4. Introduction to Facilitation – Page Text

Introduction

In the last session, we talked about getting together a PET group. Here, we’ll talk about how to facilitate such a group. We’ll have a lot more to say about this in the course on communication later in the series.

Roles of the Facilitator

Ideally, in a PET group, everyone participates equally and takes full responsibility for the group and so a facilitator is not really needed. That doesn’t happen in many groups and so it’s generally a good idea to assign that kind of responsibility to one or two people. Also, people can facilitate in turns.

Facilitation takes experience. Even the most experienced people don’t always get it right. It’s also sometimes hard to see what is working and what isn’t. Our advice is to keep with it and, after each group session, to look at what you did and ask other people in the group what they thought about it. You can do that privately or, even better, ask the group what they thought of it. That also can bring solidarity to the group and increase trust.

One of the most important parts of a PET group is participation. Thus, everyone needs to speak and to express his or her point of view and to practice. It’s the responsibility of the facilitator to get the people who don’t speak to express themselves fully and to control people who dominate. That can be difficult, particularly when people have strong personalities. This is especially important when you’re talking about sensitive and personal issues, as frequently happens in PET groups.

Also, remember that PET groups are *sharing* groups and that they shouldn’t be lectures, at least not for the most part. That isn’t to say that it isn’t good for the facilitator or for someone else to talk for a while about a specific topic or to demonstrate a specific technique. However, one of the emphases of PET is on the experience of the participants and how various experiences contribute to the overall knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the group.

Another important role for the facilitator is keeping track of time. We’ve found that it’s difficult for most people to concentrate for more than about 50 minutes without a break and that a session of between an hour and a half and two hours is more than enough for most people. There are exceptions, of course, particularly on some sensitive and personal topics and sessions can be longer or shorter. Yet, we find that taking a break in time, even until the next session, gives space and distance, and can help. That allows people to absorb things in terms of their thinking and their emotions. Again, it is the role of the facilitator to keep an eye on the time and to make the judgment as to when the time has come to break or stop.

Location

Another point is where the group takes place. We’ve held groups just about everywhere you can think of, in formal classrooms and offices, in people’s living rooms and kitchens, in cafés, in parks, and in other places. The environment should be reasonably pleasant and private so that people can express themselves without the danger of them being overheard. Also, it’s important that the background noise level isn’t loud.

Other Equipment

It’s handy to have some paper with you to be able to draw or demonstrate things. That also can be done electronically. Mobile telephones generally are a little too small in our experience, but tablets can work fairly well. Doing things electronically also has the advantage that you can distribute the material to everyone later.

Rules and Procedures in the Group

We like to establish the working procedures, or rules, if you’d like, at the first or second session of the group so that everyone is on the same page. What follows are a few of the ones that we use. However, every situation is different. These procedures shouldn’t be dictated from above, but should be agreed on by every member of the group. The rules may need to be changed as circumstances change, of course.

The first point is that everyone has to be present, this in several senses of that word. People have to come on time and to every session of the group. It’s very frustrating for members of the group who are loyal when other people come late or not at all. It also means that things may need to be repeated and that important points may be lost between people. While some of the material can be given to absent group members, the spirit and trust of the group is damaged when people aren’t there, particularly when personal issues are discussed.

A similar point applies to people being concentrated on what’s happening in the group. Under some circumstances and with some people, that’s difficult. Those difficulties should be discussed openly within the group. In this same spirit, we have a rule that mobile phones need to be put on silent and that no one can text during the group except for extreme emergencies.

Generally, we start every session of a group by asking people what happened to them between the last session and now. People can speak in any order they like as long as everyone speaks. People can, of course, say that they don’t want to speak. We discourage that.

The members of the group then choose the topic of that session. It can be theoretical or personal. Very frequently, the two go together. One example that has occurred in our groups is the topic of domestic violence. We have spoken about it from the very personal point of view of several group members and from several theoretical points of view of traumatization and also have talked about what to do about it practically, and how to heal from it. This kind of discussion generally goes on over several sessions. It’s the facilitator’s role to bring the group back to where it was when the new session begins.

Privacy within a group is essential. We’re very strict about that. Of course, people can talk about the theoretical material to anyone. However, no personal material can go outside the group, even to partners, close friends, or anyone else. We’ve thrown people out of groups for violating this rule. This is crucial for gaining trust and solidarity. Especially in small communities, this is essential. Loose talk can damage people badly.

Another rule we have is not to judge people, but to talk about their actions. This is a crucial difference. We all try our best. We all fail at times. Compassion and empathy are essential. This is a large part of what these courses are all about.

It’s also very important that people speak the truth in the group. Frequently, people want to make themselves look better. Doing that destroys trust. This also is connected to the previous point, namely that people should not be judged harshly as people. Not telling the truth distorts the situation and makes education much more difficult.

Another rule that we have is that anyone in the group can say “no” or “stop” if the topic gets too difficult to handle. Many things that go on in PET groups get emotional and hit sensitive areas. In that case, usually, the topic is put off until another session. One of the roles of the facilitator is to talk to the person who says “stop” and to find out what is going on, if the person is willing to talk about it. If not, in our groups, the group has to respect the person’s wishes.

Another point in PET groups is that we find that it’s ok for people to react emotionally. Given the material that we’re dealing with, that happens fairly often. The emotions can be crying, anger, fear, pulling back, and a number of other reactions. We encourage the group as a whole to support the person in his or her reaction. The facilitator can play an important role in doing that.

As we’ve said, there may be other procedures or rules that each group will want to take.

So, facilitating and participating in a PET group is serious business. It takes experience to get it right. Even the most experienced facilitators don’t always. Remember what we’ve said and what we will continue to say, namely that we’re always learning.