Advanced Techniques
in Facilitating Peer Coaching Groups (PCGs)

About Facilitation and Group Process

To What Extent is the Facilitator the "Expert"?

During the initial PCG training and first few PCG meetings, members might perceive the facilitator as an expert in solving the members' individual problems. However, this perception should dissipate quickly, especially if the facilitator deals with any problems by following the guidelines in this document.

It's fair to assert that the extent to which members perceive the facilitator as the expert is proportionate to the extent to which members may lose their opportunities for learning, due to their own passivity.

When Do I, As a Facilitator, Intervene?

The ground rules in the *Circles Quick Reference* serve as a set of guidelines for what group norms are appropriate in the PCG. If a ground rule or terms of a role are being violated, this should be pointed out as soon as possible.

Ultimately, it's up to the sensitivity and judgment of the facilitator and PCG members to indicate if they perceive an action, interaction, or pattern of behavior that they believe requires intervention. Great care should be taken that the intervention addresses the behaviors or patterns of behaviors that are in violation of the ground rules or roles, rather than addressing perceived character traits of the person(s) associated with the "violations."

What if the Presenter Keeps Eye Contact Only with the Facilitator?

The presenter is the group member who is currently getting coached in a PCG meeting. Sustained eye contact from the presenter to the facilitator occurs occasionally. This should be avoided since it tends to disenfranchise the other members and indicates that the facilitator is perceived as the "leader" of the PCG, which detracts from members' ownership and development.

The facilitator should avoid continued eye contact with the presenter by occasionally looking to other members in an attempt to divert the presenter's eyes to other members. Make a note to cover certain suggestions about the PCG process in the next meeting, including mentioning to the group how important it is for presenters to acknowledge members of the PCG through comprehensive eye contact.

What if One Member Does Most of the Talking?

It's appropriate to note to the group members that PCG coaching has become somewhat uneven. Remind members how important it is to achieve as much PCG "energy" as possible for the sake of each member, and that this energy develops from members' maximum participation. If a member has been quiet, for example, for an hour, then consider asking the member if they have anything they'd like to add.

What if a PCG Member "Rescues" the Presenter?

When a presenter has a major priority about which he or she has been struggling for some time, it's sometimes very attractive for members or the facilitator to step in and "rescue" the presenter, that is, to dictate "quick solutions" to the presenter's issue, including dictating what the presenter must do.

This rescuing should be avoided. Real development for the presenter comes from their initiative in achieving their goals and resolving their issues. Rescuing not only subverts the presenter's opportunity for this development, but also establishes an imbalance in group dynamics, indicating that the "rescuing" member or facilitator holds powers greater than the rest of the PCG members.

If this "rescuing" behavior is perceived to occur in the PCG, it's appropriate to ask the presenter if they feel they have the freedom to choose their own course of action, noting that the current feedback may seem too directive.

Can the Group Set Their Own Ground Rules and Values?

This *Circles Quick Reference* includes suggested ground rules and values for groups. A group can come up with their own ground rules and values. However, the suggested ground rules have been time-tested over the years and should be modified only with great care. If modifications are being considered, then the modifications should be considered by the group as a whole and the process should be done outside the format of a peer coaching group. For example, use a discussion group format. Any more than ten ground rules can be unseemly for group members to realize. Be sure that ground rules and values are repeated at the beginning of each meeting.

Can I, As a Facilitator, Use the PCG's Process to Achieve a Goal?

Yes. Some past facilitators in the PCGs have asked the PCG for permission to present an issue to the PCG and seek their focused assistance. On these occasions, the facilitators were able to experience the presenter's role in the PCG's process. This opportunity for facilitators is best when one or two members are missing from a group, thereby freeing up time for the facilitator to take a time slot.

About Keeping PCG's Process Effective for Everyone

What if a Member Says the Process Just Isn't Working?

Weinstein (*Action Learning: A Journey in Discovery and Development,* London: HarperCollins, p. 100) points out several suggestions for those who believe their experience is not effective for them, as paraphrased below. Has the member:

1.   Told other PCG members?

2.   Asked for help?

3.   Been clear?

4.   Attended regularly?

5.   Felt committed and involved themselves?

6.   Listened to others?

7.   Taken responsibility for working out why the process seems ineffective?

8.   Helped the (members) ... to help them (by their own responses and feedback)?

The author has had a few occasions where a PCG member has called to report that the process wasn't working for them. When these members were asked if they had reported this issue to their PCG, they responded that they had not. In PCGs, members must fully and honestly participate. They must take charge of their own development experience. Members need to report their impressions and concerns to their PCG members or privately to their facilitator.

A member may feel disenfranchised from the process because he or she does not have enough in common with them. That's why it's important when organizing the PCG, that all members have a similar topic in common.

How Does One Know if the PCG's Process is "Working" for Its Members?

Schwartz (*The Skilled Facilitator,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1995, p. 21) explains that a group is working when:

1.   The services that the group delivers or the products it makes meet or exceed the performance standards of the people who receive it, use it, or review it.

2.   The processes and structures used to carry out the work maintain or enhance the capability of members to work together on subsequent group tasks.

3.   The group experience, on balance, satisfies rather than frustrates the personal needs of group members.

A facilitator or member who's wondering if "it's working" should ask the members if they think it is. This frankness models the kind of trust and confidentiality desired in the PCG and more quickly gets to the answer to the facilitator's or member's question.

Remember that it is not the facilitator's job to solve each member's problem. Instead, the job is to ensure that the PCG process is following the PCG format, agenda and ground rules.

What if the PCG's Process Seems Somewhat Stale?

Sometimes by about the fourth or fifth meeting of PCG meetings, one or more members may comment that they sense that the PCG is no longer as robust or energized as before. At these times, it's useful to pose the concern to the entire PCG to get other members' senses as well.

Review the ground rules with the group. Often, if a PCG is going stale, members will find that they have abandoned the ground rules.

Consider taking 10 minutes of the meeting to have each member record on paper their thoughts about "What we need to do to energize the PCG" and provide the notes to the facilitator. Before the next PCG meeting, the facilitator can synthesize these suggestions and pose them to members of the PCG in the next meeting, for members' discussion and conclusions. Do attempt to incorporate some suggestions in the next PCG, if only for some reinvigoration.

Dealing With Conflict

This author has seldom experienced or heard of a major conflict that could not be addressed by the following guidelines.

- **First, recognize, or name, the conflict and moving on.**
  Note that there is disagreement between members of the group and ask how the members would like to promptly address the conflict. Often, parties in the conflict can quickly find suitable means to resolving it.

- **Focus on ground rules.**
  PCG's ground rules can go a long way toward resolving conflicts. The ground rules recommended in the *Circles Quick Reference* are intended to cultivate respect and individuality among participants. Remind participants of the ground rules that apply to the conflict.

- **"Table" the conflict.**
  That is, recognize that member(s) disagree, suggest that the disagreement be put aside, and then proceed on with the PCG's agenda.

- **Invite the involved member(s) to take a "cooling off" period.**
  The member, or members, in the conflict can take five minutes to step outside of the group, while the group engages in open discussion about a matter other than the conflict.

- **If a member is chronically confrontative, then privately ask that member to quit.**
  Mention the specific recurring behaviors that are not acceptable in the group. You might offer other resources, such as getting private coaching.

About Membership and Attendance

Sometimes, for example, during the summer months or if an organization is mired in a major activity, a member may not be able to attend a PCG meeting. Ground rules assert that if a member cannot attend a PCG meeting, they call the facilitator to explain the pending absence. However, occasionally a member may begin to miss meetings without notification. In these instances, it's important to acknowledge to the member that the absence was noticed and concern exists among PCG members about the absence, and ask for a recommitment. If it's not there, pose to the rest of the members whether they want to replace the member or not.

What if a Member Doesn't Show Up?

Be sure to call the member to see if they're OK. Ask them to consider coming for the remaining half of the meeting. Remind them of the importance of attendance. If they continue to not show up to meetings, present the issue to the group and ask how they would like to address the issue.

What if Two Members Don't Show Up?

Repeat the process above. Ask the attending members if they want to continue the meeting (typically, they do). The meeting can proceed; however, the quality of feedback may be decreased due to the reduced rate of communication and diversity of views remaining in the PCG.

Can a Member Be Fired From the Group?

Yes. A member might be fired by being voted out of the group by other group members. A facilitator should be very careful not to remove a member without first getting majority or unanimous vote from other group members.

Acts that might deem being fired could include breaking terms of confidentiality, chronic absence, chronic lateness, continued rude behavior in the groups or continued provocation of conflict.

In the above cases, the facilitator might present the case to the group, hear from the member who is charged with having made the wrong act(s), asking the member to step outside the room for ten minutes, having remaining group members discuss the act(s), voting on whether the member should retain his or her membership in the group, and then letting the member come back in the room to hear the decision of the other group members.

What if a Group Member Drops Out?

Occasionally a member will drop out from a PCG. This is not a major problem. Typically, you will first find out from the facilitator that a member has left or needs to leave. See the process below for adding a member.

Can a Member or Two Be Added to a PCG?

If a member or two decides to quit a PCG, then new members can be added. The facilitator can respond with the following process.

1. Before adding a new member, the facilitator should ask the remaining PCG members whether they want to add a new member. Typically, adding a new member is well received.

2. Once the potential new member has been identified, the facilitator should tell the new member's name to the current members. Provide any additional information about the potential new member to help give current members some impression from which to decide if the new member will work out or not.

3. If current members agree to accept the new member, the facilitator calls the new member to:

   a. Tell the new member that current members agreed on the new member.

   b. Brief the newcomer on the current members, how long they have met, their positions and general descriptions of any goals that current members have worked on or are working on. Carefully consider confidentiality when providing descriptions of goals or issues because the new member is not yet vested in the PCG.

   c. Tell the new member when the next meeting is to occur and where.

4. Update the PCG membership list for new members, the facilitator and provider.

5. In the first meeting when the new member attends, take about 15 minutes for members to introduce themselves and describe their organizations. Provide a brief review of the PCG process and its evaluation, and the PCG ground rules. New members typically pick up quickly on the PCG process.

About Emotions and Therapy

How Are Strong Emotions Addressed in Groups?

The dealing with strong emotions in a group is not really a "problem in facilitation." However, dealing with strong emotions can be a major challenge for a novice facilitator. If a member is using their PCG to deal with a particularly difficult issue, the member may exhibit strong emotions in their PCG where trust and confidentiality are usually high. Showing strong emotions is a healthy response to dealing with the stress of handling such a major issue. To deal with strong emotions:

1. **Stick to the PCG process,**
    including monitoring time during the time slot, offering coaching, ideas and advice.

2. **Use "clearing".**
    The member with the strong emotion, or even confusion, can take one minute to clear. Clearing involves venting about the emotion or confusion or problem in a continuous stream of expression for the time allotted. It's important that the facilitator and other group members not intervene or judge the member who's doing the clearing.

3. **Offer a time out.**
    If a member becomes so emotional as to not be able to communicate with other group members during their own time slot, then offer the member a time out. During the time out, they can step outside the group, for example, into a hallway or outside for five minutes, and then come back.

4. **Let the group member leave that meeting.**
    If the strong emotions persist, then offer the member the opportunity to leave that meeting. At least one member should specify that they will call the emotional member within the next few days.

Are PCGs Intended to Provide Psychotherapy? (No!)

PCGs are not intended to be therapy groups, and facilitators and members should not act as if they can provide psychotherapy. PCG facilitators and members should not act as if they have the expertise to evaluate and diagnose for psychotherapy. However, there may be occasions where it may be suitable to suggest that a member pursue a psychological evaluation if the member exhibits any of the following:

    a) Continued, frequent sobbing

    b) Mention of, or actual, behavior that's hurting them or others

    c) Mention of suicide

    d) Consistently not getting their needs met in the PCG meetings