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# FORMING A LEADERLESS MEN'S GROUP

by Milton Slater

...but not so much leaderless

as leader-*full*

(us)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

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It is my belief that men are oppressed in ways that are both obvious and subtle. The roles that we have been taught to play limit and bind us, and if not examined, prevent us from discovering the path to self-awareness and freedom.

Although participation in a men's group is not a panacea to male oppression, it does, however, offer us an opportunity to examine this issue, and to make positive changes in our lives.

A leaderless group allows each member to have an equal role with all other members of the group. Since competition against men, whether for grades, sports, women, jobs, status, prestige and a myriad of other areas has been part of our indoctrination and conditioning, it generally becomes an unconscious part of the way we relate to one another.

Therefore, the egalitarian aspect of a leaderless group presents us with a unique opportunity to deprogram ourselves, and to replace our drive for dominance, power and control, with behavior that shows care, support and nurturance.

To experience the fellowship of men in a non-judgmental environment, to feel safe enough to be vulnerable, to know that you can be real, honest and open, and elicit support,...is both joyous and liberating.

When forming or joining a leaderless men's group, there are many concepts that should be understood. The following thoughts and ideas have evolved from my personal experiences and observations from involvement with men's groups as well as workshops that were jointly conducted with my colleague, Cass Adams. They are offered in the hope that they are helpful and practical.

\* This is certainly an oppressive society, oppressive in different ways for different groups, for men, women, homosexuals, etc. But the language here is careless. Black slaves were certainly "oppressed" on the cotton plantations of the old South, an oppressive society. No doubt whites were dehumanised, but not "oppressed".

## II. MAJOR CHARACTERISTICS AND PURPOSE OF A LEADERLESS MEN'S GROUP

A group consists of several men, generally between 4 and 8, who have made a commitment to meet once a week, usually on a specific night, for a period of approximately 2 to 3 hours, without a leader.

It is confidential, non-judgmental, and each member shares equal responsibility for all aspects of the group experience.

The purpose of a group is to develop a support system among the members, where nurturing and intimacy skills can be explored and developed. The meeting provides an opportunity to discuss a variety of issues that are relevant to the men in the group, and to experience different group activities.

There are an infinite number of options concerning group process and content, and groups frequently experiment and try different approaches at different times. The evolution of each group is distinctly unique.

## III. THE NEED TO MAKE A COMMITMENT

A group will bond for a variety of reasons. However, one of the most important reasons for failing to bond occurs when members don't share an equal commitment to block out the night of the meeting as a top priority in their life. Regular attendance, punctuality, and continuity are essential for success.

I have heard men describe their weekly meeting as a "sacred night" in their lives, and the only time in the week when they can consistently expect to receive concern and support that is focused exclusively on issues with which they are grappling.

However, a lack of commitment, characterized by the irregular attendance of a member is frequently interpreted as a way of discounting the other members, elicits resentment, and often has a divisive effect on the group unless it is resolved in a frank discussion.

Another important commitment we should make to one another is to honestly express what we like or dislike about our participation in a group, particularly if it will affect our desire to remain in the group. Even if the problem cannot be resolved, the issues should be clearly understood, complete discussion should take place, and a sense of "closure" has been provided for the remaining members.

## IV. CONFIDENTIALITY, TRUST AND VULNERABILITY

In order for a group to function successfully it must provide a safe and trusting environment for all of its members. Most men have been conditioned to hide their feelings about fear, doubt, ambivalence, failure and anxiety from one another, lest they become diminished in each others' eyes, and perceived as being weak, "wimpy" or not successful in dealing with their problems; in short, not "real men".

Therefore, in order to be willing to expose our innermost feelings and allow ourselves to become vulnerable, it is essential that every member in the group agrees to the concept of confidentiality. This mandates that anything stated that is of a personal or confidential nature, will not be revealed to anyone outside the meeting. If there were Cardinal Rules for participation in a men's group, this would have to rank at the very top.

Most men have experienced criticism from their own fathers as well as other men. To earn mutual trust and encourage openness, we must listen to each other without implied or direct criticism in order to create a non-judgmental atmosphere.

#### V. EACH MEMBER'S ROLE

Learning to nurture and support one another is a critical role we must assume as a member of a group, especially when we disagree with one another. When differences do arise, or the actions of a member create a problem for us, those issues and feelings should be fully explored and discussed in an atmosphere that is respectful and non-judgmental. In particular, these situations present great challenge for us. There is so much in our conditioning as men that has taught us there is only one correct answer or one way to think, that it is difficult to see how these attitudes have been incorporated in our unconscious patterns of response.

Every member must take equal responsibility for the success or failure of the group. This requires that each member share his thoughts and feelings each night, not only about himself, but the group process as well. Appropriate and thoughtful responses to the other members is also a key ingredient to the group process. There can be no "voyeurs" or passive participants.

It is important that each man learn to be a good listener, refrain from interrupting and to be attentive and thoughtful about what he has heard.

Remembering to personalize one's remarks with "I" statements would probably be a second Cardinal Rule for a group to follow. Sharing one's personal experiences and beliefs enables each member to understand how the other members process information and experience and come to conclusions.

Hearing other men's stories provides us with insights and choices. We realize that there is no correct way to deal with a concern or problem...only an infinite variety of options. It is from this key process of listening that we experiment, change and grow.

#### VI. GROUP PROCESS

Each group must work to discover the process or processes to create the "chemistry" that brings cohesion and bonding. I have yet to see two groups that function identically, although many groups share a number of similarities.

When a group is first formed, it is important to establish the agreed upon mechanics such as the night, number of hours for the meeting, etc. It is helpful if a schedule of meetings, with each member's home address and telephone

numbers for home and work, is duplicated to allow anyone who can't attend a meeting to inform the host for that week. This first meeting should also include a "go round" where each member expresses his expectations with respect to what he wants to get from the group experience.

Some groups have had remarkable success in bonding strongly and rapidly by having an entire meeting devoted to a member's "life story", until each member has told his story. This enables everyone to know what experiences have influenced each member, their history, past and present concerns, and in general allows members to have a frame of reference in order to understand one another and the way we have processed and integrated experience.

Most groups start the meeting with what is called a "check in". In turn, each member tells about his week, with particular emphasis on the unresolved or painful issues that he is dealing with. This portion of the meeting should elicit members' support and enable them to share the feelings they experienced when they were in a similar situation.

It is essential that each member be allowed to complete his remarks without interruption. There will be occasions however when it will be necessary to bring someone back to relevant issues if they wander off into philosophical rambling or meaningless detail.

Meetings are usually rotated so that each member serves as host, providing modest snacks and beverages as finances permit. If a member does not have a house or apartment either large enough to accommodate the group comfortably, or cannot provide a quiet, or private enough environment, then he might serve as host in one of the other members home. In some cases, when the "check in" is over and no member is in a crisis requiring extensive discussion, the host can select a topic for discussion for the rest of the evening. If he chooses, he can ask for suggestions. Generally, a topic naturally flows from something a member is dealing with that strikes a chord with most of the members who then agree to pursue the subject further. Once a group has agreed upon the mechanics and ground rules for their meetings, and developed enough history to allow members to feel more comfortable with one another, nontraditional or experimental meetings can be integrated with traditional discussion types of meetings or even tried independently. The important point to remember is to build in an evaluation process so that we are constantly sensitive to the nuances of acceptance or disapproval.

The "check out" process is an evaluation technique that presents an opportunity for each member to inform the other members of how he felt about the meeting, what he liked or didn't like, and to make any suggestions or recommendations that he feels would be useful. This process is particularly important when groups are first forming, members are tentative, and no one is comfortable with exactly how to proceed.

The legitimate expression of affection between members is frequently ritualized in either individual hugs at the beginning or end of the meeting, and in some cases, with a group hug at the close of a meeting. This process must flow naturally from the honest feelings of the members, and should not be experienced as applied pressure to anyone who feels uncomfortable. Meetings have been devoted to problems men have had with either receiving or expressing affection, not only with men, but in all other relationships.

Patience and perseverance are the major requirements when forming a group, and it is not uncommon for it to take up to 10 or 15 meetings before comfort, routines and process have jelled and the bonding process has begun.

## VII. GROUP CONTENT

The sharing of what is currently going on in each member's life should be the prime focus of the group. The continuing changes in our lives enables us to become closer to one another, to support one another through our individual trials and joys, and to bond.

Additionally, there are many choices with respect to issues for discussion that allow us to see how differently we may perceive life, as well as how we may share a common point of view. The following topics are by no means a complete list of subjects for discussion, but have been common for many groups.

COMPETITION	SEPARATION
TRUST	SUCCESS/FAILURE
VULNERABILITY	MENTORING
WORK ISSUES	SPIRITUALITY
ISOLATION	ANDROGENY
OUR MOTHERS	MALE IDENTITY
OUR FATHERS	MALE CONDITIONING
PARENTING	MID-LIFE CRISIS
FRIENDSHIP	INTIMACY
HOMOPHOBIA	LONELINESS
RELATIONSHIPS	SELF WORTH
DIVORCE	MALE OPPRESSION
CUSTODY	OUR BODIES
SEXUALITY	DENIAL
AFFECTION	CREATIVITY
DEATH AND LOSS	CRITICISM
BURNOUT	ADDICTION
HEROES AND ROLE MODELS	DREAMS
RITUALS	THE "WILD MAN"
ANGER	ACCEPTANCE/REJECTION
COMMITMENT	RESPONSIBILITY
HONESTY	ATHLETICS
SINGLE FATHERS	INCEST
FEAR	AGEING
DEPRESSION	CHILD ABUSE

THE NICE GUY  
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The uniqueness of each group also dictates choices that are experimental, non-traditional, and in varying settings. For example:

- ° Weekend events that could include a sweat lodge, hike, cycling trip, men's rituals or a ski trip.
- ° Drumming, dancing, massage, art and wrestling as part of their meeting.
- ° Joint meetings with other men's or women's groups to get a different perspective, as well as to create new experiences.

- Meetings that are conducted outdoors.
- A pot luck with each member preparing his own dish, and the meeting is more of a social experience.
- A father and son meeting.
- A political action that the group has agreed to.
- Professional speakers may be invited to provide information on subjects of increasing interest, such as Robert Bly, his theories, and how they impact us. Contributions from each member may be necessary.
- Discussions based on articles a member has read (usually copied and given to everyone) or from books, plays, films, T.V. presentations or social commentaries that have been reported about in the media.

### VIII. ROLE PLAYING

Nothing is more destructive to the success of a group than when the members play a role that either undermines the principle of equality, or is demeaning to the other members. Although members in a group frequently may include psychologists, therapists, ministers, counselors and other leaders, their participation should allow them an opportunity to "drop" their professional role and not have to be an expert or leader.

Negative roles most frequently played are as follows:

#### Therapist.

This is the person who makes constant interpretations of what members are doing, what they should be doing, etc. Some people have trouble dropping their work role when they come to a group, while others have a need for power and control. It's a way of avoiding disclosure and hiding behind a mask that prevents a member from being real to the other members.

#### Advice Giver.

This member generally has a solution for every problem and offers his opinion whether it is solicited or not. This behavior, similar to that of the "therapist" is really demeaning and inhibits the process of members finding their own solutions to a problem. It also fosters dependency behavior and is not in the best interest of anyone, especially the advice giver.

#### Deflector.

Sometimes a discussion can be intense, difficult or painful, and rather than allow all kinds of feelings to be expressed or worked through, the deflector tries to change the subject, discourages the expression of negative or angry feelings, plays the role of protector or peacemaker, and thereby effectively inhibits a process that allows for the expression of a full range of feelings.

## The Intellectual.

This member hides behind a proliferation of words to avoid expressing his own feelings. His interaction frequently makes the meeting a discussion of theories and an avoidance of each member's feelings and experiences.

## Labeling.

Identifying another member with a label is judgmental behavior and is demeaning to the member who is labeled. It is more appropriate to talk about the behavior and how it affects you.

Although anyone may be guilty on rare occasions of doing any one of the above, it is only when a continuing and repeated pattern exists that is detrimental to the group, that it must be recognized and brought to the attention of the member who presents this problem.

There are many positive roles that can be played by members. Sharing leadership, offering ideas, suggestions and recommendations for group process, and helping to overcome problems that arise are beneficial interactions. Giving advice that has been solicited can also be helpful. Individual members who have special gifts of knowledge and insight can enrich meetings when they share these gifts with us, without judgment, and when it is appropriate.

## EXPECTATIONS

Most people come to a group with a variety of expectations. Some will be met, but others will not. It is a common expectation that friendships will be formed by joining a group. While this frequently does happen, it is not the purpose of a mens group to form friendships that extend beyond the meeting.

It should be understood that a group will not supply answers to a problem that a member is experiencing difficulty with, or who feels "stuck". Members of a group can be expected to share possible options to solve a problem based on their own personal experiences and feelings, but not to give advice. A leaderless mens group is not a therapy group, even though it is frequently a therapeutic experience for its members.

Each member should not expect that "chemistry" will automatically take place after a given period of time, that the group will bond, that all differences and problems will be overcome, and that a stable group will develop. A great deal of effort is required to overcome our conditioning, the complex differences and expectations that exists among members, and to learn how to resolve problems that naturally arise. Every group runs into difficulty of one kind or another. We grow through the process of resolving what is soluble and learning that many problems don't have a "perfect solution".

This last statement leads to another important expectation that many members feel should occur. It is their expectation that if they work hard enough they can resolve a problem with a member who frequently is disruptive to the group process. Some men have too much anger, are too defensive, cannot really listen, have an addiction problem, or have such a need to dominate or control that they should be in therapy before they can function positively in a group.



### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL GROUP

A trusting and safe environment has been established where members know that their personal and confidential remarks will not be revealed to anyone outside the group, and members feel free to share all kinds of feelings.

Leadership is shared by all members.

Members listen to one another with attentiveness and without interruption.

Members have developed the ability to move from their heads to their hearts.

All members take part in the discussion.

When problems or disagreements arise, they are confronted directly with sensitivity, and resolved.

Members look forward to the meeting, and feel a bond with the other members.

Members enjoy and are stimulated by the group process and content.

There is a shared feeling that all members feel supported and cared for.

The group regularly reevaluates process, content and purpose.

It is important to remember that it is the movement towards these ideals that we strive for, since none of these criteria have an absolute value.

### SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF A GROUP WITH PROBLEMS

Some members are domineering or play other negative roles and their disruptive behavior is not dealt with.

Members are either late or frequently absent.

Discussions are too intellectual, and not all members are willing to share their feelings and experiences.

Meetings lack vitality or meaning and some members feel a loss in interest without having taken steps to identify or correct the problems.

Members feel that judgments are being made about their behavior, style, or difficulty in solving problems, and that they are not being supported.

One of the members has a hidden agenda that requires therapy, but the problem is not identified.

A member discovers that someone in the group has disclosed a confidential item to a person outside the group.

The group has not incorporated an effective method of evaluating and restructuring meetings.

Problems that arise in a group present challenge and opportunity. As men we have been taught to solve our problems independently, to compete with one another for solutions, and to develop the strength and power that moves us up the career ladder over other men who have similar career aspirations.

Generally, the problems we encounter in a group replicate relationship problems we experience with wives, lovers, parents, children, friends and co-workers. Working through the problems that we encounter in a group helps us to develop the tools of cooperative behavior that has value and application in many other parts of our lives.

#### LOSING OR ADDING A MEMBER

Every group at some time in its history loses a member and must deal with the issue of that loss and the need to find a replacement. Both of these situations are extremely difficult, and present problems that must be understood and overcome.

There are many reasons why members leave a group. Some of the more common reasons are as follows:

- ° There are some individuals who have great difficulty with disclosure and who have had such an emotionally repressive family life experience, that they prefer to drop out rather than to experience the discomfort of exposing intimate feelings, and to work it through.
- ° Moving away because of job loss or divorce.
- ° Incompatibility with one or more members.
- ° Not being able to identify with or enjoy the process or content of the meeting.
- ° Feeling that problems are not being faced or dealt with.
- ° A member becomes bored and loses interest.
- ° An individual comes to a group with a narrow concern or agenda, such as wanting a group that deals mainly with creativity, political issues, ritual or body movement.
- ° In some groups, members have enjoyed a wide range in age (my present group has an age spread of from 28 to 69) and it works, while others will drop out of a group because they feel the age gap doesn't work for them.

It is therefore essential that when problems such as these arise, they are not buried. Nothing can be more hurtful to the remaining members of a group than having someone drop out without fully explaining their reasons for leaving. A group should be given the opportunity to make changes that are positive and that lead to the satisfaction we can experience by changing a negative situation to a positive one. A responsible sense of closure rather than a rejection of the remaining members is the least we owe each other.

The loss of a member generally triggers the feelings of loss we have experienced in other situations, and should be thoroughly explored at that time. We all have experienced loss and will continue to do so as long as we live. Therefore the loss of a member and the discussions that follow can be extremely beneficial.

Replacing a member after a group has been functioning for some time is difficult because the new member has missed so much of a personal nature. There follows a period of adjustment that is hard to manage for both the new member and the group, as they have different obstacles to overcome before he can be successfully integrated. A new member comes in as the outsider who wants to make connection and to be accepted, but does not know experientially what has taken place before he came. He is not sure exactly how much or how little he should share, and is frequently tentative and anxious.

The original group frequently has ambivalent feelings. On one hand, they hope that a favorable transition can be achieved. On the other hand, they are not sure that the original chemistry they worked so hard to accomplish will not be disrupted or changed into a less satisfactory version. There are some techniques that can be used to help him catch up, such as having members devote a few meetings with an abbreviated version of their life stories, and what they feel they have gotten from meetings to date, as well as what they would like to experience in the future. Going to lunch with individual members would expedite familiarity and the sharing of basic information.

In searching for a new member the following approaches have been utilized:

- ° Inviting friends of current members who are strongly recommended as possessing the qualities required for membership.
- ° Seeking individuals who have previously been in a mens group or therapy group and are interested in participating in a leaderless group.
- ° Soliciting men who have attended a workshop for leaderless groups and are looking for a functioning group.
- ° Advertising for members through newsletters, personal ads and newspapers, etc.

It is advisable to select a potential member who has had some type of therapeutic or group experience and a relatively good understanding of what is expected from him.

Many groups have told the prospective member that there would be a trial period of approximately four weeks to ascertain whether he wanted to continue, or they did. There are some groups who have taken the position that it requires unanimous approval before a new member can be accepted.

Whatever decisions the group makes, this is clearly a time for risk and experimentation. There is no predictable outcome, or a blueprint for success.