

A GUIDE FOR
TRANSFORMATIONAL GROUPS



AS WE CHANGE OURSELVES, WE CHANGE THE WORLD.

GAIL BROOKS, SUSAN GRIFFIN, MELISSA WEST, AND
THE EDITORS OF PERSONAL TRANSFORMATION



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Foundation for Transformation Groups

WHAT ARE TRANSFORMATION GROUPS?

Transformation Groups are self-organizing, self-directed voluntary groups of individuals interested in personal and spiritual transformation. While we support and assist groups in a variety of ways, each group operates totally independently of the FOUNDATION FOR TRANSFORMATION GROUPS and are legally and financially responsible for its own activities. We do not screen potential hosts or facilitators of groups. We do however, reserve the right to remove a host or facilitator name for our list of hosts or facilitators if it is in our best interest.

OUR MISSION

The FOUNDATION FOR TRANSFORMATION GROUPS (FTG) is a non-profit organization that seeks to foster personal transformation through the development of a grass-roots national network of small support groups. Through coaching, national conferences, written material, and other means, the FTG supports the power of small groups to create loving communities that will provide a matrix for the spiritual and emotional transformation of their members.

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Dear Facilitator,

Welcome! We're delighted you've joined us and look forward to supporting you starting a Transformation Group in your area. This guide book will help you with some of the basic questions in the formation of a group. We are currently compiling a more comprehensive guide with more detailed information from our advisors.

WE NEED YOUR FEEDBACK.

With your input we will be able to better support and help future groups in their startup. We have provided a form at the end of this guide for your input.

On the "Recommended Reading" page you will find the names of three books that will be of help for those first starting out in groups.

When you sign-up for this project you receive one hour of coaching. You may call to set up your appointment as soon as you're ready for your consultation. Please keep these ground rules in mind:

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- Please honor your appointment by calling your coach on time. Your coach will need at least 24 hours cancellation notice if you cannot for any reason call at the appointed time. Less than 24 hours cancellation notice will result in a charge of \$45. This charge must be reimbursed by the participant before any further appointments will be made.

- Please prepare for the coaching session by having questions and concerns in mind when you call your coach.

Our coaches have extensive experience and training in transformation groups, and are happy to answer any questions you may have and to support you in setting up your groups. If you wish more coaching time, you are welcome to set up additional sessions with your personal coach at \$80 per hour.

We are glad to serve you and hope that setting up and participating in your transformation group will be an exciting and rewarding experience for you.

Sincerely,


Rick NurrieStearns

Introduction

BY SUSAN GRIFFIN

In your hands is a guide, a reliable companion to assist you in gathering a group of kindred spirits and making the most of your precious time together. Hidden between the lines and pages, there is a great deal of supporting energy and love from those of us who worked to bring the project to life. Now we are happy to share the fruits of our labor with you.

The creative process is far from complete. We hope you will be generous with your honest feedback as you work with this guide. Perhaps over time you will identify additions or changes that might make it even more useful. Throughout the birth and life of this project, ongoing co-creation is what we have in mind; together we can learn, improve and achieve more than any of us could ever accomplish without one another.

We look forward to answering your questions and meeting your needs as they arise. At this stage our intention is simply to provide you with enough solid guidance to get you off to a good start. We trust you will find that here.

Then, already well on its way is an extensive collection of supporting material derived from many hours of interviews and consultations with all the respected transformational authors, teachers and group leaders who make up our Board of Advisors. We feel blessed by their willingness to enrich our resources with what they have experienced and learned over years of work with thousands of people and hundreds of groups.

Mary Manin Morrissey, for instance, presents a wonderful ritual in her book, *Building Your Field of Dreams*, that could be adapted as a way to begin joining the energies in a newly-formed Transformation Group. It's called a "blending ceremony," and it revolves around the symbol of a treasure chest. With a wooden chest, or a specially-decorated box, set on the center of a table, one by one each person in the group puts in an item which they feel has special meaning in terms of the commitment they are making to being part of the group.

Imagine your Transformation Group consecrating and symbolizing your anticipated time together this way. She

suggests that the ritual could take place in stages: At the first meeting, members could each place a card or piece of paper in the chest, on which they have written a word or phrase that describes their intention in joining the group. Each person might wish to speak that intention aloud as they place it in the group's treasure chest. The next meeting, each member could bring an item to contribute that would concretize the intention in a symbolic way. At the following meeting the group as a whole would perform a blessing of the treasure chest, and a volunteer could take on the task of caring for it. That "Treasurer" might be asked to place the chest in the center of the sharing circle at each meeting, thereby initiating "sacred space," even if the meeting location changes from time to time.

Bernie Siegel suggested an idea that you could consider integrating into your group formation. He thinks it would be great to seek out and invite at least one elder from the local community to join the group, bringing with him or her the rich wisdom, sense of humor and broad perspective gained through many years of life's ups and downs. Whether it's a ninety-year old or someone much younger, he says that you can open the door and say, "The room is here. Come." After that, the courage of the individual to enter, and to talk about what we are here for, what life is all about, is what begins the process of a group. In his experience with groups, he often sits silently with others until their pain has led them to talk, or until people wanted to share what was on their minds. "How would you introduce yourself to God?" is one question he poses sometimes to get people to look beyond professions and roles as they introduce themselves to a new group.

Richard Moss knows, "that there is more energy available for inner process when you are in a group. Secondly, there is a certain ritualistic quality to meeting with people that says to your own soul and to your unconscious 'I want to do serious work with myself.' Therefore you're opening the door for co-operation from your own unconscious. That's really important," he says. "There's both a symbolic and a ritual 'reaching out' to one's own deeper nature."

There is something magical about any intense, tightly knit group of people working together and playing together... A transformative community is a nearly indispensable launching pad for transformation. Such a community can create the context and the confidence for a transforming journey.

—George Leonard and Michael Murphy

All you can really bring to a group, he adds, “is not what you know ‘in your head,’ but rather: willingness, commitment, sincerity and honesty. Honesty with yourself, sincerity with the others, and willingness and commitment to whatever the form asks.”

Many forms of community can provide people with contact, feedback, motivation and inspiration, as Gay Luce points out. However, she recognizes spiritual community as having a very intimate quality. “People are aware at some level of their being, even though they may never say it, that when they come into a group like this, they are talking about ‘soul-baring’ with each other. That makes a very deep community.” Her first advice is, “open your heart and be as non-judgmental as humanly possible.”

Wayne Muller believes, “that each one of us needs to feel as if we can tell our story, some part of ‘the way it was’ for us, the landscape we’ve traveled, the shapes of wounds and blessings that have come our way.” That sharing, he says, “is sacramental and necessary at some level.” Yet retelling our stories in habitual ways, or allowing ourselves to get stuck at a particular point in our story, is not what serves us well. “If there’s a ground rule principle that could perhaps be inculcated into the group process, it’s a covenant that our stories, over time, will become larger. What I mean by that is: first the story’s about me; then it’s about me and my partner, or me and my family. Then the story becomes about me and my community. And finally it’s about me as a part of all the children of the earth, me as a child of creation.” Part of what we’re doing by sharing in a group, he says, “is enabling our story to get larger, allowing our sense of identity to get larger over time, so that we’re not always staying just on the level of the individual ego, or the individual personality.”

Jacquelyn Small is enthusiastic about the value of participation in small, grassroots groups. “This kind of group work has a huge amount of power in it,” she says, “because people get inspired.” She adds that, “validation and feedback are part of any sacred community, for we are a group soul. And it’s got to be authentic feedback; there has to be

a genuine rapport established.” Emphasizing the importance of the way in which leaders or facilitators approach their roles, she says, “leaders have to know that because we’re invoking transformational group work, we are all going to be dealing with new things. Not one of us is going to be an expert about the way the future comes in. Facilitators have to be willing to walk their path with others.” She points out the paradox, “of being both ready to take on the responsibility of leadership, and at the same time being flexible and vulnerable enough to allow ourselves to stay right at the edge of what’s trying to emerge.”

In his book *Journey of the Heart*, John Welwood addresses the inner dilemmas of entering into any kind of new relationship that has the potential for emotional intimacy. “Consider the kind of situation we find ourselves in when we are suddenly drawn to a new lover with tremendous force and intensity,” he writes. Some of the feelings could be similar as we anticipate sharing deeply with others in a group. “This can be so exhilarating that we want to open without reservation. Yet at the same time we come up against inner cautions about letting our love flow so freely: ‘Can I let myself be this open? ...Can I trust this person [these people]? ...Can [they] accept me as I am and really be there for me?’” Though these concerns are quite natural, we could miss out on many wonderful opportunities if we let them stop us from entering into relationship.

“The key to finding our way in such situations,” he says, “lies in learning to allow opposite sides of our nature—unconditional and conditional love, passion and fear—to coexist, side by side, without letting one negate the other. When we do this, we become more fully present to our own experience and consequently to another person as well. We can let ourselves open and expand while still keeping our feet on the ground.”

Jean Shinoda Bolen says that one of the major elements that makes a group work is that it has to be safe. “Safety has to do with some obvious things,” she notes, “such as confidentiality and how people are treated in the group itself.” She says it should be a place, “where you have a sense of

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one defiantly commits oneself, then Providence moves too. All sorts of things occur to help one that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in one's favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no man could have dreamed would have come his way. Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it. Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.—*Goethe*

being respected, and that everybody in the group is an equal participant.” The image that works for her, “is that it’s a circle like a wheel, with the axis of the wheel, in the center, being the agreed-upon principles around which the group is operating. That is, there should be a sense of the soul, or the spiritual dimension, being the heart of this circle.”

Speaking from years of working with groups along with her husband, Gay, Kathlyn Hendricks says that her main recommendation at the outset for a group, is to ask that everyone agree to use their interactions with one another as an opportunity to learn. “The future of any kind of transformation will occur in groups,” she believes, “not in isolated geniuses. It will occur as we change our focus to the space between us, the relationships between us.” She says that every time she has the opportunity to be in a small group, she finds that “co-creation is occurring, and it’s always a surprise. Each time a group gets together, there is the possibility of a miracle.”

Here is a sample the rich storehouse of knowledge and experience from which we draw, as we invite you to begin joining with one another in Transformation Groups. These teachers and authors have shared more that they have discovered while journeying on their own transformational paths and guiding many fellow travelers along the way.

In the future you will have the opportunity to read and learn from what they have to say about many facets of group work, and to experience some of the simple group practices they have found most fruitful. As soon as that

compilation is complete, it will be available to you as a source of further reference and support.

For now, you have in your hands all that you need. It’s best to start out simple; and for the most part, what really matters can be said in very few words. The truth of that became increasingly evident as certain basic, simple sentiments kept recurring in the wisdom and warm encouragement shared by the members of our Board of Advisors.

These are the most important things to remember: Open your hearts. Have faith. Make a commitment. Listen. Allow enough time for mysteries to unfold. Trust. •

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

WHERE TO BEGIN

Although it seems simple enough, there are some important aspects to consider before beginning, including the size of the group, potential meeting places and participant list. The following may help you assess the benefits and challenges of various styles to aid you in formulating your approach.

SIZE OF GROUP

LARGE GROUP (20+ PARTICIPANTS)

Benefits: Lots of ideas, interaction, diversity of thoughts stimulating, almost a social event. Generally a high energy level.

Challenges: Takes longer to process any one topic or exercise. Can be chaotic and difficult to facilitate. Small groups can begin to split off. Can create conflict. Can be difficult to involve everyone.

MEDIUM GROUP (10-20 PARTICIPANTS)

Benefits: Generally a good size even if some cannot always attend. Facilitation is comfortable for an experienced leader. Can provide a nice mix of perspectives.

Challenges: May lack intimacy. People in this size group may be frustrated that they can't get to know everyone well. May appear to be superficial because it's sometimes difficult to go in depth and still discuss everyone's thoughts.

SMALL GROUP (5-10 PARTICIPANTS)

Benefits: Intimate, people really get to know each other. Bonding. Easier to go in depth with subject material.

Challenges: Can become stale due to lack of diverse perspectives. If a some don't come, the group may be too small and lack stimulation.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

FRIENDS & NEIGHBORS

Benefits: Typically know each other, comfortable with each other. Common bonds. Ease of communication.

Challenges: May find it difficult to stay focused on topic. May not allow for diverse perspectives. Facilitator may not be able to manage group dynamics as a "known" person.

OPEN TO PUBLIC

Benefits: Can be diverse. Community-oriented. Inclusive. Spreading ideas. Always seeds newly interested parties.

Challenges: May become too diverse to manage dynamics. Participation size may fluctuate radically from one gathering to the next. May grow large and cumbersome to administer.

PEER GROUP

Benefits: Honors the group's common experience. Typically know each other. May act as a support to other programs in the organization. Often supports a philosophy or lifestyle perspective.

Challenges: May become too exclusive and create "group think." May not honor diversity. May not be "spreading the word."

NEXT STEPS

After considering size, meeting place, and invitation list, you'll need to consider how you will initially contact potential participants, and how you will continue to communicate with them over time.

POSSIBLE LOCATIONS

CHURCH

Benefits: Often low or no cost. Usually offers kitchen facilities, may set a certain tone of reverence depending on setting.

Challenges: May be assumed your group is for church members only. May be offensive to non-church participants.

PUBLIC BUILDING

Benefits: Generally easy for people to find and provides parking, a way of publicizing your intentions to others in the community.

Challenges: Distractions from other people using the building. Atmosphere may not be aesthetically pleasing. May not be close to where people live.

PRIVATE HOMES

Benefits: Warm setting. Puts people at ease. May be a more inviting attractive environment.

Challenges: Space or seating may not be ample. Parking may be a problem. If more than one home is used, directions can become a project. May not be handicapped—accessible. May be security or privacy considerations for host whose home is used.

UNIVERSITY

Benefits: Sets an academic, serious tone. Fosters an openness to new ideas.

Challenges: May be an intimidating environment for those not educated at the university level. May have effect of excluding some potential participants.

OUTSIDE

Benefits: Can be very pleasant and beautiful. Conducive to transformational work.

Challenges: May be difficult for people with allergies. Can be distracting adjusting to various weather conditions.

DECIDING HOW TO COMMUNICATE

Keep in mind that even beyond the initial invitation there will be a need to communicate. People tend to need to be reminded!

There are various ways to invite people to this gathering depending on the intended audience. The following shows the advantages and challenges associated with various approaches.

FORM OF COMMUNICATION

PHONE

Benefits: Personal. Allows opportunity to explain something in more depth with less chance of misinterpretation.

Challenges: May be difficult to reach person. May end up playing telephone tag. Time-consuming.

BY MAIL

Benefits: Handwritten note can be a personal touch. Acts as a physical reminder to the person. Encourages personal participation.

Challenges: May appear impersonal if typed. Time-consuming. Addresses change more often than telephone numbers.

E-MAIL

Benefits: Fast. Efficient.

Challenges: Not everyone is on-line. Now you have two lists! Can appear impersonal.

COMMUNITY NEWS/NEWSLETTER

Benefits: May be less time-consuming. For large groups this may be ideal.

Challenges: May be impersonal. May not encourage personal commitment to the process.

Whatever method or methods you choose, recognize

that it will take time to organize process that works well and is not cumbersome. You may want to recruit some volunteers to help you with this aspect of your group.

DOES THE GROUP EVER END?

It all depends! Your subject and purpose will offer direction as to whether this group is an open-ended, ongoing experience, or limited to a specific number of sessions at least for this subject.

DURATION

OPEN-ENDED

Benefits: No time constraints. Conducive to community building. Develops a core group of committed individuals. May foster deeper levels of learning.

Challenges: Requires a sustained level of energy to administer and to support. Requires deeply focused individuals.

A PRE-DETERMINED NUMBER OF SESSIONS

Benefits: Honors participants' varied commitments. May increase participation. Sustains interest.

Challenges: May not seem to treat the subject fully. People may not have a support system to follow this experience.

A PRE-DETERMINED NUMBER OF SESSIONS FOR ONE TOPIC, BUT OPEN-ENDED GROUP

Benefits: Allows for "new" starts and stops in subject and participants.

Challenges: Requires a sustained level of commitment on part of initiators.

MEETING TIMES

WEEKLY

Benefits: Intensity. Participants may be highly committed. Supportive structure.

Challenges: Dropout. Burnout rate may be high due to other commitments.

TWICE A MONTH

Benefits: Continuity but allows for busy schedules.

Challenges: Sometimes confusing to remember schedule.

MONTHLY

Benefits: Allows time to assimilate and practice what was experienced in group. Accommodates busy schedules. Provides more time for leaders to prepare.

Challenges: May lose momentum, cohesiveness. May have to regroup and review each time.

QUARTERLY

Benefits: May be highly effective for large group events supported by smaller “cell” groups.

Challenges: May be difficult to draw participation without a lot of publicity.

ON THE SUBJECT OF FEES

It is the intention of *TRANSFORMATION GROUPS* that groups will meet on an egalitarian basis and that host or facilitators shall not charge fees in excess of basic operating cost. Unless the group as a whole decides to bring in an outside presenter or guest facilitator for whom professional fees and travel expenses must be paid.

It is reasonable to anticipate that some minor cost will be associated with any group. Refreshments, materials, mailings, registration and any charges for the use of a meeting space are expenses that can be shared equally among all members, by arranging for the collection of a nominal fee to cover estimated cost.

FEE CONSIDERATION

AN INCLUSIVE FEE COVERS YEARLY COST OR GROUP DURATION.

Benefits: One fee covers all costs associated with entire group process. Encourages commitment.

Challenges: May be cost prohibitive in one lump sum. Some may not want to make that long a commitment.

INDIVIDUAL MEETING FEE

Benefits: Cost associated with each meeting easier to pay. People can buy the process one meeting at a time.

Challenges: Having to take this time out each meeting to collect can be a distraction.

MAKING IT A CONTRIBUTION RATHER THAN A SET FEE

Benefits: This gives the greatest flexibility. People give as they see worth, according to their capability.

Challenges: May not cover costs.

VOLUNTEERS

Speaking of volunteers—recognize that the group experience you are helping to create can be one where you may want to carry a large share of the load to organize and facilitate, or, you may want to invite others into the process. There are some good reasons to consider both. While our

objective is to create a sense of community in all settings, this can be achieved or be broken down by the involvement or non-involvement of others in the “running” of the programs. Review the following as a way to consider the value and challenges of different approaches. Keep in mind that volunteers here may mean everything from those bringing refreshments or taking care of communication to facilitating group work. A lot will depend on the size of the group and the subject matter.

LEVEL OF VOLUNTEER PARTICIPATION

A LARGE PART IN PROCESS

Benefits: Sense of ownership and commitment. Can build community. More democratic approach.

Challenges: Difficult to organize. Sense of ownership can lead to greater and greater conflict if everything needs to be decided by consensus. You may lose “creative license.” May lack true expertise where needed. May lose original purpose and focus. If sharing the role of facilitator, all may not be effective at this, which can lead to disinterest on the part of participants.

A ROLE TO PLAY BUT ONE THAT DOES NOT REQUIRE A MAJOR TIME COMMITMENT

Benefits: Some involvement can lead to greater commitment to the process. Creates a sense of belonging.

Challenges: People are often so busy. You may spend more time following up on volunteers.

LITTLE TO NO RESPONSIBILITY FOR THE PROCESS

Benefits: You relieve others of another “to do.” You free them up to concentrate on the experience rather than the administration. Allows you to use your creative process.

Challenges: You may take on too large a project for one person. You may become so caught up in the administration that you are less present for the experience yourself.

SUSTAINING ENTHUSIASM AND COMMITMENT OVER TIME

It may be your experience, as it has been ours, that transformational group experiences are powerful and can be deeply rewarding and community-building. Over time people bond, bring their very best to the experience, grow, learn and discover. You may also find that over time the group takes on a certain form, a certain rhythm. Whereas you may have started out with a rather large turnout of individuals, the group may now have honed itself into a

smaller group of “regulars.”

Whatever your experience and however it plays out, it is important to recognize that people tend to get stale with the predictable. You will want to consider elements you can introduce to “keep the dream alive,” bring fresh perspective and inject a little of the unpredictable into the experience. Here are some things you and group members might try over time:

- Bring in occasional guest speakers on the topic you are exploring.
- Hold an occasional meeting in a different setting.
- Create a “social event” that may be different from your regular group process, perhaps a special dinner at a restaurant, or an outing to a special musical presentation.
- Have a time set aside when people can share how they are applying what they are learning, outside of the group experience. Testimonials can be a powerful motivation for others.
- Create a monthly or quarterly newsletter which includes articles related to your topic. Include works written by participants, book reviews, summaries of previous meetings.
- Perhaps the group can develop a special outreach project to impact others not in the group, something that would express and demonstrate the theme of the learnings.
- Choose to not limit yourself to just one experience or topic. Select related, complementary topics. Some can be active experiences, others more intellectual or introspective. Experiment with various formats for delivering the learning as described in this guide.
- Adults learn in many forms—visual, auditory, participatory, quiet reflection. Mix the medium by which a topic or experience is presented.
- Take an occasional break—perhaps a month off in the summer.
- Recognize when a group experience may have served its purpose and it may be time to move on.
- If you are the principal facilitator, invite others that you recognize as natural leaders to begin to lend support in this role.

USE OF GAMES, EXERCISES, JOURNALIZING AND ROLE PLAY AS A LEARNING PROCESS

Consider exploring your topic in a format that differs from the more traditional discussion group. Creating games to illustrate points can be a fun learning medium.

For example, if your topic is *Simplicity*, perhaps you might develop a game where participants go on a “scavenger hunt” to see how many messages we receive every day to buy something. Teams would go out and take notes of what they see within a 5-block radius (i.e., trash, billboards, bumper stickers, storefront signs, etc.). If the subject is *Practicing Random Acts of Kindness*, perhaps everyone could leave the group for a half an hour and find a way to and deliver a random act of kindness and report back! If your topic is *Parenting*, perhaps you could Role Play typical and particularly challenging situations with your children. If your subject is the environment, perhaps small groups could write a “scenario” about how the world could be, or a futuristic newspaper headline about what they would like to read in a newspaper 50 years from now!

USE CREATIVITY

You can create a crossword puzzle or quiz in which small groups look up answers from the text they are reading. For example, this might be a good format for learning about some of the elements of *Religions of the World*.

Physical games can sometimes illustrate community or teamwork. The approaches are as limitless as your own imagination! Don’t be afraid to experiment. Perhaps a way to illustrate *Life Purpose* would be to have a kind of “show and tell” in which you ask participants to bring a physical object that they could use as a way to represent their purpose in life!

You might ask the group to compose a song to express their joy for living! You might write a case study (a hypothetical story). Participants read this case study and discuss how they might best manage the situation if they were the people in the story. Next, of course, they discuss how this case study may be similar to their own lives. This approach could be helpful for any exploration of stress. If you were exploring the subject of creativity, perhaps you could supply everyone with crayons, construction paper, glitter, glue, etc., and people would play with developing creative ideas. If you were leading a program on *Life Changes/Passages*, people could cut out pictures and create a collage representing stages in their life process.

LINK GAMES AND EXERCISES DIRECTLY BACK TO THE SUBJECT

Of course, all these ideas and any other games and exercises should always stay focused on the subject. As the facilitator, you want to link the experience, game, etc., to the subject and the key learning points. Lead a discussion following the exercise to develop the meaning of the experience.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

YOU NOW HAVE A GROUP. HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT CHOOSING A TOPIC?

HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT MAKING A CHOICE?

As the leader and organizer of the group, you probably have your own ideas and interests. You may choose to structure the group and attract participants based upon a particular interest that you have, or you can let the group as a whole decide the topic.

If you decide to start the group with a particular topic of your own choosing, let others know during your recruiting work:

1. What the topic will be,
2. Whether you intend to change the topic after a certain period of time, and
3. Whether you intend to have the group stay with that topic for the duration of the group. You may also let new group members know roughly how much group time you intend to set aside for active experiences, and how much for discussion.

If you have the group choose the topic, encourage potential participants to be thinking of topic choices before the first meeting. If you are screening your group, or have contact with each potential member before the first meeting, you may also send them a list of potential topics (see below) that they can think about beforehand. Make sure to let them know that the list is by no means exhaustive, and that they are free to add new ideas at the first meeting.

At your first get-together, after you have spent some time getting to know each other, have a “round robin” on possible topics. Let each person have a chance to speak about what they’d like from the group, and what topics they might be interested in. You may also have a brainstorming session after the round robin, where people are free to brainstorm other ideas without censorship. Make sure to have a volunteer who would be willing to write down what everyone suggests, so that you have a written record of all ideas.

You may find that your group has a rough consensus of a choice of topic or topics after the round robin. If, however, you are faced with a wide variety of choices, as you probably will be, you have several options on how to proceed.

- If you are facing a long list of potential topics, you may take a brief straw poll of first choices by show of hands and narrow the potential topics down to five or so. Open the floor up for discussion of each one; allow the person who suggested the topic to talk briefly about why that topic is of

personal interest, and why it might be of interest for the whole group.

- Have each participant respond, either internally or in discussion, to any of the following questions:
Which topic might my heart choose, and why?
Which topic might my mind choose, and why?
Which topic might my soul choose, and why?
Which topic is most exciting for me? Which is the most anxiety-provoking?
Which topic offers the most potential for my own transformation?

- You may then simply vote, by hand or ballot, on which topic the group would like to start with.

- Instead of a simple vote, you can have everyone write their first three choices on a slip of paper. Have them rank each one by number of points: 3 points for first choice, 2 for second, 1 for third. Tally the points and proceed from there.

- If there is no clear winner, narrow the topics down to the three most voted-upon. Have group members reflect on the questions above once more, and vote once again.

HOW MUCH TIME TO SPEND ON EACH TOPIC?

Another important point to decide is the length of time spent on each topic.

- You may find that you have a group that wants to spend an indefinite amount of time on a particular topic, thereby becoming a group more or less dedicated to studying that subject. This topic could be a subject for study or experiential work, such as dream work; it could also be a practice, for instance a meditation group or a tai chi group.

- Most groups, however, will want to explore different subjects over time. Decide as a group how long you wish to spend on a particular topic before going to the next choice.

- One option is to set a certain number of meetings for a particular topic.

- Another option is to change topics after the study of a particular book or books on a subject.

- A third option is to set a certain amount of time on a particular subject, with an evaluation and vote of whether to continue on that topic or proceed to the next when the given amount of time has passed.

STRUCTURING THE TOPIC

Once you have decided upon your first topic, how do you proceed? You have a variety of options, depending upon the temperament of your group and the subject chosen. You may either decide to structure the topic yourself, or have the group decide how to structure the topic that they have chosen.

BOOKS AS A TOOL FOR STRUCTURE

- If you are reading a book, you can decide how many chapters you cover each meeting.
- Sometimes, books contain exercises or questions after each chapter or section that are suitable for group work.
- Single articles lend themselves well to single meetings.

VIDEO AND AUDIOTAPES AS TOOLS FOR STRUCTURE

- You may choose to watch a videotape or series of tapes, or listen to a single or set of audiotapes, after which there could be general discussion.

SPEAKERS AS A TOOL FOR STRUCTURE

- You may decide to invite a speaker to talk about his or her area of expertise within your chosen topic, concluding with a question and answer session. You could also have that same speaker, depending upon the speaker's level of expertise, lead your group through a series of exercises, concluding with sharing.

USING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AS A STRUCTURING TOOL

- Questions can be generated for discussion, and more personal questions for sharing. For instance, if you have a group meeting on prayer, a discussion question might be, "What do you think are the strengths and weaknesses of praying for something specific vs. 'Thy will be done'?" For a more personal sharing question, you might ask the group, "What has been your most powerful personal experience of prayer? Why?"
- The leader may prepare before each meeting a set of questions to be discussed.
- Each member of the group might be asked to come with one question on the topic they wish to have discussed.

ASKING MEMBERS TO STRUCTURE MEETING

- If a member of the group has personal experience or expertise on the topic, he or she may wish to structure and/or lead the meetings on that topic. For instance, if your group is studying near-death experiences and a member of your group has had such an experience, you can have a session in which that member shares his or her experience

and what it meant, with time for group members to ask questions at the end.

EXPLORING TOPICS

You have two broad ways to approach your topic, with the freedom to mix the approaches.

- You can take a discussion approach. With this approach, you can read and share information, discuss/debate alternative viewpoints of a subject, and share personal viewpoints and perspectives.
- You can take an experiential approach. This can take many forms. You can experiment with guided imagery; work with art materials; play experiential games; pray or do dreamwork together; meditate; do tai chi or Qigong.

If you are leading your group with your own choice of topic, be clear with your group as you begin what relative percentage of the group time will be spent with discussion of the topic, and what percentage will be spent doing experiential work. Different groups have different needs, histories of group work, and trust levels; be sensitive, even if you pick the topic yourself, to the needs of your particular group.

If your group is generating its own topic, it is important to get consensus from the group, before you begin, about the relative importance members wish to place on intellectual discussion of a topic vs. experiential exercises and sharing. Some groups may decide to focus almost exclusively on one or the other; other groups may decide on a relative percentage of the time spent in each area. Make sure you get a consensus here; you may have participants who feel very strongly about this. It is important for all to be heard, and for either a workable compromise to be made, or to be clear as to the direction of the group so that members may make a choice whether or not to continue, given the format.

Remember that you can explore any combination of both that you wish, and the relative percentages of each can change over time as your group process deepens or according to topics you subsequently choose. In the following sections, the strengths and pitfalls of each format are laid out so that you can consider both.

DISCUSSION FORMAT

This is the traditional format of idea groups. Discussion groups can stimulate a wonderful free flow of ideas. They can be an opportunity to learn new material and to learn from each others as well. Discussion groups can be a safe place to start from if you are new at leading groups, or if your members are hesitant to move into more personal or experiential work.

The potential drawbacks of discussion groups are twofold. First, they can become dry and too “heady.” It is your job as group leader to forestall this, either by asking members to share more of their own personal experiences with the topic, or to include experiential work to deepen the format. The second pitfall of pure discussion groups is that they can become diffused and too freewheeling. Again, it is your job as group leader to keep the group focused.

EXPERIENTIAL FORMAT

You may also explore your topic in a format that differs from more traditional discussion groups. Creating games and experiential exercises around your topic can deepen the group process and open participants up to deeper levels of their own psychological and spiritual selves.

There are, as in the discussion format, several drawbacks for you as group leader to be aware of. First, there may be those in the group who are reluctant to work experientially. It is your job as facilitator to create as much of an atmosphere of trust and emotional openness as possible; this will go a long way towards helping others with their fears of working experientially. You can also give participants permission, always, to participate in experiential exercises only to the extent that they feel safe. Giving participants this permission, ironically, often frees them to go deeper. If a group member declines to work experientially, please respect that. Most of us know our own limits; the more that you as group leader can respect others’ limits, the freer the participants will be to move beyond them, in their own time and in their own way.

The second possible pitfall of working experientially is that it may open participants up to intense and deeply felt emotions at times. This in itself is not a drawback; it is one of the great gifts of working experientially. However, you as leader must be prepared for this possibility, and be comfortable working with the proper balance of containing and encouraging strong feelings and experiences as they arise.

If you and your group decided to work experientially, there are many ways you can go about doing this.

- If you are skilled at leading visualizations, you can create guided imagery for your group. Many books now contain visualizations; you can read them, or pre-record them if you wish to take part. In addition, there are many guided imagery tapes available on a wide variety of subjects.
- Art, craft and clay projects lend themselves to a variety of topics. Remember to stress to group members that these projects are not about being “artistic”; they are about manifesting externally the ideas, images and feelings that are connected to different topics. For instance, after a medita-

tion on forgiveness where you have asked for a symbol of an open and forgiving heart, you can have the group spend some time drawing or sculpting the symbol, and sharing both the symbol, and what the process evoked for them, afterwards.

After you and your group participate in an experiential exercise, give members a chance to digest their own experiences. You can set aside some time for members to record their experiences (in more or less detail, according to need and time constrictions) in a journal, perhaps playing some reflective music in the background. Afterwards, give time as a group for people to share their experiences and what they learned.

When you design your own games and exercises, make sure they stay focused on your topic. Use your own creativity! The approaches are as limitless as your own imagination.

RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC

There are many ways to research a topic.

- Think about books, tapes and videos that have had an effect on you. Ask friends for recommendations.
- If you have a book you like on the subject, look in the back for recommended further reading on the topic. Appendices in books often list tapes and videos, as well as national organizations that could help you find more information to create experiential exercises concerning your topic.
- Call a local expert on your topic to get recommended reading and viewing from him or her. This can include people who teach classes on your topic, as well as spiritual teachers, rabbis, ministers and psychotherapists.
- Visit your local bookstore and library to ask for staff recommendations.
- Browse through book and audio/video catalogs
- If you can find a local organization that specializes in your topic, ask it for recommendations for books, tapes, and speakers. The organization may also be able to share experiential exercises with you around the topic.
- Browse through back issues of personal/spiritual growth magazines at your library. Not only do articles contain valuable ideas, they often have recommended reading lists and sidebars with suggested exercises. You can write to magazines and request information on back issues with pertinent articles.

Whatever topic you or your group pick, allow yourself to open fully to the adventure it can bring you. Groups are synergistic: instead of $1+1+1=3$, the equation of a group of

individuals coming together to learn and grow might look like 1+1+1=the sky's the limit! Be open to inspiration, creativity, and new directions as you proceed. Your group can bring you and its other members gifts of grace, healing, and transformation. Congratulations! You are taking a step that can serve to bring joy, hope and personal transformation to others, and, in turn, you will find the same for yourself! Hosting a community group, whether it be small or large in number, is a BIG gift. It is a commitment to love in action.

There are numerous approaches you and other "founders" may want to consider in structuring your group and in defining the subject material and process. You will also need to consider how best to facilitate actual group interaction and what it will take to sustain interest over time. This guide will help you sift through options. It is a guide only. Use your own intuitive wisdom as you consider what you read here. These are considerations that may appear to be secondary to the heart's intentions; however, it is prudent to consider the practical aspects of group process. You have most likely had the experience of attending a well-intentioned gathering which failed to create the dynamics for transformational experiences. Reasons may include such aspects as too little structure, poorly facilitated, uncomfortable environment, no clear purpose, etc., etc. The purpose of this guide is to help you borrow on the experience of others and avoid some of these all too common pitfalls in group work and community building.

TASKS OF THE FACILITATOR

Whether novice facilitators or seasoned professionals, many of us feel the need to vary somewhat from our natural, everyday traits in order to effectively assume a leadership role. There is wisdom in that impulse. Each position in a group is often best served by its members allowing certain personal characteristics to come forward and letting others drop to the background from time to time. But the aspects of ourselves which count the most toward successfully guiding a gathering are not always the most obvious, nor those most readily fine-tuned.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE FACILITATOR

Understanding the task at hand is a good starting point toward identifying and mastering the various keys which experience has shown are most likely to unlock the gifts and mysteries each unique group has to share. One of the facilitator's most important roles is to consistently maintain an overview of the group and its dynamics as a whole. Modeling a quality of genuine and attentive listening is the talent and practice of a wise leader. And gently guiding the

group in the direction of its mutually agreed-upon goals, by way of well-placed questions, timely summaries and close monitoring of the group's need for moderation or stimulation, is the leader's key task.

Numerous tools and methods have proven themselves as valuable contributions toward the management of a group. But just as a carpenter doesn't pull all the tools from his box at once, not all of the suggestions here will be appropriate to employ for every group or gathering. Discernment, however, should be practiced each time. Which words or means to employ in any unique situation the leader might encounter is one of many choices and decisions that will eventually enhance or diminish the group experience. The importance of watching and listening carefully cannot be overemphasized. For that reason, plenty of space will be devoted here to assessing and honing the facilitator's skills in discerning what to do or say, and when it's best to do nothing at all. First, though, get the framework in place.

MAKE YOUR GATHERINGS WARM AND FRIENDLY

Since the gathering is based on mutual readiness and desire for companionship or sharing of some kind, setting a warm and congenial tone right from the start will invite the group members to relax, and will become a first step toward the possibility of deep bonding. How a friendly tone can be created is limited only by the willingness of the facilitator to be open, warm or humorous in whatever way seems appropriate to the moment. Often a gesture, remark or personal observation which arises quite spontaneously in response to the assembling process itself will prove to be more of an ice-breaker than any well-planned scheme or joke could ever be. Be inclusive; address your initial remarks to everyone present, with broad, sweeping glances around the group that carry a smile of welcome.

SET GROUND RULES TOGETHER AND ESTABLISH GROUP NORMS

Some basic rules of what is acceptable group behavior and what cannot be tolerated apply to the majority of groups; others can be omitted or chosen to meet the particular needs your group may express or anticipate. These are suggestions which reflect what many groups have found helpful in creating a safe sharing and learning environment.

- All members of the group are invited and encouraged to enjoy free expression of their views, opinions and beliefs. Honesty is expected and members will respect the views of others.
- Opposite ideas, different opinions and conflict-

ing viewpoints are all acceptable means of broadening the group members' understanding of a concept or issue.

- Criticizing a member personally, rudely discounting an opinion, or in any other way challenging another members right to expression will not be tolerated.
- In presenting thoughts or feelings to the group, members will endeavor to use "I" statements whenever possible. For example, "I feel uncomfortable with any type of exclusivity, because I prefer a wide open and universal approach," versus "You sound as if you think that beginners aren't worthy of joining your meditation circle."
- Though participation by all is strongly encouraged for the benefit of the group as a whole, members retain the right to participate or not in any discussion or experiential exercise as they choose, with no pressure or demands from other group members.
- Members are asked to take responsibility for monitoring the appropriateness of their own level of contribution. Those who tend to speak up very frequently or at length may be asked by the facilitator to refrain from doing so until all others who wish to be heard have had equal opportunity.
- Side discussions are disruptive and therefore discouraged; respect and consideration for the member who is speaking at any given time are requested in advance. Save any pertinent remarks for a full-group hearing; keep other conversation for a break or after the meeting.
- Once the gathering has commenced, any major variation from the agreed-upon format, agenda, exercises, meditations or topic of a certain meeting will be cleared with the group for consensus before continuing in the new direction.
- Gatherings will begin and end on time, and members are expected to respect one another by being punctual. The group may decide on any acceptable leeway.
- The facilitator will act as a guide who maintains a neutral stance, and will endeavor to keep the group proceeding "on track" and observing the ground rules.

Group norms allow each individual to have some sense of what to expect, at least logistically, at the gatherings. These simple decisions are best arrived at as a group, rather than imposed by the facilitator or an organizer. Writing them on a posterboard, flip-chart or any other easily visible sign as the group members offer input and suggestions will

ensure that everyone sees and remembers which norms have been established. Examples might include:

- There will be a break mid-way through each gathering, for fifteen minutes.
- What is shared in the room, stays in the room. Everything said and heard is confidential.
- A list of telephone numbers will be provided to each member for their exclusive use in contacting other members between gatherings. Members may choose not to have their numbers included on the list, by advising the organizer.

Norms are specific and personal to each group, depending on a number of variables. If the group will be meditating together regularly, for instance, it will be necessary to find out who will be comfortable sitting in a circle on the floor, and who might require a chair instead. Various considerations, from personal boundary issues to physical limitations, might have an impact on how the group's norms are set out. The important thing is that participants deserve to know what to expect and what is expected of them, and there is no need for logistical guesswork.

Note: If a specific issue, such as confidentiality or anonymity, arises as particularly important to certain or all members, it might be better to include it in the ground rules, for greater emphasis.

THE FACILITATOR AS MANAGER

Once the framework has been established, the facilitator's attention turns to guiding and directing the gatherings. There are myriad possibilities for management style, depending on the type of group and the specific goals it has laid out. A group whose focus is primarily on sharing experiential exercises or meditations will require a type of facilitation quite different from that which is helpful for a discussion, reading or study group focusing on specific written material, videos or recorded audio presentations. The following considerations apply equally to both, as they are aimed toward fostering connection, learning and growth for all concerned. The facilitator who embraces these principles and suggestions will be well-equipped for encouraging the kind of depth, vulnerability and trust that eventually helps to build a true sense of community.

KEEP AN EAR CLOSE TO THE HEART OF THE GROUP

Perhaps nothing matters more than listening, and the more that message can be conveyed, the better the group's chances of growing and moving deeply together. This means listening actively, and to more than just the sound of voices. The facilitator, especially, can increase effectiveness

by watching body language, for example. If the energy level seems to be lagging, or side discussions are being whispered, check for a general increase in slouching postures, yawning or sighing. Maybe the group has wandered way off track; it could be time for an impromptu break or stretch; have you, or someone else, been doing most of the talking? Listen, also, to the sensations in your own body. If your stomach has tightened into a knot, or your breathing has become shallow and rapid, perhaps others are feeling an increase in tension too. Monitor the ebb and flow of heightened conflict or passive agreement. Steer the group back toward a gentler ambiance when that seems necessary, or add fuel to the fire if your intuition tells you that an injection of energy is overdue.

BE CAREFUL NOT TO READ YOUR OWN EXPERIENCE AS THE GROUP'S EXPERIENCE

An important word of caution is in order: The best facilitators in a group devoted to personal or spiritual growth work, in particular, practice to become adept at recognizing and acknowledging their own current personal, emotional and psychological factors that might have an influence on their perceptions, reactions and interpretations pertaining to the group climate at any given time. Without having honestly checked-out their own internal state of affairs prior to each gathering, facilitators can easily go astray in monitoring the status of the group, mistaking a personal issue for something universal. Regularly listening to oneself is as important as attending to the movement of the group.

RELAX, BUT REMAIN ALERT

A final note on listening is that the process need not be tiringly intense or sharp-focused. In fact, learning to listen from a relaxed yet alert stance will provide more information, and at greater depth, than attempting to catch and analyze every little nuance throughout a gathering. It might be helpful to relate to the image of a pilot scanning the sky off to the sides of an airplane rather than just staring straight ahead and having limited peripheral vision. Or think of an elegant dinner hostess keeping abreast of how all her guests are faring, watching and listening for any unfulfilled needs, yet remaining relaxed enough to enjoy her own party. The facilitator should be attuned to the sound of the group heartbeat with a natural ear, not the scientific scrutiny of a stethoscope.

AIM FOR EXCELLENCE DON'T EXPECT PERFECTION

Strive to model an exemplary quality of attentive, sincere and careful listening. If your attention wanders off

repeatedly, you will not be able to direct the discussion nearly as well as you could if you were following each turn and new development. Imagine a bus driver checking the road only occasionally; keep the passengers on your voyage of discovery in safe and capable hands. The stakes might not seem terribly high in a study group, perhaps somewhat more so in an experiential process. Nonetheless, when you have been entrusted with assuming an important position in the group, performing your task with integrity will offer greater growth potential to both you and the other members.

USE RITUALS TO ESTABLISH UNITY & FOCUS

From officials calling a courtroom to order, all the way to a child saying grace at the family table, rituals effectively signal the beginning or end of a process or occasion. Even when a ritual might seem archaic or redundant, such as the opening and closing of a heavy red curtain, behind which there is nothing more than a flat movie screen in a theater, it still serves as a ceremonial signal. A group facilitator can employ various kinds of ritual to nurture the development of community spirit, and to delineate the boundaries of a gathering, thereby creating a greater sense of intimacy.

Which specific kinds of ritual are most appropriate for a particular group will depend on a number of considerations. What is the group working to accomplish? Are there certain practices and beliefs common to all the members? Is the meeting place permanent and readily conducive to setting up for elaborate ceremonies, or should any ritual be kept simple and easily portable?

More important than the content or trappings of any ritual, however, is being clear as to what purpose it will serve. Do you want the sounding of a chime just to indicate that the group is ready to start a discussion? Or is there a desire to consecrate the gathering, to symbolically indicate the group's heartfelt intention to create and enter sacred space together?

TAILOR RITUALS TO SUIT THE OCCASION

A minute of silence, as the group joins hands in a circle at the start of each gathering, could be dedicated to connecting with each other and remembering what has brought you together in the first place. A prayer, affirmation or dedication could be spoken by a different group member each time you begin a session. Taking a few deep breaths together, letting go of the stress of the day, could become a group ritual in itself. Simply lighting a candle is a lovely way to mark the start of a gathering.

In another form of ritual, the facilitator might pose a question at the start of a gathering to consolidate the group

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES SHARED OR ROTATING LEADERSHIP

and short-circuit any possible hindrances to an enriching experience for everyone. For example, asking, “Would any members like to share anything that is happening in their life right now which might make it difficult for them to be fully present at this gathering?” or “Before we get started, are there any concerns left over from last time that should be brought out into the open?” could provide an important arena for exposing impediments to the growth of the group as a whole. Care must be taken, however, to avoid creating a ritual of non-productive venting that could sideline the progress of the gathering. This is one of the places where the facilitator’s discernment is key. Unless there is a sense that the group is accumulating a lot of “unfinished business,” this type of ritual is better reserved for use as an occasional check.

Generally, rituals are best kept short, simple, and more heart-centered than intellectually-focused. Choosing and creating rituals as a group is strongly recommended, as that shared creative process often results in highly imaginative, personal and meaningful rituals which embody the spirit and energy of the collective participants right from the start.

Aside from signaling beginnings, rituals are naturally suited to marking endings and important occasions as well. The manner in which a group disbands at the end of each gathering can help the sense of sharing and growing to carry over from session to session. And creating a group ritual to assist a member in dealing with loss, or to heighten the joy of a member’s occasion for celebration, are other valuable ways to expand upon the group’s ability to engage with and respond to one another on many levels. Ritual is one more way of uniting through shared experience.

SHOW THE GROUP THAT YOU’RE HUMAN

Sometimes even those with plenty of experience in leading groups can fail to genuinely and deeply connect because they get caught up in speaking and relating *to* the group, instead of *with* them. A facilitator who goes in as an authority figure and remains detached, defended or closed at the heart level will have trouble eliciting true response from a group, and will limit the possibilities of the gathering. Inexperienced facilitators can take advantage of any nervousness or anxiety over their ability to fulfill the role expected of them, by candidly admitting to the group right at the beginning that they are experiencing those feelings, and asking for the group’s patience and support. Two valuable precedents will be set right away in the process: there is room for all honest expression of feelings in the group, and it’s fine to ask for support when you need it.

In some cases, it may be desirable to divide responsibilities for facilitation among various members of the group. If the group founder has a busy and demanding family life or career, for example, he or she may wish to start out as facilitator, and then share that role with others once the group is well-established. Some groups will be rich with members who would welcome the opportunity to develop and practice leadership skills, while others will be comprised mainly of those who prefer not to partake in facilitation at all.

Opening up discussion around this issue at one of the initial meetings will bring to light the preferences and skills of each particular group. Members can be divided into pairs who will meet ahead of time and prepare for co-leadership responsibilities at certain pre-determined gatherings. Or counting-off in whatever numbering system is appropriate to the size of the group can provide a framework and schedule for each member to take a turn at leading the group for one meeting.

Since there are numerous ways of logistically arranging for shared or rotating leadership, the process itself can be a valuable exercise for the establishment of a collaborative and cooperative atmosphere in the group. All of the principles and suggestions outlined here for the facilitator apply to any configuration of members assuming that task.

GUIDING DISCUSSION GROUPS

DEFINE YOUR ROLE

Make it clear from the start that you are not the group expert, nor will you be the ultimate judge or arbiter of any discussion. Briefly explain your role as moderator and guide. Encourage participants to direct their comments and questions to their fellow group members, rather than to you. Remind them from time to time, and emphasize that this will help to create meaningful dialogue for the whole group.

If some people still tend to look directly at you each time they begin to speak, one option is to avert your gaze after a few minutes so that they will quite automatically direct their words to another member.

BE PREPARED

Arrive well-prepared, by familiarizing yourself with the material thoroughly beforehand. Although constantly referring to notes will create a stifled and unnatural opening, jotting down a few key points that you want to remember to highlight can help you to kick-off the discussion. Have questions ready to keep the discussion moving. Anticipate and consider some of the directions in which the group might move with the material, and prepare questions to coax out any subtle possibilities you recognize or find intriguing yourself.

SUMMARIZE THE PREVIOUS MEETING

Usually it will be appropriate to have some sort of review of the material at the beginning of the gathering. On rare occasions when there is a consensus that each person present has referred to the subject material recently or repeatedly, the group could decide to dispense with a recap and launch right into discussion. Otherwise, reading a passage from a book being considered, watching a portion of a video, or listening together to part of an audio presentation chosen as the topic of discussion, will refresh everyone's memory and give those who didn't manage to review the material beforehand an opportunity to participate nonetheless. Keep the quantity of subject matter chosen for each session down to an easily manageable amount, so that a lengthy review isn't necessary to provide comprehensive exposure when the time comes to discuss it.

DARE TO ASK TOUGH QUESTIONS

Introduce possible lines of thought that challenge members to move beyond the obvious or popular viewpoints. Avoid asking "closed" questions—the kind that are satisfied by a simple "yes" or "no" answer. Refer to the suggestions listed below for some ideas, but strive to come up with your own original ways of querying effectively, too.

SUMMARIZE, HIGHLIGHT AND REINFORCE LEARNING POINTS

Every so often during a gathering, find an opportunity to summarize and reflect back to the group some of the main ideas and contentions that have surfaced. Sometimes the discussion will take an interesting turn when the group looks again at what has come up so far, and notices an absence of balance or a pertinent omission.

In the process of recapitulating, if you sense something which the group seems to be overlooking, raise the point yourself, then sit back and let the group work with it.

MANAGE TIME AND TANGENTS

As facilitator, you are like the captain at the helm of a ship; it's your job to keep the group moving close to the course set out, not veering too far off in any other direction. Use your discernment as to when venturing into new territory is actually enhancing the experience, and when the discussion is simply drifting off its intended course.

PAY ATTENTION TO BALANCING PARTICIPATION

One of your key functions is to make sure that every group member has the opportunity to speak, and that contributions to the discussion are balanced. Dominant personalities can make it difficult for shy or naturally quiet participants to find openings. The facilitator is expected to suggest that those who have spoken more often make a point of allowing space for the others to have their fair say, and to interrupt if anyone persists in dominating the discussion. Of equal importance is occasionally encouraging and inviting the opinions of those who seem hesitant to offer them, without undue pressure or putting anyone "on the spot." Even if some group members seem terribly shy or reluctant to share their views, their attendance at the gathering indicates a wish to participate to some degree, so the facilitator shouldn't hesitate to gently draw them out.

LET SILENCE BE A FRIEND

Periods of silence are not necessarily indications of trouble or failure on the part of the facilitator. Sometimes people need time to consider, before offering an opinion or answering a question, and there should be no panic or pressure for an immediate response. Be careful not to assume that a question you have posed requires further elaboration or reiteration just because nobody immediately speaks up. It will only confuse the issue if you start piling on more details or rewording the question. If you feel impatient or uneasy, take a few deep belly breaths, or resolve to do whatever inner work might help you to be more comfortable with a little silence in a group. Participants will appreciate the sense of having time to form their thoughts before sharing them.

MODERATE YOUR OWN ROLE

For the most part, keep your opinions to yourself while you are serving as facilitator. This doesn't mean you can't participate at all in discussions; in fact you play a vital role. However, it is important to realize that your position in the group automatically carries a certain status or power. Any values you strongly express or support could carry disproportionate weight, thereby skewing the discussion, and reducing your ability to again present a neutral stance.

Straying too far from a neutral position also puts you at risk of becoming aligned with one faction of a group divided on a particular point, which leaves the other side in an awkward position.

MANAGE CONFLICT: THERE'S NO NEED TO PANIC

Don't shy away or get upset when conflict arises; it is a natural and often productive part of discussion and study groups. Just moderate carefully to help keep conflict closely focused on the issue up for discussion. Be on the alert for and bring to a halt any personal attacks being launched under the guise of free speech. All opinions are welcome; none are excuses for nastiness or disrespect, however subtle it might be. In addressing the offender, learn to use terms like "inappropriate," "off-topic," and "not in keeping with our purpose here;" rather than "unfair," "cruel," or "out of line," which might only increase discomfort and inflame the situation further. Direct the focus back to the original topic of discussion, or call a short break if you sense that the group needs a cooling-off period. Be aware of any "charge" or residue among group members after a particularly heated discussion, but trust that aftereffects might not necessarily be negative; the group could actually be moving toward feeling greater safety and freedom in expressing unpopular or difficult views.

BECOMING ADEPT AT ASKING QUESTIONS

In the facilitator's tool kit, questions act as propellers and probes; they can be used to increase momentum and to reach greater depth. They can be directed specifically to one member of the group or another to encourage participation when that seems prudent, and they can be timed skillfully to create a lively exchange of energy. Bear in mind that the goal of a discussion group is not to reach consensus, but to learn and explore together in ways which increase and enhance everyone's understanding.

Questions which you have formulated on your own are often the most comfortable to use and easiest to remember. Still, having an array of suggestions at hand is useful when you are starting out, when you feel stuck, or when your own attempts don't seem to be drawing out the level of participation you had anticipated. The following ideas are listed randomly, to be employed when and if the time seems right. Your own variations on the structure and wording will probably evolve quite naturally.

SOME SUGGESTED QUESTIONS

- What differences in values do you suppose could be at the heart of these opposing viewpoints?

- Is there anything we may have neglected to consider here?
- Are any of you noticing links or commonalities in what some of your fellow members have put forth? What key themes are we hearing?
- What type of strong feelings does discussion of this topic trigger for anyone?
- How might you make your point in terms simple enough for a child to grasp?
- What do you believe is the crux of the matter?
- Can we allow space for the possibility that what she/he is saying could be true?
- Of all that we have considered so far, what most disturbs or concerns you?
- Are there questions left unanswered in your mind at this point?
- What might be keeping us from deepening this discussion?
- Can anyone offer an image that may help to clarify what we are trying to describe here?
- Is there something you'd like to share with us that you've realized just now?
- Does anyone want to challenge that assertion, or support it?
- If you have shifted from your original position on this subject, in light of what others have just shared, can you tell us more about that?
- Could you briefly give us a hypothetical case, or an example from your own life, that would perhaps illustrate your point?
- Is there more anyone wants to say about that?
- What do you find most exciting of all that we've explored today?
- How might you begin to integrate something new from this gathering into your daily life?

A further note to the facilitator on second-questions versus second-guessing.

There is a method of further questioning that can prove extremely helpful in deepening understanding, or "peeling back the layers of the onion" when a group member has just answered a question. The idea is to ask a second or clarifying question which is directly related to what the person has just said, rather than assuming that you and the group have accurately understood the meaning of what was shared.

For example, in response to the facilitator's inquiry as to how people are finding the meetings so far, Heidi has just expressed that she was deeply moved by the previous week's gathering. Instead of just letting that remark go by, open to a wide range of interpretations by various members (which would likely represent varying degrees of proximity to what Heidi meant). A second question could invite her

to expand upon how she was moved, or what deeply means to her, or perhaps what exactly it was about the gathering that moved her so. Employed properly, this is not prodding or prying; rather it is a means of expressing genuine interest, and of promoting better understanding among the members of the group.

In a case where the question is more theoretical and the answer offered is more in the nature of an opinion, second questions can help the speaker to bridge the gap between theory and practice. "How does that stance apply directly to the way you interact with your colleagues at work?" is the type of second question that might encourage a group member to think analytically, to problem solve, or to consider alternatives, options and consequences.

Second questions are valuable tools in the facilitator's kit, but should be used with discretion, lest they become tiresome or predictable. If members begin to anticipate the next level of inquiry each time they offer an answer, the process becomes stifled and the purpose is defeated. Once again, discernment, skill and timing will develop and become more natural over time.

MEETING CHALLENGES WITH SOLUTIONS

Facilitators can generally look forward to an enjoyable, enlightening and energizing experience when leading a group which has grown out of the mutual urge to share and commune with others as we expand our horizons and grow further toward our aspirations. However, every gathering has the potential to present challenges. Awareness of effective ways to handle those problems which tend to crop up most often can usually help the facilitator to prevent them from becoming major disruptions to the group or any particular gathering.

Certainly no response or solution is guaranteed to restore balance to every situation. But the following suggestions can act as starting places or ideas to work with. Always let your own common sense, intuition and familiarity with the people involved determine when and how it is most productive to intervene for the good of the group as a whole. Whenever possible, be tender.

THE CHALLENGE :

UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OR SENSITIVE EMOTIONAL ISSUES

It seems that some people in the group have huge expectations or inaccurate preconceptions of what the group will offer them. They ignore stated goals, and try to re-orient the gatherings to their own agenda. Or it becomes increasingly evident that what a person is really seeking, or could benefit from, is group therapy.

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS :

BE GENTLE BUT FIRM

Tread lightly here. Human beings are complex and mysterious, and easily hurt. Still, if the goals of the group have been clearly stated, it is appropriate to let members know when the gatherings are unsuited for or unable to provide them with what they seem to be looking for. Sometimes all that is required is a clarification and review of the group's purpose for gathering, after which participants can re-evaluate any mistaken impressions, and decide whether to respect those guidelines or search for a more compatible group.

KNOW YOUR LIMITS

In the case of individuals whose apparent quest is for a place where they can routinely vent personal grievances, unload the anguish of extreme emotional trauma, or appeal to other members to solve all their problems, great care must be taken to avoid causing further damage. It is especially important to remember that discussions and comments might go beyond what you are qualified to manage or address if you are not a trained therapist, psychologist or psychiatrist. The group has come together for particular purposes, and can't or shouldn't be expected to take on responsibilities outside of those realms. It will be up to you to avoid overstepping your own personal capacities. To begin with, watch and wait. Maybe someone is just having a rough month. Don't let the fear of hurting someone's feelings, or a desire to avoid confrontation, keep you paralyzed in an escalating situation, though, because the group as a whole will suffer, and as facilitator you are expected to act.

FIND THE RIGHT TIME AND PLACE

Choose your time carefully, and try to speak to the individual concerned in private, or with just a few other members present for support. Explain your observations delicately and without judgment, and be ready to provide names and numbers of some local resources which are better suited and equipped than the group to provide appropriate assistance. Be clear that the situation really can't continue as it is, and that together you would like to identify alternatives.

Allow the person time and space to make a decision about leaving the group or trying to attend in a different manner. Don't assume that you will have to ask someone to leave, unless the situation has deteriorated to the point where there is really no alternative. If they express a sincere intention to follow-up on seeking help through the resources you have suggested, it is possible that they could

eventually become better integrated into your group and make unique contributions.

THE CHALLENGE:

CERTAIN PEOPLE MONOPOLIZE TIME

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

MONITOR CAREFULLY, ACT QUICKLY

Address this situation promptly, as soon as you see a pattern clearly developing. If several gentle reminders don't bring about any change in behavior (as is sometimes the case), you will have to be direct, maybe even insistent, to make sure that this imbalance is corrected. You will need words to the effect of: "Glenn, I'm sure you still have more to say, but let's move on to Angela and hear her points as well." Or: "I'll have to interrupt here. It's time to turn over the floor to someone else."

TROUBLESHOOT

If the problem seems destined to repeat itself, you might prevent a build-up of frustration in the group by laying out boundaries shortly after a particular gathering gets underway: "We did hear from you quite a lot last week, Catherine. Tonight let's give the others a chance to catch up."

THE CHALLENGE:

LACK OF PARTICIPATION

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

MAKE TIME FOR ANYONE WHO SEEMS SHY.

If you have already made a point of directing questions or comments their way occasionally, and if making eye contact often to express your awareness of and interest in their presence doesn't seem to make quiet members any more inclined to speak up, try seeking them out individually when the group is not formally in session. Find a couple of minutes at a break, for example, and share something briefly about yourself rather than immediately posing a question to someone who might be almost as shy outside of a circle as they are when a discussion is in progress.

When all else fails, just wait, in faith.

Above all, trust that silent members' reasons for attending and their contributions to the group are bound to reveal themselves in time. Often, admirable facilitating is a matter of creating space and then waiting for a mystery to unfold, rather than forcing or insisting that something spe-

cific should happen.

Remember to observe inwardly, too. What seems like a problematic and frustrating eternity to you could be one of life's rhythms for natural and organic unfoldment. Cultivate patience, and don't presume to know for certain what the most desirable outcome of any gathering might be. When people join together, more is present and possible than any individual could ever imagine.

THE CHALLENGE:

SIDE CONVERSATIONS

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

REFER TO THE GROUND RULES.

If rules established at the outset include an attitude of respect for fellow group members, gentle reminders to that effect should help to curtail outbreaks of side conversation which are disruptive to the group discussion. Should such behavior continue, calling the room to silence can bring the attention of those engaged in a separate conversation to the fact that everyone is affected. Alternatively, inviting those who are talking to one another to share their comments with everyone present might bring out points of dissension or dissatisfaction which are undermining the group as a whole.

THE CHALLENGE:

DISCUSSIONS LOSE FOCUS

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS:

ASSESS THE SITUATION BEFORE INTERVENING.

When a digression from the topic at hand is accompanied by an apparent drop of energy in the group as a whole, the facilitator's task is clearly to steer the discussion back toward the original considerations. Introduce re-focusing remarks along the lines of, "Some interesting points have been raised, but I'd like us to re-orient our discussion now, so that it relates more closely to this evening's subject. Who would like to help get us started in that direction?"

Sometimes, however, the facilitator's most appropriate response is not easy to determine. If the discussion has strayed far from the subject intended for the gathering, it may, on occasion, be that most members find the new direction more compelling, or that the topic originally chosen was too narrow and confining. Rather than just blindly steering the discussion back for the sake of maintaining a stated course, the facilitator should create a pause in which the group can quickly re-assess its goals. If a con-

sensus is reached in favor of the new direction, chances are the group as a whole will be more satisfied than if it had proceeded according to plan.

LET CHANGES OF FOCUS BE THE EXCEPTION, NOT THE RULE

As a rule, participants will arrive prepared to discuss the stated topic, and they shouldn't be expected to accommodate every whim. It will be one of your primary tasks, as facilitator, to keep the discussion lively and focused.

THE SYNERGY OF PRINCIPLES AND PEOPLE

When used in combination, all of the guidelines and principles here will conspire to create an energy and form which has potential for expansion and growth in every direction. Facilitators practicing, refining and increasing their skills for guiding groups, especially those which have formed around common goals for a common good, cannot help but grow themselves in the process.

The many choices, decisions and suggestions that facilitate productive movement in a gathering of individuals can certainly add up to something with a force far greater than just an assembly of time-honored tactics. When carried out with skill and directed by the heart, guiding fellow human beings in the context of a simple gathering will leverage growth in the facilitator as much as in those who benefit from a kind guiding hand.

There is synergy in people joining with one another regularly over a period of time. That very act, alone, invites a reciprocal flow of energy with the potential to enhance and expand the life experience of everyone present. It is a privilege to assist and nurture the currents of change and newness which are flowing in us all. Encourage members of the group to express themselves freely, and discourage them from judging, competing or comparing themselves with one another. In doing so, speak also to yourself. The facilitator in a group may not always know exactly what to do or say, but can never go wrong by acting with integrity and honor. •

Recommended Reading

THREE EXCELLENT BOOKS ON GROUPS

CALLING THE CIRCLE: The First and Future Culture. Christina Baldwin. Swan, Raven Books.

WISDOM CIRCLES: A Guide to Self-Discovery and Community Building in Small Groups.
Charles Garfield, Cindy Spring, And Sedonia Cahill. (February 20, 1998) Hyperion.

GOOD THINGS HAPPEN: Experiencing Community in Small Groups. Dick Westley.
Twenty-Third Publications.

BOOKS AND RESOURCES FROM OUR ADVISORS

JEAN SHINODA BOLEN, M.D.

CROSSING TO AVALON. HarperCollins.

CLOSE TO THE BONE. Scribner Books

GODDESSES IN EVERYWOMAN, HarperCollins.

GODS IN EVERYMAN, HarperCollins.

RING OF POWER, HarperCollins.

THE TAO OF PSYCHOLOGY, HarperCollins.

GAY HENDRICKS, PH.D., KATHLYN HENDRICKS, PH.D.

AT THE SPEED OF LIFE. Bantam Books.

CONSCIOUS LOVING. Bantam Books.

Gay and Kathlyn Hendricks conduct training and workshops. Contact the Hendricks Institute, (800)688-0772.

GAY LUCE

LONGER LIFE, MORE JOY. Newcastle Books.

Gay Luce is the founding director of NINE GATES: A Contemporary Mystery School. (415)927-1677.

MARY MANIN MORRISEY.

BUILDING YOUR FIELD OF DREAMS. Bantam Books.

Mary Manin Morrisey is the founder of the Living Enrichment Center and the Namaste Retreat Center. (800)893-1000.

RICHARD MOSS, M.D.

THE SECOND MIRACLE. Celestial Arts Publishing.

THE I THAT IS WE. Celestial Arts Publishing.*

THE BLACK BUTTERFLY. Celestial Arts Publishing.*

*Contact authors office for these books. (209)642-4090

Richard Moss holds seminars and mentoring groups, contact his office for more information.

WAYNE MULLER

HOW, THEN, SHALL WE LIVE? Bantam Books.

LEGACY OF THE HEART. Simon & Schuster.

BERNIE S. SIEGEL, M.D.

PEACE, LOVE & HEALING: Bodymind Communication & the Path to Self-Healing. Harper & Row Publishers.

LOVE, MEDICINE & MIRACLES. HarperCollins Publishers.

JACQUELYN SMALL

EMBODYING SPIRIT. HarperCollins Publishers.

AWAKENING IN TIME. Bantam Books.

BECOMING A PRACTICAL MYSTIC. HarperCollins.

Jacquelyn Small also holds healing retreats and mystery school groups. Contact Eupsychia for more information. (800)546-2795.

JOHN WELWOOD PH.D.

LOVE AND AWAKENING. HarperCollins Publishers.

JOURNEY OF THE HEART. HarperCollins Publishers.

ORDINARY MAGIC. Shambhala Press.

NOTES

Personal Transformation Group

Wanted: • People experiencing the gifts and challenges of personal and spiritual awakening. • People desiring change, a deepening of their inner and outer journeys, but who are not quite sure how to “do it.” • People eager for a small community where they can experience the power of being fully and compassionately listened to and supported in their life journeys. • People wanting to support others in personal transformation, thereby enriching their own spiritual lives as well.

- *MEET OTHERS* who are also interested in personal transformation. We believe that we were not meant to do this work alone. Even though each of our journeys is unique, there is great power in sharing those journeys, finding inspiration in other’s stories, and supporting each other through the ups and downs of the path.

- *LEARN* how the process of transformation works. Again, even though each of our journeys is unique, there are general road maps for the journey itself. Through reading and discussion of selected materials, you will gain a wider understanding of the gifts and challenges of the transformational journey.

- *EXPERIENCE* how the power of transformational work increases within the support of a caring community. In stage two of this project, you will be able to work experientially in these same groups, with the guidance of trained leaders, exploring creative ways to deepen your personal and spiritual awakening.

FOR MORE INFORMATION CONTACT

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