Facilitating a Small-Group Exercise

Small-group facilitation is a skill that even the most experienced educator struggles with. How do you listen to rather than lead a class? How can you share your expertise when the students teach each other? Traditional lectures are quickly becoming a model of the past. Active learning methods, such as small group, problem-based, and team-based learning encourage the learner to actively engage, question, and analyze information. These methods stimulate the learning environment while encouraging a meaningful level of understanding by those who engage in the exercise.

In order to be an effective small-group facilitator, you must understand the stages of group development as well as the practical behaviors and skills that will make the learning environment pleasurable for you and the students.

Stages of Group Development

By understanding the stages of group development the facilitator can appropriately intervene and correct issues within the group.

1. Forming – in the formation stage, students are generally polite and limit negative conversation. While this stage seems less demanding than the others, very little output is achieved.
2. Storming – in the storming stage, true personalities come out and the group sorts out its structure and purpose. Conflict is rampant and the facilitator must encourage the group to embrace the expression of divergent views.
3. Norming – in the norming stage, group members learn to appreciate the differences in the group and work becomes the central focus.
4. Performing – in the performing stage, people begin working together to achieve the goals of the project.
5. Adjourning – when adjourning, the group takes pleasure in their accomplishments and is ready to move on to another project, course or group.

Practical Behaviors & Skills

The following facilitator behaviors and skills support the development of an effective group process.

- Establish and maintain a safe learning environment by having the group establish ground rules, diagnose and intervene when ineffective behaviors occur, and accurately listen to and respond to issues empathetically.
- Manage the process by fostering participation by all group members, keep the content on track (and redirect when necessary) and have the group summarize periodically.
- Use effective questions to stimulate discussion and probing questions to check and develop thinking. If the group asks you to answer a question, defer the questions back to the group.
- Serve as a role model by showing patience, consistency and accepting feedback without being defensive.
- Be learning-centered by asking rather than telling. Help students make connections with prior knowledge. Provide or encourage concrete and relevant examples that illustrate a concept or skill.

Andrea Berry, MPA
alberry@mail.ucf.edu
University of Central Florida College of Medicine