10

Skills and Techniques of Social Group Work

R. Nalini

Introduction

A social worker has to understand and imbibe skills of social group work. It would be one of his or her major tasks in the job as social work often involves work with groups differing in its size and composition. What is a skill? "The term skill refers to a conscious, disciplined use of one's self and one's abilities which can be acquired reliably only through the disciplined experience of professional training for social group work, during which the potential group worker not only takes help in his learning from teachers and supervisors but carries responsibility in a group work agency simultaneous with his acquisition of group work theory. On the one hand the social worker has to understand his profession's philosophic values and also draw from social work's professional purposes. These are the roots of social group work skill. The capacity to translate values into professional efforts that precipitate movement toward the fulfillment of purpose constitutes social group work skill." (Philips: 1957).

Roles of the Group Worker

A group worker plays two vital roles while working with groups: as a member and as a leader switching roles as

_____

*Dr. R. Nalini, Pondicherry University, New Delhi

and when tasks emerge. Membership and leadership skills are viewed jointly due to the following rationale:

For the group's efficient functioning, the leader and his members need to be dealt with skillfully.

Similar concerns of individualistic communication emerge for leaders and members.

A group worker has to perform various functions which are broadly grouped into (i) job oriented functions that facilitate the group to converge and concentrate towards fulfilling group's objectives (ii) individual oriented functions to cater to the personal needs of group members that ensure healthy group cohesiveness and (iii) maintenance oriented functions that ensure the consistency of group members' contribution.

Skills and Techniques of Group Work

According to Trecker (1955), skill is the capacity to apply knowledge and understanding to a given situation. Trecker (1955: 36-37) also has specified skills for social group work as follows:

1) **Skill in Establishing Purposeful Relationships**

   A) The group worker must be skillful in gaining the acceptance of the group and in relating himself to the group on a positive professional basis.

   B) The group worker must be skillful in helping individuals in the group to accept one another and to join with the group in common pursuits

2) **Skill in Analyzing the Group Situation**

   A) The group worker must be skillful in judging the developmental level of the group to determine what the level is, what the group needs, and how quickly

the group can be expected to move. This calls for skill in direct observation of groups as a basis for analysis and judgment.

B) The group worker must be skillful in helping the group to express ideas, work out objectives, clarify immediate goals, and see both its potentialities and limitations as a group.

3) **Skill in Participation with the Group**

A) The group worker must be skillful in determining, interpreting, assuming and modifying his own role with the group.

B) The group worker must be skillful in helping group members to participate, to locate leadership among themselves, and to take responsibility for their own activities.

4) **Skill in Dealing with Group Feeling**

A) The group worker must be skillful in controlling his own feelings about the group and must study each new situation with a high degree of objectivity.

B) The group worker must be skillful in helping groups to release their own feelings, both positive and negative. He must be skillful in helping groups to analyze situations as a part of the working through of group or intergroup conflicts.

5) **Skill in Programme Development**

A) The group worker must be skillful in guiding group thinking so that interests and needs will be revealed and understood.

B) The group worker must be skillful in helping groups to develop programs which they want as a means through which their needs may be met.

6) **Skill in Using Agency and Community Resources**

   A) The group worker must be skillful in locating and then acquainting the group with various helpful resources which can be utilized by them for program purposes

   B) The group worker must be skillful in helping individual members to make use of specialized services by means of referral when they have needs which cannot be met within the group.

7) **Skill in Evaluation**

   A) The group worker must have skill in recording the developmental processes that are going on as he works with the group.

   B) The group worker must be skillful in using his records and in helping the group to review its experiences as a means of improvement.

Thus, the social group worker has many skills to master, but the important ones are discussed below:

Skills in Building Group Cohesiveness

The group worker must know his group members – their strengths, capacities, fears, problems and roles they can play in the group's progress. The following are the other factors the worker needs to concentrate upon in building himself within the group:

- Effective rapport building with the group members; to get on the same wave length with people easily and quickly

- Winning the confidence and trust of people by accepting members as they are and enabling them to see the worth of every job that has to be done in the group large or small

- Establishing a good working relationship, based on friendship and mutual confidence that would facilitate influence over the group members

- Ability to avoid splinter groups, especially sub groupism by empathizing and thinking for all the group members. The group worker has to be cautious to interpret the silence of the group members. Silence always does not denote negative aspects; it could just indicate the individuals' hesitation.

- Skill to remain cool and composed while listening to the distasteful – understanding and internalizing the fact that two people can look at the same thing and look at it differently. It is important that the worker has to strengthen his inner self without getting upset or hitting back at unpleasantness of the group. He needs to understand that this is in light of the larger good of the group.

- Capacity to get the group to willingly shoulder responsibilities rather than taking up all the burden on himself – the ability to segregate works that can be delegated and executing those which are best done by the worker.

Facilitation Skills

This involves the group worker helping the group to stay focused on the goals to be achieved, to ensure that the group members work towards a common direction. Facilitating skill, also sometimes called the "here-and-now" of group interaction is often missed by the group workers. This is because group processes take a back seat when group interactions are intense. Also, at times the group worker may hesitate to intervene during a lively yet dispersed discussion.

However, the group worker has to acquire this skill to enable spirited group accomplishments. To help a group accomplish the goals it has set for itself, the worker will often find it helpful to guide the group's interaction in a particular direction. By limiting or blocking a group member's communications, by encouraging another member to speak or by linking one group member's communication to those of other group members, the worker can guide the group's interaction patterns. This method has been referred to as selecting communications patterns purposely (Middleman & Wood, 1990).

Helping the group maintain its focus can promote efficient work by reducing irrelevant communications and by encouraging a full exploration of issues and problems. The group worker does this by minimizing unwanted interactions and by stirring optimum search investigation of concerns and tight spots.

Skills of Information Collection and Evaluation

Information is power and this is true in working with groups too. It is handy in impacting communiqué designs in the group. Through information gathering and evaluation skills, the group worker bridges the gap between the process-oriented approach of facilitating group processes and the task oriented approach of using action skills to achieve goals and satisfy members' needs. Without effective data gathering and assessment skills, workers' interventions are not ground in a complete understanding of the situation. This can result in the use of premature, oversimplified, or previously attempted solutions that have not been carefully analyzed and weighed.

Requesting Information, Questioning and Probing

By skillfully questioning and probing the group worker may gather data effectively. A broad outlook to the task in question and to the pursuits of the group could be added

(with this supplementary information) that could benefit the group immensely. Skills are needed in properly wording the questions – leading questions; double questions etc should be avoided. The questions need to extract information that is clear and precise. Care should be taken while dealing with sensitive issues and concerns.

Analyzing Skills

Once the data have been gathered and organized, the worker can use analyzing skills to synthesize the information and assess how to proceed. Analyzing skills include:

- Pointing out patterns in the data,

- Identifying gaps in the data, and

- Establishing mechanisms or plans for obtaining data to complete an assessment.

Synthesizing Skills

Another useful data gathering and assessment skill is blending verbal and nonverbal communications. Examples of synthesizing skills include:

- Making connections among the meanings behind a member's actions or words, expressing hidden agendas

- Making implicit feelings or thoughts explicit

- Making connections between communications to point out themes and trends in member's actions or words

Synthesizing skills can be useful in providing feedback to members about how they are perceived by others.

Listening Skills

We convey our listening skills verbally and non verbally. By appropriate feedback and playback the group worker

conveys verbally whereas through his eye contact, gestures and body language he conveys it non verbally. Egan (2002) suggests that, in addition to body position and eye contact, skills that indicate that a worker has heard and understood a member are part of effective listening. Research has shown that effective listening skills are an important characteristic of successful leaders (Johnson & Bechler, 1998). Effective listening skills include repeating or paraphrasing what a member says and responding empathically and enthusiastically to the meaning behind members' communications. They also include what Middleman (1978) has referred to as 'scanning' skills. When scanning the group, the worker makes eye contact with all group members, which lets them know that the worker is concerned about them as individuals. Scanning also helps reduce the tendency of workers to focus on one or two group members.

Reframing and Redefining

Often, one of the greatest obstacles to the work of a group or an individual is failure to view a problem from different perspectives that block attempts to find a creative solution (Clark, 1998). Redefining and reframing the problem can help members examine the problem from a new perspective. Thus, a worker may want to reframe or redefine an issue or concern facing the group.

Action Skills

This includes modeling, role playing and rehearsing situations in the group. Action skills can be helpful in both task and treatment groups. Modeling refers to the worker or a member demonstrating behaviors in a particular situation so that others in the group can observe what to do and how to do it. Role playing refers to having group members act out a situation with each other's help. The two primary purposes of role playing are to assess

members' skill in responding to an interpersonal situation and to help members improve particular responses. Responses can be improved through feedback, rehearsal of a new response, or coaching (Etcheverry, Siporin, & Toseland, 1987). Role playing can be a very useful tool when trying to help members improve responses to stressful situations.

Rehearsing refers to practicing a new behavior or response based on the feedback received after a role play. Because it is difficult to learn new behaviors or to diminish less adaptive but habituated behavior patterns, a member may have to practice a new response several times.

Confrontation Skills

From handling conflicts and resistance to enthusing group members, confrontation skills could be a valuable tool for the group worker. Confrontation is the ability to clarify, examine, and challenge behaviors to help members overcome distortions and discrepancies among behaviors, thoughts, and feelings (Egan, 2002; Toseland & Spielberg, 1982). However, one has to vigilantly judge the state of affairs and about the acceptability of his interventions during confronting situations. He has to be fully aware that confrontations are forceful, emotionally charged and also anticipate strong responses. Since confrontations often involve indicating members' mistakes and limitations, the worker has to prepare the group for a candid examination on these lines by underlining the fact that ultimately such discussions aid in identifying potentials and abilities of the group.

Skills of Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution skills are needed to smoothen out frictions within the group and also with those outside the group – inclusive of social systems. There could be several

grounds for conflicts among the members. The group worker should facilitate the group to consider conflicts as a factor nourishing the group's development. Conflicts, if constructive and issue based, help the group to get a clearer vision of its goals and discover individual strengths and weaknesses. It is well known that conflicts are bound to happen; through efficient group facilitation, conflicts could be minimized and antagonistic disagreements avoided.

Critiquing Skills

Constructive criticism is an important skill for the worker, for lots of learning happens while critiquing the group's progression and activities. It enables retaining the focus on the group's primary purpose. It also means appropriate questioning of the leader's inputs and interventions, contribution of members and patterns of group's functioning. Critiquing by members is healthier and many a times anticipates and prevents flaws.

Leadership Skills

This is a vital skill that is disputed by researchers – is leadership a trait or a behavior? Is a leader born or made? Despite differing views, it has been proved beyond doubt that leadership skill can be learned. However, there is no 'one size fits all' solution to mastering leadership skills. Group leaders have to constantly remind themselves that they are working with human beings each with different viewpoints, personalities and ways of functioning.

The key skill of the leader is communicating and keeping communication channels open within the group at all times. This means the leader has to involve all members in discussions – the quiet ones, the ones who may not be comfortable talking in groups or those who can be easily silenced. The other key skills of leadership are:

- Consensus seeking

- Gate keeping

- Setting standards

- Self understanding that leads to enhanced communiqué

- Inter-personal understanding that leads to understanding members' viewpoints

- Preventing disruptive behaviour such as diverting, blocking, dominating, silence, attention seeking, sympathy seeking etc

How to Acquire Group Work Skills?

Reach out and ascertain the qualities of individuals who are successful in working with groups. By checking yourself against this list of traits you could perhaps figure out where you stand with regard to working with groups. The most important point to be kept in mind is that no one individual shall possess all the qualities and that all of us can endeavour to imbibe them.

Keenly observing democratic leadership styles in action and understanding reasons behind all the reverence and influence these individuals possess over their groups. Experience shows that it is worthwhile observing good presiding officers and good discussion leaders. Do not stop with observation, but do take hold of the skills of competent leaderships.

Reading relevant material from libraries, authenticated websites, journals, reports etc will keep you updated on the latest in the field.

Maintaining a dairy of everyday work with the group gives a written documentation for reference. It indicates the areas for improvement, when reviewed periodically. It is a tool for self evaluation if done methodically and with honesty.

Interacting with social work fraternity and with group workers in professional forums such as workshops, seminars, conferences, training programmes etc facilitates interchange of ideas and experiences in working with groups. It is a practical knowledge bank and feeds the group worker with skills largely demanded in the field.

Gain hands on training through observing a group or by becoming a member of an existing group.

Lastly, by lending a hand to others to acquire group work skills, one can constantly check and reinvent oneself about the skills needed in working with groups.

Conclusion

Thus group work skills described above are vital for successfully working with groups. The group worker needs confidence, love for people and a belief in team work to accomplish his task. For, "great people are those who make others feel that they too, can become great".

References

Benson, F. J. (1987). *Working more creatively with groups.* London: Tavistock Publications

McConnell, T. (1974). *Group leadership and self-realization.* Leviathan House

Milson, F. (1973). *An introduction to social group work skill.* London: Routledge and Kegan

Philips, U.H. (1957). *Essentials of social group work skill.* New York: Association Press

Trecker, H.B. (1955). *Social group work: Principles and practices.* New York: Whiteside