

COFACILITATION: A Two-header

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One way to continuously build on the existence of shared leadership (see *Shared Leadership Workbook and Shared Leadership Handbook*, located in Online Resources at www.selfhelp.on.ca) is to consider cofacilitation as an option. Sometimes a group's original organizers may depart for a variety of reasons, leaving fewer members to handle the facilitation. If members are accustomed to someone else leading their group, they may be reluctant to take on the task because they lack experience or are simply afraid of doing a terrible job. Wherever possible, planning for such a situation can ensure that a support group will continue. Cofacilitation is one approach that offers some stability during that transition.

If it is true that “two heads are better than one,” then cofacilitation applies that idea by creating a team of two or more people to facilitate a group. While requiring an investment of time, cofacilitation nonetheless offers numerous benefits, by providing: more ideas during the preparation for group; more practical experience for a beginner, while being supported by a more experienced facilitator; more energy during tense or conflict-laden moments; more support for a lead facilitator in the event they become too personally involved in the discussion; and, most importantly, more than one head to make the prospect of facilitation less intimidating and exhausting.

Initially, members can begin by adding two broad sets of skill to their repertoire -- vibes watching and process observing:

- The task of a vibes watcher is to be aware of the emotional climate in the room, to check for body language (yawning, dozing, sagging, fidgeting, sudden departures), to observe facial expressions (actively present or “zoned out”) and to bring attention to the need for a break when energy flags.
- The task of process observer is to pay attention to side conversations and interruptions, how decisions are made, the quality of listening and participation, how conflict is handled, and the manner in which a group operates, be it relaxed or tense. As an observer, a cofacilitator disengages from the group's agenda and instead, looks for patterns of participation -- who speaks to whom, whose leadership predominates, etc. With the group's understanding and agreement, a process observer may then offer feedback, but only if done with tact and sensitivity.

In taking on these differing roles, the cofacilitator begins to learn the art, as well as the science, of facilitation. Over the weeks and months, cofacilitators can switch roles – from being the lead facilitator for half a meeting, to being the only facilitator during a scheduled vacation or because of a sudden crisis. With a combination of support and lived experience, a cofacilitator can become more confident, more willing to give

feedback and handle conflict, and eventually, to support new members eager to try what they have seen modelled so successfully.

The cofacilitation approach can also be a successful method of transitioning from a professionally-led to a member-led group. As we are all expected to do more with less, professionals may want to try this approach with members who wish to continue past agreed-upon timelines or in preparation for situations when the professional is unavailable. It is also good contingency planning after a specific project has concluded, but participants see the benefits of ongoing support and wish to continue the group themselves.

Regardless of the circumstance, using cofacilitation can be an excellent way of empowering members while modeling an essential element of self-help – mutual support through shared leadership.

Inspiration for this article comes from the pamphlet *Meeting Facilitation: the No Magic Method* by Berit Lakey, New Society Publishers, Philadelphia 1982

COFACILITATOR PROFILE

Think about, record and share your answers with your cofacilitators and coordinate your styles before beginning a group; it will make your joint efforts more successful.

1. When starting the group, I usually _____

2. I feel most comfortable in group when _____

3. When someone talks too much, I usually _____

4. I feel uneasy when _____

5. When the group is silent I usually _____

6. When someone cries, I usually _____

7. When someone comes late, I usually _____

8. When there is conflict in the group, I usually _____

9. My favourite intervention in group is: _____

10. If I forget something or you have a great idea to share while I'm talking, please

11. If someone storms out of group, I would want _____

12. Because I am right- (or left-)handed, I tend to _____

13. I would like some feedback from my cofacilitator on _____

14. I feel well prepared when _____

15. I enjoy and feel competent in _____

16. I would like to learn more about _____

17. One skill I plan to practice is _____

18. My intervention rhythm is fast/slow, because I _____

19. My signal to ask for my cofacilitator's help is _____

20. I like to do evaluations regularly because _____

COFACILITATORS' INITIAL MEETING

Background

1. Review your answers of your profile with your cofacilitator
2. Discuss your past experience as a group member and cofacilitator
3. Explain some of your behaviour patterns in group and what part of your style you would like to work on in this group
4. Together define your goals and expectations for the group and review the group's current guidelines.

How to operate in group

1. Decide who is doing what in advance: Who will be the "main facilitator" & who will vibs watch and observe group process
2. Begin with announcements, group guidelines, and
3. Have clear predetermined signals when one person hands over the facilitation responsibility to the other
4. Have a plan if your cofacilitator doesn't show or is late
5. Summarize when a member speaks for too long

Cofacilitation Agreements

1. Where, when, and how will we deal with conflicts between us?
2. What is non-negotiable for each of us as cofacilitators? (i.e. don't leave the room without warning, don't insist on having the final word, don't interrupt, disagree or take over, etc.)
3. Make sure that, combined, you are saying very little
4. Always talk afterwards about what you felt went well and could be improved
5. Provide honest, but gentle feedback, to your cofacilitator when asked

Ethics

1. How do we handle the expression of strong emotions?
2. How do we respond when someone abruptly leaves the room in anger or tears?
3. How do we handle breaches of confidentiality?
4. What do we do if a group member is having psychological difficulty and we are concerned about them?
5. How do we maintain our boundaries in group?
6. What is our responsibility after the group meeting is over?

Sources include: The 1975 Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators, Notes on Co-Facilitation from www.uea.ac.uk/lhj, and Starting/Running Support Groups from www.parenttoparent.org/Sup-run-10.htm with adaptations by Spencer Brennan, OSHNET Coordinator, Self-Help Resource Centre of Greater Toronto