

Guidelines for starting a Reflective practice/peer consultation group (RPG) by Michael Lang

There is no "one size fits all" when it comes to these groups. Ultimately, participants will determine what works in terms of format, structure and membership.

Two guiding principles apply to all RPG's:

- (1) Participants are committed to learning from their experiences through candid and rigorous self-examination.
- (2) Helpful and relevant learning comes through a process of self-exploration (not from prescriptive advice or recommendations) and self-discovery.

Why should conflict resolution professionals get involved in an RPG?

We work in a bubble; observed only by the participants and their representatives. We seldom solicit (and they almost never offer) their feedback. Therefore, apart from whether the dispute was resolved, we have little if any basis for understanding whether our efforts were useful, effective, and responsive and why.

As our profession has evolved, we have been slow to create opportunities for supervision or peer mentoring. There are very few situations in which we can engage with other practitioners to discuss difficult or unusual situations and to seek advice.

Professional development programs generally deal with the acquisition of new techniques and strategies. However, filling one's toolbox is not the same as being adept at knowing when, how and why those tools can be most effectively used.

Within this context, certain questions naturally arise for practitioners seeking to improve the quality and effectiveness of their practices.

- How do I know that I am doing the best I can?
- What interventions were helpful, which were off the mark; and why?
- Apart from settlement rates, how can I understand whether my efforts are as effective and resourceful as possible?
- How do I learn from difficult and frustrating experiences or from surprising successes?

Participation in a reflective practice/case consultation group offers practitioners an opportunity, with likeminded colleagues, to address such questions and learn from puzzling practice situations.

Consider the following questions as you design, promote, organize and manage an RPG.

Format

Are likely participants able and willing to meet face-to-face? Do they live/work within a reasonable distance or are they widely dispersed? Even if participants could attend meetings, is this an ideal or essential format for the group?

Comment: Even though geography may be a significant factor, it's important to think through the benefits and challenges for each option.

Face-to-face: These meetings tend to build collegial relationships more quickly, building trust and encouraging candor. It's easier for members to figure out how to avoid interruptions and to know when it's OK to offer comments. Complicating factors include finding a suitable and mutually convenient location, privacy, and members' ability to travel.

What setting is best suited to the group? Would you gather in a courthouse, community mediation center or public library; or will you meet at your facility or the office of one of the participants?

Comment: Factors to consider are: availability for the date and time your group wants to meet; adequate size, seating arrangements and resources (white board, etc.); accessibility for anyone with physical limitations; convenient location; and suitability with respect to confidentiality (e.g. is the room reasonably sound proof).

Video conference: This method has many of the advantages of face-to-face meetings. As well, you won't need to find a convenient and suitable location. The single greatest disadvantage is ensuring that all members have access to a reliable internet connection.

Tele-conference: One factor is nearly complete anonymity. Sometimes members prefer not to be identified. An advantage is accessibility—only a phone and lack of background noise are needed. There are a couple of disadvantages: (1) members don't have non-verbal clues to enhance their ability to relate to one another, and (2) it's more difficult to build a sustained and trusting relationship.

Comment: See above regarding members' internet connections. You may also need to arrange (and pay) for a tele-conference or video-conference platform.

When, how long, frequency?

Time of day, day of the week, length of the gathering and the frequency? Finding a mutually workable date and time for meetings in consultation with the members; this is never a simple process. For example, we routinely have participants from 4 time zones in our ABA RPG.

Comment: One factor that helps determine the length of the meeting is the number of participants. With fewer people (4-7), it's possible to meet for only an hour. As the number of participants increases, and in order to ensure everyone who wishes to do so can participate in the discussion, it may be a good idea to extend the meeting time to 90 minutes or even 2 hours.

Another factor is the frequency of your meetings; a longer meeting is a good idea if you meet less often than monthly. Most groups follow a monthly schedule, but that choice is one made by group members.

Participation

Will members be asked to commit to regular attendance, providing a consistent cadre of members? Or will this be a drop-in (such as the ABA RPG), with members drawn from a larger group where attendance changes from meeting to meeting?

Comment: Managing a drop-in group requires skill. You won't know in advance how many people (and who they are) will attend. Some will be familiar with the group's reflective process; for others it may be the first time. Shifting membership means participants may not know one another and may not have the benefit of common experiences. As a result, some may be reluctant to speak candidly, or at all. The challenges of a drop-in group are the reasons for its distinct advantage. Having an open membership allows for a larger group of practitioners with a wide range of practice experiences.

When participants make a commitment to show up regularly, they tend to form durable and helpful professional relationships, be more willing to share puzzling or unsettling practice experiences and more candid in their self-reflections. The principal downside of a creating more structured group is the challenge of making a long term (e.g. 6 months or longer) commitment.

- Will there be a leader/facilitator, or will the group be self-managed?

Comment: Most groups benefit from having a leader; someone to facilitate the conversation, encourage participation, keep the focus, and maintain the guiding principles—and on a more mundane level, manage the time. These advantages hold whether leadership rotates among the members or one person acts as the leader.

Self-managed groups work well when group members are familiar with and experienced at the process of reflective practice, and where there is a reliably consistent membership.

Participants

- It can be helpful to have a homogeneous group with members whose area of practice is relatively similar. There is, however, a benefit in opening group membership to those with different practice arenas and different content areas.

Comment: In a drop-in group, for example, there is a greater likelihood of diversity both in levels of experience and in areas of practice. Diversity can enrich the discussion; conversely, it can become more difficult for those who practice in the commercial arena, for example, to relate to the practice problem presented by a family practitioner. Another benefit of a diverse membership is that participants learn about and gain insights into other areas of practice.

When membership is limited to practitioners in a single area of practice, discussion of case situations can be more fluid. All members can, to some degree, relate to the problem being discussed, they use a common language to describe their work and, it's likely they have had similar experiences.

- Do you want members to have a minimum degree of practice experience; or do you see a benefit in having a diverse group of practitioners?

Comment: See the comment immediately above. An advantage to a group with varied levels of experience is that novices tend to ask questions that at first seem so obvious that they needn't be asked, but on reflection, they are profound and helpful. There are at least a couple risks of having a mixed group. More experienced practitioners may begrudge what seem simplistic comments and questions. Conversely, the less experienced members may be intimidated, and participate less actively.

- Is there an ideal group size?

Comment: Assuming one to two hours for presentation and discussion, a maximum membership of 12 is ideal. If there are more members, there is a chance that several could become conversational wallflowers, observing without participating. Also, while the choice to present a case at any meeting should be voluntary, it's essential for group trust and cohesion that each member takes a turn.

Groups can function quite well with a minimum membership of 5.

For most of the groups I help manage, the range is 6 to 15 members.

Group process

- Candid conversations require trust. Consequently, it is essential to ensure that confidentiality is strictly maintained. Before discussing any practice situations, participants should talk about and reach an understanding on the meaning of confidentiality within the group.

Comment: Questions must be put to the members; they are the beneficiaries of the commitment and the ones obligated to honor this principle.

- Are there other ground rules or guidelines essential for the group?

Comment: (See the next item for additional comments.) Perhaps the most important guideline is also the most obvious—do not judge, criticize, or second-guess one another, either overtly or subtly. Participation is not a license to spout off, to prove oneself or show up a colleague. See also the *guiding principles* noted at the beginning.

- Would it be helpful to provide/share articles about reflective practice, or other similar information to the participants?

Comment: Ask a dozen people to describe reflective practice and you're likely to get that many responses, with some overlap and substantial divergence of opinion. As a result, it's helpful if everyone is singing from the same song sheet. Among those you might share is "Why Case Consultation/Reflective Practice Groups Matter for Mediators" (Lang and Arms, 2017), see www.thereflectivepractitioner.com/resources