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Getting the job done: Use of a work group for agency change

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Abstract: *Work groups offer the potential to influence the structure, policy and procedures in agency practice. Skilfully led work groups engage workers in a process where problems are identified and explored and collaborative solutions are developed and implemented. A case example of a work group mobilized by a child welfare worker to restore parent child visitation rooms will be used to illustrate the planning process, recruitment of work group members, development of a common purpose and goals and facilitation of sessions throughout the stages of the group's work. Implications for practice focus on group leadership skills that enhanced the work, resulting in the success of the project and agency change. Barriers to the work will be discussed with suggestions for future projects.*

Key words: *group leadership skills; work groups; agency change process*

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Introduction

In helping clients to access services, social workers have the responsibility of determining whether services are being delivered in an effective and respectful manner. At times, this necessitates becoming involved in agency practice on a macro level to influence the structure, policy and procedures that ensure quality service delivery. This professional responsibility represents a challenge for overburdened workers who voice concerns about the lack of time, power and knowledge to effect change in agency service delivery (Gitterman & Miller, 1989). However, social workers have already developed multiple practice methods that can lead to successful problem solving in agency practice and many of these methods are used in work groups. Work groups have the potential to engage workers in a cohesive process where problems are identified and explored and collaborative solutions are developed that lead to change. Within this process, there is also the potential to develop a sense of camaraderie amongst workers, that not only accomplishes the agreed upon task but also improves morale and decreases the social isolation that can develop in busy agency practice. Through the process of a skilfully led group, instrumental skills are developed that can be transferred to future group experiences that impact on professional and agency change (Toseland & Rivas, 2005).

This article discusses the work group and its role in agency change. A case example of a work group mobilized by a child welfare worker to improve the physical environment for parent child visitation will be used to illustrate several points:

1. the planning process that identified supports for and barriers against agency change;
2. the recruitment of the work group members and the development of a common purpose and goals;
3. the social groupwork skills used to facilitate the collaborative work and successful completion of the identified project; and
4. the barriers that created challenges to the work.

Environment and parent-child visits

The child welfare research literature highlights the strong relationship between parent-child visiting and successful outcomes for children who have been removed from their homes due to abuse and neglect, (Cantos, Gries, & Slis, 1997; Davis, Landsverk, Newton, & Ganger, 1996; Fanshel & Shinn, 1978; Haight et al., 2002; Littner, 1981; Maas & Engler, 1959) Visiting is at the heart of reunification and central to the achievement of case goals (Hess & Proch, 1993). Visiting helps parents, as well as professionals, to assess their ability and willingness to care for their children, strengthen and develop new parenting skills, and maintain a strong parent child relationship. The visiting process helps parents to increase their confidence in their ability to meet their children's needs and in some cases also provides a venue for maintaining involvement in their children's school or community activities (Hess & Proch, 1993; Rycus & Hughes, 1998). During visits, child welfare practitioners can also assess parents' progress toward case goals and through longer, unsupervised and overnight visits provide a smoother transition back home for the children and family (Hess & Proch, 1993).

Ideally, parent-child visits should be conducted in the home, since this environment is familiar to both the child and the parent and provides the most natural setting for the parent to practise their parenting skills (Hess and Proch, 1993). However, for various reasons, it may not be feasible to conduct visits initially in the home. In cases such as these, the goal is for visits to be conducted in the most natural setting as possible. The setting should be comfortable for families to spend time together, as well as private and non-threatening. Toys and books in clean and good condition for children of all ages should be available to provide opportunities for positive interactions between children and parents. Ideally, families should have access to food preparation facilities to assist in creating a home-like setting, in which families can participate in organizing and sharing meals together (Pine, Spath, & Jenson, 2005). Therefore, in cases where visits must be conducted at the state child welfare agency, it is critical that an environment be created that is conducive to positive child and parent interactions. The next section discusses the role of task/work groups in working towards agency change – and in the case presented in this article – working towards change in the environment where parent-child visits are conducted.

Task/work groups

Systems and ecological theory underlie the understanding of group functioning. According to systems theory several functional tasks guide the work of groups, whether they be organized for task or treatment purposes. The functional tasks include internal (integration of members; maintenance of purpose and related procedures that promote optimal functioning; and attainment of the identified goals) and external (adaptation to the environment) workings of the group (Parsons, Bales, and Shils, 1953). In several studies observing teams and juries, Bales (1950, 1954, 1955), concluded that the equilibrium of the group was influenced not only by its internal integration but by adaptation to the outside environment. By attending to the internal workings of the group (task and social-emotional roles) the optimal functioning of the group is promoted, so increasing member satisfaction (Bales, 1950). In their ecological models, Homans (1950) and Germain & Gitterman (1980) have emphasized the importance of simultaneously focusing on the external environment (agency and community) in all phases of group development.

Task groups are many and varied and every agency uses such groups to focus on specifics of agency organization and administration. Task groups have goals that are not intrinsically or immediately linked to the needs of the members of the group (Wayne & Cohen, 2001) but are concerned with creating new ideas, developing plans and programs, solving problems external to the group and making decisions about the organizational environment (Garvin, 1997). Committees, planning groups, staff development groups, discussion groups, multidisciplinary teams, advocacy groups, boards of directors and work groups are all types of task groups organized to contribute to ongoing functioning and service delivery within agencies (Corey & Corey, 2006; Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Fatout, 1995; Toseland & Rivas, 2005). The focus of this article will be on the use of the work group to accomplish a task that led to agency change (Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Francis & Young, 1992). Work groups can be a pivotal resource or barrier in efforts to change agency structure, processes and practices.

Leadership of work groups

Effective leadership of the work group is essential to encourage members to collaborate fully in working toward accomplishment of a goal (Francis & Young, 1992). Understanding the principles of groupwork and using the skills that enhance the democratic participation of all members in an agency work group has several benefits. Skilled leadership engages members around a common purpose directed toward a change in the agency organization and functioning; encourages the generation of diverse ideas which enhance the attractiveness of the solutions with a greater likelihood that the mutually developed plan will be embraced in the actual change process (Maier, 1971). Finally, effective leadership not only helps to complete the project but enhances the working relationships among staff – with the ultimate goal of creating an environment that supports an ongoing collaborative problem solving process in the agency.

Knowledge of groupwork principles and skills greatly enhances the movement of the group, empowerment of its members, and accomplishment of the task that the group has contracted to complete (Ephross & Vassil, 2005; Garvin, 1997; Toseland & Rivas, 2005). Within work groups, leaders must balance the content (what members discuss and work toward) and the process (the interaction of members within the group) to enable the work to move forward. Rather than consider workers as subordinates in the agency hierarchy, use of a democratic model of groupwork encourages member contributions to the generation of ideas and the solution of problems (Ephross & Vassil, 2005). Effective leaders of work groups deal with issues in the here and now, model respect for diverse opinions and address conflict resulting in members acquiring new skills for interacting in ways that are non-oppressive, empowering and contribute to effective problem solving in the agency (Corey & Corey, 2006; Doel, 2005).

In task, as in treatment groups, workers respond to individual and group needs through the multiple phases of the group. Workers recruit members committed to the project, facilitate mutuality in development of the group's purpose and tune into and facilitate the group processes that enhance and/or present barriers to accomplishment of the task. Facility in the use of groupwork skills enables the worker to communicate between the group and the agency, involve members in decision making,

monitor and supervise performance and problem solve when barriers to the work are evident (Garvin, 1997). Specifically a leader needs to understand his/her leadership style and the impact that their style can have on the work group members – as well as an understanding and willingness to change leadership styles as needed. A work group leader also needs to relate to group members in an authentic manner – and be honest and trustworthy in their interactions with others. The leader must also have a positive, optimistic and realistic view of individuals and their ability to interact and relate – and be able to empower and tap into the unique skills and resources each member brings to the work group. Work group leaders need to clearly show a strong commitment to every group member – and help to clarify the roles and goals of the work group. They need to create a work group environment which, while supporting, can be constructively confrontational if necessary. In collaboration with group members, the work group leader needs to develop and continually assess the work methods of the group, and whether they are both satisfying and effective. And finally, the leader needs to be able to maintain discipline and address all barriers to effective group process (Francis and Young, 1992).

Lack of leadership skills in facilitating any of these processes may result in failure to accomplish the agreed upon task, or completion of the task with an enormous expenditure of energy from the leader and possibly one or two members of the group. Such a dynamic leads to disgruntlement of those who have never constructively engaged in the work of the group, resulting in negative feelings that may generalize to future work group situations within the agency.

Stages in the work group

Planning stage

Planning is crucial to the development of any work group and failure to think carefully about the purpose of the project and the physical and emotional climate of the host agency can result in barriers to the group's successful completion of its task (Ephross & Vassil, 2005). Planning for a work group includes defining the need for the project, developing a clear purpose and goals and engaging the support of agency

stakeholders. Additionally, the worker must focus on the structure of the work group including making decisions on the optimal size of the group and its composition, length of time and duration of meetings and the strategies to appoint, invite or recruit members to the group (Fatout & Rose, 1995).

Working stage

Once the group has been established the worker needs both task and interactional/expressive skills to engage members in collaborative work toward the common goal of completing the identified project (Mondros & Wilson, 1994; Zastrow, 2006). Key to this phase is keeping the vision for change in the forefront of all interactions to foster member empowerment as steps are taken to accomplishment of the goals (Mondros & Wilson, 1994). Task skills include the organizational aspects of keeping the meetings focused on the goal; facilitating a problem solving process that engages diverse opinions; dealing with conflict that occurs when the group is engaged in discussion; brainstorming solutions to problems; making decisions; and organizing the plan and evaluation of the project. Strong group leaders are also able to model interactional or expressive skills along with task skills to move the work along without alienating members. They respond with empathy; intervene with the individuals and the group when interactions are not conducive to the work of the group and support members throughout the group process (Mondros & Wilson, 1994).

Completion of work

In the final stages of a work group, completion of the project and recognition of members' contributions, often in a celebratory way, are the focus (Fatout, 1995; Vassil & Ephross, 2005). Evaluation of the work includes attention to the task completion as well as the review of the strengths and difficulties of the work group process. Such discussion allows the group to understand the factors that contributed to or interfered with the group process and this knowledge can be used in future work group projects in the agency.

A case study of an effective work group in a child welfare agency

Planning stage: Defining need, purpose and goal

The project was led by a child welfare worker in a state agency whose knowledge of groupwork skills that she was concurrently learning in her social work education program guided her leadership. The worker identified the dirty, outdated and uninviting space in the family visiting rooms as a work project that needed addressing in the agency. Graffiti and profanity were painted on some of the walls and holes had been punched through the plaster board in a few of the rooms. Parents were reluctant to allow their children to play on floors that were seldom cleaned. There were no toys to engage the children or contribute to positive parent-child interaction. Since the agency's mission was to promote family reunification, the worker strongly believed that the public setting should serve as a model environment for the families, rather than expose them to many of the same conditions that had been cited as problematic in the homes from which their children had been removed. She also believed that future placement planning meetings of the multidisciplinary team of mental health providers, lawyers and potential foster parents needed to be conducted in a clean and inviting space. Knowing that many staff had similar concerns about the conditions of the visiting rooms, the worker speculated that if the agency workers could complete a project to clean and restore the rooms, a secondary gain might be the increased morale of the workers.

Once the need for the project was developed, the worker used force field analysis, a useful tool in organizational development, to identify and analyze the various forces that could potentially impact the project in either a positive or negative way. This approach is also helpful in developing strategies to gain the support of critical actors and overcome any potential resistance or barriers to the work (Brager & Holloway, 1992). The analysis of these various forces was critical in an agency with a hierarchical organizational structure with little opportunity for workers to give input into the change process. The worker identified two potential barriers to the success of the project:

1. the attitudes of the overworked and disempowered workers who

- were seldom included in decision making that impacted on the organization of the agency;
2. the previous discussions about the conditions of the visiting areas that had brought about no ownership of the project or subsequent follow-through of the work.

Based on this analysis, the worker realized the importance of developing a concrete plan to address specific factors related to the project. She developed a clear proposal that specified worker release time, and a budget for supplies to clean, paint and decorate the rooms and to purchase age appropriate toys for each of the visiting rooms. She submitted the proposal to the area director, who was identified as a critical actor who supported the project. The proposal was approved and then presented to the supervisors and managers to gain their agreement to fund the project and provide staff release time.

Recruitment: Inviting participation

The next step was recruiting workers for the project at a staff meeting of caseworkers and supervisors. The goal of the recruitment meeting was to get the staff excited enough to commit to taking part in the work project. The current project needed a clearly defined purpose with a focus on its feasibility and subsequent benefit to the workers and families. In the recruitment meeting, the worker addressed the project goal of changing the environment for visiting parents and their children and emphasized how it would directly affect the daily work of the caseworkers. She reasoned that the families deserved clean and inviting rooms for the visits and that the development of a professional and calming atmosphere might inadvertently contribute to fewer difficult situations arising during the visits. Provision of clean, attractive visiting spaces furnished with mats for playing and age-appropriate toys, games and books would provide the context for a positive parent-child visit and less opportunity for destructive interactions that might require the intervention of a staff member. She also emphasized the administrative backing and funding for the project's completion, outlined the one week timeline for the work, the proposed schedule of tasks and the incentives of compensation time for participation. She assured the staff that she was willing to take ownership of the project and would not only oversee

the work but would be a part of the daily work force. The agency would remain open during the renovation and supervisory release time would be obtained for caseworkers. She committed to taking charge of getting the materials and keeping the project 'on task'. Finally, the worker emphasized the need for the energy and vision of the staff and invited interested workers to a lunchtime planning meeting.

Engaging the workers in the plan of action

Eighteen caseworkers and two managers attended the first lunch time planning meeting of the work group. The goal of the meeting was to decide on what to do (the colors and the decoration plan for each room) as well as how to do it (the scheduling of tasks and workers). Group members expressed an overall excitement and eagerness to get involved in the project, but also a simultaneous concern about the enormity of the task and the short, one week time line for accomplishment of the huge task of cleaning and painting nine visiting rooms and the waiting area by the twenty agency workers.

The worker facilitated the brainstorming session to determine the colors and design of the rooms and the work schedule for accomplishing the tasks. It became apparent immediately that separating the roles that the caseworkers and managers had in the daily workings of the agency was a significant challenge to decision making. In the hierarchical agency, the managers were used to authoritatively making decisions that impacted on agency practice. Their previous experience with a similar project several years before influenced their ideas about design and scheduling. They were also adamant that the work should take place during the Monday-Friday work week, but the eighteen caseworkers realized that their available time to work on the project during the work week was negligible and they favored the incentive of using a Saturday work time to accumulate compensation hours during the week. Recognizing that the caseworkers were concerned that challenging the opinions of the managers might affect their workloads, the worker took the lead in modeling how to express ideas that differed from those of the managers. She respected each suggestion, despite her frustration with the manner in which the managers exerted power in the meeting. At the end of the meeting, the worker summarized the discussion and defined next steps. Between meetings she met with the area director

to report on the progress of the project and to gain continued support for the work.

The working stage: The job gets done

A small core group of workers (6-7), two supervisors and the project leader completed the work during one work week including a Saturday session. Several additional workers volunteered for short painting sessions but were not part of the planning and ongoing daily work of the project. The project lost several of the workers who had come to the initial planning session. Some were too burdened by work responsibilities to contribute. Others (caseworkers and managers) left because their ideas were not included in the final planning. Despite the challenges of completing the work on schedule with fewer workers, many of whom could not be present at each planning and work session, the organizational task and maintenance leadership skills of the worker facilitated the daily progression of the work, as she simultaneously managed to keep the work going and to nurture and support the workers through the process.

Keeping all members involved with the decision making process and the progress of the work was an ongoing focus and the worker reiterated the goal of the project at the beginning of each update lunch meeting and work session. An agenda was set for each meeting, questions raised at previous meetings were answered, differing ideas were examined, discussions were recorded, and next steps for the work were identified. Since membership at lunch time planning meetings changed daily, the worker discussed issues with a core sub-group of workers between meetings and brought back the decisions made by the majority to the daily work group. When she observed that a group member was disgruntled by a decision, she sought the worker out to discuss the concern. She, explained the challenges to the decision making process influenced by the changing membership at planning and work sessions, as well as the pressure to make decisions quickly based on the shortened time frame for whole group discussion of the issues. Such attention to individuals within the group resulted in disaffected workers feeling understood and respected and thus able to reengage in the work of the group.

Once decisions were made about the work to be done, the worker

offered support to the work group members in both tangible and intangible ways. Food and beverages were always available to the work group members. Supplies were organized and ready for use at the beginning of each day. Schedules for each room breaking down tasks into manageable steps helped to decrease the overwhelming feeling that the workers had when they viewed the entire project of cleaning, painting and decorating nine rooms in one week's time. Workers signed up for tasks that were already identified on the list of tasks. Occasionally, an individual task was identified by a worker, as when an artistic group member offered to create a mural on a column in the waiting area. Updated lists on the doors of each room tracked the daily progression of the work and workers gained a sense of accomplishment as they saw the project completed one room at a time. The finished rooms were showcased and feedback was elicited from agency workers who were not involved in the work of the project, providing unexpected and ongoing affirmation from peers, many of whom had expressed doubts that such a project could be completed.

Final stage: Recognizing the work

The project was completed in the one week time period that had been allotted.

The work group had managed to transform the dismal and unappealing visiting and waiting areas into a space that was painted with fresh and welcoming colors and furnished with donated supplies that provided more opportunity for parents to interact positively with their children. Affirmation was provided to the staff by an award ceremony where each participating staff member received a certificate from the Commissioner of the state agency for outstanding work in a social service agency. The work group members were nominated by the Director of the agency for a state award which recognized service beyond the daily work requirements. An article was written for the newsletter documenting the project. An unexpected affirmation was given by the agency clients who expressed surprise and appreciation that the workers had volunteered their time to clean a space for their family visits. The attention to client comfort in a bureaucratic public agency (Seabury, 1971) seemed to influence the attitudes of visiting parents toward the workers. Agency workers who had doubted that the project could be

accomplished gave praise to the work group. The collective pride and ownership of the visiting rooms resulted in both caseworkers and clients taking renewed ownership of the public spaces, encouraging increased accountability for their ongoing condition and care.

Implications for practice

Critical groupwork skills that moved the work along

The project described illustrates the importance of using groupwork principles and skills in work groups organized to solve problems and impact on agency functioning. The worker's groupwork skills were evident in the planning, recruitment, and working stages of the group. Identifying a problem that was recognized as a need in the agency was the first step to unite administrative and line staff around a mutual goal. Obtaining administrative support for the project and keeping the agency administrators abreast of the progress throughout, ensured that the financial and staff support were available and encouraged the work force who had previously been disappointed by past failed efforts to address the identified problem. As she recruited members to the work group, the worker developed the mutual purpose and goals for the group by focusing on outcomes (vision of how the restored rooms might impact on family visitation and agency meetings) rather than the problem (failure of agency to address the neglect of the visiting rooms). This focus encouraged the group to start with positive pro-active thinking rather than the negative, defensive style of addressing problems so common in agencies with numerous barriers to worker empowerment in the change process (Hupp, Polak, & Westgaard, 1995). Nurturing the group members in both tangible and intangible ways through the actual work of the project was essential to its success.

An enthusiastic and energetic leadership style engaged members of the group, and motivated the workers even when the task seemed overwhelming. The worker used both task skills to move the work along and maintenance (interactional /expressive) skills to attend to the social-emotional climate of the group (Mondros & Wilson, 1994; Zastrow, 2006). Assessment of the agency barriers and supports to the project was essential to its development and recruitment and ongoing

involvement of the members (Brager & Holloway, 1992); Mondros & Wilson, 1994). She kept the focus on the purpose of the group, followed through on each of her leadership responsibilities that allowed the work to progress and emphasized the importance of group members to the completion of the project.

A focus on the common vision of providing a clean and attractive space for clients to visit with their children helped when conflicting ideas for how to complete the work challenged the ongoing work. Modeling respectful ways of asserting ideas and helping the group members to see the commonalities in their ideas enhanced the cohesion of the group and alleviated some of the power struggles in the early planning sessions of the group. Finally, the worker's ample use of praise and reinforcement, modeled a way of commending agency work in a public work environment that seldom acknowledged accomplishments of the hard working caseworkers.

Barriers that created challenges to the work

Despite the energetic and organized leadership of the worker and the ultimate success of the project, the work group lost several of its members during the project putting additional burdens on the leader and the core group of workers to finish the work in a short period of time. It proved a challenge to satisfy the administrative demands of the busy child welfare agency by keeping the work on schedule while balancing the social-emotional functioning of the group. Discomfort in dealing with conflict, recognized as a difficulty experienced by many social workers (Abramson, 1989), resulted in the worker reverting to a somewhat authoritarian approach when challenged by disparate opinions from different sub-groups. The composition of the work group which included the managers, who wielded power in the planning group, had not been identified in the analysis of the agency strengths and barriers to the work project. It is possible that a hidden agenda (Ephross & Vassil, 2005) of getting back at the managers and needing to do the project without their help also interfered with their integration into the group. Although the worker modeled respect for their diverse ideas during brainstorming sessions, there was no strategy developed to include the managers' suggestions in a meaningful way in the ongoing work of the project. A valuable opportunity was lost to engage the group

members in problem solving and decision making that included ideas from stakeholders with differing levels of power.

Given more time for the project, the worker might have encouraged the group to take ownership and deal constructively with conflicts as they occurred. Raising issues early in the planning meetings might have encouraged workers to give more input. Addressing the different roles of the managers, supervisors and caseworkers and the challenges of collaborative rather than hierarchical working methods might have alleviated the expected power struggles that occurred over how and when the project was to proceed. Sub-groups could have been identified that had meaningful tasks to complete. Engaging the managers in solving some of the resource problems might have also resulted in increasing the number of workers who were available for the work.

Conclusion

Using work groups is an effective strategy for organizational change and empowerment of workers. The importance of incorporating groupwork principles and skills into work groups can greatly enhance the progression of the work group through, planning, working and ending stages of the work. This project illustrates how a worker used these skills to identify an agency problem and then led members of a work group in a project to clean and restore the visiting rooms in an overburdened child welfare organization. The successful process of the work group empowered workers as they learned skills for collaborating in problem solving for agency change and saw their contributions making a tangible difference in service delivery for families in the child welfare system. An unexpected benefit was also the empowerment of agency families who expressed appreciation that the workers had recognized the need to create attractive visiting spaces for reunions with their children. Although this project was implemented in a child welfare agency, the problem solving process and the groupwork principles and skills that were used to bring the project to a successful conclusion could be easily transferred to settings that serve other populations. Schools, hospitals, and various other social service agencies could well make use of a process that thoughtfully examines an organizational problem and

uses the skills of groupwork to lead a work project that creatively and collaboratively results in a solution that benefits the agency, workers and clients.

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