



# VSGN LEADERSHIP SERIES

## HOW TO FACILITATE A SUPPORT GROUP

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For other articles by Tod Fiste, visit his website at [yourselfinbalance.com](http://yourselfinbalance.com)

### CREATE THE CONTAINER

- Create a safe “container” for the group, where people feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings that may be sensitive.
- Be very clear about the goals of the group, the format or structure of the meeting, and your role as facilitator. Putting this in writing could be useful.
  - People will feel persecuted if you announce rules or enforce boundaries without having made them clear up front, because they will believe that you are just targeting them (which may be true).

### DIFFERENT GROUP FORMATS

It is very difficult to reliably control a drop-in group that is open to anyone and advertised publicly. If you have 2 (or more) categories of people who have different needs or interests, you can either limit the time any one group gets what they want or you find a way to separate them into different groups.

- A certain amount of time to share painful feelings and challenges and another period of time to share positive experiences and gratitude for resources. Point out that it takes practice for some people to acknowledge their difficulties and allow others to support them, while for others it takes practice to acknowledge their resources and capabilities and be grateful for those.
- You may need to change the structure or format of the group if something isn't working. That's OK. Any group is a collection of individuals, and therefore is not going to feel the same or need the same things as a different collection of individuals. If the group becomes stale, changing things up could get people more engaged.
- Consider splitting the group into different groups with different goals and/or boundaries. You may not want to penalize people who are able and willing to focus on making positive changes by forcing them to listen to people who just want to vent and don't want to take responsibility for their own change.
- Remind people that the only sure thing in life is change.
- Have a very strict format for the group with limited time allotted to different things, like a time slot for helping people who are in crisis mode. This will only work if you are willing & able to tell someone in crisis that their time is up. You might allocate time after the meeting to helping such people identify or locate other help resources. (At

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meetings where nobody appears to be likely to try to take up inordinate amounts of group time and attention, you could loosen up on the schedule more.)

- Set limits and boundaries on the type of group and goal of the group. For example, have different groups for people in different phases. You could do this in conjunction with...
- Have a drop-in group that is open to everyone, where your crisis folks will start, and one or more other groups that are only open to people you have “vetted”, either by meeting with them beforehand or by observing them in the drop-in group. Alternately, require all new people to meet with you before they can participate in the group; this way you can assess their needs and direct them to more suitable resources if their needs are likely to disrupt the group.
- Enlist your “veterans” to help the newbies who are in crisis mode so they (the veterans) have something interesting and useful to do.
- At some point in the meeting split the group into different sub-groups, giving the veterans a discussion question and letting them interact with each other while you help the crisis folks.

Trying to be all things to all people sometimes just creates a situation where no one is satisfied. It is usually better to be clear with yourself about what you are trying to achieve and who you are trying to help, and then structure the group(s) accordingly.

## DEALING WITH NEGATIVITY

- If you have someone who consistently can't find things to be grateful for, use that as an opportunity to pull them aside and talk to them about what resources they are not accessing or making use of.
- Ask people if they would like others to share how they have dealt with similar situations; if so, make it clear that people are to talk about their own experiences, not try to “fix” others (e.g. don't say, “You should do this,” but rather say, “I've done this.”)
- Get people to express their **feelings** rather than their **conclusions**. “I'm afraid that things will never get better” is different from “I know things will never get better.” You can point out and encourage the feelings without supporting the conclusions. Naming the feelings that people are not saying can be helpful. If someone says, “Everything is terrible and I hate my life,” you might say something like, “It sounds like you are feeling angry about the difficulties you are dealing with and that you are afraid you are helpless to create change.”
  - You can reframe people's hopeless statements with empathy and at the same time continually make it clear that this is what they are feeling, and that their conclusions about the situation may not be the entirety of the situation. “I hear that you feel sad and anxious, and that you are afraid that the situation will not



change. It sounds like that fear is making it difficult for you to look for the things you can do to improve the situation.”

- Asking people what they are feeling in their body as they talk can sometimes get people to sink into their feelings - talking (“awful-izing”) is often an attempt to avoid feeling. You may need to use this carefully, since getting in touch with their physical sensations may trigger painful emotions, which could be upsetting.
- Invite people to empathize with themselves and with others who they are having trouble with. Point out that they don’t have to choose between the two. They can appreciate others’ challenges and also validate their own hurt, frustration, etc. at the way those others are responding to them.
- Ask what people are wanting from the group in this moment. Use this as an opportunity to help people practice making specific, actionable, realistic requests of others. We don’t always know what we want or need, but it is unrealistic to expect other people to figure it out when you can’t. You can ask for help brainstorming things that might be helpful or for perspective to help you see things you aren’t seeing.

## VALIDATE PEOPLE’S EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE

- Some people are really wedded to their opinions or conclusions. The worst kinds of fights are the ones that are about who is right, especially about the “right way” to feel about something. Emotions are rarely consciously chosen. We don’t pick our feelings any more than we pick the weather. This is one reason why it is so important to validate people’s emotional experience. On the other hand, we CAN choose what to do with our feelings when they arise. This is very difficult for some people, and is a good reason to steer them toward individual counseling.

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

- Notice what you, as a facilitator, are feeling. Be conscious of whether you are feeling triggered.
- Make sure you get the support you need. Care providers are prone to burnout without good self-care.

## STATEMENTS OF INTENTION

You may want to start each group session by reading a statement of intention. Here are some suggestions:

- We are here to acknowledge that our painful feelings, such as anxiety and sadness, are real and valid while at the same time reminding ourselves that those feelings do not define or determine "Reality," and that identifying ourselves as helpless victims actually adds to our pain rather than improving our lives.

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- We are here to support each other by validating for each other the understandable painful feelings we experience and by paying attention to the resources we have and practicing gratitude for them.
- AND...What is shared in this group stays in this group. Confidentiality is important to promote open and honest sharing.
- AND...We are all welcome to share our knowledge and experience, while recognizing that nothing said should be taken by anyone as medical advice. Always check with your healthcare provider before changing any therapies that could impact your physical or mental health.

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## WORKSHEET

### CREATING THE CONTAINER

1. What are the goals for the group?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
2. Describe how you see your role as facilitator:
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
3. As a facilitator how will you create the “container” for people to feel comfortable sharing thoughts and feelings that may be sensitive?
  - What rules will you need to enforce?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - What boundaries will you need to enforce?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  - How will you enforce the rules and boundaries?
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
  
4. Write a summary to share the above with the group.

### FORMAT OR STRUCTURE OF GROUP

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1. What type of group format will you follow?
2. Considering Speaker Meetings: How would they look?
3. How will you make sure the needs of different groups are getting met?

## DEALING WITH NEGATIVITY

1. List five to ten ways you will deal with negativity.
2. What are ways to end on a positive note?

## TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

1. How will you decompress after a meeting if you get triggered?

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2. If it should happen how will you deal with burnout?

## VALIDATING PEOPLE'S EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCES

- How will you support people emotionally?

## STATEMENT OF INTENTION

- Write the STATEMENT OF INTENTION for you group.