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Programme Planning in Social Group Work

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Introduction

Careful planning is necessary for any successful group and it is a very important, ongoing group process. A well planned programme gives direction to the group and enables each member to know and prepare his/her responsibility. The group worker should possess abilities and skills to guide the members through an effective programme planning process. The programme planning process includes (i) setting goals (ii) brainstorming with members (iii) planning the programme in line with the goals (iv) obtaining the approval of the group (v) assigning individual and sub group responsibilities (vi) implementation of the programme (vi) periodic evaluation and feedback (vii) Follow-up

Concept of Programme Planning

Groups achieve their objectives through programmes that are split into achievable targets, tasks and activities. Therefore, deciding on appropriate programmes becomes very important for the progress and development of group and its members.

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"Programme as a concept and working tool is not prominent in the group work literature. This may be because it tends to be equated with a structured, goal-oriented approach. In reality, every group has a programme if we define it as *what the group does as a means of trying to achieve its aims*. With this definition, a decision to run a group on an existential creative spontaneity basis is as much a programme decision as is an elaborate timetable of visits, talks and structured activities. There is distinction to be made between *potential* or *planned* programme and *actual* programme. The former is what is planned in advance, the latter is what the group actually does, and the two do not always coincide.

Some basic considerations affect decisions about programme. The first two are philosophical as well as technical:

a) *Structure and Spontaneity*: Every group has to reach some balance between prearranged structure and spontaneous development. Some groups are so preplanned and rigid that there is no scope for response to the needs of individual members and their unique group. Others are so vague and unstructured that they drift along aimlessly, without anyone really knowing what they are there for, or what they are supposed to be doing. Groups need both the security of some known structure and the flexibility necessary for learning and change.

b) *Person and Task:* Every group is concerned with its members as people, and with the tasks for which it is met. A group with person-centered aims, as in group psychotherapy, is likely to devise a person-centered programme. A group which is highly task-oriented, whether the task is located at the individual, group or community level is likely to devise a programme

emphasising procedures, decisions and the monitoring of task achievement. Most social work groups require a sensitive balance between focus on persons and focus on task. This is one reason why programming is a highly skilled aspect of group work.

c) *Individual Factors*: Programme depends on what the members are capable of, and this varies according to age, verbal ability, motivation and self-control. In groups with a wide ability range, programme needs to include activities adaptable to individual differences.

d) *Group Factors*: Programme takes into account fixed factors such as group composition and size, and variable factors associated with the stage of development the group has reached, and its current state. This includes group morale, cohesion, conflict and the level of commitment to task.

e) *The Individual and the Group*: Programme should be consistent with what has been agreed with individuals and the group in the initial contract, although as the group develops, needs and interests change, and opportunities for renegotiating programme should be available. Programme involves a blending of activities which include the whole group with those which individuals undertake on their own, or in pairs, or sub groups. As a guideline, individual and pairs activities may be more needed in the early stages when group experience is rather daunting for some members.

f) *Resources*: many activities need resources, both cash and in kind. This may be a real limitation on programme and it is unethical to raise members' expectations about exciting activities unless necessary resources will be available.

Given these basic considerations, the groupworker then faces a number of questions. The choice within this range is dependent not only on the task, resources and member capabilities, but also on the skills and capability of the groupworker. Group members are quick to sense whether the worker feels comfortable with the methods she is using, and if she reveals excessive anxiety and uncertainty it will be transmitted rapidly to others. It may make them reluctant to engage in the activity, and more vulnerable to failure. Groupworkers wishing to extend their repertoire of activities and skills by trying out a new approach for the first time, can usually do so with more confidence if they have rehearsed it beforehand in the relatively 'safe' setting of the team or a training session, perhaps using video play-back" (Brown, A; 1994: 97-98).

For people to be served effectively in a group, sound preparation for the initiation and subsequent development of that group is essential. Thorough and thoughtful planning contributes mightily to the success of social group work. Planning comprises the thinking, preparation, decision-making, and actions of the group with facilitation by the social worker. Max Siporin notes, the planning process is deliberate and rational, designed to assure the achievement of specific objectives. The programme decisions are based on knowledge of social contexts, group processes, agency policies and procedures, and assessments of clients in their networks of interacting social systems.

Principles of Programme Planning

Providing a programme of activities is one of the main tasks of a group. Planning the group's activities in advance helps a group run smoothly because:

- Members understand and accept their responsibilities

- Optimum utilization of resources

- Better coordination between group members, agency and the worker in accomplishment of objectives

Programmes in group work have to be effective since the groups' effectiveness is largely dependent on its programmes. Programme planning is an instrument in the hands of the group and the worker and its efficient use results in feasible, well thought out programmes. Programme planning in social group work has to follow certain principles, termed by Trecker (1955) as the 'criteria of effectiveness':

- Programme should grow out of the needs and interests of the individuals who compose the group

- Programme should take into account such factors as age of group members, cultural background, and economic differences

- Programme should provide individuals with experiences and opportunities which they voluntarily choose to pursue because of their inherent values

- Programme should be flexible and varied to satisfy a variety of needs and interests and to afford a maximum number of opportunities for participation

- Programme should evolve from the simple to the more complex with movement coming as a result of group growth in ability and readiness. Movement from initially "personal" to "social" or "community" concerns should be an ultimate objective if our programmes are to have a greater social significance.

> **A Set of Guidelines to Programme Planning**
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> *Stage 1*
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> - What is the objective of the programme?
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> - What is the group members' wants/welfare
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> - What are the resources accessible?
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> - What is the relevance of the programme to the group's objective?
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> *Stage 2*
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> - Splitting the programme into smaller realizable goals and tasks
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> - Actual implementation commences
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> *Stage 3*
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> - Periodic evaluation of the programme and progressing to the next phase of the programme based on the evaluation and inputs of members themselves
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> *Stage 4*
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> - Reflection – giving members a chance to look back on their experiences of the programme and see how they have progressed, in the process.

Factors Influencing Programme Planning

All initiatives and efforts of the group in pursuit of fulfilling its goal is considered to be a programme in the social group work context. Though one tends to equate programme with activity, let us be clear that programme is a concept that comprises of not only activities but also emotional aspects such as group bonding, communications, experiences etc. One important aspect is that all these should result out of conscious planning by the group under the guidance of the worker. Programme is thus a process rather than the

periodic culmination of a process. In the light of the above, let us discuss the factors influencing programme planning:

The primary responsibility for programmes in groups lies with its group members – the group worker is only a facilitator in the entire process. The programmes have to be person-centered, catering to the requirements of its members. The group members, therefore, have to engage themselves to their best possible extent in programme planning, fully understanding that its successful implementation calls for their cooperation and contribution.

If a programme has to be person-centered, it has to respond to the wants and welfare of the group members. The group worker has to make the group understand that (i) there is a vast distinction between the wants of the group members and their welfare (ii) This can be gathered when group members put across their views during programme planning sessions. However, when group starts spelling out ideas for the programme, the worker needs to carefully evaluate them on the basis of collective interests, fine foundation, feasibility in terms of resources and agency's objectives, feasibility of personal partaking of members and also of group's cooperation.

It is of equal importance that the worker consistently taps the wants and welfare of the group from its members. Gathering this vital information is not a one time affair to be done in the initial stages of the programme, but has to flow at periodic intervals to ensure that the programme is on the right path. The worker has to understand and also convey to the group members that programme planning is an ongoing process – that as the programme evolves in sequence, one could comprehend the group's progress as well.

Any discussion of programme in social group work must take into account such items as content and area, media

of expression, and methods of conducting it. Programme area or content refers to a segment of life experience that has general meaning for the individuals at their specific point of development. The programme process is not segmental; in actual work all these are interrelated and almost indistinguishable (Trecker; 1955).

In order to grow and execute its programmes, the group has to have systems for:

- Decision-making and its support from group members

- Delegation of responsibilities and its accountability

- Develop whole-hearted involvement of all the group members, in all the phases of a programme such as planning, execution, evaluation etc.

- Direct day-to-day affairs of the agency and its members

The group worker enables the group to understand their role in programme planning and implementation – that programmes are successful largely due to the members' willingness to share responsibilities. During the planning stages, the group members should clearly assign and accept duties and responsibilities – individually, in pairs or through forming smaller committees within the group. The group worker assists the members in functioning in unity towards executing the programme.

Healthy, purposeful and friendly communication among group members is the essence of programme planning and development. The group worker's role here is imperative. He steers the group members to meaningful communication which in turn leads to the group working towards aims that reciprocate with the agency's functioning. Thus communication is a fundamental mode on the road to the group's goals.

Thus, the programme planning process is influenced by various factors such as: (i) consistent unearthing of the

wants and welfare of members (ii) identification of the point wherein the programme shall commence (iii) studying and scrutinizing work responsibilities involved in programme execution (iv) delegating duties and responsibilities to various members (v) synchronization of individual efforts and striving for harmony among the group members and programme evaluation

A Sample Programme

The following is a very brief outline of a programme to help a group learn listening skills.

- The 'Indicators' are how the leader identified the need of the group and what skill to develop

- The 'Activities' are how the group learned and practiced the skills

- The 'Skills Practiced' breaks the skill down into small achievable steps and each activity is matched to the step it helps the group to take

- 'The Learning' is the aim of the programme/activity

Identify The Need	Activities	Skills Practiced	The Learning
A group has trouble listening to each other Indicators • Members have trouble taking turns to make a point • disagreements caused by not taking time to understand others • difficult to facilitate group discussions	Group games	asking and waiting for a reply listening for another person's voice	Listening is important for having fun and achieving
	Listening games & group discussion	Awareness of listening skills	What skills make me a better listener
	Problem solving game in which the group has to listen to each other	Practice of the skills learnt so far Practicing the skills Recognition for being good at the skills	The group works better when we listen to each other