

We believe that co-facilitating a group is superior to working alone. In this paper we discuss the major advantages, some potential disadvantages and some suggestions for avoiding the dangers in co-facilitation. An additional resource available, but not included here, is the Co-facilitating Inventory, a guide to maximising the learning experience of working together.

Advantages

Facilitating group development

One of the most convincing reasons for working with a colleague, as a co-facilitator is to complement each other's styles. One person may have a group dynamics focus while the other may have an intra-individual focus. Together, they may be able to monitor and facilitate individual and group development better than either of them could separately.

Dealing with heightened affect

In personal growth groups, highly emotional situations occasionally arise, and the facilitator must be able to deal not only with persons who have a heightened affect but also with the 'audience' effect. It is difficult to help an individual work through deeply felt reactions and at the same time to assist other group members in integrating the experience in terms of its potential learning. In such situations, it is always profitable to have a co-facilitator. One facilitator can work with the person(s) experiencing significant emotionality, while the other facilitator assists participants in dealing with their reactions to the situation.

Personal and professional development

Co-facilitating offers each partner support for their personal development. Facilitating personal growth groups and team-building sessions can be a lonely activity; the opportunities for meaningful personal development are lessened by the complexity of the facilitator's monitoring and intervening tasks. With co-facilitators, each can better work their personal development issues both in and out of the group setting.

Another major advantage of co-facilitating is the opportunity for professional growth. Participants are usually not able to offer meaningful feedback on facilitator competence. When facilitators work together, they can provide each other with a rich source of professional reactions. In this way, each group experience becomes a practicum for the facilitators involved.

Synergistic effect

The remark that 'two heads are better than one' has often been validated experientially in consensus-seeking tasks in laboratory training. When people work together collaboratively, a synergistic effect often develops. That is, the outcome of the deliberation exceeds the sum of the contribution of the individuals. Co-facilitating can develop synergistic outcomes through the personal and professional interchange resulting from working toward a common goal.

Modelling

One way participants learn in groups is by studying facilitators as behavioural models. Co-facilitating provides not only two models of individuals with their own life situations but it also offers a model for meaningful, effective two-person relationships. The interaction between the co-facilitators gives participants a way to gauge dyadic relationships. The likelihood that the training will transfer to participants' back-home everyday situation is increased.

Reduced dependency

A recurring theme in both personal development groups and team-building sessions is the problem of dependency on the facilitator. Facilitators who work many groups alone sometimes dread having repeatedly to face participants' unresolved authority conflicts. With co-facilitators, the leadership is shared, and therefore the dependency problem is somewhat dissipated.

Appropriate pacing

Facilitators can pace themselves more effectively if they are working with a partner. Observing and intervening in a group session is demanding, and the facilitator is sometimes not able to relax enough to permit the process to emerge at its own rate. Co-facilitators can check each other's timing of events and provide some respite from the detailed monitoring to provide meaningful interventions.

Sharp focus

A final advantage is that sometimes issues can be focused more sharply when they are seen by two facilitators. Facilitators usually have 'favourite' issues that are likely to emerge in their groups, and co-facilitating can offset biases.

<h3>Potential disadvantages</h3>

Different orientations

Some dangers are, however, inherent in co-facilitation. It is important to be sensitive to potential problems. Individuals with different orientations - theoretical technical, personal - can easily impair each other's effect in the group. It is, for example, difficult to imagine a good melding of a Tavistock-oriented 'consultant' and an Easlen-trained encounter group leader. Such partners would likely discover themselves working cross-purposes.

Extra energy

Co-facilitating takes energy. Not only is the facilitator occupied with the development of the participants and of the group, but they are also have to expend effort to develop and maintain the relationship that may be pivotal to the success of the training. The training sub-goals include not only the facilitator's personal and professional development but also their relationship with their co-worker.

Threats and competition

Since two professionals in a group may constitute more of a threat to individual participants than one would, they may see co-facilitating as colluding with each other. The 'clinicking' that co-facilitators engage in between sessions can arouse suspicion and create an emotional distance between co-facilitators and participants.

Co-facilitators can become competitive with each other. Although they may deny any concern for popularity, they may, without knowing it, engage in behaviour that meets other needs besides those inherent in the training.

Overtraining

It is clearly possible to 'overtrain' a group, particularly with the presence of two active facilitators. It is important to recognise that too many interventions may stifle both participation and learning. This is especially true when facilitators play the 'two-on-one' game simultaneously attempting to interpret and facilitate one participant. Group member helpfulness is one of the most potent dimensions of personal growth and team-building activities. After an initiation period, participants - as well as facilitators - can make meaningful interventions. It is important that facilitators stay out of the way in order to permit this process to occur.

Blind spots

Co-facilitators may have mutual blind spots in observing inter- and intra-individual dynamics and it is possible to reinforce each other's failure to attend to particular areas. If co-facilitators are similar in their theory and technique, it is quite likely that they will pay attention to the same data. Thus they may neglect, or pay less attention to, other data and thereby increase the possibility that they will fail to notice significant learning opportunities that are outside their normal purview.

A misleading model

In any human relations situation there is always the possibility that people will react to assumptions rather than to clear understandings of each other. This, of course, can occur to co-facilitators if they are not clear about each other's position on recurring and predictable group issues. In this case, they can provide an ineffective model for the participants.

When the relationship between co-facilitators is tense, mistrustful and/or closed, the modelling is negative. Participants may mistakenly conclude that what 'works' in human relations is to behave in ways directly opposed to the values on which human relations training is based.

Different rhythms

A final potential disadvantage in co-facilitating is that the facilitators' intervention rhythms may be different. One may intervene on a 'beat' of ten, while the other intervenes on a 'beat' of three. The facilitator who is slower to react or who hesitates in the hope that participants will take responsibility for the maintenance of the group may find obtrusive the partner who intervenes more rapidly. Disjunctive contacts that may result between the co-facilitators provide a negative model.

Avoiding the dangers

Facilitators who are considering joining together to work with a small group can engage in a number of activities to obviate these potential disadvantages. The obvious first step is to share orientations and experiences with similar kinds of group situations.

A second way of avoiding the problems of ineffective co-facilitation is to solicit feedback frequently and regularly. As a check on behavioural perception, there is no substitute for honest and straightforward reactions.

In order to counteract one facilitators' tendency to overtrain the group and to cut into the rhythm of interventions of their partner, it may be useful to count to ten - or twenty - before intervening. If any participant speaks during that time, the count is begin again at zero.

It is important that the co-facilitators be honest in presenting themselves and in soliciting feedback from participants. In this way, they can de-emphasise the impact of their presence in the group. Each co-facilitator needs to monitor the reasons for their behaviour in the group. Each intervention should be 'located'. That is, the facilitator needs to know what they are observing, what they are responding to, what the needs in the group seem to be, and what the intervention is designed to elicit. Otherwise, it is likely that the intervention will meet the personal needs of the facilitator at the expense of the needs of the participants.

Testing assumptions

It seems axiomatic that all assumptions need to be tested continuously. Facilitators are clearly not above making errors in communication. It is critical that they check the bases of their professional judgements.

If co-facilitators experience difficulty in working together, they may solicit a third party as a consultant. This activity may produce a great deal of learning not only for themselves but also for observers.

In confronting the potential disadvantages of co-facilitating, partners can create for themselves opportunities to experiment with and to enlarge both their personal development and their professional expertise. We believe that the advantages of co-facilitating clearly outweigh any potential problems or dangers.

Source: J. William Pfeiffer & John E. Jones (1975) *Annual Handbook for Group Facilitators*, pp. 219-229.