

PART ONE

Establishing and
re-establishing a group

Groups are formed in a variety of ways: a committee sets up a working party and people volunteer or are invited to join it; an individual decides to set up a group, for example, a youth worker starts a group for young people; a number of people together decide to have regular meetings about justice and peace issues; or a new staff team is formed, and so on.

If you find yourself in this kind of situation, thinking through the points below will enable you to alert people to questions and issues which need to be considered as you plan, recruit, organise, and start a new group. If you are starting from scratch it can be immensely supportive to find someone who will partner you in the enterprise.

I. ESTABLISHING A NEW GROUP

1. Conditions for success

Groups are more likely to get off to a good start if:

- the purpose and underlying philosophy of the group is clear from the start or is clarified early on;
- people join freely and not because they are pressurised to join. They may need to be encouraged and motivated but this is different from exerting undue pressure. People need to be given time to think about joining, possibly experience a few meetings, and decide for themselves whether or not it is for them;
- the practicalities are decided upon together so that they fit the various needs of all the members. It did not help the cause of a woman in South London who wanted to set up a group on ecology when she said ‘the group must meet within walking distance of my home’. Not surprisingly there was a minimal response;
- the way the group is to be run is clarified and agreed from the beginning: some people may want to be in a group where everyone actively participates; others may do so much discussing and deciding at work that they seek a group where they are the recipients in one way or another;
- the life span of the group is clear: it may be for a specific period, to do a specific job, or be indefinite. If the latter, it can be useful to build in a review after so many meetings or months;
- it is clear to what people are and are not committing themselves in terms of frequency of meetings, time, effort, finance, etc.;
- the group sets itself realistic and limited objectives.

2. Recruiting initial members

Where applicable, the way in which a group is recruited effects its ongoing life. The following areas could well be considered.

- *Involving people in the process:* The more people who actively participate, the wider the net is likely to be. However, the approximate size of the group needs to be decided: this and the nature of the group will determine who to involve. A more intimate type of group will not want to attract too many people. Some of the methods outlined on page 29 may be used.
- *Criteria for membership:* The basic criteria may suggest themselves by the nature of the group and include such things as 'interested in, agreed about and committed to x, able and willing to attend meetings regularly', as well as more obvious factors such as age, sex, denomination, skills and abilities, responsibilities, job, qualifications, location, etc. There may be other criteria which refer to the group as a whole, for instance, the balance between the sexes, races, or denominations; a wide variety of complementary skills and abilities; people from different firms, departments, organisations, areas or communities and so on.
- *Publicity:* Any publicity needs to reflect the ethos of the group and state its aims as clearly as possible, thus enabling the self-selection of members. However, you may decide against an open invitation in case it attracts inappropriate people. In either case a personal invitation is likely to be more effective, whether it be in face-to-face conversation, by phone or in a letter.

3. Launching: the first meeting

A new group will not immediately start functioning at full capacity. Time and patience are needed before people settle down, feel at ease with each other, and work out an acceptable *modus vivendi*. One way of describing the early history of a new group is in terms of four overlapping stages through which many groups go:

Forming: Members begin to get to know each other and to see what different people, including themselves, have to contribute to the group.

Storming: People become more familiar and underlying disparities and tensions are liable to surface, as individuals try to establish their place in the group and how they can make a contribution. Differences of opinion, expectations, ideas and assumptions, brought from other groups and situations, have to be worked through.

Norming: Gradually a way of operating as a group becomes generally accepted and agreed.

Performing: The group is now ready to work together and tackle more exacting tasks.

The first meeting is important in getting the group off to a good start. Your own welcoming attitude is key and much of what is written about preparing yourself for a meeting is relevant here (p. 35).

Introductions: Those who arrive for the meeting need to feel not only welcomed by you but at ease with each other. Having an informal cup of coffee as people gather can be helpful. Introductions can be simple or elaborate, serious or hilarious. Choose a method which is in keeping with the subject matter and nature of the meeting; this will set the tone and atmosphere and colour people's expectations. It can be useful for each member to say something by way of introduction, even if it is only their name and where they come from. It helps them to speak again. Or they might be asked to say why they are at the meeting, what attracted them to it, or what they are hoping to get out of it. Unnecessary time may be taken up or people become restless if some members talk for too long. You may prevent this by asking people for 'only two or three sentences'. Alternatively you may suggest people talk to their neighbour and then ask them to introduce each other to the group. If you are able to take longer over the introductions you could ask people informally to spend a couple of minutes talking to every person.

On the other hand, if time is at a premium, it can be useful after the briefest of introductions, to get on with the business of the meeting but early on, ask people to talk in twos or threes in response to a question on what you have been saying. Such early use of buzz groups can help individuals to feel relaxed and involved. The arrival of a latecomer can provide a useful opportunity to get people to repeat their names, and for you to summarise what has been said so far: many people will not have taken everything in and be glad of the repetition (p. 89).

II. RE-ESTABLISHING A GROUP

For a variety of reasons a group may need to be re-established. It may be that after a long summer break or planned period of inactivity the group simply re-convenes; or it could be that after a crisis, a period of stagnation or dwindling membership, a new start becomes necessary. In this case people are more likely to put their heart into this if they see it as an opportunity to build on

what was good in the past and avoid some of the pitfalls. Much of what has been written about starting up a new group (p. 25) will be applicable.

In either case people will need time to re-establish their relationships. After a break, there will be news which they want to share and time may need to be allowed for this. It may be done informally or in a structured way, for instance, by asking each one to share one item of news or something which is on their mind, or say how they feel about returning to the group. Decide what would best fit your group.

A re-start provides an opportunity to look again at the aims of the group, to check them out and amend or revise them. In the same way practicalities can be re-considered: the frequency, time and place of meetings; the way of working together or tackling the task; and the plan or programme for the coming months.

It may be appropriate to review the past in a more detailed way (p. 126). What do people feel went well in the group? What was helpful? Why did they come or what did they get from the group? What do people feel needs changing? Were there things they disliked or felt uneasy about? Why did people stop coming? Are there any new ideas and suggestions which could be discussed?

In discussing these things it is important to remember that the group belongs to everyone, facilitator and members: everyone has a responsibility to make a success of it. Time spent in openly discussing these things and making arrangements which are mutually convenient is time well spent. No one should be made to feel guilty if everything did not work out well in the past. The great value of things going wrong is the learning opportunity this provides. One rarely goes down the same blind alley twice.

III. RECRUITING AND WELCOMING NEW MEMBERS

Some groups, such as working parties, are formed for a specific purpose and have a limited life with a stable membership. Others, such as tenants' associations, are on-going and may need to recruit members; in others, new members may automatically join on becoming a new member of staff or of a residential community.

Groups may be variously open or closed, they may consciously or unconsciously encourage or discourage new recruits, and make it easy or difficult for people to join them and to feel at home in them. Most people, although they adopt various devices to cloak it, find approaching and joining a new group something of an ordeal. Potential members may become

committed from their first meeting; or decide on a trial period of several meetings; or simply attend a few meetings and then decide whether or not to remain.

It is important to remember that one or more new members change the shape of a group: it may have the same name, members may subscribe to the same purpose, continue to do what they have always done, but in fact, a new and different group of people is meeting together. The group may be enriched by an influx of new insights and abilities but there may well be difficulties in being open to them and integrating the newcomers.

This section considers what the facilitator and group can do in relation to recruiting new members, preparing for them, and integrating them into the group.

1. Recruiting new members

There are several related questions below from which you could pick appropriately to help a group to consider recruitment:

- *Attitudes towards recruitment:* Do we want new members? Are we ready for them now or do we need first to get better established or know each other better? Should we actively recruit or wait for people to turn up? Are there specific times when it would be easier than others to absorb new members (e.g., at the end of a cycle of work rather than half way through)? Do we need to recruit regularly so the group will continue as members leave for various reasons? For example, a group responsible for a job in the community or an organisation would be wise to encourage younger members and train them so they are able to carry on the work as people retire from age, ill-health or leave the area.
- *Criteria for membership:* Some groups by their very nature are open to anyone, others are for specific people. Is anyone welcome to join the group? If not, what are the criteria? What sort of people are we looking for (p. 26)?
- *Methods of recruiting:* How can we make ourselves known so people can respond appropriately? Some of these suggestions may be of use:
 - have an ‘open meeting’ at which the function and activities of the group are explained and displayed;
 - issue an open invitation through the organisation’s outlets (written in newsletters or magazines or spoken about at a function or gathering) or through a local press advertisement for community groups;

- list all the groups and agencies and people who might be approached. Ask the group to brainstorm their ideas. Brainstorming works best if certain ‘rules’ are adhered to (p. 98);
- using registers and lists, review by name everyone in the locality known to members to decide who to invite to the group.

2. Preparing for new members

The group worker may need to help members prepare for newcomers by considering their own feelings and what new members may feel.

The feelings of the current group members: When a group has been together for some time it can be difficult to be genuine in welcoming newcomers. Members may need to discuss how they feel and find ways of dealing with any negative feelings they have. Some of the suggestions as to how as facilitator you could deal with your negative emotions (p. 42) could be adapted or adopted.

The feelings of new members: Since everyone will have experienced being new to a group, it may well be that no more is needed than a word to alert people beforehand as to how new members may feel when they come along to their first meeting. If, however, it is a close knit group which no one has joined for some time it may be useful to do one or more of the following:

- discuss together how they will welcome and assimilate new members and who will do what;
- take the members on a journey of remembrance, thinking about a particular group they joined or failed to join and recalling their feelings and what helped and hindered their integration (p. 73);
- get members to stand in the shoes of the potential new members and imagine how they are feeling and what they may be thinking and expecting (p. 74);
- list what would help new people to feel welcome or unwelcome; what they need to know about the group: the members, the mores, procedures, history, purpose, etc.

3. Integrating new members

What is done to prepare potential new members before their first meeting and to welcome them to it, will depend very much on the nature of the group, its ethos, the degree of formality or informality, its circumstances, and whether a newcomer is expected or just turns up.

Before their first meeting: Among the possibilities by way of preparing newcomers beforehand the group may want to consider such things as:

- sending information through the post: this could be a letter of information, a descriptive brochure or booklet, the constitutions, trust deed, records or minutes of previous meetings or a welcoming note. What is likely to inform without overwhelming someone? What will make them feel wanted without putting undue pressure on them?
- an informal contact giving opportunity for questions to be asked and information given. This could be a telephone call or a meeting with one or more members.
- arranging for one of the group to bring the new members along to their first meeting.
- inviting new members to a preliminary social occasion or some group event.

At their first meeting: In deciding how best to help one or more new people to feel welcome and to become integrated into the group, members could ask themselves such questions as:

- Are they likely to find it easiest to receive a quiet word of welcome and to be allowed to spend their first meeting or two quietly observing and getting the feel of things?
- Would it help if we had some sort of celebration before or after the meeting: for example, something to eat or drink informally?
- How can we get to know each other? Would it be best done gradually as we discuss and work together or should we each introduce ourselves? If the latter, with how much detail? (p. 27)
- How can we give the new members some idea of the history, ethos and purpose of the group? Have we any reports, visual aids, photographs, or videos which would be a useful introduction?
- Do we expect them to pick up the procedures as we go along or are there certain things they need to know from the start?
- How can we encourage them to participate without pressurising them? How can we be open to their ideas and contributions?
- Would it help if one of the group keeps an eye on or befriends each new member?
- How can we ensure they understand, agree with and are committed to the basic philosophy and purpose of the group? Do we foresee any danger of newcomers wanting to steer the group in a new direction? How could we deal with this? What is negotiable/non-negotiable?

IV. SETTING UP A ONE-OFF MEETING

Much time and effort can be put into organising a meeting for which a disappointing few turn up. Unless people are under compulsion to attend, this will at times be inevitable, but asking oneself certain questions beforehand may help to ensure that it happens less frequently.

1. The purpose of the meeting

The purpose or objective of a meeting is closely connected with the question of who you want to attend. As well as categories of people, such as parents or local residents, consider their attitude or frame of mind. Presumably, you are hoping for people who will take a real interest, benefit and contribute, rather than be likely to misunderstand, be bored or pour scorn.

2. Encouraging appropriate participants

Learn from your own experience. Try working through the points below as you think about your own response to the possibility of attending various meetings. It might help to make a check list as you do so.

What makes you want to attend or decide against going to a meeting?

There may be several interrelated factors in relation to:

- what you think and feel about the person or group setting up the meeting or where you saw it advertised.
- the way in which the invitation or advertisement is couched and presented: the tone of voice, over enthusiasm or lack of it, the amount of pressure, print, illustrations, etc.
- the subject matter: You are likely to be influenced by whether or not the topic concerns, interests or intrigues you, or is likely to benefit you.
- your situation, for instance the time factor: you may be overstretched, or have time on your hands, be feeling bored or low and welcome an opportunity to get out of the house. Attending may entail complicated arrangements for transport or baby-sitter and not be worth the effort or expense.

For further suggestions see *Convening a Meeting* (p. 79).

Finally, it is worth testing the way you intend to present the invitation on one or two people whom you hope will attend.