

## LEADING GROUPS IN PRAYER

### GROUP DYNAMICS

#### **What is a group?**

A group is a collection of two or more individuals. A group is an aggregation of people. They interact with each other. They are aware of one another. They have a common objective. They perceive themselves to be a group.

Group dynamics or group process describes the way in which any group of humans interacts and develops as a group, and the relationship between the group and the individuals within it. Group dynamics is best understood by combining the characteristics of each group member, how each group member's actions affect the group, and how these group interactions affect each group member. This creates a cyclical and reciprocal feedback loop which simultaneously impacts all group members and all group members' relationships.

#### **As a new group meets**

As people arrive to a new group, there are some common questions that can arise:

- What will the sessions be like?
- What do I have in common with the other participants?
- How am I different from other people here?
- Will I be accepted or excluded in the group?
- Will this be worth the effort?
- What risks might I have to take?
- Will I be put under pressure in some way?
- Who is really the leader in this group?

Here are some common concerns or fears.

- I might look stupid
- I might not be able to answer the questions
- Everyone else knows more than I do
- I might be asked to share and get embarrassed
- Others might tell I'm nervous and afraid
- Nobody will talk to me and I'll withdraw
- I might be asked to do something I don't want to do
- Others won't like me
- I might share too much too quickly

Understanding the above is important as a group leader and there are practical ways that some of the above concerns can be reduced at the beginning as follows:

- Welcoming
- Introductions
- Explain clearly what is to happen during the time of the meeting so that people aren't anxious about what might lie ahead.
- Set boundaries for working within the group. Talk about what is expected of the group and how they will interact e.g. please feel free to share only what you feel comfortable sharing; listen to what a person shares but don't comment upon it; confidentiality

**As a group session progresses**

Some of the things a group leader pays attention to as the session progresses:

- Levels of engagement
- Energy levels of the group
- Understanding of the group
- Verbal contributions – who and how often

There are three levels of engagement within a group:

- Customer** Fully engaged - wants to get the best out of the opportunity
- Complainant** Partially engaged – wants to learn, but not what is being offered. Think they know what should be given and you are not giving it. *Have confidence in your material. "What we are offering is valuable and you are free to use it as you wish."*
- Visitor** Limited engagement – not really interested in and not expecting to learn much. There at another's suggestion or because of peer group pressure. *Encourage their participation and affirm their responses.*

Ways of monitoring energy levels and understanding of the group include:

<p><u>Scanning for non-verbal cues:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>▪ Head nodding</li><li>▪ Facial expression</li><li>▪ Body shifts – frequent shifts can indicate confusion, boredom or irritation</li><li>▪ Eye contact</li><li>▪ Slowness in engaging with a task</li></ul>	<p><u>Verbal cues:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Statement of not understanding</li><li>• Questioning the purpose of a task</li></ul>
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Some helps to the above:

Check out periodically with the group if they have any questions or comments or offer them an opportunity to reflect on their learning.

If needed, summarise where the group have got to.

Encourage participation by using pairs or small group discussions. Change the composition of the groups regularly to avoid cliques or behaviour patterns.

### **Managing challenging behaviour**

The nature of this will depend on the session you are leading e.g. in a retreat there may be little opportunity for questions or engaging with the group so you may not be aware of potential issues.

If a person talks too much:

- Listen, summarise, let them know you heard OR
- Ignore their hand up and pick someone else OR
- Ask to the group, "Are there others who have not yet responded who might wish to add something?" OR
- "You've already spoken a lot. I wonder if you could let someone else say something"

If you want to get a contribution from everyone use other methods e.g. writing on paper, or asking each person in the group to say one or two words

Disruptive:

- Intentionally ignore the unhelpful behaviour
- Revisit group guidelines – especially in listening groups
- Focus on individual e.g. "I can see you feel strongly about this but we can't address this now; we need to move on"
- Address privately with individual

Quiet/withdrawn:

In a retreat day this may not be an issue, and may be someone wanting to stay reflective. Remember when offering sharing you should always give people permission not to share.

- Try to draw the individual out – affirmation, encouragement, eye contact
- Invite discussion in pairs or groups then ask for feedback
- In time, if comfortable group environment, invite response by name