
Frameworks and skills for keeping self-help groups on track

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I Introduction

The Ontario Self-Help Network (OSHNET) Program of the Self-Help Resource Centre (SHRC) provides support to self-help groups in their development and, most importantly, with ongoing enhancement, change and sustainability issues. This includes consultation services related to specific challenges and training workshops on themes such as "Keeping Your Group on Track" and "Facilitation Skills for Self-Help Support Groups."

Self-help/mutual aid support groups are informal networks of individuals who share a common experience or issue. The primary focus of self-help is emotional support, practical support and information exchange. For more background about self-help groups and strategies, see "Self-Help/Mutual Aid: Take Another Look" OHPE Bulletin 80.1 (http://www.ohpe.ca/ebulletin/index.php?option=com_uvmnewsletter&Itemid=79&nid=80) or visit <http://www.selfhelp.on.ca>.

Since self-help groups depend on the leadership of peer volunteers, challenges like maintaining momentum, ensuring regular evaluation, and addressing change are accentuated even more than in professionally-led programs. On the up side, the experience of working through these community processes builds community members' personal skills, empowerment and social support--all key ingredients of health.

The goals, structures, activities and procedures of self-help/mutual aid groups vary as widely as the communities where groups are present. And they should. Still, OSHNET (and similar self-help capacity building programs across Canada, the US and the UK) teaches common frameworks for how groups should approach discussing, deciding and clarifying their activities. Beyond the realm of self-help initiatives, many of our key messages point to good frameworks and skills for any group working together towards health promotion goals.

This article will share the key messages covered in OSHNET's work teaching frameworks and skills for keeping self-help groups on track:

* Understand the Stages of Group Development

III Share Leadership

Why?

On a most practical level, volunteer-run groups risk their sustainability when they are led by only one person. Burnout is not uncommon and in certain types of groups (e.g., cancer) disability or death are realities that regularly affect group dynamics. More fundamentally, the diverse grassroots community movements that popularize self-help strategies question the common notion that successful groups result from the influence of one or two good leaders. Most successful self-help groups are those that share leadership roles among many members--and leadership roles include any effort that supports the positive momentum of the group (tasks as varied as listening, cleaning up refreshments, welcoming new members, opening or facilitating group discussions). When groups demystify leadership in this way, members can affirm the real value of their unique contributions; they will also perceive new responsibilities as more of a development of their role and less of a risk.

What?

We ask groups to seriously consider "what makes for good leadership in groups?" In training workshops, we do this through a game where they are asked to answer the question with words that begin with each letter in the word "L-E-A-D-E-R-S-H-I-P." The results are most often words like Listening, Empathy, Appreciation, Direction, Encouragement, Respect, Sharing, Humour, Insight, Patience. When groups debrief these results, it becomes clear that if only one group leader practiced these actions/behaviours, the group would be awfully messy. A successful group depends on the commitment of many to practice and model these roles together through a variety of actions big and small.

Next we encourage groups to discuss how they can practice shared leadership more effectively. To help groups clarify and structure shared leadership roles, we invite them to break down leadership tasks into their smallest components and divvy them up: e.g., What's involved in preparing for a meeting? Setting up the room? Ensuring a welcoming and safe space? Opening, facilitating, and closing a meeting? Cleaning up and closing up? Ongoing outreach, evaluation, and planning? Once each role is broken down, some members will commit to one task, some might commit to several. Keeping the view that leadership is a collection of supportive actions makes joining leadership less ominous, and practicing leadership less of a burden.

Resources

* "From the Toolbox: The Leadership Matrix"

(http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/cgi-bin/resource/webdata_shrc.pl?fid=1107376535&

[query=all_search%3D%26pagenum%3D1%26cgifunction%3DSearch&cgifunction=form](http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/cgi-bin/resource/webdata_shrc.pl?fid=1107376535&query=all_search%3D%26pagenum%3D1%26cgifunction%3DSearch&cgifunction=form))

* OSHNET/SHRC Shared Leadership Workbook (<http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/SharedLeadershipWorkbook.pdf>)

* Working Collectively handbook

* "Factsheet: Community Readiness for Economic Development: Community Leadership", Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, Chuck Bokor, Community Leadership Specialist
(<http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/rural/facts/01-033.htm>)

* "Shared Leadership--developing theory and practice in groups and organizations," Infed - Informal Education
(http://www.infed.org/leadership/shared_leadership.htm)

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IV Clarify Guidelines for Group Activities

Why?

If only one or a select few leaders of a group are clear about why the group meets and what norms guide its activities, the work of maintaining these falls disproportionately on their shoulders. Clarifying guidelines (and all agreements) puts the group vision out front in a forum where all can participate in and support it. Furthermore, guidelines for group discussions make the job of the discussion facilitator easier by sharing responsibility (leadership) among all participants to support good listening, avoid judgment and offer appropriate responses during times of sharing or debate. This is especially supportive when facing difficult situations. Clear guidelines also help both members and outsiders better communicate what the group does (goals and activities), and what it cannot do (boundaries).

What

We guide groups through the process of developing a group blueprint (plan) that covers goals, activities, boundaries and guidelines. Guidelines should include those related to confidentiality (a cornerstone of mutual aid) and evaluation (how groups will receive and integrate feedback from all members into their plans and practices). We also encourage members to collectively develop guidelines specific to their meeting procedures or group discussions (e.g., code of conduct). A good question to ask is "what will make this group a supportive and safe place for you?" Making a list of the answers forms the basis for group guidelines.

During training, we guide participants through OSHNET's Shared Leadership Workbook, which was designed as a tool to help groups clarify guidelines and other decisions. Each page of the workbook outlines key questions related to different aspects of a group blueprint, with space to document decisions. Once agreed on and documented, some of these decisions would be transferred to publicity materials (e.g., group goals, activities and boundaries). Others, such as confidentiality agreements and discussion guidelines, should be incorporated into group welcoming materials, opening remarks, and/or wall posters at meetings.

Resources

- * Shared Leadership Workbook (see reference above in Share Leadership section)
- * Ask existing groups in your community for sample guidelines or contact OSHNET

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V Practice Skills for Dealing with Difficult Situations

Why?

Conflict can happen at levels that are so small we hardly notice it (e.g., I don't feel like eating fish for dinner) and on such heightened scales it can become overwhelming or at times horrifying. Conflict in groups is normal, yet it often seems mysterious and many people find the task of addressing conflict ominous. To better address conflicts, group members need to integrate two behaviours: 1) expect it--because it's normal and 2) practice addressing it--because the more you address it, the better you get (like learning to play an instrument).

What

The Self-Help Resource Association of BC outlines three skill areas for effective facilitation (especially important to addressing conflict). These are centering, listening, and assertive expression. Practicing these skills makes dealing with difficult situations easier. We help group members practice these skills through exercises that address one specific skill (e.g., reflective listening exercises) and through roleplays (roleplays offer the opportunity to practice assertive expression in all its intimidating complexities). Foremost, we encourage group members to support one another in bringing issues of conflict to the table (preferably while they are still small) and talking about them within the context of group guidelines.

More elaborate guidelines are available to assist groups in working through conflict. OSHNET uses an adapted version from the Nova Scotia Self-Help Connection. The steps in this process are check in with yourself, use "I" statements to identify feelings of tension or concern, create a space and time to "put the issue on the table", clarify goals and ground rules, give everyone a chance to be heard, use reflective listening skills, clarify the problem, brainstorming solutions, identifying an action that is agreeable, pursuing the new plan, committing to checking in later, congratulating yourselves (for talking and trying) and checking out.

Resources

- * "Working with the Hard Parts" workshop handouts, Ontario Self-Help Network (print)
- * "Methods for Developing Skills," chapter 13, Psychological Self-Help, Clayton E. Tucker-Ladd

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VI Maintain Momentum

Why?

With volunteer-run groups, there are no paychecks to help maintain momentum among leaders, so groups must be more conscious and creative about recognizing their efforts, rewarding themselves, setting limits and taking a break. Other important aspects of maintaining momentum are the integration of new members and mentoring of new leaders.

What?

Making a plan is paramount. Otherwise, this important aspect of group sustainability can be neglected among other concerns. We encourage group members to discuss amongst themselves how they like to be acknowledged and thanked for both their day to day and special contributions. This discussion focuses on the individual. For the group as a whole, we advise them to incorporate activities of group appreciation into regular meetings or at regular intervals (e.g., quarterly or annually). For example, reflect back over the past meeting/year and share perspectives on how the group has helped members over time. Enhancing group self-esteem helps keeps the energy flowing.

Resources

* Linda Kurtz, *Self-Help and Support Groups: A Handbook for Practitioners* (Sage, London, 1997) has two chapters that discuss stages of affiliation to groups, beginning participation and long-term participation, with useful insights and tips for maintaining momentum

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VII Conclusion

Although member-led self-help groups achieve tremendous impacts in diverse communities without outside funding, research has documented how their impacts can be enhanced and broadened by capacity-building support through professionals, non-profit organizations and government. In Ontario, diverse local, regional and province-wide organizations provide this support, among them the Ontario Self-Help Network. In addition to supporting groups directly, OSHNET's mandate includes offering consultations and trainings to health promoters on strategies for integrating and supporting self-help in their work.

Contact OSHEM for more details, or check out our online factsheets "Tips for the Helping Professional" (<http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/professional.pdf>) and "Integrating

Self-Help Strategies in Your Health Promotion Work"
(http://www.selfhelp.on.ca/resource/integrating_strategies.pdf).