**PHYSICAL STRUCTURE OF THE GROUP**

The setting for the group can have a profound effect on the behavior of group members and the conduct of group meetings. Room size, space, seating arrangements, furnishings, and atmosphere should all be considered. Difficulties encountered in early meetings, inappropriate behavior by members, and unanticipated problems in the development of the group can sometimes result from inadequate attention to the group’s physical environment.

**ROOM SIZE**

Room size can influence how active or involved members become with the business of the group. Generally, a small room engenders positive feelings of closeness among members and limits potential distractions. A large room can put too much distance among members, encouraging some members to “tune out.” A small group of people meeting in a large room may be distracted by the open space around them and have difficulty concentrating on processes.

On the other hand, a room might be too small and not allow enough space certain populations are particularly reactive to size of the meeting room. Young children , for example often benefit from a large, open area in which to engage in activities. Similarly, disabled older adults benefit from a room with and out of; bright glare-free lighting; and good acoustics (Toseland, 1900a).

Comfortable seating should be available. Sometimes group members prefer to sit on the floor to create an informal atmosphere. Carpets, lamps, work tables, and other furnishings should also help create a comfortable atmosphere. A comfortable physical environment conveys a message to group members about the agency’s regard for them as clients.

Overall, the worker should consider the total effect of the physical setting on a group’s ability to accomplish its tasks. If a group is to engage in informal discussion, the worker can create an informal atmosphere with comfortable couches or pillows for sitting on the floor. If a group is to work on formal tasks, such as reviewing priorities for a five-year plan, the worker should create a more formal atmosphere, for example, a room in which the group can sit around a well-lighted table may be most appropriate.

**Seating Arrangements:**

Seating is important for several reasons. It can affect who talks to whom, influence leadership roles, and, as a result, affect group cohesion and morale. In most groups members should have eye contact with one another. The group leader must be able to make eye contact with everyone to obtain nonverbal feedback on what the members are thinking and feeling.

A circle is ideal for generating discussion, encouraging a sense of equal status for each member, and promoting group openness and cohesion. The traditional classroom arrangement, on the other hand, has the effect of placing the leader in a position of authority it also tends to inhibit communication because members can easily make eye contact only with other members seated nearby.

**TABLE ARRANGEMENT**

Tables have advantages and disadvantages. They provide a place to write and to put work materials, and some members feel more comfortable at a table because they can lean on it. But tables restrict movement and may serve as barrier between people.

The leader should thus carefully consider the use of tables. In business meetings or other “working” sessions, for example, tables are necessary, in therapy groups, however, tables are seldom used. When work surfaces and written communication are required, small tables in a circle can be an effective arrangement.

The shape of the tables can also influence the way group members interact. If the table is rectangular, the leader traditionally sits at one end, becomes the head of the table and the “authority” tends to do more talking, and has a greater influence on the discussion than other group members. A round or square table, however, establishes a more egalitarian atmosphere. The “head of the table” effect can also be reduced by placing two rectangular tables together to make a square.

In new groups, or even established ones, members are likely to sit next to friends. If it is important for everyone in the group to interact, the leader may want to ask people to sit next to individuals they do not know. People are most apt to talk to others sitting at right angles to them and then to those next to them. Those sitting directly across receive less communication, and those sitting anywhere else are even less likely to be addressed.

**Securing Financial Support**

The worker should be concerned about how the expenses associated with the group will be met. For this reason, the worker should explore the financing arrangements with group’s sponsoring agency, beginning with an assessment of the agency’s total financial statement. The costs associated with treatment and task groups vary, but major items include the salary of the worker, the use of the meeting room, and the expense of supervision for the worker. Other expenses may include duplicating, telephone, mailings, refreshments, and transportation.

Expenses such as the worker’s salary and the meeting room are often routinely paid for by the agency. For expenses requiring an outlay of cash, the worker should submit a budget request to the sponsoring agency. A petty-cash fund can provide a flexible means to cover expenses incurred by the group.

For some treatment groups, income may be generated by fees collected from members, or it may be produced from outside sources, such as grants or contracts. Although most task groups do not usually generate income, some are formed to generate money for new programs or to raise funds for the agency. Others generate financial savings to an agency through creative problem solving or decision-making. Using information about costs and income, the worker can determine what financial support must be obtained for the proposed group.

**Special Arrangements:**

The worker should be particularly sensitive to any special needs of group members. The worker should be sure that barriers will not prevent particular members from being able to attend meetings. For a group of senior citizens, for example, the worker should consider transportation needs, the safety of the meeting place, the comfort of chairs, and access to the agency and the meeting room. In working with the physically challenged, the worker should plan a barrier-free location for meetings. If a group for parents is planned, the worker should consider child-care arrangements. For a children’s group, the worker should discuss transportation arrangements and obtain parental consent for whom English is a second language, the worker may need to arrange for the services of an interpreter during meetings or may wish to co-facilitate with a bilingual or bicultural co-leader.

TELEPHONE GROUPS. In some situations, it is not possible for people who could benefit from social work to meet face to face. For example, people who suffer from debilitating illnesses, such as the frail elderly and those with terminal illnesses, often are not able to attend group meetings. In other situations, people may find it difficult to avail themselves of a group service agencies often serve large geographic areas. Even in urban and suburban communities, some health and social service agencies, such as regional hospitals, serve the needs of special populations dispersed over a large area.

In recent years, technological advances have made it possible to have telephone conversations among a number of individuals. This often referred to as “teleconferencing” or making a “conference call” (Kelleher & cross, 1985). Until recently, the use of this technology was largely limited to business meetings. Several pioneering individuals in the social services, however, have begun to use the technology to offer groups to individuals who cannot meet face to face.

Galinsky, rounds, Montague, and Butowsky (1993) and Bertcher (1990) have prepared manuals on how to set up and operate telephone groups. In addition, Bertcher is the editor of Tell A Group Hotline, and occasional newsletter published through the school of Social work at the University of Michigan. Some of the special considerations in setting up a telephone group include (a) teleconferencing capacity in the organization’s telephone system, (b) a speaker phone if there will be more than one leader, (c) sufficient funds for teleconferencing, and (d) a willingness to call 15 minutes before the group and stay on the line until all members of the group are connected.

As can be seen in the bibliography in telephone groups in appendix E, telephone groups are usually planned for people with physical disabilities, and those who live in rural areas. Although research on telephone group is limited, some clinical evidence suggests that they have certain advantages over in-person interacting groups. Some individuals appear to be more willing to participate in telephone groups than in-person groups. Bertcher (1992) suggests that the anonymity of telephone groups appear to encourage members to discuss issues that were reported to be taboo in in-person groups and that, contrary to expectations, cohesion develops quickly in telephone groups.

Telephone groups also have potential disadvantages. For example, there is no informal time for members to get together with each other before or after the meeting (Rounds, Galinsky, & Stevens, 1991). With members’ consent, swapping telephone numbers for between-session contact is one solution. Also, because inflection, silences, and other cues such as members becoming less responsive or completing dropping out of the discussion over time. Despite these limitations, telephone groups offer a promising, cost-effective alternative to face-to-face interacting groups for frail or isolated individuals.

References:

**(An introduction to Group Work Practice written by Ronald W. Toseland Robert F. Rivas Second Edition).**

**(Social work with groups written by Charles H. Zastrow Sixth Edition)**