When groups go wrong - troubleshooting

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In the previous two chapters, we've looked at small group dynamics and the art of facilitating a group. In this chapter, we're going to concentrate on when things go wrong. In particular:

1. How you might become aware that they are going wrong
2. The different factors that might have made it happen
3. Ways of preventing things going wrong and
4. Some possible solutions for when it does happen.

Hopefully, you've read the previous two chapters otherwise some of what follows may not make sense. Most of the issues we're going to write about relate to groups that meet at least a few times, but much of this applies to shorter term groups as well.

General rules about dysfunctional behaviour in groups

It is important to think carefully about why people *behave* in the way that they do in groups. Things can go wrong because of

- *Group* dysfunctional behaviour.
- *Individual* dysfunctional behaviour.
- The *facilitator* not getting it quite right.

Remember it is the BEHAVIOUR that affects the group, not the person. It can be that they feel challenged and uncomfortable, or may be demonstrating learned behaviour that they are unaware of. It may be a reaction to feeling anxious about their capability, or having different beliefs and values from others in the group. In such cases the value of working in a group may be that their peers can give them feedback IN THEIR OWN INTEREST that may help them adapt their behaviour, both in the group and outside it. It is likely, but not definite, that an individual's behaviour in a group setting is reflected in their behaviour and interactions elsewhere, to a greater or lesser extent.

It is also important that the members of an educational group are not there to receive psychotherapy - unless it has been specified differently. If individual difficulties at that level are uncovered, you should speak to the group member, either in, or outside the group, and offer to direct them towards external help.

But if the behaviour is truly dysfunctional - that is, it is affecting the functioning of the group, you need to handle it in some way and not ignore it. You have a responsibility to the group as a whole, and, while caring for each individual, you cannot let the work of the whole group be disrupted.

So, you will need to challenge an individual's behaviour if it is producing group disruption - if the process is preventing the task and support from happening. 'Disturbances take precedence' (Jacques).

How do you know things are going wrong?

If you are not sure how your group is doing, Jacques (reference needed) tells us to look at the following 5 areas (mnemonic PeCANS):

1. Participation

Is everyone taking part, either verbally or non-verbally? It can help to map out the lines of communication within the group. In the previous chapter, we introduced the idea of these lines of communication being like the strands in a spider's web. From this web, you can work out

- Who is talking the most?
- Who is talking to whom in the group?
- Whether there are sub-groups?
- Whether you are talking too much?

This might show that all communication is taking place through you, which might suggest to you that the group is locked into dependency, and that you might need to move to a more co-operative mode.
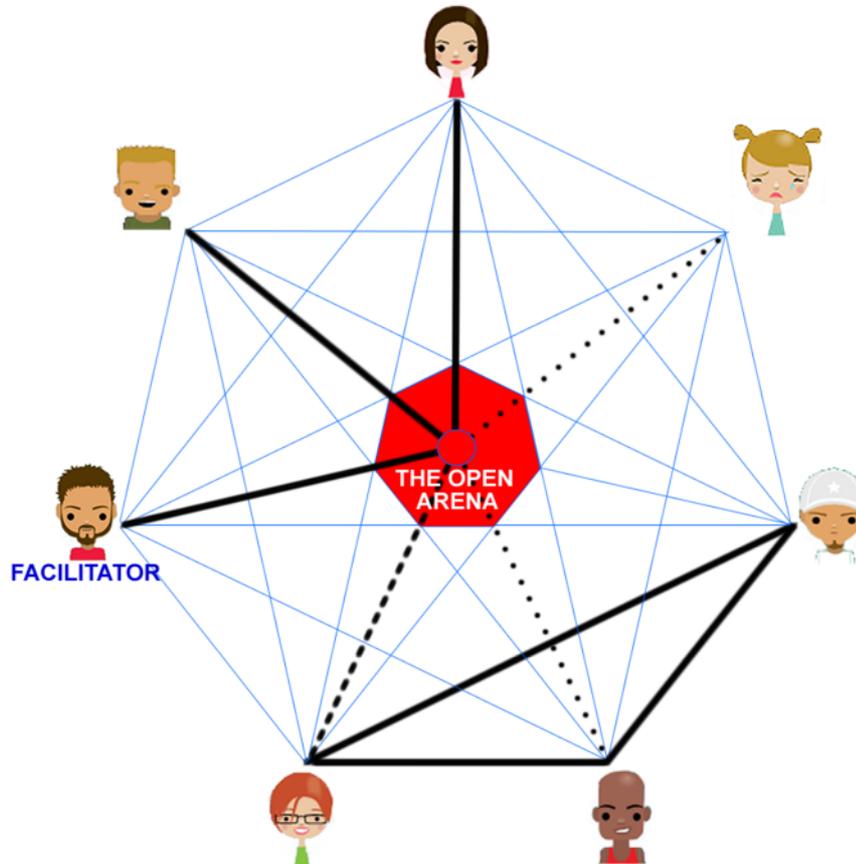
In this spider's web of a small group of seven, the blue lines represent all the *possible* lines of communication. The open arena is where questions, views and issues are thrown to the group at large as opposed to any one particular individual. The solid black lines represent dominant communication whilst the dotted ones indicate lower levels of interaction. You can see that a sub-group of three has formed in the bottom right corner. Perhaps they're making fun of the girl in the top right corner – who, as a result, shows little participation. It's only the two in the top left corner (blonde boy and black haired girl) and the facilitator who are truly participating in the small group discussion.

2. Communication
- Does everyone seem on the same wavelength?
- Are they all using the same sort of language?
- Can an individual say if they don't understand?

3. Atmosphere
- How does the group feel?
- How it makes YOU feel will give you a good idea.
- Is it feeling cosy, hostile, warm, querulous, formal or informal?

4. Norms
- Has the group established a code of behaviour?
- Are they sticking to the group rules of courtesy, tolerance, and encouraging each other's contributions?

5. Support
- Is the group cohesive? Does it feel a supportive environment? Are people able to say what they really feel?
- Are there mostly 'I' statements, or are they of the type 'One should…' or 'Doctors should…'?

At a superficial level a group may appear bored or irritated but on a deeper level, this may arise because:	
• The task vs. maintenance balance seems wrong to them.	*Participation/Communication*
• The group members do not see the relevance of a task.	*Communication*
• There is lack of motivation, because the members feel that they have not agreed the learning outcomes.	*Norms*
• There is lack of cohesion - the group has not yet formed properly.	*Support*
• The group would like to be in a more co-operative mode, and feel held back, either by themselves or the facilitator.	*Support*

So, why does it go wrong?

Is it your entire fault? Probably not! Here are four questions to ask yourself:

1. Is this just a natural stage in the life of the group – namely, storming?
2. Is it just a reaction to an external challenge? Has some external factor made the group move back from performing to storming?
3. Has something changed within the group? Is there a new member that has not been fully integrated?
4. Are there deeper reasons for the dysfunctional behaviour? (see below)

Deeper reasons for the dysfunctional behaviour

The individual, or the group, has some agenda of their own that they bring to the group. This may, occasionally, be related to another individual in the group - such as some past dispute, professional or personal. It may be related to some external factor, such as a pending exam. It may be related to distress caused by something outside the group, and this in turn may have been reawakened by something going on within the group - such as a discussion about a bereaved patient. Heron describes the three main areas in which he feels dysfunction arises, each of which can affect the group dynamic in a negative way:

> **Group dysfunction can result from:**
>
> **1. Cultural oppression**: the group members bring their own ideas of acceptable, or normal, behaviour. This might include competitiveness, or attitudes to emotional disclosure.
> **2. Educational alienation:** they bring their own ideas of learning objectives. This might inhibit the areas in which they are prepared to learn, for example only wanting to work towards the next exam.
> **3. Psychological defensiveness:** anxiety or fear from the immediate situation of being in a learning group, and/or uncertainties about what might happen.

These in turn may arise from a *deeper* held anxiety related to:

- **Acceptance anxiety**: *'Will I be accepted and liked?'*
  This may cause displacement in the individual into submissive behaviours with dependence on the leader, permission seeking, and withdrawal from emotions.
- **Orientation anxiety:** *'Will I understand what is going on?'*
  This may cause flight behaviours with avoidance of the group activity, by theorising, humour, gossip, or the forming of subgroups.
- **Performance anxiety:** *'Am I competent enough to do what is needed?'*
  This may get displaced into attacking behaviour, which may be aimed at the facilitator, other members, or an external subject.

How can you prevent things from going wrong?

Prevention is better than cure! And there are things you can do in advance to maximise the chances of success.

Review practical arrangements

The way that you set up the group is important in preventing things going wrong later, but the way in which you do this will be influenced by the type of group, and the length of time it will be together. The pre-session checklist below may prove helpful.

Pre-Session Checklist

Information you need about the group:
- Do you have accurate information about the membership?
- Do you have an up to date email list?
- Is there any other information that you want in advance- do you want them to fill in a needs assessment, or learning styles questionnaire

Information the group needs:
- Have you sent out all the necessary information in advance?
- Perhaps an induction pack (see box below)

Venue, I.T. and things:
- Accessibility of the venue – access routes, parking, etc.
- Comfort- temperature etc.
- Seating arrangements
- Refreshments
- Computer, audio visual aids, if required
- Flipcharts, pens , paper

What an induction pack might include:
- Information about the course
- Information about the group membership
- Information about you and any other facilitators
- The programme for the first meeting
- Details of the venue, parking and timings
- Any preparation that is expected of the members
- Some guidance and information about learning and working in groups. (Kindred: Once upon a group)

And finally - have you planned the first session in an appropriate mode for this group? (see Heron's modes of facilitation in the book *Chapter 12: How Groups Work – the dynamics*)

At the beginning of the session:

- Arrive in plenty of time to greet people as they arrive. The more people are made to feel truly welcomed, the more they are likely to engage.
- You have enough group forming time. We can't stress enough how important this is. A group of people who get to know each other are more likely to respect and value each other's views when it comes to small group discussion.
- Make space for timings and breaks. And try to agree on them with the group.
- Achieve some degree of consensus as to the agenda. This usually means negotiation and renegotiation.
- Establish the educational contract (what is expected of them and what they can expect of you) and then go on to introduce the group rules.

Don't forget about group rules

Group rules are covered in detail in the book *Chapter 13: Teaching and Facilitating Small Groups.* They cover things like punctuality, confidentiality, constructive criticism, owning your own statements, one person speaking at a time and so on.

Setting group rules can sometimes feel a bit 'heavy' and are sometimes overlooked by facilitators; but they are *incredibly* important. Why? Because they lay down some jointly negotiated boundaries which members agree not to cross. Crossing them is when group dysfunction sets in. Setting group rules early on helps synchronise each individual's understanding as to what is expected of them and what is considered unacceptable. Group rules also help create a suitable environment to share and be honest. Most experienced facilitators will tell you that they never regret introducing the group rules - they only regret it later if they have left them out! When things go wrong in a group, you will find that taking the group members back to the group rules that they had agreed, will often resolve the issue.

Specific *group* problem behaviours

Group and individual dysfunctional behaviours have a lot in common, and one may cause the other. The different behaviours may present in many ways, but some of the commonly observed are:

> **Problem Behaviours in Groups**
> - **Flight:** The group members collectively avoid the topic. Sometimes people may leave.
> - **Fight/challenge:** This is usually directed towards the leader, but may be towards an individual or subgroup.
> - **Humour:** This is a good way of trivialising any topic. It ensures light heartedness and a lack of depth in the discussion.
> - **Scapegoating:** Everything would be so much easier if it wasn't for the......'[Department of Health, difficult patients, state of the country]. This avoids dealing with the particular issue.
> - **Collusion:** The group collectively colludes to avoid certain issues - either external tasks that have been set, such as preparation work, or internal process going on within the group that they wish to ignore, as it might prove challenging.
> - **Fragmentation:** The group splits into well-defined subgroups, and put up strong barriers between them. The different subgroups develop different agendas.
> - **Childishness:** The group may get stuck in child mode. They may be highly dependent on the facilitator and unable to move away from this.

You can see that most of these behaviours are avoidance behaviours - the group is wishing at a superficial level to stay away from issues that might feel uncomfortable or challenging, and might cause upset. You might find it helpful to draw parallels with working in a team in the practice and the difficulties that arise there.

Dealing with *group* problem behaviours

At the beginning:

A baggage check: If you anticipate some of this happening, run a baggage check.

> **Useful questions to start off a baggage check:**
> - Is there anything anyone wants to say before we start?
> - Are there any major things going on for anyone?
> - What sort of week have you had?
> - Is there any unfinished business from the last session?
> - How did you feel after the last session?"
> - Make it more inclusive by going round the group giving each person the opportunity to say something, or ask for everyone to contribute but not necessarily in a particular order.

The question you are asking will be influenced by what has happened previously - for example if you felt that there was unfinished business from the previous session, or for doing a checkout for external issues that will affect the individual's and the group's ability to be free to learn. It is an opportunity for you to bring up avoidance behaviours that you have observed: *'I felt last week that we steered clear of difficult issues, and I was wondering afterwards why that was.'*

> **Baggage check using a bin**
> *If you like making it more theatrical, you can offer the participants the chance to ceremonially 'dump' the baggage in an empty bin in the middle of the group. The bin is put to one side for the duration of the group and the members can choose at the end of the group whether they reclaim their baggage or not*

Group forming games: A common reason for dysfunctional behaviour in a group is that the group members do not yet feel comfortable enough with each other to do this work. You may choose to introduce some more group forming exercises before delving into group task.

During the session:
First of all, you need to make sure that you do not in any way collude with the group or an individual in these behaviours.
Other practical options:

- Call for time out: primarily to give you some time to think or the opportunity to discuss things with a colleague. Either call for a coffee break, or put the group into pairs for a structured exercise related to the topic.
- Re-energise the group with an activity: break into small groups for an exercise that bumps up the energy levels.

> *The group sits in a circle, with one chair too few. The person without a chair says, for example, 'All those with glasses on change places', which they do, and the person left standing then calls the next descriptor, and so on. Stop when it feels as if it is beginning to lose momentum.*

- Revisit the group rules: get the group to decide which, if any, of the rules are not being adhered to? Is this a root cause behind the dysfunction?
- Confront the process yourself (but remember to stay within the group rules): *'I'm not sure what is going on here but I'm feeling a bit uncomfortable with/about…'*
- Encourage the group to confront the process (and hopefully challenge behaviour): *'How are you all feeling at the moment, shall we just go round and check?'*.
  This could be a time when you can bring out your de Bono red hat (more on de Bono's hats in chapter XXX Different Facilitation Methods).

How to reset group dynamics

1. Get the group to problem solve for themselves:

You can give the group information about group dynamics; by explaining what happens in groups, you can give a structure that the group members can relate to what is happening here. That may then put *them* in a position where *they* are able to offer a way forwards.

2. Use feedback exercises

Alternatively, you can set up exercises that enable the group to look at their behaviour, and the process that is going on in the group. For example, using the Johari window as a starting point for an exercise in feedback (more on Johari in chapter XXX Educational Theories worth knowing). Here are some more specific exercises:

a) *Giving feedback about each other*

These exercises can seem a bit scary to try for the first time, but our experience has been that it is a powerful tool for valuing each other, and giving more challenging feedback in a positive and honest way. The emotions it produces are usually provoked by receiving positive feedback from others.

1. *Each person writes on a piece of paper 3 comments about each other person in the group, and how they come across to them. Each person also writes 3 comments about how they feel that they come across to the other group members. They each collect the pieces of paper that relate to themselves and read them. The exercise is completed by a round where each person describes their reaction to the comments they have received, and whether they were what they were expecting or not.*
2. *Two chairs are set in the middle of the circle. One group member sits in one chair, and the other members of the group take it in turns to sit opposite them, and give them feedback about something that they value in that person, or an area which they find difficult. Everyone should have a turn in the 'hot seat' but not necessarily in the other chair. It is important to stress the group rules before starting.*
3. *For more general discussion, you can try a fishbowl exercise where a few members of the group sit in an inner circle of chairs and discuss what has been happening in the group. The outer group observe the inner group, and then a general discussion is opened up afterwards.*

b) *Giving feedback to the group about yourself*

Another way of looking at process differently is by using a 'sculpting' exercise. Two examples of these are given here, but there are more! It is amazing how powerful using a *spatial* exercise can be: highlighting process issues within a group, but also by offering some solutions.

Sculpting

1. *The group members are invited to assess for themselves on a scale of 1-10 how much they feel they are getting from the group in terms of learning for themselves. They are then invited to put themselves on a line across the room from 1-10. The facilitator then asks those who have put themselves on a low score (i.e. not achieving their learning): 'What would need to happen for you to increase your learning score?', and give them each a chance to express this. The group can then look at possible solutions.*

> 2. *The facilitator points to an imaginary centre of the group, as a place in the room. The group members are then invited to place themselves in relation to the centre, as to how close they feel to it and how included in the group that they feel. The facilitator then asks them each in turn to comment on where they have placed themselves and how they feel about where the other people have placed themselves. The facilitator can ask if there is any placing that they feel uncomfortable about. This can be a useful exercise where someone is feeling excluded from the group, as it gives the rest of the group the opportunity to draw them back in, within the exercise.*

Or you can use metaphors: for some people using drawings, symbols, or other representations of how they are feeling can be helpful.

> *I asked a group of Training Programme Directors (TPDs) to go out for a walk in Windsor Great Park and to bring back anything they found which represented how they were feeling as a TPD. They came back with twigs, logs, acorns, pieces of grass.... and each in turn explained how they felt this represented them and their feelings.*
>
> *Another time, they were asked to describe the 'hat' that they wore as a facilitator, and why it represented their style.*

c) *Feeding back to oneself*
   Or you can use more formal objective methods, life Belbin and Emotional intelligence assessments, to get the individual to see how they are performing relative to others in the group.

3. Alter the group membership

Sometimes, the level of dysfunction is so great that you might need to ask an individual to leave or join another small group.

> *We were working with a group of GP trainees. One of them had moved into GP training as she had been working in O&G and had been advised that with the workforce situation, she would have no future in that particular career path. Her behaviour in the group was dysfunctional: she was often criticising the other members because they showed an enthusiasm for their career choice in GP, which she felt was a second rate career choice. The individuals and the facilitator challenged her on several occasions, but it produced no change. Eventually it was decided, after discussion with her and her trainer, that her time might be better spent in some other educational activity that she would find more fulfilling, so she spent the time completing a research project in her practice. The group was then able to get on with enthusiasm.*

Dealing with sub-groups

Sometimes there is a collection of group member who form an alliance within the larger group. Sub-groups may pre-exist or form within the life of a group. The formation of subgroups is less likely to occur the smaller the group. People in a sub-group like to sit together, and often pass remarks (or exchange knowing looks) to each other during group time.

Why do sub-groups matter?

A sub-group is potentially very powerful at disrupting the group - creating an 'us' and 'them' climate and sometimes by scapegoating a particular individual. Sometimes, it can be initiated as a form of attack on the leadership, but is often due to performance anxiety.

What can you do about a subgroup?

Sometimes, sub-groups can be very useful: if they want to go down a certain path with you they will often 'pull in' the rest of the group too. So, first decide if the sub-group is serving a helpful purpose or not. If the sub-group is being disruptive:

- Changing the seating is a very powerful intervention.
- Split the group into smaller groups to break up the sub-group. For example, by numbering individuals around the circle 1-2-3, 1-2-3, 1-2-3 and then making 1's work together, 2's together etc.
- Revisit the group rules: If the subgroup is behaving badly (e.g. not valuing a specific individual) revisit the group rules and discuss which is being broken.
- And at times, you may need to confront the subgroup because of the behaviour that is occurring.

Specific *individual* problem behaviours

As with group dysfunction, some *general* behaviours that you may observe are:

- **Lack of motivation** - the individual does not want to be there and would rather be elsewhere.
- **Boredom** - the individual does not see the relevance of what is going on.
- **Physical or emotional discomfort** - the individual may have a hangover, be tired, or had a row with their partner that morning (See Maslow in Chapter XXX Educational Theories that make a difference).

But there are particular types of individual behaviour which may become evident when they are in a group, and there are certain skills which you might find use to deal with them.

The Dominating Talker

Behaviour: Constantly interrupts, talks over people, is sure that their point of view is the most important, puts down others' contribution and causes boredom in the rest of the group.

Problem: If one person is talking too much, it means the others are not able to participate.

Possible solutions:
- Focus on the others and encourage talking in turn around the group.
  'Shall we hear what others might like to say'
- Set up a structured exercise to look at the level of each individual's contribution, and how the members feel about it.
- Challenge: *'You come across as talking more than some of the others'*. Be careful: in the short term this interaction might focus the group on the dominant member even more!
- Use a non-verbal intervention such as gently holding your hand up to signal them to cut them short.

The Silent-Submissive Participant

Behaviour: sits quietly, reluctant to verbally join in and generally watches what is going on. There may be some non-verbal participation.

*Problem***:** If they don't participate, their point of view may never be heard – limiting the cross fertilisation of ideas. Those 'hidden' views may offer different powerful perspectives.

Possible solutions:
- First, figure out if it is a problem. Although they may be sitting quiet, they may be reflecting quite a lot internally. It might be your problem, not theirs
- Encourage them to say something early on. An easy contribution that they find non-threatening might encourage them to engage more later on.

- Break up the large group task - they may find it easier working in smaller groups or writing down ideas individually and then reporting back.
- Encourage them to participate in other tasks, such as writing on the flipchart.
- Confront the behaviour in a sensitive manner: that is an observation of the behaviour, not a judgement of it. *'Sally, we've heard what a number of the other members in the group think, but we've not heard yours. How do you think or feel on the matter?'*

The Silent-Powerful Participant

Behaviour: Says little and seems bored. Will often watch what is going on, little non-verbal participation and never volunteers. Can make others feel uncomfortable. They may even be doing another task, such as reading the newspaper.

Problem: They can dampen the educational climate which may infect others and is unfair on the group as a whole.

Possible solutions:
- Encourage them to say something early on: *'I would really like to hear what you think about this John'*
- Encourage them to participate in a specific task, such as scribe or time keeper.
- Challenge without being belittling: *'Jack, I noticed that we've not heard much from you and it makes me wonder if you're interested in what we are discussing. Is there another approach that you would prefer?'*
- Confront the behaviour: reflect back to them how their behaviour is making others feel. 'Sonya, I feel really uncomfortable about you not joining in, I wonder if others do too?'

The Expert

Behaviour: Has always got an academic answer to everything. They use acronyms unknown to anyone else and tend to talk to the air, rather than to an individual, often as a speech. Confirms, or more often disputes, whatever is being said (even the principles of peer learning!).

Problem: Can create tension in the group by belittling the views of others or by confusing them. Tries to make self appear intelligent/superior and others less so.

Possible solutions:
- Make sure that others are able to respond.
  'Mmm.. Can we hear what the others think about that?'
  'I'm afraid I don't understand, so I expect some of the others don't either.'
  'I would be interested to see how we can make that more relevant to the rest of our discussion.'
- Try to paraphrase what has been said in order to encourage others to get involved.

- Challenge the behaviour: *'Fair enough, but I would really like to know a bit more about what YOU personally think or feel about this.'*

The Joker

Behaviour: Brings humour in at every opportunity - sometimes appropriately but sometimes to deflect some real emotional content that might be surfacing. They can produce an anecdote or joke for every occasion.

Problem: Cracking jokes results in discussions being kept at a superficial level. Whilst some humour can enhance the educational climate, too much can hamper it.

Possible solutions:
- Acknowledge the humour, and then suggest it can be kept for later over coffee.
- Refocus the discussion *with* humour: *'Jake, you're such a comedian - you should be on TV! Anyway, let's be a bit more serious and get back to the discussion.'*
- Refocus the discussion *without* humour: *'Okay, enough of the jokes. But seriously, getting back to the discussion, what do people think of...'*
- Is it time for a break? Perhaps the joke is an indication of the joker disengaging – which might mean others are disengaging too.
- Challenge the behaviour: *'Whilst I like some of your humour Sarah, it is interesting that you like to turn everything into a joke. I wonder why that is?'*

The Broken Record*

Behaviour: uses every possible chance to bring up the same subject - a dispute at work, the trouble with patients, no-one understands me and so on. Because of these, rejects solutions from other members in the group. *'Everything would be alright if it wasn't for my wooden leg'*.

*'You sound like a broken record' is a saying used when you want to shut someone up who is saying the same thing over and over again.

Problem: Can limit group discussion by going around in circles. By blaming everyone or everything else, directs group members away from what *they* can do to make things better.

Possible solutions:
- Acknowledge the problem and deflect it: *'I think we have discussed this before Mark. Can I suggest we move on? Otherwise, we'll end up going around in circles and get nowhere.'*
- Use other members in the group to deflect it: *'I think we've discussed this before Mark so rather than spending time going over it again, let's ask what others would like to bring to the discussion.'*
- Stacking: ask else who wants to say something, and give them an order to bring their point to the discussion, so that they know they will get a chance.

- Acknowledge the lack of progress: *'I don't think we've really helped you much with that, so perhaps we had better leave it for today.'*
- Challenge the behaviour: *'We seem to have come up with a lot of solutions, but you seem to find it difficult to try any of them.'*

The Chatterer

Behaviour: Unable to stay quiet. If not talking in the group, they will turn to their neighbour and start a rival discussion, make a joke, or run a private conversation that excludes the rest of the group.

Problem: The chatterer stops the person they're chatting to from getting involved in the discussion (as well as themselves). May also distract the group at large.

Possible solutions:
- Include them in the group: *'What do you think about this Dhilan?'*
- Ask them to repeat back what someone else has just said - they may be able to talk and listen at the same time!
- Change the seating or divide into smaller groups, so that they're not sitting with their usual neighbour.
- Remind them or the group as a whole of the group rules about one person speaking at a time.
- Point out that sometimes other people might think they are talking about THEM.
- Check whether others are becoming bored with the topic as well.

The Intellectual Thinker-Analyst

Behaviour: Avoids anything to do with emotions - produces intellectual arguments and interrupts with rationalisations if any emotions are being discussed. Refers to emotions as touchy feely.

Problem: The group discussion can be kept at an intellectual level with the feelings of individual members being ignored. Feelings are important too, especially if you want to get people to change.

Possible solutions:
- Acknowledge what they say, then provide a 'safe space' to encourage the 'intellect' to talk about his/her feelings. *'That's very interesting and stimulating, but I would really like to know what you actually **feel** about this?*
- Encourage other members to talk about their feelings.
- Lead a discussion about whether the group wants feelings to be on the agenda.
- Challenge: *'It seems to me Declan that you would prefer not to discuss anything to do with feelings. I wonder whether you have thought about that?'*

Challenging behaviour in general

Anticipating the behaviour can help the way that you manage it.

Once a group member has started behaving in a certain way in the group, if they remain unchallenged, or have no insights, the behaviour is unlikely to change. As facilitator, you can to some extent pre-empt the behaviour by

- Arranging the seating so that sub groups are separated, or
- Starting with an exercise where everyone has to contribute, to encourage more equal participation.

A well thought out plan can often make it more difficult for some behaviours to be shown, or at least can prevent them dominating the session.

Just before you're about to challenge behaviour, ask yourself the following 5 things:

> 1. What is my intention at this very moment? Is the confrontation in the interest of the group or the individual?
> 2. Do I want to punish them, for bad behaviour?
> 3. Am I misusing my role as the facilitator?
> 4. Do I feel calm enough to do it, or am I too angry, or upset, or tearful?
> 5. Is my timing right? Is there time to do this properly?

What is the best way to challenge behaviour?

It is apparent that there are times when you will have to challenge the group or an individual member, if the group is to address the task and achieve the learning that is intended. Challenge needs to be done sensitively, and ALWAYS in the interest of the individual(s) receiving the challenge.

- As challenger (or confronter) you need to get the right balance between pussy footing around the issue, and sledge hammering.
- It is important that you own the statements, as in the group rules, so that it does not turn into the whole group attacking the individual.
  *'**I** find it difficult when...'* - not *'**We**...'*
- When challenging you should always remain non-judgemental about individual behaviours. To do this, be *specific* about your *observations* of the behaviour and the *effect* it has on you.
  'When I heard you say xxx, I felt yyy'
- There is no point challenging behaviour if you cannot give an alternative suggestion as to how it might be modified.
  'I would really like it if...'
- Remember: challenge the behaviour, not the person!

If the behaviour is affecting the group members, this then becomes group property. Although it can feel less threatening to you as the facilitator to challenge behaviour on a one-to-one basis, you should aim to do it sensitively *within the group* (with the interest of all the group members as the basis for the interaction).

We were working with a group of established medical educators. One of the participants always arrived late, and then asked questions about things that had already been discussed. She always left early, as she had to pick up her children, and then missed the discussion about the preparation required for the following week. It was a cause of great irritation to the other group members, who had discussed her time keeping with her, but she felt her reasons were valid.

One of the members challenged her: 'When I noted you leaving ahead of the ending time each week and arriving late each day, I felt frustration and anger. Frustration because I am concerned that you may not value the group work and us, and angry that I am able to make arrangement with similar challenges and stay for the full session. I really value the group work and my colleagues' efforts and would love it if you were able to do so as well.'

The recipient of this was completely taken aback, and had not realised that she was causing upset. She checked out whether the rest of the group felt the same way, most of who did, and as a result she made considerable efforts to improve her arrival and departure timing.

Challenge that takes place within the group achieves several things:
- The other members of the group have seen a demonstration of constructive, helpful challenge.
- The interaction has been observed by all, so that the individual can be supported and helped by all.
- It provides insight into group dynamics.
- It demonstrates some interpersonal skills that could be used elsewhere.

Challenging group behaviour

Occasionally, you will notice undesirable behaviour in the whole group rather than in one particular individual. They might not feel able to voice that to you (especially if there is still an apparent dependency on you). On these occasions, it's down to you to initiate the discussion by reflecting what you sense.
- *'I feel we are a bit stuck in moving on, and I feel a bit uncomfortable that I may be taking too many of the decisions.'*
- *'I feel that you are all a bit cross with me today...'*

What have I done wrong?

Often it is easy to blame yourself for the dysfunction, particularly if

1. Your confidence about running groups is not too high at the time
2. If using group facilitation skills is new to you
3. The task you set yourself was unrealistic.

Don't be too self-critical. Be realistic!

Be realistic about what you can achieve: sometimes you may be asked to do the impossible. An example would be running a session on communication skills with a group of 40 hospital doctors (who have not worked together before) and have been given only an hour to do 'group work'. In situations such as these, a solution is to abandon any hope of interaction in a large group, and get the 40 members to work in small groups on set tasks, with some reporting back.

Obtain feedback on yourself

Checking out your own facilitator skills may give you some ideas as to how you are doing, and give some pointers for your skills development.   Ways in which you might do this are:

1. Observing yourself by video recording a session.
2. Getting a colleague to come and sit in and observe you, or work with you. But remember that having another facilitator will in itself affect the dynamic, and their role at that time needs to be clear (are they observing you, or participating?).
3. Get feedback from the group members – formal or informal (see the book chapter *Chapter 7: The Skilful Art of Giving Feedback*).
4. Self-analysis and reflection.

Self-analysis and reflection

1. *What was my purpose?*
    - Your intention as the facilitator in any intervention is vital. If you are not acting in the interest of the group, but are in some way 'playing' with the group, this will obviously cause dysfunction.
    - *So, ask yourself: What outcomes was I trying to achieve? Why was I doing this particular intervention – did it help?*

    > *I once observed a facilitator running a group. He used icebreakers to set the group up, but deliberately chose exercises that were challenging to some of the members and made them feel uncomfortable. He felt that pushing back their barriers would cause amusement, at their expense. Clearly, it didn't work and instead made things worse!*

2. *Did I have a different agenda from the group? Had I shared that with them?*
    - You need to maintain trust and openness at all times. If there is an externally imposed agenda, it needs to be declared to the group, and not introduced by stealth.
    - For example if the Deanery has decided that all GP trainees should have a session on ethics, this needs to be presented to the group and the reasons behind it explained.

- You should avoid taking sides, or blaming the Deanery, or alternatively colluding with the Deanery. Look for the positive aspects and see if the group can see what the possible benefits might be.

3. Was I using the right facilitator mode?
- Does this group need less or more leadership than I am giving it? Were they frustrated because they wanted to be in autonomous mode, and I kept interfering? Are they ready to move on, or do they need some more structure to build up trust?
- Was I giving them the right balance of dimensions? (Heron's Planning, Meaning, Confronting, Feeling, Structuring and Valuing)

4. Am I flexible enough in my style?
- Every facilitator has their own natural style and therefore brings something unique. However, you need to be able to adapt that style to the situation.
- Part of your facilitator skills development might be for you to learn how to use styles and types of intervention outside those you are most comfortable with. For example, there may be times when you have to act in a more authoritarian manner than is your natural style.

I was working in a group where one of the members asked if we could finish early as he wanted to go to an external activity that was taking place locally. I put the decision to the group to finish early, and they agreed. In the next exercise, the group was struggling, and becoming quite challenging towards me. I discussed this with them and what came out was that the other group members felt I should have made a decision on their behalf NOT to stop early. They wanted to appear helpful and kind towards the individual by giving permission to leave, but did not want to stop the group work.

5. Did I provide the right amount of structure?
- If your session seems higgledy piggledy (i.e. wanders all over the place), it's likely that the learning points will simply drown in the 'sea of chaos'.
- One of the jobs of the facilitator is to help add structure to the session to help learners with the retention of new information.
- Providing structure is closely related to the section below on *'Had I prepared properly?'.* The first step to providing structure is having a clear session plan. In many instances, as the session evolves the plan will change – but those modifications will make it easier for you to modify and provide the appropriate structure.

6. Have I been sticking to the group rules?
- The whole group has been made responsible for the group rules and you are not outside them.

- If the group sees that you are not sticking to the group rules, you will lose their trust, particularly regarding confidentiality issues.
- Sometimes you might feel that there is something about a group member that needs to be shared with someone else outside .You should only do this after telling the person concerned, and explaining why it has to be done.

7. *Do I have favourites within the group?*

- There may exist sub-groups within the larger group. If you *appear* to favour some of the sub-groups or an individual (whether true or not), it will produce an elitism.
- It is important for you to *appear* neutral in your relationships with the group members.
- This should be demonstrated in breaks as well as within the group: who do you talk to at coffee, or sit next to at lunch?

8. *Had I prepared properly?*

- A poorly prepared session is devaluing to the participants. Being prepared also helps you structure a mental map of the session thus relieving anxiety by helping you to focus your concentration on the art of facilitating.
- If you haven't had time to prepare, be honest and open – share it with the group. You might say something like: *'I am really sorry but I have had a terrible week, and I have not managed to prepare the handouts that I said we could use as a starting point today. I am sorry to let you down like this. Can any of you suggest a way we could start the discussion off? Would you like to get into pairs and come up with some ideas as to how we can start the discussion?'*
- You will all differ in how much of a plan they like to have in your head. You should always come to a session with a clear plan (Plan A), preferably written down, but you need to accept that circumstances might move you to Plan B... or even as far as Plan Z. Your proposed plan should take into account the previous experiences of the group, but also have defined learning outcomes.

A facilitator decided to discuss topic of bereavement, as the previous week, when discussing difficult patients, a group member had seen a patient who had recently been bereaved, but time ran out before all the issues it raised had been discussed. The facilitator developed a plan of how to start the discussion off, what exercises and structures might be used to encourage the discussion, and timings. The desired outcomes the facilitator decided on were issues of handling bereavement in patients and airing the emotions it produces in the doctor. His plan A took account of all of these.

9. *If working with another facilitator: were we on the same track?*

- If you are working with another facilitator, make sure that you both have the same plan, and that it is clearly defined as to who is doing what – it sounds simple, but it is easily overlooked. For instance, you might want to assign one of you to looking after the group task and the other for the group process.
- Having photocopies of the plan ensures you are both working in tandem.

- Co-facilitator goes wrong if there is any sense of competition between you. One obvious way of driving a group into severe boredom is for one facilitator to explain something, followed by the second facilitator repeating it 'only clearer'.
- As second facilitator, keep quiet! You will need to decide in advance how you will manage this, and how much structure you need to give to the leadership, depending on both your styles.

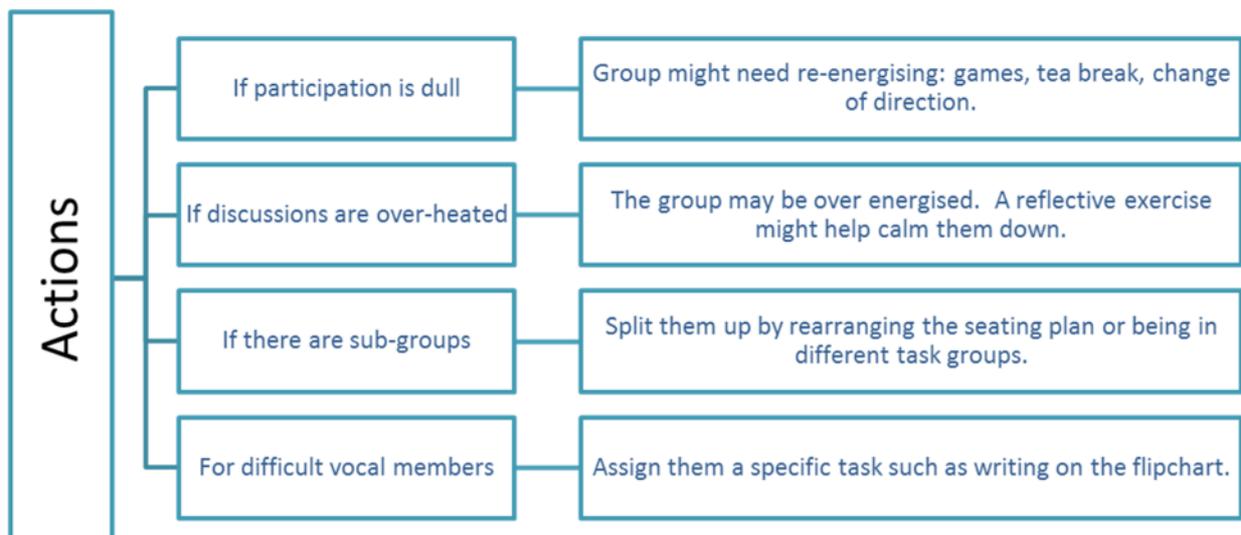## Summary: when things go wrong in small groups

Your options

Re-visit the **group rules** - if you feel indviduals are breaking them.

Spend more time on **group forming exercises** - if you feel the group members don't know and trust each other enough.

Explore feelings – yours and theirs: *'I am feeling quite frustrated at the moment? Does anyone else feel like that? I wonder why that is?'*. Or encourage them, with an exercise, to say how they are feeling.

Get the **group to problem solve** the process problem. It's worth giving the group some theory about group dynamics before discussing it (Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing etc.).

Set up a **specfic activity to look at the group process** - group sculpture/ line up/Johari window/formalised feedback/hot seat.

Actions

If participation is dull	Group might need re-energising: games, tea break, change of direction.
If discussions are over-heated	The group may be over energised. A reflective exercise might help calm them down.
If there are sub-groups	Split them up by rearranging the seating plan or being in different task groups.
For difficult vocal members	Assign them a specific task such as writing on the flipchart.

Some theories to discuss with the group:

Communication Skills

Giving & Receiving Feedback

Group Dysfunction

Reflecting:

At the time of the dysfunction or shortly after:

Reflect on what happened. What can you do different the next time?

Are you achieving the right balance in the triangle of task, process and support?

Recognise your own feelings (and learn to share them with the group).

Always remember:

If you can consult with patients, you already have some facilitation skills.

Learn from your mistakes - groups, like patients, are very forgiving if they see your primary concern is for them.

How are you developing your skills? Appraisal, facilitator group etc.

Above all, enjoy it.

Remember your skills at communicating with patients are all reflected in your facilitator skills.

Other chapters you may like to read

- Chapter 12: How Groups Work – the dynamics
- Chapter 13: Teaching and Facilitating Small Groups
- Chapter 10: Five Pearls of Educational Theory
- Chapter 7: The Skilful Art of Giving Feedback
- Web chapter: Group Games

References

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- Heron J[2009] The complete Facilitators Handbook. Kogan publications