Developing Structure Statements for Group Therapy
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A structure statement is a brief statement of purpose and direction made by the leader during, or following a “critical incident.” It is designed to normalize a difficult situation, as well as to define the direction that the group needs to take to resolve it. It serves to balance the two extremes that the group and its leader need to avoid: stagnation and volatility.

The formula for designing an effective structure statement is as follows:
1) an introductory statement that describes the critical incident as something that happens in group, and it to be expected and seen as valuable.
2) a statement that discusses why this incident often occurs in the context of a therapeutic group.
3) a statement about the desirable direction that the group needs to take.

In most cases, a structure statement is made only after the whole group has processed the event, and it’s time to bring it all together into a cohesive statement. Often it follows the sequence, Observation, Enquiry, Group Process, Structure Statement. Making a structure statement too early may preempt the group process, and deprive the leader of the “evidence” to support the statement that emerges from the process. In the first example below, a structure statement that is made as soon as the member challenges the leader may seem like a convenient defense. But if the other members have a chance to respond, you will inevitably find that some of the members want more disclosure from the leader, and some would feel threatened by the leader becoming more like them. By waiting, the leader is able to draw on all the feelings, as well as his own professional standards, to weave together a statement that satisfies all of the needs present.

Example 1: A member challenges the leader to become more available: “It’s common for group members to feel that the leader is too removed from the group process, and to want the leader to participate more. Group therapy often provokes such feelings in members, because the leader is never able to leave his role to join the group. Like a lifeguard, who must remain on his stand in order to see the whole picture, and to respond whenever needed, I, too, have to stay in my role. That doesn’t mean, however, that I can’t share with you aspects of my life from time to time if it serves your interests to know how I may have dealt with an issue that you face.”

Example 2: A monopolizing member: “When it comes to sharing, there’s no way to divide equally the amount of time between the number of members, and so we have to depend on everyone to remain sensitive to the needs of others to speak. However, if members do not assert their needs, other members may inadvertently overlook their needs. Group is designed to test both your sensitivity to the needs of others, as well as your ability to assert your own needs. Whenever a member is accused of taking too much time, there are usually other members not asserting their needs, as well. This is an opportunity for everyone to look at what needs to change. It’s easy to say to the one who has been doing all the work to give the others a chance, but it’s equally important for us to challenge the silent members to speak when they feel a need.”
Example 3: A member is afraid to share something very painful. “Sharing the most painful experiences in our lives takes a lot of courage, and should be done only in the safest of places. It’s important for each member to feel safe before entering into such sharing, and it may take a while before all of you are ready to do this. However, by supporting each other in a confidential setting, and by remaining committed to helping each other resolve these deep matters, group therapy is set up to enable you to heal these memories. Your job as members, and my job as a leader is to build enough trust so that each of you can enter into such sharing, never doubting that you will be accepted and supported throughout the process.”