I

Working in Groups

This book is about working groups that are concerned with producing a product of some kind external to themselves. Such groups are composed of people who are members because of their professional and occupational responsibilities, their interest as citizens in creating some sort of a product, or making a difference in the community or the broader world, or a combination of the two. Working groups do not aim primarily at changing the attitudes or behaviors of their own members but rather form in order to generate some external product, develop policies, or participate in decision-making processes. It is this focus on producing or influencing something external to itself that defines the essence of a working group. Others have used terms such as task group to differentiate working groups from those formed for clinical treatment of their members.

Suppose you were to spend a week with a nurse-administrator, an executive director of a social agency, an educational planner, a department head in a hospital, or a human services administrator in a state government. You might ask the question, “What does this person actually do?” If you try to answer this question by directly observing the person and noting the amount of time he or she spends performing various kinds of activities during the week, you would find that a large number of working hours are spent participating in various roles in working groups such as staff meetings, committees, subcommittees, task forces, boards of directors, commissions, and subunits of these bodies. Some professionals, especially those who hold jobs with major administrative, planning, policy formation, or research components, may spend a majority of their working hours in activities connected with their memberships in such groups. These activities include preparation for group meetings, participation in the actual meetings, and following through on decisions reached during the meetings. Technically, of course, only some of these so-called groups deserve
the name. Others are collectives or aggregations, or encounters, or whichever term one prefers for a collection of people who do not constitute a fully developed group. What meanings does participation in these groups have for members? For the professional being observed, the meaning may be broad and deep. Some of the events that are most important for members of various professions, and those whom they serve, take place within working groups. Points of view are accepted or rejected, modified or voted into effect. Decisions are reached that either enable or support, or frustrate and discourage the deepest purposes of professionals, their professions, their organizations, and individuals who compose them. Organizations, services, agencies, and projects are funded or ended as a result of decisions reached in groups. Particular targets of services are selected. Criteria for future decisions are developed. Group members learn a wide range of knowledge, attitudes, and skills. Judgments are made, hirings and firings planned and confirmed, influence strategies adopted, and rewards and sanctions distributed, all within the context of working groups in which professionals serve as members, chairs, staff, or sometimes all three.

Each of these terms deserves some attention to definitions. In this book, we will use the term *staff* to refer to professionals who carry responsibility for working with, advising, and following through on decisions made by various groups. Characteristically, such people hold administrative responsibility within organizations. We will use the term *chair* for an elected or subselected person whose responsibility it is to keep the group going, to keep the trains running on time, as the old expression has it. Generally, the chair is one of the members of the group. The staff person is not and is paid by the organization. It should be noted that professionals not only staff working groups but also serve as members of others. And, indeed, professionals also serve as chairs of working groups.

Community development and all forms of planning are carried on largely within the context of working groups. Funds are raised and allocated in the voluntary, not-for-profit, for-profit, and public sectors by groups that exist for these purposes. Administration involves a large and crucial component of group participation and group leadership. Even clinical practitioners in the various health and human service professions find, as their careers progress, that they spend a good deal of time in working groups such as staff groups, teams, and professional associations.

Working groups are as important in the lives of many citizens in their lay capacities as they are for professionals. Such groups occupy a great deal of time and attention of a wide range of people who participate in them as volunteers. What goes on in such groups makes a great deal of difference both in the inner
lives of lay participants and in various organizations, institutions, and processes in society at large. The fabric of social living for many adults is woven of experiences in local unions and trade associations, charitable organizations, churches, synagogues, or other religious groups, community councils, political clubs, sports teams, community choruses, and ethnic organizations, each with its many committees and other subunits. All these groups are important in people’s lives, though we shall consider in this book only those that are part of organizations connected with the delivery of health and human services.

Working groups are very much affected by and affect the processes of social change. Various writers have pointed out that today’s work organizations in the twenty-first century are quite different in structure and in operation from the organizations that characterized our society in the past. Together with writers such as Lincoln (1985), we view organizations as ecologies of groups. The small group is the framer, the definer of issues and the decision maker. Organizations can be viewed as interlocking networks of small groups and groups as the parts of organizations that defines the relevance of other parts of the organization.

With the emphasis on creativity that characterizes the transformed work organization (see Bennis, Spreitzer, and Cummings, 2001), working groups can also be viewed as “charismatic enclaves.” Small groups are the places within organizations in which new ideas, new views, new ways of defining problems, and new ways of finding solutions come about.

This new view of working groups and the vital function they perform for organizations is true, in the views of theorists, for all organizations. We shall point out repeatedly and from various angles that nowhere is this more the case than in organizations devoted to the provision of health and human services. In our view, health and human service organizations depend on the working groups of which they are composed for their existence, their development of resources, their allocation of resources, their standards of quality for providing services, and for the evaluation of success or failure that is so important a part of service delivery organizations. While leaving room for examples of individual creativity, the largest part of the work of health and human service professionals is and should be spent making contributions to the working groups that compose the organizations within which most professional lives are lived. We shall elaborate on this perspective in several chapters and illustrations in this book.

If working groups are so important, it might be expected that the various professions and programs of professional education would pay them lots of attention. One might expect that the skills required for both effective
participation and effective leadership in such groups would be widely taught as part of the educational system that prepares people for citizenship and that the processes of working groups would be studied exhaustively through both formal research and informal means. Quite to the contrary, it seems to us that most people have experienced comparatively little formal teaching and learning about how to work together in groups. For the most part, our society has relied on catch-as-catch-can experiences and folk wisdom as sources of learning about working groups.

This book is an attempt to fill some gaps in readers’ educations. Before we proceed, it may be helpful to look at some of the reasons that working groups haven’t received as much attention as they deserve. A brief look at some of the history and sociology of approaches to work with groups may provide some answers.

**Working Groups and the Sociology of Group Work Knowledge**

Social workers and other applied social scientists have been aware of the importance of group work from the beginning. Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century figures in the development of social work wrote about work with groups in general and about working groups in particular. Specifically, Mary Parker Follett was deeply committed to building democracy and developing citizenship through experiences in groups. In 1920 Follett wrote, “The group process contains the secret of collective life, it is the key to democracy, it is the master lesson for every individual to learn, it is our chief hope for the political, the social, the international life of the future.”

During the 1930s and 1940s a steady stream of social and behavioral scientists seeking refuge from the horrors of Nazi Europe brought to this country a concern with teaching democracy at the grass roots. It was natural that many, including especially Kurt Lewin (1948), emphasized the potential value of learning to work together in small groups for teaching citizenship and inoculating society against the possibility of totalitarianism. The contributions of these refugees blended with the earlier, indigenous concerns of others to produce a sizable constituency of writers, theorists, and practitioners whose interests centered on group processes and group work.

During the postwar period, these interests produced two bodies of research and practice. The first, initially identified with social scientists who had been exposed to group theorists in their graduate education, developed
within universities. This body of practice and research came generally to be known as “group dynamics.” The second body of knowledge and practice came largely from social work, used the name “group work” or “social group work,” and emphasized work with groups of children, adolescents, and adults, including older people, in neighborhood and community settings, and, later, patients in health care settings. It was somewhat unclear to what extent either group dynamics or social group work were fields, professions, methods, or processes that had relevance for all. Group workers formed their own association, the American Association for the Study of Group Work (later the American Association of Group Workers) during the 1930s and sought to decide whether they belonged in social work, in education, in recreation, or elsewhere. Ultimately, the decision was made to consider social group work as a part of social work, and the AAGW was one of the organizations that formed the National Association of Social Workers in 1956. The group dynamics idea grew to span boundaries, as it still does, among sociology, psychology, education, nursing, psychiatry, and at times political science as well. During the 1960s and 1970s the idea grew, entered the mainstream of American life through the mass media, became a topic of popular conversation and even a subject for parody, and was sometimes referred to as a growth industry.

Our concern is not so much with history per se as with a look at the development of knowledge about groups and group work. A quick tracing of group work in social work may be useful for understanding what has happened to knowledge about groups in other professions as well. The classical group work texts of the period from 1948 to 1972 (see Ephross, 1986) were clear on two points. All group work practice was viewed as having social goals content, sometimes implicit and sometimes explicit. The ultimate purpose of work with groups was viewed as contributing to the development of a better, more just, more equitable, more humanistic society. Equally important, group work skills were presented as applicable to a wide range of types of groups, including, explicitly, working groups. A very influential text of the postwar period (Wilson and Ryland, 1949) not only devoted a chapter to “administrative processes” but also began with the citation from Follett given above.

At the same time, group work was one of the very first of what may now be termed the “process disciplines.” Groups’ processes are intangible (though their products may not be), and perhaps for this reason expertise in group work sounded and felt a bit slippery in an earlier, industrial, production-oriented world. Now, when we are used to viewing with respect skills such as computer programming, information systems design, and arbitration and conflict management, earlier points of view may seem obsolete. For earlier
decades, however, mere skill at guiding interpersonal relationships and group development lacked those elements of production that made for recognition and prestige. Further, since much early group work practice was not directed toward healing the sick, it lacked the quasi-medical aura that surrounded treatment and therapy. Finally, since much group work practice was directed toward members of low-power populations, such as children, immigrants, ethno-racial minorities, adolescents, the aged, and poor people, some stigmatizing probably tainted both the practitioners and the organizations that sponsored the practice. Such speculations are intriguing and await more rigorous historical study for further development.

Until the late 1960s group work in social work contained an emphasis on contributing to the building of society and a corollary emphasis on the importance of democratic group participation; group workers were to learn skills in working with citizens’ groups, in particular. In our opinion, these emphases have been somewhat neglected over the past thirty years or so. Staffs and their processes, though omnipresent in service delivery organizations, have not received their proper share of attention. A steadily increasing concern with gaining skills in group methods in treatment, which is to be applauded, has not been accompanied by corresponding attention to working groups.

Related questions may be asked about group dynamics. Why has so much research been conducted with ad hoc nongroups, many of them temporary aggregations of college students that do not meet the criteria for being groups? Why has there been so little observation of existing groups in their natural habitats? To underscore these questions, we note that many articles and even some books use the general term “groups” to refer to just one particular type of group, usually the T (training) or experiential learning group. Other types of groups are often ignored.

Retrospect can be useful in several ways, not only to understand what has happened in the past but also to learn about our present dilemmas and enable us to chart a course for the future development of knowledge about groups and group work. It seems to us that, just when group work was establishing itself clearly as a major part of social work and group dynamics as a major part of applied social sciences, developments within human services in general and major social trends combined to divert attention away from the detailed study of what takes place in microsocial interactions among people. Some of this attention has been diverted toward greater concern with broad social goals and questions of societal direction. These concerns are genuine and need to continue. They may correct an earlier, somewhat naive, all-is-for-the-best
stance that was part of the development of knowledge about groups (Feldman and Specht, 1968). It is time to return to a concern about what takes place within groups, particularly working groups, because of their importance in the lives of people, in the development of health and human services in our society, and in the effective delivery of such services to those who need them. In sum, it is our point of view that those who are concerned with social planning and social change are precisely the people who need to be concerned with what goes on in groups and how one can influence it.

Group processes influence the lives of citizens and professionals in many settings and throughout life. Only a small proportion of the population, relatively speaking, is involved in purposeful group experience for therapeutic or people-changing purposes under professional direction at any given time. A much larger proportion is involved in groups at work, in neighborhood organizations, or religious congregations. In order to influence large numbers of people, those who work with groups need to develop the skills needed to work with both naturally occurring groups and with formed working groups. Most of these groups exist in order to achieve purposes that are important to them, which they view as important ends in themselves. Personal growth that takes place for members of such groups, while vitally important for society in the long run, is a distinctly secondary motivation for most working groups’ members. Achieving groups’ purposes and succeeding at groups’ tasks should be given full weight and respect by all concerned.

There are some hopeful signs that widely disparate voices are beginning to recognize the need for attention to be paid to working groups. The quality of people’s experiences at work is now being widely recognized as an important topic for attention. This is true both in the broader society, by students of management (Oichi, 1981), and within the human service field (see Ephross, 1983), particularly by those who have defined the phenomenon of burnout (Edelwich and Brodsky, 1980). There are signs of a revival of interest in group work that stems directly from some of the historical developments alluded to above (Garvin, 1987:32—34). Perhaps most important, there seems to be growing recognition throughout the health and human service professions that service delivery and service system issues are important and should not be separated from issues of service effectiveness. That is, how a health or human service can be delivered, what kinds of organizations should deliver it, and what human resources and interpersonal structures and processes are needed may be as important to the welfare of the consumer or patient as the nature of the service or treatment itself. This perception is more and more
widespread. In our view, it is accurate, and it underlies much of the material that follows in this book.

Throughout this book, we shall blend perspectives gained from practice, theory, and research and draw upon the insights of writers and practitioners educated in various professions and disciplines. We hope that readers will make the translations necessary to apply what we have written to their own work and their own professional identities; we have, however, tried to keep the need for such translations to a minimum.

**Social Trends That Affect the Importance of Working Groups**

As we move into the body of the book, a list of major social trends at the beginning of the twenty-first century may provide a useful backdrop to understand the relationship between and among individuals, groups, organizations, and the broader society. We suggest the following list for discussion. It was developed for this book, based on a great variety of sources.

1. Changes in the Nature of Work. Most work is or will become connected with the use of information technology and/or provision of services. This is having a number of effects on organizations, including making race, gender, ethnicity, and age both less and more important: less important for effective task accomplishment; more important for effective work in groups. Most work in contemporary society requires education beyond the basic literacy that virtually all jobs require.

2. Information Technology. The widespread importance of information technology has resulted in increased organizational power for those skilled in its use and decreased power for those who are not. In addition, variations in horizontal and vertical communication within and across units can significantly alter organizational cultures.

   a. There is still a clearly hierarchical quality to many organizations, including human service organizations. This quality is most plainly seen in overinflated salaries, options, and bonuses paid to CEOs.
   b. The increasing diversity of the work force results in an advantage for supervisors, managers, and peers who are culturally
competent and corresponding disadvantages for those who are not.

c. The organizations that are succeeding and growing—whether in business, government, or the military; in the reduced but still huge production sphere; or in health care or human service delivery—tend to be flatter. They value creativity at the expense of conformity. They set clear boundaries between employees’ work and personal lives and refrain from trying to control the latter.

d. We think the organizations of the future will be made up of fairly stable small groups, with the keyword for work success being participation that is conscious, effective, and contributes to group productivity.

4. The Diversity of U.S. Population. The U.S. population has diversified at a rapid pace in the last several decades and is bringing and will continue to bring about a corresponding diversity within virtually all the institutions of society, as well as greater readiness to accept diversity in institutions previously thought of as homogeneous.

5. Major Changes in Gender Roles. Changes are still in process and include but are not limited to:

   a. Greater acceptance of sexual minority behavior.

   b. Sexuality primarily viewed as a means of establishing, maintaining, and changing relationships and as a means of self-expression.

   c. The entry of more women in the workforce with higher levels of education and acceptance into professions, which has helped to produce greater variance in family structure, for example:

      i. Both parents employed, contributing equally or nearly so to family income.

      ii. Greater acceptance of single-parent families, both male- and female-headed and other diversities of family structure.

      iii. Far greater use of out-of-home day care from infancy.

      iv. Increased prevalence of divorce/remarriage/blended families, which has changed the modal life cycle (see below).

6. Quantitative and Qualitative Changes in Both the Modal and Normative Life Cycles.

   a. Life expectancy has increased for all groups of the population, though there is still a lag for some minority groups.
b. Adolescence/young adulthood has been extended in parts of the population, accompanied by a significant increase in concerns about fertility for couples in their thirties and forties.
c. Divorce, followed by remarriage and establishment of blended families or less formal relationships, is both more common and more widespread.
d. Expectations for vigorous good health in middle and later years have increased. There is a growing tendency to go back to work, at least part time, after retirement.
e. “Science fiction” developments in diagnostic, surgical and pharmaceutical care, widely publicized, increase most people’s expectations.
f. The crisis in paying for medical care and medications highlights the increasing inequality in what health care is available to particular parts of the population and what is not.
g. There has been a rapid increase in acceptance of a widespread need for therapy of various kinds and forms. The most recent boom is in “life coaching.”

7. Capitalist Triumphalism.
   a. The end of Soviet Union and radical shifts in the Chinese economy mean that the only real challenges to Western-style modified capitalism come from the premodern rather than radical side.
   b. Rapid increases in environmental awareness, from energy use to diet, exist in a state of tension with a consumerism that is sometimes frenzied.
   c. The range of income, from top to bottom of organizations and in society as a whole, is extremely high. In other words, inequality has increased.

8. Intergroup Relations.
   a. Decreases in overt/de jure discrimination and racism make the covert de facto racism, whether individual, institutional, or cultural, all the more painful and destructive.
   b. In the 2000 census, for the first time, people could identify themselves as being of “more than one race,” with 6.826 million people identifying themselves this way. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004).

9. Education. From preschool to graduate school, is education evolving or in a state of revolution?
10. Terrorism. At home and abroad, terrorism and its ramifications with respect to the military, governmental, and societal fabric have grown greatly in importance.

11. A collapse of the moral authority vested in CEOs and corporate boards of directors. This collapse has taken place simultaneously with the decline and disempowerment of employee and stakeholder rights.

The mixed picture facing the American public, in many forms and guises, presents formidable challenges that will surface in small group processes. At this juncture and for the foreseeable future, social work is in a unique position, as a profession with deep concerns for the democracy of group processes, to assume and exercise a leadership role in revitalizing interest, study, and practice in work groups as keys to change and stability.