

Group Counseling: "The Counselor Blows Up"

CRITICAL INCIDENT

Background

I have been counseling groups for the past 6 years. The groups are conducted in a small book room used only by the person who grades papers for the English department. The room is furnished with a large table, chairs, and the grader's desk. The room lends itself to informality with no classroom atmosphere. I have used various criteria for determining which students should be members of the groups. However, membership is always voluntary. I meet with the students during their assigned study hall period.

This particular group met once a week over a 7-month period. The group consisted of four ninth-grade boys, two of whom were repeating the ninth grade. These boys were selected by their teachers, who identified them as having the "worst attitudes" of any of their students. Although the boys knew one another prior to the group sessions, they did not run in the same "gangs." All four of the boys had police records.

The boys were told they did not have to decide about group membership until the end of our first counseling session. If, at that time, they accepted membership, they were then committed to attend the remaining meetings. I told them there were only three restrictions I would place on the group:

1. No physical harm was to be done to anyone or any property in the room.
2. What was said in the group was not to be discussed outside of the room.
3. No one member could leave the group until we all decided to discontinue meeting as a group.

All four boys chose to continue. After explaining that I hoped the time would be spent in discussing their problems, I emphasized it was their group, and they could spend the time any way they saw fit.

I am still amazed at their ingenuity in finding so many ways of testing my commitments to them. I fought hard to keep from "correcting" their behavior as they attempted to challenge, ignore, annoy, and shock me. A workable group began to emerge from all the chaos, after many weeks of somehow living up to what I had promised. The boys slowly began to join me at the discussion table, one by one. The one exception was Danny.

Although none of the boys came from ideal home situations, only Danny lived in a fatherless home. Danny was an only child and lived with his obviously doting mother. His mother had a reputation for "covering" for Danny when the school had any occasion to check up on him. Unlike the other boys, Danny did not have to work in order to have money and clothes. In my judgment, Danny was "spoiled" but quite likable.

While it seemed the other boys were now ready to use the time to talk seriously, Danny was still instigating various distractions. The other boys never seemed to get upset with Danny and his constant shenanigans. I soon learned that their basic philosophy was "let and let live, don't bother anyone if he is not hurting you." In trying to live up to what I had said about each member spending his time as they wished, I began to ignore Danny's behavior, as he set about trying to lure other boys away from the table by engaging them in private conversations or diverting their attention in any way he could. It had been a long and frustrating wait to see the group come this far. I am afraid that my feelings were becoming rather hostile toward Danny, because he relentlessly tried to destroy what had taken so long to develop.

One day, Danny was sitting at a desk, opening the drawers and going through the contents while the rest of us were sitting at the table talking. I had asked him not to, explaining that the grader let us use the room and the desk belonged to her. When he chose to continue, my annoyance grew until I felt I could no longer keep still. Although he was not harming or taking anything from the desk, I felt I had some obligation to the grader to protect her privacy. I was unsure as to how the group would view my censure of Danny's behavior, because he was not really breaking a group rule.

I finally decided that if I were now accepted as a group member, then I, too, had a right to express my feelings, even if they were contrary to the feelings of the group. Although I spoke calmly, my choice of words showed I was upset. "This is a place to express feelings and right now I want to express mine. Danny is making me so damn mad right now that I can't even decide how to express my anger." Danny immediately jumped up, overturning his chair, and hollered, "All right, if that's the way you feel, I'll leave!" As he went toward the door, I yelled, "You can't! You can't leave the group because of our initial contract." I hoped the group had some meaning for Danny and that it would be strong enough to hold him, but my hopes were not high since he had displayed such total disinterest. Surely Danny knew as well as I did that I really was powerless to stop him from walking out the door, and I certainly could not force him to return again. On the basis of his past

behavior, Danny's walking out would have been the predicted outcome. However, something held him there that day. He did not leave, and I have always wondered why he decided to stay.

Discussion

First, let me state that I do not recommend "blowing-up" as an acceptable technique for a counselor. I consider it my weakness and my inexperience that allowed me not only to lose control when the incident occurred, but also to cloud my vision to the circumstances leading up to it. Although I feel I was justified in being upset with Danny's efforts to sabotage the group, I know I was wrong in getting so involved with my own anger and temporarily ceasing in the process to care about or to understand Danny's feelings. I can see how Danny might have interpreted my permissiveness as rejection. By ignoring Danny's actions, I also ignored Danny. Perhaps it was only through this incident that I was able to show Danny that I did consider him a group member and that he was not insignificant. Nevertheless, my attack might have easily placed him in a position of feeling compelled to leave to "save face."

Another possible explanation for his failure to leave was his perception of me as an authority figure. He stayed because he felt he had to. However, I believe that I had already passed that test and was no longer a threat to any of the boys. Also, because Danny was not adverse to being absent from school, he could have easily arranged to be absent on group days.

I feel this incident is an example of the value of group counseling, indicating the power of the peer group. Danny was possibly rejecting me as a group member and resented my feminine intrusion into this masculine group. Looking back at the type of distractions that Danny created, they were usually of a masculine nature, such as rough talk, "horsing around," and activities he felt would exclude me. I feel Danny had a strong need to belong and to identify with the masculine norms generated by his peers in the group. Perhaps he realized that to become a real member of the group, he would have to join with the others in their acceptance of me.

It appeared to me that Danny gained a great deal from his group experience. He looked up to Vik, a large well-built boy who emerged as leader of the group. I often watched Danny as Vik talked about such things as "love" and "fear," which I am certain Danny had viewed as effeminate. Danny's concept of what one must feel or do to be masculine was obviously altered.

I have offered several ideas that I feel were factors as to why the incident occurred and as to why I believe Danny would ultimately have chosen to remain in the group. But the question that is still in my mind is this one: Why did a boy with a history like Danny's choose to remain when I had put him on the spot in front of his peers at a time when he was obviously operating at an emotional level rather than a rational one? I would be interested in the opinion of others.

QUESTIONS

1. How active should a counselor be in a group? How emotionally involved should one become?
2. Was I really rejecting Danny, or was he rejecting me, or both?
3. How could I have better handled the situation?
4. Because Danny had not joined with the rest of us, was a clash of this type inevitable, or would he have found some other way to have joined us in time?
5. Why didn't Danny walk out?

RESPONSES TO THE INCIDENT

Rudolf Dreikurs

The counselor submitted this report for the purpose of understanding a crucial event in her work with a group. She tries to analyze the development of the group in a way that would perhaps be acceptable in a different frame of reference. From my point of view, her interpretations of the events are incorrect; I see them in a different light.

The cause of her difficulty seems to be evident on the first page. One may question the validity of an attitude merely from the words

used to describe what happened. For me, the words this counselor used are highly significant. She says, "The boys were told," "they did not *have to decide*," "they were then committed," "no physical harm was to be done," "was not to be discussed," and "no one member could leave." It is obvious the counselor wanted to be democratic, but the choice of her words, along with her probable tone of voice, indicated a rather autocratic approach. All subsequent events show clearly that she got herself into a power conflict with the boys from the first moment.

Had she recognized her involvement, she would not have been so amazed at their "ingenuity" to fight her. Because she did not realize that the boys had involved her in a power conflict, she misinterpreted their behavior as "testing my commitments." It is her involvement in a power struggle that made it so difficult for her to keep from correcting them. She tried not to respond, but obviously she was annoyed and shocked. What made it difficult for her to "live up" to what she had promised was her pretense to be democratic, a pretense that the boys easily recognized and challenged. This is the reason it took her so many weeks to emerge from the chaos. When the boys realized they could not succeed in defeating her, they slowly gave up the fight, except for one boy.

The counselor recognized that Danny was spoiled. She refers to his status as an only child without a father, with a mother who tried to make up for that and who gave him the justification that he had a right to do what he wanted. This is how he behaved in the group. At no point did the counselor attempt to explain to Danny the significance of his own behavior; therefore, she failed to recognize his determination to defeat her at every turn. It was almost as if she was a sitting duck at whom the boy directed his potshots. When she tried to counteract his disturbance, he became worse, instigating the other boys to side with him against her. Naturally this behavior frustrated her because she did not know what to do with a boy in a power conflict, how to extricate herself, how to help him and the others to understand his goals, and how to lead him away from the power struggle. Under these circumstances, it is not surprising that by "waiting" she became hostile, not only because Danny tried to destroy the group but also because he continued to

defeat her. That went on until finally she put the cards on the table, no longer pretending to be uninvolved.

The incident started off in the typical way such conflicts take place. She told Danny what not to do, and so he decided to do it until she could no longer stand it. When she blew her top, it was not because she tried to protect the privacy of the test reader but because she was helpless in view of Danny's power. In this moment, she came down from her throne and became human. But leave it to Danny to increase his pressure by jumping up, overturning his chair, and threatening to leave. She felt utterly helpless, and Danny, as well as she, knew she was powerless to stop him from walking out. Then why did he fail to leave? Why should he leave? She revealed her defeat, and he liked it. It was only his old game of defeating her. She was a good sparring partner, an easy target for his provocations. There was now no benefit for him to leave. This picture is how it looks to me. But the counselor gave a number of other possible reasons for his staying, which deserve closer scrutiny. The events look different from another point of view.

She considered it a consequence of her weakness and inexperience that she lost control. Actually, she gained control by admitting her defeat. Contrary to what she assumed, she was not "getting" involved with Danny when she got angry. In this moment, she extricated herself from the long-suffering involvement that she precipitated before the incident. She was right that her outburst gave Danny the realization that he was not insignificant.

In this light, the value of group counseling or the power of the peer group appears superfluous. The group actually played a limited role in the incident. Because the counselor did not identify the power conflict in which Danny involved her, she assumed, without any justification, that the boy was "rejecting" her. Once she began this kind of speculation, she even went so far afield as assuming that Danny resented her feminine intrusion into a masculine group. Naturally, Danny's destructions were aggressive, what else would one expect from such a boy? The need for masculine identification may be correct, but it does not explain the way he dealt with the counselor. His assumed fear of being effeminate reflects, rather, the

counselor's preoccupation with masculinity and femininity and her own apprehension about being feminine in a group of tough boys.

Now let us consider the incident's questions:

1. The counselor of a group should always be an active participant. Emotional involvement is not desirable. However, the counselor was deeply involved emotionally with the group long before the incident occurred.
2. I can see no evidence for either Danny rejecting her or she rejecting him. He provoked her; but this does not mean that he did not like her at the same time.
3. The effort of the counselor to keep Danny in the room was only the last step in her effort to control the group. What the counselor needed was not to handle "this situation" better, but to resolve the conflict long before it came to a showdown. Contrary to what she believed, losing her temper was constructive. She admitted her defeat openly and he responded to that by not going much further.
4. The clash was inevitable when the counselor became more and more defeated in her attitude and transactions with Danny.

Don C. Locke

Obviously, the group had a history together and a relationship had developed among the boys and the leader (the counselor). If I assume that some 10-15 sessions had been held and Danny had not engaged in the process, I wonder if an earlier direct intervention, especially by an experienced counselor, might have been appropriate.

The ground rules for the group were only those that were "told" to them by the leader. Ground rules are most effective when group members can sense ownership of the rules by directly participating in their development. The leader can set rules like those she "told them" by asking the members to decide how they will relate to each other in the group. If the members do not express the desire to avoid physical contact, then the leader can suggest the rule, at least giving the appearance of mutuality in the establishment of

ground rules. Leaders are responsible for telling group members that the rules will be reviewed periodically during the process to determine if they are still relevant or if new rules need to be introduced. Later in the process when Danny began going through the desk in the room, the leader used a new ground rule to restrict the behavior. The introduction of this rule suggests that the relationship between the leader and the members is indeed hierarchical and the leader could impose rules as she saw fit.

In most cases, school counselors should be participant observers in their groups. The exception would be the rare case of a therapy group. In most counseling groups, the counselors can use their participation as evidence of their humanity and involvement in situations similar to those experienced by group members. In doing so, the counselors can model appropriate behaviors rather than "explain how it should be done" or discuss situations in isolation. The role of participant observer provides the counselor an opportunity to become "emotionally involved" and to have group members use their skills in addressing concerns expressed by the counselor. For example, the counselor might ask group members how she or he might have handled a difficult situation. In this case, the counselor might have used the difficulties with Danny by saying something like, "I invited boys to participate in a group with me and I want all of them to be involved. I found that one member is not participating. In fact he is deliberately challenging my leadership of the group. How might I handle this situation?"

A number of possibilities exist on how the situation might have been handled differently. First, if all members had been involved in the development of the ground rules, there probably would have been a greater sense of ownership and willingness to abide by those rules. The counselor could have introduced a rule on member participation, requiring that all members participate at some level during each session or discuss reasons for their nonparticipation. Because the group met in a room used primarily by another professional, a ground rule regarding respect for this person's space could have also been introduced.

The counselor should have used ground rules to determine how well members would participate in her group. The group should have not advanced to a halfway point (or beyond) in a 28-session process before the confrontation occurred. Should the counselor have blown up? No. The counselor should have used general standards of practice to exercise leadership so that blowing up would be unnecessary.