How to Stabilize a Support Group
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A question that all support groups have to deal with is how to assure group stability, and how to avoid the disruptive influences that so often ravage organizations. Even though most FM support groups are non-profit organizations, they can still be arenas of mini-politics and heated contention. Few people starting support groups are savvy about behavior in groups and organizations; often storms of contentious elements, members who, if given the opportunity, will challenge the present leadership and attempt to assert control against the wishes of the leadership. How do you deal with such elements?

At the administrative level. The first place where stability versus instability can be determined is in the structure of the organization. In simplest terms there are two forms that the control of the organization can take. The organization's control may be vested in a single person, the leader, who has ultimate control in all areas. Or, the organization's control may be vested in a board or some other administrative body. Both formats are vulnerable to disruptive influence, and strategies apply to both that improve their stability.

1. Unitary control - meaning one leader who has ultimate say-so - obviates serious dissent if this person indeed is fully in charge. There is much to be said for unitary control, sometimes criticized as "dictatorship," because it confers stability on the group. Unitary control is effective in carrying out the mission of the group provided the leader is able to appreciate workable suggestions from others and engage them in the tasks of the organization. If the leader does not have these qualities, then the organization is limited in its capacity to reach out and accomplish its objectives, since would-be helpers are restricted in their ability to participate in the organization. Nevertheless, a leader with unitary control can be challenged in at least two ways. Individual members may latch on to a degree of control despite the formal structure of the organization. Much depends on the relationship of the leader with members and participants in the organization. This is discussed below in the section entitled, "at the membership level."

Also, unitary control may be challenged by the legal requirement of many states to have a board or similar group at its center. Various state laws applying to non-profit groups discourage or disallow unitary control. Attorneys can assist the set-up of an organization to make unitary control possible; for example, the tax-exempt corporation may be set up so that the board's only responsibility is a legal one, not administrative.

2. The second main format for the control of organizations is board control. In this case the ultimate say-so is vested in a board or similar administrative group. Boards can be veritable brewing pots for contention; but they can also be stabilizing and engaging in their influence if run smoothly. Ideally (but not often in practice) the board is set up to run well. If it is not, infighting and contention in a board is almost inevitable, maybe not at first; but in time conflicts, challenges, resignations in protest, etc., will predictably occur. These kinds of problems can be corrected if a communication facilitator is called in to help. These consultants are individuals skilled in communication and conflict resolution in group settings. They may be hired for this purpose; they come to board meetings and bring about unified action and consensus using communication techniques. In the yellow pages they

may be found under headings such as organizational consultants, group facilitators, and communication consultants. The prerequisite for their success is that they obtain full commitment for their work of facilitation from the highest levels, including from the leadership and the board's main officers. Nominal or perfunctory commitment spells failure. Commitment can be elicited by highlighting the worthwhile outcomes of facilitation. In almost every instance when facilitation is backed from the top, it brings to an end costly and counterproductive dissention among board members. A facilitated board or group can learn to speak as one voice, and to be a unified, stabilizing influence for the organization.

At the membership level. Leaders, administrators, officers, and board members can meet with contentions in their dealings with support group members if their dealings are not carried out in a professional way. Contention occurs in only a small proportion of encounters with members - most support group members have reasonable expectations and behave in an appropriate manner. But some persons are waiting for the opportunity to gain in personal authority and prestige, and any potential leverage that comes to them from officials in the organization will be used for these purposes. Here are four ways by which contention can occur:

1. Some individuals look for limelight by chumming up to the leader of the group. Pretty soon an informal "power collusion" is formed, in which individuals personally close to the leader have authoritative roles that were not legitimized in the operation of the group. In time these informal "de facto leaders: can sidestep, challenge, or undermine the authority of the formal leaders. They may attempt to control the operations of the group, at first in very small ways, but eventually in larger ways, and then form a competing center of leadership. Although these persons do not make up the majority of helpers in any support group, to assume they are totally absent from the group is naïve. Most groups learn of their presence through difficult experience with the struggles such persons introduce in the group.

2. Other individuals may seek limelight at meetings, helping behind the scenes at first, then drawing attention to themselves, They may take control of the floor and bring up problems in the group there: or they may start discussing their personal views on FM and testimonials regarding treatment in from of the group without consent from the leader. Ostensibly the intentions are sincere, but the net result in usually disruptive.

3. Individuals may work outside the larger group meetings in special interest workshops, subgroups, or cliques. These smaller groups form a grandstand for the airing of discontent and complaints. Dissidence in small groups disrupts the cohesion of the larger group; sometimes these smaller groups form factions that break off from the larger group and attempt to form competing support groups.

4. Members of the group or visitors may have commercial products and services they want to present or that thy want the group to endorse. Their chief desire is to win the group's loyalty and backing for their products and services. Such commercial concerns rarely have the group's interests at heart. These are examples of ways in which members may act out in ways that are self-serving rather that group serving. There are innumerable other ways that individual members may promote their own interest at the expense of the group. Leaders need to know that groups can be broken up over the dissentions that arise in these ways. In addition to being alert to these problems as they arise, we have these suggestions for leaders: First, use formal agendas at meetings. Procedural agendas discourage acting out by members. If a formal agenda is being followed, members do not have the opportunity to interrupt and attempt to control the floor. If they try to anyway, it comes across to the group as an interruption of proceedings, and a correction of their behavior is fully justified. Second, establish

group policies regarding who is authorized to speak or teach at meetings. Will impromptu personal testimonials be allowed, or only invited speakers and qualified professionals? Will sales representatives be permitted on the premises? Will individuals trying to promote their services or products be allowed to address the group? What kinds of questions (for example medical question) need to be deferred to a board of advisors? If such policies are in place, the leader simply recites the policy and ends the impromptu presentation. The leader may ask presenters to formulate their thoughts into questions, and then refer the questions to the appropriate source. Third, in dealing with members leaders in all capacities are well advised to keep a professional distance with the members of the group. For example, a family therapist or psychologist draws an "invisible line" between their personal life and that of their clients, so they do not get drawn in personally. Similar precautions are more that prudent for support group leaders. Any leader, of course, needs to have personal friends; but to invest yourself in this way in group members is often asking for difficulties. Personal friends are better chosen apart from the group's functions. The charm and charisma of a leader often attracts people who want to be friends, so that it is tempting to attract a circle of friends by this route. Nevertheless it is not wise; it is better to display your charisma to a selected audience, to groups of members at meetings, or in newsletters, but not to individual members who then feel specially favored. Pouring out a personal favor on a member and giving that member a "piece of the action" in the group as a personal gift - these are actions that can backfire on the leader. Roles, positions, functions, and responsibilities are better assigned to members in the context of the group as a whole. The assignment of administrative responsibilities should be done in a manner normative for that group. The responsibility assigned in this manner is carried out as a contribution to the group, not a personal favor to the leader. A leader who uses personal affection and favor to get people to do things is likely to get entangled in the drives, hopes, ambitions, and disappointments of these delegated persons.

Final Comment. Support groups are often viewed as informal get-togethers, or as groups with information-seeking as their only mission. Nevertheless, when people gather in groups, group behavior emerges, and some of this behavior is likely to be disruptive. Leaders or administrative boards in charge of such a groups are often surprised and dismayed by such behaviors. For the sake of the stability of the group, it is wise to apply the basic policies and practices for stabilization of organizations to support groups. Using such approaches, support groups can assure themselves of continued stability, and can greatly enhance their ability to carry out their mission.