Two Vital Aspects In The Facilitation Of Groups: Connections and containment

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Abstract

This paper outlines two vital aspects in the facilitation of adventure groups. These aspects, linking and containment, are important in all types of group, whether they are for recreation, education, development or therapy. Linking refers to the existence of links at both conscious and unconscious levels. These links involve each group member, the group-as-a-whole, the leader, and the primary task of the group. Adequate containment refers to group members having the conscious and unconscious sense of being firmly held in the group and its task, and yet not immobilized by the experience. The leader has a vital role in facilitating both linking and containment, but to do so requires a sound level of skills and a degree of emotional and psychological maturity. Some aspects of leader competencies are examined.

Introduction

Groups are complex. They involve the interdependence of a number of human beings whose actions, interactions and perceptions are constantly changing. The leader of a group is an integral part of the dynamic system that involves both conscious and unconscious processes of all present. Accordingly, he or she is strongly influenced by the emotional tides that move through the group. Being a member of a group challenges participants and leaders alike to maintain adequate emotional independence and behavioral autonomy, whilst simultaneously being influenced to act in ways that meets the approval of the group. Leading groups, then, is a challenging and complex business, but one that is as rewarding as it is difficult (Neill, 1997a). Two components of group leadership that can facilitate satisfying leadership experiences and the development of effective groups are addressed below.

The group leader is the facilitator of two major functions in groups. The first function is what I will call "containment." This involves creating boundaries around the group that enable it to conduct its business with a reasonable sense of security and without interference or harm. The second function is "linking" which involves creating and maintaining the links that hold the internal "structure" of the group together and create the potential for high quality interaction in the group. Linking and containment are necessary for all types of group, ranging in purpose from therapy, through development and education, to recreation. I have discussed elsewhere how addressing unconscious processes

in a group create the potential for enjoyment in recreation groups and for effective learning in education and development groups (Ringer, 1999). This paper extends the ideas in the previous and focuses more on the rational rather then the unconscious. Issues addressed here include building both the outer "shell" and the inner structure of groups. Eggs provide an interesting comparison.

Of groups and eggs

If I remove from a raw egg the shell and the thin membrane inside the shell, the white and the yolk will slip through my fingers, and form a sticky mess on my hands and on the surface beneath my hands. The yolk and the white will mix, and the whole mess will flow in a gelatinous glob, following the whims of gravity. This egg is no longer contained, and in a limited way resembles a group that is uncontained. There is no predictable structure, the group is fragmented and all mixed up. The experience of being in an uncontained group is messy and often very disturbing. This disorder in the group generates a distressing disorder in our experience of ourselves and of others in the context of the group.

A raw egg that is adequately contained by its shell retains its form, but it is entirely dependent on that container to avoid it becoming an uncontained mess. If the egg is carefully boiled while still in its shell, it will be "processed" to the extent that the white and yolk develop a stable form that is independent of the outer shell. In comparison, A "raw" group is usually very dependent on structure, form and effective leadership to hold it together until it has been

"processed" enough for adequate internal links to be built.

The molecules in the white of the cooked egg have linked with each other to form a resilient shape that follows the shape of the shell and is strong enough to remain intact after the shell has been removed. The yolk has solidified and also holds its own shape. If I peel this egg it will retain its shape and form. In other words, if I remove the container, the *links* inside the egg will enable it to retain its form. The comparison between eggs and groups should not be pursued with too much enthusiasm, but the key comparison remains valid that a group with excellent internal links will be less dependent on its external boundaries than a group that has poor internal links.

There are some very important differences between eggs and groups and so it is not helpful to push the simile too far. The most important of these differences is that groups are composed of intelligent creatures each of whom has his or her own will and initiative. The components that make up eggs are not active agents in the same way. Secondly, there is no clear parallel between the passive role taken by the egg shell and the active role of the leader in facilitating containment of a group. Thirdly, the rigidity and permanence of the links between molecules in a cooked egg do not resemble the dynamic process of linking that occurs in the internal "matrix" of a group (Foulkes & Anthony, 1990). Finally, the egg is a physical item but groups have two key elements in addition to their physical existence. These are; *interaction* that determines in part the nature of the containment and linking, and an unspoken out-of-awareness (or *unconscious*) element that exists in the minds of the participants and has a substantial influence on the subjective experience of being in the group.

In groups, each of these three elements (structural, interactive and unconscious) is inextricably related to the other two, but it is helpful at times to discuss them separately to simplify the narrative. **Structural elements** refer mainly to the boundaries that create the container, **interactional elements** refer mainly to the quality of interaction that supports linking, and **unconscious elements** include both the subjective imaginings, impressions and fantasies of each group member and the overall "feel" or "ambience" of the group-as-a-whole. Linking and containment both influence and are, in turn, influenced by each of these elements. Building an adequate container for the group involves addressing primarily the structural elements required for boundary building and the

unconscious elements that influence group members' feelings of comfort or anxiety.

Containment

At an unconscious level, the container helps group members manage the anxiety that results from being in the group, and at a more rational level, the container provides some of the structures that enable group members to locate themselves securely in the group. The group container provides tangible evidence to group members about what (and whom) is inside the group and what is outside the group. Without this clarity the group may be unable to achieve its task. This container is woven collectively by the group and the leader(s). Early in the life of the group the leader usually has to take a very active role in constructing the container. It is constructed through building a shared understanding that the group is *purposeful, bounded* and *safe*. In particular…

- **Purposeful** means: the purpose of and primary task for the group is shared and understood. In agreeing to a primary task, group members delegate their authority to the leader to assist the group to achieve that task. For example, the primary task of a group may be to "Use abseiling so as a means of developing the trust of group members in their own courage and competence as well as building trust in relationships with others."

- **Bounded** means that adequate boundaries are established so that:

  * *Membership* boundaries are clear. i.e. only people who legitimately belong to the group are present;

  * there is a shared understanding of the *physical space(s)* for the group and an expectation that the group can conduct its business without being intruded on or disrupted. In adventure activities physical space has particular importance where there need to be safety zones set up – such as during rock climbing or abseiling.

  * there is a shared understanding of the way in which *time* limits will provide boundaries for the group. For example, groups need to know about start, break and stopping times, as well as the transition times at which a change in type of activity requires group members to change roles.

  * group members understand the distribution of *roles and tasks* in the group. Here, all of the roles required to conduct the group are established and they

are allocated to leaders and amongst group members.

- **Safety** is created both through good-enough containment and through effective linking in the group. The elements of containment that build safety are:
* "confidentiality" or the expectation that participation in the group will not create damage in the world outside the group. I find it useful to talk about the principle of "No jeopardy" in that group members agree not to disclose anything to people outside the group that may create jeopardy for group members.
* "psychological depth", which largely determines at what psychological level the group will operate at. Psychotherapy is seen to be much "deeper" than recreation or education. More detail can be found in Ringer & Gillis (1995) and Vincent, (1995).

Most groups have an unspoken understanding that the designated leader(s) of the group will take prime responsibility for establishing and maintaining all of these elements necessary for containment. However, during the maturing process for most groups, building and maintaining of the holding environment becomes distributed between all persons in the group. Most groups do not talk about the need to build this container but when it is missing people talk about the negative impact containment being missing or flawed. For example, a lack of clarity about the primary task of the group may lead to people complaining that they're confused and that the group feels pointless – "What are we doing here; why bother?". A lack of clarity about whether the group is a recreational or a therapy group may result in some participants complaining about "not wanting the 'Freudian' crap imposed on us."

While containment holds the basic "shape" of the group, the internal structure also needs to develop. Participants need some evidence that they will be safe to interact in the group without undue fear of being attacked, ridiculed, ignored or abandoned. In other words, they need some assurance that the quality of linking in the group will be adequate.

Linking

A group is more than just a number of people who happen to be in one place at one time. In fact, groups do not always need to be physically together to constitute a group. One key characteristic of groups is the interconnection between members and their common connection with a leader and a task. At an unconscious level a group comes into existence when members adequately share a connection with a mental representation of the "group." The existence of the unconscious element of the group occurs when there is a significant commonality in the sense or feel of this group-in-the-mind.

At the start of any group the leader can facilitate the development of six different kinds of link that directly assist in building an effective group. These six links include:
1. Leader with task
2. Group with task
3. Leader with individuals
4. Leader with group
5. Individuals with group and
6. Individuals with other individuals.

1. Leader with task

The leader needs to demonstrate to the group that he/she has an understanding of the primary task of the group and also has some personal affinity for and/or competence to work with that primary task. For example, as a part of the introduction to an abseiling group for building interpersonal trust and "trust in self" for participants, the leader might say… *"Although I am experienced at abseiling and rock climbing, I still find it exciting the way that holding a safety line for someone else is such a powerful way of building a trusting relationship. I also really appreciate the creativity that each person uses in managing his or her fear. Some do so by tightening every muscle in their bodies and overriding the fear. Others do it by talking to the instructors, and still others joke and laugh so as to push the fear out of their awareness. I still feel the fear at the moment that I go over the edge, but I use my rational mind to reassure me that the whole set-up is safe and that I've never had problems during the many abseils that I've done in the past."*

2. Group with task

The fundamental building block for a group is the existence of a shared task that requires interdependence between participants. Task clarity is also one of the boundaries mentioned above, so the leader's role includes assisting participants to connect themselves emotionally and subjectively to the task that is to be conducted by the group. The leader of the abseiling group could say *"This group meets here today to use abseiling as a stimulus for personal growth. To do that we will need to work together on supporting others in the group to achieve what is best for them."*

During the life of a typical group there are numerous opportunities to simultaneously

remind the group of its primary task and to facilitate linking between group members and the task of the group. Each time a person raises a topic that is peripheral to the primary task, the leader can make a statement like… *"I can see that you're fascinated by (topic) and it seems from the response of some others in the group that they are too. I'm not sure though, how that helps this group make progress on (primary task statement.)"* Such statements can easily be made in a way that seems discounting to the speaker, so they need to be carefully constructed.

3. Leader with individuals

The leader needs to actively build links between him/herself and each member of the group. Much of this is done non-verbally through being *attentive and responsive.* Being seen to link with the wishes and fears expressed by group members is an important component of building the links, but some early runs on the board can be achieved by introducing oneself in a way that also links your own life with the lives of the group participants. This is a fine art because the leader necessarily needs to remain differentiated from the group – not "one of the boys/girls" - and simultaneously needs to be seen by group members as "someone with whom we can relate." Some of this linking occurs as a spin-off from the leader facilitating the building of the boundaries described above. If group members have already introduced themselves, a part of the leaders introduction to the above abseiling group could be… *"Well, it seems as though some of you can't wait to get over that cliff, some of you aren't sure, and some of you are wondering why on earth you came today. I'm not going to push anyone past where they want to go, but I will try to work with you so you end the day satisfied with the choices you made. As I work with each of you, I'd like you to let me know how much you want to be nudged in the direction of the cliff and how much you just want me to be there in a quiet supportive sort of a way."*

4. Leader with group

Each participant in a group is simultaneously aware of two different realities. On one had he or she is an individual with his or her own life, will and autonomy. On the other hand there is a single collective that has assembled to achieve a collective purpose, is gathered in a collective space and has some form of interdependence that involves all group members. To assist in the formation of a psychic reality that the group exists, the leader also needs to link with this collective "group-in-the-mind." An example, relating to the abseiling group above, could be… *"This is a mature group and so I'll keep my lectures*

about safety and responsible behavior to a minimum…" Regular reference to "the group" helps to reinforce the "fantasy" that the group-as-a-whole exists as some form of tangible entity. The leader's statement above about modifying her usual talk about safety in response to the level of maturity of the group signals clearly to group members that she has noticed a characteristic of the group-as-a-whole and is responding to that characteristic. This responsiveness to the group-as-a-whole helps to build links between the leader and the group.

5. Individuals with group

The leader's role includes assisting to facilitate the building of between individuals and the group-as-a-whole. We could think of this as encouraging emotional attachment between individuals and the fantasy or unconscious image-in-the-mind that each member holds of the group (Marrone, 1998; Stapley, 1996). Linking of individuals with the group-as-a-whole is one of the most powerful factors in group cohesion (Neri, 1998), but one that many leaders have difficulty in conceptualizing, let alone working with. The difficulties occur because: the link between individual and group occurs primarily at an unconscious level; it defies description; and it can seldom be addressed overtly. Imagery, symbolism and drama provide some useful tools for working directly with the group image, but these techniques are often outside the comfort level of both participants and leaders.

Returning to the abseiling group described above, one statement that a leader could make during the day to help linking between each individual and the group is *"Well, how are you finding this group? Let's pause for a few minutes and we'll make space for each of you to comment on how you're doing and if you want any changes to the way you interact with the group or the group interacts with you."* This acknowledges that each person has a relationship with the "group" and interacts with the "group." The statement also provides a chance for the leader to get overt feedback about the extent to which participants experience their needs being met.

6. Individuals with other individuals

Imagine that there is a thread connecting every group member to every other group member. Even if each thread is not particularly strong, the end result is that every participant is held firmly as a member of the group and can not easily be pulled away. These metaphoric threads are the relationships that each member has with each other member in the context of the group. The subjective experience of safety in a group

depends on being able to look around the group and find at least one other face that is perceived as friendly or supportive. With this in mind, I usually conduct a deliberate linking exercise early in the group that enables participants to have brief one-on-one interaction to start the building of relationships. An example of this would be to ask the participants in the abseiling group described above to *"Find at least one other person in this group whose reason for attending is similar to yours. You will need to hold one or two minute conversations with most of the others in the group to find this or these persons."* This exercise also facilitates the linking of the individual with the task of the group.

Safety and attacks on linking

These six links form the basis for building a well linked group, but they are not all that is required. The group also needs to build an understanding of the nature of the allowable interactions – or the norms of interaction. In other words, participants need to build a justifiable expectation that neither the quality nor the content of the interaction in the group will damage any member of the group - either during the group meeting or after it ends. Safety depends on the quality of interaction in the group including non-verbal cues of respect, trust and absence of intrusion (Hinshelwood, 1994; Nitsun, 1996).

The development of norms, expectations and group "culture" is again, a broad topic that is well articulated in other sources (Agazarian, 1997; Ashby & DeGraaf, 1999; Johnson, 1991; Tyson, 1998). A common element amongst most literature on the development of group culture and norms where safety and sound linking successfully emerges, is the central role of the leader in the facilitation of the groups progress.

The role of the leader

The leader plays a key role in facilitating the building of links early in the group and in helping the group to deal with attacks on the linking. Also, the leader plays a vital role in building and maintaining the container for the group. This involves also applying judgement about the way in which the rigidity of the boundaries needs to be varied at any time depending on the level of anxiety in the group and depending on the strength of linking in the group. Both successful containment and successful linking arise from the development of a complex combination of rational structures, relationships and unconscious processes. Establishing these elements requires significant skill on the part of leaders. Some of the skills and attributes required to build containment are the same as those required to

facilitate linking in the group, but for simplicity I have divided the requisite skills and attributes into two sets in the text below. These sets are:
1. Skills and attributes required to build containment
2. Skills and attributes required to facilitate linking.

1. Skills and attributes required in building containment

[In this section the gender of the leader is taken to be female]

The effective leader is able to imagine the group before it starts and to apply her prior experience with other groups to plan a suitable introduction to the group. When the group begins she is attuned to anxiety in the group and demonstrates confidence in her ability to manage the forthcoming challenges. Early in the formation of the group she works with the group to surface and acknowledge the range of hopes and fears in the group. She does not become pre-occupied with only the hopes or only the fears (Whitaker, 1989).

The leader puts into language that is appropriate for the group the basic boundaries for the group(outlined above) and negotiates changes in response to group members requests. She judges and matches the level of psychological depth at which she introduces herself and assists the group to understand the level at which the group will work. Her early interaction with the group includes a high level of observation and assessment of the group's level of maturity and the information from this assessment is applied to match the group's needs (Neill, 1997a).

The leader is also aware of her emotional response to the group (countertransference) and she manages her behavior so that she uses her countertransference as information rather than "acting out" with the group to reduce her own anxiety. The group is not used to meet her own social needs, but is focussed on as a group of clients for whom she is available. She makes herself visible enough to the group so that members see her as a human being who is capable of warmth and empathy, but she is not so present with her own narrative that she dominates the life of the group as it forms. Finally, she demonstrates to the group that she has a sense of passion and ownership for the group.

2. Skills and attributes required in facilitating and protecting linking

[The gender of the leader in this section is taken to be male].

The fundamental competence for the effective leader in facilitating and protecting linking in groups is that of "appropriate responsiveness." This means he is responsive to events in the group in a way that facilitates the group in achieving its primary task and maintaining adequate quality of relationships (Board, 1998). Responsiveness contrasts with reactiveness, where he acts in opposition to events in the group. Underlying the ability to be appropriately responsive is the ability to keep track of the leader's own emotional state and to be able to periodically tune into the unconscious aspects of his own functioning. Deeper still, in support of this function, is the leader's confidence that in the process of exploring his own perceptions, he will find a "good" person in himself. This confidence is achieved by building an acceptance of himself and his history through sustained self reflection, resulting in an ability to reclaim the parts of his history and personality that have previously been too painful to acknowledge and integrate (Kottler & Forester-Miller, 1998; Smith, 1995).

The leader demonstrates responsiveness by being constantly empathic and attuned to the unconscious elements in the group and responding to them in a way that enables "stuckness" to be resolved without showing him to be some sort of guru who is cleverer and more perceptive than group members. He builds linking between members by acting as "consultant to relationships" in the group and intercepting attacks on group members in ways that minimize damage to the linking in the group (Hinshelwood, 1994). He demonstrates by his actions an understanding of the basic unconscious processes that are involved in conflict – those of splitting and projection (Gordon, 1994; Wells, 1995). Interventions are timed with precision. Too much too soon is just as unhelpful as too little too late (Ashbach & Schermer, 1994).

When an event occurs in a group that raises levels of anxiety past what is tolerable for most members, each person will retreat into their own emotional "safe space" and severely limit their visibility to the group and their emotional investment in the group. This retreat seriously limits the quality of linking between members. The effective leader facilitates the management of anxiety in groups to avoid serious retreats.

Anxiety can be raised through boundaries being broken, through inappropriate psychological depth being reached, through confusion about roles, through loss of confidence in the leader or the process, and many other factors(Berg & Smith, 1995). The leader needs to be able to manage his own anxiety as a prerequisite to his being able to facilitate the management of anxiety in the group. Anxiety creates a powerful to regression to child-like emotional and psychological states. Conversely, leaders who are relatively mature psychologically and emotionally are the more likely than their "immature" counterparts to be able to manage their own anxiety in a group situation. The subject of psychological maturity is too large to do justice to here, but because of the importance of this subject to group leaders, a summary of key points follows.

Psychological maturity

The core aspects of psychological maturity for group leaders are:

1. The ability to reflect on and take responsibility for one's own assumptions, actions and views, rather than disown them and project them onto others.
2. Degree of tolerance of involvement with the others or the group, and appropriateness of involvement with others. Low tolerance of engagement leads to hostile or distant relationships, and inappropriate closeness leads to invasion or overpowering of others.
3. Congruence between feelings and actions/speech and with reality. Disconnection between feelings and thinking creates a sense of being untrustworthy. Disconnection between observed reality and one's own description of the world is disconcerting to others. Adapted from (Ashbach & Schermer, 1994).
4. Ability to tolerate complexity, ambiguity, contradiction and "not knowing" (Bion, 1961; Senge, 1992). Also the ability to separate self from one's ideas. Ideas contribute to the sense of self and so when core ideas are challenged by experience the sense of self can be threatened unless it is very secure (Meares, 1992).

This is far from an exhaustive list, but provides a useful first base to begin making sense of the capabilities that are required of group leaders in order for them to be able to develop adequate containment of their groups and for them to be able to facilitate and maintain adequate linking in the groups that they lead (Neill, 1997b). Further ideas about psychological maturity can be found

in psychodynamic literature (Tyson & Tyson, 1990).

Conclusion

In addition to having to deal with the activities involved in their groups, leaders face the challenge of building a climate for group members that supports the group in achieving its task – whether that be recreation, education, development or therapy. Successful groups are bounded, purposeful and safe. Key components of such groups are the level of containment and the degree to which effective links have been developed in the group. Having the subjective experience of being contained and having adequate links in the group results in a positive experience. This is contributed by a diminishing of anxiety, an implicit hopefulness about the future, a perception of being in relationship with other human beings, a feeling of being loved or cared for, a sense of being worthy and often an expansion of awareness from self to others and the world. Effective leaders can play an important part in constructing the conditions for such experiences to take place.

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