The Group Counselor

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Beginning group leaders face a number of concerns when setting up and leading groups. Before you begin reading this chapter, ask yourself these questions: "What concerns do I have about leading a group?" "What personal characteristics, skills, and specialized knowledge do I associate with effective group leadership?" As you read this chapter, respond to these focus questions:

1. What skills for leading a group do you already possess? What specific skills do you need to acquire or improve?
2. What single personal characteristic do you think is likely to be your main asset in effectively leading groups? What single personal characteristic is most likely to impede your effectiveness as a group leader?
3. To what extent do you think the fear of making mistakes might prevent you from being as creative as you could be in facilitating a group?
4. When you think of designing and leading groups, what major potential problem do you anticipate you will encounter? How might you deal with this challenge?
5. In leading a group characterized by many forms of diversity, what would be your main challenges? To what degree are you confident of your ability to conduct groups characterized by culturally diverse membership?
6. What specific knowledge and skills do you most need to acquire to enhance your effectiveness when working with group members who are culturally different from you? What are a few steps you can take to become culturally competent?
7. How might you modify the techniques you use in a group to suit the specific needs of clients from diverse backgrounds? How can you determine the effectiveness of the techniques you employ in a culturally diverse group?
8. What are some advantages and disadvantages of coleadership of a group, both for the members and for the coleaders? In choosing a coleader, what specific qualities would you most look for?

Introduction

This chapter deals with the influence of the group counselor, both as a person and as a professional, on the direction a group takes. First, we consider the counselor as a person, addressing problems faced by beginning group leaders and the personal qualities of effective leadership. Then, looking at the group leader as a professional, we consider the specific skills of group leadership, including skills required for becoming a diversity-competent group counselor. We discuss the rationale for coleadership practices, including the advantages and disadvantages of the coleadership model. We end the chapter with a discussion of the challenges of combining research with the practice of group work.

The Group Counselor as a Person

The professional practice of leading groups is bound up with who the counselor is as a person. Indeed, the leader's ability to establish solid relationships with others in the group is probably the most important tool in facilitating
group process. As a group leader, you bring your personal qualities, values, and life experiences to every group. The person you are acts as a catalyst for bringing about change in the groups you lead. To promote growth in members’ lives, you need to be committed to reflection and growth in your own life.

We address some of the typical challenges faced by beginning group leaders, but there are many benefits to being “new” to the profession as well. We have found that our students and interns possess enormous energy, creativity, and a strong drive to be helpful to their clients. Beginning group leaders often have a drive to succeed and a fresh perspective that can help to balance their lack of experience and skill.

If you hope to inspire others to get the most out of living, it is imperative that you attend to your own vitality and that you practice self-care throughout your career. You need to have a purpose for living if you hope to challenge the members of your group to create meaning in their lives. If you are a student, now is the time to attend to this personal quest. How you deal with the stresses and anxieties of a training program have important implications for how you will function as a group counselor when you encounter challenges and stresses in your professional work (see M. Corey & Corey, 2007).

Problems and Issues Facing Beginning Group Leaders

Those who are just beginning to lead groups are typically overwhelmed by the problems they face. Those new to group work often ask themselves questions such as these:

- Will I be able to get the group started?
- What techniques should I use?
- Should I wait for the group to initiate activity?
- Do I have what it takes to follow through once something has been initiated?
- What if I like some people more than others?
- What if I make mistakes? Can I cause someone serious psychological harm?
- Do I know enough about theory? Can I apply whatever I do know in groups?
- Should I share my anxiety with my group?
- What do I do if there is a prolonged silence?
- How much should I participate in or involve myself in a personal way in the groups I lead?
- Will I have the knowledge and skills to work effectively with clients who are culturally different from me?
- What if the entire group attacks me?
- How do I know whether the group is helping people change?
- How can I work with so many people at one time?
- What do I do if I become emotionally involved and cry with my group?
Whether you are a beginning group leader or a seasoned one, successful groups cannot be guaranteed. In supervising group leaders, we hear them express their fear of making mistakes. We tell our trainees that this fear can stifle their creativity and impair their effectiveness. For example, when we are processing a group that students have facilitated in class, we ask students to share observations they had during the group work. Oftentimes trainees are very insightful, yet they keep their observations and insights to themselves because of their concern that they might say or do the wrong thing. We find that the things they are thinking, but not saying as group leaders, are often the most beneficial ideas to put into words. Use supervision and consultations to speak in an unedited manner and to see whether your thoughts about an intervention may have been therapeutic. Make a few notes after each group session, and write down the things you were thinking but chose not to say. With the help of a supervisor you may begin to find ways to put more of your clinical hunches into words.

One problem you will probably face as a beginning group leader is negative reactions from members. You need to learn how to constructively confront those who have these reactions. If you become defensive, the members may, in turn, become increasingly defensive. Allowing an undercurrent of these unresolved issues to continue will sabotage any further work. Later in this section and at different places in this book we suggest ways to deal with these situations.

It takes time to develop leadership skills, and beginning group leaders may feel like quitting after leading only a few sessions. Some people expect to be accomplished leaders without experiencing the self-doubts and fears that may be necessary to their development as leaders. Others may feel devastated if they don’t receive an abundance of positive feedback. Some struggle with the uncertainty that is a part of learning how to lead well. Nobody expects to perfect any other skill (skiing, playing the guitar, making pottery) in a few introductory lessons, and becoming an accomplished group leader is no different. Those who finally experience success at these endeavors are the ones who have the endurance to progress in increments.

There is probably no better teacher than experience, but unguided experience can be unsatisfactory. We cannot stress enough the importance of supervision by experienced group leaders. Immediate feedback—from a supervisor, from coleaders, or from other students in a training group—enables leaders to profit from the experience. Group supervision of group leaders offers unique opportunities for both cognitive and affective learning because it provides a way to experience group process, to observe models of group leadership, and to receive feedback from many perspectives (DeLucia-Waack & Fauth, 2004).

**Personal Characteristics of the Effective Group Leader**

In our view who the counselor is as a person is one of the most significant variables influencing the group’s success or failure. In discussing the personality characteristics of the effective group practitioner with some of our colleagues,
we have found that it is difficult to list all the traits of successful leaders and even more difficult to agree on one particular personality type associated with effective leadership. The following sections discuss some aspects of a group leader’s personality that we deem to be especially important. As you read about each of these dimensions, reflect on how it applies to you. Consider the degree to which you are at least on the road to acquiring the traits essential for your success as a group leader.

**Courage**  A critical personal trait of effective group leaders is courage. Courage is demonstrated through your willingness (a) to be vulnerable at times, admitting mistakes and imperfections and taking the same risks you expect group members to take; (b) to confront others but to stay present with them as you work out conflicts; (c) to act on your beliefs and hunches; (d) to be emotionally affected by others and to draw on your experiences to identify with them; (e) to examine your life; and (f) to be direct and honest with members in a caring and respectful way.

**Willingness to Model**  One of the best ways to teach desired behaviors is by modeling them in the group. Through your behavior and the attitudes conveyed by it, you can create such group norms as openness, seriousness of purpose, acceptance of others, respect for a diversity of values, and the desirability of taking risks. Remember that you teach largely by example—by doing what you expect members to do. Realize that your role differs from that of the group member, but do not hide behind a professional facade. Engaging in honest, appropriate, and timely self-disclosure can be a way to fulfill the leadership function of modeling.

Disclosing your reactions to a member’s behavior and sharing your perceptions provides feedback that the person may find very helpful. For example, consider a member who talks a great deal yet leaves out how she is feeling. You might say, “As I listen to you, I am not sure what you want us to hear. I wonder what you are feeling and what you are aware of in your body as you are telling your story.” When a group member talks a lot, but says very little, other group members may no longer listen to this person and may display frustration and a lack of interest. The group leader's response challenges the talkative member and invites the member to connect to her emotions while modeling a way other members can confront people without judging them or shutting them down. The member is invited to explore her inner experience more from a place of interest and curiosity than from criticism.

**Presence**  The ability to be present with group members is extremely important. Presence involves being touched by others’ pain, struggles, and joys. However, it also involves not becoming overwhelmed by a member’s pain. Presence implies not being distracted, but being fully attentive to what is going on in the moment. Some members may elicit anger in a group leader, and others may evoke pain, sadness, guilt, or happiness. You become more emotionally involved with others by paying close attention to your own reactions. This does not mean
that you will necessarily talk about the situation in your own life that caused you the pain or evoked the anger. It means that you will allow yourself to experience these feelings, even for just a few moments. Fully experiencing emotions gives you the ability to be compassionate and empathic with others. As you are moved by others’ experiences, it is equally important to maintain your boundaries and to avoid the trap of overidentifying with your clients’ situations.

To increase your ability to be present, spend some time alone before leading a group and block out distractions as much as possible. Prepare yourself by thinking about the people in the group and about how you might increase your involvement with them.

**Goodwill, Genuineness, and Caring**  A sincere interest in the welfare of others is essential in a group leader. Your main job in the group is to help members get what they are coming for, not to get in their way. Caring involves respecting, trusting, and valuing people. It may be exceedingly difficult for you to care for certain group members, but we hope you will at least want to care. It is vital that you become aware of what kind of people you care for and what kind you find it difficult to care for—and to know what this tells you about yourself.

There are various ways of exhibiting a caring attitude. One way is by inviting a client to participate and allowing that person to decide how far to go. Or you can observe discrepancies between a client’s words and behavior and confront that person in a way that doesn’t intensify fear and resistance. Another way to express caring is by giving warmth, concern, and support when, and only when, you genuinely feel it toward a person. Even when you don’t feel warmth, show your clients respect and caring.

**Belief in Group Process**  We believe that a deep confidence in the value of group process is positively related to constructive outcomes. You need to believe in what you are doing and trust the therapeutic process in a group. We are convinced that our enthusiasm and convictions are powerful both in attracting a clientele and in providing an incentive to work.

It is often during the most difficult moments in group work that we are challenged to both trust the process and our ability to help group members navigate the conflicts, as well as other painful dynamics, that often arise in group work. One result of working through the rough times is that group members often describe a greater sense of closeness with one another and a deeper sense of self than they could have achieved without the growing pains involved in participating in the group.

**Openness**  Openness means that you reveal enough of yourself to give the participants a sense of who you are as a person. It does not mean that you reveal every aspect of your personal life. Your being open can enhance group process if you appropriately reveal your reactions to the members and to how you are being affected by them. Your openness can foster a corresponding spirit of openness within the group. It will enable members to become more open about their feelings and beliefs, and it will lend fluidity to the group process.
Self-revelation is not to be used as a technique; it is best done spontaneously, when it seems appropriate. Here is an example of something we might say to a client who is typically very intellectual but at this moment is showing his emotions: “I really respect your intellect, and I know it has served you well. Yet at this moment I am so struck by the way you are sharing yourself emotionally with us. It is delightful to experience this side of you.” This authentic and spontaneous statement highlights the client doing something he has expressed as a personal goal, reinforcing his efforts at emotional expression. It also acknowledges the part of the client that he values—his intellect. The compliment does not diminish one part in order to reinforce another. By sharing her perceptions and personal reactions with this member, the leader has provided another form of self-disclosure.

Nondefensiveness in Coping With Criticism  Dealing frankly with criticism is related to openness. Many of the challenges you may be subjected to by group members require the clinician to develop a thick skin. Members may sometimes accuse you of not caring enough, of being selective in your caring, of structuring the sessions too much, or of not providing enough direction. Some of the criticism may be fair—and some of it may be an unfair expression of jealousy, testing authority, or projection onto you of feelings for other people. It is crucial for you to nondefensively explore with the group the feelings behind the criticism.

If members take a risk and confront the leader and are chastised for doing this, they are likely to withdraw. Furthermore, others in the group may receive the message that openness and honesty are not really valued. Even if someone verbally abuses you as a leader, it is not therapeutic for you to respond in kind. Instead, model an effective and nonaggressive way of expressing your thoughts and feelings. Maintaining a therapeutic stance with group members does not mean that you need to be unaffected by behavior that is difficult and perhaps even attacking or verbally abusive. You can tell the person your reactions and let him or her know how you are affected by the confrontation. By modeling effective ways to express anger or frustration, you provide members with helpful ways of expressing these emotions in a respectful manner.

Becoming Aware of Subtle Culture Issues  Most of us think of ourselves as open-minded and nonjudgmental. However, it is nearly impossible to be raised in a society filled with cultural discrimination and not to hold some degree of prejudice or misinformation about people who differ from us. Most of the cultural mistakes and harm we cause as group leaders are unconscious and nondeliberate on our part, so it is crucial for us to engage in processes that challenge our worldview and our values. Becoming aware of the unconscious parts of ourselves requires deep and critical self-analysis. The harm we do is not less painful to the individual because it is not intended. The following scenario illustrates how a group leader’s unconscious and nondeliberate cultural naivete can present itself.
During one group session, an African American woman was speaking in an angry and loud tone to a Caucasian female group member. The therapist intervened, asking the African American woman to lower her voice and to speak in a way that was easier for the other member to hear. On the surface you may think this is a reasonable request, but the underlying message received by the African American woman was to “be polite and don’t make the White woman uncomfortable.” If you are unaware of the fact that many African Americans feel resentful when asked to contain their emotions or to edit themselves to make others feel comfortable, you will miss the subtle racism in this exchange.

Another way you might handle this is to say to the African American member, “I can appreciate how frustrated and angry you are, and it seems that you need to express this to Sue right now. You have mentioned that you edit and censor yourself around Caucasians and how this gets in the way of being yourself. I’m not telling you to deny your anger. You have a right to express it. However, I am concerned that the way in which you are doing it at this moment is not getting your message heard. I think you deserve to have your message heard, and I want to support you with that.” This response conveys an understanding of the complexities of race and race relations and validates the potential conflict the African American member may feel when asked to “lower her voice.” It also does not immobilize you as a leader and provides you with a way to be culturally sensitive to the client while also challenging her to find a way to get her message heard.

As group leaders, if we increase our awareness of our own prejudices and biases, we stand a better chance of dealing effectively with prejudicial attitudes or remarks made in a group. Even in groups of people who consider themselves open and culturally aware, racial or culturally insensitive remarks are not uncommon. Racist remarks that go unnoticed or unaddressed by leaders or the members do influence the group process. The moments in which these subtle and overt comments are made are timely opportunities for learning and for leader facilitation. If a sexist, homophobic, or racially derogatory comment is made and goes unattended, it can create a climate of mistrust and anger on the part of many members. If the comment is addressed by members rather than the leader, it is crucial to take a nondefensive stance in exploring the impact of the incident and to acknowledge your lack of awareness or failure to attend to such comments.

**Being Able to Identify With a Client’s Pain**

It is unrealistic for us to expect that we have experienced the same problems as all of our clients, but the emotions are common to all of us. We all experience psychological pain, even though the causes of this pain may be different. One basis for empathizing with clients is being open to the sources of pain in your own life without becoming swept up by this pain. It is good to remember that we typically can only take a client as far on his or her personal journey as the road we have willingly explored ourselves.

Over the years, we have found that it is often the most difficult paths we have taken and the greatest pains we have endured that have helped to fine
tune our clinical intuition and effectiveness. It is not merely having had difficult times, but the willingness to think critically about those times that helps us use these experiences in effective ways as group leaders. For example, if you have experienced incest as a child and have not done your personal work in this area, it is likely that your clients’ stories of incest will affect you to the degree that you will not be effective with them. However, if you have engaged in your own process of healing, you will likely possess an understanding and a sensitivity that will show in your work with group members.

**Personal Power**  
Personal power does not entail domination of members or manipulation of them toward the leader's end. Rather, it is the dynamic and vital characteristic of leaders who know who they are and what they want. This power involves a sense of confidence in self. Such leaders’ lives are an expression of what they espouse. Instead of merely talking about the importance of being alive, powerful leaders express enthusiastic energy and radiate aliveness through their actions.

Power and honesty are closely related. In our view people with personal power are the ones who can show themselves. Although they may be frightened by certain qualities within themselves, the fear doesn't keep them from examining these qualities. Powerful people recognize and accept their weaknesses and don't expend energy concealing them from themselves and others. In contrast, powerless people may very much want to defend themselves against self-knowledge. They often act as if they are afraid that their vulnerabilities will be discovered.

Clients sometimes view leaders as perfect. They tend to undercut their own power by giving their leaders too much credit for their insights and changes. We have a concern that leaders will too readily accept their clients’ perceptions and admiration of them. Effective group leaders recognize the ways in which they have been instrumental in bringing about change, and at the same time they encourage clients to accept their own share of credit for their growth.

**Stamina**  
Group leading can be taxing and draining as well as exciting and energizing. Therefore, you need physical and psychological stamina and the ability to withstand pressure to remain vitalized throughout the course of a group. Be aware of your own energy level and seek ways to replenish it. It is crucial to have sources other than your groups for psychological nourishment. If you depend primarily on the success level of your groups for this sustenance, you run a high risk of being undernourished and thus of losing the stamina so vital to your success as a leader. If you work primarily with very challenging groups, this is bound to have an impact on your energy level. Unrealistically high expectations can also affect your stamina. Leaders who expect immediate change are often disappointed in themselves and are too quick to judge themselves inadequate. Faced with the discrepancy between their vision of what the group should be and what actually occurs, leaders may lose their enthusiasm and begin to blame not only themselves but also the group members for the lack of change within the group. If your enthusiasm begins to fade, being
aware of it is an excellent place to start. Examine your expectations, and if they are unrealistic, make efforts at acquiring a more realistic perspective.

**Commitment to Self-Care** If we hope to maintain our stamina, we need to take care of ourselves. Those of us in the helping professions have been socialized to think of others, and we often have difficulty recognizing our own needs and taking care of ourselves. At times we may give to the point of depletion and in the process neglect to care for ourselves. A growing body of research reveals the negative toll exacted from mental health practitioners in symptoms such as moderate depression, mild anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and disturbed relationships (Norcross & Guy, 2007). To be able to meet the many tasks facing us as group leaders, we need to be committed to developing effective self-care strategies. Self-care is not a luxury but an ethical mandate. We cannot provide nourishment to those in our groups if we don’t nourish ourselves.

Self-care is a basis for utilizing your strengths, which can enable you to deal effectively with the stresses of your work and prevent some of the risk factors leading to burnout. Staying alive both personally and professionally is not something that happens automatically; it is the result of a commitment to acquiring habits of thinking and action that promote wellness. Baker (2003) emphasizes the importance of tending to mind, body, and spirit. This involves learning to pay attention to and be respectful of our needs, which is a lifelong task for therapists. It is difficult to maintain our vitality if we are not consistently tending to our whole being. If we demonstrate a commitment to taking care of ourselves, we are modeling an important lesson for the members of our groups. For an excellent discussion on this topic, we recommend Norcross and Guy’s (2007) book, *Leaving It at the Office: A Guide to Psychotherapist Self-Care*.

**Self-Awareness** A central characteristic for any therapeutic person is an awareness of self, including one’s identity, cultural perspective, power and privilege, goals, motivations, needs, limitations, strengths, values, feelings, and problems. If you have a limited understanding of who you are, it is unlikely that you will be able to facilitate any kind of awareness in clients. As we’ve mentioned, being open to new life experiences is one way to expand your awareness. Involvement in your own personal therapy, both group and individual, is another way for you to become more aware of who you are. It is essential that you become aware of your personal characteristics; unresolved problems may either help or hinder your work as a group counselor. Awareness of why you choose to lead groups is crucial, including knowing what needs you are meeting through your work. How can you encourage others to risk self-discovery if you are hesitant to come to terms with yourself? Reflect on interactions you have had with members of your groups; this is a potentially rich source of information about yourself.

**Sense of Humor** Although therapy is serious business, there are humorous dimensions to the human condition. The ability to laugh at yourself and to see the humor in your human frailties can be extremely useful in helping
members keep a balanced perspective and avoid becoming “psychologically heavy.” Groups occasionally exhibit a real need for laughter and joking simply to release built-up tension. Laughter is good for the soul, and genuine humor can heal. Humor can be a natural way to show one's human side, and it may encourage members to utilize their own sense of humor. We continue to find that using spontaneous wit makes us more real to the members of our groups and results in their being less intimidated by the power differential. However, everything we do and say has the power either to heal or to harm. Being spontaneous and using humor may evoke both positive and negative reactions from clients. This does not mean you should avoid humor, but be cognizant of its potential impact on members.

Inventiveness  The capacity to be spontaneous and to approach each group with fresh ideas is a most important characteristic. Freshness may not be easy to maintain, particularly if you lead groups frequently. It is important to discover new ways of approaching a group by inventing experiments that emerge from here-and-now interactions. Working with challenging coleaders is another source of fresh ideas.

If you listen to the members in your group, you will discover opportunities to tap into their creativity. If a member is an artist, you could encourage her to share some of her work with the group, or she might lead the group in an activity involving creative arts. During one particularly tense session that had gone on for hours, the group members and leaders decided to step outside for some fresh air and movement. One of the members, who happened to be a soccer coach, had a ball with him and taught the other members some soccer moves. This was highly effective in releasing tension, getting unstuck, and allowed a typically shy member to take on a leadership role. It enabled the group to be playful with one another and had a more positive effect than continuing to talk. Preplanned exercises and activities can be useful, but often the most powerful use of creativity comes for the members themselves. Create a space in which this creativity can be valued and explored.

Personal Dedication and Commitment  Being a professional who makes a difference involves having ideals that provide meaning and direction in your life. This kind of dedication has direct application for leading groups. If you believe in the value of group process, and if you have a vision of how groups can empower individuals, you will be better able to ride out difficult times in a group. If you have a guiding vision, you can use it to stay focused and on track with group members when the waters get rough.

Develop a stance of curiosity with group members and encourage them to do so as well. All member behavior has meaning and serves a purpose, if we choose to view it as such. Even the most difficult of members can and should be seen as approachable in spite of how challenging they may make it for others to care for them. “Masks reveal what they are intended to conceal,” which we interpret as meaning that the very things people do to keep themselves
hidden tell us a lot about who they are, what they fear, what is painful, and what they desire. It's our job to help members discard those masks and to present themselves in more authentic and direct ways. We can do this only if we are invested in them both while they are wearing the mask as well as when they are not. We need to convey acceptance of and commitment to the members of our groups, especially when they are behaving in difficult ways. We are there to support them in good times and in bad times.

Being a dedicated professional also involves humility, which means being open to feedback and ideas and being willing to explore one's self. Humility does not mean being self-effacing. It is the opposite of the arrogance that is implied in convincing ourselves that we have nothing more to learn. The best teachers are always learning and never arriving at a place of being all-knowing or of feeling like a finished product. In fact, one of the great gifts of our profession is that the process of doing what we do allows us to become better human beings. In addition, professional commitment entails staying abreast of changes in the field, reading journals and books, and attending professional workshops.

The Group Counselor as a Professional

Overview of Group Leadership Skills

It is generally accepted that a positive therapeutic relationship is necessary but not sufficient to produce client change. Certainly it is essential that leaders possess the knowledge of how groups best function and that they have the skills to intervene in timely and effective ways. Creating a group climate that fosters interpersonal norms such as openness, directness, respect, and concern for one another will lead to therapeutic interactions among members. Riva, Wachtel, and Lasky (2004) state that “an essential leader behavior is to foster a group climate that is safe, positive, and supportive, yet strong enough to at times withstand highly charged emotions, challenges, and interactions between members” (p. 41).

The group leader's supportive relationship with members is a requisite for client change (Dies, 1994), and the leader's interpersonal skills, genuineness, empathy, and warmth are significant variables in creating the kind of climate that leads to successful outcomes. Personality characteristics of successful group leaders include empathy, competence, responsiveness and attentiveness, presence, and engagement. The therapist's personal development and awareness of personal style are influential aspects of the therapeutic relationship (Fuhriman & Burlingame, 1990), but awareness of how the therapist's behavior may influence the group is also crucial. Group leaders are responsible for activating the therapeutic factors within the group (Riva et al., 2004).

In addition to personal characteristics, group leaders need to acquire a body of knowledge and a set of skills specific to group work. Counseling skills can be taught, but there is also an element of art involved in using these skills
in a sensitive and timely way. Learning how and when to use these skills is a function of supervised experience, practice, feedback, and confidence.

Several points about the skills discussed next need to be clarified. First, these skills can best be thought of as existing on a continuum of competence rather than on an all-or-nothing basis. They can be fully mastered and used in a sensitive and appropriate manner, or they can be only minimally developed. Second, these skills can be learned and refined through training and supervised experience. Participating in a group as a member is one good way to determine what a group is about. Leading or coleading a group under supervision is another excellent way to acquire and improve leadership skills. Third, group leaders must be able to multitask, continuously scanning the room, observing the verbal and nonverbal communications of multiple members, and tracking process and content issues for each member. This can be exhausting at first but becomes easier as you gain experience. It is helpful to have a coleader whenever possible to share this burden.

Fourth, these skills are not discrete entities; they overlap a great deal. Active listening, reflection, and clarification are interdependent. Hence, by developing certain skills, you are bound to automatically improve other skills. Fifth, these skills cannot be divorced from who you are as a person. Sixth, choosing the skills to develop and use are expressions of your personality and your leadership style.

We will now consider some of the skills you will need to acquire and continue to refine as a competent group leader.

**Active Listening**  It is most important to learn how to pay full attention to others as they communicate, and this process involves more than merely listening to the words. It involves absorbing the content, noting gestures and subtle changes in voice or expression, and sensing underlying messages. Group leaders can improve their listening skills by first recognizing the barriers that interfere with paying attention to others. Some of these roadblocks are not really listening to the other, thinking about what to say next instead of giving full attention to the other, being overly concerned about one’s role or about how one will look, and judging and evaluating without putting oneself in the other person’s place. Like any other therapeutic skill, active listening exists in degrees. The skilled group leader is sensitive to the congruence (or lack of it) between what a member is saying in words and what he or she is communicating through body posture, gestures, mannerisms, and voice inflections. For instance, a man may be talking about his warm and loving feelings toward his wife, yet his body may be rigid and his voice listless. A woman recalling a painful situation may be smiling and holding back tears. In addition to group leaders listening well to members, it is important that leaders teach members how to listen actively to one another.

**Reflecting**  Reflecting, a skill that is dependent on active listening, is the ability to convey the essence of what a person has communicated so the person can see it. Many inexperienced group leaders find themselves confining most
of their interactions to mere reflection. As members continue to talk, these leaders continue to reflect. Carried to its extreme, however, reflection may have little meaning; for example:

**Member:** I really didn’t want to come to the group today. I’m bored, and I don’t think we’ve gotten anyplace for weeks.

**Leader:** You didn’t want to come to the group because you’re bored and the group isn’t getting anywhere.

There is plenty of rich material here for the leader to respond to in a personal way, with some confrontation, or by asking the person and the other members to examine what is going on in the group. Beginning on a reflective level may have value, but staying on that level produces blandness. The leader might have done better to reply in this way:

**Leader:** You sound discouraged about the possibility of getting much from this experience.

The leader would then have been challenging the member to look at the emotions that lay beneath his words and, in the process, would have been opening up opportunities for meaningful communication.

**Clarifying** Clarifying is a skill that can be valuably applied during the initial stages of a group. It involves focusing on key underlying issues and sorting out confusing and conflicting feelings; for example:

**Member:** I’m angry with my father, and I wish I didn’t have to see him anymore. He hurts me so often. I feel guilty when I feel this way, because I also love him and wish he would appreciate me.

**Leader:** You have feelings of love and anger, and somehow having both of these feelings at once presents a problem for you.

Clarification can help the client sort out her feelings so that she can eventually experience both love and anger without experiencing overwhelming guilt. However, it may take some time before she can accept this polarity.

**Summarizing** The skill of summarizing is particularly useful after an initial check-in at the beginning of a group session. When the group process becomes bogged down or fragmented, summarizing is often helpful in deciding where to go next. For example, after several members have expressed an interest in working on a particular personal problem, the leader might point out common elements that connect these members.

At the end of a session the leader might make some summary statements or ask each member to summarize. For instance, a leader might say, “Before we close, I’d like each of us to make a statement about his or her experience in the group today along with a statement about what is left to think about for future work.” It is a good idea for the leader to make the first summary statement, providing members with a model for this behavior.
Facilitating  The group leader can facilitate the group process by (1) assisting members to openly express their fears and expectations, (2) actively working to create a climate of safety and acceptance in which people can trust one another and therefore engage in productive interchanges, (3) providing encouragement and support as members explore highly personal material or as they try new behavior, (4) involving as many members as possible in the group interaction by inviting and sometimes even challenging members to participate, (5) working toward lessening the dependency on the leader by encouraging members to speak directly to one another, (6) encouraging open expression of conflict and controversy, and (7) helping members overcome barriers to direct communication. The aim of most facilitation skills is to help the group members reach their own goals. Essentially, these skills involve opening up clear communication among the members and helping them increase their responsibility for the direction of their group.

Empathizing  An empathic group leader can sense the subjective world of the client. This skill requires the leader to have the characteristics of caring and openness already mentioned. The leader must also have a wide range of experiences to serve as a basis for identifying with others. This is especially important in being able to empathize with a culturally diverse client population. Further, the leader must be able to discern subtle nonverbal messages as well as messages transmitted more directly. It is impossible to fully know what another person is experiencing, but a sensitive group leader can have a sense of it. It is also important, however, for the group leader to avoid blurring his or her identity by overidentifying with group members. The core of the skill of empathy lies in being able to openly grasp another's experiencing and at the same time to maintain one's separateness.

Interpreting  Group leaders who are highly directive are likely to make use of interpretation, which entails offering possible explanations for certain behaviors or symptoms. If interpretations are plausible and well timed, they result in a member’s moving beyond an impasse. It is not necessary that the leader always make the interpretation for the client; in Gestalt therapy, clients are encouraged to make their own interpretations of their behavior. A group leader can also present an interpretation in the form of a hunch, the truth of which the client can then assess. For instance, an interpretation might be stated as follows: “Harry, when a person in the group talks about something painful, I’ve noticed that you usually intervene and become reassuring. This tends to stop the person’s emotional experience and exploration. What might that say about what is going on with you?” It is important that the interpretation be presented as a hypothesis rather than as a fact and that the person has a chance to consider the validity of this hunch in the group. Thus, it is essential not to interpret too soon. It is also important to consider the cultural context in making an interpretation to avoid mistakenly interpreting a member’s behavior. For example, a member’s silence may be related to a cultural message rather
than being a sign of mistrust or resistance. To interpret the person’s silence as a sign of a lack of trust would be a mistake without understanding the cultural aspects of the behavior.

In addition to making interpretations for individuals, whole-group interpretations are appropriate. An example of this is a leader pointing out how many members may be invested in attempting to draw a particular member out. A leader might suggest that such behavior is an avoidance pattern on the part of the group as a whole. This interpretation may mean something very different during a transition stage than in a working stage. Member behavior needs to be viewed and interpreted in light of the developmental level of the group.

**Questioning**

Questioning is overused by many group leaders. Interrogation seldom leads to productive outcomes, and more often than not it distracts the person working. If a member happens to be experiencing intense feelings, questioning is one way of reducing the intensity. Asking “Why do you feel that way?” is rarely helpful because it takes the emotional material to the cerebral level. However, appropriately timed “what” and “how” questions do serve to intensify experiencing. Examples are questions such as “What is happening with your body now, as you speak about your isolation?” “In what ways do you experience the fear of rejection in this group?” “What are some of the things you imagine happening to you if you reveal your problems to this group?” “How are you coping with your fear that you can’t trust some of the members here?” “What would your father’s approval do for you?” These open-ended questions direct the person to heighten awareness of the moment. Leaders can develop the skill of asking questions like these and avoiding questions that remove people from themselves. Closed questions that are not helpful include those that search for causes of behavior, probe for information, and the like: “Why do you feel depressed?” “Why don’t you leave home?”

Group leaders need to develop skills in raising questions at the group level as well as working with individual members. Group process questions such as these can be productively addressed to the group as a whole: “Where is the group with this topic now?” “I’m noticing that many of you are silent. I wonder what is not being said.” “How much energy is in the group at this time?” Such questions can assist members in reflecting on what is happening in the group at different points.

**Linking**

A group leader who has an interactional focus—that is, one who stresses member-to-member rather than leader-to-member communication—makes frequent use of linking. This is an important skill that can foster involvement by many members. This skill calls on the insightfulness of the leader in finding ways of relating what one person is doing or saying to the concerns of another person. For example, Katherine might be describing her feeling that she won’t be loved unless she’s perfect. If Pamela has been heard to express a similar feeling, the leader could ask Pamela and Katherine to talk with each other in the group about their fears. By being alert for cues that members have some common concern, the leader can promote member interaction and
raise the level of group cohesion. Questions that can promote linking of members include “Does anyone else in the group feel connected to what Katherine is saying?” or “Who else is affected by the interchange between Pamela and Katherine?”

**Confronting**  Beginning group leaders are often afraid to confront group members for fear of hurting them, of being wrong, or of inviting retaliation. It doesn’t take much skill to attack another or to be merely critical. It does take both caring and skill, however, to confront group members when their behavior is disruptive of the group functioning or when there are discrepancies between their verbal messages and their nonverbal messages. In confronting a member, a leader should (1) challenge specifically the behavior to be examined and avoid labeling the person, and (2) share how he or she feels about the person’s behavior. For example, Danny has been chastising a group member for being especially quiet in the sessions. The leader might intervene: “Danny, rather than telling her that she should speak up, are you willing to let her know how her silence affects you?”

As is true for other skills, confronting is a skill that leaders need to learn in challenging both individual members and the group as a whole. For example, if the group seems to be low in energy and characterized by superficial discussions, the leader might challenge the members to talk about what they see going on in the group and determine whether they want to change what is happening.

**Supporting**  Supportive behavior can be therapeutic or counterproductive. A common mistake is offering support before a participant has had an opportunity to fully experience a conflict or some painful feelings. Although the intervention may be done with good intentions, it may abort certain feelings that the member needs to experience. Leaders should remember that too much support may send the message that people are unable to support themselves. Support is appropriate when people are facing a crisis, when they are venturing into frightening territory, when they attempt constructive changes and yet feel uncertain about these changes, and when they are struggling to rid themselves of old patterns that are limiting. This kind of support does not interrupt the work being done. For instance, Isaac feels very supported when several members sit close to him and listen intently as he recounts some frightening experiences as a refugee. Their presence helps him to feel less alone.

**Blocking**  Group leaders have the responsibility to block certain activities of group members, such as questioning, probing, gossiping, invading another’s privacy, breaking confidences, and so forth. Blocking helps to establish group norms and is an important intervention particularly during the group’s initial stages. If a member or members are bombarding another member with questions and pushing the member to be more personal, the leaders should comment on the process and ask the questioning members to examine the intent and consequence of their style of engagement, as well as help the member being
questioned to express his reservations about disclosing. In addition, sometimes members push others to become more personal as a way for them to remain hidden. The skill here is to learn to block counterproductive behaviors without attacking the personhood of the perpetrator. This requires both sensitivity and directness. Here are some examples of behaviors that need to be blocked:

- **Bombarding others with questions.** Members can be asked to make direct statements that involve expressing the thoughts and feelings that prompted them to ask their questions.
- **Gossiping.** If a member talks about another member in the room, the leader can ask the person to speak directly to the person being spoken about.
- **Storytelling.** If lengthy storytelling occurs, a leader can intervene and ask the person to say how all this relates to present feelings and events.
- **Breaking confidences.** A member may inadvertently talk about a situation that occurred in another group or mention what someone did in a prior group. The consequences and impact of breaking confidentiality need to be thoroughly discussed. Leaders need to teach members how to speak about their experiences in such a way as to maintain the confidentiality and privacy of other group members.

**Assessing**  
Assessment skills involve more than identifying symptoms and figuring out the cause of behavior. Assessment includes the ability to appraise certain behavior problems and to choose the appropriate intervention. For example, a leader who determines that a person is angry must consider the safety and appropriateness of encouraging the member to express pent-up feelings. Leaders also need to develop the skill of determining whether a particular group is indicated or contraindicated for a member, and they need to acquire the expertise necessary to make appropriate referrals.

**Modeling**  
One of the best ways for leaders to teach a desired behavior to members is to model it for them. If group leaders value risk taking, openness, directness, sensitivity, honesty, respect, and enthusiasm, it is essential to demonstrate attitudes and behaviors congruent with these values. Leaders can best foster these qualities in members by demonstrating them in the group. A few specific behaviors leaders can directly model include respect for diversity, appropriate and timely self-disclosure, giving feedback in ways that others can hear and accept nondefensively, receiving feedback from members in a nondefensive manner, involvement in the group process, presence, and challenging others in direct and caring ways. In groups that are cofacilitated, the relationship between the coleaders can set norms for appropriate engagement between members.

**Suggesting**  
Leaders can offer suggestions aimed at helping members develop an alternative course of thinking or action. Suggestions can take a number of forms, such as giving information, asking members to consider a specific homework assignment, asking members to create their own experiments, and
assisting members in looking at a circumstance from a new vantage point. Leaders can also teach members to offer appropriate suggestions to each other. Although suggestions can facilitate change in members, there is a danger that suggestions can be given too freely and that advice can short-circuit the process of self-exploration. There is a fine line between suggesting and prescribing; the skill is in using suggestions to enhance an individual’s movement toward making his or her own decisions.

**Initiating**  When the leader takes an active role in providing direction to members, offers some structure, and takes action when it is needed, the group is aided in staying focused on its task. These leadership skills include using catalysts to get members to focus on their personal goals, assisting members in working through places where they are stuck, helping members identify and resolve conflict, knowing how to use techniques to enhance work, providing links among the various themes in a group, and helping members assume responsibility for directing themselves. Too much leader initiation can stifle the creativity of a group, and too little leader initiation can lead to passivity on the part of the members.

**Evaluating**  A crucial leadership skill is evaluating the ongoing process and dynamics of a group. After each group session it is valuable for the leader to evaluate what happened, both within individual members and within the whole group, and to think about what interventions might be used next time with the group. Leaders need to get in the habit of asking themselves these questions: “What changes are resulting from the group?” “What are the therapeutic and nontherapeutic forces in the group?”

The leader has the role of teaching participants how to evaluate, so they can appraise the movement and direction of their own group. Once the group has evaluated a session or series of sessions, its members can decide what, if any, changes need to be made. For example, during an evaluation at the close of a session, perhaps the leader and the members agree that the group as a whole has not been as productive as it could be. The leader might say, “Each one of us might reflect on our participation to determine our degree of responsibility for what is happening in our group. What is each one of us willing to change to make this group more successful?”

**Terminating**  Group leaders need to learn when and how to terminate their work with both individuals and groups. They need to develop the ability to tell when a group session should end, when an individual is ready to leave a group, and when a group has completed its work, and they need to learn how to handle each of these types of termination. Of course, at the end of each session it is helpful to create a climate that will encourage members to make contracts to do work between sessions. This will help members build the skills they will need when the group itself is coming to an end. By focusing members on the ending of each session, they are better prepared to deal with the final termination of their group.
The skill of helping members to bring closure to a particular group experience involves (1) providing members with suggestions for transferring what they have learned in the group to the environment they must return to, (2) preparing people for the psychological adjustments they may face on leaving a group, (3) arranging for a follow-up group, (4) telling members where they can get additional therapy, and (5) being available for individual consultation at the termination of a group. Follow-up and evaluation activities are particularly important if the leader is to learn the effectiveness of the group as a therapeutic agent.

It is important for group leaders to have examined their own history with loss and to be aware of the issues that may be triggered for them during the ending stage of group. In Chapter 8 we explore some creative ways leaders can facilitate positive and healthy termination for group members.

An Integrated View of Leadership Skills

Some counselor-education programs focus mainly on developing counseling skills and assessing competencies, whereas other programs stress the personal qualities that underlie these skills. Ideally, training programs for group leaders give due attention to both of these aspects. In the discussion of professional standards for training group counselors in Chapter 3, we go into more detail about specific areas of knowledge and the skills group workers need.

We want to acknowledge that you are likely to feel somewhat overwhelmed when you consider all the skills that are necessary for effective group leadership. It may help to remember that, as in other areas of life, you will become frustrated if you attempt to focus on all aspects of this field at once. You can expect to gradually refine your leadership style and gain confidence in using these skills effectively.

Becoming a Diversity-Competent Group Counselor

In addition to the group leadership skills already discussed, special knowledge and skills are required when dealing with culturally diverse group members. In this section, we present a conceptual framework that organizes diversity competence into three areas: beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skills. As you read, try to become more aware of your own worldview. In Chapter 1 you completed the MAKSS, which assessed your multicultural awareness, knowledge, and skills. As you read and think about the ideas in this section, review your responses to that assessment inventory and make a professional development plan to enhance your diversity competence. Self-assessment tools such as these can be beneficial in gaining awareness of your level of cultural competence, but the crucial form of evaluation is found in the relationship you establish with the participants of your group and the ways you respond to them culturally. Ask yourself this question: “Am I really helping the members of this group, and do they feel effectively helped by me? At the end of this chapter you
will find some activities geared to the DVD program *Groups in Action: Evolution and Challenges* that provide concrete illustrations of scenarios in a group that call for multicultural competence as a group leader.

**A Starting Place: Understanding Your Own Culture**

Effective group counselors must have some level of understanding of their own cultural conditioning, the cultural conditioning of their clients, and an awareness of the sociopolitical system of which they are a part. Pack-Brown, Whittington-Clark, and Parker (1998) maintain that culturally competent group counselors need to be (1) aware of their own personal biases, stereotypes, and prejudices; (2) knowledgeable about the members of their groups; and (3) able to practice skills that are appropriate for the life experiences of their clients. Translated into practice, this means that if you are raised to believe that men and women should be seen as equals, then your worldview will greatly differ from some of the clients you will encounter. If you are not able to recognize that your values are not absolute truths, but products of your cultural upbringing, then you will likely impose your own worldview on your clients and possibly do harm. This does not mean that we never challenge clients’ ways of behaving. However, we need to be careful about determining what is problematic, especially if it is based on our own standard of what we consider to be good and bad. We often remind our students that it is our job as therapists to remain invested in the process with our clients while maintaining an openness about the outcome of our clients’ decisions and lives. They must live with the consequences of their actions, not us. This can be helpful to remember when thinking about our roles as group leaders in all contexts, not merely the culture-bound situations.

If you model genuine respect for the differences among members in your groups, all the group members will benefit from this cultural diversity. The goals and processes of the group should match the cultural values of the members of that group. If you respect the members in your group, you will demonstrate a willingness to learn from them. You will be aware of hesitation on a client’s part and will not be too quick to interpret it.

Your willingness to put yourself in situations where you can learn about different cultures outside of your role as the leader will be most useful. While you are likely to learn a tremendous amount from each group member, it is important for leaders to avoid treating members in ways that makes them feel as if they have to teach you all about their culture. On numerous occasions, we have heard group members talk about feeling frustrated with having to educate others about their culture or being placed in the position of being the expert on all people from their cultural background. Leaders need to strike a balance between learning from each individual about his or her specific experiences and extending themselves outside of the group to gain useful information that will make them more culturally effective leaders.

DeLucia-Waack and Donigian (2004) suggest ways for group leaders to understand themselves and others as a beginning point in working toward
developing and implementing effective interventions in multicultural group work. They propose the following steps to consider as we strive toward multicultural competence:

- Clarify your personal values, beliefs, and how you view people interacting in productive ways.
- Identify the values inherent in your theoretical approach to group work.
- Learn about group interventions shown to be effective with specific cultural groups.
- Identify specific situations where your personal or theoretical values, views, and beliefs might be in conflict with the values of people from diverse backgrounds.
- Avoid imposing your worldview on members of your groups.
- Identify times or situations where you may need to refer a person because of a conflict of personal or cultural values.
- Identify situations when you might need supervision or consultation in working through your biases or views.
- Find a list of sources where you can acquire information about different cultures and potential conflicts related to group work.

Most of these steps imply that a counselor has achieved a degree of self-awareness. At times, practitioners may be convinced that they are culturally aware, yet they may be engaging in self-deception. Often we need to be in a culturally diverse setting to recognize our blind spots and assumptions and to learn where we may need to do more work. DeLucia-Waack and Donigian (2004) emphasize that “you need to constantly think about how your knowledge of culture and cultural values affects how you lead groups, and about how the cultural orientation of group members affects the way they participate in groups” (p. 29).

**A Personal Perspective on Understanding Differences**

My (Cindy’s) identity development as a heterosexual, female, Euro-American (German and Italian) has been instrumental in finding a way to successfully work with people from backgrounds much different from my own. It is crucial for me to understand how I see the world as well as how others may see the same world through a very different lens and context. I have learned that I cannot attempt to prove myself too quickly to clients who differ from me; rather, I have to trust the process and allow the relationship between us to unfold. It is much more what I do rather than what I say that gains the respect and trust of diverse group members. I am often told by my students of color that when they first see me they have a level of mistrust because they see a “privileged White woman” who is not likely to understand them or care about their causes. I am acutely aware that these students bring their past experiences with other White people to their initial interactions with me, and I know it will not be helpful to be defensive about their initial reactions to me.
As the process of our getting to know one another unfolds, their attitudes toward me often shift as they begin to feel understood and cared for in spite of our obvious differences.

Through my teaching of multicultural counseling courses, I have learned that each person is at a different place with regard to her or his process of learning about diversity. My journey toward cultural effectiveness will look quite different from that of my Latino American or African American colleagues. Although we are likely to struggle with some similar issues, our histories, worldviews, and context for understanding complex diversity issues are different. Just as I cannot know exactly where you are and where you need to grow as a culturally competent practitioner, the members of a group are similarly at very different stages in their cultural awareness and identity development. These differences can be a great catalyst for learning if they are explored in the group.

Numerous clinicians have expressed that they face challenges in trying to develop and establish trust with diverse clients and group members. I too find this to be true, but there is enormous satisfaction in being able to work through these initial feelings with group members and to be a small part of helping to heal the damage that has been done to many people from diverse cultural backgrounds. The key is to be clear with myself about my own identity, its impact on others, and to continually work to keep my isms in check so that my personal issues do not hinder the work of group members. It is paramount that group leaders know where their blind spots are and work hard to develop those areas so that our clients do not become our main source of education around issues of diversity.

A Framework for Developing Diversity Competence

Our views about diversity competence have been influenced by the work of a number of writers, including Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), who have developed a conceptual framework for multicultural counseling competencies and standards. The revised and expanded dimensions of multicultural competency involve three areas: beliefs and attitudes, knowledge, and skills. In addition, Arredondo and colleagues (1996) have developed a comprehensive set of multicultural competency standards, and the ASGW (1999) has adopted “Principles for Diversity-Competent Group Workers.” These standards serve as a model, reflecting the goals we strive for as culturally competent clinicians. Explaining how to attain these standards is beyond the scope of this book, and we urge you to engage in processes that challenge you intellectually, politically, emotionally, and psychologically to increase your cultural effectiveness and responsiveness toward all clients. We have condensed the multicultural competencies and standards identified by these sources and adapted them for use by group practitioners.

**Beliefs and Attitudes of Diversity-Competent Group Workers**  
Effective group leaders recognize and understand their own stereotypes and pre-conceived notions about other racial and ethnic groups. They are aware
of both direct and indirect ways in which they may communicate a lack of cultural responsiveness to diverse group members. Diversity-competent group workers:

- Do not allow their personal biases, values, or problems to interfere with their ability to work with clients who are culturally different from them.
- Are aware of how their own cultural background and experiences have influenced attitudes, values, and biases about what constitutes psychologically healthy individuals.
- Have moved from being unaware to being increasingly aware of their own race, ethnic and cultural heritage, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, abilities, spiritual beliefs, and to valuing and respecting differences.
- Seek to examine and understand the world from the vantage point of their clients. They respect clients’ religious and spiritual beliefs and values.
- Recognize the sources of their discomfort with differences between themselves and others in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, and beliefs. Because these group leaders welcome diverse value orientations and diverse assumptions about human behavior, they have a basis for sharing the worldview of their clients as opposed to being culturally encapsulated.
- Accept and value cultural diversity rather than insist that their cultural heritage is superior. They are able to identify and understand the central cultural constructs of the members of their groups, and they avoid applying their own cultural constructs inappropriately with these group members.
- Monitor their functioning through consultation, supervision, and further training or education. They realize that group counseling may not be appropriate for all clients or for all problems.

We strongly encourage group leaders to increase their cultural effectiveness and responsiveness toward all of their clients by engaging in processes that challenge them intellectually, politically, emotionally, and psychologically.

Knowledge of Diversity-Competent Group Workers  Culturally skilled group practitioners possess knowledge about their own racial and cultural heritage and how it affects them in their work. In addition, diversity-competent group workers:

- Understand how oppression, racism, discrimination, and stereotyping affect them personally and professionally. They do not impose their values and expectations on their clients from differing cultural backgrounds, and they avoid stereotyping clients.
- Understand the worldview of their clients and learn about their clients’ cultural backgrounds. Because they understand the basic values
underlying the therapeutic group process, they know how these values may clash with the cultural values of various minority groups.

• Are aware of the institutional barriers that prevent minorities from actively participating or utilizing various types of groups.
• Possess specific knowledge and information about the group members with whom they are working. This includes at least a general knowledge of the values, life experiences, family structures, cultural heritage, and historical background of their culturally different group members.
• Are knowledgeable about the community characteristics and the resources in the community as well as in the family.
• View diversity in a positive light, which enables them to meet and resolve challenges that arise in their work with a wide range of client populations.
• Know how to help clients make use of indigenous support systems. Where they lack knowledge, they seek resources to assist them. The greater their knowledge of culturally diverse groups, the more likely they are to be effective group leaders.

Skills and Intervention Strategies of Diversity-Competent Group Workers Diversity-competent group counselors possess a wide range of skills, which they are able to use with diverse client populations. Diversity-competent group workers:

• Familiarize themselves with relevant research and the latest findings regarding mental health issues that affect diverse client populations.
• Actively seek out educational experiences that foster their knowledge and skills for facilitating groups across differences.
• Are able to use methods and strategies and define goals consistent with the life experiences and cultural values of the group members. They are able to modify and adapt their interventions in a group to accommodate cultural differences.
• Are not anchored to one method or approach to group facilitation and recognize that helping styles may be culture bound. They are able to use a variety of culturally appropriate and relevant interventions, which may include consulting with traditional healers and religious and spiritual healers.
• Are able to send and receive both verbal and nonverbal messages accurately and appropriately.
• Are able to become actively involved with minority individuals outside the group setting (community events, celebrations, social and political functions, and neighborhood groups).
• Are committed to understanding themselves as racial and cultural beings and are actively seeking a nonracist identity.
• Take responsibility for educating group members about how groups function and use sound ethical practice when facilitating groups with a diverse membership.
Inviting Conversations About Culture With Group Members

One way to actively incorporate a multicultural dimension into your group leadership is to initiate open discussions with the members of your groups about issues of race and ethnicity. However, such discussions have the potential for good and for harm. Learning when and how to raise cultural and racial issues is essential. Some group leaders avoid racial topics because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing or of being offensive. Others assume that race is the key issue in all encounters, even if the members’ actions don’t support this.

Group members may be reluctant to talk with people outside of their race about certain topics. Ask members if they are hesitant to raise certain topics within the group and what contributes to this reluctance. Confronting these silent issues can serve as a catalyst for meaningful and often difficult dialogue. Another way to acknowledge race is illustrated in this situation: A Persian woman is talking about feeling lonely and isolated, yet she does not mention any connection to culture. The group leader says, “I wonder if being a Persian woman has contributed to your feelings of loneliness and isolation.” This statement invites discussion of the topic if it resonates with her, yet it also gives space for her to disagree. In addition, the leader has modeled to other members that we can talk about sensitive topics.

Cardemil and Battle (2003) contend that conversations about culture with members enhance the therapeutic relationship and promote better treatment outcomes. We believe their recommendations below can be applied to your work as a facilitator of many different kinds of groups:

- Suspend preconceptions about the race or ethnicity of clients or their family members. Avoid making incorrect assumptions about group members that could impede the development of the therapeutic relationship. During the early stage of a group, ask members how they identify their race or ethnicity.
- If you engage group members in conversations about race and ethnicity, there is less chance of stereotyping and making faulty assumptions.
- Be aware that the more comfortable you are with conversations about race and ethnicity, the more easily group members can respond appropriately to others who may be uncomfortable with such discussions.
- Address how racial or ethnic differences between you and the members of your group might affect the process and outcomes of the group. Although it is not possible to identify every between-group difference that could surface during the course of therapy, the critical element is your willingness to consider the relevance of racial or ethnic differences with members.
- Recognize and acknowledge how power, privilege, and racism can affect interactions with clients. Discussing these topics is invaluable in strengthening relationships within the group.
- Be open to ongoing learning about ways that cultural factors affect group work. Although acquiring knowledge about various racial and
ethnic groups is important, it is not enough. It is essential that you be willing to identify and examine your own worldview, assumptions, and personal prejudices about other racial and ethnic groups. Know that this skill does not develop quickly or without effort.

Group leaders address racial and cultural differences between leaders and members in a variety of ways. Some ignore the difference unless members raise the concern, some ask members how they feel about the difference, and others talk directly with members about their own sense of the differences present in the room. Leaders need to be flexible in their approach to discussions of cultural differences and invite discussion on multiple levels. The initial step is to communicate verbally that you are aware of the diversity within the room and that it will likely have an impact on the relationship and connections that are formed. However, the crucial part is in your actions. Members watch what we do as much as attending to what we say. They often pay close attention to what we communicate nonverbally as they have learned to read nonverbal language to ascertain what people really think and feel. If we miss opportunities to address cultural differences or make assumptions about gender roles, sexual identity, and cultural identity, we are communicating to members that we are not likely to understand their experiential world.

To initiate conversations with group members about their cultural identity, you need to have some fundamental understanding about the members’ ethnic and cultural backgrounds. However, it is not realistic to expect that you will know everything about the backgrounds of all the members of your group. We need to carefully listen to group members as they talk about relevant differences and the meaning these differences hold for them. Again, members will provide us with the information we need to work effectively with them if we give them this opportunity.

In working with culturally diverse individuals within a group, it helps to assess the degree of acculturation and identity development that has taken place. This is especially true for individuals who have had the experience of living in another culture. Immigrants often have allegiance to their own home culture but find certain characteristics of their new culture attractive. They may experience conflicts when integrating the values from the two cultures in which they live. These core struggles can be productively explored in an accepting group if the leader and the other members respect this cultural conflict.

One group member we worked with talked about his struggle to be more talkative during sessions. He said that he felt pressured to share himself in a way with the group that was extremely foreign and uncomfortable to him. He remarked that if he starts to open up and share his feelings, when he returns to his homeland he will not know when to stop and will likely be disapproved of by his people. This is a common struggle that members from a variety of ethnic groups might face: success in one area directly contradicts what success looks like in the member’s cultural of origin.

I (Marianne) live between two cultures. When I am in Germany, I tend to use fewer words to get my message across. When I speak English, I am
more verbose. Around Americans, I am more likely to disclose feelings and personal information to people other than my family. These disclosures would be frowned upon in Germany. In moving between two cultures, I am aware of making these adjustments because the consequences of what I say and how I say it differ between these two cultures. Years ago, when I participated in a therapy group as a recent immigrant, I felt very embarrassed when others disclosed personal information about their family, and I was extremely uncomfortable when asked to make myself known in a similar fashion. The challenge for both the leader and the member is to help that person find a way to define what openness might look like for him or her in both settings.

**Recognizing Your Own Limitations**  As a diversity-competent group worker, you are able to recognize the limits of your multicultural competency and expertise when working with group members who are different from you in terms of race, ethnicity, culture, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, religion, or worldview. When necessary, you actively seek consultation and supervision and, in rare cases, refer clients to more qualified individuals or to additional resources.

If you are working with clients from a specific ethnic, racial, and cultural background different from your own, you can benefit from reading books and journal articles addressing group work with diverse client populations. Some resources we recommend, which are found in the References and Suggested Reading section, are Arredondo and colleagues (1996), ASGW (1999), Bieschke, Perez, and DeBord (2006), DeLucia-Waack, Gerrity, Kalodner, and Riva (2004), DeLucia-Waack and Donigian (2004), Ivey, Pedersen, and Ivey (2008), and Sue and Sue (2008).

We encourage you to stay up to date with current readings in the field, but the most effective way of working toward cultural competence is to engage in a variety of experiential activities and personal growth opportunities that take the learning from the head to the heart. If we do not walk our talk, all the cultural knowledge in the world will not serve us or the group members with whom we work.

**The Coleadership Model**

**The Basis of Coleadership**

Many who educate and train group leaders have come to favor the coleadership model of group practice. This model has a number of advantages for all concerned: group members can gain from the perspectives of two leaders; coleaders can confer before and after a group and learn from each other; and supervisors can work closely with coleaders during their training and can provide them with feedback.

We (Marianne and Jerry) prefer coleadership both for facilitating groups and for training and supervising group leaders, and we usually work as a team.
Although each of us has independent professional involvements (including leading groups alone at times), we enjoy coleading and continue to learn from each other as well as from other colleagues we work with. Nevertheless, we do not want to give the impression that coleadership is the only acceptable model; many people facilitate a group alone quite effectively. In conducting training workshops with university students, we continually hear how they value working with a partner, especially if they are leading a group for the first time. As we discussed earlier, group leaders preparing to meet their first group tend to experience self-doubt, anxiety, and downright trepidation! The task seems far less monumental if they meet their new group with a coleader whom they trust and respect.

In training group workers using a coleadership model, we find it is useful to observe the trainees as they colead so we can discuss what they are actually doing as they facilitate a group. Then, as we offer feedback to them, we frequently ask them to talk with each other about how they felt as they were coleading and what they think about the session they have just led. The feedback between these coleaders can be both supportive and challenging. They can make constructive suggestions about each other’s style, and the process of exchanging perceptions can enhance their ability to function effectively as coleaders.

The choice of a coleader is a critical variable. If the two leaders are incompatible, their group is bound to be negatively affected. For example, power struggles between coleaders will have the effect of dividing the group. If coleaders are in continual conflict with each other, they are providing a poor model of interpersonal relating, which will influence the group process. Such conflict typically leads to unexpressed reactions within the group, which gets in the way of effective work. We are not suggesting that coleaders will never have conflicts. What is important is that they work out any disputes in a respectful and direct manner, for doing so can model ways of coping with interpersonal conflict. If conflict occurs in a group, it should be worked out in the group.

Not being able to choose your coleader can be frustrating. As with a blind date, it can turn out beautifully or be a complete disaster. If you find the relationship with your coleader is not productive, consider the following steps:

- Identify the specific characteristics and or behaviors that bother you about your coleader and examine why these are problematic for you.
- Seek supervision and consultation to enable you to work through these issues.
- Communicate your feelings to your coleader in an open and nonjudgmental way, and discuss what you each need to develop a more effective working relationship.
- Increase the amount of time you spend preparing for and debriefing group sessions with your coleader.
- If you, your coleader, or your supervisor determine that these conflicts are likely to cause harm to the group members, consider changing coleaders.
Luke and Hackney (2007) summarize some potential problems with coleadership and note that problems often involve relational difficulties between leaders: interpersonal conflicts, competition between the leaders, overdependence on the coleader, and unresolved conflicts between the leaders. If these matters are addressed and resolved by the leaders, their relationship will be strengthened, which will have a positive effect on the group. If coleaders are unable to work out their relationship problems or achieve an understanding of their different perspectives, they will not be effective in facilitating their group.

To avoid negatively affecting a group, Riva, Wachtel, and Lasky (2004) point out that coleaders need to share a common view of the basic structural issues of groups and that they need to discuss their working relationship. A key part of their coleadership relationship involves an awareness of their personal issues that could lead to competitiveness, performance anxiety, and power and control struggles between them in the group. They write: “It seems crucial to the health of the group for coleaders to be open, willing to share and listen to different points of view, and to discuss and resolve difficulties that may arise between them” (p. 43).

A major factor in selecting a coleader involves mutual respect. Two or more leaders working together will surely have their differences in leadership style, and they will not always agree or share the same perceptions or interpretations. If there is mutual respect and trust between them, however, they will be able to work cooperatively instead of competitively, and they will be secure enough to be free of the constant need to prove themselves.

It is not essential that you be best friends with your coleader, but you need a good working relationship, which you can achieve by taking time to talk with each other. Although we take delight in our personal and professional relationship, we are also willing to engage in the hard work necessary to be a successful team. This relationship reflects our belief that it is essential that coleaders get together regularly to discuss any matters that may affect their working as a team. We encourage those who colead groups to spend some time both before and after each session discussing their reactions to what is going on in the group as well as their working relationship as coleaders.

### Advantages of the Coleadership Model

Having acknowledged our clear preference for coleading groups, here is a summary of the major advantages of using the coleadership method.

1. The chance of burnout can be reduced by working with a coleader. This is especially true if you are working with a draining population, such as the psychologically impaired who often simply get up and leave, who hallucinate during sessions, and who may be withdrawn or be acting out. In such groups one leader can attend to problematic behavior while the other attempts to maintain the work going on in the group.
2. If intense emotions are being expressed by one or more members, one leader can pay attention to those members while the other leader scans the room to note the reactions of other members, who can later be invited to share their feelings. Or, if appropriate, the coleader can find a way to involve members in the work of someone else. Many possibilities exist for linking members, for facilitating interaction between members, and for orchestrating the flow of a group when coleaders are sensitively and harmoniously working as a team.

3. If one leader must be absent because of illness or professional reasons, the group can proceed with the other leader. If one of the coleaders is especially drained on a given day or is temporarily experiencing some emotional pain, the coleader can assume primary leadership, and the leader having problems can feel less burdened with the responsibility to be present for the group members.

   In such a case it may be appropriate for the coleader to say to the group that he or she is going through some difficulties personally, without going into great detail. By simply having said this, the leader is likely to feel freer and may be much more present. This admission provides sound modeling for the members, for they can see that group leaders are not beyond dealing with personal problems.

4. Coleader peer supervision is clearly beneficial. If one of the leaders has been strongly affected by a session, he or she can later explore feelings of anger, depression, or the like in some detail with the coleader. The coleader can be used as a sounding board, can check for objectivity, and can offer useful feedback. There is no problem of breaking confidentiality in such instances, for the coleader was also present at the session. However, we do want to emphasize that it is often necessary for leaders to express and deal with such feelings in the session itself, especially if they were aroused in the group setting. For example, if you are aware that you are perpetually annoyed by the behavior of a given member, you might need to deal with your annoyance as a group matter. This is a time when a competent and trusted coleader is especially important.

5. An important advantage of coleading emerges when one of the leaders is affected by a group member to the degree that countertransference is present. Countertransference can distort one's objectivity so that it interferes with leading effectively. For example, your coleader may typically react with annoyance or some other intense feeling to one member who is seen as a problem. Perhaps you are better able to make contact with this member, and so you may be the person who primarily works with him or her. You can be of valuable assistance by helping your coleader talk about, and perhaps even resolve, reactions and attachments toward such a client.

6. Another advantage of the coleadership model relates to differences in power and privilege based on culture, ethnicity, religious/spiritual orientation, or sexual identity. If one of the leaders represents a position of power and
privilege that may affect members in a particular way, the other leader can help process this, especially if he or she does not possess the same status position.

Disadvantages of the Coleadership Model

Even with a coleader you choose, one whom you respect and like, there are likely to be occasional disagreements. This difference of perspective and opinion need not be a disadvantage or a problem. Instead, it can be healthy for both of you because you can keep yourself professionally alert through constructive challenges and differences. Most of the disadvantages in coleading groups have to do with poor selection of a coleader, random assignment to another leader, or failure of the two leaders to meet regularly.

1. Problems can occur if coleaders rarely meet with each other. The results are likely to be a lack of synchronization or even a tendency to work at cross purposes instead of toward a common goal. Leaders need to take time to discuss their differences. For example, we have observed difficulties when one group leader thought all intervention should be positive, supportive, and invitational, whereas the other leader functioned on the assumption that members need to be pushed and directly confronted and that difficult issues should be brought up. The group became fragmented and polarized as a result of these incompatible leadership styles.

2. A related issue is competition and rivalry. For example, one leader may have an exaggerated need to have center stage, to be dominant at all times, and to be perceived as the one in control. Obviously, such a relationship between coleaders is bound to have a negative effect on the group. In some cases members may develop negative reactions toward groups in general, concluding that all that ever goes on in them is conflict and the struggle for power.

3. If coleaders do not have a relationship built on trust and respect or if they do not value each other’s competence, they may not trust each other’s interventions. Each leader may insist on following his or her own hunches, convinced that the other’s are not of value.

4. One leader may side with members against the other leader. For example, assume that Alta confronts a male leader with strong negative reactions and that his coleader (a woman) joins Alta in expressing her reactions and even invites the members to give feedback to the coleader. This practice can divide the group, with members taking sides about who is “right.” It is especially a problem if one leader has not previously given negative reactions to the other and uses the situation as a chance to “unload” feelings.

5. Coleaders who are involved in an intimate relationship with each other can get into some problematic situations if they attempt to use time in the session to deal with their own relationship struggles. Although some
members may support the coleaders’ working on their own issues in the group, most clients are likely to resent these coleaders for abdicating their leadership functions.

We think it is important that the two leaders have some say in deciding to work as a team. Otherwise, there is a potential for harm for both the group members and the coleaders. Careful selection of a coleader and time devoted to meeting together are essential.

Developing a Research Orientation to Practice

As a group leader, you will be expected to demonstrate the efficacy of your interventions. With the current emphasis on short-term treatments that provide symptom relief or solve clients’ problems, familiarity with research in the group work field is becoming an essential part of practice. Along with follow-up group sessions and individual interviews of members of your groups, research can help you come to a better understanding of the specific factors that contributed to the successful outcomes or the failures of your groups. Applied research can help you refine your interventions and identify factors that interfere with group effectiveness. As a practitioner, it is essential that what you do in your groups is supported by research on the process and outcomes of groups. Part of your development as a group leader involves thinking of ways to make evaluation research a basic part of your group practice.

The Challenge of Combining Research and Practice

Combining research and practice is challenging. Because of the demands of each role, it is difficult to be both a group practitioner and a researcher. Yalom (2005) admits that few group practitioners will ever have the time, funding, and institutional backing to engage in large-scale research, yet he contends “many can engage in intensive single-patient or single-group research, and all clinicians must evaluate published clinical research” (p. 529).

Yalom’s (2005) observations suggest a need to consider “doing research” in a different light. Instead of thinking exclusively in terms of rigorous empirical research, practitioners can begin to consider alternatives to traditional scientific methods. For example, systematic observation and assessment can become basic parts of the practice of group work.

Whether or not group workers actually conduct research with their groups may be less important than their willingness to keep themselves informed about the practical applications of research on group work. At the very least, group counselors need to be up to date with the research implications for practice. Yalom (2005) claims that group trainees need to know more than how to implement techniques in a group—they also need to
know how to learn. According to Yalom, a research orientation allows group therapists, throughout their career, to remain flexible and responsive to new evidence. Practitioners who lack a research orientation will have no basis to critically evaluate new developments in the field of group work. Without a consistent framework to evaluate evidence of the efficacy of innovations in the field, practitioners run the risk of being unreasonably unreceptive to new approaches.

In learning how to become a group practitioner, it is necessary to progress from a beginner to a skilled clinician in stages. Likewise, a developmental approach can be useful for understanding the process of teaching students how to get involved in research about groups. Rex Stockton is an advocate for a developmental apprenticeship model. Just as students improve their clinical skills through practice, consultation, supervision, and discussion with mentors and peers, they can become insightful researchers through the same kinds of exposure, practice, consultation, and collaboration with those who are doing research (Stockton & Toth, 1997).

As a group practitioner, whether or not you actually conduct research with your groups is less important than your willingness to keep yourself informed about the practical applications of research on group work. At the very least you need to keep up to date with the research implications for practice.

Future Directions

In their discussion of the current status and future directions of group therapy research, Burlingame, Fuhriman, and Johnson (2004a) conclude that the time has never been better for research on group approaches. They add that future challenges facing group researchers include “linking outcome with process, training with practice, practice with research, and facilitating the application of research results by clinicians in the field” (p. 658).

Although research on group counseling has improved over the past two decades, many research studies in group work suffer from serious methodological problems. Future group research needs to inform practice and at the same time be guided by the expertise of those who conduct groups (Riva & Kalodner, 1997). A gap exists between research and practice in group counseling, and closing it involves overcoming some major obstacles.

The lack of collaboration between researchers and practitioners continues to be a key problem in group work. Researchers often do not really understand what can be learned from clinical experience, and practitioners often perceive research as being irrelevant to clinical practice. Only a small percentage of group practitioners use research findings in any consistent manner or engage in research of their own. If this knowledge gap is to be bridged, practitioners and researchers need to develop an increased mutual respect for what each can offer, and they must learn to work cooperatively, accepting the dual role of practitioner–researcher (Morran & Stockton, 1985).
Points to Remember
Concepts and Guidelines for Group Practitioners

- It is important to have a theoretical rationale to help you make sense of what occurs in a group. Take the time to understand several theoretical orientations, and then select concepts from each to form your own personal style of working.
- Personality and character are the most important variables of effective group leaders. Techniques cannot compensate for the shortcomings of leaders who lack self-knowledge, who are not willing to do what they ask group members to do, or who are poorly trained. Think about your personal characteristics and try to decide which will be assets and which liabilities to you as a group leader.
- Effective group leaders are knowledgeable about group dynamics and possess leadership skills. Use the self-evaluation inventories at the end of this chapter as a means of thinking about skills you might need to improve and skills you might need to develop.
- As a group leader, you need to decide how much responsibility for what goes on in the group belongs to the members and how much to you, how much and what type of structuring is optimal for a group, what kind of self-disclosure is optimal, what role and function you will assume, and how you will integrate both support and confrontation into group practice.
- In a therapeutic group, participants can learn more about themselves, explore their conflicts, learn new social skills, get feedback on the impact they have on others, and try out new behaviors. The group becomes a microcosm of society in which members can learn more effective ways of living with others. Depending on the type of group, there are some clear advantages to constituting a group that is diverse with respect to age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background, race, and philosophical perspectives.
- Develop behavioral guidelines and teach them to group members. Some of the behaviors you might stress are keeping the group’s activities confidential, respecting the differences that characterize the members, taking responsibility for oneself, working hard in the group, listening, and expressing one’s thoughts and feelings.
- Pay attention to the diversity that exists within your group, and help members recognize how their diverse backgrounds influence their values and behavior. Highlight cultural themes as they surface during a session.
- To become a diversity-competent group worker, you need to possess a range of knowledge and skills competencies. Seek avenues for consultation and supervision as you recognize your limits in understanding diverse groups.
- Take some time to think about your therapeutic style and its influence on the process and outcomes of your group. Be able to describe the key features of your style in clear terms.
- Look for ways to meaningfully combine a research perspective with your practice when leading groups.

Exercises

We encourage you to complete these exercises before you begin leading and then again toward the end of the semester. The comparison will give you a basis for seeing how your attitudes and ideas may evolve with experience.
Attitude Questionnaire on Group Leadership

This inventory does not lend itself to objective scoring. It is meant to assist you in clarifying your own attitudes concerning group leadership matters. Comparing your results with those of your coleader will help you understand each other and may lead to fruitful discussions about working together. Read these statements concerning the role and functions of a group leader. Indicate your position on each statement using the following scale:

1 = strongly agree  2 = slightly agree  3 = slightly disagree  4 = strongly disagree

_____ 1. It is the leader's job to actively work at shaping group norms.
_____ 2. Leaders should teach group members how to observe their own group as it unfolds.
_____ 3. The best way for a leader to function is by becoming a participating member of the group.
_____ 4. It is generally wise for leaders to reveal their private lives and personal problems in groups they are leading.
_____ 5. A group leader's primary task is to function as a technical expert.
_____ 6. It is extremely important for good leaders to have a definite theoretical framework that determines how they function in a group.
_____ 7. A group leader's function is to draw people out and make sure that silent members participate.
_____ 8. Group leaders influence group members more through modeling than through the techniques they employ.
_____ 9. It is generally best for the leader to give some responsibility to the members but also to retain some.
_____10. A major task of a leader is to keep the group focused on the here and now.
_____11. It is unwise to allow members to discuss the past or to discuss events that occurred outside the group.
_____12. It is best to give most of the responsibility for determining the direction of the group to the members.
_____13. It is best for leaders to limit their self-disclosures to matters that have to do with what is going on in the group.
_____14. If group leaders are basically open and disclose themselves, transference by members will not occur.
_____15. A leader who experiences countertransference is not competent to lead groups.
_____16. Group leaders can be expected to develop a personalized theory of leadership based on ideas drawn from many sources.
_____17. To be effective, group leaders need to recognize their reasons for wanting to be leaders.
18. Part of the task of group leaders is to determine specific behavioral goals for the participants.

19. A leader’s theoretical model has little impact on the way people actually interact in a group.

20. If group leaders have mastered certain skills and techniques, it is not essential for them to operate from a theoretical framework.

21. Leaders who possess personal power generally dominate the group and intimidate the members through this power.

22. There is not much place for a sense of humor in conducting groups because group work is serious business.

23. Group leaders should not expect the participants to do anything that they, as leaders, are not willing to do.

24. Group leaders have the responsibility for keeping written documentation summarizing group sessions.

25. For coleaders to work effectively with each other, it is essential that they share the same style of leadership.

26. In selecting a coleader, it is a good idea to consider similarity of values, philosophy of life, and life experiences.

27. If coleaders do not respect and trust each other, there is the potential for negative outcomes in the group.

28. It is best that those who colead a group be roughly equal in skills, experiences, and status.

29. Coleaders should never openly disagree with each other during a session, for this may lead to a division within the group.

30. The group is bound to be affected by the type of modeling that the coleaders provide.

After you have completed this self-inventory, we suggest that your class break into small groups to discuss the items.

**Self-Assessment of Group Leadership Skills**

In this chapter we described a set of skills necessary for effective group leadership. The following self-inventory helps you identify areas of strengths and weaknesses as a group leader. Read the brief description of each skill and then rate yourself on each dimension. Think about the questions listed under each skill. These questions are designed to aid you in assessing your current level of functioning and in identifying specific ways you can improve on each skill.

You can profit from this checklist by reviewing it before and after group sessions. If you are working with a coleader, he or she can provide you with a separate rating. These questions also provide a framework for exploring your level of skill development with fellow students and with your supervisor or instructor.
To what degree do you demonstrate the following? (One space is for you to rate yourself early in the term and the other space for later on.) On each skill, rate yourself using this 3-point scale:

3 = I do this most of the time with a high degree of competence.
2 = I do this some of the time with an adequate degree of competence.
1 = I do this occasionally with a relatively low level of competence.

1. **Active listening.** Hearing and understanding both subtle and direct messages, and communicating that one is doing this.
   a. How well do I listen to members?
   b. How attentive am I to nonverbal language?
   c. Am I able to hear both overt and subtle messages?
   d. Do I teach members how to listen and respond?

2. **Reflecting.** Capturing the underlying meaning of what is said or felt and expressing this without being mechanical.
   a. Can I mirror what another says without being mechanical?
   b. Do my restatements add meaning to what was said by a member?
   c. Do I check with members to determine the accuracy of my reflection?
   d. Am I able to reflect both thoughts and feelings?

3. **Clarifying.** Focusing on the underlying issues and assisting others to get a clearer picture of what they are thinking or feeling.
   a. Do my clarifying remarks help others sort out conflicting feelings?
   b. Am I able to focus on underlying issues and themes?
   c. Do members get a clearer focus on what they are thinking and feeling?
   d. Does my clarification lead to a deeper level of member self-exploration?

4. **Summarizing.** Identifying key elements and common themes and providing a picture of the directional trends of a group session.
   a. Does my summarizing give direction to a session?
   b. Am I able to tie together several themes in a group session?
   c. Do I attend adequately to summarizing at the end of a session?
d. Do I encourage members to summarize what they heard?

5. **Facilitating.** Helping members to express themselves clearly and to take action in a group.
   a. Am I able to help members work through barriers to communication?
   b. How much do I encourage member interaction?
   c. Am I successful in teaching members to focus on themselves?
   d. Can I steer members into discussing here-and-now reactions?

6. **Empathizing.** Adopting the internal frame of reference of a member:
   a. Are my life experiences diverse enough to provide a basis for understanding members?
   b. Can I maintain my separate identity at the same time as I empathize with others?
   c. Do I communicate to others that I understand their subjective world?
   d. Do I promote expressions of empathy among the members?

7. **Interpreting.** Explaining the meaning of behavior patterns within some theoretical framework.
   a. Are my interpretations accurate and well-timed?
   b. Do I present my interpretations in the form of hunches?
   c. Do I encourage members to provide their own meaning for their behavior?
   d. Do I avoid making dogmatic interpretations?

8. **Questioning.** Using questions to stimulate thought and action but avoiding question/answer patterns of interaction between leader and member.
   a. Do I overuse questioning as a leadership style?
   b. Do I ask “what” and “how” questions instead of “why” questions?
   c. Do I keep myself hidden through asking questions?
   d. Do I use open-ended questions that lead to deeper self-exploration?

9. **Linking.** Promoting member-to-member interaction and facilitating exploration of common themes in a group.
   a. Do my interventions enhance interactions between members?
b. Do I foster a norm of member-to-member interactions or leader-to-member interactions?

c. Do I help members find a way to connect with each other?

d. Am I able to orchestrate interactions so several members can be involved in working at the same time?

10. **Confronting.** Challenging members to look at some aspects of their behavior.

a. Do I model caring and respectful confrontation?

b. How do members generally react to my confrontations?

c. Am I able to confront specific behaviors without being judgmental?

d. In confronting others, do I let them know how I am affected by their behavior?

11. **Supporting.** Offering some form of positive reinforcement at appropriate times in such a way that it has a facilitating effect.

a. Do I recognize the progress members make?

b. Do I build on the strengths and gains made by members?

c. Do I balance challenge and support?

d. Does my providing support sometimes get in the way of a member’s work?

12. **Blocking.** Intervening to stop counterproductive behaviors in the group or to protect members.

a. Am I able to intervene when necessary without attacking a member?

b. Do I block a member’s behavior that is disruptive to the group?

c. Am I aware of when it is necessary for me to protect a member from another member?

d. Can I effectively block counterproductive behaviors?

13. **Assessing.** Getting a clear sense of members without labeling them.

a. Can I understand a member’s problem without using a label?

b. Do I help members to assess their own problematic behavior?

c. Am I able to detect members who may not be appropriate for a group?

d. Can I create interventions that fit with my assessment?
14. **Modeling.** Demonstrating to members desired behaviors that can be practiced both during and between group sessions.
   a. What kind of behavior do I model during group sessions?
   b. Am I able to model effective self-disclosure?
   c. Can I model caring confrontations?
   d. What is the general effect of my modeling on a group?

15. **Suggesting.** Offering information or possibilities for action that can be used by members in making independent decisions.
   a. Do I differentiate between suggesting and prescribing?
   b. Do my suggestions encourage members to take initiative?
   c. Do I tend to give too many suggestions?
   d. How do I determine when to give suggestions and when to avoid doing so?

16. **Initiating.** Demonstrating an active stance in intervening in a group at appropriate times.
   a. Do I generally get group sessions started in an effective manner?
   b. Do I take active steps to prevent a group from floundering in unproductive ways?
   c. Am I able to initiate new work with others once a member’s work comes to an end?
   d. Do I teach members how to initiate their own work in the sessions?

17. **Evaluating.** Appraising the ongoing group process and the individual and group dynamics.
   a. What criteria do I use to assess the progress of my groups?
   b. What kinds of questions do I pose to members to help them evaluate their own gains as well as their contributions to the group?
   c. Do I make a concerted effort to assist members in assessing their progress as a group?
   d. What kind of evaluation instruments do I use in a group?
18. **Terminating.** Creating a climate that encourages members to continue working after sessions.

   a. Do I prepare members for termination of a group?
   
   b. Do I allow adequate time at the end of a session for closure?
   
   c. Do I help members transfer what they learn in group to daily life?
   
   d. Do I take steps to help members integrate their learnings in group?

Once you complete this self-assessment, circle the items where you most need improvement (any items that you rated as “1” or “2”). Circle the letter of the questions that are the most meaningful to you, as well as the questions that indicate a need for attention. Think about specific strategies you can design to work on the skills where you see yourself as being most limited. It is a good idea to take this inventory at least twice—once at the beginning of the course and then again later.

### Guide to *Groups in Action: Evolution and Challenges* DVD and Workbook

If you are using the *Groups in Action: Evolution and Challenges* DVD and Workbook, you can integrate some of the key ideas in this chapter with the DVD. Refer to a section in this chapter on “Becoming a Diversity-Competent Group Counselor” and review the salient issues discussed. In the *Challenges Facing Group Leaders* DVD, a program segment entitled “Challenges of Addressing Diversity Issues” illustrates various situations that most group leaders would find challenging. The scenarios that are enacted within the group provide an action-oriented picture of the skills needed to effectively address a variety of diversity themes, some of which are listed below.

- What does my culture have to do with my identity?
- I feel different from others in here.
- Sometimes I want to exclude others.
- I struggle with language.
- I resent being stereotyped.
- We are alike and we are different.
- I express myself better in my native language.
- I am colorblind.
- I know little about my culture.
- I want more answers from you leaders.

Each of the above themes is enacted in the DVD program and elaborated upon in the workbook. We suggest that you first answer the questions in the workbook dealing with each theme and then use your responses as the basis for discussion in small groups.