Effective Support Groups

How to Plan, Design, Facilitate, and Enjoy Them

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What's the difference between leading a group and facilitating a group?

Strictly put, a support group does not have a leader as such. If someone were to take over active control, then it would stop being a support group and become a different kind of group.

It's expected that a therapy group will have an acknowledged leader. This person will be a trained therapist whose role will be to direct, in one way or another, what happens within the group. It's assumed the therapist's knowledge and expertise will place them in a position of authority. Likewise, it's common for task-oriented work groups to have a leader in place, either elected or appointed, who will run meetings and perhaps even direct people in what they're to do.

Support groups, however, operate under a different model. That model is known as facilitation. According to the dictionary, when one facilitates, one "makes things easier or helps something go more smoothly." That's what a support group facilitator does: they help the group function as easily and as smoothly as possible while fulfilling its reason for being a group. A facilitator is more concerned with guiding the process of what happens than the content of what's said and done.

A wise and caring support group facilitator is constantly striving, not to assume power, but to give it away. A good facilitator is intent on keeping power within the group, or on giving it back to the group if it has gone somewhere else. A support group facilitator helps individual members feel empowered too—empowered to be active participants in the ongoing group process, to assume responsibility for their own feelings, changes, and growth, and to live life as fully as they're able outside the group experience.

This may sound like an easy task. It's not. It takes will, time, and energy to learn about people and how they function, and about groups and how they work. It takes great concentration to keep track of all that is happening during a group meeting. It requires both knowledge and courage to make split-second decisions about when to intervene in the group process and when not. It requires using both your experience and your intuition in knowing what to say or ask at the appropriate time, and how to say or ask it. It demands self-awareness, self-assurance, and self-control.

Being a support group facilitator is a challenging task. So why do people choose to do it? Because it's also a maturing and gratifying task. Facilitators can help make a real difference in people's lives. That can include their own lives.
What are the qualities of a good group facilitator?

“Leaders are born, not made,” goes the expression. Whether or not that’s true, it’s clear facilitators are both born and made. Some traits seem to be inbred. Others can be nurtured and learned. The following characteristics are among the most important for any successful support group facilitator:

♦ **Caring and compassionate.** A facilitator must be interested in and concerned about the people who compose the group. He or she will do best if they genuinely enjoy people. Good facilitators can be outgoing or shy, talkative or quiet, high-strung or low-key, but underneath it all, they must care about others. They must be sensitive.

♦ **Accepting and nonjudgmental.** A facilitator should be open to all types of people, including every person who attends that particular support group. This means each group member is regarded and treated as a unique, worthy, fully-functioning individual. Even when someone acts disruptively, a good facilitator relates to that person with empathy and compassion. The facilitator’s first inclination should be to believe in each group member individually and to trust in the group as a whole.

♦ **Self-aware.** A facilitator can know others only to the extent he or she knows himself or herself. Otherwise their perceptions will be clouded by what they do not and cannot fully see. A mature facilitator continually strives to be mindful of their past hurts and their present unresolved issues so they don’t get in the way of relationships with others. They make it their aim to stay clear about themselves while they participate in a group, and they develop ways to monitor how well they do that.

♦ **Adept at listening.** Effective facilitators listen much more than they speak. Therefore they need to know how to listen well, how to concentrate on what the other says while minimizing their own internal dialogue, and then how to remember what’s been spoken. Because facilitators are modelers of behavior, the better they listen, the better their groups will listen.

♦ **Skilled at communicating.** When a group facilitator speaks, their words are noted, both because they usually don’t speak a lot and because of their role in the group. So it helps if they speak plainly, clearly, and pointedly. They need to express their feelings as well as their thoughts, and be comfortable communicating with all parts of themselves, more than just their spoken words.

♦ **Observant.** A skilled group facilitator is all eyes and ears, taking in all they can from every participant—what their faces say, what their bodies disclose, what their inflections reveal. They notice patterns of interaction between individuals and with the group as a whole. They pick up also on what people don’t say and do.

♦ **Authentic.** It’s difficult to overestimate the importance of a facilitator’s being real with the group. It’s only when a facilitator feels free being his or her own self that group members will feel free to be themselves too. If any participants are hiding, withholding, or roleplaying, the group will not go to that deeper level where they can really trust and support one another. The facilitator leads the way here, not by doing, but by being.

♦ **Present.** A group feels important and empowered when their facilitator is fully present to them. Such leaders bring all aspects of themselves—body, mind, heart, and soul—to the experience. They center themselves before the meeting begins, then they stay centered throughout the time together. If their attention starts to drift, they know how to bring themselves back to the moment.
∗ Energetic. A centered facilitator brings their own energy to the group experience. They don’t expect the group to energize them, nor do they feel responsible for energizing the group. They simply come ready to work, taking responsibility for their own preparations and looking forward to what can happen in this time that has been set apart.

∗ Optimistic. Believing in what people can do on their own and in what groups can accomplish together, the facilitator maintains a hopeful presence throughout each meeting. They stay open to the various possibilities that await, and when the time is right, they see to it those possibilities are put on view, whether that’s done by them or by someone else within the group. A facilitator is not Pollyannish. They don’t try to talk people out of their feelings, whatever they are. They simply carry the belief in what can happen after those feelings have been acknowledged, accepted, and addressed.

∗ Continually learning. A wise facilitator approaches each meeting time ready to learn. They have as many questions as they have answers, and perhaps even more. They’re drawn to new ideas, new perspectives, and new discoveries. They’re constantly gathering experience and adding to their expertise. They’re comfortable realizing that sometimes they will make mistakes, and that’s another way they’ll learn.

∗ At ease with conflict. They understand that conflict is a natural part of any group process. Therefore they don’t try to avoid it. They help bring it into the open where it can be recognized, worked with, and worked through. They realize that any conflict which has been successfully handled can lead the group forward and draw them even closer.

∗ Able to set boundaries. A facilitator must be able to place limits on what they’ll do and not do, not only for their own good, but for the good of the group, just as all participants need to learn to set their own boundaries too. In addition, if the facilitator does too much, the group will do too little.

∗ Able to give self-care. Facilitators cannot give more than they have within them to give. So they must take good care of themselves if they’re to be open and available to others. That includes diet, exercise, rest, relaxation, and all the other ways people can meet their own needs.

∗ In touch with spirituality. If it’s true that people have souls as well as bodies, minds, and hearts, then the spiritual dimension needs to be a part of a facilitator’s life. This can be one more channel for their communication with others. Being open to the spiritual has nothing to do with sharing one’s religion with another. Rather, it has to do with the sharing of life as a gift, realizing that this gift came from somewhere far beyond.

You’ll notice there has been no reference to a support group facilitator needing to be an expert in the field on which the group is focusing. A breast cancer support group facilitator does not need to be a cancer survivor herself; for instance, nor does an AIDS group facilitator need to be an authority on that disease. Although being well informed is useful and even important, it matters less what a facilitator knows about the topic at hand and more what they know about how to assist a group of people in supporting and caring for one another.
How important are ground rules?

Ground rules are essential. A support group cannot function as it’s supposed to without having a set of them in place. Ground rules play a critical role in creating those conditions under which the group space is kept safe. When a rule is broken, the facilitator or other group member can remind the person or people involved what has happened and suggest the situation be corrected. Remember: it’s the behavior that’s inappropriate or unacceptable, not the person.

It’s wise to keep ground rules to a minimum. If you have to work hard to remember them all, or to separate one from another, you have too many and they’ll lose their effectiveness. An overabundance of rules feels oppressive. So begin with a few ground rules which are regarded as “givens.” Without these, the group could not function in a healthy way. Later, if the group desires and if they’re needed, more rules can be added.

Many facilitators put these rules in writing so there’s no question about their meaning. Sometimes a copy is given each group member or they’re posted at each meeting for all to see. Some facilitators ask participants to sign their names as a pledge they’ll abide by this covenant.

Here are examples of common ground rules many support groups use:

- We will be on time for each session.
- Anything personal that’s shared will be kept confidential.
- Only one person will speak at a time, while everyone else listens attentively.
- Any and all feelings are welcome to be expressed.
- No one person will monopolize the group’s time.

Other rules which groups sometimes apply include:

- We will not give advice to one another.
- We will not criticize one another.
- We will not discount or minimize another’s feelings.
- We will each participate at every session.

If it’s a closed group, this rule might be added:

- We will be present at each session unless we notify the facilitator beforehand.

Ground rules should be among the early items on the agenda when a group first begins meeting. They should be re-visited whenever a new member joins the group.

This is especially important: ground rules should be conscientiously enforced. If not, they will lose their effectiveness and your group will not develop an adequate level of confidence and trust. In that case, your support group will be less than it could be.
Is there a preferred meeting format?

No. Group members and facilitators develop their own preferences. Organizing issues and group types may influence the meeting structure, as may the size of the group and how long the group has been meeting. There are many possible variations. A common format for a closed, facilitator-led group might look like this:

✦ The beginning. The meeting officially starts with a welcome, any introductory comments, and possibly a beginning ritual.
✦ "Checking in" or "doing the rounds." All group members are invited to say a few words as a way of entering the group time. They might describe something significant that happened since the last meeting. They might report about their progress on a goal they’ve established for themselves. They might speak about what they’re feeling at the moment.
✦ A short period of input. This is a prepared segment which relates somehow to the group purpose. A grief support group, for example, in each meeting might have a brief module which addresses a different aspect of the grief experience. In another group this input might relate to issues about the group process—how to listen well to another person, how to validate someone else, and so on.
✦ Disclosure and discussion. Members spend the bulk of their time talking about what’s uppermost on their minds and in their hearts, while also relating to, learning from, and supporting one another.
✦ A summing up. Either the facilitator or a group member recaps what happened during the session and summarizes important learnings or developments.

✦ The ending. The meeting is formally closed, sometimes using a final ritual.
While it hasn’t been identified in this format, there’s also a beginning before the beginning when members first arrive, take their places in the room, and start the transition from “being in the world” to “being in our own small community.” A comparable process happens in reverse after the ending of a session when people take their time to leave the experience.

Additional options for a standard meeting format include:
✦ “Doing the rounds” after disclosure and discussion. This enables each member to express where they are as the meeting draws to a close. They might name a lesson they learned, a “gift” they were given, or a message they want to leave with another member.
✦ Plans or assignments. Some support groups are set up for members to read something, to write in their journal, or to perform some other between-session activity.
✦ Evaluation. The group may evaluate an individual session or the entire group experience: What’s most meaningful? Most helpful? Less helpful?
✦ Refreshments. Some groups provide refreshments; others don’t. However you choose, it usually helps if any refreshments are not a part of the actual group time itself. They are served before or after but not during. Neither are they elaborate.
What are the responsibilities of a group facilitator?

Depending on how you divide them, there are about a dozen responsibilities for support group facilitators. In his book Group Facilitation, Harvey Betcher lists many, but not all, of the following categories:

- **Starting.** The facilitator sees to it that the meeting begins on time. She or he is also responsible for starting the different sections of the meeting, if there are any.
- **Negotiating and maintaining rules.** The facilitator suggests certain ground rules by which the group will operate, helps group members add any other rules, and watches to see that the group abides by these rules, as described on pages 38-39.
- **Attending.** The facilitator pays attention to each member in the group, especially when they're communicating, but other times as well. Attending includes letting the person know you're paying attention and then remembering what was communicated.
- **Seeking and giving information.** When they seek information, a facilitator is gathering new data and adding it to what's already known. When they give information, they're supplying facts and other available knowledge about a topic the group is exploring.
- **Responding to feelings.** Using both verbal and nonverbal means, the facilitator actively communicates their understanding of and empathy for a group member's emotions after they've been expressed. Sometimes this applies to the whole group's feelings.
- **Focusing.** The facilitator calls the group's attention to what has been said or to something that has happened so it can be underscored or dealt with.

- **Rewarding.** When an individual or the whole group does something which moves them toward their agreed-upon goal, in one way or another the facilitator communicates "Good job!". One purpose of rewarding is to encourage more such behavior.
- **Contraposing.** In this case, the facilitator informs one or more people of an inconsistency between what they've just said or done and what they agreed to do, or what they've done in the past, or what's actually true.
- **Mediating.** The facilitator figuratively places herself or himself between two opposing people or factions and helps them resolve a disagreement.
- **Gatekeeping.** The facilitator uses various means to equalize participation in the group, so that those who talk less will become more verbal and those who talk too much will curtail their speech.
- **Summarizing.** Either at the close of a meeting or at the end of a topic of discussion, the facilitator pulls together the thoughts and feelings that have been expressed and puts them in the form of a concise statement, checking with the group to make sure this summary is correct.
- **Ending.** The facilitator makes sure each meeting ends on time or, in rare circumstances, negotiates a later ending if that seems appropriate.

There is one other responsibility that overlaps many of the others:

- **Encouraging redundancy.** The facilitator uses rewarding, modeling, and educating to empower group members to assume some of the above responsibilities themselves. Individuals mature in the process, relationships grow stronger, and the group fulfills its purpose even more.

Several of these responsibilities will be explored in more detail in the following pages.
How does a facilitator practice "contraposing"?

"Last session, Mark, you promised the group you wouldn’t be late anymore, and now you’ve come in twenty-five minutes after the meeting started."

"You just stated, Janet, that you didn’t think it was appropriate for people to get angry with one another in this group, and yet I recall when you got pretty upset with Ed not very long ago. Do you recall that?"

In both of these examples a facilitator is contraposing. They’re isolating something that’s been said or done and setting it next to something else that’s been said or done, revealing an inconsistency. Maybe what happened didn’t agree with the past or perhaps it didn’t jibe with actual fact. Whatever the discrepancy, something isn’t quite right and the individual is made aware that’s been noticed. Contraposing is appropriate for behavior that gets a person in trouble with the group, that is admittedly unhealthy, or that conflicts with the group’s ground rules.

Contraposing works best when the facilitator speaks in a normal tone of voice, avoiding critical words or an imposing demeanor. The facilitator offers information, not ridicule. It’s best to be brief—one or two sentences preferably, and no more than four or five. State the disparity clearly. Avoid arguing. Stay factual. Be cordial but firm. Allow the person—or the whole group if the contraposing has been addressed to everyone—to respond as they will. It will be up to them how they deal with the inconsistency.

How does a facilitator practice "mediating"?

When you mediate, you place yourself between two opposing people or factions so you can play a role in helping resolve the disagreement. This is a good time to remind yourself of the dictionary definition of facilitator: “one who makes things easier or smoother.” Your role is neither to divert nor solve the conflict. You’re merely to guide the process so the parties themselves can find a solution, if one is to be found, often with the help of the group.

✧ Begin long before conflict is even an issue. Understand, and help group members understand, that human conflict is normal and natural, it’s inevitable (if a group meets long enough), and it’s potentially constructive. Accept also that many people, including perhaps some in your group, feel uncomfortable with conflict and will automatically try to avoid it. Monitor your own comfort level with conflict; find ways to expand it if necessary. Your reactions will be carefully watched by the group; they’ll tend to follow your lead.

✧ Watch for any disagreement which hasn’t yet surfaced. If it seems to be getting in the way of people’s communication, ask about it. “I sense some friction here that’s not being talked about. Am I right?” If someone is showing signs of anger and not expressing it, ask. “Joe, what are you feeling right now?”

✧ Use your best judgment as far as timing what you do. It’s difficult to know when to step in. Generally, sooner is better. But you also want group members to take responsibility for themselves and not depend on you to intervene each time. If people are already verbally disagreeing and you intercede too soon, you may cut off ventilation that needs
to happen. If you wait too long, parties may become more polarized and feel more hurt. This is a subjective decision every facilitator must make. No two will do it alike.

- When you actively facilitate verbal disagreement, encourage each side to make a clear statement of their position while the other listens. Make sure people don’t interrupt one another. If it’s needed, clarify they’re not to accuse or blame one another—they’re to stick to issues, ideas, and behaviors.

- If people do not move toward a common ground through this discussion, move on to other means. Ask the opposing forces to let go of their stance momentarily and state the other’s position as clearly and factually as they can, until the other acknowledges this statement is accurate. If this cannot be done, ask others in the group to assume those two positions and develop statements that reflect their thoughts and feelings. Ask for feedback from the people who first disagreed.

- If sides are not approaching one another at all, try other alternatives. Can the disagreement be set aside until another time? Can a workable compromise be struck? Can both sides simply agree to disagree and yet still work together for the good of the group? After all, not all disagreements can be worked out.

As facilitator, highlight what can be agreed upon. Identify signs of growth, both individually and as a group. Ask group members to make their assessments too. Ask about lessons that emerged. Validate facilitation done by others within the group. Validate also the respectful expression of thoughts and feelings on everyone’s part. Then move on.

How does a facilitator practice “gatekeeping”?

Gatekeeping is what a leader does to encourage more or less equal participation among group members. This involves three tasks:

- When someone talks too much, the facilitator works to limit their input. You can do it subtly by attending them less when they’re speaking. You can intercede and block their continued talking: “We’re clear now about your ideas, Tom. Who else would like to respond?” You can refer to the ground rule about not monopolizing group time. You might negotiate a plan to help them change this self-defeating behavior—a simple signal or hand motion by the facilitator or anyone else when he or she has gone on too long. Over-participators deserve positive feedback when they curb their speech.

- When someone speaks little, pay attention to them regularly. Catch their eye from time to time so they know you’re aware of them. Watch for signs they wish to speak—leaning forward or clearing their throat, for instance—and give them the opportunity if they don’t take it themselves. “Do you have an opinion about that, Joan?” Give them positive feedback after they talk, especially if it’s a courageous or revealing sharing. Another option is to remind them of the ground rule that everyone participates.

- If group members direct too much attention to you when they’re speaking and not the group as a whole, look down or look away when they talk. Pass questions back to the group to be answered. If the pattern persists, speak about it in a session, preferably right after it has happened. Encourage everyone to be gatekeepers to one another.