

Group Observation and Analysis of a Counseling Center
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Introduction

This paper will examine the components of a group meeting that took place at the main office of ABC Counseling Center. Various themes will be examined such as specific goals, stage development, diversity issues, conflict strategies, and leadership styles. These components will be examined individually to assess the group's efficacy in achieving its goals.

Description of Group and Members, Purpose and Goals

Group Members

Johnson and Johnson identify a group as “a group of individuals who work together toward achieving a common goal.” (p. 5.) ABC Counseling Center is comprised of a group of professionals who work as counselors with men, women, and children who have been the victims or perpetrators of domestic abuse or disruption. Currently the company has five employees and is in the process of expanding. The team has two leads in addition to the staff:

Susan (Team Lead) is a 54 year old white female. She changed careers fairly late in her life to become a therapist. She is a Licensed Counselor and has been doing this work for around eight years. She is unmarried and is a very independent and nurturing person.

Roy (Team Lead) is a 52 year old black male. He holds his Masters Degree in Counseling and has recently moved to Georgia specifically to work with Susan. Before this he was a therapist for a professional football team. He is congenial, honest, and frequently plays “devil's advocate” in role plays. He is married and has no children.

Sam is a 30 something year old white male who has recently started employment with the company. He is currently working on his Master's Degree and hopes to continue on to get his Ph.D. after he is finished. He hopes to gain a lot of valuable experience working for Susan and

Roy but also feels that he can bring a lot to the table with his own background in behavioral health as well as a man's perspective.

Rhonda is a 40 year old black female who is new to the company as well. In fact, all of the employees have started at around the same time. She is working on her Master's Degree in counseling and is hoping to use this job as possible internship hours toward her Master's requirements. She is pleasant and has worked primarily with the adolescent population in the past. She is divorced with no children.

Dee-Dee is a 45 year old black female. She is also working on her Master's Degree in Counseling. She and Rhonda actually attend the same school, so they know each other on a somewhat personal basis. She is quiet and reserved but seems to have good ideas when she does speak out. She is married and has two children.

Louise is a 47 year old black female. She has her Master's Degree in Psychology and is considering the possibility of going back to school in the near future. She is very professional in her demeanor and has a good grasp of Behavioral and Social Psychology principles. She is single but has a fiancée.

Sharon is a 57 year old white female. She currently assists Susan and Roy with administrative duties for the office. She is the only internal employee for the company. She is very succinct in what she says and does not have a clinical background. She is married and has 3 children (grown.) Her role in this meeting is to act as a recorder of pertinent information.

Purpose

As stated above, the company deals with issues of domestic violence and dissonance by offering comprehensive counseling services to its clients. Sometimes these are voluntary services and sometimes they are mandated by the court systems of Georgia. These services

range from family intervention counseling, anger management groups, grief counseling, parenting skills classes, non-violence (CPI) training, clinical hypnotherapy, and divorce programs for adults and children. The purpose of this particular meeting was to examine the specific components that constitute disharmony within the family unit, specifically violent acts perpetrated by males. Themes included: operational definitions of violence, including verbal, physical, and psychological, the concept of male privilege, family dynamics, and therapeutic approaches in dealing with violent perpetrators.

Goals

The primary goal of the meeting was to identify particular themes or commonalities within these types of acts and to reach a consensus on the most effective form of therapy to deal with these situations. A secondary goal was to gain a feeling of trust and personal insight into each one of the group members. Susan and Roy made it clear that each counseling session would have a facilitator and a co-facilitator present at all times. This made it necessary to have a good working relationship with each of our colleagues and to ensure a healthy respect and understanding for each individual style of communication.

Stage of Group Development

According to Bruce Tuckman (1965), there are essentially five possible stages for a group. These are forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. This meeting was the first for the field employees so they were in the forming stages of its initial development. Since the group had two facilitators, there was already a structure to the process and the storming and norming stages were avoided. The group as a whole was very cooperative, gracious, and used excellent active listening skills to process everyone's input. As the meeting progressed and

the goals were made clear by the two team leads, the group entered the performing stage and began collaborating on various therapeutic concepts.

Johnson and Johnson identify different stages of maturity in groups and determines how well a group will communicate and work cooperatively to achieve its goals. Surprisingly, this group demonstrated many components of a high-performance group even though many of its members did not know each other previously. It demonstrated a real connection between its members, did not concern itself with appearances of vanity, and seemed to genuinely work well toward achieving its goal. This may be attributed to the fact that everyone in the room seemed to demonstrate a real passion for their work and a shared belief system that was somewhat liberal minded. This mind-set more than anything seemed to be a binding force between the members and exceeded any of the issues typically associated with newly formed groups. This belief system consisted of the ideologies that while violence in society is a perpetuating and frequent theme, it can be overcome one individual at a time. Many experts in the social sciences feel this is too prevalent a theme to be addressed by conventional methods, but this particular group believes the contrary is true. Once this belief system had been established, each member immediately identified with their counterparts on a very personal and affective level.

Group Dynamics or Processes

Member Roles

In terms of task roles, the members (with the exception of the two team leaders) were all in the same position of power. There were some diversity differences, but these seemed to have little or no bearing in terms of roles. The one exception was Sam who was the only male, Caucasian employee. Because of this he was able to offer a unique perspective in terms of male attitudes and what was called “male privilege.” His ethnicity enabled him to offer insight into the social insinuations of “white privilege” as well. This was especially pertinent since the vast majority of clients are black and do not have the benefit of certain social norms that white people possess.

The two team leaders were in charge of directing and focusing the group. They did this skillfully by allowing each member ample time to discuss certain areas of experiential knowledge that was important to the topic at hand. Because of this, each member had a feeling of self worth and legitimate ownership of the discussion and mission. The team leaders also had an excellent working relationship. Susan was typically quieter and more reserved while Roy was anecdotal and would often challenge perceptions from the other members. He forced the members to qualify their statements and this in turn caused a greater influx of ideas, comments, and general discussion.

Each of the members equally participated in encouraging the other members to expand on their ideas. There were few disruptions and on the rare occasion that the discussion would go off track, the team leaders were quick to refocus the group by asking a central question related to the goal at hand. This would cause everyone to stop and reconsider the purpose of the discussion, thereby re-centering the discussion.

Physical Setting

The meeting was held in the conference room of the main building. The room was well lit, well circulated, and comfortable. The chairs were hard and rigid and forced the members to sit up and pay attention to the discussion. These were set up in a circular fashion so everyone could see everyone else without having to turn their heads at awkward angles. Refreshments were offered and bathroom breaks provided. It was a very informal type of meeting and this allowed the members to be more at ease. Clothing was semi-casual so people were not confined or uncomfortable in their attire.

Diversity

As mentioned previously, the group was fairly diverse. It was made up of different age groups (30, 40, 50 year olds), both male and females and Caucasian and African-American ethnicities. This diversity actually strengthened the group's ability to solve problems and deal with different points of perspective. This most likely could not have been done if the group did not have such a collective sense of purpose.

Nonverbal Communication

Social psychologists point to nonverbal communication as much more important than the spoken word. This is due to the fact that many people feel they have to conform to the group by speaking in a way that will not label them as an outcast. Within this specific group, there was much hand gesturing to emphasize points of contention, direct eye contact to demonstrate trustworthiness, and erect body posture to demonstrate attentiveness. These were all positive and added a deeper dimension to the overall discussion.

Group Leadership

Leadership Behaviors

Johnson and Johnson have researched the link between high-performing leaders (HiPR) and emotional competence, often referred to as Emotional Intelligence (EI) and have found that there is a positive correlation between the two. High performing leaders are those that are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, have a healthy self-identity, congenial and genuine personalities, and are willing to let others within the group express themselves. They are also fairly well structured, do not allow individual attacks, and are good facilitators. Both Susan and Roy demonstrated the characteristics of HiPR's and this contributed to the fluidity and productivity of the group.

Additional Strategies

The only instance of ineffective leadership was demonstrated by Roy who would occasionally go off on a tangent that was not really related to the discussion at hand. One strategy might have been for Susan to refocus Roy by gently interceding and redirecting his efforts. This was fairly infrequent and often served as impetus for the rest of the group to think about their next line of conversation.

Leadership Style

According to Johnson and Johnson, there is a direct link between leadership styles and motivation. This particular group was present because they all had a common goal and each person brought to the table unique experiences and insight. Because of this, Susan and Roy allowed a great deal of controlled, individual expression. The group was team motivated as well as goal motivated. The group's main source of motivation was creativity and a desire to

come to a consensus regarding the nature and treatment of violent offenders within a sociological context. Each individual was an independent, achiever in his or her own right and had a good deal of experiential and educational knowledge to bring to the table. Because of this, Susan and Roy allowed a great deal of latitude in terms of self expression and there was a free-flow of ideas.

Alternative Leadership Methods

The style of leadership exhibited by Susan and Roy was appropriate and effective considering the characteristics of the group's members. Had the group not been so well suited for one another, this approach would not have worked. For instance, more authoritative methods may have been necessary especially in terms of rigidity. It may have been necessary to keep the conversation strictly guided as opposed to allowing a type of open forum as was the case here.

Summary

Effectiveness of Leadership Skills

Overall, the leadership skills exhibited by Susan and Roy were consistent and effective for the particular group in question. The groups overall characteristics were: congeniality, honesty, experienced, open-minded, active listeners, and team and goal motivated. The groups were incredibly task oriented and had a strong sense of unity even for being strangers prior to the meeting. This unity and sense of direction allowed the group leaders, Susan and Roy to relax and join in the discussion on a more personal level. There were times when it seemed by all outside appearances that the group did not have any leaders. This is in fact closer to the truth; Susan and Roy acted more as facilitators and then became more like regular members

themselves once the purpose of the meeting had been established. There was a relatively low level of supervision due to the commonalities of the members.

Communication Methods

The group showed a lot of positive communication techniques. Two way communications seemed to be of prime importance because of the nature of the meeting which was more of an open forum discussion. Active listening was also used frequently and this led to a constant flow of information. At times, there was too much information to process at once so the team leaders would call attention to one concept and allow the group to develop that before moving on to something else. If for some reason, one participant had not voiced their opinion for a while, they would purposively call on that person for input. These were often times when there had been a bit of debate regarding an idea and when this happened sometimes the forum was monopolized by two or three members of the group. This was a rare occurrence however.

The general theme or pattern of the group was one of cooperation, nurturance, and support. Support was represented by tolerance to different points of view, acceptance of differences of opinions, and most importantly, allowing others to speak with little or no interruption. That was perhaps the most gratifying aspect of the meeting. Rarely do people work so well together who have no prior history together. It is a testament to both the self-awareness of the team leaders as well as the desire to accomplish a common goal.

Power, Conflict, and Decision Making

The power scheme of the group was evenly divided. In fact, it would probably be fair to say that power was really not a motivator in this group whatsoever. Each member seemed to recognize in the others that there was a wealth of experience to be gained by listening to what everyone had to say.

Due to the lack of power struggles, negative conflict was virtually nonexistent. There were times of constructive criticism when one member may try and influence the other's point of view. But there were no instances where any negative statements were made. Roy, who played devil's advocate on occasion, would frequently challenge a member's assertions. This is a necessary and vital element to any productive discussion. Because of this, certain ideas were dismissed and others were introduced. This type of positive conflict is important for groups who are advanced enough not to take insult by the process of constructive criticism.

In terms of decision making, the group for the most part guided itself as a collective unit once the initial parameters were set by the team leaders. The group simply took ideas that were introduced by other members and would pass them around the circle. At times there would be intricate patterns between two, three, or four members, while at other times, a problem would be solved fairly quickly. It was analogous to a group of dancers who were constantly trading partners.

This was indeed one of the most vivid examples of an advanced group. The goals were clearly established, the members very involved, and the facilitators excellent in their leadership styles. Again, this would not have been the case under but the most optimal of conditions. As a result, the group was able to achieve a high level of understanding and productivity in just a few short hours.