

"When (name of person) told us about (the event or topic), no one responded (or whatever happened such as changing the topic). It could be helpful to tell (name) what feelings were triggered for you as you listened to him/her."

Or, if the members began to tell their own stories, give advice and other such actions, first block to stop the action, and then use the example statement.

Table 6.1 presents guidelines for providing feedback. Table 6.2 presents guidelines for the receiver to help manage negative and/or intense feelings that may be aroused.

TABLE 6.1 Guidelines for Providing Feedback

- Focus on observable behavior.
- Stay emotionally present, and resist thinking about something else.
- Do not make inferences, such as member's degree of comfort.
- Become mindful and just observe without judgments.
- Provide feedback that is objective and descriptive of observable behavior, free from evaluation/judgments, personal opinions, inferences, and the like.
- Use a neutral voice tone when providing feedback.
- Carefully select descriptors and other words.

Providing Feedback/Reporting Observations

Become mindful that statements of fact can be heard and interpreted by the receiver as a judgment and/or evaluative even when stated in a neutral voice tone. Receivers can have the following responses.

- The statement can be taken personally as blaming or critical of them.
- It can arouse transference, or associations with other past experiences.
- It can be introjected by the receiver, and defended against.
- It can be responded to defensively, such as rationalized, denied, intellectualized, and/or explained.

TABLE 6.2 Managing Personal Responses to Feedback

If you experience any of the described responses, such as taking it personally, become mindful of the following:

- You cause your feelings—not the other person.
- You don't have to "take it personally," even when that is the speaker's intent.
- The feelings aroused or that emerge can be explored for the association with past experiences—unconscious introjections you have that are being acted on or acted out.
- You may be reacting to you self-perceptions of thoughts about your adequacy, worthiness, lovability, and so on.
- Try to understand the validity of the perceived to your self.
- Consider the extent to which your undeveloped narcissism (e.g., grandiosity, impoverished self, or excessive self-focus) may be contributing to your distress.
- You may not have accurately heard what was said and meant, and your response may be off target.

(Continued)

TABLE 6.2 (Continued)

Tips for Managing Responses to Feedback

- Become or stay aware of your tendencies to assume and/or infer judgments and evaluations.
- Think; consider the possibility that the statement of fact was just that—an observation that can be verified by others—and the speaker was not making judgments or evaluations.
- Explore the aroused feeling now or later by associating your response with your past (e.g., possible transference, and other experiences; and your tendency to jump to conclusions, etc.).
- Assess the threat to your self by what was said. Most likely, there is little or no threat.
- Assume responsibility for your feeling(s).
- Resist the urge to explain, rationalize, analyze, and/or retaliate.
- Use the information provided in the feedback in a constructive (to you) way. You don't have to agree with it, but it may be worth considering.

Leaders must remain mindful that statements of fact can be heard and interpreted by the receiver as judgments and/or as evaluative even when stated in a neutral voice tone. The message from the feedback may have unintended effects such as the following:

- The statement can be taken personally as blame or criticism, or even as an attack.
- It can arouse transference, or associations with other past experiences.
- It can be taken in by the receiver (introjected), and then defended.
- It can trigger defensiveness, such as rationalization, denial, intellectualization, and/or cause an extensive explanation.

When any of these reactions occur, this can be an opportunity to model and teach how to manage responses to feedback, such as what is presented in Table 6.2.

Effective Use of Silence

Silence can be anxiety provoking in the group. Many people are uncomfortable with silence and tend to either rush to fill the silence, or become so anxious and fearful that they cannot or do not speak, or a sensitive personal issue could be touched on if they speak and the silence is a form of resistance. This is not a constructive silence. On the other hand, sometimes silence denotes reflection and thoughtfulness, a need for some space to contemplate and think things through. This is an example of a constructive silence.

Then too, there are times when the group leader has a low toleration for silence, and acts to keep the session active so that he/she does not have to experience the anxiety, tension, fear, and/or general discomfort that silence can produce. An inability to tolerate silence can keep a group leader from effectively using it

to help the group and its members. One of the most helpful skills for a leader to develop is a toleration for silence, and an understanding of what the silence means for the group at that particular time. This understanding can lead to effective interventions.

Strategies to use for silence include doing nothing and letting the silence build until a member says something; remark on what the silence feels like to the leader, for example, the silence feels like members are reflecting; or ask what the silence could be about, such as suppressing comments to prevent a possible conflict; or if the silence is resistance, just mentally note it but leave it alone. A skilled group leader can make an educated guess about what may be being suppressed or avoided, and the like, because she/he is emotionally present in the session and tuned in to the group's process.

Repairing Empathic Failures

This is a group level skill that is very beneficial to the group as well as for individual members who can be empathically failed. While this topic is discussed in more detail elsewhere in the book, it is also presented here as a group level leader skill because it is so important to the group's functioning, and it is a primary leader responsibility.

Benefits for the group as a whole can be the following:

- It becomes evident that the group leader is attuned to the group and is emotionally present.
- Members who were not empathically failed can feel reassured that the leader is attending and caring.
- There is also reassurance that feelings are important, and even intense and distressing ones can be heard in the group.
- Members learn the importance and necessity to respond empathically to strengthen and build relationships.
- Feelings and perceptions of safety and trust are enhanced and expanded.

While repair of empathic failure is best done in the session where it occurred, it can still be effective if done in a subsequent session. Leaders, even very alert, caring and skillful leaders, can miss or commit an empathic failure. In this instance, the group leader first acknowledges that he/she missed the failure, and then responds to what was missed.

For example, if a member did not receive a response and his/her feelings were not responded to, the leader would note that he/she did hear those feelings, and then respond to what was missed. For example, suppose that Mary commented about something that was upsetting to her, but no one responded, including the leader. The leader reflected on the group session and identified that an empathic failure occurred. At the next session the leader could say to Mary, "Last session

when you commented that you were upset about _____, you did not receive a response. I want you to know that I heard your distress and frustration.”

If there was a change of topic, note that there was a change, and reflect the feelings spoken or alluded to by that member before the topic was changed. This will model empathic failure repair, and other members will begin to notice and help repair or even prevent empathic failures.

Linking

Linking involves relating what members are doing and saying among the group to identify commonalities, similarities, and patterns. This is an advanced skill that comes with practice and experience. The leader has to listen carefully to discern such commonalities and patterns.

Illuminating these for members promotes growth and development for the group and for individual members. The group can become more cohesive and members can relate to each other in meaningful ways to gain interpersonal learning about self.

Leaders can say something similar to the follow for linking. “_____ seems similar to another (issue, problem, concern, situation, or event) you described before”; “Your story has some elements similar to what (another group member) told us about (use a core issue or feeling to make the similarity)”; and “Each group member has expressed (their discomfort, or resistance or something else) in a different way [use one of the following or something else: some were silent, some changed the topic, someone told a joke, a member moved the chair back from the group—use observable behaviors].” The underlying theme of the actions become linked.

Blocking

Blocking involves intervening to stop intellectualizing, storytelling, inappropriate responses, or any behavior that negatively affects the progress of the group or the well-being of group members. Blocking must be done so that it cuts off the undesired behavior without blaming or criticizing. Leaders must take care not to make members feel chastised or wrong.

Leaders can block by gently interrupting the speaker and saying something like the following:

“(Name of group member), I want to stop you at this point because:

I’m getting lost in the details of what you are saying, and have lost sight of the core concern.

I’m not getting a clear sense of your feelings about (the person, situation, event).

You want us to understand and see your perspective so you are providing as many details as possible.

I think it would be helpful for me and the group if you can state the concern in six words.

You seem to be telling us about several issues. Which one do you consider to be the most important?”

Tuning in to Process

Tuning in to process involves evaluating the ongoing progress and process of the group, which generally is left to the leader. Most of the other skills discussed here can be manifested by group members, but evaluation requires knowledge of group process generally not held by members unless they have had education or training in it. Understanding the stages of a group and the process taking place in it are skills developed by the experienced group leader.

Confronting

Confronting is a skill that is misunderstood by many people. It has come to be synonymous with attack. The accurate meaning of confrontation, however, does not involve attacking, telling someone off, or force of any kind. Confrontation is an invitation, not an imposition. The receiver is invited to look at an aspect of him or herself and its impact on others. Confrontation is extended tentatively, not forced on the other person. Telling someone what you think he or she needs to know is an attack, not a confrontation. The giver of the confrontation must be clear about his or her personal motives before taking action. Wanting to retaliate, tell someone off, or discount another person are inappropriate reasons for confronting. Chapter 10 provides more information on how to make confrontation constructive.

Terminating

It is important to have constructive terminations for sessions and for the ending of the group. Too many times experiences are simply stopped, not ended in such a way as to provide closure for participants. Group leaders should take the time to decisively end sessions. Constructive termination ensures that loose ends are tied up, important and intense feelings are dealt with so that members are not left dangling, and participants have an opportunity to say goodbye to one another.

Summary

Knowing what is effective and what to avoid is important for group leaders. Many of these skills seem relatively easy to master in isolation. It is much more difficult to use them when so much is happening in the group at every moment. All groups are dynamic, and the effective leader recognizes and accepts that fact and does not attempt to ignore the complexity.

Further, an effective leader is aware of his or her personal needs and uses these in constructive ways to facilitate the group. Group members are valued as worthwhile, unique individuals, not as pawns to be manipulated for their own or for the leader's good.

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Group Level Skill Development Practice

Following are some common group situations. Select the answer closest to the choice you think you would make under the circumstances. There are no right or wrong answers. However, some are more effective than are others. Assume that you are the group leader.

1. This is the first meeting of a psychoeducational group of young adolescent girls in a high school, and is designed to help them develop relationship skills. You welcome the group members, and explain the purpose of the group and how you intend to facilitate the group. As part of the introduction, you present the session's agenda, which begins with an icebreaker. However, after the introductory remarks, the members begin to pepper you with questions about what they are supposed to do in the group, what is the group's purpose, and why are they in the group, all of which you addressed in the introductory remarks. Your action/response is to
 - a. Try and answer their questions as best you can.
 - b. Move ahead with the planned activity and tell them you'll answer their questions later.
 - c. Ask them for their thoughts about the group.
 - d. Tell them that it can be very anxiety producing to face a new and unfamiliar situation.
 - e. Ask them if they are anxious and scared, and explore their answers.

2. This group of young adults has been meeting for several sessions, and you feel that the group is going well. They seem willing to talk about their abuse of alcohol, and to participate in planned activities. This session begins like the other sessions with a check-in about members' week, and you comment on each. No important or urgent concerns are surfacing, and you start to move on to the planned mini-lecture. As you introduce the mini-lecture, a couple of side conversations appear, a member scoots his chair out of the circle, and another member heaves a big sigh. You start your talk, but the side conversations are disruptive. Your action/response is to
 - a. Ask the participants in the side conversations to bring these into the group.
 - b. Ask the participants in the side conversations to stop and pay attention.
 - c. Do nothing and continue with your mini-lecture.
 - d. Stop and ask members what seems to be suppressed (is not being talked about) in the group at that time.
 - e. Remind members that they will find it beneficial to pay attention.

3. The group is a work group in an organization, and the topic is time management. Midway through the second session, a conflict breaks out between two