

Peer/Community Groups: Effective Planning

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How do group leaders insure that a group will be effective, remaining focused on essential values? What prevents a group from breaking down into a “gripe session” that occurs on a regular basis rather than a group focused on recovery? How does a group maintain vitality in the face of leadership “bur out”? These questions are best answered prior to the formation of a group. But if these challenges apply to an existing group, they need to be acknowledged and actively addressed.

In order for a group to accomplish a recovery focus, its planing must be focused and effective. Two essentials are to establish clear goals and to provide for periodic evaluation of goals.

Establishing clear goals

Developing a clear, simply stated goal (often called a mission statement) for the group helps it remain focused. Documenting this goal in a written statement is essential to remain focused and effective. The conversation that occurs in the process of developing a clear, written goal helps the leaders of a group to join in a common goal.

Clear goals are essential in determining the frequency and quality of meetings and

maintaining the consistency of the organization. If the primary goal of the group is to provide education, the group might choose to meet monthly instead of weekly in order to assure a consistently high quality educational experience at each meeting. If the primary goal is to provide frequent support opportunities, the group would more likely meet once a week or perhaps more often. If the group embraces both of these goals, a monthly educational meeting with weekly small groups might be the preferred option.

Faithfulness to a group’s goals strengthens a group and helps assure consistency. One depression/ bipolar recovery group developed this Mission Statement:

To provide high quality education for the general public and to facilitate recovery groups for individuals challenged by depression or bipolar disorder and their family members and close friends.

When the war against Iraq began, the steering committee discussed the impact of this national event and whether it should be specifically addressed at the following meeting. Asking the question within the context of the mission statement provided a clear answer. The steering committee decided not to address the war specifically, but

to keep the meeting’s focus on education and recovery.

Certainly, members brought the war into our group’s discussion, but the leaders retained their focus on recovery. They asked members how they were taking care of themselves and helped the group work out strategies to deal with concerns and anxieties about the war. This proved to be right for the group. Members were grateful that the recovery focus was maintained in a consistent manner. Many said that it was helpful to come away from the day’s news and to continue to focus on recovery even when the world around them was shaken. Later evaluation of the decision showed that consistency was needed during a difficult time and that group members valued that consistency.

Planning for Change by Providing for Periodic Evaluation of Goals

In steering a ship, the captain and crew must continually check their sights, maps, weather reports and satellite information. This enables them to make corrections that keep the ship on course or to change course when necessary. Periodic evaluation of goals enables an organization to stay on track or to discover different paths in order to weather the storms that will naturally face any group.

All organizations experience a natural fluctuation in patterns of growth, a concept that has been well defined in the literature about non-profits and businesses. Being aware of this natural process of growth

and decline can allow a group's leaders to chart direction in order to nurture new growth that precludes decline. Because organizations have a life of their own, they sometimes grow disproportionately. Some members quickly gain insights while others find recovery illusive. When clinical services are cut, a group may suddenly swell in size and at the same time present greater and more varied challenges to its leaders. When groups experience these types of changes, the addition and training of new leaders becomes a necessity. A group will always outgrow its ability to function smoothly if leaders experience the exhaustion that results from a few people doing all the work.

Evaluation of goals helps the organization rise to meet the challenges posed by fluctuations in growth. Prioritizing goals and keeping them obtainable is essential to the long-term success of any group.

Here are some questions to help your group evaluate its goals:

Is our group growing in numbers too slowly to provide a truly group experience?

- Would marketing our group help?
- Does our group meet too often to maintain membership at the level appropriate for our group?
- Is growth in numbers really an indication of success? Might our group continue to flourish and accomplish its mission though small in size

Is our group growing too fast?

- Does our group need to limit its size in order to gain stability?
- Is our group at a point of strong leadership and adequate numbers? Could it start an additional group or increase frequency of meetings?
- Would it be possible instead to provide a second type of group experience such as an employment issues group or a group that provides for social interaction on a more casual basis?

Is the quality of the programming consistently high?

- Are we actively looking for programming that meets member needs?
- Are our educational topics humdrum or are they varied and applicable to members' lives?
- Were our original goals too expansive? Should we trim our goals to make them more obtainable? For instance, having a quality monthly speaker may be too much to achieve. Would it be better to alternate a quality educational video or group discussion with speakers?
- Can organizations in our community provide speakers through their Speakers Bureaus?

Remaining Focused on Essential Values

A successful group maintains its focus and it resets its course when necessary. Organizations need direction and self-correc-

tion in order to develop and sustain their ability to meet the needs of constituents. Establishing clear goals and providing for periodic evaluation of goals are key tools to charting a course that will ensure the success of your group.

For more about recovery and bipolar, return to the homepage at www.beyondbipolar.com.

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Website Resources

American Psychiatric Association, www.psych.org

American Psychological Association, www.apa.org

Child and Adolescent Bipolar Foundation, www.cabf.org

International Society for Bipolar Disorders, www.isbd.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, www.nami.org

Depression and Bipolar Support, Alliance www.dbsalliance.org

Stanley Medical Research Institute, www.stanleyresearch.org