

The group “consultancy” / peer review process

- a 'critical friend' group process, designed at Brown University, USA (author unknown)

Introduction

This tool offers a process for focused group reflection. A group is formed where participants have a shared interest in learning, problem solving and creative thinking through listening and generative dialogue, sharing information, dilemmas and ideas.

I successfully used this tool first with a group of (16) practitioners from three different geographic areas who were involved in different ways in developing community-based collaborative service provision initiatives in their respective areas. The process was successful in terms of a high level of engagement, shared learning and generation of new ideas and insights amongst all the participants. It is also proving to be a powerful tool for problem solving, exploring and focusing on issues within our professional development group of research and evaluation practitioners.

Purpose

This is a reflective process which lends itself well to different topics / issues, problems or dilemmas, contexts and depths of thinking (i.e. it's versatile). It enables new perspectives and insights to emerge through listening, reflecting, sharing ideas and dialogue.

What's needed:

- A facilitator - introduces the process, negotiates timeframes, preferred approach to sharing, and guides the process including keeping a watch on the time as agreed
- A group of willing participants. It can be done with a small group (3-5), and the more people and diversity in the group, the richer the perspectives may be for generating ideas, insights and creative solutions to issues. It is important that all members of the group feel safe enough to fully participate.
- A place to meet face-to-face (or this can be done on-line).

Process:

Participants come prepared to present the issue, question or dilemma that they want to discuss / consult about with the group. One issue is dealt with at a time. So the group may need to schedule issues according to priorities and time available.

1. A participant presents their issue – brief outline of the project or dilemma and relevant information to enable the group to understand the situation. Presenter identifies their question or issue they want input on from the group.
2. Group members ask clarifying questions of the presenter until they are all clear about the situation, and the presenter's question.
3. Presenter can then either turn away from the group (so no eye contact or direct engagement with the group members), or just sit back out of the circle of

discussion. The idea is then, the other group members discuss amongst themselves the issue or dilemma that has been presented with a view to offering different perspectives and generating ideas or possible solutions while the presenter listens and takes notes (if they choose).

4. When time is up or discussion is concluded (whatever process the group agreed) the presenter rejoins the group and facilitator invites them to share with the group any ideas or insights they gained from listening to the group's discussion.
5. Group then 'stands back' and reflects on the process as a whole to mine the learnings from the process.

Suggested approach to sharing:

- go around the circle, one person at a time, each person sharing their idea(s) or until all have had an opportunity to speak
- no cross talk
- participants may ask each other for clarification when necessary
- repeat this process as needed within agreed time, or renegotiate parameters (e.g. more time) if appropriate

Further suggestions

For more complicated issues (e.g. multi-faceted or layered):

- it may be useful for those 'in' the discussion to share one main idea at a time in a round, and have 2-3 rounds of sharing
- Have an option of a two stage group reflection process, whereby after allowing time and space for the 'presenter' (of the issue) to 'settle' and reflect on what has been offered in the first stage, the above process is repeated. For the second stage, the presenter will have refined the issue or reformed their question on the issue for the group consultation process. This two stage process may help deepen discussion and reflection in keeping with the generative nature of the dialogue process.

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