

Facilitating Quality Father Groups

By Nigel Vann



Parents as Teachers™

While individual home or office visits can be invaluable in your work with fathers, for many fathers it is participation in a group with other men that is most meaningful. I've heard fatherhood group work described as the "glue" that keeps men involved in a wider program and leads to powerful life changes for them and their families.

For this to occur, a fatherhood group needs to be built and facilitated on a foundation of trust that encourages self-reflection, personal sharing, group support, and ongoing growth.

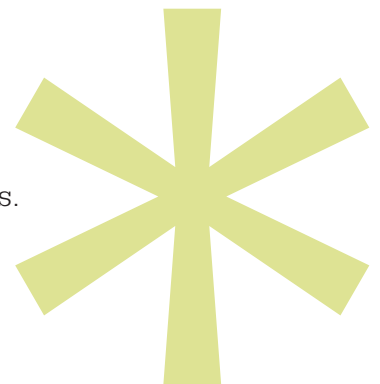
I've had the privilege of sitting in on many fatherhood groups in the United States and in England and have enjoyed many examples of strong group facilitation, but I've also observed poor or average group facilitation that failed to fully engage the dads in attendance. Three of the most common reasons I've identified for poor group facilitation are:



1. Insufficient preparation time. (I advise you spend at least twice as much time preparing as you will facilitating.)
2. Lack of purpose. (You should always be aware of why you are doing this work – have immediate goals for a particular session and long-term goals for the group.)
3. Ineffective facilitation. (This includes disorganization, too much lecturing, personal storytelling irrelevant to group goals, not managing problem group behaviors, a boring approach, a judgmental attitude, and so on).

On the other hand, good group facilitators are well-prepared and clear about the objectives. They are focused on the journey that the group members are embarking on and have a clear vision of the kinds of changes in attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors that they hope to inspire the fathers towards. To successfully guide their participants on this journey, they:

- > Engage them in the process of growth and learning through varied types of activities.
- > Are aware of the needs of individual group members.
- > Spend time listening to and learning from the group.
- > Know how to keep things on track by encouraging participation.
- > Manage difficult people.
- > Deal with problematic issues that come up.
- > Keep a focus on outcomes by encouraging the application of new skills.





Facilitation skills

A book that I recommend for further reading is *Workshops: Designing and Facilitating Experiential Learning*. Although this does not focus on fatherhood groups per se, it does provide some very helpful ideas. I particularly like the authors' delineation of four types of basic facilitation skills (Brooks-Harris & Stock-Ward, 1999), which I interpret as follows:

1. **Engaging** – Creating a welcoming and safe environment that draws participants in and encourages them to stay.
2. **Informing** – Providing knowledge and information that is meaningful and useful to participants, through a variety of approaches that engage and involve participants in the sharing of knowledge.
3. **Involving** – Ensuring that all group members are able to participate and benefit from the group activities and discussion.
4. **Applying** – Allowing time for reflection about key take-home messages and encouraging the use of new awareness, knowledge, and skills to build stronger relationships and outcomes for children and families.

Stages of group development

Don't expect men to start sharing and supporting each other instantly! All groups go through various stages of development. In the **Forming** stage, everything will seem new, and participants will feel wary and unsure. The role of the group facilitator is key here – you need to draw on those engaging skills (creating a welcoming environment, providing guidance and direction, and establishing that the group is “safe”).

Next comes a **Storming** stage where the facilitator's ability to listen and deal with issues of conflict or competition may be key.

In the **Norming** stage, the group coalesces around common goals, shares a sense of group belonging, and embraces group process and mutual support. Some individual members will begin to have “a-ha” moments, and leadership will be shared.

The fourth stage of **Performing** is what we are striving for. The group will be more task oriented and comfortable engaging in problem solving; most members will be aware of key take-home messages; and the facilitator will be able to take a back seat at times as the group “performs.”

One of the hardest stages is **Adjourning**. You have created a meaningful group experience for members, but now you must say farewell and leave individuals to proceed on the next stage of their journeys without the group.



This is where the work that a good group facilitator has done can really have a payoff. If you have been prepared and clearly focused on your goals; if you have utilized an array of interesting, stimulating and engaging activities; if you have managed the group process in a way that encourages the participation of all; and if you have encouraged reflection on a-ha moments and take-home messages and challenged participants to apply their new knowledge and skills with tangible actions – then you have done your job.

Tip from the Field **Take the Fear out of Feelings**

Many times feelings can be a sensitive or difficult topic to approach, whether it is in a relationship, with a co-worker, or with children. As humans we all feel, and we know what we feel. The problem for many is talking about or expressing those feelings.

Knowing this made me very apprehensive to approach this topic within our fatherhood meeting. Having heard the background of many of these men over the months, I thought for sure this would be a dead topic, that I would be made to look like a fool for even trying to speak about feelings. Boy, was I wrong.

I had planned to have the topic of feelings cover two sessions, with the hopes of scratching the surface of feelings and maybe giving some tools or hints for the men to ponder. What happened was far greater. The fathers in the group were surprisingly open to sharing their feelings on many personal and sensitive topics. The other facilitator and I added our feelings into the discussions and even opened up about very personal things.

These very intense dialogues and conversations monopolized most of the two meetings that I scheduled for this topic and stretched over the next two meetings as well. The topic's popularity has caused us to add a section at the end of each meeting to discuss any feeling that fathers want to share.

Working with men, you have a certain expectation of how most of them will react, but this was a pleasant surprise. This has become valuable knowledge that will help to enhance our fatherhood program in the future. It has taught me that all you have to do to get men to open up is to take the fear out of feelings.

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References

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- Tuckman, B. W. (1965, June). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63(6), 384-399. doi: 10.1037/h0022100.

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