failing to get one or a dozen vacancies by no means signifies that he cannot get a job. Rejection hurts, but we can over-personalise such setbacks as rejections of our being. This makes a rejection feel akin to a personal attack, so altering this perspective enhances well-being and life prospects.

It is likely that at a deep level the job searcher who catastrophises and declares their retirement from the activity of job-hunting holds deep seated beliefs that they are intrinsically not worthy and have failed for this reason. Because they perceive they cannot get a job, it is not too far a leap for a distressed person to believe their existence is threatened, or that they are innate failures, sparking intense anxiety. This is why disputation is important, so that the client be helped to see that job searching is hard, that setbacks are the norm. If we slow things down, test the assumptions he has leapt to by rationally examining the evidence, put forward dissenting perspectives, we usually find the process can restore some calm in the participant as well as a capacity to view things more clearly and in the round.

We might ask the disenchanted participant 'Does not succeeding in an application make failures of all job seekers'? Unless they feel the need to be particularly stubborn, they invariably reply 'Of course not'! Then why should the brush of failure be applied solely to themselves? The therapeutic group factor of universality (Yalom, 2005), where everyone can share their hurt, frustration and sense of failure can be tremendously useful in facilitating the development of a more rational perspective on the setback, provided it takes place in a positive and encouraging atmosphere.

Facilitator and catastrophe

Experience is invaluable. When we have run group after group we develop a perspective tempered by experience. We become more realistic, more sanguine: we develop a higher sense of self-efficacy around the work. Having been tried and tested, it is likely we become less inclined to catastrophise setbacks or difficulties. Nevertheless, if I am unwell, or tired, my propensity to go this direction is increased. At least I know this and can guard against it.

It is important to bear in mind that our labour often involves working with vulnerability. A facilitator who is prone to catastrophising will breed great insecurity and impede the group from reaching its potential. Moreover, conflict and challenge, often of the facilitator, are part and

parcel of groups. If a facilitator overreacts to these episodes she again undermines the functioning of the group. We return to the Rogerian precept that those working on the development of others ought to be in an ongoing process of development themselves: this helps build awareness, which, according to May, can effectively combat anxiety (1975), thus allowing us the equanimity required to look with cooler and more reasoned perspective upon unfolding events.

Empowerment and boundaries

A trainee colleague came to me one day, in some distress. She was working very hard, and wanted so much to make a difference, but people were coming to her group and quite quickly dropping out. "I don't understand! Why don't they stay? All I want to do is empower people" she cried. The issue lay, of course, in her cry of despair, for she couldn't empower anyone but herself. As a facilitator, she could merely create conditions in which group members could empower themselves. Talking it through with her, it became clear that up to that point, while she may have employed the term facilitator to describe her work, she operated by standing at the head of the room, with 'participants' sitting in rows in front of her while she instructed them how to fix their lives.

Empowerment can't be lectured into people. By accepting the boundaries of her own power, 'Anna' began a new journey in her professional and personal development.

I have also learnt hard but valuable lessons about empowerment and boundaries by making mistakes. Several years ago, when I worked as a Career Guidance Counsellor to the long-term unemployed, I used to obtain great satisfaction from helping people: it made me feel good about myself. People would look for my support in finding work, and I believed in going the extra mile. One client came to see me and told me he had been away for a while and was eager to find work. We chatted about his areas of interest: 'Jim' mentioned warehousing and forklifts. I had been scanning the jobs pages and seen a job of this nature with an organisation with whom I had enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. I couldn't restrain my excitement and cut across him: "I've seen just the job for you". I shoved the ad in front of him and encouraged him to try for it.

"You should ring, it's perfect for you", I pressed. 'Jim' was palpably uneasy, his eyes shifted to the clock, then the door. I took this to mean he needed extra encouragement. "Go for it, it could change your life" I enthused. Jim responded, "I don't know what to say. Would you ring them for me, you'd know all the right things to say. You're great on the phone".

Oh Glory! I'd know all the right things to say! I'm great on the phone! Of course I'd ring! I rang, gave my client's details and arranged an interview. As I spoke on the phone, describing my client's maturity and sincerity, he sat there giving me a series of winks, nods and thumbs up. When I put down the phone, he warmly congratulated me. Then his face froze in panic. He had an interview in a week! What would he say, what would they ask, what would he wear... a barrage of anxious questions. Half-jokingly, Jim said "you'd never do the interview for me? I just want a job".

It dawned on me I had brought to pass a situation I had no business in creating. I had arranged an interview for someone who could not make a phone call because I had felt flattered. I reasoned that the best I could do now was to offer to intensively coach Jim to do the interview. He agreed to this proposal and we set to work. As we talked, Jim revealed that he had been a considerable portion of his adult life in prison. I had taken 'been away' to mean he had been working abroad. It transpired he had never held a regular job or attended an interview, nor was he licensed to drive a fork-truck! I had sold it quite differently on the phone because I hadn't paused to listen. By sheer luck I managed to get Jim placed on a licensed fort-truck course that would finish two days before his interview, giving us time for last minute interview practice.

A bigger problem was Jim's prison sojourns and his complete lack of work experience – he was in his 30s. Having placed people with this company before I knew they valued experience and maturity – I was now seeking to present them with something quite other. It wasn't my call to reveal Jim's story yet I felt in an ethical bind.

We worked hard on interviews skills, Jim got his licence and he landed the job! A month after he started the manager of the company rang me to say they were letting Jim go. He was guilty in their eyes of a whole series of infractions and had not lived up to his presentation of himself – he had been a most impressive interviewee. At the end of the first week, he had asked the company if he could take home one of their new trucks for the weekend as he wanted to do some DIY – understandably they were not impressed.

Jim was fired, I had let down a contact I valued that had given employment to previous clients and I was left with my conscience far from clear. All of this transpired because I believed I knew what was best for Jim – if I had listened in a humble way I wouldn't have shoehorned him into a situation that was more than likely to end in tears. Of all the parties my actions affected, I paid the lightest price.

Spontaneity

Spontaneity is an organismic reaction, and acting in a spontaneous way requires a high level of self-trust and self-awareness. Spontaneity involves responding to the whole picture, "giving consideration of the whole environment" (May, 1975: 113). As we work on ourselves, learning to listen to and trust our organism, we begin to simply know the right thing to do or say when we work with others (Rogers, 1961). Moreno regarded spontaneity as the most important characteristic to possess in life (1947). He believed the one thing that was guaranteed in life was the unexpected. The more spontaneous we are, the better we can respond to life's vagaries. The closer we are to our own experience, the more self-knowing we are, the more we can trust ourselves to respond in the right way (May, 1975: Rogers, 1961).

When I began facilitating my main worry was what questions to ask. I would get so caught up with *what will I say next* that I wasn't truly in the moment, not fully present and therefore not truly listening. Deep connection, or relationship, was inevitably curtailed. Observe or listen to chat show hosts or radio interviewers on personal interest stories. The best ones listen and seek to hear and understand; their questions come about as a response to the ebb and flow of the relationship in the moment. Others have a pre-set list of questions, they read through them regardless of what the interviewee has said – it can hurt to hear it, being so wooden and disconnected. If we are open and present for the group member, the right response (which can include simply nodding) will come. As Rogers put it, trust in the process (1961).

What is the process in which we are enjoined to place our trust? That if we are present, open, genuine, empathic and accepting, the participants will engage, trust, feel safe and take the risk of sharing, and as a result they will grow and develop. If we 'encounter' the client, and if they see that we are present, that we accept and understand, they will develop a growing capacity to self-direct and move towards their potential.

When I am spontaneous, I am at my best, I am in the moment. I have a felt knowledge of what is the right thing to say or do, I can feel that I flow. I feel more grounded and confident. I do not reach this place as often as I would like, and I rarely reach it in solitude. Something clicks into place with certain groups or individuals and it all comes together, a feeling of connection, the feeling that whatever happens, it will be right. I feel certain that participants respond with ever increasing trust and openness to a facilitator they see as open and spontaneous – in fact they generally respond in kind.

Fear

Is any emotion as innate as fear? Imagine the fear that is generated by the act of being born, as we are forcefully cast out of our oceanic world into the alien element of air. Fear is in us from the start, before we draw breath. The reflex is ingrained in our species, inextricably linked to our survival.

A good friend told me of her ambition to become a full-time artist, to leave her regular occupation and devote herself to her passion. She wanted to honour the lifelong sense she had of being, at heart, an artist. She felt she had reached a stage in life where she had to answer to herself the question – what do I want to do with the rest of my life? The yearning that had been growing in her replied – follow your heart's desire, be an artist.

Soon afterwards she visited an exhibition to garner ideas. As she looked about at the displays, an inner voice said "ah, *real* artists". The quality of the work in front of her seemed to taunt her own efforts. She wondered at her nerve in assuming she could number herself among this august club. She was flooded with the feeling of her own insufficiency and an urge to run seized her. It took several days for the feelings of fear and unworthiness to abate, for reason to kick in.

Who has not experienced this sensation? Whenever I take on a new project, one that I see as ambitious, I invariably encounter the fear that I'll fall short. Many of our upbringings would not have encouraged the admission of fear. Fearlessness was presented in particular as a male ideal: to admit to fear breached a powerful taboo. Suppressing fear, showing courage we do not feel causes no end of angst. We end up afraid of feeling afraid!

It is healthier and more helpful to accept the unavoidable presence of fear. We see that its origins come from our earliest life. We can also see that having 'brakes' or an alarm system is not in itself a bad thing. If we can see fear less as an enemy to defeat or silence, we will spend less time and energy pushing against or concealing it. Fear invariably peaks; then subsides. I try not to make major life decisions when I feel fear and doubt surge through me.

But it is not as easy as simply changing our thinking, or flicking a switch. These feelings are embedded from a time before the capacity to think developed: they run deep. Modifying these impulses takes time.

What is the evolutionary purpose of humans feeling fearful and doubt laden to such a degree? I frequently see outsized fear in participants on facilitation training programmes where they are tasked with delivering a practice session. They report that the feeling strikes them when they are putting themselves forward, when they are saying "I can do it". We can see the logic involved in a reaction that keeps us from jumping off a cliff,

but it is nonetheless irrational and exaggerated when faced with giving a talk to a group.

New ventures

For all those approaching new undertakings and feeling the surge of doubt I ask – how could it not be there? It is too easy to dismiss doubt as simply a lack of self-esteem. Doubt is natural and serves a purpose. I am far more fearful of the person who is doubt free – save us from the adamant! Bertrand Russell put it more bluntly: "those who feel certainty are stupid" (cited in May, 1975).

Every project or undertaking we embark upon has a starting point. My artist friend recovered her composure; she has embraced her heart's desire and has become accomplished both as an artist and at telling people "I am an artist". She felt fear, she felt doubt: she found the courage to persevere.

When we commence working with groups, there will, inevitably, be the first group. You will, I hope, be somewhat nervous – it is a healthy reaction to a new challenge. Look to your purpose, to the skills and qualities you bring, to the motivation that has you wanting to be a group facilitator in the first place, to the times you've faced challenge and succeeded in the past. If you still feel like running away, ask yourself, what will you say to yourself afterwards? Provided you are prepared and have undertaken sufficient work on your own development, you can get through it, like everyone else that started off on the same adventure. The more groups you run, the easier it gets, the more you will gain awareness of your own strengths and growing edges, which will signal a pathway to your ongoing growth. There's no shortcut: the more you work, the more you reflect, the more you learn and the better you get. We all start at the start: no one sets out polished and complete. We make mistakes, we have our blind spots – it is unavoidable; we may as well accept this reality and aspire to do as much good and as little harm as possible, and 'have the courage to be imperfect' (Dreikurs, cited in Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). We can only gain experience through doing. As we do so, let us keep in mind Gide's words – *man cannot discover new oceans unless he has the courage to lose sight of the shore.*

CHAPTER 4

GROUP DYNAMICS

Complexity

Groups are too complex to allow most mortals to 'know' what is going on at any time

(Ringer, 2002: 19)

Confusion is not an ignoble condition

(Brian Friel, *Translations*)

There is abundant and sufficient literature to convince us that any one individual is too complex and layered to fully know and understand. A cursory study of the simple but profound Johari's window[11] captures some of the challenges of developing greater knowledge of our hidden aspects. Jung likened attempts at exploring the unconscious as akin to trying to see through the back of one's skull.

Humans differ: we differ in every imaginable way. We have different experiences, which results in our developing individual perceptions and expectations. We trust and hope to different degrees. We have different needs, interests and aptitudes. We possess different levels of self-regard.

We are emotional as well as rational creatures. There are many aspects of ourselves we repress and disown. We are prone to seeing our faults in others and condemning them for it (Freud, 1991). We are competitive to different degrees, vying for mastery, attention, popularity, acclaim. We

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[11] Johari's window presents an elegant model of the levels and challenges of self-knowing. It consists of four cells: Cell A – the aspect of us known to self and known to others (the public area): Cell B – unknown to self and known to others (the blind area): Cell C – Known to self and unknown to others (the secret area): Cell D – unknown to self and unknown to others (the unconscious self). We expand A by learning more of B through feedback and letting C be seen to others. Learning about D is the goal of some therapies.

are drawn to groups, yet we fear them. We are drawn to bond with others, but also to see them as rivals.

When individuals come together to form groups, all this roiling tumult comes with them. Groups are heightened, intense and febrile environments, bringing many unconscious elements to the surface (Ringer, 2002). Relationships form, enmities and friendships develop and processes occur at an intra and interpersonal, as well as a group level. The mix and clash of all this activity is what we blithely label group dynamics.

There are statements we can make about groups that are broadly applicable. But groups are as diverse and individual as people and at least as complex, and generally more so. Just as we are drawn to the idea of an omniscient powerful being (Yalom, 2005) because it offers security and comfort in our random universe, we are also drawn to theories that neatly explain everything: theories of group development, theories of group roles or learning styles; theories that make groups more comprehensible – and therefore, less threatening. All are useful, but none can be considered complete. All human knowledge is exactly that – human; "it is mixed with our errors, our prejudices, our dreams and our hopes" (Popper, 1963: 30). Maturity and reality demand that any aspiration to omniscience had better be abandoned.

Psychological birth of the group

All groups have a physical beginning – a moment when people walk into the room. The psychological beginning of the group usually occurs at some stage after the physical birth. It occurs at a different pace, and in different ways, for different groups. Certain groups can manifest high levels of distrust – this would be my experience of ex-prisoner groups. Or, participants may feel compelled to attend: in such cases it is likely they will resist the dynamic of group formation. There might physically be a group of people in the room, but they may be no more bonded than a bus queue. I recall one occasion doing some introductions with a group and discovering everyone present felt they had been sent by their respective managers – I had not expected this development. Looking around I commented ruefully 'Everyone feels sent. Lucky me'! The group burst into laughter and at that moment the commencement of bonding occurred. I confessed to the group I had had a different expectation, that I had anticipated voluntary attendance and that I didn't like being 'sent' somewhere myself. We contracted there and then to make the best of the situation. As de Shazar might put it, I sought, and thankfully attained, their collaboration (1988).

I like to try to nurture the psychological birth of the group from the first possible moment. I make sure I am there from the outset to meet and greet

everyone warmly as they enter the room. I seek to get people talking to each other, watching for opportunities to make links between participants. Where possible I will ensure there are refreshments at hand as this helps ease people into the experience and lets them see me and each other from a more informal angle.

Over time, as participants become accustomed to other group members and find their place in the group, they invariably grow in confidence and feel freer to express opinions and participate actively. They begin to belong to the group and to bond with their peers. How long this process takes can be influenced by the actions of the facilitator from the first.

Cohesion and barriers to its achievement

Yalom (2005) considers cohesion to be one of the most significant therapeutic group factors. It is my principal aim on the first day of any group I run to explicitly aim to develop as much cohesion as possible. Cohesion is not guaranteed simply because a group congregates; it must be nurtured and promoted. Cohesiveness is the root and foundation of all group work: it is the glue that binds. Moreover, a facilitator can do what she can to develop it, but cohesion without active participant involvement is not possible and sometimes, though very rarely, one of the dark secrets among experienced practitioners is that it does not always occur. (I've had two groups in fifteen years of practice that did not achieve sufficient cohesion for meaningful work).

Groups can fail to become cohesive for a number of reasons, but trust and safety issues will invariably underpin such a failure. Too many hierarchical relationships in the group can complicate the process: it can be hard to put aside such relationships for the duration of the group – and also hard to pick them up again afterwards. Interestingly, those more senior often feel even more reticent than their 'reports' as they fear saying or doing something that would undermine their 'authority'. Another potential roadblock involves a group formed of staff of organisations that externally compete with each other for scarce resources.

If cohesion is not achieved, then connection and relationship are stymied to the detriment of the overall group experience. A group cannot reach an optimum level of functioning without bonding: in fact, without cohesion a group is not truly a group.

Other forces that can undermine cohesiveness are members questing for power and dominance. Sometimes in groups one encounters individuals who cannot keep their drive to dominate in check. Also, envy is destructive to group cohesiveness as at its heart it involves one or more members

plotting against others in the group with a view to undermining them. I recall once being part of an inter-agency group set up to work for the progression of ex-prisoners. Good work was undermined because one member of the group produced an acclaimed report that gained the author considerable attention. This discomfited some of the other members who then set out to block and stymie all proposals of the author, even at the expense of the target group.

Certain groups can struggle with issues that cause the group members to be quite self-absorbed. For cohesion to occur members need to relate to each other, have empathy for and acceptance of the other group members. People in early stages of addiction recovery can find it hard to be present, to trust and to connect. If a group is struggling with depression, many participants struggle to lift their heads to look at other group members. Moreover, the low energy associated with depression can lack bonding force. Being aware of these challenges is important as we can develop strategies to address them, some of which can be as simple as asking participants to lift their heads and make eye contact with each other, or activities that encourage a safe level of physical contact.

Timing

As stated, much of my learning comes from mistakes. Approximately four months into my first experience of an ex-prisoner programme, which met three mornings a week, I felt the group had begun to plateau. I believed it was time to inject some urgency and momentum. Some of the group had rather vaguely expressed interest in pursuing adult education options – probably as a sop to me – but had singularly failed to follow through. Entry to such courses entailed attending for interview. Usually candidates in interviews are asked about their strengths and qualities. I proposed to the group we look at this area and after some preliminary ground work I asked the group "tell me something good about yourself that you're proud of"?

On asking the question I noticed a strong bodily reaction in the participants – they visibly recoiled and shifted every which way in their seats. The group went eerily quiet for a few seconds (an unusual event in an ex-prisoners' group) and then burst into clamour. Several conversations broke out at once and it took several minutes before it settled. Eventually, having reined in the myriad tangents, we began the task: it was slow going. The question was most excruciating for 'Donal', who had spent much of his adult life living rough when not imprisoned.

Feeling alarmed and stuck, I invited the group to give Donal support – what positive traits did they notice in Donal that would be useful for him

to say in an interview? This was risky as I feared they might not have said anything. Thankfully, the group rowed in behind him and mentioned several positive things they had seen in him. Donal wasn't exactly comfortable, but he was chuffed. Inwardly I sighed in relief, but the exercise had been a close run thing and I had to conclude that I had asked the question too soon. We had limped over the line, but my own impatience for progress had made me rash[12]. Yet it also served to inject realism and urgency into the group thereafter.

Group development

One of the main imports of the various theories of group development is that a group does not suddenly spring into being just by converging in a room together: we cannot simply assume a bunch of people to be a group. A group must be built – not only must people choose to belong to it (Nitsun, 1996), but the group leader must actively set about facilitating the group development process. To reach a high level of cohesiveness and performance is a process that takes time – more time for some groups than others. While we can shepherd this process, groups have their own innate pace, and, as we see above, some things cannot be forced. The process of building a tight, well-functioning group can be assisted however – that is one of the primary roles of the facilitator and with this in mind the facilitator needs to plan to achieve this end. If attention is not paid to the process of group development the group may fail to become a safe space for participants, greatly hindering its capacity to achieve, as can be seen in the following vignettes.

Too much, too young

Some years ago I attended a night course, scheduled to run over two years. There were approximately forty students in the class, located in a large, tiered lecture hall, with the lecturer standing on a platform below us. Some students sat near the front, others preferred the lofty benches at the back. The capacity of the hall was around two hundred. As no form of introductions had been

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[12] I was also conscious that I was in some ways inviting the group to rescue Donal – and indeed it could be argued, myself. However, in that moment I was clear in my mind that Donal was genuinely struck dumb and unable to speak and that acknowledgement from his fellow group members would be more effective than any comments from myself. Notably, after the group began to name his qualities, Donal found his voice and declared his belief he was the most effective beggar in Cork as well as having been a skilful hurler in his youth.

conducted, I did not know the names of my fellow students. Our lecturers would arrive in the class, say hello and begin to lecture or set problems for the class to solve.

One of our lecturers who began his subject mid-term sought to involve us in interaction. He requested our questions and observations. He got nothing back from the floor – actually, he was met with some bemusement. I wanted to ask some questions but I feared making a fool of myself: I found the arena daunting – a large hall, scarcely one quarter full, tired people, most of whose names I did not know and most of whom were sitting in murky light behind me. I stayed silent.

Looking back, with the benefit of experience, I can see that a well-meaning lecturer sought an interactive environment without building cohesion and long after the norms and culture had been set. Moreover, the layout also mitigated against his designs.

I knew little enough of groups back then but the experience has stayed with me – providing a valuable lesson. A colleague had a similar experience recently. She attended the first night of a newly developed programme. The facilitators were infectiously excited and enthusiastic, full of good intentions. As advocates of client-centred service delivery, they sought to establish a participative group environment from the off. To initiate this they began the first session with a complicated game that involved a considerable element of self-revelation. The activity fell flat and instead of building cohesion as they had hoped, it greatly raised the tension levels of those present.

Moreover, the facilitators stood at the head of the room and the group sat in rows, behind tables. They had set the room up as an archetypal classroom, stood at the head of the room like lecturers and then expected a participative and egalitarian atmosphere to develop. It doesn't work like that.

Setting the stage

The behaviour of an organism cannot be considered in isolation from its environment (Benson, 2001). If a room is set up in a traditional lecture format, then people will invariably act accordingly. There is a shape to a classroom; when we inhabit that shape we feel we are in a classroom. In a classroom we have a teacher standing at the top and learners sitting down, behind rows of desks, looking up at teacher. There is an expectation that those at the top of the room have knowledge and those seated looking up are about to receive, rather than contribute.

If you wish to achieve active engagement, participation and sharing, if you want to build a cohesive group, then you have to consider the shape or layout.

A circular shape is best in my experience, though some colleagues question its growing ubiquity. Undoubtedly desks are obstacles to contact and connection: I talk more – like a lecturer – when people are behind desks looking up at me.

I like to have the room arranged so that everyone can comfortably see everyone else when they are seated. When I stand to 'teach' a point of theory that has arisen from the discussion, I feel my role change. I am at a different elevation, doing most of the talking, so all eyes are drawn to me. When I sit down again, I feel the change in my role and in the atmosphere: we are all at a level and our gaze moves from speaker to speaker. I would encourage beginning facilitators to bring their awareness to changes in the dynamic when they alter their physical position.

I feel the group is beginning its journey to cohesion when I see people looking around, making eye contact with each other, seeking eye contact with the group leader less and less.

Building bonding

In consciously seeking to build cohesion I often get the group to break up and work in pairs initially, followed later by small groups. This is done in order to maximise contact with other group members, and, crucially, take the formal group leader out of the way. If the groupings are energetically engaged I seek to make myself as invisible as I can, I surreptitiously watch to see that pairs are engaging with each other – if they can work together without my input I stay back. I try to keep attuned to the energy from the different pairs so that if things begin to lag I can approach and seek to rekindle the energy by checking in. I crouch down, usually below or at the level of those seated.

To foster cohesion, I like to do introductions in pairs. I ask the group 'what are the things we are curious about when we meet new people': 'What are the things a facilitator would like to know about their participants.' The answers usually revolve around background, experience, motivation for attending, hobbies and interests etc. From the start I seek to draw the group in to the ownership and elaboration of the programme. Then I get each member to interview their pair and they introduce each other to the group. As they are talking about their partner rather than themselves they find it easier to speak – in general participants feel shy talking about themselves on the first day. I get the various pairs to sit together and use all the space available in the room so that their discussion is not hampered by close proximity to another pair. I think it is critical on the re-formation of the group to ask the group to sit in a discernible circle, not too distant from me. If group members are seated far from me I find it harder to connect and I feel cohesion is dissipated.

Cohesion is as much to do with shape and alignment as with interaction. A group that's comfortable will find it easier to sit more closely. The sense of the group as an entity is apparent in its shape. In the spirit of 'fake it till you make it' and without overstating the issue, I ask groups on the first day to sit as a group, not a row, and not too distant from me. When we meet our friends or family we do not sit in rows, when we have big family meals we sit around, we are close, we can see each other. It facilitates and underlines connection and a sense of belonging.

Some final points I'd like to make on the connection between shape/pattern and cohesion. If I expect a group of ten but less than that show up, I take out the empty chairs. Doing so changes the atmosphere of the group. Empty chairs take from the sense of cohesion and dampen the atmosphere. Gestaltists speak of an incomplete gestalt. Take a crowd of 45,000 people in Croke Park, with its capacity of over 83,000, and the atmosphere is flat and the huge stadium feels half empty (which it is). Put such a crowd into Lansdowne Road and you have close to a capacity attendance and the atmosphere is charged.

The shape of the room is a consideration. A long narrow room mitigates against cohesion – I once worked in a room which was long and narrow with a curve around the corner of a building. On days of full attendance I had to carefully select my seat so as to see all group members but it meant some participants could not see each other without craning their necks. A room that is too small can give a sense that the energy of the group over-flows the physical shape – too big and it can feel cavernous. A room where there is plenty of space for comfortable small group work and where chairs are not pushed back against walls is best.

Numbers is another factor. I don't like to go over twelve or under five. With groups that need more attention, the upper limit reduces: when I worked with ex-prisoners I felt eight was the upper limit.

So, in building cohesion, we are thinking not just of the activities and plan for the day, but factors such as shape of the group, the shape and layout of the room as well as issues such as group numbers and physical comfort – heat, light and access to facilities. Not forgetting the stage of development the group is at, and employing activities and questions suit-able to that stage.

Always treat the group as important

"The physical survival of the group must take precedence over all other tasks"

(Yalom, 2005: 120).

On occasion a client has sought to set up a grand exit – I try not to accommodate such gestures. In one instance someone asked on the first morning of a programme if they could stay for five minutes to see if they liked it and then leave if they didn't. I don't know why, but it was clear to me they had no intention of staying. On the chance they might stay and benefit, I proposed that they wait until the break and leave then should they wish. Again, she reiterated her desire to stay for five minutes and leave if it was not to her liking. I demurred. She left there and then with what drama she could muster, confirming my suspicion. Humans need and seek attention, but a group cannot be used as a disposable prop for same: someone getting up and walking out after five minutes undermines the group. I acted in accordance with my belief that the group is important and must always be treated as such. I strive to convey to group members this message, for the more importance they attach to the group, the better the outcomes that result (Yalom, 2005). Having people walk out after five minutes undercuts my objective and infers to participants that the group scarcely matters if people leave so casually.

There is a higher chance of achieving participant buy-in when certain factors are embedded into the culture of the group from the off. Yalom reminds us, "norms that are established early are often exceedingly durable" (p. 406). This cuts both ways. It is crucial to promote good timekeeping and attendance; to exhort the input of effort; to expect follow through on agreed tasks; to maintain a certain pace and intensity in every session, enough to challenge and stimulate, but not intimidate. It is vital to remember that someone with low self-regard may well doubt the importance of anything they belong to, therefore the facilitator must exert themselves in conveying the message that the group is important, until all (or the bulk of) participants concur. The more participants feel they own the group, the more likely they will be diligent members. Treating the group as important promotes its viability and its success.

Role clarity: dancing for our supper

It is important to manage those who seek to make us perform for their own edification and need for control. On a few instances at the end of a session a client has invited me to make a pitch as to why they should come back for more – to 'sell' the programme to them. In my earlier career I sought to oblige, but it never worked. I began to suspect it was a psychodrama I didn't fully understand, that no words of mine would actually convince them. Moreover, the dynamic felt wrong, inappropriate.

I now think it is important to assert that I am not selling anything and that participants are clients, not customers. I am offering something they

can choose to avail of, provided they hold up their end, for both facilitator and participants have legitimate expectations of each other. I point this out and turn the question back – do you feel you are getting something to keep you coming? What has kept you coming thus far? That dread phrase "the customer is always right" has occasionally been hurled my way when I refuse to sing for my supper. My refusal to enter into the dynamic requested of me is underpinned by a serious consideration regarding the role of the facilitator and the importance of the group: there are times when the facilitator must challenge, dispute or disagree with participants to be true to what they are doing. The facilitator is the group leader: to become a supplicant undermines our capacity to function as such, and therefore undermines the viability of the group. By lessening the importance of our own role, we lessen the importance of the group and its venture.

Ringer reminds us that the leader and participant both require competence to fulfil their role, and that clarity regarding the respective nature of their roles needs to be established and maintained (2002). If I plead and supplicate I am not leading. If participants demand I 'clap wings and dance' then they become the judges of my showmanship and capering. After such a performance how can I revert to the role of group leader?

Of interest to oneself

It is a tenet of Narrative Therapy that we do not speak unless we think what we have to say is interesting (McLeod, 1997). To believe that what we are saying is of interest is akin to saying we are interesting. If this observation is accepted as credible, then we must conclude that there are many people who do not think themselves interesting. I can't think of a single group where there wasn't at least one silent person. In more marginalised groups the self-silencing is more pronounced and deeper. It therefore follows that as group leaders we must "encourage the development of voice"; though not force the issue lest we silence entirely (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 9).

There are, of course, people who seem to be able to talk at great length on issues that to most of us are banal, giving an in-depth account of the minutiae of unremarkable experience. I wonder is this an admittedly noisy form of silence, as they are effectively 'all sound and fury signifying naught'.

Conversely, there are those who are verbally quiet but quite active in the group with their organism; they are clearly interested, watching avidly, listening intently to all contributions (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004). When they do speak their hands often cover their mouths. After they make their invariably short contribution I might bring attention to what their hand is doing.

It is a fascinating thing to observe – one part of the organism wishes to express itself, to be. Another part probably sees this as dangerous and exposing. It tends to look like the action of a child, giving the impression it was a habit formed at an early age. What is the hand/body trying to say in its silencing of the voice? 'Here be dragons – beware', no doubt! We might see the action of the hand as intended to keep the participant safe from ridicule, exposure or dangerous attention. We might speculate that as a child they were sternly silenced. Was the stern external voice so trenchantly integrated that it continued to operate beyond the lifetime of the original critic?

The behaviour learnt as a child may be of little benefit to the adult. Learning to trust themselves to speak in a group may take some time and will likely be a life altering achievement for the quiet participant. It is one of the joys of group work to see someone recover – even discover – their voice. Clearly then, group leaders "must create an opportunity for voice" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 101).

Quietness can attract misguided forms of help. One particularly quiet group participant came to be referred to in her group as 'the quiet one'. A group member would say "I know 'Ciara' is quiet but what I think she is thinking..." and offer their speculation on Ciara's imagined train of thought. Whatever the intention behind putting words into Ciara's mouth, the effect was disempowering. Asked what it was like being referred to as 'the quiet one' Ciara fulsomely outlined how she felt it made it even harder for her to speak, because every time she did it was met with a fanfare of "hasn't Ciara done well for someone so quiet". She felt others spoke for her, assuming command of her voice. In the weeks after her declaration of 'sovereignty', Ciara spoke more, took on a healthy glow, she reduced the amount of child minding she did for her adult children, she went on outings, signed up for education courses and pursued new hobbies. It was as if she had decided to take her life back, to say what she wanted and say what she didn't want.

Recovery of voice through a group intervention does not necessarily mean that participants speak more – In Ciara's case it did. In 'Ida's' case it meant speaking less. Ida joined a group that was already three weeks running. On her first morning she talked more than the other eleven members put together. She offered opinions and advice on everything to everyone. Once she harnessed her wildly firing energy and channelled it she became a group powerhouse. She often just listened for whole sessions. Once she slowed down she began to grieve for the loss of her parents and the business she had inherited from them. As she moved inward a real depth began to emerge. She spoke less, but said much more.

Finally, we must remember that using one's voice is not the only way of communicating. Someone who attends every group session on time is communicating a great deal. The body has many ways of expressing itself: in ex-prisoner groups we used activities like Tai Chi to encourage expression. Nonetheless, I feel the most empowering thing for a participant is putting their thoughts and feelings into words and all efforts should be made to facilitate this as an ultimate goal.

Contracts

Contracts give clarity: clarity about expectations, expected outcomes and the role and responsibilities of all parties. They are best conducted early in the formation of the group. If we espouse the belief that people have the capacity to run their own lives and it is best for them that they do so, then announcing a set of ground rules puts us in contradiction of our avowed beliefs. It is better to work with the group so that they participate in the development of the contract that will serve as the constitution that governs the running of their group. I like to put a number of questions to the group, usually getting the group to work in small teams (thus facilitating cohesion) to generate their responses.

What can the group reasonably expect of the facilitator?

What can the facilitator reasonably expect of the group participants?

What do you (as a participant) expect of yourself so that at the end of the programme you are satisfied with your own efforts?

Participants can sometimes be surprised that the facilitator might have expectations of them. I explain that if they do not participate in the group I cannot function as a facilitator. When I am running a training group for facilitators it is helpful for them to see that the group leader has legitimate expectations, and that she needs to become comfortable in asking for them.

A contract is excellent for clarifying the expectations each has of the other. It is not uncommon in an unemployment group for a participant to say that their expectation of me is that I get them a job. I do not have that power – it is an expectation I cannot fulfil. I am presented with the opportunity to explain that I see my role as supporting as best I can the participants to get a job themselves. The participant may not always respond well to this, but it is for the best that my role (and its boundaries) is made clear. It is then the participant's choice whether to work with me or not.

Other times group members respond that they expect the facilitator to stop participants from dominating the group. This opens a useful discussion on what constitutes dominating behaviour. Invariably this will be described as someone talking too much. I accept that I have some

responsibility in this regard but I also take the opportunity to point out (or elicit) the fact that the more that all group members participate, the less space there is for anyone individual to dominate.

I also take the opportunity to elicit other ways in which a group might be dominated. I might ask 'imagine you had just shared something significant; what would you like or expect from the group'. Invariably group members say they'd like support and acknowledgement. I ask – what if you get it from most members but one or two participants consistently stay silent and sit sternly? The group is quick to respond that they would feel judged and unsafe and be less likely to venture another answer thereafter. They can then see how the feeling of the lack of safety would spread through the group so that the silent person effectively dominates proceedings.

This insight into the effect of silence is useful because often, in their fear, some groups will propose that a right to silence and non-participation be written into the contract. By engaging in debate and exploration on the theme, individuals get drawn into the group. They may challenge the facilitator who can respond appropriately. Negotiation can occur, clarification established – all of this is participatory interaction and cohesion building. It also gives the facilitator the chance, if she feels it is useful, to assertively hold her ground, to be strong without being dismissive or offensive.

Personally I would usually seek clarification regarding the 'right to silence', as without participant input I cannot facilitate. I have had participants say – "*you're the teacher, the expert: I just want to listen*". That's fair enough if I enter a room as a teacher or lecturer, but not when I enter as a facilitator. To function as a facilitator I need the active involvement of the group members. How can I elicit if no one responds? How can I listen empathically if no one is willing to speak?

By contracting as outlined above I am acting congruently with my belief that the group has the capacity to develop a contract and that imposing one from above is at odds with the role of a facilitator. By eliciting the contract, I am gaining involvement, sharing power and responsibility, exhibiting trust and establishing a participatory group culture. I am also taking on board what participants want and exhibiting confidence in my capacity (and theirs) to deliver. By alternating this task from small to big group I am actively working to build cohesion and safety. I am reminding the participants that they too have responsibilities. The contract makes a statement about boundaries and roles – this is mine to do, this is yours, we do this together etc. and it gives clarity and direction, vital elements in a successful group. I am seeking to model inclusive, effective, assertive, consensual group leadership.

Contracts can be written up and signed. They provide a reference point to resolve difficulties, misunderstandings and conflict. The staff of an excellent

Garda Diversion Project I am familiar with develops a contract with their client group that involves agreeing on the sanctions to be imposed for contract breaches. Sharing power and responsibility this way greatly aids the maturation of the young clients and helps develop in them an internal locus of control.

I think it is important to leave space for the development of the contract, the option of revisiting, expanding and revising. One outcome of a group that aims at growth and development is that views and expectations evolve. As a group becomes more adept and comfortable, people who were quiet initially begin to come into their own and may have requests they wish to add to the contract.

As can be seen, the process employed is at least as significant as the content. Moreover, we see the layered nature of facilitation – several things can be happening at once; indeed that is the norm.

A final point – I ask my training groups if they ever have groups where they would not contract. Those that facilitate one off sessions lasting a few hours often feel there is not time to engage in anything other than a brief, often perfunctory contract. Others say that as they are employed as in-house trainers and facilitators in their organisation then many things are obligatory and non-negotiable by virtue of their being an employment contract, which clearly sets out expectations around staff development. Yet others make a point which echoes something I feel myself – namely, that if a group is highly marginalised, with poor concentration, little experience of work, education and training, perhaps in recovery from addiction, then their capacity to develop, but more importantly, to uphold a contract may be low. It may well become in their mind one more thing they have failed at.

Clients in a difficult place are not usually replete with self-esteem, so they need building up rather than further knocks. I believe a contract is best done when clients have the capacity to fulfil it, when they have acquired their voice, built some resilience and are keener to take responsibility. With some ex-prisoner groups I've worked with, we might contract on a rolling basis, as specific issues – such as use of mobile phones – arose. As capacity developed and powers of attention grew, more comprehensive contracting was undertaken. Until then, capacity building was the focus.

Consequences of poor leadership

If we are closed we cannot learn, we cannot grow, improve or develop. Conversely, if we are too open, it is questionable the extent to which we exist as an 'I', as we take our shape and views from the relationships and systems we belong to. In a closed belief system, to question is to commit

heresy – the system will do what it can to silence such questioning (Magee, 1997). Herman portrayed the lengths to which silencers will go (1992). Inept leaders tend to be silencers as they fear the exposure questioning can lead to.

A number of those drawn to positions of power are driven by a desire to be seen to be in charge rather than to fulfil a vision (Lee, 1989). As they are often without vision, and therefore without strategic direction, they tend to oversee stultified organisations, where much effort is aimed at generating tasks that create the illusion of meaningful activity. Second rate leaders tend to surround themselves with a second rate team – genuine leaders are usually secure enough in themselves to surround themselves with talent. How many heads of organisations around you are genuine rather than nominal leaders, burning with a sense of mission, possessed of a clear vision? How many get the best out of those around them, inspiring and leading a motivated team to meaningful achievements? How many are unthreatened, indeed pleased, by the achievements of their staff?

We see from the recent crisis in Ireland that it is questionable whether excellence, imagination and creativity are attributes that rise to the top in our society (O'Toole, 2009). It is widely commented that our public service rewards conservatism and orthodoxy – it is not the exception to the rule either, as a look at banks, politics and business quickly reveals (O'Toole, 2009). Poor leaders are not just bad because they achieve little that is worthwhile – they often cause conflict and stress in the organisation they purport to lead and thus deflect a considerable proportion of the energy of the organisation to intrigue, strife and innuendo. They also often feel threatened by ability and therefore seek to hem it in and constrain it. Worst of all, their focus is rarely on the clients of the organisation.

Facilitators who work with disadvantaged client groups are generally highly committed people, with a strong sense of mission in seeking to make a positive difference to the lives of others. They deserve and require the understanding of their organisation. They should be supported with their own ongoing development: the more they grow the more effective they can be: they should have access to professional supervision – it is astonishing how many do not. They also need not to have to pursue meaningless 'Key Performance Indicators' (KPIs). If a facilitator has gained expertise in working with a particular client group, then they should be consulted in setting meaningful progression targets rather than have these imposed by an administrator working several removes from the front-line.

As I write I am currently working with a group of trainees that are participating on a certified training skills programme. To a person they are all disillusioned and at the point of burn out. In every session we have had

together there have been tears as they describe their working conditions. With little or no training, with no support and much coercion, they are instructed to work whole days with groups in the early stages of recovery, the vast bulk of whom are extremely reluctant participants. Every day is a torture to all concerned and little, if anything, is achieved.

They feel they are set up to fail but they fear the consequences of challenging the management of their organisation with whom there is no meaningful communication, merely a stream of top down diktats. Their clients are set up to relapse as they are expected to sit through sessions they have not chosen and that are considerably too long for their current state of recovery and attention span. The organisation wants to generate a certain number of certified outcomes to placate funders: they seem set to pursue this goal regardless of either the human cost or its attainability.

The reality is, if there were free and open communication it is possible that all sides could emerge enhanced by the work of this organisation. The clients could increase their focus and attention span by gradual increments. They could be consulted with and offered the opportunity to attend training that both interests and suits them. The trainers could get to see progressions and feel a sense of achievement: they could get to work with more interested and participatory clients. The organisation would have a lower rate of absenteeism, happier, healthier staff and clients, good progressions and an enhanced reputation. All of this is obvious: not only that, it isn't difficult to achieve. As it is, the group I am working with are losing their health and well-being and their clients are at best standing still.

By having their views heard and understood in the group the affected participants feel better and have resolved to act with a view to gaining a satisfactory resolution. They fear the likely backlash from their employer, they fear for their jobs, but have come to see that their health and well-being is more important and that if they don't act soon they may well lose the capacity to act at all.

Sadly, the case I outline is not exceptional and I have worked in organisations and interacted with many others that fall short in their duty of care to their staff and their clients, in spite of being avowed client-centred organisations and investing considerable resources in developing and disseminating worthy and inspiring mission statements. The impact of poor leadership on the dynamics of groups and organisations is toxic and costly.

Group-directed empowerment

It is a feature of personal development groups in Ireland that they largely attract women. In one particular group, these women were largely married

or in long-term relationships, had raised families and spent the best part of their adult lives working in the home. Many of them appeared to live comfortable lives; however, they were not content. Few of them enjoyed satisfying relationships and most felt their relationships had atrophied and not matured along with them, as if they and their partners were stuck in their early twenties. They also largely felt that they had sacrificed their own potential but had not received recognition or gratitude. They frequently expressed the view that they had let life pass them by and they longed to do something more meaningful, but felt it was beyond their reach.

A sizeable minority felt they were in the power of their partners, controlled socially, psychologically and economically. In general, this sub-group had difficulty merely giving voice to their opinions, enthusiasms, sorrows or needs. The theory I was reading at the time suggested that participants would empower themselves through recovering their voice (McLeod, 1997). We focused on building self-knowledge and self-acceptance, on freeing the voice, so as to recover power.

Such a group can be delicate ground for a facilitator, not least as I found the group evoked strong feelings in me. I thought about the group a lot outside contact hours. I surged with emotion hearing participants describe abuses perpetrated against them for no other apparent reason than malice or the desire to dominate.

If one part of a relationship changes, the whole relationship inevitably changes (de Shazar, 1988). If one partner is quite satisfied with current arrangements, or feels threatened, they will likely resist change (Berger, 1997), resulting in strife and possibly a deterioration of circumstances. Pained as I was by their circumstances, I felt I could not suggest to the group members that they go and demand change or seek confrontation – it was not my place to exacerbate a bad situation.

Instead, strengths were identified and acknowledged, built on and integrated. The potential of life and relationships were explored. Participants mourned lost time and lost love. Other times they railed against injustices suffered and vented their anger and fury. Listening, empathy and understanding were what I felt I had to offer. I focused on holding the space and being present. As a consequence of their growth, the group members grew into this function themselves so that I felt that group leadership became pooled. The major differentiating factor between me and the participants – aside from gender – was that I didn't share of my own experience; I was part of, yet apart. I felt it was important to hold this line.

It took months for some participants to begin to find their voice, but once they did they were not going to relinquish it or let others tell them where to go or what to think or do. They developed skills and strengths

they were able to transfer into all aspects of their lives. Not all relation-ships improved, but all the women felt they had reached a better place either singly or with their partner. They felt an increased sense of agency and took steps to better their situation, realising that the significant others in their lives would react in their own way.

Those who are silenced are often isolated and saddled with shame (Herman, 1992). Lonely up to that point, the group members built strong bonds with each other, restoring faith in their capacity for relating and connecting. They formed a community. In their feedback, they noted how they had gone from isolation to membership of a strongly bonded and understanding sorority. They had come to realise and accept that they had choices and only they could make choices for themselves.

One thing I vividly recall from this group was the practice of embody-ing attitudes and qualities as if the group members already had them. I would invite them to walk around the room, head high, shoulders back, as if they were brimming with confidence and power. Shyly and with falter-ing steps, they walked initially in small, timid circles. Someone would laugh, sparking group laughter: exaggerated poses would be struck, but all the while more and more space would be occupied and strides length-ened. The women would begin to march about as if they exuded health and power. The whole group would laugh delightedly at the stances adopted and the energy and power in the room would dramatically increase.

Participants reported that this physical imitation of states they did not yet feel imbued some of those qualities in them, they felt strengthened and lightened by donning such attitudes – they could at least imagine and play with their latent strength, they could see life could be different, and by so experimenting it was. Moreover, it provided silenced people with a way to experiment and participate through the body, important for those who struggled to verbally articulate.

As a facilitator of a process of growth I sought to take my lead from the participants – what did they need from me? Once cohesion was established, they needed just enough input to prompt direction – then they would pick up the ball and run with it. I felt they primarily needed the group to be psychically held, for the space to be made safe and considered important. They needed someone to listen, to believe them, someone to be an interim anchor, who would witness them laugh, cry, rage or stay silent. I complied as best I could, focusing on being present.

The issue of power was something I pondered throughout this pro-gramme – working with participants who had had their power sequestered, I sought to be mindful of my own exercise of power, of my physical size and gender. Once the group reached the 'performing' stage and leadership

emerged from sundry quarters, I continually sat in different chairs, so no one spot would be seen as the seat of authority. This felt right with this particular group at that particular time.

The power of 'performing' groups

Working or performing groups have a certain look or shape, an atmosphere; there's a comfort, a definite sense of camaraderie. People sit around in ways which suggest they are at ease, that they feel they belong together. A working group has a capacity to contain crises, even explosive ones: it emanates a sense of ownership, adulthood and responsibility. It is capable of working collaboratively towards the achievement of goals. In conflict scenarios in such groups the impetus to resolve or manage the difficulty frequently comes from within the group itself. For the facilitator, it often comes back to 'being there' – being present, 'trusting in the process'. For such a group, upset and anger come to be accepted as part of life. Such a group can sit empathically and psychically 'hold' someone while they express hope, fear, or dread. They realise it is good that someone can feel and express rather than repress and be burdened with an issue. A cohesive, performing group can manage or work through difficulty – it can summon up the capacity to resolve its own issues. It can live relatively comfortably with tears. It can cope with ambivalence.

It is a fascinating spectacle, and an enriching one, to see strong and able antagonists accommodate each other in a group, to develop a mutual respect even when there clearly isn't a mutual liking. I recall one group – a long-term unemployment group – where two strong characters presented with strikingly different perspectives and approaches to life. They differed in every conceivable way except they both very naturally assumed leadership. In the early stages there was quite a bit of tension between them without it ever spilling into open hostility. Both men were robust and capable but had a consciousness of their power to affect others and were mindful and protective of the other group members and the group as a whole. They were also stalled in their life by unemployment in spite of their undoubted capacity and considerable work experience: it was perhaps inevitable they would be edgy.

It soon became apparent they were very skilled at disagreeing with each other, and as they saw each other as worthy opponents, a tangible respect developed between them. One of them played devil's advocate in the group and annoyed many group members but was undaunted. He had a penetrating, fault finding intelligence. The other was one of life's natural salesmen and was the group's great encourager. They both played

vital roles – one in keeping things grounded and realistic, the other in promoting hope and optimism. Initially, it was easier to like the optimist, but the devil's advocate softened from cynic to sceptic and the salesman became more tangible and realistic in his positivity. Between them they made the group into one of the most engaged and hard-working I have ever experienced.

Because of their competence and capacity, they offered other group members an interesting example of high level diplomacy – a real life demonstration of working well with someone you mightn't necessarily like. Neither party sought to play sides, or build alliances against the other. They both presented as themselves, content in their own skin. I believe they learnt a more heightened sense of nuance from each other: by taking into account the perspective of the other they began to frame things in more subtle and gradated shades. I learnt a lot from them. Another senior group member often took on a narrator/commentator role, referring to the contribution they were making and how he felt he benefitted from their contributions. He also voiced his fascination in seeing such a diverse pair manage to accommodate each other and work for the benefit of the group. For the sceptic, the praise could be uncomfortable, but he learnt to live with it!

Good endings

When I join a group as a participant I hope to be seen to be a positive contributor, to be accepted, to be valued. I think about the group, my fellow group members, and events that happen in the group quite a bit. It becomes a strong presence in my mental life. I anticipate seeing my fellow participants when we are not together and maybe think of things I might say to them. I watch and consider the alliances and enmities form, trying to figure my own place in the ebb and flow. I see myself drawn to some participants more than others. I notice how my first impression of my fellows is either confirmed or altered as I learn more about them. I am curious about how I am perceived by others. I may notice my old patterns of group behaviour emerge and might decide to do some things differently this time – challenge myself. I assess my place in the group: am I sharing as deeply as the rest – am I holding up my end?

On academic programmes I notice that some – a distinct minority – read all the assigned work and produce all that is asked. Others will do enough to get by. Some will do very little: when younger I used to be astonished that they would come to group under-prepared and be utterly unfazed. It is in groups I learnt most about diversity and similarity – how utterly different

people could be from each other; how strikingly similar we often were when it came to things of fundamental importance like pain, loss, grief, love, hope. I must admit that one of the most surprising 'learnings' I had in groups was seeing that people could genuinely and sincerely think and believe things that were completely different, even alien, to my way of seeing things.

In short, the group becomes important to me and commands a lot of my attention. When the group draws to an end I feel sadness and loss – as well as achievement. Close as I get to people in groups, part of me is always conscious it is a finite thing. I know there will be a final day, we will all promise to keep in touch and most likely we won't follow through. It is the way of things.

Because I have delivered and been a participant in a considerable number of groups I have experienced numerous endings – over time they have become more comfortable for me. However, many groups do not like the ending of their time together and it is an emotional experience. This makes it all the more important to have a satisfactory closing – to acknowledge the time people have spent together, the gains and benefits accrued, the friendships and mutual support and the sorrow felt upon ending.

It is important to make space on the final day for people to say all they need to say so as to close well. A variety of activities can be used to facilitate good closure – whatever the activities chosen, ultimately it is good if people can acknowledge what they got from the group, from their fellow participants, and what they themselves contributed. Growth comes from acknowledging and integrating our achievements – good endings facilitate this process.

In my personal experience the psychological group does not end at the same time as the physical group. The final day we take our leave from each other is not the moment I cease to think of the group, though it may be the last time I see many of the members. There are some groups that remain active or alive in my mind for years after their physical ending. This is not to say I do not accept their end. It is simply to acknowledge that these groups made a deep impression and remain active in my mental life. Given the intensity of the group experience, this, to me, is no surprise.

I try to keep my own experience of participation in mind as I end those groups I facilitate: groups can mean a great deal to their members – as they do to me. If running groups becomes our daily task, and we meet several groups a week, we can overlook the uniqueness and importance of the experience for group members, and slip into performing perfunctory closures. This may leave the participants with unfinished business, which lessens the prospect of integrating the fruits of their experience. I find it most effective when group members take on the task of closing. Their

ascension to the role of group leader for the final task neatly underlines the ultimate goal of the group leader – to facilitate the group to outgrow their need of the facilitator.

Curtailing stories and resistance to change

It is useful to note de Shazar's idea that if one part of a system changes, the whole system changes (1988). People can change profoundly as a result of participating in a group; this will likely have an effect on all other areas of their life, including the other groups they belong to. These others may not welcome change and may thus seek to resist it.

Within the groups we facilitate, one group member positively changing can encourage others to progress as well. On the other hand, positive change in one can spark envy or appear threatening to other participants, who may react by seeking to sabotage the achiever (Klein, 1988) or even the group itself (Nitsun, 1996).

Debasing the helper

I have often been told when working with addiction recovery groups that no-one but an addict can understand the difficulty of change and that it is nigh impossible for them to succeed; they have a disease that is more powerful than they are. If I try to encourage and promote change I am demonstrating my naivety and lack of understanding. If I accept the story, I effectively surrender. We might speculate that the '*no-one but another addict can understand or help us*' narrative is constructed by the addicted part of the psyche, which is responding to the threat of potential annihilation. Resistance invariably masks fear.

When first rebuffed by a group with the claim that '*only another addict could work with our issue*', we were several weeks into a programme. Participants had been regularly attending and participating in something they were now proclaiming could not help them. It was a perplexing moment for me. I have since heard the charge '*only someone who's been through the same can help*' in many groups by now. A former College Professor of mine had a pithy response – *if that's the case, who would work with the dying?* Over time I began to notice that the charge invariably rears its head as the group approaches key moments, where participants are faced with decisions that concern changing behaviours and accepting responsibility. These moments induce anxiety in most of us and are even more daunting when one has been through experiences that corrode self-belief.

Change to a way of living threatens the sense of identity a person has constructed. As a defence, they can present as scornful when those who '*don't know what it's really like*', come to offer them assistance. I remember one discussion in my hearing among a group of ex-prisoners which was dominated by stories about what they saw as hapless helpers. One participant told the story of a group he was in which was led by a young facilitator. The narrator described a group leader who neither drank nor smoked, who was into yoga and eating healthily – all 'symptoms' of innocence and naivety. The punch-line involved the story teller throwing a five euro note at the feet of the facilitator and taunting him to "*go away and buy yourself a habit*".

It is not uncommon that those who think ill of themselves are often bitter, scornful and dismissive of others (O'Leary, 1982). Though rebuffs of this nature can initially sting, it helps to see such behaviour as driven by fear and self-loathing (Horney as cited in O'Leary, 1982). Obviously it also helps if we feel confident in our capacity to be of service to the group. If the group leader is 'decapitated', the group is rudderless and won't go anywhere, so we need to find ways of handling such rebuffs.

Aside from skills and knowledge of the field, self-belief and a clear sense of mission are important bulwarks. I believe that those who have lived a certain span of time are likely to reach a place where they have felt and experienced a wide range of the spectrum of human emotions. Whether they have experienced addiction or not, they surely have experienced moments of loss, grief, despair, fear and hopelessness – as well as love, hope and joy. They have most likely endured 'dark nights of the soul' and contemplated committing dark deeds against their foes, themselves, or even their loved ones. When we know our dark capacity but chose not to act out of it we develop a heightened ability to empathise, accept and understand the struggles of others (Ringer, 2002). If we undertake relevant training and work assiduously on our own development, and have a clear sense of purpose, then surely we can help. If we believe we can be of service, we can withstand the 'slings and arrows' hurled our way by frightened participants.

Counter-change

When someone in a group begins to grow and change they are challenging the story of those who continue to cling to the line that change isn't possible because of addiction, or prejudice, or whatever real or perceived barrier constrains them. The other participants can either take inspiration or they can sabotage, and sometimes they sabotage. If their sabotage succeeds, their narrative is reinforced. "*See, it's not possible for us...*"

We might rightly wonder at the self-destructive urges in humans that keep us in thrall to self-undermining behaviour. But then, the whole human condition is beset by such mysteries. Ellis believed we were genetically disposed to develop irrational beliefs, which led to us engaging in unhealthy activity (1997). Freud believed our drives were essentially not rational anyway: he pondered and puzzled at the destructive impulse in humans (Gay, 1998: Edmundson, 2007).

What is important to bear in mind as group leaders is the capacity for people to change and better their situation – while not letting go of knowledge of the converse: we humans can also make things worse, often when we are on the cusp of succeeding. In groups, we have the opportunity to facilitate growth and improvement, to counter and reverse the downward spiral. Even the most stubborn devil's advocate, as long as they continue to attend, is drawn for a reason.

Someone who keeps returning is also attaching and belonging to something – their group. They experience membership and ownership. I have experienced initial hostility from group members who nonetheless clearly felt connected to the group – they stay in spite of their animosity towards me. Over time, their hostility to me is often tempered by the respect or acceptance the other group members might show me. Usually their animosity declines – whatever transference issues were at play seem to ease, I am no longer seen as some totemic representation of previous authority figures. Once there is some cohesion and direction in a group it exhorts regulating behaviours of its members. Belonging urges compliance with the establishing norms.

External dynamics

It must equally be remembered that participants are part of systems outside the life of the group. Such systems may deeply resent perceived interference with their modus operandi (Grant, 1992). Resistance can be quite fierce, as these systems seek to maintain their status quo. A group participant who wants to change their life will likely be part of a family as well as myriad other social groups. This can lead to a crisis and the making of hard choices (Berger, 1997).

(a) I recall one female participant in a group who, in her 40s, developed a hunger for education. She became a voracious reader and began to attend one course after another. Her husband was not impressed: neither were her friends. They were constantly on the alert for the merest sign of 'airs and graces', demonstrating a particular aversion to 'big words'. She progressed

into a professional job and achieved further academic awards. Under a barrage of incessant criticism, a number of her friendships cooled – through her work and academic pursuits 'Josephine' developed new friendships. Ultimately her marriage could not sustain the stress of change and failed. Not everyone has the strength and resilience to be who they are, and many in her situation would have given up for a quiet life. Josephine often declared that the support and encouragement she received from her group gave her the strength to continue.

(b) 'Mike' was a participant on a long-term unemployment group. He had been out of work for over five years. In the early stages of the group he gave voice to strong views on immigrants, blaming them for many of his ills. He also expressed the view he was too old, no employer would look at him, that the group was surely wasting its time. He sought to recruit support for his views by continuously speaking in the 'we'. In time he quietened, influenced by the industry and serious mindedness of the group, which had signally failed to join his campaign and in time began to rebut his claims.

   Mike became very interested in positive psychology (see the final section in the book), in identifying his signature strengths and finding activities to utilise them. He began to go to the library on a daily basis, becoming adept at using the internet, read widely and came into group everyday overflowing with news and ideas.

   Mike put his name down for a two-year diploma course in a field he had always dreamt of entering. With the help of the group he prepared assiduously for the interview and to everyone's delight was awarded a place on the course. He had also begun to walk and swim every day. He transformed from being the roadblock in the group to becoming one of its dynamos. Then there followed a slow, almost imperceptible change. Mike became withdrawn and grew morose. He spoke of doubts about going to college – he had left school at fifteen. Moreover, he was too old for it, he told us – he'd 'be a laughing stock and wouldn't fit in with the others'.

   He eventually revealed that he was being scorned by his wife. She told him that he could have no hope of succeeding in college, where he would be like 'a fish out of water'. She sustained her campaign and eventually Mike conformed and got a manual job. He gave credence to her views because in thirty years of marriage she had been the educated one in the relationship, the one who helped him fill in forms, who explained current

affairs to him. Working still pleased him better than being unemployed, but he surrendered his dream[13].

   (c) I facilitated a number of long-term interventions for the progression of ex-prisoners in the 'noughties'. The groups met in a city centre location. All the participants were struggling with addiction. It took time, but eventually the groups would settle and become productive and cohesive. It was always a clear sign of progress when group members signed up for night courses, joined a gym, begin to eat healthily and report back that they were beginning to handle relationship issues and potential conflicts much better in their life outside the group. Timekeeping and attendance improves and participants arrive in group looking like they are ready to work.

   On each occasion, as the group members began to make strides, acquaintances of theirs would gather on the quay opposite the building so that they would see the participants as they left the venue after group sessions. The waiting 'friends' would hold tins of beer aloft, shout greetings and invitations. Some of the group members were lost to us this way – more pertinently, lost to themselves as well. Unfortunately, we were into the third group before I noticed the pattern, it suddenly dawning on me that I had seen it before at a similar stage in the previous groups' development. I think I had been unable to see what was before my eyes for what it revealed to me of human nature[14]. We moved location for the next programme.

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[13] Such scenarios are challenging for a facilitator. I try to bear in mind that I am dealing with a dynamic that predates and likely outlives the group, while remembering the group is aiming at the growth and development of its participants. Moreover, what we hear in the group is the participant's perception of a dynamic that involves two people – the other partner may have a very different tale to tell. I feel it is important in a case like this not to engage in criticism of a party whose voice has not been heard. We also need to be wary of fuelling rage and resentment in the participant by insisting his spouse is undermining and wronging him. Ultimately the participant has to be supported to make choices that s/he can live with and hopefully enhance his/her life.

[14] I believe that those who gathered to tempt the group participants back into their old ways of life were not wholly conscious of their destructive urges: none woke that day and said to themselves "the progress Bill is making is undermining me so I'll pull him down to protect my story".

CHAPTER 5

CONFLICT

Internal conflict

In claiming that most conflict is internal, William Glasser (1998) finds himself in rare alignment with Sigmund Freud, who proposed that the human mind is structured in such a way that we are in a near-permanent state of inner strife between instinctual life and the forces of repression (Freud, 1991). One internal instrument of repression, the superego, harangues the person for their urges and behaviour, in keeping with its role of upholding the ego ideal (ibid). The barrage can be temporarily suspended by falling in love, becoming inebriated, or blindly following an autocratic leader (Edmundson, 2003). Much as we suffer at the hands of our inner critic, the Nuremberg trials of senior Nazis – with the defence "we were only following orders" – highlights the perils of being without this badgering presence.

   Anytime we choose an object or a course of action, "we have to forgo others which are also desired", one of the reasons that led Bowlby to declare that "conflict is the normal state of affairs in all of us" (2007: 14). The psychodynamic theorists believed that developing a capacity to deal with ambivalence was the key to reducing inner conflict – essentially to come to terms with the fact that we are capable of loving and hating those precious to us. However, for many of us, this awareness can be too painful; we struggle to regulate our conflicts, leading to deep unease and illness (ibid).

Transference and aggression

Freud (1991) opined that humans are constantly in search of security and control of their surroundings. As we move through our environment, our mind works to relate it to what we already know. In other words, we seek and are inclined to see what is already familiar in any new situation (Storr, 1989). When we meet someone new, we unconsciously seek to place this person: 'Who are they like; who do they remind us of?' Sometimes the

person may remind us of someone we are fond of and we feel warmly towards them. Other times, however, we may recall someone we do not like or feel threatened by, and our reaction may be abrasive or fearful as we transfer feelings onto them more appropriate to a different setting. Thus, there is negative and positive transference, depending on the association sparked (Freud, 1991).

A group environment, particularly in the early stages, is quite a febrile one, full of stimulation – a "complex and dense" experience (Ringer, 2002: 114). It is fertile ground for transference, much of it initially likely to be directed at the group leader. A group setting may spark unconscious associations with early family life (Yalom, 2005) or early learning environments. If some participants had a harsh schooling and consequently associated an educational setting with fear, punishment and shame, they might come to the session in an unsettled state, with old fears churning to the surface. If we employ a traditional classroom layout, with tables, pens and paper, and the group leader were to walk around the room commandingly while everyone else is seated, the anxiety and tension is exacerbated for participants, who might invest the group leader with unrealistic levels of power and see in them a threatening presence (Yalom, 2005). It might spark behaviour ranging from obeisance to aggression. Often a group caught up in transference falls silent and does not respond to questions and prompts. A neophyte facilitator might then begin to cajole the group into answering. If she gets no response, mounting desperation might lead her to become more strident, which silences participants even further. She is caught up in counter-transference: she has taken on the persona of the unconscious fear or phantasy of the group and acts out of it.

How do we deal with such dynamics if they are largely unconscious? By constantly seeking to expand our awareness, more and wider experience allied to reflection makes what we encounter less strange and threatening. With experience and increased self-knowledge, we get 'snagged' less often (Ringer, 2002; Cohen, 2005). As May put it, self-awareness "goes hand in hand with enlarging power to direct our life" (1953: 162). Simply knowing – and accepting – that such dynamics occur makes us more alert to and more comfortable with their happening. Knowing of such dynamics tempers any tendency we may have to notions of omniscience – we never know it all.

Internal working models

Bowlby declared that each of us is "apt to do unto others as we have been done by" (2007: 160). From our earliest interactions, we begin to develop

an internal working model (IWM) which comprises assumptions and expectations and which acts as both a lens and a filter through which we perceive our world (Bowlby, 2007). We enter any situation predisposed to seeing things a certain way because of the personal nature of our IWM: there are things we are more likely to notice and things we will not notice because what "we already believe sets limits" (Ringer, 2002: 59). Our IWM is largely unconscious, so we are at best partially aware of our predis-positions or blind spots. Our expectations can become self-fulfilling: if our life experience has been tough, or our self-esteem low, if authority figures have been difficult, then we unconsciously expect the pattern to continue and will be set to perceive these traits in a person's actions and behaviour whether they are portraying them or not – in fact, quite often we attract that which we expect (Klein, 1988). We see "what we already believe to be pos-sible" (Ringer: 127): if we are defensive, we are prone to seeing criticism (Yalom, 2005) – the converse also being true (Klein, 1988).

I have been struck by the frequency with which group participants have understood my comments as quite contrary to what I sought to convey. To correct the mistaken impression can be difficult – little wonder, as we are dealing with the lifelong patterns and experiences that led the participant to misperceive in the first place. Likewise, I am often taken aback at how my initial reading of someone can be so wide of the mark. It is important that we strive to be non-judgemental, but we must also accept that we cannot be, as our personal history affects our "current ways of perceiving current events" (Ringer, 2002: 55). Therefore, we also strive to be open to modifying our positions. Neither aspiration is easy: we cannot achieve them without working to know ourselves as best as we can.

Projecting aggression

Another unconscious psychological dynamic at play in human interactions is projection, where feelings that are uncomfortable to us are ascribed to another person rather than owned (Freud, 1991). The recipient of our pro-jections can serve as a scapegoat (Bowlby, 2007). If I walk into the library in a bad humour, I may wonder why the person behind the counter is such a curmudgeon. As a result, I might be curt with them and unmannerly. From the librarian's perspective, someone has just walked in and been unaccountably rude. They might decide "I'll be damned if I'm going to put up with that", and they may respond in a terse way. Receiving this response, I feel vindicated.

Projection is connected to splitting (Klein, 1988), a primitive defence mechanism whereby we unconsciously split that which we encounter into

good or bad, especially under duress. If we perceive an aspect of ourselves as undesirable, we may reject owning it: we might then attribute this characteristic to another and dislike them instead of ourselves. Klein (1988) labelled this dynamic the 'paranoid-schizoid' position which is absolutist by nature and tends to reduce everything to a comforting fundamentalist simplicity of good and bad, black and white.

We can see this tendency surface in flaring rows. The angry combatants are flushed with certainty, convinced they are right and virtuous, while the other is wrong and offensive. They feel persecuted by the other and feel they are within their rights to lash out, even get their revenge in first: the aggressors perceive themselves as acting in self-defence as they 'know' they are about to be attacked, so they strike preemptively (Bowlby, 2007).

The paranoid-schizoid position is characterised by an inability to deal with ambivalence (internal conflict) – dealing with this state was, from Freud's perspective, the defining characteristic of maturity (Edmundson, 2007). Being able to see good and bad in someone (including ourselves) and be accepting of this is necessary if we wish to resolve conflict with others (or even ourselves).

The quest for power

The quest and competition for power is a major cause of conflict in human society. Linked to our basic urge to compete it can unlock irrational and murderous impulses: it can be as toxic as greed and envy. Down through human history, our quest for wealth and power has seen us justify the most horrendous acts, to the point where we now threaten the existence of life on earth, with many of those most responsible denying blindly that there is any actual threat (Francis, 2015). Nor are they short of cheerleaders: the powerful have always attracted toadies who compete for the crumbs of influence. Power corrupts – playing its seductive game corrupts to the marrow.

In Western society, we broadly tend to see ambition as a positive trait. One historian has expressed the view that people in Ireland have tended to seek leadership positions in order to be seen in charge (by dispersing largesse) rather than implement a vision (Lee, 1990). In his writings on narcissism, Freud pondered what drove people to want to be in control of others. He did not see the drive to be 'the one in charge' as healthy or benign – quite the contrary (Freud, 2003).

An autocratic style in any leader should raise questions: Why would someone wish to be the voice and mind of an entire corpus of people? (It also begs the question why people should be drawn to follow such a

figure.) Others show their power hunger in the way they ration and restrict access to information. People who seek power for dubious reasons will invariably cause resistance and an environment that is fretful and on edge. Those who seek power for the 'wrong' reason are also generally averse to questions (Herman, 1992). It returns us as facilitators to the question of motivation and awareness. Why do we wish to be group leaders? What power and wisdom do participants attribute to us? How do we manage that influence? How open are we to challenge and question? Do we accept or silence dissent?

A facilitator wields soft power, largely the power of influence, and often meets people at a vulnerable stage in their life. Given that "anything that can be used can be misused" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 128), there may be no more important decision for a facilitator than how they wield the power that being a group leader confers on them. To return to Frankl (1957): Are we decent or indecent? There is no fence to sit on; we must choose.

Knowledge is power

As competition and diversity are features of the human condition, then surely conflict is inescapable: it is certainly ubiquitous (Nitsun, 1996). Yalom contends that it "cannot be eliminated from human groups" (2005: 363). Moreover, Wittgenstein believed that, given the ambiguous nature of language, misunderstandings were inevitable (Magee, 2000). We have different cultures, perceptions and aspirations. Added to this, as we have seen, we have incessant internal conflict disturbing our equanimity, making us at least occasionally irascible. Perhaps, we should ponder there is not more conflict!

Fritz Perls claimed "awareness is curative" (cited in O'Leary, 1992) – it may ease things for us to realise how pervasive and normal conflict is (Bowlby, 2007). Foucault (1977) declared that knowledge is synonymous with power. When we possess knowledge, we can make more considered choices. How we see conflict is, at least to some degree, a choice. Many of us see it as something to be avoided and put away at all costs – this all-too-human trait of denial often exacerbates conflict. Knowing that conflict is sure to surface wherever humans congregate offers us the opportunity to see it as a foreseeable event that could be handled constructively. Bowlby opined that there is "nothing unhealthy about conflict" (2007: 14). All the same, for many of us it is easier to think than to feel the truth of this statement...

Our own response to conflict

Those of us who wish to work as group leaders may fear conflict, but we can expect to meet it. Clearly, it is in our interest, and in the interest of our groups, that we challenge ourselves in this regard, as participants will look to us for a lead and a 'secure base' when difficulties surface (Bowlby, 2007). How do you react when confronted with aggression? Does your reaction ease or exacerbate the situation? Do you respond in kind; pretend it is not happening; seek desperately to appease; or retreat into your shell? All of these responses are natural, and it is proposed that we have a reflexive inclination to one of three reactions – fight, flight or freeze (Cannon, 1929). A reflex is beyond our conscious control: in speaking to trainees I find that most of them would like to be better able to stand up for themselves and are unhappy with their gut response, but it is important not to berate ourselves for our particular reflex. If we can acknowledge and try to accept our personal response, we know what we have to work with and can begin to build our capacity to be more effective.

Rogers believed people made themselves ill because they invested too much time and effort pursuing an ideal self – the self they wanted to be and to be seen as (1961, 1980). We all have an ideal self: maybe confident, successful and unfazed by rudeness or strife. It does not leave much room for our faults, the things we are embarrassed by, our perceived weaknesses, or aspects of ourselves we consider unacceptable – what Jung (1995) aptly called our 'shadow'. Things that we suppress, and aspects of ourselves we do not listen to, can cause us neuroses: we can only begin to change when we accept ourselves (Rogers, 1980). As Dreckurs (1970) wisely put it, we must find the "courage to be imperfect" (cited in Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 120).

The ameliorative power of listening

Those who feel listened to undoubtedly experience a wide range of benefits. They feel understood and as a consequence "released from loneliness" (Rogers, 1980: 8). Effective listening dissolves alienation (Rogers, 1961: 151) and involves empathy, which humanises conflict situations (Yalom, 2005). As a result, we cease to feel strange, odd or out of sync with the universe (ibid). In fact, the simple intent to understand "is of value in itself" (O'Leary, 1982: 35), as it conveys to the speaker that they are worthy of attention (McLeod, 1997). For those in an agitated state, being listened to can act like a valve that releases pressure. Much conflict stems from misunderstanding or disconnection – effective listening helps bring clarity and connectedness.

However, sometimes a person is so caught up in their anger that they are not aware of the other, and even the most adept listener will not soothe their sense of aggravation. In a state of upset, a person who experienced an insecure or chaotic primary attachment is more prone to enter into a state of hyper (agitated) or hypo (flat) arousal, where it is hard to connect with them. The job of the facilitator in this case is to seek to guide the person to a 'window of opportunity' – the place where they can be reached. It can help to use a soothing voice, mirroring the movements of the person, *imperceptibly* hugging ourselves, stroking our arms, perhaps gently rocking as we do so and making soothing noises: many of the motions a mother makes as she soothes an upset child. In short, listening and responding with our whole organism, conveying our acceptance and understanding organismically. If we bring awareness to ourselves when we are intently listening to someone in distress, we will see that we do much of this already, as an automatic human response to another's suffering (Gladwell, 2000). It is the 'knowing' that enables us to do it better and with consciousness.

What do we control?

Glasser contends that the only behaviour we can ultimately control is our own: we can choose our actions and behaviour (not our initial feelings), but we have no control over what another person chooses to do (1998). We can only account for our own behaviour, which has, however, the potential to influence others. We are most likely not at fault if someone we have never met or interacted with feels aggrieved. As Rogers put it, the core conditions impact positively on the other party provided they can perceive said conditions (1961). We can feel empathy for the aggrieved other, but we are neither responsible for nor the cause of their presenting distress. We may be able to help them, but their burdens are not ours. This is not callousness, it is simply good boundaries. If facilitators own too much, taking responsibility for things they cannot possibly influence or control, they will inevitably feel they fall short. It is likely that if a facilitator is taking responsibility for something that is not theirs, then the person to whom the issue rightfully belongs is not owning it. While the impulse might spring from good intentions, such an action is ultimately disempowering, suggesting an underlying belief that the person with the issue is incapable of resolving it. Maybe in the given moment that is the case, which means the work to be done is to bolster capacity.

Parent, adult, child

Useful insights into conflict management can be gleaned from the work of Eric Berne, who developed a system called transactional analysis. Berne

proposed that people operate out of one of three ego states when inter-acting with others. These three states he referred to as Parent, Adult and Child. The Parent ego state consists of values integrated from influen-tial authority figures in our lives and can present as critical or nurturing. Somewhat like Freud's Super-ego, it conveys tradition and culture. The Adult state is objective, rational, decision making, mindful of reality and not unlike Freud's 'ego' in outlook and constitution. The Child state could be considered to be our natural state, consisting of feelings, impulses and spontaneity. It is expressive and alive but can trim itself in order to adapt to social mores (Corey, 2000).

It is useful to reflect on ourselves – What do we do when we are in each of these states, what kind of expressions do we use, how do we behave? What triggers us into the parent or the child state? What helps us return to adult? If you are running a group and someone acts out of their stern par-ent or rebellious child place, how do you react? What state do you respond from?

If a client comes in demanding attention, it is likely that they are oper-ating from their child state. They may be unreasonable, as if having a tantrum. Are you familiar with such behaviour? You should be: you will have seen it in others and in yourself! When someone acts childishly, we may feel the need to admonish them, to tell them to pull themselves together. Our voice becomes peremptory, we hector them, we use plenty of 'shoulds' and sigh in exasperation. In short, we enter into our stern par-ent state.

For some of us it can be quite difficult if a client adopts a superior or condescending tone and we find ourselves getting flustered: we may feel they are standing over us to judge or reprimand. We can find ourselves swept along in a pattern of behaviour we feel trapped in – a bewildering experience. We have responded to their parent state by entering our child state – we feel small, incompetent and pressured.

Naturally, the ideal situation is for us to monitor our own behaviour and develop an awareness of which state we are in at a given moment. Working life is generally easier if we can maintain ourselves in the adult state – yet there are benefits to be got from all of our states, the spontaneity and joy of the child, the prudence and nurturing aspect of the parent. Our staying in 'adult' may help the other person access their adult state, but even if it doesn't, we stay unhooked from the fray and professional. Even if we stray from our adult state, we have it as an aspiration. It is natural for everyone to have triggers that can cause them to enter their child or parent state. It is most useful to get to know these triggers – with knowledge, we can assess our state and amend our course.

Diversity

As referenced earlier, human diversity is intrinsic to much conflict. We all perceive differently: two people witnessing the same event will likely not see the same thing. While this diversity is greatly enriching, it inevitably leads to misunderstanding and strife. As Stephen Grosz put it, "I think it takes time – it took me time – to realise just how very different people are from each other" (2014).

Because we crave security and structure and "abhor uncertainty" (Yalom, 2005: 10), we can feel threatened by difference and affect a defensive posture when we encounter that which is other. In ordinary life, "stranger anxiety is common" (Nitsun, 1998: 48). In the early stages of a group, a participant is often faced with an array of strangers. We need and indeed are drawn to difference, but we also fear it, so the start of a group can be tense and awkward (Benson, 2001). This underlines the importance of working to make the strange familiar in the initial group stages – work put into establishing cohesion is worth the investment as it both reduces tensions and offers a more supportive environment for resolving conflict when it does arise.

Conflict and group development

The first important theory on the stages of group development was for-mulated by Bruce Tuckman (1965). In the forming stage, group members enter the room as individuals. They are unsure and a little apprehensive, concerned about acceptance and fitting in and probably on best behaviour. As the group progresses, members begin to assert their place and worry about their autonomy (Benson, 2001). They may question each other or the facilitator, query how things are done, the direction of the group and so on. So, Tuckman saw storming, or conflict, as a natural stage in a group – moreover, one to be addressed and surmounted before progressing. If group members see that the group and its leader are capable of dealing with discord, a deeper trust grows which allows the group to perform at an optimum level.

The fact that Tuckman viewed conflict as inbuilt to the development of groups is instructive – it slows the propensity we might have to see con-flict as being our fault or as a problem to be solved as quickly as possible. If I see it as my fault, I may become anxious, rush to soothe or smother it and I may miss the opportunity it offers for learning. I may also cut par-ticipants off at a heightened moment, causing hurt or resentment. If I see group conflict as an element in the development of a system, I can see it as

a natural process. I can begin to consider how I might facilitate the group through it in a way that is growthful.

I recall when working with ex-prisoner groups that levels of conflict were strikingly low – I must confess that my expectation had been otherwise. I learnt over time that the participants' prior experience of conflict usually occurred 'under the influence' and occasionally resulted in grave injury and/or incarceration. As a result, conflict was associated with harsh consequences which restrained its occurrence. I remember in one group a participant entering the room in a state of aggravation, spoiling it seemed for a 'fight'. He fired a lot of aggression and complaint at the facilitators. He was looking more at my co-facilitator than at me: she nodded as he spoke, clearly listening, open and accepting. I noticed she was holding herself as if in a hug, imperceptibly rocking, making soothing sounds. As he stopped for breath, she simply said "I can see you're upset 'James'". He made eye contact and his eyes misted over. He tried to go back to his litany of complaints, but the understanding conveyed to him had deflated his ire. He sighed and sat back. Then he asked "anyway, what the f*** are we doing today" and laughed, ruefully. The group laughed with him.

I could see a tension being released and realised that the other members had been holding their breaths, transfixed by the episode. It emerged that they saw conflict as something that usually led to harm and were not accustomed to seeing any other outcome. For them, seeing that anger could be released, that it could be handled by the facilitators and that they themselves could contain it as group members opened up new vistas and possibilities. Over the course of the next few weeks, other group members felt emboldened to vent. By working through or being ok with this expression of anger, the group developed an intimacy and safety that greatly facilitated progression.

Change and counter-change

In some form or other, most group interventions advocate change – be it of behaviour and/or mind-set. Glasser declared that if we kept doing the same thing, we'd keep getting the same results (1998): if we want things differently, we have to do things differently. We need change in order to grow: we also need adventures to have a rich, fulfilling and meaningful life (McLeod, 1997). Yet, "to venture causes anxiety" (Kierkegaard, cited in May, 1975). Groups are dense and stimulating environments, a departure from the everyday for most, promoting other ways of being. Where there is change there is also, invariably, resistance to it. We crave and desire structure and security as much as we want and need change

and excitement. This structure of tensions between the human desire to grow and broaden our horizons while feeling safe and secure is both fretful and fruitful for most participants. Bowlby (2005) showed that people are more willing to explore and become autonomous when they feel they have a secure, accessible and trustworthy base: surely a 'recipe' which gives good direction to a facilitator.

Good lessers

Freire (Brunson & Vogt, 1996) employed the term 'good lessers' to portray those participants who thrive in and are accustomed to what Knowles referred to as pedagogical learning (Garavan et al., 1995). In such an environment, the educator directs learning, is the dominant voice and deals with 'how to' and 'how not to'. The focus is on outcomes, facts and answers rather than opinion, discussion and process. When confronted with a facilitated environment and asked to collaborate, share and tolerate ambiguity, some participants struggle and put considerable pressure on the facilitator for definitive answers. I remember the exasperated plea of one participant: "Can't you just tell us the do's and don'ts of facilitation". Sometimes the exasperation turns into antagonism, with the facilitator the target of participants' ire. The resistance, though intense, is usually short-lived, and after surviving an initial period of angst and confusion, they usually become keen participants.

Conflict in organisations

If conflict is seen as natural, it is not a stretch to see it as potentially constructive (Bowlby, 2005). It raises energy levels and creativity: vigorous disagreement can be fruitful. In this revolutionary technological age, ongoing change has become the norm (Fukuyama, 1999). An organisation that can manage conflict and see it as an inevitable consequence of a policy of openness and pluralism will be best placed to reap the benefits of the creative tensions that inevitably arise in response to change and the pursuit of goals.

Unfortunately, some staid and static organisations opt for obedience and compliance. Those who question are viewed as heretical and consequently silenced. Closed to challenge, these organisations struggle to improve and inevitably flounder (Magee, 1997). Organisations that are open to challenge, with relatively flat hierarchies, reap most from their staff (Spreitzer, 1995: Pescosolido, 2003).

While acknowledging that conflict is potentially growthful, it can also be deeply destructive (Nitsun, 1996). When conflict erupts in an

organisation, it can absorb a tremendous amount of energy in unproductive activity. Long-term conflict is also injurious to health and well-being, and its protagonists can lose sight of the original grievance and become sucked into a zero-sum war of attrition. Therefore, it is worth considering ways of minimising unproductive conflict.

Organisational congruence helps: too often organisations espouse values and mission statements that are not upheld and are not even genuine aspirations. This creates a gulf between rhetoric and reality which can fuel resentments. An organisation true to the values it espouses will strike its members as authentic. This enhances the prospect that disputes may focus on how the mission is achieved, rather than relationship-focused, personalised disputes. Broadly speaking, personal disputes are destructive, whereas disputes on what should – and how can it – be achieved enhance the organisation.

Organisations that promote autonomy and responsibility – adult behaviour – will find disputants tending to own their feelings and reactions. If there is an inclusive, consultative culture, staff will feel respected (Pescosolido, 2003). In an open organisation, people can disagree about what should be done and how: this kind of conflict has the potential to spark competition, creativity and growth. If views are heard respectfully rather than scorned or belittled, there will a greater creative ferment (Jung & Sosik, 2002). Nothing silences as thoroughly as derision.

Resolving conflict: techniques and approaches

Carl Rogers had a simple but effective conflict resolution technique (1961). Where two parties were in dispute, he would ask them to relate their side of the story in each other's hearing. He would then ask each protagonist to repeat the other's story to that party's satisfaction. This critical element can only be achieved if they hear the position of the other. In practice, I have seen this technique generate understanding and result in conflict softening and unlocking. Perspective has shifted as a result of each party acquiring an empathic understanding for the position of the other – the situation has been humanised. I have employed this technique with couples, warring colleagues and in disputes in groups. It is highly effective, but in order to work as desired, all combatants must want to be there and must want to resolve the issues. Emotions can run high, and one or both sides may interject while the other is talking. More often than not – recalling Berne's *Parent, Adult, Child* (PAC) model – the protagonists may act like children, possessed by feelings of hurt and rage. It is important that the facilitator stay in 'adult' – not slip into hectoring parent role – and uphold the rules: each side gets a chance to speak and be heard.

In the role of a mediator, I have occasionally found I have had to be quite insistent when one party expresses reluctance to tell the other's story to the other's satisfaction – this is the critical piece of the technique and I have 'pushed' things in this regard sometimes quite hard. It is a delicate skill, being strongly assertive without exacerbating the situation. Naturally, being forceful is an end rather than a starting position. To be assertive without appearing to favour any one side is the optimum position for the conflict mediator.

Choice and limits

William Glasser commences conflict resolution sessions by asking the parties if they wish to resolve the issue. He deliberately uses a closed question – it leaves no fence to sit on. Unless they answer unequivocally that they do, he sees little point in pursuing the matter. I always employ this opening. It can be done gently – "ok guys, it's plain we have a difficult situation here which is causing you some concern/grief and I'd just like to hear from each of you. Do you want to resolve this?"

Occasionally one party will answer "I suppose so", or seek to impose a condition "I do if they'll stop being so..." I tell them I need a straight yes or no without pre-conditions or ambiguity. If they don't want to resolve it, that's their right as adults. It would be hard for me to exaggerate the resistance I have encountered at this stage, and I know that a 'yes' given very grudgingly is often insincere. I feel I have to name the resistance as I see it but without censure and always be mindful that the other party may say "see, that's how they always are", or may start acting 'extra good' to show up the other party.

If there is conflict between parties, I find admonishing them is of little use – often people who are locked in conflict feel upset or embarrassed as it is. But the conflict cannot be resolved unless the parties want to, and resolution almost always requires movement from both sides. It also requires of the protagonists a willingness to let go of a grievance, an undertaking not to throw a past misdemeanour in the face of the other once they have agreed they are intent on moving on.

As a facilitator trying to mediate conflict, we can only work with what we are given. Most people who agree to mediation want to resolve their difficulty. Not always however: people are capable of duplicity.

Solving circle

Glasser employs the *Solving Circle* to resolve conflict (1998). He puts forward the view that in a conflict between a couple in a relationship

there are three entities involved, each individual and the relationship. His strategy is to get the disputants to do something concrete and constructive for the relationship, regardless of the behaviour of the other. When each side sees movement, optimism and a greater willingness enter the picture. Where enmity is deep, both parties can feel they are doing something for a separate entity – the relationship – rather than the other person. An element of Glasser's approach is to ask the parties when they last did something together that they enjoyed, to see if they can repeat the occasion. It also reframes the perspective that all is miserable. This approach is similar to the solution-focused approach that declares there is an exception to every problem – simply locate the exception and get the antagonists to 'do' more of it (de Shazar, 1988).

I have found this a useful technique to use in group settings. Where there are two protagonists (or more), I ask each one of them to do something to promote the viability of the group. This works best when the group has become "an object of attachment" (Ringer, 2002: 263) and is therefore something neither party wants to lose or be seen to damage.

System

Ideas from systems thinking are useful: central to this approach is the idea that everyone is an element or part of a system – if one part of the system changes, the entire system changes (De Shazar, 1988). Sometimes people use groups to work through a difficulty they have with an absent other – therapeutic approaches like psychodrama (Moreno, 1947) and Hellinger's constellation work can unlock impasses for people in the absence of all the protagonists. The latter approach will usually focus on the family of origin of the participant, as current disputes we enter into can have their roots in the nexus of ties and confusions of earlier life that we simply replay in the present. By unwinding entanglements of the past, we free ourselves in the present. With psychodrama, we get the opportunity to have other participants engage in a role-play of our difficulty and get to see the scenario come alive through the perspective of each 'character', giving us overview and the possibility of changing the script and achieving a new, more satisfying outcome.

The challenge of ambivalence and reducing internal strife

Albert Ellis wrote that our propensity for absolute dogmatism was "one of the main causes of human disturbance" (1997: 2). Such dogmatism offered certainty but was essentially an immature position, voiced in the 'choiceless' language of 'must' and 'should'. As mentioned, Freud opined that

humans were at their best when they developed the capacity to deal with ambivalence, such as coping with the fact we can want with one part of us that which seems abhorrent to another. In his view, the more we understood and were accepting of our unconscious drives, the more mature and durable we were. The discomfort of ambivalence could lead humans to want to surrender autonomy to an all-knowing, all-powerful entity (Edmundson, 2007). Such surrender of autonomy rarely ended well. For existentialists, the key challenge is to choose. In between stimulus and response is a window where we can exercise such choice (Frankl, 1959). However, when we are internally conflicted, we are also often quite confused.

Often we find ourselves split between the competing demands of love and freedom (Glasser, 1998). Perls employed the empty chair technique to help bring movement and clarity to the impasse of internal division and confusion (O'Leary, 1992). The technique utilises two chairs, wherein we sit in each one and speak the concerns of each part of our conflicted psyche. Then we might sit in another chair and consider the positions that have been enunciated – this moment often leads to insight and awareness. As Perls said, awareness is curative. From a position of awareness, we make choices.

Conflict: in conclusion

First of all, conflict is natural, universal, but manageable and resolvable, often to the greater benefit if all parties feel respected and heard. Second, conflict does not have to be 'lethal'. Yet most of us fear it, perhaps due to a mix of personal history and species memory. Conflict brings fear and even terror for many of us – including facilitators. Third, by building self-awareness and accepting the aspects of ourselves – flaws and all – that we uncover, we put less pressure on ourselves to get it right and are consequently calmer and more widely accepting of what comes. Fourth, there are a number of techniques, many of which can be melded together so that you form an integrative style or approach to suit you best. All require a genuine willingness to engage. Fifth, the field of positive psychology proposes that by focusing on building our strengths and qualities, we become better equipped to handle all difficulty (Seligman, 2011). Sixth, taking a line from Brief Solution-Focused Therapy, simply calling something a problem makes it so; problems are problems because they are maintained (de Shazar, 1988); we are upset not so much by things but by our view of things (Ellis, 1997:2); we have the capacity to alter our perception and see a problem as a challenge or even an opportunity.

Often when I am training facilitators, a lot of time can be devoted to the issue of conflict. As conflict can occur in groups, it is wise to discuss

it. Nonetheless, in my years of facilitating groups, I have not experienced a whole lot of major conflict – and where I have, and as a group we managed to resolve it, it has been rewarding and growthful, leading to greater intimacy and acceptance and a deeper level of performance. Being ready is good; being on the alert maybe less so.

Postscript: *The following is an extended version of a technique called Pause, Acknowledge, Clarify, Respond (PACR) developed to deal with 'raging customers'.*

1. *"This above all: to thine own self be true ... thou canst not then be false to any man" (Shakespeare). Authenticity and integrity are respected and preserve self-respect.*
2. *The more knowledge we have of ourselves, the better able we are to deal with scenarios of aggression. What we don't know controls us. What we are aware of we can make choices about.*
3. *A high level of self-confidence generally tends to deter aggressors (though it can draw envy-fuelled aggression). People with higher confidence also recover faster (Herman, 1992).*
4. *Positive psychology can be employed to build strength and capacity so that we are more resilient and better able to manage difficult situations (Seligman, 2011; Gaffney, 2011).*
5. *Albert Ellis recommends that people develop a high tolerance for frustration, as life inevitably throws setbacks our way (Ellis & Dryden, 1997).*
6. *If we see someone as a problem, we will likely approach them in armour! To again hark to Shakespeare, "present fears are less than horrible imaginings". Labels matter.*
7. *Aggression and anger are often triggered by fear, frustration, hurt, or feelings of inferiority. The anger seemingly directed at us is often not personal – it may be directed at the organisation we represent or simply be a reaction to life events.*
8. *It is useful to separate the person from their behaviour. The client's behaviour is not how they actually are – the behaviour is transitory. Such an attitude makes it easier to be respectful and feel less threatened.*
9. *Don't make a situation worse by ignoring an aggrieved person: many organisations close ranks against complainants and whistle-blowers, seeking to silence or scapegoat them. Instead of having a manageable issue to resolve, the problem can develop to a scale where it becomes an existential threat to the organisation.*

10. *If an aggressor is met with courtesy and respect, they can find it disarming and the aggression can be defused quite quickly.*
11. *If the aggressor feels listened to, they generally calm down – someone 'sees' them and is taking them seriously. The fact that someone is showing they are worth listening to can counteract the negative feelings they are experiencing (McLeod, 1997).*
12. *If you give your name and seek and use their name, the situation becomes personalised. It is much harder to maintain aggression in circumstances of familiarity.*
13. *Be on a similar physical footing where possible, i.e. both seated/ standing.*
14. *The most useful behaviour in a conflict scenario is assertive behaviour. Aggressive behaviour will likely fuel the situation, and passive behaviour could lead to one being walked on.*
15. *In the initial stages, it is considered useful to match your pitch and tone of voice to the other and gradually slow it down – it can help soothe the other person.*
16. *In Brief Solution-Focused Therapy (BSFT), practitioners seek to turn 'complainants' into 'customers' by developing a collaborative relationship to resolve the issue. For example, if a person is complaining, the therapist might ask* "how can we solve this", *inviting the complainant to take an active role in resolving their issue. By using 'can', we signal a belief it is resolvable.*
17. *Keep communication channels open and keep the person informed. If you have to transfer a client to another form of support, explain what you are doing and why.*
18. *Know your limits in relation to your responsibilities. Do not take responsibility for what you do not control (Glasser, 1998), nor shirk what you are responsible for.*

CHAPTER 6

WORKING TO NEEDS

The exercise of autonomy

Significant intellectual effort has been expended arguing the case as to whether nature or nurture is the dominant factor in the formation of character (Pinker, 2002). The subject garners such attention because it concerns the exercise of free will – if we were solely determined by our genes, or by wholly unconscious drives, we would be reduced to the status of passengers in our own lives.

There seems little doubt that both factors operate. While we clearly are not a blank slate moulded solely by societal forces, neither are we wholly carved in the intractable stone of genetic coding. It seems evident we can be pulled by goals as much as impelled by drives (Frankl, 1959) and that our experience, to some degree, forms us. We clearly exercise choice; we can alter our situation and our thinking. There are obvious limits – we cannot become taller, but most of us will feel better for simply electing to take a walk or set and realise an ambition. Most of us have survived some level of adversity and emerged from it by making decisions and taking action. And, according to Seligman (2011), emerging from difficult situations lends truth to Nietzsche's dictum "what doesn't kill you makes you stronger". Seligman further argues that we can build and strengthen our character and engage in activities that allow us to flourish: much of it really is up to us.

I once attended a supervisor called Ray, who told a story that had a considerable impact on me:

> The Roman Empire grew to such a size that it was decided there should be two capitals – Rome in the West and Constantinople in the East. The Western empire began to collapse under pressure from barbarian invasions in the fifth century. However, the Eastern Roman empire survived until 1453, when Constantinople's defences were breached by Ottoman invaders. On storming this ancient city

the Islamic invaders arrived at its architectural jewel, the church of Santa Sofia. This was the primary Roman and Christian symbol in the city. The invaders had two choices – destroy or assimilate. The victors decided to assimilate. The Christian altar was angled to face Jerusalem. The conquerors tilted the altar a few degrees so that it faced Mecca. A small change of a few degrees signifying a whole new order...

I have often seen people change perspective just a little and be transformed in the process. To be effective or significant, change does not have to be radical, though its results can be.

I would find it difficult to work with groups if I did not believe in people's capacity to change. Nor can I believe sincerely in the capacity of others to change and grow unless I see the same potential in myself: "we can only help others to the extent we have grown as a person" (O'Leary, 1982: 39). Meaningful and lasting change can be challenging and requires staying power as well as courage and optimism. Unless someone who is in a difficult place makes a decision to change behaviour, then they are unlikely to exit their predicament. Wanting a different outcome involves "someone doing something different" (De Shazar, 1998: 8). Blatantly obvious as this may be, we humans seem deeply resistant to this fundamental reality of our power and responsibility (Grosz, 2103). In fact, we are prone to surrendering our autonomy lightly to unsuitable others (Freud, 2003). By so doing we surrender our chance to authentically meet our needs.

Resistance and doubt

The various psychotherapy schools might differ on the extent to which we control our destinies; yet, therapies couldn't function as such unless they propounded the notion that we can manage better, grow and develop. These theories also give consideration to the fact that we are resistant – often unconsciously so – to change.

Much as we may want to choose and live better, we hold back, we prevaricate, which "serves the purpose of avoiding anticipated failure" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 43). Even when we are aware of our needs, we can still sink ourselves. We trip ourselves up, get ill, talk ourselves out of things, doubt our capacity or our right to meet our needs. It is the classic human condition – ambivalence, prevarication, self-undermining – call it what we will, it attends upon many of us whenever we seek to move forward, whenever we dare to hope and dream.

Too often I have seen people shy away from their objective when it is within their grasp, achieving confirmation of their inner critic's perspective by failing and then lacerating themselves as failures, as if their psyche has set them up to flounder so badly that they retreat and won't venture out again.

Forearmed is forewarned. In personal development groups, such setbacks seem to be part of the process of change. The participant may catastrophise such setbacks – they *'should have known from the start it wasn't for them'*, they proclaim. If the group can 'hold' the person, give them acceptance, understanding, encouragement, if some wry humour at what we humans do to ourselves emerges, if others share similar experiences – all of this helps the 'scalded' participant to gain insight, to see they have experienced a mere setback and not the disaster they first perceived. Through support and encouragement, the participant can go forward again. Fellow group member support in these instances is a critical element of the power of groups to facilitate change and fulfil needs.

Needs driven

It is widely proclaimed that the most successful groups are those that meet participants' needs and it is a worthy sentiment to declare that a group should be driven by the expressed needs of its participants. In reality, some groups may not yet have the capacity to identify their needs and might well be intimidated or confused by being asked to do so. In silenced and/or marginalised groups, the task at hand may be to build the confidence and capacity wherein participants feel they have attained sufficient voice and awareness to ascertain and relate their needs.

If these needs cannot be clarified at the outset, they do need to be clarified at some stage, with room given for them to be modified or even scrapped as participants grow, to be replaced by more apposite ones. If a group cannot yet articulate its needs, agreement on any proposed tasks can still be sought to embed the norms of consultation, collaboration and inclusiveness. Yet never forget, if a group is considerably disadvantaged, they will generally perceive a considerable gap in power and knowledge between themselves and the facilitator and may well be alarmed as to why they are being consulted: they are unlikely to be used to it.

In one women's empowerment group, some spoke of the shock they initially felt – and the pressure – when I asked them to look at and name their needs. Some owned that they had resisted the notion of having needs; their job was to meet the needs of others, such as children and spouses. They felt intensely uncomfortable at any notion of having needs of their own and equated it with selfishness or, as some put it, 'very

American'. I've met this resistance as well in groups of long-term unemployed men where some participants were adamant that they needed little more than food, work, sex and a few pints. In short, they presented themselves as little more than beasts of burden bouncing along the bottom rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Many of them, after countless knocks and setbacks, seemed to have developed the self-limiting philosophy of 'aim low and you won't disappoint yourself' to cope with reversals of fortune.

Confusion or lack of awareness of needs is not, of course, confined to certain sectors of society. When we focus on marginalised groups, it is simply that some experiences, like chronic disadvantage, undermine even further the opportunity to build self-knowledge and self-regard, as well as decreasing hope and belief in the possibility of change. Reversing these effects is critical to exiting the disempowering grasp of disadvantage.

Clearly, we all have needs and meeting them is the key to health and contentment. It can take arduous work to be clear as to what our needs are: moreover, they change over time. As we grow, we become different to what we were and our needs consequently evolve. This is naturally as true for facilitators as it is for participants.

The unique needs of others

We can broadly ascertain some of the general needs of participants by virtue of their humanity. Who doesn't want to feel welcomed, respected and listened to? If I am dealing with homogenous groups, there may be broad issues of mutual concern besides each individual's particularities. A group composed of members of the Traveller community will very likely have issues that concern them as a minority, disadvantaged group, along with each participant's individual concerns. In my experience of Traveller groups, I have always been asked if I have had previous experience of working with their community, signifying their desire to be understood and their fear of being met with ignorance and prejudice. They invariably respond very positively to even a modest show of knowledge – with modern technology, it isn't very hard to undertake enough research to demonstrate respect.

Unemployed groups will often want to know about your exact relationship with the Department of Social Protection – do you report to them, how free are they to speak their minds? Professional groups often seek to establish your level of knowledge and expertise. Every group is unique in its needs, as is every individual. Creating opportunities to clarify needs on an ongoing basis helps get the best outcomes for participants.

Funders, stakeholders and ticking boxes

The effort and length of input required to facilitate the progression of highly marginalised groups, such as ex-prisoners, is radically different to that required to support the movement of recently unemployed groups. So is the level of skill and experience required by someone facilitating such groups. Unfortunately, it has been the long-term practice in this state that one progression is measured much the same as another: quantitatively the same, but qualitatively poles apart. In the public sector, the tyranny of box-ticking holds sway and progressions are calculated in such reductive terms that it results in significant achievements not being meaningfully measured.

   Just one example out of countless – I once had a client who by the age of thirty had spent fifteen years incarcerated: the longest period of freedom he had experienced was five months. He attended every session of our seven-month-long intervention: there was no place to count this outcome, by a considerable margin his longest stretch of sustained effort and freedom from both prison and active addiction. Moreover, this client ultimately found and kept a job. That counted as one job placement, one box ticked. Someone who spends thirty minutes with a case load officer tweaking a CV and then obtains employment also ticks one box. In state measurement terms, they are seen, absurdly, as equal outcomes. Where will funders invest their money – in the resource-intensive interventions or the outcome-intensive ones? Moreover, if they could look at the bigger picture, they could see that a year in prison costs the state approximately €80,000: if the participant is working, they are paying tax and not claiming welfare, augmenting the outcome for the state's coffers. They are far less likely to re-offend. They become better role models for their children, who are likely to do better as a result. The ripple effects are momentous – how is this not acknowledged?

   Invariably, funders want group interventions to be as brief as possible with a maximum number of participants. In the effort to boost box ticks, they seek an intervention that inevitably curtails the efficacy of the experience for the target group. They also frequently push for impossible guarantees of outcomes, imposing demands they would never accept for themselves. It is dispiriting: it is the current reality.

   Moreover, there is a deeply embedded culture of exaggerating progressions – this is detrimental to both society and target groups. If organisations exaggerate their success rate to secure their funding, they contribute to the misleading notion that people who are seriously disadvantaged can be 'activated' quickly and easily. For most people, long-term

unemployment has such deeply undermining consequences that recovery of sufficient capacity to re-enter the labour market is often a considerable journey. Ex-prisoners and other marginalised groups like Travellers have to overcome considerable internal and external barriers to progression. If this is not recognised, then many of the interventions aimed at marginalised groups will be superficial and potentially counterproductive.

Standards in high places?

When running groups, we often have to take the considerations of stakeholders into account. Funders and boards of management are part of the equation. Sometimes their needs may clash with the needs of group members. It is not uncommon for these stakeholders to have limited understanding of the target group – many of those who serve on boards receive insufficient training, if any. In the public, community and voluntary sectors, it is not uncommon to see a modestly endowed board of management oversee the work of a professional workforce. It is generally not an effective mix. While there are some outstanding people on boards around the country, there are too many who are there for the wrong reasons.

Many working with marginalised groups would have had interaction with state agencies that often acted as if their needs were opposed to those of their client groups. In FÁS, the state training agency, the weight of scandal grew to such a level that the organisation was dismembered at a time when it was most needed. Unfortunately, this agency was simply one of the most egregious in its behaviour (Ross & Webb, 2010). As the NESF report *Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market* (2006) makes clear, a radical overhaul of the culture of state agencies so that they are focused on – and driven by – the needs of their clients is required. Alas, the will and vision to undertake meaningful reform is largely absent.

Whither the facilitator

As Ellis said, because we are human, we are flawed (1997). It is inevitable that our organisations should also be flawed, but sometimes it can be hard to understand why they are often *so* flawed. It can be dispiriting to view the width and scale of it all, but ultimately we can only be responsible for what we control (Glasser, 1998). What is it we control, what are the things we can do right – where is it worth putting in our effort and attention? It is in our own interests to do the best work we can in spite of all. We must look to our integrity. As Frankl said, regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in, we can always choose our attitude (1959).

Working with marginalised clients in groups is a challenging and fulfilling occupation. It is a vocation, a mission. Working with funders and other stakeholders is as challenging: it is a means to an end. Often your work will not be understood. You will be pressured to produce unrealistic and sometimes irrelevant outputs that have more to do with a funder's wants than the needs of clients. You will be pressured to accept responsibility for things you cannot control.

It is not easy to navigate these waters and maintain a state of composure and even integrity. It may help to know that you are not alone in your frustration – many of those I know who are driven by idealism and a benign intent in working with others are frustrated by the endless and often meaningless and misleading box-ticking, or sense-defying KPIs they are obliged to comply with. However, we must continue the struggle for meaningfulness for the sake of those who need authentic, client-centred services and supports.

Feedback and evaluation

Popper's dictum that all we have is our current best thinking (1963) encourages us to keep testing what we believe we know and to see everything as improvable. Naturally, knowing how the programmes we run and how we ourselves impact on our groups offers an invaluable opportunity for growth. Growth and continual improvement are facilitated by good-quality feedback. However, eliciting quality feedback is complex and not straightforward.

There is no view from nowhere (Nagle, 1986). We are always biased observers, always seeing things through a lens (Marrone, cited in Ringer, 2002). No participant, or facilitator, is a wholly objective creature. The feedback we receive comes from a perception someone has of what they experience.

As none of us are wholly self-knowing creatures, sometimes people benefit from interventions in ways they do not fully realise (Yalom, 2005). Moreover, not everyone is generous – people can be stinting in their praise. On the other hand, some offer gushing praise where it is hardly merited. Some place the facilitator on a pedestal. Others demonise her. Transference works both ways.

The feedback I offer another says as much about me as it does about the recipient. It follows that the feedback I get from participants says as much about them as it does about me, or the programmes I run. Yet taken in the round and for all its limitations, feedback is a vital, if sometimes uncomfortable, source of learning. The challenge is to figure out how to

get good-quality feedback – and how to be resilient when it isn't all that we hoped for. In fact, what I often observe in groups is that, for many, the great challenge is accepting and integrating positive feedback.

What is the best feedback? Surely that which comes from a participant who is self-aware, fair, balanced and with an open, constructive outlook. How many of us are that way? Ideal feedback comes from an ideal participant. Facilitators might not be so needed if all participants were ideal!

Whither client centredness?

Much collection of feedback through evaluation sheets is done for reasons which elude me. At the end of a programme I delivered for the long-term unemployed, which was funded by an avowedly client-centred area partnership company, a representative of said company arrived unexpectedly on the last morning and requested I accommodate her by asking the group to fill in a feedback form. Envisaging at most a single sheet I (reluctantly) agreed, whereupon she produced a thick stack of documents – her questionnaire ran to nine pages!

Some members of the group would have had some literacy issues and were now being asked to fill in a small book! Moreover, it was a standardised feedback form, used to cover a broad range of programmes, many of them technical, with questions about equipment and other irrelevancies for a personal growth and career progression programme. There was no fit between the programme run and the evaluation document, nor any consideration given to developing a form that clients would be capable of responding to. Several of the questions were inevitably about how the participants perceived the facilitator and I was going to have to support them in answering. Some participants asked me to identify the best boxes to tick in order to enhance my prospects of future tenders!

It was clear that this evaluation document was produced to assuage a funding agency, rather than improve a programme to better meet the needs of the service users. On the last day of a programme that was aimed at facilitating the development and progression of its participants, said participants were deflated by their struggle in filling in a form. Moreover, some completed it before others, so the group togetherness was disrupted in the important final stages.

Power and the skewing of evaluation

Some time ago I attended a training day presented by a national training authority. There were close to a hundred participants. The entire three-and-a-half-hour session consisted of a PowerPoint presentation. At most,

10% of the session was relevant to me – this was the case for most in attendance.

Believing considerable time had passed and it was surely time for a break, I asked a fellow attendee the time. To my dismay, I was informed that only twenty-five minutes had elapsed. Never had time moved so slowly. The thought of a further three hours of slides was unendurable. Soon people on all sides began to groan. At the tea break, we acknowledged each other with the knowing look of grizzled survivors. Like any trauma, I struggle to recall the second half of the morning. From twenty minutes to go, my spirits began to rise giddily at the idea of my impending freedom. As the end approached, feedback sheets were distributed....

My first reaction was one of intense frustration: the ordeal had taken place in a stale, windowless chamber and the feedback sheets were impeding my release by another five minutes. Moreover, I was in a dilemma. I had found the session awful, but I could not find a way to say something as blunt as that – the trainers were human beings, how could I hurt them with the full extent of what I felt? I must also say that the host agency was in a position of considerable power vis-a-vis their audience and I can't deny the thought was on my mind as we were asked to sign the feedback sheets. Yet I was also angry that an authority, with responsibility for standards, and which had no qualms about passing judgement on others, should have bored me to a catatonic state. I looked around at my fellow participants to sneak a look at what they were doing. Most of them were ticking the excellent box the whole way down the page!

I found it deeply instructive. It is clear that filling in an evaluation sheet for a person or organisation in a comparative position of power invariably influences the outcome. I also feel that being a facilitator and trainer myself I can't help but take the feelings and the potential impact of my words on the evaluated into account. I am certain that the organisation in question received the most misleading feedback imaginable. Naturally they would see no reason to change their ways.

That time of day

More generally, when I participate on a programme I feel a wave of tediousness sweep over me when at the end of the day a feedback sheet is passed round. Invariably, those handing them out do so sheepishly. If I can escape without filling it in, I will do so. If I fill it in, I tend to express myself with more positivity than I feel. I have talked to groups about this and the response I receive is very much in line with my own – most people see feedback sheets as a nuisance and most people fill them in as quickly

and superficially as possible. If they see a way to leave the room without filling them in, they will do so. It raises the question: how much can be learnt from such reaction? Can it even be called evaluation? And if, as I believe, my views are broadly in line with most others, why is the same ineffective thing being done time after time?

In the moment

Much of facilitation is about being in and spontaneously responding to the moment. For me, the most effective evaluation of all is the constant monitoring of the group. Are people interested? Are they taking part? Are they tiring – is it time for physical movement? If they are slow to get involved – is it time to use small groups to encourage someone to talk? Are people clear about what I'm saying? A facilitator is always monitoring.

I am also seeking to pay attention to my own gut – seeking to feel how things are going. Rogers considered this the highest form of authority and I concur (1961). I recall going to a group feeling quite tired and drinking strong coffee for stimulation before commencing. At the end of the morning session, the group were very generous in their feedback, but I knew I had been jittery for the session, that I had not left enough space after questions and come in too fast and too often, that my listening was not up to the level I would have wanted. Other days I work very well but the group might be resistant and the engagement is unsuccessful. I need to be able to acknowledge to myself that I did a good job (if I did): we return to Glasser, we can only be responsible for what we can control (1998). If we have done our best and it hasn't worked, that's simply the case and we cannot lacerate ourselves for it, though we can reflect and learn.

Effective feedback

I generally find focus group evaluation more effective than questionnaires – though the presence of the facilitator invariably influences the feedback. On a number of occasions, participants have facilitated focus group evaluations on the programme I have delivered as a means of performing their practical assignment. In one such session, four sheets of paper were pinned to the wall. Participants were asked to walk around and write things they liked about the programme, things they were taking away that they would apply to their work, things they themselves contributed to the success of the group, and things they would either add/omit/modify on the programme. I found it very useful – there was an 'organic' opportunity to discuss and clarify each and any point. What it also revealed was that

some people wanted more of a topic that others wanted less of: participants could clearly see that *'one person's meat was another person's poison'*.

Learning journals are a highly effective way of gauging engagement and impact; they help participants reflect on their experience, integrate what they have learnt, and also allow the facilitator to see how engaged people are, if they are learning and what they might or might not find interesting and useful. Journals, maintained over a stretch of time, carry immeasurably greater weight than feedback sheets completed in a hurry. Of course, every piece of writing has an intended reader – someone keeping a reflective journal as a course requirement obviously knows that someone is going to grade their effort. Nonetheless, the best journals are those that engage with the programme and convey a sense of what it is to be a participant on it. This allows the facilitator an insight into the felt and reflective experience of the programme for the participant.

Giving feedback

When giving feedback to learners, I prefer to deliver it verbally. I like to observe the recipient to ensure there is clarity for them in what I am saying. I believe that most people feel vulnerable receiving feedback – I do myself. Giving feedback face to face allows me deliver it empathically. Some feedback is inevitably difficult for participants to hear: I think it is important that feedback is always well intentioned with the growth of the recipient the primary goal.

When I offer feedback to a participant, I like to point out their strengths and one or two areas for future growth, their 'growing edges'. I always check to see what the recipient has heard because invariably people have greater recall of what they see as negative. I think it is important to ensure that the learner has registered the affirming and constructive elements.

'Negative' feedback can be invaluable, but invariably touches on our vulnerabilities. We are wired to pay more attention to the negative (Gaffney, 2011), and it is important to temper any criticism we may have to offer: there's no value in people being hurt in the service of truth and honesty (Yalom, 2005), particularly in the more exposed arena of a group (Ringer, 2002). Seligman (2011) declares we need a 3:1 (not 3:0) ratio of positive to negative for well-being – it's a useful rule of thumb in offering feedback.

Receiving 'negative' feedback

Receiving negative feedback is not easy for most of us. If we can accept it as the person's view, examine it critically, take on board what is fair,

discount what isn't, then we can benefit greatly from it. It is our own reaction to what we perceive as negative that it important. It can thrust us into a vulnerable place, we can catastrophise to a disabling degree and lose confidence and perspective. Of course, our own reactions allow us an opportunity to learn more about ourselves.

The best antidote to vulnerability is to hold ourselves in high positive regard. I believe that for most of us that is the work of a lifetime. It is worth striving for.

Constructing evaluation forms

As mentioned, I find most of us are averse to filling in such forms at day's end. Fusion Training does use evaluation forms. On our certified training programmes, we ask people to return them with their written assignments some weeks after the end of their programme, giving them time to reflect and hopefully give us more considered feedback. Some do so, others fill them in perfunctorily, yet others do not fill them in at all. We also ask our students, as part of their course requirements, to produce reflective pieces on their experience of being in group.

We employ a mix of quantitative and qualitative questions. For the former – how much did you enjoy the training, how would you rate the facilitator, how would you rate the supporting documentation, etc.– we use scales. These are usually of a 1–4 nature as 1–5 scales leave a middle ground which is not of much use. Quantitative measures give you a broad picture on how something is perceived, a number: for example, the groups we run get over a 90% approval rating, the venue 80%, etc.

Qualitative questions help drill down into the experience a person has of the programme, into the more intangible but vitally important area of feelings – what elements did they most/least enjoy and why? We ask participants to name their own gains – 'what were the most important aspects of learning for you', 'in what ways has the programme affected your confidence', 'after completing the programme, do you feel differently about facilitating and how'.

We also want to know what participants feel they are taking with them and intend applying in their personal and professional lives. In human resources (HR) terms, this refers to the idea of return on investment.

It is a good idea to peruse a number of evaluation sheets before constructing your own and to try to keep the form as short as possible while capturing the key areas – how did the intervention impact, what did people learn/gain from it, how could the programme be improved, how would you rate the facilitator, what learning is being taken away to be applied

elsewhere? Obvious though it seems, we must bear in mind our overriding purpose – to see if the programme is working, is enjoyable, is meeting the needs of participants and how it can be improved.

Concluding evaluation

Eliciting genuinely useful feedback and evaluation is invaluable as it allows us an opportunity to integrate our strengths and grow and to address areas in need of improvement. Much of the best feedback I have received has occurred informally and organically – something strikes someone in the moment and they say it. Checking my email today, I received this comment from 'Margaret': "thank you again for an amazing course, I enjoyed every minute, feel I've really grown and I look forward to trying all the new ideas in my next group. I've never felt so involved before in a programme, I'm still on a high". That's lovely feedback, very affirming. I have to temper it by admitting that Margaret is one of life's great enthusiasts! This influences her outlook, but does not undermine it.

In reality, one needs to be alert for every opportunity to receive feedback and evaluation. It starts with ourselves. If a facilitator does all they can to work on their own development, if they have put effort into knowing themselves, then their own sense of how a session has gone is critical.

Finally, remember your purpose in evaluating. As Einstein put it: "Everything that can be counted does not necessarily count. Everything that counts cannot necessarily be counted".

CHAPTER 7

CASES

Possibilities

I meet group participants who feel they have wasted their lives, seeing long stretches of their past as gaping holes. There are myriad causes – addiction, prison, unemployment, living under the control of another. They frequently express the view they know little and have nothing much to say: it can sometimes seem they feel they are nothing. They struggle with self-loathing. They doubt their right to belong to the group. As they painstakingly develop self-acceptance and begin to engage more with others, they slowly begin to see that what they have to say is of interest to their peers. This presents a crisis of sorts as it challenges their self-belief – are they being simply humoured by their fellows, they ask themselves. Such moments of uncertainty are commonly followed by a retreat.

If they persist in attending the group it is because they have gotten a glimpse of the possibility of change, of a better life; reverting to their former state is no longer a desirable option. They have perhaps begun to sense the provenance of power and well-being – that its originations and its conferring come from within. Moreover, if they don't seek to embrace this power someone else may come and exercise it over them. To surrender the belief that they are interesting and worthwhile is to embrace the contrary belief that they are not, which is a regression many are unwilling to make.

Gaining self-knowledge and self-acceptance is critical to the process of recovery, empowerment and progression. In accepting themselves, participants come to acknowledge their right to a voice. Possessed of increased self-knowledge, they have material to give voice to – they have something to say. Moreover, they have an audience. As one former participant put it, "before, I would never start a conversation. Now you can't shut me up".

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For change comes dropping slow

It would scarcely be possible to be a facilitator unless one believed in participants' capacity to change and grow. Moreover, I could hardly sustain such a belief unless I experienced growth in myself. Thankfully I have seen many participants change profoundly. Sometimes this change has come quickly, other times – more often in fact, it is piecemeal, gradual and accumulative. Regrettably, other participants have not changed. There needs to be an engagement for change to occur; a willingness to depart from certain established patterns of behaviour. Simplistic as it sounds, a person has to change what they are doing in order to have different outcomes – the resistance to this simple truth can be profound (Grosz, 2014).

   People can only change themselves. Sometimes, initially, participants do not like this idea. Frankl's idea that we can always choose how we respond to our situation is a challenge as it confronts us with our essential autonomy (Frankl, 1959). It also removes the option of blaming others.

   As a facilitator I seek to establish an atmosphere that fosters change and growth. This is achievable only with the cooperation of group participants. It is also possible to create an atmosphere that strangles growth – criticism, envy, disrespect, sarcasm: in such a climate, participants will not risk, will not share. A group in any meaningful sense of the word cannot be developed in arid conditions. It is my experience, in concurrence with Rogers, that when certain conditions are present, and the participant is open and receptive, then growth and change can occur (Rogers, 1961).

I. Change moments

Having worked in groups for over fifteen years there are scores of clients who I have had the pleasure of witnessing transform themselves. And others, regrettably, who didn't. Here are some of their stories:

   Donal, a participant on an ex-prisoners' programme, had lived rough for much of the previous fifteen years. He suffered from multiple addictions. He had experienced many terms in prison, much of it for petty crime. He had never held a regular job and was unsure when he had left education. By his own report he had fathered at least eleven children, none of whom he had contact with. He had a pregnant new girlfriend whose profile was similar to his own. Donal had an air of difference, of belonging to a wilder time and place. When he commenced the programme (during a particularly cold February) he was living rough, behind a huge limestone church on the quays. I couldn't think of a colder or more desolate spot.

Donal was silent in the group for weeks, very shy and reluctant to speak, but watching everything intently. He came every day, mostly on time. As he slowly thawed, he would share snippets of his story. He gradually became part of the group. It was clear that even by the standards of chaos to which the other group members were accustomed to, they too saw Donal as different. Nonetheless they accepted him: they drew him into their humour and jokes, smoking together at the break.

I believe that the seven months of the programme was Donal's longest ever period of rootedness. As he emerged from his shell we heard of his vagabond life, never belonging, always outside. We heard of his pride at his prowess in begging, or that he was a skilful hurler in his youth. He began to receive and return respect. In Donal's case, change came slowly, without an apparent pivotal moment, more through an accretion.

Two interactions with him stand out. One day he came to the group literally blind drunk. I greeted him but he was unable to recognise me. With a snarl, he threatened to open my face and pulled out a metal object. I stepped back in alarm but when I looked at the object I saw he was holding a bottle opener. I found it hard not to laugh at the unintended humour of his threat to open my face with an 'opener', but thankfully I didn't. I sought to soothe him as best I could: he suddenly realised who I was and became abject with apology. We brought him to a mattress and he slept for a few hours.

On awakening one of the group members told him he had threatened me and the apologies resumed. It was evident to me he hadn't known who I was and that he had threatened me out of fear. Again I sought to soothe and reassure him. I could see that he held me in regard and he was horrified at the idea of the threat. It was also clear the group really meant something to him. He expected to be expelled, which was the last thing on my mind. I asked if he was in danger to be carrying a weapon – he replied that he was feeling threatened on the street. I asked if he received help from the support workers in the building would he consider coming off the street as we'd be upset if anything happened to him. As a favour to us and out of remorse for the unintended threat he agreed to move into sheltered accommodation. On this occasion I found it easy to accommodate myself to the discomfort of my manipulation!

Also of note in this incident was the reaction of the other group members. Though their lives were frequently punctuated by violence, they were disturbed that I had been threatened. It was clear that in their eyes a serious transgression had been committed – they viewed the incident in a different light to me. Moreover, they were more ambivalent at the notion of mercy and second chances. It took time for Donal to regain his former position of

regard with some members. Long after the event they referred to it as one of the most significant episodes of our considerable time together.

On another occasion near the end of the programme Donal told me about his grandmother. It emerged his parents had abandoned him in infancy. She had taken him in and given him her best. He spoke of her greatness as a human being. She had done everything right by him. I said that she sounded a rare and wonderful person – she was unique he told me. The way he lived now was letting her down, he said tearfully. What would she want for you, I asked[15]? A vision emerged of a good and untroubled life, responsible, productive, a stable home with his kids and a car he would keep in immaculate condition. 'Sounds good Donal,' I said. 'Sounds very good,' said Donal.

I last saw Donal five years after his group ended. By then a number of his peers on that group had died through violence, drugs and all-round deprivation. Donal looked a bit more weathered but he strode along with purpose: the eye was drawn to him; he still carried that wild air about him. It looked to me as if he were living rough. I didn't attract his notice, I let him pass. I don't know if he had moved any closer to his vision. Given the terrible rate of attrition among those who shared his lifestyle I was surprised to see him striding along: and yet I wasn't. He is one of life's great survivors.

'Patrick'

My first interactions with Patrick did not bode well. A few minutes after the facilitation training group had started, he bluntly told me that all I had said up to that point struck him as *'airy fairy nonsense'* and was of no use to him in his role as a peer group facilitator. Stirred by his lead, others joined the fray and raised a host of grievances.

I felt it better that the grievances be given space and aired. I have noticed before how a wave of ire can sweep through a group. It isn't a good idea to seek to suppress it as this breeds resentment and distrust. The first few grievances may be serious, but the wave also washes up flotsam of lesser gravity. As the group reached this point, other group members who had remained silent until then cajoled the group to pull together and give the programme a try, pointing out I was an inappropriate target for their annoyance. It is a dynamic I have witnessed enough to nearly expect it: the group airs an issue, vents a few other (often unrelated) concerns, grows weary of the activity, decides to right itself and proceed – accepting the facilitator in the process.

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[15] This was a question I had just come across in Victor Frankl's *Man's search for meaning*.

We set about clarifying my role, their expectations and mine; we separated their grievances with their organisation from the proposed programme and progressed with the work. By lunchtime the group was a tightly knit and hard-working unit; it was quite a transformation, but not untypical.

Patrick very quickly showed himself to have a penetrating intelligence. He responded with enthusiasm to theoretical inputs about responsibility, control and the Jungian idea of the Persona. He absorbed and integrated the material and came forward with ideas for how it could be utilised to advantage in the peer groups he and his fellow participants were being trained to facilitate. His engagement with these ideas helped make them more accessible to his fellow participants.

However, just as striking as his quick intelligence was his level of self disparagement. Upon demonstrating deep understanding of a concept he invariably concluded his observations with phrases such as "I'm just guessing: what could someone as thick as me know about it".

His colleagues began to comment on his insightfulness. However, he would immediately deflect or diminish the recognition. After another insightful contribution, before Patrick had the opportunity to run down his effort I asked the group what they saw him bring. They revealed their deep admiration of his ability to grasp ideas and relate it to the groups he worked in. They felt sure that this ability would bring great benefits to their client group. Patrick listened and was clearly moved. He brushed away a tear and then started on his customary deflection. He began to tell the group members that he wasn't as good as they thought, he was 'always fairly thick', that only for their help he wouldn't be able to... I asked him to halt and asked the group what it was like to offer Patrick feedback.

They spoke of the sadness they felt that he couldn't accept their heartfelt comments, though they could identify with the urge to run from praise. But they felt Patrick was particularly vehement in putting himself down and it was a pity as he was such a warm and generous man. At which point Patrick spluttered in disbelief proclaiming "you don't know me, I'm a right bastard". I stepped in to cut off a pantomime chorus of 'oh yes I am' and 'oh no you're not' and asked Patrick what he had heard people say of him. After an effort he listed the compliments directed his way. I then asked him to relate how people felt he reacted to heartfelt compliments. Amid many attempted digressions and jokes Patrick relayed to the group's satisfaction what they felt was his response to compliments.

A solemn silence descended on the group, one of those pregnant, charged moments. Then Patrick began to speak. "All my life I've lived behind a front because I didn't know who I was. I put up a shell to keep

people out. I could let it down a bit with my wife and kids but to all others I put out this dog rough 'f*** you' image. I grew up in chaotic, alcoholic violence in a fractured family and all I could do was act in whatever way that kept me safe. I ended up being passed from family to family, some of them nice. But I've never known who I am and now I'm starting to learn in this group and I'm delighted but also terrified".

From the confusion about his identity to the fact he suffered from a range of disabling illnesses, to his self-depreciation, Patrick portrayed all the signs of an adult survivor of chronic childhood trauma (Herman, 2001). As I looked around the group I saw eyes glistening with tears as his fellow members looked at him with love, acceptance and appreciation. They began to speak of their regard for him, their joy he had allowed them to really see him and their gratitude for his courage.

What I found funny, and I had to share it, was that for all his bluster and hard man theatrics, Patrick was so clearly and transparently one of the warmest people I had ever met: his real self easily visible beneath a persona that had grown threadbare. Everyone had known this bar Patrick.

Some months after the group had ended I was in contact with Patrick. He informed me he had spent the intervening months working on the issues that had arisen in the course of the group. It had been a difficult summer for him, but he felt he was emerging from his trials: he was 'becoming' his true self.

Janet was twenty-four. On the first day in a facilitation training group Janet sat directly opposite me. She wore dark, heavily rimmed glasses, her hair was pulled back in a tight bun and she was swathed in a dark shawl. She watched me all day with an unbroken, impassive stare. In the introductory round she informed us she had not long finished her Masters and worked in the field of addiction counselling. Her father was a highly regarded figure in the field. Her colleagues at work were very interested in the fact she was doing a facilitation course and if it went well it might lead to several of them doing the course as well.

I found Janet's presence unsettling on that first day. She was half my age but I felt as if a school inspector was sitting there watching me. She gave very little of herself away and her technical knowledge and vocabulary intimidated others. I caught myself going faster than I intended to on a few occasions – a sure sign of anxiety for me. As the day progressed I was aware I was feeling like I had to prove myself. I struggled to keep myself grounded.

I left after the first day feeling dissatisfied that I had been so thrown. I didn't have supervision scheduled but I used the techniques my supervisor would normally employ. In my mind's eye I looked at Janet as if she were

sitting in a chair opposite me. I saw a young person dressed old, adopting an expression of judgement and censure. 'I am not going to be impressed' it said. I imagined sitting in her chair and immediately I felt a fear of judgement, of being found out. I started feeling empathy for Janet – she was putting on a big front, a front too big for her youth and experience: she was presenting as someone she wasn't.

The next training day I was in the building early, getting the room ready. I was easier about working with Janet, but still had a few flutters. I reminded myself that she was one member of the group and that I had spent more time thinking about her than the entire group put together. After chiding myself, I went straight back to thinking about her again!

The doorbell rang. I opened it and a young woman fell into the hall-way – she had been leaning against the door, expecting to be buzzed in. It was Janet, though I barely recognised her. Her hair was down, she had no glasses on, was dressed as a young person would and – she confessed bashfully – she was a 'little bit' hung-over. I welcomed her; I felt pleased to meet her.

Later that day, as cohesion in the group continued to grow, Janet spoke of how at her work place she perceived an attitude towards her that she owed her advancement more to her father's than her own success. This stung because she had worked hard in order to earn her position. Moreover, as the bulk of her clients and colleagues were older than her, she felt that she encountered an attitude of 'what would you know little rich girl' from both groups. Far from being advantaged by her parentage, she suffered for it. She felt she was constantly 'monitored' and under unceasing pressure to perform. Moreover, she had a persistent fear of falling short. I marvelled at how her description of her inner world mirrored so closely what I had felt the week before. She talked of the armour she felt she needed to don when she entered the workplace – she felt she needed to look older, serious, and authoritative. She chose her glasses and dress with a view to conveying gravitas.

I told her I hardly recognised her at the door without her disguise. Other group members spoke of how they felt they were really seeing her at that moment and how good it was to meet her. Janet spoke of how she had come to the group to learn skills and theory but she had found a place where she could literally let her hair down, unmask and be herself. Having done so, she felt free and more whole. She did not want to don her disguise again. She had decided to enter her work place as she was, to trust that things would work out: she was putting too much effort into the creation of an image and she feared it would harm her capacity to connect with clients. As she spoke, Jung's ideas on the persona came to mind, how we can

over-identify with this surface construct and lose connection to our real self. When that occurs, it's all about the impression made – until there's nothing left behind the mask. Wise to the danger, Janet avoided such a course. She threw herself wholeheartedly into the rest of the programme as herself, much to the group's benefit and her own. And mine – I reverted to my normal speed, with stuff to chew on!

Seamus was thirty years old. Between youth and adult institutions, he had spent fifteen years in prison. His longest spell of freedom was a few months' duration. On the inside Seamus had devoted himself to body-building and had a powerful physique – he told of how he used to trade his dessert for chicken in order to boost his protein intake. He was one of the most charming and affable participants I had ever encountered. His life was full of dramatic stories – he told how he had been shot in the arm once, an attempted execution he had escaped from due to a gun jamming. He ran from his captors as they sought to un-jam the weapon. As he ran they fired and he was wounded in the arm. I was attempting to listen empathically while filing his story in the tall tales section until he showed the wound – I had never seen a bullet wound before, but the scar on his arm fitted the bill to such a degree I believed the story. On another occasion I handed him a cheque – a small payment was issued to participants. He looked at it and shook his head – he couldn't go into that bank, the last time he had entered it he had been carrying a shotgun and received seven years as a result.

Seamus reported that he had stopped going to school aged eight. The rest of his family were in stable employment and had never been in trouble. He reported these elements of himself as curiosities – he was as curious about this as anyone else, as if he had no say in how events turned out. Things just happened. Often when we began to make progress with the group Seamus would tell a story taking us off on a humorous or surreal diversion – he was masterful at deflecting.

My initial view of Seamus was that he was incorrigible and would be hard to progress. The wider world was an alien and little understood place to a man who had spent much of his teens and practically all his adult life locked up. He had several defences as to why career progression could not happen for him. For a start, 'all the foreigners' had taken all the jobs – they hadn't of course taken any off of him as he had never had one. Moreover, he was an addict. Again, this was announced as something he had no influence over at all. It was an illness – out of his hands.

"Anyway", he declared, "I'm an ordinary, decent criminal", stating it as breezily as another might reveal their profession as housepainter, with the implication he already had a trade, and didn't need to go looking for another. He had "only ever robbed companies and never hurt ordinary

people, not like some of the scumbags out there". This was how he would usually deflect the group into an arid cul-de-sac; he would tell of some awful criminal act someone had committed and bemoan the decaying state of standards in the criminal fraternity. Of course, other group members would seek to top that and the detour for the day would be achieved.

On one particular day I asked Seamus what he felt it would be like to have been an 'ordinary decent worker' or some innocent collecting their welfare cheque when confronted by a guy in a balaclava, armed with a shotgun. A bit to my surprise, the question stopped him dead in his tracks. I had pitched my question to deliberately personalise it – as long as the bank was an institution, or the bank tellers labelled as bankers, then he could play the part of Robin Hood. I had challengingly used phrases like 'decent workers'. "I wonder", I asked him, "how long would it take them to get over the fright – would they ever"? The rest of the group were muttering mutinously – they weren't pleased with the direction this was going, but Seamus was genuinely struck dumb.

A few sessions afterwards, when we were talking about expectations, Seamus breezily announced that he wouldn't get out of bed for a job unless it paid €1,200 a week into the hand after tax. Other group members nodded in agreement. I explained to Seamus that my co-facilitator and I didn't earn that between us. While other group members began to blame foreigners for undermining pay rates and taking jobs, Seamus stayed silent – it was clear he was thinking quite hard.

Two weeks later Seamus informed the group that he had managed to get his hands on a strimming machine and a lawnmower. He had called to the houses in his neighbourhood and offered to cut the grass. At first he had priced himself too high and was roundly derided for his brass neck. He began to negotiate downwards and was soon inundated with work.

Another group member asked to go into partnership with him – Seamus agreed, but dropped 'Bill' the minute he became unreliable. As the level of work began to decrease with the change of season, Seamus secured a job in construction, then a booming industry.

A few weeks after starting full-time employment, Seamus returned to the group to thank everyone for their support. He looked wonderful – fit, strong, proud, whole. He stood as if he had a right to *be:* a lot of ex-prisoners present furtively, alert to constant threat. I felt joy looking at him. Seamus being Seamus he had a speech he needed to make. He told the group how happy he was. He was enjoying the longest spell he had ever had out of prison. He said that he had had a wake-up call and he had heeded it. He had a home, a job and a family. When he entered the group it was a bit of a laugh to him, but he felt the facilitators were

decent, though he didn't always 'get' them. He liked the group members too, so he began to enjoy coming. He didn't think anything would come of it, but something began to change, he wanted something different and he slowly began to believe he could have it. If he could have it, anyone could. "They say a leopard doesn't change his spots, but I've changed mine one at a time. You can too". With his natural raconteur's sense of timing he said no more, turned and shook hands with everyone and left.

A year later I heard that Seamus was still with the same firm – he had been entered on their pension scheme and become a key-holder to their warehouse: a trusted man.

'Ann': my little group

Ann was a mature participant on a facilitation training group. Her behaviour was most interesting, veering from openness and generosity one minute, to barbed comments the next, digs that were so subtle they would not resonate until some time after they had been thrown. Once I noticed, I began listening closely to Ann's speech and found it littered with self-depreciating comments. There were references to 'my little job', 'my little groups' and so on.

Confidence in others annoyed her. If someone expressed the view they were skilled at something, Ann might say "isn't it great in this day and age to hear someone talking that way, full of pride; I'd never be able to be like that. I suppose it's great really. In my day we were taught to hide our light under a bushel. If I said that I know it would sound arrogant. People would say I'm fooling myself". Her tone would suggest she not only thought the speaker vain but delusional as well. She was masterly at damning by faint praise.

Ann was a schemer and would seek out my co-facilitator at break time and make comments that lauded the efforts of those who had paid for the programme themselves – 'they were really trying hardest in the group'. This was a scarcely veiled criticism of those she felt were funded to do the programme (naturally, all of these details were speculation on her part).

After one intervention where she mentioned her little job and little groups again, I asked Ann to notice her use of this word. In exploration, she began to see that she was running down her own efforts. She recalled that she had been severely criticised all through childhood at home and cruelly mocked in school for being overweight. She realised she had always suffered from poor self-image. Consequently, Ann had integrated some very negative messages about herself. It caused her to be envious and resentful, caustic towards others, but herself most of all. In the next session Ann confirmed that she had not been looking at her groups as important. She

realised that deep down she held the view that if she was running it, how important could it be?

By gaining an insight into her inner dynamic in one arena, Ann was able to be different in another. She revealed that she was returning to psychotherapy to look at the issues she had been repressing, as being in the group helped her realise that her unresolved matters were affecting her efficacy in working with others. It is hard, she declared, to give to others, what you cannot give to yourself. It also transpired she was experiencing bullying at work – an authority figure was undermining her in a way that resonated with a figure in her childhood. The subtle, cutting comments directed her way were having a catastrophic effect on her sense of self-worth. She announced on the final day of the programme that she was leaving her workplace and had commenced looking for new employment. She was nervously excited, liberated and unburdened.

II. Women's empowerment group

This section reports participant perception of the impact of a year-long empowerment group they attended. The group consisted of ten women, ranging in age from 25 to 62 which met one morning a week. In the next-to-last meeting the members were asked to write a reflection on their experience and return it in the final session. Three reports were randomly selected and analysed closely in an attempt to gauge the effect of the intervention.

The process of empowerment

While each respondent portrays an individual process that leads to their own empowerment, there is a lot of common ground evident in their accounts. Initially they see the group providing them with a safe haven where they could go and simply be. As the group gained greater cohesion, the open atmosphere encouraged participants to share and to listen to each other. This, in turn, led to a sense of validation, of being heard and accepted. Acceptance by others facilitated participants to begin accepting themselves.

Over time, participants began to learn from each other and from group activities. Growing in awareness of their traits and characteristics, they develop increased self-knowledge. Gradually, they become adept at giving voice to their thoughts and feelings. They begin to acquire the ability to speak in their own voice. Knowledge and power have been described as synonymous (Foucault, 1978). In this case, self-knowledge resulted in a growth in self-power. Self-knowledge is predicated on the presence of self-acceptance, which rests in turn on acceptance by others.

Participants cannot initially give voice to their feelings because they do not possess the words to do so. Through relationship with fellow group members, they gain a level of self-understanding and vocabulary that facilitates them to tell their story. Their acquisition of knowledge helps them articulate their feelings.

Being received by the group and learning to feel comfortable within it was one step in the process of empowerment. Another common element is that participants trace the root of their loss of autonomy. Respondents' texts have a 'then and now' structure, which contrasts how they were at their most disempowered with how they are at the end of the programme.

This structure serves a number of purposes. First of all, it seemed necessary for each respondent to pinpoint the block to their development, be it in the past or present. They seemed to feel the need to explain to themselves how they got to be where they were, including their own role in it. It provided them with an explanation for their present state that they could comprehend, as well as a starting point from which they could begin to grow.

Secondly, accepting their role in their own disempowerment was an important step because it highlighted behaviours that were detrimental to their well-being, and, as a result, brought the solution within their control – they could change their behaviour. Thirdly, by having a starting point, respondents had a fixed position with which to gauge how far they had come. The structure fulfilled the functioned of a feedback loop in their process and in employing it the respondents show themselves as having the confidence and competence to perform a self-evaluation.

Gilbert and Beidler (2001) have shown that owning a problem and taking responsibility for behaviours that give life to or sustain the problem can be empowering, as it allows the participant to consider the outcomes of changing (or not changing) the behaviour.

At the commencement of the programme the respondents did not have supportive significant others to help them in their development. As a result, the group served as an instrument to meet this need. One respondent, Christa, is able to modify her home environment to such an extent that she enters into a satisfying and supportive relationship with her husband. As a consequence, she makes least reference to the group. Kay, by contrast, reaches her lowest ebb during the life of the group and it seems to have been her primary support as she works through her crisis, thus it figures most prominently in her text. While the group played an important role in the empowerment of the participants, the extent of its role seems regulated by the level of support they have outside of it. Whatever the source, all participants acknowledge the role of helpful people in their

journeys. The process of empowerment is facilitated by the support of third parties.

The respondents had many common needs that were met by the group. All felt they were listened to. It is noteworthy that the group also appeared to meet individual needs. For Kay who came to the group in crisis, the group was a safe, caring place, where initially she could simply be. Christa, who had hidden her feelings all her life to the extent she could not recognise them, was taken by the openness and honesty of the group. Nora, engaged in an arduous rebuilding of herself, needed to be valued for her new self. She needed a place where she could experiment with acting out of character – or perhaps, acting in new character.

All respondents had experienced silencing, not being heard and being denied the right to voice their story. They examined their own role in this process and took responsibility for reversing it. They accepted their right to have a voice, and that the task of recovering it was theirs. While obtaining support in their quest, the work undertaken and accomplished was their own achievement.

The nature of empowerment

The data generated by the group participants suggests that self-awareness is a manifestation of empowerment. It is notable that respondents are able to acknowledge both strengths and weaknesses. They are able to own the strengths in a straightforward way, without shyness or embarrassment, which serves to authenticate the validity of their claims. Christa informs us that her communication skills have improved a lot, that she's a much better listener. The narrator is not claiming perfection in these skills: she is claiming improvement. Moreover, she provides considerable evidence to support her claim, such as her newly acquired ability to initiate and participate in conversations.

The respondents also portray the ability to signal areas they are weak in. Nora describes herself as having always been shy, quiet and not very sure of herself, and that she had difficulty owning her own opinions. Such 'weaknesses' are reported in a non-deprecating manner, and her ability to name them and trace the impact they have had on her life becomes a significant strength for Nora, as it provides her with an insight as to how her behaviour has curtailed her possibilities. Identifying and becoming aware of her harmful behaviour guides the work of growth. We see her experimenting with new behaviour – taking risks, acting on impulse – and finding it exhilarating and empowering. All participants show clear signs of having more choice and control over their behaviour, giving them greater choice and autonomy.

For all respondents control is a critical aspect of empowerment. In the initial stages respondents felt control of their lives lay largely outside of them. This was manifested in their silence. All respondents avoided expressing opinions and Christa and Nora explicitly state that they largely took their views from others, believing others knew better than they did. In short, they did not speak in their own voices, and often did not speak at all. Control and the use of authentic voice are intimately linked in this data. In recognising they have been silenced, and that this has been detrimental to their lives, respondents also achieve awareness that they did not control their own lives. In order to speak in their own voices, the respondents have to come to a stage where they feel they have something of interest to say, and a right to say it. As they embrace themselves and grow in appreciation of their needs, they begin to assert themselves and give voice, inside and outside the group. They move from having no views, to (implicitly) perceiving themselves to be interesting.

In reaching the stage where respondents feel they have a right to a voice, they come to realise that being controlled by another is not in their interest and is stultifying of their development. As a result, all respondents are adamant that what they have recovered will not be taken from them. With real intent, they inform us that they will defend their right to a voice. Christa tells us, "you can't shut me up". Kay informs us that she "will never go back" to where she was. Nora is determined to "stick to my guns" and have her voice heard, regardless of how others perceive her. All the women know the price of freedom and are willing to pay it because they are aware of the cost of being without it. The force of the respondents' resolve in keeping what was hard won is one of the more striking aspects of the data. These women, who previously could not develop and own opinions, are now resolved to resolutely defend their right to express their views.

The understanding that the respondents have acquired regarding the nature of power underpins any claims made regarding their empowerment. There is a clear awareness that if they do not take power for themselves, the resulting 'vacuum' can be filled by another. Kay informs us of her prior tendency to do herself down and, as a consequence, she never stood up for herself, making it easy for others to control her. Christa realises she gave authority to individuals and allowed them to control her behaviour all her life. Nora, unaware she had power, surrendered it easily. She informs us, pithily, that taking it back is not so simple.

Nonetheless, implicit in their descriptions of their earlier selves is the fact that they have recovered such power. The women have recovered their power by reaching an understanding of the provenance of autonomy: that it is conferred from within. Christa has learnt to think for herself, and

trusts her own judgement and intelligence. She has developed her own ideas of her worth and her place. Kay has come to appreciate herself and is kinder to her self – she can think clearly and is confident that she has the ability to handle life's vicissitudes. Nora is much more in command of the situation and herself, because she has given herself the gift of the freedom to be who she is, regardless of criticism, censure and disapproval. She gives herself permission to dance.

Becoming empowered has had a profound impact on these women and they seek out dramatic metaphors in an attempt to capture the significance of the change. Nora likens her experience to a rebirth. This process began a number of years before she entered the programme, but accelerated while on it. Kay picks up on and borrows Nora's image of rebirth: the change she sees in herself is 'wonderful', 'a great feeling'. She is a different person – underlining the notion of being born again. Christa likens her experience to growing up, as if she were a child up to the point of joining the group and incapable of agency. On reaching adulthood, she has acquired the maturity to manage her life. In all cases, the profundity of change experienced requires transformative, metamorphic imagery.

In the course of becoming empowered, there is clear evidence that the respondents engage in a re-examination and re-adjustment of their role. We encounter Kay as she is going through a difficult separation. Her role as a housewife is ending and she is unsure and unfocused. It is reminiscent of Nora's reaction when she hit rock bottom: she did not know who she was, or where she was going. Christa suffers clear role discomfort, as she is racked with feelings of guilt and insufficiency. In each text the respondent changes: they make adjustments and re-arrangements. Christa undertakes this task in concert with her partner. Nora instigates change in the face of criticism and opposition, but continues undaunted. Kay has to chart her new course independently of others, and does so. The respondents have a new-found ability to carve out a role in life, one that is driven by their needs and not imposed on them against their will. The respondents are in a position to validate and approve their own life choices.

As a result of having more control over their present and future lives, the respondents experience a decrease in fear and anxiety. This is evidenced in the fact that all respondents have goals and hopes for the future: all of them wish to continue learning and working on their own development. Nora had been fearful of looking at the future for a long time, to the extent that thinking about it induced panic attacks. Now she is stronger, more positive and has faith in herself to tackle whatever life throws in her path. Christa can contemplate returning to the scene with which she commences her story – a job interview – which had symbolised her perceived inability to

treat with the world. She is nervous at the thought, but not daunted, and is confident of success in a number of planned ventures. Kay simply informs us that she intends to move on. It is a significant sign of development that they can contemplate and plan for the future, as the starting point for these women was that they looked to the future with such trepidation.

III. Working with long-term unemployed groups

Heart of darkness

Unemployment is one of the most undermining life episodes a person can experience. The findings of the University College Dublin (UCD) Geary Institute *Report in to the effects of unemployment* (Delaney, 2011) confirm that the consequences are broad-ranging and almost universally negative. The report drew its findings from a range of focus groups conducted with unemployed people. Fusion Training has also conducted focus groups with a range of long-term unemployed (LTU) groups and the following is a synopsis of participants' testimony intermeshed with the findings of Delaney's report:

- The longer unemployment lasts, the more damaging it becomes to the person's self-image
- Unemployment erodes the very skills a person needs to escape it
- It extinguishes an established routine, inducing a sense of general aimlessness
- It reduces the person's opportunity to apply skills, knowledge and experience
- It shrinks the opportunity for achievement, challenge and satisfaction
- People suffering unemployment frequently feel their existence is purposeless
- It sharply reduces income, creating a life of constant financial stress, anxiety and poverty

Many respondents report that once they adjust to the initial slump in income, they can survive on welfare in the short term. However, they begin to become undone by the occasional life events like Christmas, weddings, communions and confirmations, birthdays etc., or with infrequent pur-chases like shoes and coats, or bigger than expected utility bills. Resources are dipped into and inexorably depleted; stress and anxiety rise and rarely decline.

Some participants speak of wearing coats over several jumpers in the home to cut down on heating costs, or going to the library or churches to

stay warm. They report that one of the key challenges is simply getting up each day, as they feel there is nothing to anticipate. They also recount:

- A progressive drop in self-confidence and self-esteem: a feeling of being 'worth less'
- A decrease in energy, motivation and general well-being
- A sense that they are failing and that life is passing them by
- A feeling that they are too old, that employers will overlook them
- A fear that their skills and knowledge have atrophied and are not recoverable
- A loss of hope, a belief unemployment will last the rest of their working lives
- A drop in resilience
- Fear of getting a job and finding they are no longer competent

The question people report dreading the most in social interaction is 'what do you do'. They feel they have no answer to give that does not diminish them. The stigma they feel means:

- Unemployment leads to progressive withdrawal, isolation and a sense of shame
- A feeling that there is a tiered society and they are at the bottom
- They feel judged by others for their predicament as if it were a failing on their part
- A self-consciousness about being seen in public during working hours
- Spending on anything that isn't a necessity induces guilt

Many spoke of a strong desire to avoid social gatherings lest they be seen as the 'poor relation', not having the 'right clothes', or fearful of being caught up in buying rounds. One participant spoke of avoiding meetings of the school board of management, of which she had been an enthusiastic member, lest someone suggest going for coffee afterwards: as a parent, spending two euro on herself felt a betrayal of her children.

Through decreased activity and interaction, people feel they have less to talk about and become more boring – they have no news. McLeod opines that people speak when they believe what they have to say is of interest (1997). People who think they are boring avoid interaction, exacerbating both their isolation and their underlying belief of being uninteresting: when people feel inferior, "they lose a sense of place in the community" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 109).

Participants have also reported feeling a disconnection between the effort they put in and the outcomes they achieve. Whether they get out of bed or not they get the same payment. If they try hard to find work they get no extra income; in fact, they spend more on postage, phones, clothes for interviews etc. They send out streams of applications but don't receive a response: job seekers label this particularly demoralising. They liken unemployment to a feeling that outside forces are controlling their lives. In short, their experience induces a sense of external locus of control. They feel reduced to being onlookers of life. They feel marooned.

Limbo

Humans "have always abhorred uncertainty" (Yalom, 2005: 10). Perhaps the most difficult aspect of unemployment is the interminable and uncertain nature of the experience. An unemployed person does not get a 'release date'. For victims of chronic trauma, interminability is seen as the most harrowing element – the idea that the experience might last forever makes it difficult to nurture and sustain hope (Herman, 1992). The Nazis utilised open ended imprisonment of their opponents to psychologically shatter them (Rees, 2005, 2012). Concentration camp survivors Victor Frankl (1959) and Primo Levi (1987) both refer to the aimless drift of unemployment as being particularly pernicious towards well-being, drawing parallels with some aspects of their horrendous experiences.

Needs analysis

Being aware of the effects of unemployment allows us to conduct a preliminary needs analysis. Addressing and countering the debilitating effects of the experience must be a priority in any meaningful intervention. Simply doing CV and interview skills with participants who have lost their voice and self-belief merely addresses surface level needs and can be counterproductive.

A needs analysis can be deepened by considering what it would be like for an unemployed person to enter a new group. After some group cohesion is established, I have asked LTU participants how it was to come to group on the first day. They reported feeling:

- Exposed and painfully visible after a period of isolation
- Outside their comfort zone – facing something unknown, including unknown people
- Fearful of the 'authority figure' (the facilitator). What's his relationship to state agencies?

- Put upon: some felt compelled to attend with an implied threat to the security of their welfare payment
- Resentful and angry – why were they sent here and what were they being sent to?
- Resignation and defeat – forced to do something that if similar to previous training experiences would not enhance their prospects and might put them out of pocket
- Childlike – not in control of their actions/lives (for those who felt they were sent)
- Apprehensive of being asked questions or made do things beyond their ability
- Futility – they were too old for learning

In fact, in the aftermath of the group, participants have revealed that they understated their initial answers and that they often felt self-loathing entering the group. For some, coming to the group heightened their perception that they were failures. In spite of having reached a certain stage of life, someone could send them to a group they wouldn't have chosen for themselves, as if they were children. One commented "I took being sent here as proof I had made a shit of my life". Others saw themselves as being "made to perform for our dole", that the state wanted to humiliate them: they felt they were picked on, singled out, forced to go through a charade of job-hunting when (they felt) there were few jobs available. Understandably, they therefore arrived feeling opposition and antagonism to the programme, looking to find fault, determined not to participate. I can confirm that the first days of these groups are sometimes quite challenging and the fault finding is usually directed at the facilitator!

Intriguingly, some reported feeling envy – envy of peers or siblings who they perceived to be doing well. While they are seated in an unemployment group – initially a group of failure in their eyes – others they know are in the workplace, earning, engaging in tasks, using skills, being needed for their abilities and so on. They (shamefacedly) admitted that they sometimes wished the object of their envy a dose of ill-fortune so they would see how others lived and not be so oblivious and 'high and mighty'. Some reported feeling envious of the facilitator as they interpreted facilitation as merely sitting around in a circle chatting and being paid for it.

If we settle for labelling the above 'negative' feelings it is important to state that 'positive' feelings and thoughts also surface: moreover, some people were ambivalent, holding positive and negative feelings concurrently. The 'positives' were

- Hope! Something might come from this
- Purpose – something to do, to get out of bed for, a break from the house
- An opportunity to learn something new
- The chance to meet new people and have a social outlet
- The establishment of a routine, a schedule

I have generally found that the hopeful side is considerably more muted in the early stages. But it is important to give it space and attention. I find that the more optimistic participants engage more fully and provide vitality and momentum to the group in the initial stages.

Knowing what it is like for someone to enter a group we are facilitating is critical information. It is the foundation of our response; it informs our aim and objectives, and how we present ourselves in the first moments of contact.

Meeting the presenting needs

Someone facilitating a group that aims for the progression of LTU participants obviously has to focus on building certain skills and getting across information about opportunities and so forth. Clearly however the state of mind of those entering the group must be the starting point of the intervention. The initial needs of the group can be drawn from the knowledge of how it is for people to enter, how they feel about themselves and the place they find themselves in, as well as understanding the effects of unemployment. For an experienced facilitator, anticipating the group's initial needs does not constitute overriding or controlling the group, once we are alive to the fact it is a preliminary position and likely to evolve (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004).

Fearful, anxious and demoralised people need security, warmth, reassurance – a secure base (Bowlby, 1988). They need to see that the leader is able and willing to step up to the demands of her role (Ringer, 2002). They will want a sense of structure and to feel safe. An insecure leader would likely raise insecurity and doubt (Yalom, 2005). A silent or non-directive leader would exacerbate anxiety (Ringer, 2002). They are most likely wounded in their dignity and need to be met with compassion (Rogers, 1961). Rogers declared that "when we are prized we blossom" (1980: 23). We must seek to convey all of this without being fussy and overwhelming.

The establishment of hope is critical (de Shazar, 1988), but speaking too much of hope in the early stages is likely to be counterproductive. Someone in a depressive state will likely struggle to believe in their potential. They will therefore think they are being patronised, at the cost of the facilitator's credibility.

What do I want?

On the first day of an unemployment group I want to achieve several things. I hope that people leave feeling that the day was worthwhile; that it was interesting; that it looks promising and worth returning for more; that it could bring change: that the facilitator is, to use Frankl's term (1959), 'decent' and appears to know their business.

I want to come across as a clear, strong and organised person. I seek to be encouraging. I keep my questions safe; no deep probing, no undue riskiness in these initial stages. I want, if possible, to hear everybody's voice. This is hard for some, but even a few words are a positive contribution and a path to becoming part of the group. I want to foster safety – I allow space for questions, for dissent: at this stage I don't leave yawning silences for this would cause uncertainty and excessive discomfort.

I want to achieve a level of cohesion. This involves creating opportunities for people to talk to each other through pairs and possibly in small groups of three. As group leader I have considerable influence on the norms that are established (Yalom, 2005) and I want to embed from the beginning the practice of eliciting ideas and answers from the group. But in the initial days I also realise I will likely do a preponderance of the talking, until comfort levels rise.

The preliminary greetings are important. I want to be fully present, to look people in the eye, shake hands and genuinely extend a welcome. I want to embody reasonable hope and belief from the outset; it must be clear that I believe in the potential of the intervention (Yalom, 2005), that people can progress if they choose. We need to be able to tell people in our introduction that if they stick with the programme they will feel better and will likely get good outcomes. This is the simple truth.

I want and require a venue that supports all I am trying to convey in my person, words and actions. A venue conveys its own clear message (Gladwell, 2000).

Facilitator skills and qualities

Gerald Corey sets out in comprehensive detail the skills and qualities of a competent group leader in his *Theory & Practice of Group Counselling* (2000). Though he writes of counselling groups, many of the attributes he lists are necessary for the broader family of group leaders. In dealing with marginalised groups there are a number of points that need underlining.

Given the effects of unemployment, some attending the group will likely be in a depressive and/or anxious state. Many may be angry and disillusioned. Others will have become silent and withdrawn. Many participants

will feel shame. Initially the group leader may be distrusted or seen in a hostile light. Energy levels may be low: it can take time to establish participation. Many of the participants are new to personal growth oriented groups. Many of the male participants in particular may find it puzzling and perhaps threatening.

As this adds up to a challenging environment, it is essential that the facilitator must really want to be there, must believe in the venture and gain satisfaction and meaning from the work. She will need courage, resilience and patience. She will need to be able to lend energy and momentum to the group until it finds its own. She will need an ability to not take things (too) personally, because darts will fly and some will likely hit home.

Buber believed that humility was a key attribute when engaging with others. The American Psychological Association has opined that the strongest person, placed under enough pressure, will assuredly tumble into depression (Maddux & Winstead, 2008). It is wise to remember that participants in a LTU progression group are enduring circumstances which have well documented adverse effects on those who experience them, and faced with the same circumstances we facilitators would also decline and suffer. Understanding this engenders in us humility, compassion, and the capacity to be open and accepting.

The facilitator must have a capacity for joy, hope and optimism to counter the bleakness of unemployment: she must have a belief that the participants can change, grow and learn. Having a trustworthy presence can greatly reduce fear and anxiety in participants (Bowlby, 1987: 148), which aids the development of cohesion, the bedrock of all other therapeutic group factors (Yalom, 2005).

Issues like a concern for justice and equality invariably play a part in the make-up of facilitators who work with the marginalised. It is all well and good to say the poor will always be with us – that is certainly so as long as we have a society that tolerates the obscene concentration of wealth in the hands of a powerful minority. The capacity to sublimate anger at social injustice into constructive action is healthier for the facilitator than being mired in frustration.

Resistance

Sometimes participants are referred by state agencies to Fusion's LTU groups – they invariably feel their attendance is compulsory: resistance, non-engagement and hostility are a common, hardly surprising response. It is vital to address these dynamics. If participants don't buy in to the process, then they won't form a functioning group and some may become

saboteurs. Even one strong cynic can make the running of a group quite challenging (Nitsun, 1996).

A facilitator must look to the well-being of the whole group (Yalom, 2005). Someone who comes to the group with a view to destruction must be respectfully challenged. It is not good for an adult to remain in a state of 'I've been sent'. People must themselves choose to be group members (Nitsun, 1996); they cannot be compelled to participate, nor would a facilitator want such power. If I am delivering a group and someone states they've been sent, I express the genuinely held view that that's a difficult place to be. I invite them to stay for the rest of the session to see whether it's of interest to them, but if they come back next session I'd like it to be because they *choose* to. I cannot function as a facilitator with members who feel compelled to attend and I state this fact.

I must remember that ultimately their issue is not with me, I am not forcing them to attend. It is better for them to confront their difficulty and not undermine the chances of others who might be positive towards the intervention. No matter the difficulty of their situation, I agree with Frankl that they can still choose their attitude and are better for so doing (1959). I invite them to collaborate with me in the belief it is in their best interests, and within their capacity, to regain sufficient self-power that they not feel compelled to do anything by anyone. I invite them to alter their perception of their circumstances. But I must act decisively and remember I am a *group* facilitator – my allegiance is to the integrity and well-being of the group.

Philosophically it can be argued that compulsory attendance rubs against the grain of facilitation. Should we be running groups for 'compulsory' clients? Everyone must devise their own answer. The reason people stay in a group is often quite different to the reason they come.

Unemployment undermines initiative and optimism. Given a choice – based on the difficulties I have encountered in recruiting for such groups – I believe that a fair amount of unemployed people would not attend a programme aimed at their progression. I would argue it is better they are respectfully referred than stay at home sinking into a dispiriting torpor. How it is done is vital – nobody likes the feeling of being compelled, and empathic encouragement, perhaps even an obligation that people make active, self-directed choices would be more effective. It is infinitely better to do something – nearly anything – than nothing. Post-course, the overwhelming reaction of participants is delight that they undertook the programme because they feel they are moving and have emerged from a place of 'stuckness'.

What a group based approach offers to unemployed participants

A group that meets a few times a week over a period of time offers considerable benefits. Immediately, structure, purpose and routine are returned, which for an unemployed person is of inestimable benefit. Participants have motivation to get out of bed, to attend to their grooming, to organise their day. They have somewhere to be a number of times a week, enriching their life with variety and challenge. For an unemployment group, such structure is undoubtedly a therapeutic group factor.

Participation in a group "almost automatically evokes mutual support" (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004: 9), which fosters a sense of community and belonging, counteracting isolation. Moreover, in a homogenous group like an LTU group, "there is no loss of social status in joining" (ibid: 10).

Adults learn best when the environment is interactive and participative, and provides them with the opportunity to contribute their knowledge (Knowles, 1973). In such an environment, participants invariably become creative and confident and begin to work out answers for themselves, rediscovering their innate capacities. This constructive activity leads to their self-evaluation changing, which in turn results in new behaviours and outcomes (Ellis, 1997).

Being "alone increases risk" (Bowlby, 1988, 147); connection and relationship are needed to "rebuild a sense of self" (Herman, 1992: 61). Group members are exposed to social interaction and can relate their experience to contacts beyond the group, having things of interest – news – to impart. In a group of twelve, each participant is engaged in eleven distinct relationships (plus one with the facilitator) and is witnessing a host of other relationships evolve in front of them – it is a highly stimulating, intriguing environment (Ringer, 2002).

In groups that are participative, goal driven and cohesive, people rebuild confidence and hope; meaningfulness and purpose are returned to their lives; people make plans and take action to follow through. If they can be persuaded to stay with the entire programme, they build resilience. They see both themselves and their colleagues' progress and take heart. Participants often source information on jobs and courses for their peers and get pleasure from being altruistic. As participants record successes they have the satisfaction of experiencing and sharing their triumphs with their fellows (Sonstegaard & Bitter, 2004).

Over time we usually see people's appearance transform and participants begin to look healthier – the outer appearance an indication of inner transformation. They reach a stage where they can speak well of themselves and look to the future with optimism. Contentment, challenge, sense

of ownership and meaningfulness are benefits that flow from engaging in successful endeavours with peers.

Above all else, participants in a cohesive, performing group invariably move towards recovering their voice and their selves: "self acceptance is basically dependent on acceptance by others" (Yalom, 2005: 64). As a result, they begin to make better life choices; they are more in touch with their needs. They increasingly direct the group, often taking on the task of steering the group back to the focus of the session, making decisions on how their time and their group are best used: in effect, how their life is best lived.

Participant perception

In the view of the participants of recent Fusion LTU programmes, the experience changed, even reset their lives. 'Klara' wrote in her feedback that before the course began "my life was stuck in a rut of doing nothing, my confidence was at a very low level and depression was setting in". Now she writes "I love the way my mind has been opened up to a new world ... I feel stronger and more able to get myself out of the rut I was in" and she lists a wide range of things she has embarked on that underline her claims.

'David' considered the programme a life changing experience: he had not realised that he had gradually slipped into depression. "Prior to attending the course I had a very negative attitude ... however, all my thinking and outlook has now changed ... I have a thirst for more adult education and learning and may even consider third level education ... what a different me ... a new more confident feeling of well-being and now goal driven actions". 'Shane' has written "when I first arrived I was feeling low from being unemployed and I also was very unsure of myself ... being on this course and interacting with others I realise that I was suffering from depression. I feel now I can do any course or job and that confidence has come from talking and interacting... it has impacted on my home life big time as I now think before I talk and it gives me an ease in the house.. I can consider trying anything now". Shane is pursuing many avenues; he is backing his words with action. He has found a job and is learning about computers.

Interestingly for 'Judy', the course slowed her down – "I came to this course hitting the ground running. I was hardly able to breathe and afraid to stop, applying for everything in sight and getting nowhere. I am now calmer and more focused ... knowledge is a great thing. On a personal note I feel I have slowed down and realise one can be in charge of one's own life. I feel I have done grieving for my parents and my business here ...

life is good and is better with wonderful new friends in it ... the course has given me the help I need to stay focused and happy". Judy is now working and has many other ventures on the go. 'Brian' wrote that "the benefits of the course will enhance my life in the years to come, not just in the present ... we went considerably beyond the theme of careers and jobs, we looked at our lives in the whole and made important decisions. We all grew as people; we grew in understanding and in self-acceptance. I resisted going to this course – I'm so glad I chose to continue".

IV. Positive psychology in unemployment groups

Positive psychology proclaims a new focus which, it asserts, runs counter to the prior trend of psychology – it focuses on strengths, capacity and positives rather than pathologies and problems (Seligman, 2011: Gaffney, 2011). As ever in psychology there are antecedents arguably not sufficiently acknowledged. Surely all forms of psychotherapy have as a core belief the idea that people can grow and improve by calling on and developing inner strength – how this is achieved is where the numerous schools diverge. I tend to agree with McLeod – "there are no new therapies" (1997:1) – all therapies being erected on foundations laid down over the course of a century.

Flourish

Nonetheless, Seligman's *Flourish* does give his reader many stimulating ideas and perspectives, not least that we can thrive by focusing on clearly defined elements of flourishing. It requires persistence to do so – we build better selves step by step. There is useful material on signature strengths and how employing them on a regular basis is one of the essential keys to flourishing. The idea of engagement, which is connected to the concept of *flow*, where we are engaged in an activity to such an extent that we lose track of time, is a timely reminder of the benefit of being active and engaged in life. Seligman would not appear to be someone who would subscribe to the notion that 'all good things come to those who wait'.

Seligman and Gaffney (2011) both propound the view that 'flourishing' has component parts. Seligman presents us with the acronym PERMA, signifying positive emotions, relationships, engagement, meaningfulness, and achievement. Gaffney's list of 'ingredients' differs slightly but overlaps – connectivity (particularly with oneself), competition, autonomy and using your valued competencies. Both warn of the power of the negative and provide a ratio of positive to negative that is required for well-being – 3:1 in Seligman's case, 5:1 in Gaffney's.

What can be useful when working with marginalised groups where depressiveness, low mood or low energy can be a feature, is the message that one might feel down about one area in life but it is important to resist the urge to globalise and declare that one's whole life is a mess. Some of the other key areas in life might be going quite well. Perspective is critical; we need to train our focus to see the good things, to cultivate gratitude, as Klein put it (1988). Because one area is doing poorly doesn't mean we can't do well elsewhere, or on the whole.

Furthermore, what we focus on is crucially important. Gaffney urges us to bring awareness to what we pay attention to and where we invest our time (2011). We have only so much concentration – where we place it has a major bearing on the fabric and quality of our lives.

The authority of both authors is underpinned by their not making inflated claims. Gaffney offers steps to flourishing, but makes clear that we have different capacities for optimism and joy – the more neurotic among us might not proclaim their delight from the mountaintop but can work to maximise the level of happiness they are capable of. Seligman also addresses the thorny issue of character, not shunning controversy and clearly stating that it really is up to us, that we can surmount most circumstances, regardless of background and environment.

Flourishing is a broader and more sustainable state than the achievement of happiness, which is, as Seligman declares, more ephemeral. Moreover, both authors are very clear on the fact that it takes effort to achieve and maintain well-being. Arguably the star quality of both books is resilience. Seligman cites studies which show it is a more important factor in academic achievement than intellectual capacity (2011).

Positive psychology applied to unemployment groups

As discussed previously, the experience of unemployment is usually accompanied by a considerable lowering in overall well-being and self-image, with persistent low mood a regular occurrence. Over the last three years Fusion Training has run several interventions for the progression of LTU people. Each intervention was twelve weeks in length – the group meeting three mornings a week for three hour sessions. The groups were composed of 70% men and 30% women with a mean age of 44, and an age range of 21–62. There was an average of eleven participants in each group. All participants were unemployed, with an average duration of approximately four years out of work. The thirty-six sessions with each group offered an opportunity to employ some of the thinking and techniques of positive psychology.

Perception

What we believe has a profound and decisive affect on how we act, or even if we act (Ellis, 1997). If we believe we are too old for education or training, we are very unlikely to undertake any. If we believe we are sure to be overlooked by employers, we are not likely to put ourselves in the way of rejection. Gaffney (2011) convincingly describes how neural pathways can be wired and a mind-set established which is pessimistic and self-fulfilling. Thankfully, what is wired can be re-wired with persistent effort. Many participants in the groups under discussion initially fear they are no longer capable of notable achievement, of sustained effort, of progressing.

Resilience can be built: in unemployment groups it can be built steadily by good attendance and incrementally increasing the workload placed on to participants: this offers the opportunity to experience the invariably positive effects and outcomes of consistent application of effort. Once a group sees the results of its work, hope enters from the wings and purpose with it. Moreover, it is difficult to keep arguing with results: if people are working hard and are producing good work, if they belong to a group which is 'performing', they will eventually allow themselves to see that they are a part of and a reason for the success that will follow sustained effort. Concrete achievement that is identified, owned and integrated is a great persuader.

It is useful to periodically ask the group members to note the benefits they get from the group and from each other. A more challenging – and latter stages – question is to own what they personally contribute to the success of the group. Being a contributing part of a success story, of a supportive, hard-working and positive entity builds a more positive self-perception.

Signature strengths

Seligman posits the idea that everyone has a number of signature strengths and that using these strengths in some activity for a period every day will greatly enhance the extent to which a person flourishes. Many of the clients in the groups under discussion did not see themselves as possessing strengths, or the ones they might acknowledge were often owned half-heartedly, along the lines of – "I suppose I mightn't be too bad at listening". Facilitating participants to become aware of and unambiguously own such strengths is a most useful piece of work – by integrating our qualities we grow. By disowning or minimising them, we diminish ourselves and hinder growth.

One exercise that groups have tended to benefit from is to ask them to think of two people they admire – one a personal acquaintance and the other someone in the public sphere. They are asked to name some of the qualities and character traits of these people and how their selected pair has influenced them. It can be affecting for participants to talk about people they hold in high regard – (incidentally, mothers feature strongly)! All the qualities are listed on a flipchart so as to compile a broad range – group members see words from others that they feel apply to their own nominees as well, so energised discussion and warm memories are generated. Then the group members are asked to attribute some words on the list to themselves. This is where the discomfort can surface, but it is worth the perseverance. The group are asked – how strongly do you own this quality, scale it out of ten, where or how is it demonstrated and what does this quality permit you to do?

To further the development of cohesion, participants might be asked to identify strengths they see in another participant that the participant themselves doesn't appear to see: we build "a sense of our own reality" from what others say about us (May, 1975: 32). This too can be difficult for a group member, getting attention, validation, approval from their peers. Being paradoxical beings however, we both love and hate such attention! I check to see that they have heard what has been said to them. I ask the group 'what is the value of knowing and owning your strengths'?

The next stage of discussion is to consider where participants use their strengths – what outlets do they have for their competencies? Often they report that they feel they have few enough outlets. They quickly begin to see that if they are using their core abilities and qualities in a job or hobby then they'll be in a better place – generating motivation to change their current state. We have had sessions where we would list someone's 'signature strengths' on a board and then ask him/her and the group as a whole to suggest occupations, hobbies and activities that utilise some or all of the strengths. All of this builds deeper cohesion, the recipient of the group's attention feels they matter to the group – the group members feel they have something meaningful to offer...

For those with the technological access, Seligman's website (www.authentichappiness.org) generously offers excellent questionnaires which help the visitor identify their own particular signature strengths. Some of the unemployment group members were keen on exploring this aspect of themselves – others simply were not. Those who made the effort of going to the library and undertaking the questionnaire were also the most active in developing and engaging in activities that utilised their strengths on a daily basis. One woman, simply by virtue of doing the questionnaire and

thinking about herself as having personal strengths, made a decision to make more time to engage in a series of courses, because learning and pursuit of knowledge was her area of strength. In order to do so, she had to reduce the amount of babysitting of grandchildren that she engaged in. She asserted her right to take time for herself and learnt to develop the skill of assertively saying 'no' to inordinate, self-negating demands on her time.

Signature strengths and interview preparation

In the 'performing' stage of a group, members can become deeply absorbed in substantial tasks. In unemployment groups we naturally work on developing interview skills, utilising the group's capacity to figure out and master the interview process. A participant might bring a job vacancy they are interested in pursuing to the group. The group is asked, "for this job, what do you think the employer is looking for"? The group generates ideas and posits answers. They work out, based on logic and prior experience, what kinds of questions are likely to be asked to find out if an interviewee possesses the skills and qualities the employer seeks. Knowing the questions, answers can then be developed. To answer well, one needs to be particularly aware of one's strengths, one's motivation in applying for the job, as well as confident and convincing in speaking. The group supports members work out the best answers for themselves, based on their enhanced self-knowledge. Then the group is split into interviewers, interviewees and active observers. They get to interview, be interviewed and observe the interview process at close quarters. The perspective of each vantage point is sought to build as wide and deep an insight into the process as possible.

At the end of such sessions people feel they have learnt important things for themselves – they have constructed learning based on their experience, insight and intelligence – they have figured something out, seen a process from all angles, profoundly understood something that was once daunting. They have applied learning that was group generated. They have been absorbed in effectively running the group to meet their needs. In doing this they have challenged their perception of themselves on many levels. Crucially, to do well at the task, they have to voice their strengths and qualities in convincing fashion – they have to know and own who they are.

Three tasks

One of Seligman's proposed activities for building positive emotions and a stronger sense of self is the three tasks activity. At the end of each day he recommends that we reflect on our day and write down three things that

went well and why they went well. The aim is to focus on owning what it is you did to make it go well.

Initially, in some of the groups under discussion, in spite of lengthy explanation, this activity was met with confusion. Some members would come to group with something more akin to an activity log, a list of three things they did, rather than three things that had gone well and why they had gone well. A typical early stage entry might go along the lines of 'I came to the group. I went home and cut the grass. Then I had my dinner and after eating I watched the match'. Some persisted with this confusion, in spite of sustained efforts at clarification. I was inclined to see this as resistance to the activity – a case of wouldn't rather than couldn't understand: for me, this highlights the corrosive effects of unemployment to self-image.

I recall one participant getting angry – he had slid into depression and become a recluse after losing his job. What, he asked, if he could only think of two positive things? I shared my own experience of keeping the journal – if I had only two things to report, I felt obliged to rouse myself and do something else in order to fulfil the task: I found the journal encouraged me to engage more in life. The answer angered him further – was I demanding that he get up and do positive things when he was watching television? Of course I was! I asked him to persist with the task as fully as possible – he wasn't best pleased. The activity challenged an apathetic state he had slumbered into and coming out of such a state meant proactively engaging with a world he felt he had been hurt by; it meant participating in a world he had increasingly come to dread. He persisted with the challenge however – he gradually hauled himself out of inertia and became a tremendously cohesive and constructive figure in the group, baking cakes for the tea break! He also found and kept a job.

Just over half of the total participants maintained the three task diary. When they had momentum behind it they began to own their positive achievements and actions at an ever deeper level. Some reported finding it uplifting and it began to become a pleasure rather than a task. One participant revealed his wife, a lifelong sufferer of depression, had tried the activity herself for eight days. He found the results astonishing – for the first time in many years he lived in a home environment of positive mental health. To his disappointment, she let the practice lapse. Yet to him, it held out hope – things were not set in stone, change was possible. Those group members who did not lend themselves to the activity perceived it as a chore: as they were unwilling, it naturally was a chore.

The active 'three taskers' were invariably the more positive participants – they shared deepest, were more willing to engage in activities and

provided the motive force in their groups. The less willing benefitted from their presence because the energy and work rates in all groups were high. However, it is noteworthy that those in a stronger place found it easier to do things that were good for them: those who arguably needed it most, tended to resist and struggle more.

To every thousand-mile march there's a first step!

Unemployment often leads to isolation, which undermines health for a whole host of reasons, one of them being that it likely increases inactivity for many. According to Seligman, inactivity is more threatening to health and well-being than obesity – it just so happens that the two often coincide. He provides evidence that an active obese person has much the same life expectancy as an active slim person, and a greater life expectancy than a slim, inactive person. So, he concludes, the evidence points to physical activity being of critical importance to longevity and well-being. The target for wellness is 10,000 steps a day or its equivalent.

I followed this advice myself for a period before advocating it to groups, and I found it of considerable benefit. I use a phone app to track my movement. Like the three tasks activity, I find keeping a log places a positive pressure on me to maintain the task. I notice that I have begun to see time differently. If I arrive twenty minutes early for a meeting, I now use it as an opportunity to rack up 2,000 plus steps instead of having a coffee or sitting in my car. It has led to improved health, steady weight loss and a lower cholesterol count for me.

Unfortunately, fewer group participants were willing to maintain this practice than the three tasks activity. All those who maintained it were in the cohort that continued to perform the three tasks. Though the benefits were written clearly in their appearance and physiques, it still did not encourage the others to follow suit. The reluctant generally claimed lack of time, though the time spent engaged in the activity has the potential to prolong lifespan considerably, thus returning the time invested with interest. Those who chose to follow Seligman's proposals benefitted noticeably. They also had the highest success rate in progressing into further training and employment.

This returns us to the realities of choice, responsibility, autonomy, resilience and character. My experience of applying positive psychology exercises in unemployment groups is that those more positive to begin with engaged the most fully – they also engaged the most fully with all other group activities and they had the most success in career progression in both getting jobs and keeping them.

Finis

All groups commence from their own unique starting point; they have their singular potential, pace and capacity; they each require a personalised response if they are to move towards reaching their potential as an entity. The onus is on the facilitator to be flexible, spontaneous and adaptable so as to meet the need of each group as effectively and successfully as possible.

Being a group leader is a position of trust and influence, requiring skills, qualities and clarity as to purpose and intent. The more we grow the better we do: the more we grow and the wider our experience, the greater our range, and the more people can benefit from the groups we deliver. Humans benefit from being in groups: our job is to connect with participants and work effectively with them in order to maximise these benefits.

Participants bring their strength, capacity and also their vulnerability to groups. Those who have experienced prolonged struggle, disadvantage and marginalisation; those who have been silenced either by more powerful others or by their experience, require of us our best efforts. We must do what we can to ensure that their encounter with us is positive and enriching.

Given the position of influence we occupy, we are obliged to think about how we use power. Used well it promotes growth and well-being: it can also be used to harm. We will invariably make mistakes, but the question of our intent and overarching purpose is one all facilitators must address. We will function better when we develop and are guided by a benign overarching vision: a personal manifesto.

The ethical case for pursuing our own growth and development to achieve these ends is surely unassailable.

By working to achieve the growth and well-being of participants we are ultimately seeking to work towards our own redundancy in each and every group we run. We need a capacity to let go of power and exit the stage gracefully, having received our own reward: meaningfulness and satisfaction from our part in the process of the growth of others.

We are human: we are strong; we are vulnerable; we are paradoxical. We are light and shade. We can grow and improve: we can also become static, complacent and, as a result, atrophy. We are models to our participants – we cannot ethically or convincingly advocate that which we eschew for ourselves. We are duty bound to live growth oriented lives (Corey, 2000).

The idea of working on our own growth and development in order to do our best work is not a novel or modern idea. Sometime in the ninth

century, an Irish monk sat in the Scriptorum of an Austrian monastery transcribing a manuscript. In the margins he jotted down a poem linking his own labours to those of his cat, Pangur Bán (Fair Pangur). It is the oldest known poem in the Irish language, and its most popular translation was by a scholar called Robin Flower. I quote the first and last verse:

I and Pangur Bán my cat/Tis a like task we are at/Hunting mice is his delight/Hunting words I sit all night

Practice every day/Has made Pangur perfect at his trade/I search wisdom day and night/Turning darkness into light

That wonderful last couplet, the striving tirelessly for the wisdom to turn darkness into light, echoes its fundamental truth down the centuries and shows that the idea that we can grow and improve by dint of persistent effort is not a discovery from the realms of contemporary psychology but one of the antique verities known to humanity. When we strive to reach a high level of ability we not only increase our capacity to do better work, we benefit enormously ourselves in terms of fulfilment. It is a truly rewarding activity facilitating groups.

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