

Tri-County Batterer Intervention Provider Network Meeting Minutes October 14, 2014

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Minutes by Rachel Smith, edited by Chris Huffine

Discussion Topic: What makes for an effective group facilitator?

What do you think makes a person a more gifted facilitator?

It might be easier to start with some examples of bad facilitation. One woman mentioned working with several different male facilitators in the past who ended up recreating the patriarchy in a group. They thought they knew more than her and were not self-aware enough to realize that they were recreating the stuff we were trying to attack. Related to this are facilitators who have not done their own work. Perhaps a female counterpoint to this has been that while some survivors who have facilitated groups have done very skilled work, some others have struggled with their own survivor issues and have ended up acting out within the group. They were not yet able to be at a place where they were fully open to hearing what the men had to say, instead imposing their own personal presumptions upon them.

Another problem has been facilitators being too self-disclosive. While some self-disclosure may be of use, at times some may unwittingly dominate the group with their stories and struggles. This has been a complaint some have heard from attendees over the years. Some facilitators may not be very interesting to the group or who may be out of touch.

Another key aspect of good facilitation is not getting into arguing or debating. This is an easy trap to fall into, as many admitted having done in the past. It can be quite tempting, although ultimately it's not particularly helpful.

All agree that it's important to have an egalitarian relationship with a co-facilitator. This isn't just related to gender, but also other qualities such as age or level of experience. If you're not mindful of all of these dimensions (and others) there can still be subtle power imbalances that the men will pick up and challenge the idea of egalitarianism that we're espousing. Another related positive are facilitators who are willing to talk about these sorts of imbalances when they appear. The negative of that, on the other hand, are people who don't raise these concerns when they are present. It's important to be as direct with your co-facilitator as you are with the men in the group. It's important to share any particular concerns you have directly with your co-facilitator. The other side of this is to be willing to be open to and solicitous of your co-facilitator's concerns. This is especially important if you're on the more powerful side of this. This can

include asking direct questions of your co-facilitator around their perception/experience of the balance, how they're feeling, any concerns, etc.

Another positive quality is the importance of having done your own work. That doesn't necessarily mean going to a therapist (although that would be one way). It's doing whatever you need to ground yourself to work well with these men. It's also not just doing it once and then you're done. It's an on-going process. Part of that includes asking yourself what you can do to improve. People who are not reflective can become more compromised facilitators.

In terms of positive self-disclosure, you need to ask yourself why are you sharing, what does it bring to the group, and how does it relate to the work being done here? Remember that everything you say and everything you don't say is willful. There should always be a clear reason why you do (or don't) say things. There are always guys that are going to want to know more, so keeping boundaries is important. Some people tend to be more private and others more open. Both are technically fine, so long as you're reflective about what you're bringing to the group. One common form of self-disclosure is to acknowledge that you, too, are imperfect and that everyone, including the facilitators, have things to work on.

There are also cultural considerations to be made. Sometimes it's rude to not self-disclose. There is also the concept of cultural sensitivity: what is it culturally about this man and how can I appropriately respond and help him with his work in a way that is beneficial.

Another important quality to model is humility. For example, I am not here to fix you and tell you how to live. This can include practicing your own accountability when you make mistakes. For example, if you start the group late, acknowledge that you started the group late.

Another positive quality is consistency. That way the men know what to expect. This includes consistency in the group structure, enforcement of the rules, group interactions, etc.

Another positive quality is being a good driver in the group. The individuals in the group are where they're at - emotionally - and being able to facilitate is to "drive" that movement. Whatever you're trying to teach that evening is what is important, but you also need to drive the group so that they're engrossed in the content together.

I think it's important for facilitators to notice the power dynamic in a group and to address it well. How you make people aware without suppression in a negative way at the same time modeling how you deal in your life with similar situations.

Sense of humor is also a good quality, but you have to be careful because they will take it as sarcasm. Humor can be a very effective tool, but it's a high powered tool that needs to be used correctly. This is a similar challenge to expressing warmth toward the men without colluding with them - same with your humor (i.e., you can come off as colluding, patronizing, etc.).

That ties into "who's your target what is the purpose of your joke?" what are you doing with your jokes? Also, playfulness is another tool that can be useful, but also needs to be used carefully and in the right way. It's another way of showing warmth, but without colluding. This can convey some appropriate compassion and disarm them a bit. What we are all bringing is all part of getting them to a place of being able to receive what we are trying to get across to them (with the humility, humor, etc.), but it's a balancing act.

Another important facilitation skill is to not let only one or a few men become the focus of the group, which can happen using these tools. It is a real skill for people to be able to see the entire room, name the men in it, and bring them along. The technical term for this is "bridging": find the men who are "hiding out" and need an invitation to engage. It is also important to know everyone by name. One exception to being aware of everyone, is intentionally letting someone sit and "cook for a little bit", as long as it's willful, I think it can be helpful. Let the message percolate, but don't put them on the spot too much: check in with them once during the group (i.e., "the party's over here, you're welcome, but you're not going to be forced.").

Another thing that we have not talked about that could be a topic in and of itself is knowing when to pace and when to lead, when to confront and when to support. The danger there is that if you're too supportive or too pacing you can get into colluding. On the other hand, if you're too leading and too confrontational you can run into cement. It's an art to be able to balance those. I have seen some programs that focus heavily on the confrontation and others that focus heavily on the pacing of being supportive and compassionate. Typically, I am hearing that people are realizing that earlier in their work they were too confrontational and that wasn't working.

Some male facilitators, especially new male leaders, want to be rescuers, rescue them from being offended. "I have been there, it's ok". Others have experienced that with newer facilitators - male or female. For those who were trained as therapists, we are trained to make people more comfortable. As new facilitators, the inclination is to overcompensate for making them uncomfortable by doing this rescuing. It can be a good strategy to debrief this kind of stuff after group.

Is there a different skill set for men and women facilitators? Several people said yes. The rescuing seems like a bigger deal with the male facilitators. It seems like one difference is what is needed to be comfortable around a bunch of men. As a female, it is salient that you're not just sitting with a group of men, but a group of men that have power and control issues. It's more about remembering who you're sitting with and how they're perceiving you. I don't think that men and women need different skill sets, but an understanding. It's modeling the egalitarian thing that we are trying to get at the bottom line. Another suggested that the position of being the woman in the room with a group of men and there is actually a power that you hold. The art is to not let them throw you and get control of the room. It's a human quality, not a set of skills, to be able to hold your ground. It's a part of the process of getting them where they need to be. You have to be ready to be in an environment where you are perceived as inferior and be able to

change that mindset. That takes a strong leader because very few people can actually do that. It's a strength and a gift - some people are better at it than others.

Another important quality is to see the men as individuals and not just as a single group. Some of these men are quite sexist. e.g., they may respect you as the female face but not the female receptionist. We can start with general ideas of how we think this guy is going to be, but also need to be careful not to be working with stereotypes and objectifying these guys and to see them as individuals.

This is a global issue. Not just a DV issue, a world issue. We all struggle with that. An important trait as a leader is to remember that you are a part of this global culture.

It's also important to know the energy of the group - some of the men will be aware of the energy and use it to their advantage. It's our responsibility as leaders to evaluate the energy in the room, the cohesiveness in the room and to use those to actually facilitate the topic.

There is a lot of literature and evidence about responsivity (aka flexibility) being an important skill. I want to also acknowledge that not all groups have the structure that allows for such flexibility, and some of these qualities apply more to facilitators in programs with flexibility and not all groups have that.

I have found that each group has its own culture and I can trace that culture back to who was in the room when that group first started. Knowing how they got to that culture helps with all other facets of facilitating each group.

Part of what being a group leader is setting the tone, setting the group culture. One thing I am doing with advanced training is how to talk about sex in the group and how to set the tone that it's ok to be talking about sex. It's on the group leaders to set that tone with what we ask, the pictures on the wall in the group room, where we sit in the group room.

Also helpful to talk about the women's experiences. Talk to the men about the women they know. Talk about survivors. One thing I always do is talk about the women I know. Male or female, if you haven't had a lot of contact, it's easy to get into that colluding when you don't have the context of what SHE is going through.

Also important to think critically, to not just accept the men's stories at face value. For example, "let me see if this makes sense: you were just sitting there and she yelled at you? That doesn't make sense. I don't understand, why was she so upset?" Asking genuine questions like that to get them to see how it doesn't "add up."

Another challenge is having that skepticism and monitoring my own counter transference and not projecting and what I am bringing into the room. For me it's the reading between the lines part. I am a very concrete person - I see something and I am like ok that is what is happening, but

in this context it's usually not. Even though it's a struggle at times, having a co-facilitator to talk about what is happening and what is happening is helpful.

Is it a good quality that you have to like these guys? I am thinking that on some level you do. I am more impressed with having a genuine connection with these men at the same time as having knowledge of what they've done. You don't necessarily have to like them, but you'll be more successful if you do. You have to at some point separate the person from the act without diminishing the act itself. You also don't want to get too invested in one or a few of the men. All we can do is seek to influence them. You have to like the work, not necessarily the men. They can pick up on that and it can make a difference.