



CONVENING GROUPS ON "VOICE-MAIL" SYSTEMS

by John N. Craig, Philadelphia, PA

The proliferation of voice-mail or voice-messaging systems is making possible a completely new way of conducting a support-group dialogue among a small, specified group of individuals. This new method involves using a specially designed voice-messaging system as a forum for group communication. This technique can create surprisingly powerful interactions and may soon prove an inexpensive, readily available, and extremely useful tool for anyone working with groups. (The system is only about \$4 per hour of interaction, as opposed to the \$150-200/hour cost of live telephone conference calls.)

Voice-mail support groups resemble closed, facilitated groups "meeting" on the Internet, but they have two crucial advantages. First, though only a minority of individuals is on line, almost everyone has a telephone or access to one. Second, voice messaging systems record and transmit the sound, intonation and inflection of the human voice, which can be extremely important when people discuss emotional or personal issues.

The dialogue created is not "live" but occurs in a series of rounds over a period of days, weeks, or months. Because participation is not live, it has unexpected but very significant advantages for those involved. In addition, voice-mail groups can create a way for group members to see more deeply into each other's lives: members can agree to call in their "sharing messages" at moments of greatest stress during the week, allowing others to hear them speak not in a formal group setting but directly from a disturbing "real-world" setting. And voice-mail support groups can be of great value to individuals in a wide variety of situations: those who are isolated geographically; those who are home-

bound, bedridden, or otherwise unable to travel; or those too shy, intimidated, or ashamed to attend a face-to-face support group.

Voice-mail group meetings can be used as important supplement to in-person meetings. For example, a group might be able to meet in person only once every six weeks. Between these face-to-face meetings, weekly voice-mail interactions could be scheduled to keep formal facilitated group communications flowing. Alternatively, groups that meet in person once a week might schedule very brief, 10-15 minute voice mail "meetings" or "check-ins" every single day, providing participants with the chance to renew the group's spirit and supportive energy on a daily basis.

I have developed and tested these ideas since 1991 when, as a professional support group facilitator, I created a small, nationwide conference program for bisexual men. The program offered a forum for the serious discussion of major life issues, including relationships with wives, children and peers, and issues related to AIDS and HIV, drug and alcohol abuse, and religion and spirituality.

Researchers at Columbia, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Michigan have been helpful to me in furthering this project. If you have any ideas concerning these concepts or, if you would like to learn more about them, please contact me. I am especially interested in connecting with organizations that might be able to fund simple and easily arranged pilot projects which could test these concepts with their own clients. Thank you for your interest and your help.

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TOTE BAGS

A few of the very attractive tote bags from the Ann Arbor Symposium are available. They are green on natural and feature the Inuit group figures of the Preliminary and Final Programs. Order from AASWG. With credit card order by FAX, e-mail or phone (See page 2). \$5 plus \$2 S&H in USA, \$3 elsewhere.

RESPONSE TO EDITORIAL ON LEADERSHIP IN JULY NEWSLETTER

By Bob Van Oosterhout

I felt that your article on leadership in the July, 1996, Newsletter raised some important issues. You talk about the need to develop leadership skills and potential among disadvantaged people as well as the social workers who serve them.

I'm writing to share my experience with leadership in an empowerment program called the Hard Times Cafe which we opened in November, 1991, after Michigan cut general assistance.

When I look at the best leaders among participants over the past five years, an interesting pattern emerges. Every one of the most effective leaders emerged rather unexpectedly. Their early participation was quiet and tentative. Many of them said little in their first few months in the program. Even now, they are neither outspoken nor out front. They speak when something needs to be said and then with heart and compassion that touches everyone, motivates us and keeps us on track.

Those who expressed strong interest in, and seemed to have potential for leadership, did not last. Although outspoken and able to express themselves clearly and effectively, they did not continue to motivate or hold the lasting respect of participants. It seems they attained an image of control and responsibility that diminished the other's responsibility and enthusiasm.

My point is that our best leaders seemed to develop themselves. We created structures for them to gain leadership experience and provided limited feedback and support. But it would be quite a stretch to say we "developed" them through any intentional action of our own.

Most of our most effective leaders do not have the skills we think that leaders need - organizing, running meetings, clarifying issues, keeping focus, etc. When I have approached them about learning these tasks, most of them were not really interested. When I encouraged them to try, they didn't do very well.

The Hard Times Cafe operated under a leadership model which I call