

Key Characteristics of an Effective Support Group Leader

Knowledge of group behavior and leadership roles.

It is helpful to understand what it takes to be a member of a group as well as a leader. Some basic understanding of how people behave in groups, the natural progression of group development and how to encourage the group's growth is important. Many effective facilitators have picked up their skills through books on group leadership or have taken a workshop to help them gain these skills.

Possess a basic commitment to the Self-Help Process.

Leading an effective group begins with a commitment to three basic assumptions;

- 1.) Each member can make a contribution to the group.
- 2.) Each member is the ultimate authority on his/her needs and what will work for him/her.
- 3.) Communications need to be open and honest to promote positive group experiences.

Are capable of recognizing and controlling their personal views.

The effective leader is able to separate their personal needs from those of the group or member needs. Those having their own agenda or "axe to grind" can end up promoting their views and opinions over the groups. It is necessary at times, for the leader to step out of their role for the purpose of expressing personal needs and opinions.

Are willing to work toward the group's goals.

The effective leader is enthusiastic about the goals of the group and is quite willing to work for their accomplishment. They see themselves as part of a team and are emotionally and physically committed to the team's success. They actively and creatively look for ways to give members the opportunity to participate in the process of setting and carrying out the goals of the group.

Possesses the ability to initiate activity.

Every leader seeks to develop shared responsibility and leadership for the group. They refrain from identifying the group as "my group" or its members as "my people." There will, however, be occasions when no one else is capable, ready or willing to do what needs to be done. In these instances the facilitator must be prepared to get the ball rolling.

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Are comfortable with the expression of emotion, tension and conflict.

There is no escaping the fact that emotion, tension and conflict are likely to arise in a support group. It is important that you are comfortable with this, not only as it occurs in others, but in yourself as well. You need to expect that conflict within the group will appear and that criticism will be directed towards you as the facilitator. Learn to look at criticism objectively and try to avoid taking it personally. Facilitators know basic communication skills and are willing to look at their own behavior to see when they need to make changes.

Are committed to the welfare of the group and all its members.

The commitment lies with the group- how to make it succeed, how to meet needs, etc. This will sometimes require a willingness to look at the big picture and serve as visionary for the group. A good leader will focus upon building a sense of community, group cohesiveness and consensus decision making within the group.

Value and respect each member as an individual.

Members are seen as equals, deserving mutual respect and consideration for the values they hold as individuals. Instead of thinking of the participants as “manpower” to get things done, facilitators see each person as an individual who is a potential teacher; having a reservoir of knowledge and experience from which others may benefit.

Emphasize the positive aspects of the support group.

It can be easy to get caught up in the problems and to view life from a depressed perspective. In an effective support group, negative emotions are addressed, but do not become the main focus. People are allowed to have their feelings without hasty problem solving; while still being guided to their strengths and away from a victim focus.

Encourages members to identify/evaluate alternatives for themselves.

The effective facilitator does not decide what is right for the members. Each member is encouraged to examine problem solving strategies and potential solutions for themselves. Leaders provide a process by which members explore options and alternatives and they offer their support as the members carry out this process and arrive at their respective choices.