Helping **managers** manage

Eamonn O'Mahony describes how the model of supervision groups can be adapted to benefit managers in the workplace

A number of years ago, in my capacity as staff counsellor, I was approached by a manager. She immediately made clear she did not want *counselling* for personal or work-related issues but wanted a space to reflect on her work so she could manage it more effectively. This was quite an unusual request and presented me with a dilemma, given that the service was well subscribed and had a waiting list for ongoing clients. But, given the motivation of the manager, and a hope on my part that by supporting her, I would be able to contribute indirectly to the welfare of her unit, I decided to offer a monthly space. A very positive working alliance ensued and we worked together for a year or so.

Planning the group

Recognising that there must be a need for a reflective space in the wider university amongst managers, I decided to run a group. I contacted the Centre for Staff Development who were very supportive and happy to have it included in their programme. The group was advertised in their written and online brochure.

In the brochure I described the group as 'a facilitated confidential group that offers the opportunity for managers/those in a leadership role to reflect upon their work, with others, with a view to managing work more effectively'. The aim of the group was 'to create a confidential, safe and supportive environment to enable reflection on and exploration of any work issue you may choose to bring'. I was conscious in the wording of trying to get an appropriate balance between using 'counselling' language, 'organisational' language and 'everyday' language!

The first step was to decide on the structure of the group. As I wanted the group to be a reflective space, I decided to use a similar format to that used in counselling supervision groups. My aim was to offer a space where attendees could explore their work issues and get feedback from group members.

The next step was to decide on the timing and duration of the group. I decided that I wanted the group to develop a relationship over time, so structured the group over six weekly sessions. In the beginning I experimented with the frequency – going fortnightly for the final two – but the general consensus was that weekly worked best. As staff are often likely to be able to attend around lunchtime, I decided on a slot from 1-2pm.

The next decision was in relation to numbers. In order for people to have sufficient time to share, it felt important that the group was limited to a maximum of six people. However, given that the reality was that people often pulled out at the last moment or after the first session, it was decided to allow eight. It was stressed in the promotional literature that the group was a confidential space and that to gain maximum benefit from the group, attendees were expected to attend *all* six sessions.

The final decision was how to name the group. I wanted to distinguish it from other kinds of learning where the 'expert' imparts information on a particular area of expertise. I decided to name the group 'Developing reflective practice for managers'. A number of years later, having had some difficulty recruiting, I decided to change the name to 'Exploring issues in the workplace'. This seemed to make little difference!

Participants joined the group by contacting staff development to book their place. There was no

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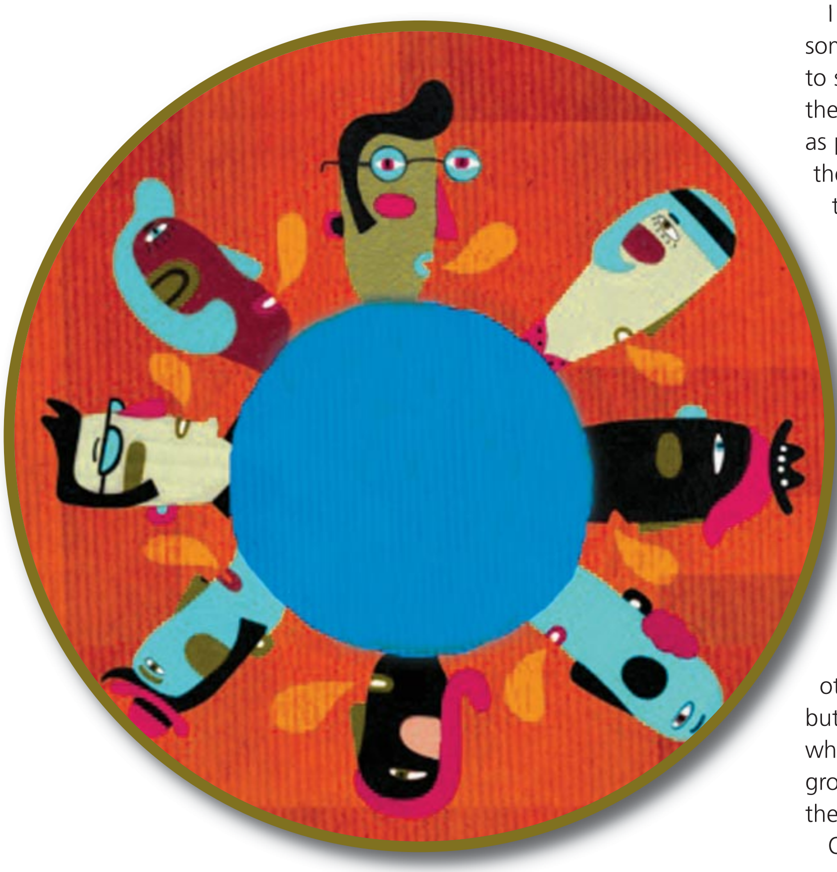
other means of selection. It felt best to allow the group to self-select. The group generally attracted staff in administrative roles but recently there has been a better balance between administrative, research and academic staff. The majority of group members over the years has been female.



Running the group

The first session is very important to set the tone and boundaries of the group. At the beginning I welcome the participants and introduce myself. I then invite each person to give a very short introduction, stating their name and role. I explain the history behind setting up the group and restate the aim of the group – to provide a supportive confidential place for managers to explore issues in the workplace. I explain my role as facilitator – that I am not there as the staff counsellor but as Eamonn, who will use his counselling skills in a facilitative way, and that I begin and end sessions. I also explain that I hope to be a participant, sharing some of my experiences.

I also explain how the content of the sessions will be group led: that the content will be generated from the group members rather than initiated by the group facilitator/leader. This format is emphasised by the seating arrangements. Instead of sitting behind tables with notepad in hand to jot down information, the group sits in a circle. This attempts to equalise the power between facilitator and facilitated. It also attempts to emphasise the importance of participants' experience as a source of learning rather than an outside source 'providing' the 'right' way to manage.

I then move on to invite participants to take some time – around five to seven minutes each – to share more about what has brought them to the group and I encourage them to be as specific as possible. As the participant shares this, I write the main points on flipchart paper. At the end of the session I keep each participant's piece and bring it to each session.

During the last part of the session I invite participants to discuss how they want the group to function and what would be important for them to get maximum benefit from the group. Issues such as confidentiality, good time-keeping, and listening respectfully to each other generally come up. I make one particular request of the group: that if they are bringing an issue in relation to another colleague, they do not name the colleague but attempt to speak about their experience and feelings. This particular request is to maintain the confidentiality of the other person who might be known to colleagues but also to avoid getting into an unproductive whining session! I also emphasise that I hope the group can be a relaxed place and be fun and I let them know it is OK to bring lunch.

Once the group rules are finished, I bring the group to a close by inviting participants in turn to say how they have experienced the session.

With the first session devoted to giving each person a chance to present their issues, subsequent sessions give more time to explore these in detail. Generally, at the beginning of each session I invite people to 'check-in'. It gives them a chance to share how they are at that moment or about their week. It also serves the function for people to report on changes, if any, that have happened since the previous session. The 'check-in' section was not part of the original format but was initiated by the group members who self-facilitated when I was unable to make a session!

Once the 'check-in' has finished, the space is then offered for one of the group to take time to explore their particular issue. The participant generally sets the scene and then gets feedback from other participants. This can be very useful to clarify what needs to be done as it often involves information-sharing about policy, procedures, and sources of help. Generally within each session, two participants have time to share, but this can be flexible.

Benefits of the group

There have been numerous benefits arising from the group.

Participants have appreciated the support given by fellow group members. One of the issues managers faced was a lack of support and time with their own manager, so they often felt isolated. Having a space to bounce off ideas was very helpful. Members were able to acknowledge they were not the only ones dealing with difficult issues like work stress, conflict in the team etc. Feedback from the group reflected this:

'It was quite a relief to realise we are not alone in encountering difficulties'

'I do not have much interaction with other managers, so in some way it was to reaffirm the way I do things is a positive way'

One of the advantages of being in a group with fellow managers was that it affirmed and encouraged the importance of developing one's own managerial style. As one manager put it:

'I loved the fact that we all learnt that actually there was not a magic answer to workplace/managerial problems. We were all facing similar situations and the way that we dealt with each problem was likely to be quite different'

Newer members of staff appreciated the knowledge of other group members in relation to understanding how the organisation worked. Every organisation has its own culture/policy and procedures and new staff can find it difficult to negotiate the transition. Having managers from different sections/staff groups also helped to give a different perspective.

'The course helped me frame my own workplace issues in the light of other university "managers". This gave me new perspectives on my work role'

One of the recurrent themes in the group was the frustration with communication between different sections of the university and the effects of this on time and productivity. The space in the group permitted participants to communicate their frustration. The expression of this frustration and having it heard seemed to free people up to move forward and make more effective decisions.

On setting up the group, my wish was that after the six sessions the group might like to continue to meet as a supportive peer group. This did not happen for any of the groups. However one group in particular suggested informal get-togethers over lunch. This did happen infrequently over a period of a year and a half. It was a nice way to maintain contact and support, and to catch up with how everyone was doing.

One of the implicit aims of the group was to create and model a healthy space for participants. The group is a system with its different roles, structure, and power dynamics. Conscious of the hierarchical nature of the university and its power dynamics, I wanted to empower the members to use their own power appropriately and in line with their own management style. Within the group I wanted to equalise power between the participants whilst at the same time exercising my own power as facilitator benignly. As each group is different, I wanted to be flexible in responding to each group's specific needs. One participant commented:

'[The facilitator] was particularly intuitive to the needs of the group as a whole as well as to individuals. He drifted quite naturally in and out of the discussion as required'

Conclusion

When I first set up the group I was unsure of how this idea would work. I was unsure if managers would be willing to dedicate an hour out of their busy schedule to sit in an unstructured group at lunchtime. Despite times when the group did not recruit, on the whole it has been a very successful and enjoyable venture. It has now run five times.

The success of the group left me with a desire to provide this kind of space to other groups. I explored the idea of offering a similar group for any member of staff. I offered one such group but it did not recruit. Perhaps the advantage of having a focused group is that there is more chance of identification between participants.

What has emerged for me is the power of placing people at the centre of their own learning. It is something I know, but each time it happens it is still a powerful experience. ■

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