**Group Facilitation**

**Definition:** Facilitation is defined as “to make something easier.”

Within a group setting, facilitation is the process of assisting a group to realize its common goals, visions, and mission. In order to achieve these aims a facilitator needs to be effective as a manager, know how to capitalize on the talents and diverse ideas of the group members, and be culturally competent.

In the previous bulletin, *Group Facilitation- Part 1: Types of Groups*, we looked at types of groups, facilitation styles, and the continuum of participation. In this bulletin we will focus on listening skills. In particular, we will look at intentional dialogue.

**Intentional Dialogue** is a tool that opens up communication between individuals about sensitive topics. It uses three steps to create an open, intimate, and safe space for the communication of emotions and feelings to take place. Intentional Dialogue was initially used in emergency and crisis hotlines and has more recently been used in couples’ therapy.

The focus of Intentional Dialogue is the content of the speaker's message and his/her feelings, not the listener's interpretation or feelings about what is being conveyed. It is not up to the listener to agree or disagree with the speaker: The role of the listener is simply to listen and ensure that s/he hears the message being sent. This is the way to create a nonjudgmental space.

**Three Steps of Intentional Dialogue**

Intentional Dialogue consists of three steps: mirroring, validating, and empathizing. The following example shows how to execute them.

**SPEAKER:**

“Even though I feel sad all the time I am frustrated because my friend insists that I go see a therapist, but I don’t believe that therapy will help me. You should see your shrink, he says.”

**LISTENER:**

1. **Mirroring** is reflecting back the idea without interpreting or adding to the message. “I hear you saying…” followed by a paraphrase of the speaker's words. For example:

   *I hear you saying that you are frustrated because your friend keeps insisting that you see a therapist and you don't think it will help you. I also hear you saying that you feel sad all the time.*

2. **Validating** is letting the speaker know that his/her view make sense even if you disagree with it. “I can see why you believe that...” validates the speaker’s point of view. For example:

   *I can see why you would be frustrated if your friend keeps suggesting something that you don’t think will help you with your sadness.*

3. **Empathizing** is acknowledging how the speaker feels about the issue s/he is sharing. “I guess you feel...” followed by a guess about the speaker's underlying feelings. For example:

   *I guess you feel upset and angry that your friend is insisting you about seeing a therapist.*

Although the listener may believe that the speaker really does need to see a therapist, during this exchange the listener suspends judgment and allows the speaker to express his/her feelings and validates how that person feels. This honest exchange wouldn’t be possible otherwise.
Now it's your turn to practice:
“My brother keeps borrowing my car but doesn't fill up the gas tank. When I tell him this he always tells me that the tank was almost empty anyway. He really pisses me off. I don't want to lend him the car but then he won't have a way to get to school or work. I'm stuck in this situation for the next few months.”

1. Mirroring

2. Validating

3. Empathizing

Intentional Dialogue as a Facilitator's Tool

Intentional Dialogue enables you to create a discussion and open up communication with participants. Using Intentional Dialogue:

- will help you determine which direction to take the group in
- will help you figure out whether participants are understanding the topic being presented
- will help you identify potential challenges, e.g., difficult clients, how they feel about certain issues
- can help create a space where clients feel comfortable expressing their opinions and emotions
- models for clients how to suspend their judgment when they listen
- models for clients how to communicate effectively

Suspending your judgment in order to accomplish effective communication is at the heart of Intentional Dialogue. It is easier to understand the speaker by clearing your mind of judgments and interpretations. Effectively using Intentional Dialogue takes practice. The more you use this tool in one-on-one conversations and group settings the better you will become at it and consequently become a more effective facilitator.

AIDS Project Los Angeles conducts training on group facilitation. For a complete list of trainings and other services offered, please visit our website, www.accionmutua.org or email accionmutua@apla.org.