

Defining Moments in Group Facilitation

Burt Bertram, Ed.D., LMFT, LMHC

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There are defining moments in the life of a group when the very future of the group is poised on the brink of a direction...they are a watershed moment – a crossroads – a point of no return. These defining moments are imbedded with powerful directional dynamics. How the facilitator responds to these moments shapes the future of the group. Defining moments are classically thought to occur at the synapse of the Transition and Working stages of group development. My experience is that there are defining moments scattered throughout the life of a group, each one equally capable of directing and redirecting the flow and quality of the experience. These moments are fleeting; in an instant they must be recognized and responded to. Depending on the purpose of the group and the context of the defining event, such moments can release a surge of anxiety in even the most non-anxious facilitator. Good group facilitation involves many skills, nothing is more important than harnessing these naturally occurring events in the life of a group. Trusting the group, the process and yourself is the key to allowing the moment to speak for itself rather than forcing it to fit into the expectations of the facilitator.

Recognize the Moment

Recognizing the moment may seem relatively easy. However, experienced as well as novice facilitators often lament that *the moment* came and went in such a way that they did not realize its importance until it was too late. The moment had passed and couldn't be recaptured or the moment had been distorted in such a way that its original potential was lost. In either event, recognition did not occur in time to capture the moment. I continue to remind myself; if I have eight people in my group, I am participating in a dance of nine (eight members and myself) separate but interactive realities. Perceptions and conclusions that appear so obvious and settled to me can be altogether different for each of the other members of the group. Therefore, no matter how secure I may be feeling about what I think is happening in the group...the fact is I will never know even a fraction of what is occurring for each member of the group.

I am reminded of a recent task group I was facilitating. My charge was to assist 25 members of a commission to develop consensus on a list of priorities. I had just two hours to facilitate the process. In a preparation meeting with the sponsors of the project I was given assurances about areas of strong consensus as well as topics where mild to strong disagreement could erupt. The sponsors told me that before the prioritization process, they would like to begin the meeting with a call for a Motion to officially name a certain endeavor they had been working on. The sponsors assured me the Motion was procedural; there was no controversy around this issue.

On the day of the meeting the process unfolded as predicted. One, two, three, the Motion was made, the vote was unanimous, and the meeting was turned over to me to facilitate the real work. I moved quickly to describe the discussion and decision-making process we would use to complete our task. As I read the group they seemed only moderately invested. I had anticipated that and had planned a warm up activity. We completed the warm up and began the first pass through the information. Out of nowhere...a member asked a question...about the Motion! What follows is a reconstruction of my emotional reactions, internal dialogue, and verbal/body responses to what turned out to be a defining moment.

When faced with a defining moment in a group:

- **Recognize the Moment**
- **Protect the Moment**
- **Respond to the Moment**

Group Member:

I need to go back...I thought we had agreed to call ourselves XXX, but I think the Motion we just passed changed that.

Group Facilitator

- Emotional Reaction: Surprise, slight annoyance, suspicion
- Internal Dialogue: What is happening? Why are we going back there? What is this guy trying to do?
- Intervention: Demonstrate interest, walk toward the questioner (members were seated at tables in U shape). Scan the other members. Non-verbally invite other comments.
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Other Group Members:

"Yea, I agree, where did things change?"

Group Facilitator

- Emotional Reaction: adrenaline surge
- Internal Dialogue: There's lots of interest in this – it must be important. I understand...they are not yet brought in – they don't "own" the Motion, in spite of the fact that it was passed unanimously. Can't move forward until this is revisited.
- Intervention: *"Mr. Chairman, (addressing the formal leader of the meeting) would you like me to facilitate this discussion or, given that the discussion has re-opened the Motion, do you want to handle the discussion?"*

Please note the question I posed to the Chairman. I knew we had arrived at a defining moment. Reopening discussion of the Motion was critical to productive group process. In my question to the Chairman, I did not want to give him a choice about whether to reopen discussion – only who should facilitate the discussion.

Whether a task group, psychoeducational or counseling/therapy group, members can't fully move on (cognitively or emotionally) to the next topic if there is significant dissonance regarding the previous issue. Prior to the question, I was prepared, based on my reality, to invite the group to go somewhere it was not ready to go. The defining moment occurred around my awareness that what I assumed was clear and complete, was neither. Time and energy had to be reallocated to assure a true consensus. It is easy to imagine what would have happened to the process had the defining moment been ignored or overruled.

Protect the Moment

In the first example described above I was unprepared for the moment. I didn't see it coming and I could have easily missed it or become confused/rattled by the groundswell of unforeseen energy. Other times however, group facilitators see the event coming, perhaps even "help it occur." The issue then is not recognition but helping to preserve the moment so it can become a defining experience. As the guardian of the process, how does a group facilitator protect a defining moment? What are the thought processes and interventions that make for a successful response?

Myra Gaban, school counselor at Zellwood Elementary School (outside of Orlando, Florida), offers a powerful example. In her group of 4th and 5th graders there is real pain. Many of these children carry the effects of a wide range of troubling family circumstances. Her challenge is not in recognizing the defining moment – her challenge is protecting the moment! She must protect it from other children who, in order to insulate their own pain, will seek to diminish or divert the moment.

"When I see the moment coming...I see a child about to disclose a level of pain that I know many in the group can identify with...I need to stay one step ahead to prevent someone from disrupting the moment. I do that by physically

moving my chair close to the potential disrupter (not the discloser). I sometimes put my arm around the child or hold their hand. While the painful disclosure is in progress I want the potentially disruptive child to know and feel that I am with them – urging them to have the courage to listen and feel without the need to disrupt”.

That is beautiful, isn't it? Protecting and preserving the moment makes it possible for it to be a defining moment. How often in the course of a counseling group must we offer protection to the fledgling defining moment? However, it's important to note, the need to protect a defining moment is just as relevant to a psychoeducational or task group as it is to a counseling or therapy group. Important, but initially unpopular, issues come up in every group. Helping give that issue voice and legitimacy is critical to the on-going health and vitality of the group.

Respond to the Moment

Defining moments are not always fragile. On the contrary, sometimes they are hurled in the face of group members with inescapable and undeniable force. In these circumstances, the issue is not recognizing the moment or protecting the moment. The issue is responding to the moment in a way that teases-out and harnesses the real potential from the experience. Two examples are offered, one from a personal growth group, the other from a community stakeholder meeting.

In addition to her elementary school counselor employment, Myra Gaban also serves as a facilitator for student personal growth groups in the Graduate Studies in Counseling Program, at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. On one such occasion, Myra was working with a group of six graduate students. Five of the students had fully committed themselves to the group experience – one was holding back, limiting her contribution to advice giving and surface disclosures. Myra was ready for the student to swim out to the deep end of the pool. The group was stuck, waiting for this member to commit herself. Myra was wrestling with herself about what responsibility she bore for the member's reluctance and what responsibility she should assume to invite her to the deep end. One evening there erupted a confrontation between two other members. It became very real – very here-and-now. Still the disengaged member sat safely on the sidelines. Myra recognized this had all the earmarks of a defining moment. The issues being discussed between the two members were so close to the disengaged member that her lack of participation was quite loud. But would it be loud enough? Much as she would have liked, it wasn't appropriate and probably would not have been helpful for Myra to drag the member into the disclosure. With a mantra of “trust the process” running through her head, Myra watched the encounter unfold, all the while knowing there was a deeper defining moment that could emerge from the interaction. Then, as if on cue, one of the members involved in the encounter turned to the disengaged member and leveled an inescapable confrontation. The disengaged member was taken by surprise. The energy of the group turned full-force on the disengaged member – there was no escape. The moment had been defined.

There are several key points to responding to a moment such as this:

- Know what you are looking for.
- Trust the process.
- Don't get in the way of the process.
- Resist the temptation to do the work that legitimately and more effectively belongs to other group members.

Responding to the moment is as much about what the facilitator doesn't do as it is about the process comments or other actions he/she may initiate. Sometimes the most important “intervention” is staying out of the way and thereby allowing the members to take responsibility for the process. I want to be clear, in these situations, resisting the temptation to make a comment or initiate an intervention is a conscious and purposeful decision, not a fallback position.

Another example is taken from a very different group experience I facilitated several years ago. This group involved a one-day meeting of community stakeholders, including executives of several community agencies, chief

executives of half dozen philanthropic organizations, and three elected officials. The task was to explore ways to improve collaboration between and among the organizations. My plan was to adopt the Virginia Satir family-sculpting activity as a way of visually defining the current working relationships – then, invite the group to “re-sculpt” themselves into a more productive arrangement. The initial sculpting activity went generally as planned. There was a tight inner cluster then an outer circle slightly removed from the inner cluster. Finally there were several “satellites” quite distant from everyone. Consistent with the Satir model, people stood in their respective positions and talked about reality from their perspective. When asked to sculpt the desired relationship the members arranged themselves in one circle – no tight cluster, no outer circle, no satellites.

My original plan was for people to return to their seats after the desired relationship had been sculpted. However, what followed was such an obvious defining moment. As people stood and talked, the dialogue became more and more honest and direct – not necessarily warm and fuzzy, but real. We stood and talked for over an hour. Several times I was tempted to invite people to get chairs and replicate the arrangement. I resisted. I was concerned that any break in the mood would remind the members of where they were and what was happening...at which point it would stop. Finally, fatigue set in and people became restless with both standing and the process but not before a new and totally unexpected level of honesty had emerged.

Conclusions

Groups are full of defining moments. Some are easy to recognize, others pass by before they can be captured. Recognizing these moments as they are occurring is a key facilitator skill. Some defining moments are tough and undeniable; others are tender and must be protected from the natural neutralizing tendency of most groups. Finally, once a defining moment has presented it will have its own power. The facilitator’s best strategy is to ride the moment like a surfer rides a big wave – accept it for what it is – make the most of it – trust the process – and trust yourself.

**Key Points
for
Effectively Responding to the Defining Moment**

- Create a solid design – in a task group, the outcomes or deliverables of the group must be clearly understood and then a process designed that will deliver the agreed upon outcomes.
- During the implementation – trust your instincts.
- Safeguard the moment and trust the natural unfolding of the experience.
- When something is working – let it alone.
- Quit while there is still juice to squeeze!

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About the Author

Facilitator, consultant, trainer, coach and counselor, Burt Bertram has been a practitioner in private practice in Orlando, Florida for nearly 30 years. He has consulted with and/or provided training to over one hundred work groups, teams, and organizations representing corporations, government, professional and trade associations, as well as community organizations. He has facilitated leadership teams, boards and community groups to articulate a vision for the future; to create action plans and/or annual goals; to understand and accept change; to open dialogue and resolve conflict; and to improve communication and teamwork.

Dr. Bertram is Adjunct faculty in the Graduate Studies of Counseling program at Rollins College, Winter Park, Florida and Florida licensed Marriage & Family Therapist and Mental Health Counselor. Burt is past-president of the Florida Counseling Association, the Florida Mental Health Counselors Association, and the Central Florida Association for Marriage and Family Therapy.