

The facile-itation of facilitation?

Searching for competencies in group work leadership

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This paper suggests an extension of the widely accepted competencies for leaders and facilitators of experiential learning groups. The philosophical underpinning of conventional models of facilitation is examined and suggestions are made as to the potential shortfalls. In particular, the current views on leadership are seen to overlook non-rational and unconscious aspects of human functioning. Six perspectives on group work leadership are presented, with suggestions on competencies that are derived primarily from combining ideas from the fields of systems thinking and psychodynamic psychology. In particular, it is suggested that leaders could benefit from developing the accuracy of their intuition and from developing their capacity to tap into unconscious processes in groups.

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"You can't measure the skills involved in facilitation, they are all 'soft' skills" is a common cry in fields such as adventure education or corporate development training. In these areas of practice most practitioners are skilled in educational processes, in conducting adventure activities or are skilled as deliverers of workplace development training. Most of the competencies that are required in the fields of development training or adventure education can be learned in ways that result in demonstrable skills. Learning can hence be assessed using rationally-derived and relatively empirical means such as those espoused by the national authorities such as the National Training Board in Australia.

Such competency-based schemes as these appear to be built on two fundamental premises that are so deeply held that they seldom surface and are even less often articulated. These premises are that:

1. Empirical, sensory-based evidence is the only data that are valid in assessing the ability of people to carry out tasks, functions or roles. By inference, subjective data such as feelings, intuition, and impressions are invalid - though some assessment schemes acknowledge the importance of values.

2. A measure of competence can only be valid if that measure can be replicated reliably by different people. In other words, a measure of competence is valid only if it is "objective" in the sense that a wide range of different people with different personalities and outlooks would give a similar rating to the same event.

Both of these criteria are useful in some settings, particularly in fields of endeavor where practical tasks are conducted. The two assumptions articulated above enable tasks to be broken down into flow charts or "algorithms" that can be applied by anyone who has the competencies to complete each step in the algorithm. However, some tension arises when the two above principles are compared to the principles that can be shown to underpin a more psychodynamic approach to the leadership of groups. The most significant of these principles are that:

1. The most significant aspects of a group are the participants' patterns of mental representations. These are an amalgam of cognitive, intuitive and emotional impressions and expectations, and include two main elements. One is the overall representation that participants have of the group, and the other is the participants' mental representation of their own place in the group. These internally held constructs range from fully conscious to completely unconscious. A shorthand for this complex array of mental and emotional expectations is the "internal working model" which is explained elsewhere .
2. These mental representations simultaneously follow the idiosyncrasies of each individual involved and have characteristics that are common across the group-as-a-whole.
3. The commonalties across the group in the mental representations result from symbolic communication between group members, in both verbal and non-verbal forms.
4. The group leader is an integral part of the conscious and unconscious field of symbolic communication and hence experiences the group-as-a-whole patterns as feelings, thoughts, and intuition. Thus, the group leader's subjective experience is the most accurate "measure" of what is happening in the group at any given time.
5. Even in identical situations, every different group leader would have different feelings, thoughts and intuition. Hence there is an essentially subjective element to perception by any leader at any given time about what is happening in a group. As a consequence of this subjectivity, the vital information that is provided by the group leader's own subjective experience is flawed by the possibility that a particular group leader could be incorrectly reading the group at a any given time.
6. Refining the perceptive ability of the group leader counteracts this potential loss of validity of information. The ability of the group leader to make accurate meaning of his or her perception of events in the group depends heavily on the degree to which he or she is aware of his or her own implicit patterns of perceiving and making meaning from life events (working models). This is sometimes summarized as "self-awareness."

These principles are simply not compatible with "objective" measures of performance. The psychodynamic approach outlined immediately above results in the basic premise that useful measurement of competency depends both on having clearly articulated criteria and on the quality of the person who is doing the measuring. In this frame, objectivity is impossible. It is no wonder that Priest and Gass in their comprehensive book on leadership in adventure programming describe the tendency for adventure-based practitioners to either relegate group work leadership skills to the realm of "alchemy" or to seek the "touchstone" that will magically enable excellence in group facilitation. The two worlds collide because the principles underpinning one appear to discount the principles underpinning the other. All too often such clashes in ideology are "solved" by drawing lines in the sand of professional theory and practice. These lines of demarcation enable each "camp" to look with metaphoric binoculars at the other camp and to laugh at the ridiculous antics of the other. Some such divisions even turn into warfare where each camp seeks to destroy the other .

It is my view that in the field of adventure education and outdoor leadership there has long been an implicit and hence invisible discounting of aspects of group leadership that do not fit into algorithmic schemes. Two main defenses seem to be in place. One is that psychodynamic approaches are deemed to belong to other fields like social work and group therapy and hence not the field of experiential learning. The second is that, within the broad field of experiential learning it is said that it is only adventure therapists who need to be able to apply such principles to their facilitation of groups. The specific means applied to keep away the discomfort aroused by psychodynamic approaches vary. Keeping challenges out of the literature is one. The literature is dominated by step-by-step descriptions of "how to..." conduct various aspects of facilitation. Critiques of these are rarely published . Even in the last few years, a reviewer for a leading American experiential education journal rejected a submitted article because it "did not reflect current views." The article in question challenged the prevailing North American views of metaphoric transfer of learning. The challenge questioned the algorithmic nature of some of the commonly accepted methods used in working with metaphor.

My concern is that the current political and economic climate in most of the Western world supports the trivialization and fragmentation of complex fields of endeavor such as group facilitation and leadership. In this vein, the title of this paper was a deliberate play on the word facile. If the meaning of the word - as derived from the French facile (easy) - signifies the state of being easy, then facilitation translates into the term "making easy." However, the meaning of facile in English has migrated to something akin to "trivial." Bending a few grammatical rules enables us to see "Facile-itation" as trivialization. Isn't the activity of "making easy" a group so simple as to warrant trivialization? Should we not simply chunk facilitation into a number of algorithms, and derive from each algorithm the requisite competencies? Then we could divide these competencies into a few manageable portions, describe empirical evidence required for each, and then set about developing an objective, "portable" training and certification scheme? This makes sound economic sense. Training and certification could then be licensed to certified operators (with franchise fees) and run to prescribed standards in any setting. Uniformity would be guaranteed across states and even between countries, greater accessibility could be achieved for the training and costs could be minimized. Unfortunately, the introduction of the principles

that underpin effective leadership of groups, as articulated above, make such simplistic schemes virtually impossible.

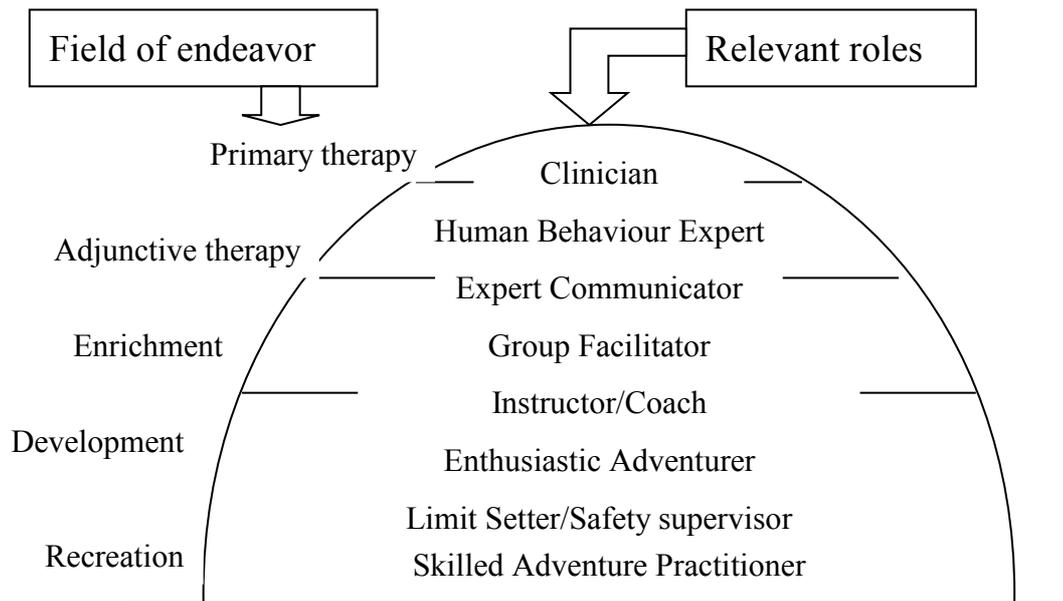
The seemingly impossible tension between the "algorithmic" competency schemes and the above "emergent" schemes can be in part resolved by acknowledging that each has its place, depending on the level of complexity of the competency that is being developed and assessed. The algorithmic approach to groups has its place in building foundation competencies. Rules and principles are essential for starting out on the journey of group work leadership. In the field of outdoor leadership, excellent examples of these can be found in . However, there remains a shortfall in the published literature in the field of adventure education and experiential learning that both deals with more psychodynamic aspects of group facilitation and that is written in language comprehensible to people other than group psychoanalysts or socioanalysts. Accordingly, the remainder of this paper emphasizes the psychodynamic/subjectivist end of the spectrum. It seems most important to emphasize that for most group facilitators, leaders or conductors it is useful firstly to have a strong foundation of practical facilitation and leadership skills before exploring in depth psychodynamic approaches. Once facilitators have a sound grasp of active listening, assertiveness, models of group development, tools for facilitation they will be in a stronger position to focus on building their capacity to work directly on unconscious, intuitive and systemic aspects of groups. Concurrent focus is fine, but the emergent aspects of groups tend only to fully make sense once the empirical aspects are understood. It should be added that group leaders need themselves to have had extensive experience of being a participant in experiential learning groups because this lived experience is an essential building block in all group leaders' development of their own capacity to understand unconscious processes in groups.

Competencies for group leaders

A paper written and presented in 1994 introduced an outline of competencies for adventure leaders whose application ranged from recreational to therapeutic. This was followed by a (passionate!) plea to the field to make a place for passion and aliveness in outdoor leadership. The model underpinning both papers complements more widely published views, such as those articulated by Priest and Gass and by Johnson and Johnson but implies the need to add non-rational aspects to their models, as was also advocated by

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Figure 1: Competencies for outdoor leaders (From Ringer, 1994).



The eight layers of competence show in Figure 1 range from the practical, rational competencies of adventure skills, through to the non-rational competencies involved in demonstrating passion and aliveness - that is the leaders' emotional connection with and enthusiasm for their work - and then to the competencies involved in being able to deal with human interaction and human dysfunction. The assumption implicit in this model was that each of the roles toward the bottom of the igloo were pre-requisites for the roles that appeared above them. Hence, recreational leaders needed to have well developed roles of limit setter and safety supervisor leaders of developmental activities needed these two roles in addition to the role of enthusiastic adventurer, and so on. Whilst this was originally intended only as an approximation, the scheme is clearly unhelpful because it reinforces the view that group work competencies and interpersonal competencies are only required by leaders who work in the fields of human change - that is in the areas of enrichment and therapy. Recent work in progress shows clearly that adventure practitioners at all levels benefit from having competence in group work leadership .

Furthermore, an examination of Priest and Gass's (1987) model of competence shows a limited acknowledgement of the need for experiential educators to have high levels of competence in dealing with the emergent aspects of groups. Their text provides excellent algorithmic methods that form the procedural backbone for inexperienced group leaders, along with extensive underpinning theory. However, unconscious and emergent aspects of groups are not described. There seems adequate justification for looking again at competencies required by group work leaders in adventure education. Hence, the exploration that constitutes the remainder of this paper is intended to provide an extension to current thinking about the role of and requisite competencies of leaders of experiential groups in many different settings. The material presented below is not unique, and in fact parallels work currently being conducted in Belgium by Johan Hovelynck (personal conversation, August 1999). Nonetheless, the outline below is offered as a basis for further discussion.

Six perspectives on group leadership competencies

In the following sections, six perspectives are taken on effective group functioning, and for each perspective some thinking is offered about the competencies required by leaders. It is acknowledged that leadership competency is only one of many factors that leads to successful groups. In the interests of brevity, other factors are not considered in this paper.

The six perspectives chosen are:

1. The **task and activity** perspective, where the focus is on the group's success in identifying and pursuing its primary task and the group's success in carrying out the activities that enable it to achieve its task.
2. The **structural** perspective, where the focus is on the existence and awareness amongst group members of the roles, authority and boundaries that are required to enable the group to function well.
3. The **relational** perspective, where the focus is on the quality of interaction and linking between key elements of the group, including members, leaders and the environment in which the group is working.
4. The perspective of **efficacy**, where the focus is on how effectively each participant in the group deals with the activities, roles and structures that group membership demands of them.
5. The **internal management** perspective, where the focus is on how well each participant manages his or her own (conscious and unconscious) inner emotional and imaginative world in order to gain benefit from the group and in order to support others.
6. The **group climate** perspective, where the focus is almost entirely on unconscious processes involving the group-as-a-whole and the way in which these unconscious

elements support or detract from the group's functioning. (Derived from the Layered Systems Model).

Clearly, each participant will have a place in supporting the group's actions towards achieving its goal. Neither the group alone nor the leader alone has it in their power to ensure effective group functioning. The group and leader are all a part of an interdependent system. Even so, this paper focuses primarily on the competence of the leader to assist in facilitating the group to enhance the level functioning as viewed from all six perspectives. Some suggestions about leadership competence are made under each of the six headings below.

Task and activity

The primary task of the group establishes the reason for its existence. This primary task, when agreed amongst participants, facilitator and any other agent/agency that has a say over group resources, gives participants the authority to support or to challenge the leader in his/her facilitation of the group. Accordingly, the ability to establish with the group its primary task is a core competency. Whilst each group will have a different primary task, there are patterns in the nature of the primary task that have been well documented.

Group leaders will be better able to assist their groups to establish the specific task for the group if they (the leaders) have understanding of one or more systems of categorization of group primary task/purpose. One form of categorization for experiential learning groups was originated by and later modified by a number of different authors. This classification system outlines four levels of category for group primary task, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Goals for adventure experiences (From Ringer & Gillis, 1995)

	Recreation	Education/ Training	Development	Psychotherapy
Primary Goal (Primary task)	Fun, laughter, challenge, excitement, initiative etc.	Change in sense of identity or self-concept.	Learning associated with a <i>generic</i> theme such as cooperation, communication and trust.	Learning about interpersonal processes that will be applied with participants <i>significant others</i> .
Distinguishing features	May be therapeutic, but focus is on enjoyment.	Often associated with learning for an occupation, vocation or course of study; often used with work teams.	Associated with the desire to improve behavior in important relationships.	Often (but not always) applied to remedy personal dysfunction. Usually preceded by assessment of clients.

In Table 1, adventure experiences are classified into categories of recreation, education/training, development and psychotherapy. The progression from recreation to psychotherapy implies decreasing focus on fun as a goal and increasing focus on improving the psychological functioning of group members.

Another form of classification originated by members of the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW) divides groups into four categories:

1. Task/work groups: task forces, committees community organizations, discussion groups, study circles, and learning groups that serve to accomplish identified work goals.
2. Guidance/psychoeducational groups: Educational groups that teach group participants knowledge and skills for coping adaptively with potential and/or immediate environmental challenges, developmental transitions, and life crises.
3. Counseling/interpersonal problem solving: Groups that offer interpersonal support and an environment for problem solving in which common career, educational, personal, social and developmental concerns can be addressed.
4. Psychotherapy/personality reconstruction: Groups that address in-depth psychological disturbance through reconstruction of major dimensions of group

participants' personalities. (ASGW, 1992, cited by Waldo).

Both of the above classification systems for the primary task of groups provide a conceptual framework from which practitioners can establish with their groups the goal for each group in their care. The conceptual framework is used by the facilitator as a guiding principle while he or she negotiates with the group to establish the specific primary task for the group. For example, the primary task for a work place team might be to "Improve the quality of interaction in this team so as to improve productivity and satisfaction of team members." This primary task would fit into the "developmental" category of Gillis et al and into the Guidance/psychoeducational category of the ASGW classification.

A further competency required by group leaders is the ability to take into account the potential conflicts that arise between the goals of group members and other stakeholders. This competency requires the group leader to be able to perceive and act on the unspoken and often unconscious aspects of organizational culture. In the case of work groups, managers and other branches or divisions of the corporation may have wishes that are different to the wishes of groups member and many of these wishes may be communicated in subtle ways rather than directly. Similarly, a facilitator who works under the administrative umbrella of a therapeutic organization needs to be able to adapt his or her style to match the expectations of the host organization. A further challenge arises from the tendency for all groups to create unconscious collusion and hence act "as if" the group exists to conduct a primary task other than the one to which the group has previously consciously agreed . The group leader is inevitably involved in this unconscious collusion. To notice one's own collusion, to catch oneself and to be able to act in ways that re-focus the group on the actual primary task requires a high level of competence on the part of the leader .

Another significant competency in the area of task and activity is the ability to conduct activities that facilitate the group to make progress toward reaching their primary task. These skills vary widely depending on the category of primary task and consequent psychological level at which the group is to operate. For example, a task group facilitator may use structured activities such as brainstorming or focus group process but the "director" of a psychodrama group with families will need the many competencies derived from the fields of family therapy and psychodrama . Whilst the group leader needs to have learned the competencies relevant to his or her field of specialization, there will be many times when the complexity and speed of events in the group are so confusing that it may be difficult to select the appropriate technique for a given time. Secondly, the emotional impact on the leader of some events creates a temporary disabling of that person's ability to function. Instead, the challenge of managing intense feelings takes over. Accordingly, the ability of leaders to manage their own internal emotional/psychological worlds becomes a core competency. This is addressed later in this paper under the heading "Internal management".

Structural

Competencies at the structural level are those involved in establishing adequate structure in the group and around the group. Primarily, these are boundaries and roles. Critical boundaries are those of time and territory. As described elsewhere, time boundaries are the marker points in time that enable a group to know when it starts, breaks for meals etc and ends. Time boundaries are also essential for marking when participants and leaders change their activities and roles. Territory boundaries are real physical constraints on where the group can conduct its activities, as well as agreed physical zones within the group space that determine what roles participants will take when in each zone. A good example is the psychodrama stage, where entering the stage area requires participants to shift from current reality to the reality that is being enacted in the psychodrama. In outdoor activities safety requirements have a great deal of influence on the territories used by groups and the nature of activities and roles that are allowable in each zone.

Formal roles provide a second form of structure for groups. Clarity about roles enables the group to work towards its primary task. Lack of clarity may result in a group acting as if its primary task is to achieve role clarity - rather than the primary task for which the group was formed. Key roles are those of facilitator, analyst, leader, director or conductor. Each of these roles implies a leadership function where group members are being led. Co-leadership involves negotiation between co-leaders to achieve clarity about who is enacting the leadership role at any moment in time. Confusion, ambivalence or conflict about roles between co-leaders will quickly lead to difficulty and anxiety in the functioning of the group.

Group members also have formal roles that they enact in the progress of the group, though this is sometimes not well understood by group leaders. The role of 'learner' is just as distinct as the role of 'leader.' The formal roles of participants also vary from time to time in some groups where participants take different parts in the group. Small group discussions are one example where participants often report back to the whole group after the discussion. Less obvious is the role differentiation that occurs when specific techniques like psychodrama are used in group work. In such cases, group members need to be informed about role expectations and sometimes coached to learn how to take on their formal roles as participants.

Any roles and role relationships that are not identified in the formal structure of the group will emerge through the interaction as "informal roles". These informal roles form a part of the focus through the *relational* perspective- described in the next section. Additional leadership effectiveness can be gained from having an awareness of the different formal roles that a leader can take and by having the ability to move from role to role, depending on the needs of the group at the time (Priest & Gass, 1997).

Other roles that need to be clarified in groups are observer, volunteer, recorder and researcher. These roles carry an implication of observation or non-authoritative interaction with the group. As such, they attract transference that is often tinged with suspicion that comes from a lack of interaction with the group. This lack of interaction can evoke phantasies¹ that the observer is hostile or malicious. Hence, it can be useful to clarify with the group of the kind of behaviors that

are expected from the relevant role.

An essential part of the structure of a group is the appropriate utilization of authority. This includes the personal authority of the designated leader. This personal authority is derived from the leader's appropriate confidence in his or her ability to enact the relevant leadership role. Personal authority results from a sound capacity to manage one's own internal world of feelings and phantasies. In a later section we re-visit this idea in the area of "internal management". Authority is also often delegated by the organization that provides the professional mandate to run the group and often provides the resources. Examples are schools, therapeutic organizations and consulting organizations. However, the most significant authority in a group is its own authority to work towards its primary task. In well-facilitated groups, this authority is usually delegated ("upwards") *by the group to the leader* once the group has agreed on its primary task .

There are numerous forms of "contract" that are used to reinforce the structure of groups. These include verbal agreements between leaders and groups, written contracts between groups and umbrella organizations, indemnity contracts, health release forms, and so on. A significant competency is to know what types of agreement or contract are appropriate for any group at any particular time in its development. Even the advertising flyer for a group forms a significant part of the structure of a group. Another useful competency is that required to interact effectively with the group so as to arrive at a suitable contract or agreement.

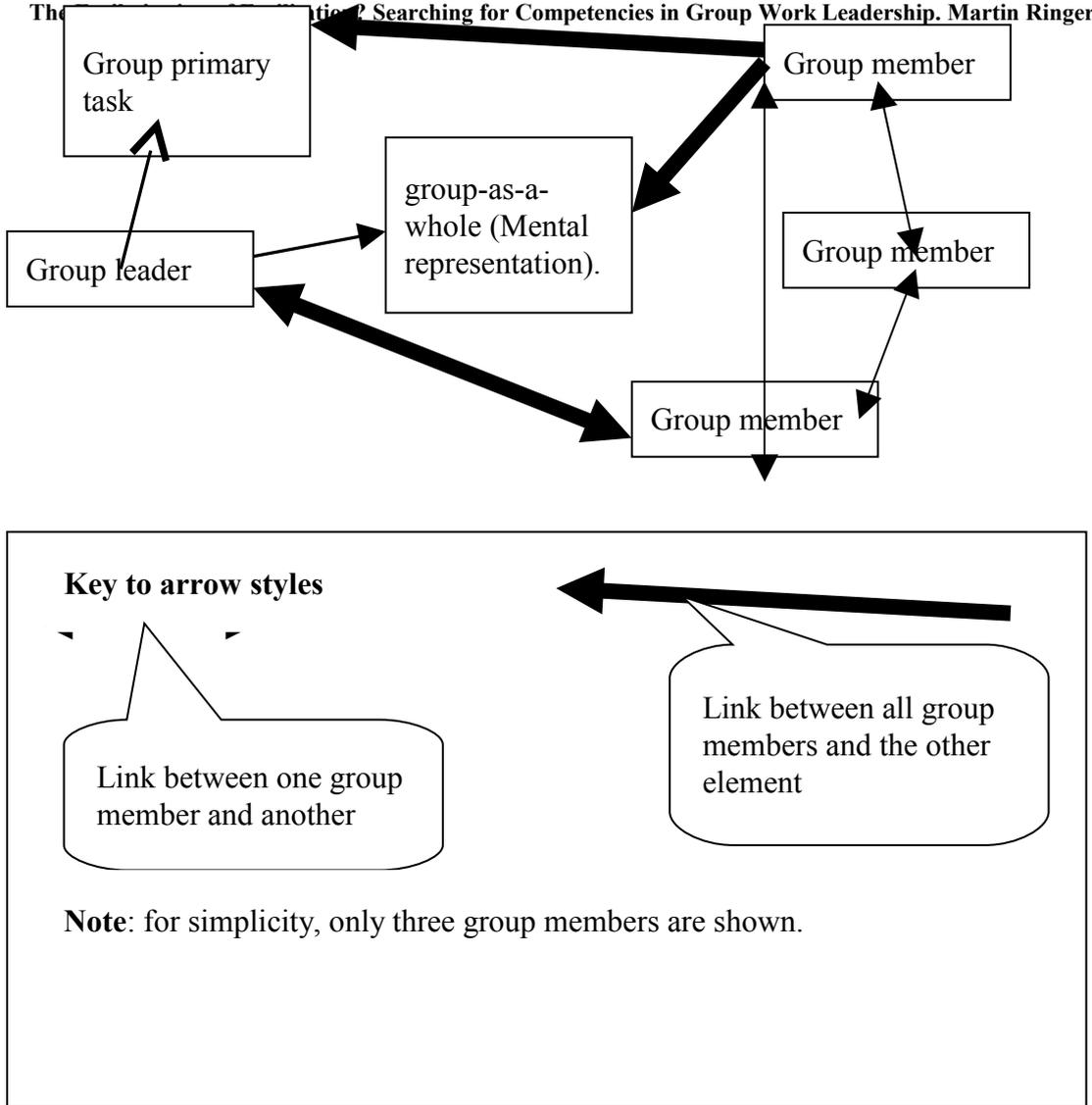
Relational

The relational perspective provides a view of relationships between key elements in a group. The word "relationship" somehow has a static quality about it, but the quality of interaction between group members and other group members, between group members and the leader is of crucial importance. This quality becomes visible as *patterns* of interaction as the group proceeds. The main elements that are considered from the relational perspective on groups are people and the informal roles that they enact, but some other elements like the group primary task and the organizational context are also relevant here.

The competence that is most relevant here is the leader's capacity to work with the group to build and maintain the links that enable the group to function. Sociometry, the study of relationships, is a useful area of competence in working effectively with relationships between people. Other links are important though. These are shown diagrammatically in Figure 2.

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Figure 2: Links between group members, group primary task and group leader. (Not showing sub-groups).



These links, as shown in Figure 2, are between:

1. Each of the group members and the primary task
2. The group leader and the primary task
3. Each of the group members and others
4. Each of the group members and the leader
5. The group leader and each of the group members
6. Group members and the group-as-a-whole
7. The leader with the group-as-a-whole.

These links are described in detail in Ringer (1999b) and so only a brief overview is given here.

The links between group members and the primary task, and between the group leader and the primary task are the essential foundations for any type of group, regardless of whether it is a task, educational, developmental or psychotherapeutic group. Task clarity provides the fundamental mandate for the group to exist. Hence, developing these links is an essential competency for group work leaders. However, the way in which the relationships between group members is related to the group purpose varies from one type of group to another. In task and educational groups sound relationships enable the group to focus on its practical or learning task and so provide the foundation for an effective group. In developmental/counseling and psychotherapy groups, strained relationships in the group may provide the grist for the therapeutic mill. In this case, the single-minded determination of the group leader to "fix" the relationships in the group will work against the effectiveness of the group in achieving its primary task - that of learning from the relationship difficulties.

Similarly, the nature of the relationship between the leader and the group provides essential information about the group itself, and so a lack of comfort in this relationship can sometimes enhance the functioning of the group, for a time anyway. This topic is covered extensively in group work literature under the term "countertransference." Finally, the various natures of the relationships of the leader with the group-as-a-whole and between participants and the group-as-a-whole provide essential information about the functioning of the group, and so can be used as another element in the complex progress towards the group achieving its goal. The relationships between the leader and the mental representation of the group-as-a-whole and the relationship between group members and the group-as-a-whole operate primarily at an unconscious level. Given their unconscious nature, these relationships are dealt with later in the section on group climate.

All groups evolve an internal structure and so any roles and consequent role relationships that are not included in the formal structure will emerge as informal roles. If, for instance, a formal group leader consistently fails to negotiate and act on time boundaries, one or more of the group participants will begin to take on the role of timekeeper. Other informal roles emerge in the group, not because they fill a deficit in the formal structure, but because of unconscious patterns of communication that inevitably occur in groups. Group members bring to the group their internal working models of themselves and their place in the world. These unconscious expectations are communicated in subtle ways to other group members. Gradually, group members shape each other's behavior through repeated acts of communication and different members adopt clearer patterns of behavior that can become more restricted in their range as the life of the group evolves. Role differentiation is one measure of the maturity of a group, and the emergence of helpful roles in a group can add to its effectiveness. However, role differentiation through projective identification involving negativity can lead to serious problems such as scapegoating .

Finally, on the topic of the relational perspective, there are other aspects of linking between elements of a group that exist at unconscious levels. Links occur at spiritual, emotional, sexual and intuitive levels as well as the more rational/cognitive levels. The leader and individuals in the group form a complex dynamic interdependent human system that functions in ways that

often run counter to rationality. A key competency is that of managing the complexity of linking, much of which occurs beyond immediate awareness. Having an understanding of the factors described in the section on group climate enhances this competency.

Efficacy

Each group member needs to be competent to perform the role that he or she performs in the group. There are two main types of role. The first is that agreed to in establishing the purpose and formal structure of the group. For example, a psychotherapy group consists of leader(s) and participants. The participants agree to adopt the role of client, and usually the conditions of that role are specified in setting up the group. These conditions include such things as the level of participation, the nature of participation, expectations about disclosure etcetera. Examples of the main formal roles in different types of group are: 'Learner' for educational groups; 'client' for counseling groups; 'patient' for psychoanalysis groups, etcetera. Just as people in organizations have job descriptions, members of groups have the equivalent role descriptions. The "full value contract" for adventure education groups provides the essence of the role description, whereas for psychoanalytic groups Anzieu's "rules of diagnostic groups" provide role descriptions for participants and leaders where expectations of each role are specified.

The second aspect of role that participants enact is that of the informal role, as mentioned earlier under the heading of *Relational* aspects of group functioning. Leadership effectiveness can be enhanced by considering that group members will, through such unconscious processes as projective identification, allocate roles amongst themselves whether or not the leader facilitates the allocation of formal roles.

Whilst the major focus in group leadership is on the competency of the group leader, it is also important to focus on the competence of group members to enact their roles in the group. Thus an important competency for leaders is that of supporting and coaching group members in the development of their competence to take useful active parts in the group. Secondly, group leaders need to have the judgement that enables them to effectively screen out potential group members whose personal competence is not up to the standard required for the group in question. Occasionally, leaders will need to remove a member because the member does not have the capacity to take part in the group, even with coaching. Perhaps one of the most difficult tasks ever undertaken by a leader is to work simultaneously with an unsuitable group member and with the group so as to remove the group member. The group member in question is likely to feel extremely threatened, and the remaining group members will have a heightened sensitivity to the risk that they too, will be asked to leave. Very high levels of competency in group leadership are required to deal with this thorny issue.

To summarize from the perspective of participant efficacy, leaders need to be competent at supporting the competence of *participants* to be effective group members. The relevant leadership competencies include coaching and supporting participants in adopting and enacting appropriate roles, setting and enforcing limits, and empowering participants to make the most of the developmental space that is created by the group itself.

Internal management

I sometimes think that at almost any time in any group, if we stopped to ask group members what they were doing, most might say "I'm working on managing my internal world so that I can participate effectively in this group." In reality many people do not have the self-awareness (or self absorption!) to know that they are actively managing their emotional state, but perhaps if they did have that awareness we might get the response above that I imagine. In other words, an essential competency for group leaders is that of facilitating group members in the process of managing their internal/emotional worlds. This is the case for all kinds of groups, not just for therapy groups. I derive this view from the observation that many people seem to be competent to do many things in life, but once they reach a certain point of emotional or psychological stress, they lose their competency. So in order for group participants to retain the competencies that they already have in participating in the functioning of the group, we need to assist them in managing their internal worlds so as to retain access to those competencies.

A second aspect of group members' internal functioning that calls for specific leadership competencies is that of projection and projective identification. Leaders need to be able to identify when group members are losing their effectiveness through projective processes and need to be able to intervene in helpful ways. Projection involves the unconscious disowning of aspects of self that create excessive anxiety or threaten the person's ideal view of him/herself. Not only is this aspect of self disowned, but it is also perceived by the person doing the disowning to be a characteristic of another person. At times the disowned aspects of self can be projected onto an inanimate object, the environment or an organization. In other words the "badness" is projected onto the other person or object. Rather than face the disturbance of having to acknowledge that this person him/herself has a characteristic that he/she perceives to be undesirable, he/she 'finds' it in someone else or something else. Of course in groups there are plenty of other people who can be identified by one group member as having undesirable characteristics. For example, a group member (Sam) who constantly smiles, quickly finds another group member (Sally) to be aggressive and rude. What Sam does not realize is that his idealized picture of himself is that of an amiable person who is tolerant of others and nice to everyone. Accordingly, he is terrified of the inevitable presence in his own functioning of intolerance and aggression. As soon as another person in the group shows intolerance and aggression, Sam jumps to point this out, thereby completely avoiding having to face his own intolerance. The combination of projective processes operating in a group leads to members adopting roles in groups that are the sum of their own preconceptions of whom they are, plus the internalized projections from all other members of the group. The internalization of others' projections is the early stage of projective identification . References to other material on projective identification can be found in the Appendix.

Leaders, too, are active participants in the complex matrix of projective processes that occur in groups and hence they are influenced at unconscious levels by the unspoken undercurrents in the group. These unconscious influences are most often experienced by the leader as feelings and intuition.

Not surprisingly, then, group leaders need to be highly effective at managing their internal worlds so that they retain their competencies as group leaders. In summary, competence to lead groups is dependent on two concurrent factors:

1. The skills, abilities, knowledge and attitudes required for the task
2. The ability to manage one's internal world so as to retain access to those competencies.

As mentioned earlier, in order for a facilitator to be able to choose an intervention, he or she needs to have some idea about what is happening and what needs to change. Awareness of what is happening in the group is derived directly from the group leader's awareness of his or her own emotional/intuitive state because that provides information about what is occurring at an unconscious level in the group. In other words, the group leader's own emotional state is inextricably linked with the emotional "field" that exists in the group. The group leader's own emotions are the thermometer or perhaps litmus paper that reads the nature of the patterns of unconscious interaction in the group.

You might object, "But my emotions are affected by my own pathology, neuroses, and other unresolved stuff that I've got going on. Surely my own emotions are a very unreliable way of sensing what is going on in the group, purely because of this 'corruption'?" "Anyway", you might say, "I'm already influenced by unconscious processes in the group, so how could I possibly identify my part in all of this?" You might point to deaths and accidents that have occurred in outdoor programs. You could well remind us that through an exclusive and unquestioning focus on the perceptions of group members and leaders it is possible for groups, including the leader(s) to become caught up in an illusory disconnection from important issues in the group and in the environment. Real physical dangers might be dismissed or ignored by groups that have built an illusion of invincibility. Sick starving or hypothermic group members might be collusively labeled as 'complainers' and left to suffer or, in extreme cases, be left to die. These objections are common and are reinforced by the so called scientific view that there is only one objective truth about everything that some unidentified 'unbiased' observer could identify.

The paradox about managing reality in groups is that there is not a *single* objective truth about what is going on in any group. Whilst leaders, group members and even whole groups can be caught in unhelpful phantasies, the observations, intuition and feelings of participants and leaders alike are what defines the 'truth' about what is going on. Leaders need to develop high levels of personal functioning to enable them to determine when it is likely that they are entering an unhelpful phantasy about the group. This is achieved at an individual level by the group leader knowing about and understanding his or her own idiosyncratic responses to others' behavior and his or her own habitual patterns of projection. Means of catching oneself entering a 'group illusion' are best gained through prior experience as a participant in such events, and through having a thorough understanding of unconscious processes in the group-as-a-whole, as discussed in the next section on 'group climate'.

Here, I provide an example of how my internal functioning can get me into trouble with groups,

and in particular with some male participants. Specifically I have a long personal history of difficult relationships with men in authority. When I have an arrogant pushy man as a participant in my group it is very likely that I will get angry. I then have the difficult task of deciding to what extent my anger arises from my unconscious perception of anger of other group members and to what extent my anger comes from my own unresolved issues with men in authority. This capacity to differentiate comes only with practice, professional supervision and patience, but it is a key competency for group leaders.

The simplest means of exploring one's patterns of perceiving and reacting to life events is to unearth our "internal working models." These are described more fully in the chapter in progress of my forthcoming book on groups:

Internal working models are personal, individualized "maps" of the way in which each person expects significant aspects of the world to interact with him or herself. Each aspect of the world is the subject of one or more working models. "The term 'working model' can be used to denote all the representations about the world and ourselves in it that we build in the course of experience, including people, places, ideas, cultural patterns, social structures and so on" . For instance, each person has a working model that includes expectations of how families should work. "...there are specialized forms of working model which can be defined as a set of conscious and unconscious notions about oneself as a person and the other as a significant figure in one's life." (Marrone , p 72). These specialized working models describe to ourselves the durable expectations about how other people will relate to us. .

Included in our internal working models is a set of expectations about how people should behave in relation to others - including ourselves. When another person behaves in a way that is significantly different to that determined by our internal working models, we feel shock or anxiety. Each person's internal working models prescribe different behaviors and so the shock and anxiety is experienced in response to different events by different people. Hence, the greater the extent of our awareness of our own internal working models, the greater the extent to which we can be aware that other people will react differently than we do.

A further factor in helping group leaders to manage their own internal worlds in ways that assist the group to achieve its purpose is the understanding of unconscious processes in human interaction, and more specifically in groups. These unconscious processes are described more fully in Stokes , Hinshelwood , Anzieu and Neri .

By now it will be obvious that there is no clean line that differentiates the unconscious functioning of any one person in the group - whether leader or participant - from the unconscious functioning of any other person. This potentially confusing insight can create difficulties for leaders who are seeking to influence the group, because they are faced with the challenge of influencing a system from the inside rather than being an external agent who influences the group from the outside. So as to support the competencies of the leader, new theoretical models are required that promote an understanding of the connection between group leader's feelings and the unconscious patterns in groups. The competencies derived from understanding the group-as-a-whole are outlined below under the heading "group climate."

Group climate

The perspective on group leadership competencies that is described under this heading is primarily a symbolic one. No longer are rationality and logic prevalent means of understanding groups. Here we focus on the process of making meaning and building mental representations of the group. The key leadership competency is that of being able to perceive events and to intervene in the group at symbolic levels. The leader needs to understand his or her place as one that is strongly influenced, beyond his or her awareness, by the powerful unconscious processes which are operating in the group. Leaders who cling to the illusion that they are "in control" of events in the group are not able to operate from this perspective.

Rather, leaders who view the group-as-a-whole and watch for patterns of perception, interaction and influence are able to assist the group to work through its unconsciously expressed blocks to progress. Here, theoretical models which describe the group-as-a-whole provide the conceptual maps for the leader. Such models as Agazarian's functional subgrouping, Whitaker and Lieberman's focal conflict model, Neri's genius loci, Foulkes' group matrix, Bion's basic assumptions and Anzieu's group phantasy are all useful at different times in different settings.

Leaders who are competent to work with unconscious processes in groups will recognize that all other elements of the group both influence and are influenced by the unconscious life of the group. The *task* established for the group affects some aspects of the climate. For instance, a psychotherapy group will have a different feel to an educational group which is made up of the same members. The *formal structure* for a group has a major impact on its climate. In particular, groups with low levels of structure tend to be more fragmented, anxious, and regressed than groups with moderate levels of structure. The *relational* aspects of the group are an important contributor to the climate of the group. A group with strong links between members will develop a sense of robustness which is not present in a group where links are fragile or even hostile. Conversely, when the group climate contains suppressed hostility, links between members and the sense of containment in the group will feel weak. A sense of fragility or fearfulness will also emerge in groups where a number of individuals, or the leader, do not have the basic *competencies* to carry out their roles. Finally, groups where members are not capable of managing their *inner* emotional and psychological worlds will not feel robust and will not retain their sense of purpose because the insecure participants will project their unmanageable feelings onto other group members. Other defenses used by insecure group members are to attack the group leader or idealize him or her with a resulting over-reliance on the leader. Competent group leaders will recognize this plethora of pitfalls and will be able to respond effectively in ways that facilitate the group working effectively towards its goal.

As mentioned earlier, a further influence on group climate is that of the umbrella organization or "host" organization for the group. The assumptions and conditions that underlie an organization's structure will also influence any group that is held under the auspices of that organization. "Truths" about human nature and about human change processes are automatically conveyed to group participants purely through their involvement in the umbrella organization. Sometimes these influences are relatively subtle. For instance, I led a workshop for an organization that was

suffering from a crisis in its leadership at the very top level. The people I was working with were not directly involved in this leadership crisis. Nonetheless, group members turned up late, the room we had booked was not available at the last minute, a staff meeting was called part way during the workshop...all in all, the chaos and ambivalence in the organization's leadership had a direct influence on our workshop. Initially, none of the group members considered that there was a link between the chaos in the organization's leadership and the chaos in our workshop. It all happened at an unconscious level.

Conclusion

Leadership of groups is one of the most complex tasks that human beings can undertake². As a result, the competencies required to be an effective group leader are many and diverse. They range from practical skills in managing tasks, boundaries and roles, through to the potentially elusive "arts" of working with intuitive and unconscious processes. Such an array of competencies is potentially overwhelming, and can create a great deal of anxiety for those seeking excellence in group leadership. The task outdoor leaders, development trainers and corporate adventure trainers already face is complex enough without adding more requirements. Already these people need to have competencies and qualifications in adventure skills, first aid, interpersonal communication and in the specific fields in which they specialize. Adding to this already heavy requirement the above competencies for group work leadership can be almost intolerable. Hence, the temptation facing many of us is to simplify the group work competencies to make them seem more manageable. In support of this wish for simplicity, we can call in the tenets of rationalism thereby dismissing aspects of group work that call for understanding of unconscious processes. My call is to tolerate the anxiety arising from the awareness that group work leadership is such a complex task. An appropriate response is to include in our personal development plans ways of improving the competencies that enable us to grapple effectively with unconscious processes.

In particular, the quality of experiential group leadership could be improved if most leaders focussed on:

1. Skills and techniques to help groups to identify and move towards their primary task
2. Ability to develop role clarity in groups and work constructively with role confusion when it arises
3. Working strategically with the relationships in the group and to ensure the means of working with relationships assists the group to work towards its primary task
4. Coaching group members to support their competencies as effective group members
5. Their ability to manage their internal worlds in a way that ensures that they retain

access to accurate perception and skills even in the midst of emotionally challenging events. (That is, their ability to manage their feelings, anxiety, defensiveness etcetera.)

6. Developing robust self awareness, in a way that provides useful data about what is occurring in the group
7. Their ability to intervene in the group in a way that balances the conscious and unconscious demands, and that balances the individual needs with the needs of the group-as-whole .
8. Ability to facilitate to growth of the emotional "container" for the group and to facilitate the development of links between key elements in the group.

Many other competencies are relevant, but those listed immediately above are a representative sample from the six perspectives outlined in this paper. The competencies outlined and advocated in this paper need to be supported by the overall view that groups and their leaders are complex interdependent human systems, where all aspects of group life are inextricably woven together. A second aspect of the supporting mind set is the awareness that human beings, both in groups and as individuals, work by a system of logic that is not exclusively rational and hence that the creation of meaning in human systems - involving unconscious processes - is of paramount importance.

Footnotes

1: Phantasy' differs from 'fantasy' in that phantasy is a form of imagining that remains completely unconscious whereas fantasy can have elements that are in the conscious awareness of the subject.

2: Whilst this paper focuses specifically on experiential learning groups, most of the principles outlined here are directly applicable to social groups, work groups, political groups and groups that form for a myriad of other reasons. However, caution should be exercised when making generalizations outside groups that are the subject of this paper. A wider view of the applicability of the concepts in this paper is taken in Ringer (in progress).

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These will be published as chapters in a forthcoming book, either in their published form or after being edited.

Constructing reality in groups (book chapter in progress)

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Ringer, T. M. (1998). *Achieving the celebration of cultural difference: The impossible task?* Paper presented at the Joint Congress of the European Institute for Adventure Education and Experiential Learning, Edinburgh.

Ringer, T. M. (1999). Enhancing group effectiveness through creating and maintaining a "reflective space". (book chapter in progress).

Ringer, T. M. (1999, January 11 - 15). *Many faces make one? - Effective learning through group experiences*. Paper presented at the 11th National Outdoor Education Conference, Murdoch University: Perth, Western Australia.