

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes--5/4/2004

Present: Stacey Womack (Abuse Recovery Ministry Services), Patty Warford (private practice/Men's Resource Center), Don Voeks (Gresham Intimate Violence), Elsie Garland (Multnomah County Community Justice), Paula Manley (Manley Interventions), Robert Johnson (Bob Johnson Counseling), Dean Camarda (Abuse Recovery Ministry Services), Chris Huffine (Men's Resource Center/Women's Counseling Center), Songcha Bowman (Multicultural Counseling Services), Marjan Baradar (private practice/Men's Resource Center)

Minutes by Paula Manley

Topic: Experiential Exercises, Bob Johnson, guest speaker/trainer

As a facilitator you provide an activity or a challenge to a group. In doing the activity the client is providing a lot of information about their thoughts, beliefs, feelings, etc. This provides an opportunity to reshape in a non shaming way.

When you approach experiential learning, you need to proceed with caution. You need to be on your toes, aware and ready for it. Make the challenge extremely simple when you start. Don't do the activities in any group that lacks some sense of group culture. There needs to be some level of cohesiveness, trust and cooperation. Otherwise, experiential learning won't be effective. There has to be some concept of buy-in. They need to be to some degree willing and wanting to learn.

A facilitator may need to work through the group to get them open to experiential exercise.

The first concept is the concept of "challenge by choice". It is always a choice to participate or not in the activity. Bob took his group to the park for an activity. The first choice was whether or not the group wanted to go. That was a separate choice from deciding to do the activity but all participated. Bob's groups are 10-13 men per group.

Bob presented his ideas experientially.

One activity (done in this meeting with those present) – have clients go outside and find a pine cone that represents something about them. Process their responses. All these activities are about process.

Bob recommends that the facilitator not participate in the activity oneself, but instead observe the reactions of the clients.

Activity #2, (done in this meeting with those present)“Knots.” Move chairs out of the way to create enough space. Invite participants to stand in a circle, shoulder to shoulder. Tell group to reach up and cross arms. Then reach across the circle and hold hands with two different people. Tell clients to, without letting go of hands, untangle the circle, either making one circle or multiple circles.

After doing that, talk with the group while still in the circle. Ask clients questions such as:

How does it feel?

What was your first thought?

Did anyone wonder whether it could be done? How did you do it?

Can anyone tell me exactly what happened? (They won’t usually be able to say.)

What happened when you . . .

What was the first thing that happened?

First action? (Movement or suggested movement)

How did you deal with your discomfort?

Was there anything you told yourself that allowed you to stay in the activity (when uncomfortable)?

What were your (expectations, fears, hopes)?

How did you feel?

The experience helps focus on the nonverbal. Bob assumes they are capable of doing the exercise, and they come through. But you need to assess your group for safety. If it’s a really dangerous group, don’t do experiential exercise until there is more trust, cohesion and cooperation.

Certain exercises may teach certain concepts, but you will almost always see the group’s agenda present itself. You want to move people out of their comfort zone in a safe way. You can place constraints to try to demonstrate certain points, but you have to recognize that you may not meet your own agenda. You will get the *group’s* agenda.

The experiential exercises look for metaphor as to what is going on in the men’s lives. While clients can’t say exactly what happened, they *can* identify key things. The first step was some movement. The facilitator can add, in your life, you don’t know how to get from here to there, but you can take the one step. If we don’t know the step, maybe someone else does. What happens when we take the step? As you take each step, you see the next one (such as AA, talking to friends, going to groups, church, etc.). Group is one of the first places where clients can untangle the knot. When they are “having faith in the process,” and are doing multiple steps, the knot unties. There has to be some faith in something in order for the process to work. Faith is the opposite of fear. Abusive men are much more fear based. They need to move to more of a faith base.

Bob sometimes asks questions of the observer, but doesn't push it. At times, he may carefully ask *why* someone didn't participate. But one needs to do it sensitively. If you produce shame, you need to be careful and let the person talk about it. You must be non-judgmental and accepting, removing punishment and shame from the experience.

You must be very flexible. An activity might not take very long, depending on the level of the processing clients are up to. Clients remember and will talk about it weeks after. Experiential exercises also can create cohesiveness.

When the group can't/won't complete the exercise, there may be a point where you need to process that point, because the idea of the whole thing is about process. The point is not just to meet the goal. So Bob asks, "How does it feel" (to be stuck). If the challenge has the potential to solve the problem, look at *why* the group isn't solving it. You can point out the comparison with how things work, and process that

Activity #3 – put a rope on the floor to divide the room. Have everyone stand on one side of the rope. Say, in a moment, I will ask you to come over on the other side. For now, imagine the other side is a wonderful, happy, incredible place and you can't wait to connect with another person in a happy way. He then says, come on over. He then says, notice how you are feeling. Does anyone have any comments? In a minute, you'll come over here. Everything over here is horrible, sullen and awful. Come on over and meet each other. Notice how it feels? Which side of the room do you want to be on?

While the counselors all vacillated to the positive side, most clients want to be on the negative side. It's what they are used to and is comfortable. Bob asks, how does it feel? In any moment of life, who decides which side of the room you want to be in? He adds, you will be in the negative time of the room at times. How long do you want to stay there? We all decide. The one step a client takes may be changing the way he thinks or even having hope. This activity is a good metaphor for self-talk.

Occasionally, Bob will have the group look at an individual's place in this exercise, but only carefully. Bob also asks the group to talk about whether they think someone is ready to do a letter of accountability. He does not give the decision of going to that phase to the group, but he does want their opinion.

Experiential exercises elicit many feelings – be reading for challenge and a lot of interaction.

Closing exercise – make a circle. If you are willing and feel safe, come in and put your arms around each other. Now, step in as far as how happy you want to feel. Then, put all hands low in the center. Start with a low-pitched hum, and as you raise your arms, increase to a high pitch.

Bob tells his client that the #1 purpose is having fun. He says #2 is learning something.