

Tips for New Groups

Introduction

It is important to ensure that all members have a clear understanding of the purpose and activities of the group. If everyone is heading in the same direction there is less chance of misunderstandings down the track.

Be sure to acquaint any new members as they come along. A helpful way to keep the purpose of the group in mind at all times is to visit it at the beginning of each meeting – ‘we are here because/to etc’

(If group members are unclear there can be problems later on. It is important that everyone is in agreement about why the group exists. Generally groups exist for mutual support and information sharing, but can also be for advocacy, fundraising, research, lobbying, community education, campaigning for change, providing services to members or a combination of any or all of the above.)

Encourage participation

Have as many members as possible involved in the activities of the group. Work openly and democratically. Members need to be seen as equals – no one is better than anyone else. Members can help with:

- Welcoming new members
- Facilitating
- Taking meeting notes
- Time keeping
- Meeting room set up
- Buying tea, milk, biscuits etc
- Handling money
- Arranging guest speakers
- Organising outings

(Having responsibility for a task gives members a sense of belonging, and generally ensures more regular attendance at meetings because there is a role to perform.)

Talk to a successful group of a similar kind

Try to locate a group that has been running well for a long time and find out why. They will be happy to tell you what they found works well and what doesn't.

Be clear about who is welcome to join the group

Is the group open to anyone with any illness, or a specific illness? Are friends, family, carers, professionals, children, other interested community members welcome? Is the group open to the public only on particular occasions?

Choosing a Name

Try to choose a name that will be easily remembered, and easily identified in Directories etc. It is harder to locate a group that does not immediately describe the issue or condition. It may sound clever, but often makes the group harder to find. Try to put the identifying word first eg XYZ Disease Support Group Queensland, rather than Queensland XYZ Disease Support Group. Acronyms can be a good way of making long names easier to remember, but can also be difficult to identify in directories.

Does the group need rules?

Have the group decide if they want to abide by an agreed set of rules or behaviours. There may be resistance by people who don't like rules. However, it is worth asking members about things such as:

- Confidentiality – do members want 'what is said in the room to stay in the room?'
- Allowing people to speak without interruption
- Any other

Write it down

Group rules can be written down, laminated and read at the beginning of each meeting as a reminder, and for the benefit of new members.

Should there be consequences?

If rules are set, does the group need consequences for infringement?

Have a meeting agenda

Have a list of items so everyone knows what is happening. If there is no agenda this can be compiled at the meeting. However, it is essential that everyone is clear about what is to take place, and prevents meetings dragging out longer than the allocated time.

Recognise different skills

Determine what skills the group has – ask people what they are good at! Some people will be good at some things, and some good at others. These can often be put to good use by the group eg computer skills, organisational skills, drawing, photography, graphic design, public speaking, finances, joke telling, writing, cooking etc

**Utilise the skills of professionals to build the capacity of the group.
Professionals can:**

- Provide resources eg meeting rooms, help with photocopying, transport
- Use their networks for connecting groups to other organisations, resources
- Help group members develop skills such as facilitating meetings, keeping records, producing flyers/newsletters on computer, debriefing, conflict resolution
- Act as a guest speaker
- Provide information that may be hard to access – they may subscribe to journals etc
- Be someone for the group to test out ideas on
- Help plan strategies
- Act as an advocate for the group
- Write letters of support for the group
- Help with funding applications

Power struggles

People who have worked very hard to start a group are sometimes reluctant to 'let go' or may think of the group as 'their baby'. Allow others to share roles, responsibilities, tasks, information and group knowledge as soon as possible. One person who carries out all the work holds a lot of power. This is not in the best interests of the group, and members will often become passive or just withdraw from the group without saying anything.

Time for chat/socialising/fun

Having some social time eg over morning tea, gives people an opportunity to develop particular friendships with other group members. Some people will be more comfortable speaking in 'one to one' situations than speaking in the group. Groups that report having a bit of fun seem to attract healthy numbers to their meetings.

Start on Time

Punctual members may not like hanging around waiting for meetings that start late. How will the meeting accommodate latecomers – will it stop and help them catch up or leave them to catch up themselves?

Have a time keeper

About two hours, including a break, is a good length of time for a meeting. Some groups have a certain amount of time for each agenda item, and have a time keeper to let the group know when it's time to finish each section.

Contacting members between meetings

A Telephone Tree is a list of the group member's contact details. Each member is responsible for phoning one other particular member if changes are made to meeting times or other information needs to be conveyed between meetings. This reduces the burden of responsibility and financial cost being carried by one person.

Dealing with people who monopolise the floor at meetings

The Talking Stick is an oldie but a goodie. This is one version. To give everyone a fair chance at being heard in meetings, a 'stick', 'ball' or meaningful token is held by the speaker and nobody else is entitled to interrupt. The stick is then placed on the floor and someone else is entitled to pick it up and speak.

Dealing with conflict

All groups experience healthy debate, and this shows the group is alive and has some energy. If the conflict cannot be managed by the group, then discuss the prospect of bringing in a mediator who is skilled in conflict resolution to assist. For mediation to work, everyone needs to agree to participate – not just the person who seems to have the problem. Having group rules, processes and strategies in place will help minimise situations that might lead to conflict.

Evaluation

A good way to end is with a quick evaluation. This gives people a chance to express their feelings, brings the meeting to a close and helps the group learn to have better meetings. Go around the circle and have everyone say one thing they liked/found useful and if there is anything they would like to change for next time. Make it quick, as it's not a discussion, just a way to end up with something positive.

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