

Leadership in Groups: Six Dimensions of Style

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When I am leading a training group I am often asked about what guided me to make a particular decision, or to what verbal or nonverbal cues was I responding, or about my overall style. Usually the people asking are seeing their own dilemmas reflected in what I did and are questioning their own style, by seeking information on which they can base their own choices in the future.

Many questions are asked, particularly as issues which arise in groups are often emotionally loaded, and need careful handling so that group members are not hurt in the process, and that working relationships are enhanced rather than damaged. Many group leaders are concerned about how to encourage sufficient openness to frank and honest talk about important issues, with sufficient support to carry work through to a positive conclusion for everyone involved. Often conflict arises because people lose sight of the elementary and most basic rules for clear communication, such as listening, checking, and agreeing before putting an alternative view. Sometimes the ordinary way in which a group is tackling a problem is ineffective and could be greatly improved if only someone could introduce an unfamiliar strategy. Groups often fall into moods which raise expectations which are not fulfilled because no-one can create the next step. One topical issue is that of discrimination against women; another is sexual harassment of women. An important aspect of this issue is that our culture lays stereotypes on both men and women that are very strongly inbuilt. Change in these areas involves personal, inter-personal, social and cultural dimensions, and may be experienced as frightening, an uncomfortable feeling, which is often resisted. It is hard for some people, especially men, to even allow themselves to become aware of their own behaviour and motives. There are similar problems to be faced in improving inter-personal skills. All of us have taken a lifetime to develop them as they are, and they stand us in good stead. Sometimes attempting to take on a new skill has the effect of pressing emotional buttons, because the new behaviour is contrary to a lifetime's practice. In all such situations, whether the group is primarily involved in work, training, political or social action, living or recreation, or in some combination of these, the skill of the leader in intervening effectively is often crucial.

This paper is primarily addressed to trainers, staff developers and leaders of groups which have learning as a primary purpose. It will also be of value to leaders of work groups. It is written in a form designed to encourage reflection by the reader, and self appraisal. In many cases the answers will be implicit. You will undoubtedly add questions that you have already answered and others that as yet you have not.

Some questions about leadership

(1) **Directive or non-directive?** Which decisions do I make on behalf of the group? Which do we make together: ones about membership; purposes and goals, long or short-term; resources; content; procedures; organisation; assessment; evaluation?

Do I propose a decision and invite comments in order to refine and modify my proposal? Do I consult the group for options and then propose or make a decision? Do I act as chairperson to assist in decision-making? Do I leave the decision-making to the group?

Do I blend all these different ways at different times? What values and principles should guide me in my decision about how far the group should participate in decision-making?

Can I resolve the apparent contradiction in deciding to be non-directive so that group members will become more independent and interdependent? Do I let go the leadership role enough to allow and encourage this to happen?

(2) **Interpretive or non-interpretive?** Should I tell the group or individuals in the group what I think is going on in the process? Should I encourage group members to express in their own way what they think is going on? Should I present some form of rationale to help members develop an understanding of individual behaviour, or motives, interpersonal behaviour, or group behaviour? Do I attribute meaning to behaviour, without an obvious theory, or from within some theoretical framework about individual process or group dynamics such as TA or co-counselling, or following some author such as Rackham, Freud, Bion, Schutz? Do I invite people to comment from a model of my choice or theirs?

When should I do this? How much time should I devote to such review?

When is interpreting an intrusion on someone's privacy, or right to be as they wish?

(3) **Confronting or non-confronting?** Should I confront the group about defensive, rigid, restrictive, aggressive, manipulative or submissive behaviour, attitudes or assumptions, which in my view hinder the progress of the group in achieving worthwhile ends? Should I encourage self-confrontation, or members to confront each other and the group?

How do I do this supportively? Do I do it subjectively? Is it possible to be objective? Should I tell about my personal reactions and if so, how? Do I draw attention to any possible or actual hidden agenda? Do I interrupt what I consider inappropriate behaviour? Do I tolerate mounting tension in the hope that members will find their own way?

Do I avoid confronting because I find it unpleasant, because of fear, or because I haven't got the skill? When does confronting become attack?

(4) **Cathartic or non-cathartic?** Do I actively encourage the expression and release of emotional tension in individuals and the group through tears, laughter, storming, trembling? Do I create a climate of tension-reduction without catharsis?

How far should I permit the ventilation of feeling? What skills do I need to work in this way? How do I lower the threshold for more openness to emotional expression? How do I keep the proceedings light enough for the group to handle and deep enough to be effective in producing learning? How and when should the group decide or revise their contract to express emotionally loaded issues? What do we do when a group member unexpectedly stumbles into catharsis? Should I divert attention from emotionally tense situations and switch activity?

How do I collude with my own defensiveness, the group's, or that of our culture by avoiding the expression of emotion?

(5) **Structuring or un-structuring?** How highly do I structure the group process? Do I leave the working procedures to whatever the group set for themselves?

Do I recommend ground-rules for behaviour or procedure? Do I introduce exercises — if so, how many, how often, with what focus? Are they taken: from a source-book, or designed for the occasion beforehand or on-the-spot, or tailor made with group members? Do I structure through interventions only? Do I have a high or low profile? Do I create an autonomous learning environment and leave people to use it in their own way? Do I facilitate by just being a model of good group membership?

What should guide me in choosing some degree of structure? When does structure rightly deal with fear of the unknown and when is it just for my comfort and security?

(6) **Disclosing or non-disclosing?** Do I tell about myself in a group or do I present myself silently?

How genuine and complete should I be in disclosing my own reactions, beliefs and needs, or in working as a group member? Should I be honest in my appreciations of, caring for, or feelings towards others? Can I express all these silently and non-verbally?

Is it possible to meet my needs as well as enabling others to meet their needs?

Six Dimensions of Leadership Style

The above questions are clustered in such a way as to pull out one way of regarding the overall style of a conscious and intentional style of leadership. The six dimensions are each a continuum between the poles of active and passive action. Neither end of each pole is more valid than the other except in the context of a particular group at a particular time. What is proposed here is that competence in our group leadership skill involves the ability to know at any time at what point on each dimension we are operating and why. Like myself you will have conscious beliefs which guide you in your choice. Like myself you will have your limits, some obvious, some not so obvious, even to others.

The primary values which underly the analysis are:

- 1 the integrity of individuals and their right to believe what they will;
- 2 personal autonomy and growth skills;
- 3 interdependence and cooperation.

How have you come to your decision about your style: through experience; through private reflection and planned learning; through informal conversation with others; through observation of more and less effective leaders; through co-supervision; through a support group with other leaders; through seeking the views of members of your groups; through training groups; through some combination of all these? How conscious are you of your style? How flexible are you in varying it with different groups?

One way I found very useful to extend my own skills was to attend a two year course which used the above dimensions as the basis for the training. I followed it by offering the same course as the primary facilitator. I also have experience of offering short 3-5 day versions of the training to experienced group leaders, whether they call themselves trainers, staff developers, teachers, therapists or managers. The training has three main parts. The first is an initial exploration of each of the dimensions using structured activities. This involves those who wish taking turns to lead small groups using the skills appropriate to each dimension, and having a chance to review their skills using a combination of self-assessment and feedback from the others involved. This is followed by each individual producing a profile of their own style and identifying the extent to which they want to extend their range of operation in each dimension. The remainder of the training is devoted to activities relevant to the needs identified in this way. This includes setting up situations to represent typical problems met in the experience of members, or anticipated as likely to arise some time in the future. Design and testing out of activities is a usual feature of the course. The object is to always expand skills beyond the limits imposed not only by lack of knowledge, but also by fear of failure, and even by personal limitations. It is to answer questions such as those defined in the text by enquiry in the practical experience of the course. I always find that the atmosphere of support, which people create in such situations allows plenty of leeway to test out possibilities which they dare not risk in real life. This has the effect of clarifying what is genuinely realistic and what is not.

Follow-up

Quite apart from encouraging peer supervision and support groups I and my colleagues offer support to staff developers when trying out new ventures, especially if they are based on any of the other training modules developed at the University. (These include a flexible 'Practical Methods of Dealing with Stress', suitable for any setting and for open groups; 'Six Basic Ways of Supervising and Helping'; the one-to-one interpersonal skills training model on which the above was based, applicable throughout all professional roles; 'Self and Peer Assessment', a cooperative approach to appraisal suitable for independent practitioners, work team members, top management). The method involves taking the high risk parts of the training in the first cycle and handing over the training at the rate that the co-trainers wish, acting as a back-stop and counsellor. The end result is a tailor-made training and additional training skill in the organisation. The practice is exciting and enjoyable and cost-effective. Just as in a group, no member wishes to be dependent on the leader for any longer than to acquire the relevant skills, so too no organisation wishes to be dependent on trainers external to it. In my view, it is far better to build in redundancy from the start.

Notes on the Author

James Kilty is a Lecturer in Adult Education in the Department of Educational Studies at the University of Surrey in the UK. He has worked extensively in the initial and continuing education of practitioners, managers and teachers in a wide range of occupational groups. Practitioners have been mainly health care workers. Managers have been at all levels from Industry, Government, Public Services, including Health, Police and Education. Teachers have been from all sectors of general education, professional training and continuing education, including personnel and training managers and staff developers. He offers a range of courses in people's own settings and from the University, from where he designs, manages and contributes to an extensive annual programme. He contributes to the internationally acclaimed Brunel Management Programme, and jointly offers the Brunel-Surrey Self-Management Programme. Some of his courses are 'off-the-shelf' training packages, offered in one basic form adapted to the needs of course groups; others are developed in consultation with employing authorities, training staff, and the groups of participants involved.

He has a Ph.D. in education, and a Diploma in Humanistic Psychology of the Institute for the Development of Human Potential (London). He has trained extensively in the field of human relations skills and personal development and associated group leadership skills.

This article was written for the Government Administration Association for Training and Development of New South Wales and published in GAAFTAD Journal Vol 2, no Nov 1983.

