I have participated in numerous experiential training groups over the years both as a leader and as a member. I can assure you that the most vivid memories I have come from those that I experienced as a member. They have been among the most important learning experiences that I have had during my career. Let me try to explain why training groups are so valuable for a group therapist.

First, you will have the opportunity to understand in depth through direct experience the kind of inner struggles patients undergo as they attempt to form relationships and use a group for personal growth. I still remember vividly my fears of diving into the uncertain waters of these groups, and I knew that I either screwed my courage to the sticking post and entered into the fray or left the group feeling like I did not have the guts to risk exposing an aspect of my personal life that perhaps portrayed me in a less than favorable light. When I thought about it, there were plenty of issues in my personal life to discuss--problems with colleagues, bosses, parents, children, spouse--but did I want to share any of them with a group of strangers? How would they react? Would I be criticized, humiliated or the worst of all--ignored? Would everyone at American Group Psychotherapy Association (AGPA) hear about it the next day? These are the very same anxieties our patients have when they enter and try to participate in a group. And there is no better way to learn about such struggles than to undergo them yourself, to feel them inside and firsthand--not from a book. It makes you more sensitive to your patients and a great deal more tolerant of other people’s resistances. Much as we all desire help from others, there are inevitable anxieties, inhibitions, and shameful feelings that make us want to withhold and withdraw.

Because we are all professional helpers, it is not uncommon for us to adopt the role of therapist’s assistant, hiding behind one’s persona as a clinician to deal only with the problem of others. Groups of professionals sometimes appear like 12 therapists in search of a patient.

Another favorite escape hatch, used by patients as well as by us therapists, is to retreat into the role of silent observer. After all, one is there to learn how groups function, how members and patients interact, and what better way than to be a fly on the wall? Let me assure you that such a role will not only make you a problem member, but you will be cheating yourself of a potentially rich experience of being as full a participant as possible.

So far I have described only the advantage of learning better how our patients feel. But there is also the possibility, nay the probability, that you will learn something important about yourself. If you tend to monopolize or conversely, if you are too silent, you are...
likely to hear about it from your fellow members. If you are too self-absorbed and don’t attend sufficiently to others, you will probably be told about it. If you don’t reflect about what others tell you, let it bounce off your back or ignore it, the group will tell you. Most often these reminders will be relatively gentle and given in a constructive manner. In any case this personal feedback about how you come across in a group, how you behave as a group member, can be extremely helpful in expanding your self-awareness.

Another way of learning more about oneself is also by silent self-observation. I began to observe in more than one group that I was constantly evaluating leaders’ interventions, giving them grades for their performance. More often than not they fell short of my expectations, and I often persuaded myself silently that I could do a better job. One leader didn’t take well to negative transference and discouraged its expression, another talked in strange metaphoric language, whereas still another made weak eye contact with members. Although some of these criticisms may have been warranted, the more important lesson I began to learn was about my own competitiveness with authority figures.

This brings me to another rich source of learning, that is, the opportunity to observe an experienced group therapist in action. If you are not intent on criticizing the group leader, as I was, you will be able to learn about a skilled clinician’s approach to a group, how he or she thinks, what gets observed, interpreted, or confronted. When is the therapist silent and when interpretive? When is the intervention addressed to the group and when to an individual? What interventions seemed to work and move the process forward and which were ineffective? In individual psychotherapy training, we rarely see our supervisors and mentors in action. Groups are unique in providing clinicians an opportunity to watch, evaluate, and learn from a mature therapist.

Still another learning experience is the opportunity to become knowledgeable about group dynamics. I have learned more about these matters as a participant than as a therapist, probably because the role of observer without the responsibility of managing the group permits more relaxed opportunities to study what is transpiring. I was a member of an unstructured group some years ago, where I observed a striking combination of group dynamics that was very instructive and memorable. This was a group in which it was difficult for members to express hostility or criticism, mainly to the leader. Some tentative jibes at the leader resulted in certain nonverbal reactions, like tightening of his facial muscles, that convinced the group that this was a leader who was not exactly welcoming of such behavior. As a result the group found a spokesperson, Dan, whose disposition to freely express negative feelings made him a likely candidate to fill that role for them. They subtly encouraged Dan to speak up and he was more than happy to vent his spleen at the leader. Does this sound like projective identification? Indeed it does. It is also the basis for role suction.

But when Dan began to express his criticisms of the leader, the group gave him little support and, in fact, began to ostracize him for his unwelcome ideas, which in turn made his devaluations of the leader even more extravagant. This scapegoating made it necessary eventually for him to leave the group. I remember his departure quite vividly
because he left with some fanfare in which he went around the room describing the Achilles’ heel of each member and then nominated me to carry on the good fight, an invitation that I wisely declined. The whole episode was a memorable experience, which I have put to good use in my understanding and teaching about group phenomena.

I would like to mention one last potential benefit from experiential groups. It has the possibility of throwing light on problems of authority, leadership, and followership in organizations. Some years ago the Menninger Clinic was undergoing a radical change in leadership, and the torch was being passed from the founder, Dr. Karl Menninger, to the next generation, led by Dr. Roy Menninger. The staff needed to give up its dependency on a strong charismatic father figure and begin taking more responsibility for decision making. At that time the organization turned to the A.K. Rice Institute’s group-relations conferences, an experiential method for studying organizations, and most of the staff attended at least 1 week-long conference. We did a follow-up study some 10 years afterward and most of the participants still spoke enthusiastically about the important learning they had gained from the experience. There was little doubt that the organization had become better able to negotiate the needed shift from a dependency culture to one in which greater autonomy was called for.

I have often tried to understand the various factors that have led to making the AGPA as successful an organization as it has become. Most of us who have been associated with AGPA have a sense of closeness and bonding with the organization and with our peers that makes membership highly valued. Over and above the professional and scientific benefits, we form close friendships that enrich us. I believe that the Institute experience contributes in no small measure to the personal relationships that develop. Friendships made in these groups often continue and endure.

What you are about to enter is a 2-day intensive personal experience in which you have the opportunity to learn about yourself, to learn about group leadership, and to learn about group dynamics—all in a way that you can’t possibly learn from reading. You may even get a new perspective about a problem in your personal life. Each of you will make unique observations and will carry away different facets of the experience, depending on where you are in your own development as a clinician and as a person. If you are especially motivated to learn more about yourself, you will probably come away with new insights. If you are interested in focusing on techniques of leadership, those learnings will be paramount.

This will be a challenging and exciting adventure in personal growth. I am certain that the experience will stay with you forever. My recommendation: Seize the opportunity.

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