Empowerment Training Sessions and Events

Training Issues

The following issues are discussed in this article. The outline below can also serve as a checklist of training components to consider in planning your training events:

- Assessing Qualifications for Trainers
- Establishing Group Ground Rules
- Planning in Advance and Getting Feedback
- Setting Up Clear and Attainable Goals for the Session or Event
- Choosing Empowerment Activities
- Knowing How Much Information Is Needed
- Giving the Event a Positive Title
- Creating an Effective Outreach Plan
- Specifying the Meeting Logistics
- Handling Training Group Dynamics
- Devising a Welcome and Opening
- Determining the Central Activity
- Incorporating a Secondary Activity and Breaks
- Using Socializing as the Main Focus
- Indicating Any Plans for Follow-up Activities
- Preparing and Collecting Evaluation Forms
- Using a Focused Closing
Part One

Assessing Qualifications for Trainers

Anyone who is interested in helping disabled people with empowerment, self-protection, and safety skills can be a trainer. However, interested individuals must have good organizing and follow-through skills; be able to set clear and attainable goals; be good listeners, be welcoming and confident; and hold high expectations for others. They also should be respectful, genuine, reasonably relaxed when facing interpersonal conflict, and willing to ask for help when necessary. Trainers should be able to evaluate the group and be prepared to make referrals to community resources when appropriate.

Although it is helpful to have experience in facilitating training sessions on a range of issues, beginners can nevertheless be effective. However, one essential prerequisite for leading training events is experience as a participant. Observing and participating in the dynamics of a group will help potential trainers become comfortable and familiar with the range of possible situations that can occur during training sessions. Sometimes surprises, including conflict, arise, and witnessing
other leaders handle these challenges helps immeasurably. If you are not experienced with facilitating training events, make sure to have a co-leader who is.

Establishing Group Ground Rules

Some group activities will include sharing very personal stories, thoughts, feelings, and opinions. To ensure confidentiality, mutual respect, and good listening skills, group facilitators need to have ground rules in place and know how to enforce them. See Facilitating Support Groups for establishing ground rules. If possible, ask for input on appropriate training-related ground rules from the individuals you will be training or from people who know your population.

Planning in Advance and Getting Feedback

Before facilitating an actual training event, take sufficient time to plan and rehearse your training-session activities with a partner or co-facilitator or think them through by yourself, imagining your group's potential responses. Make a written agenda for yourself with the specific components of the session's plan.

Setting Up Clear and Attainable Goals for the Session or Event

Decide what goals you have in mind for your participants as well as for yourself as the trainer. What do you hope to achieve? What specific skills do you hope to impart? Formulating clear and attainable goals beforehand will enable you to assess the effectiveness of the training.

Choosing Empowerment Activities
Select empowerment tools that best fit your group, based on your assessment of the participants' needs. Feel free to change or adapt activities included here or make up new ones and experiment. You know the individuals you are working with - trust your practical and intuitive knowledge and your thinking. Also, encourage your participants to give you feedback about which aspects of the empowerment tools they find useful and effective and in which sequence they need to be presented and practiced.

Knowing How Much Information Is Needed

The amount of information to be addressed in a single training session will vary greatly and depend on the particular makeup of the participating group members. Like any other group of people, different populations of disabled people have different needs and different learning styles. However, it is usually best to start slowly, aiming for a modest amount of new information, combined with some fun activities that emphasize building connections with others within the group. Experiment as you proceed to work with your group and learn what participants enjoy and can handle. Regularly ask for group members' feedback to find out if the new information is adequate in quantity, quality, and usefulness, and if there is anything else participants would like to learn about.

Giving the Event a Positive Title

Give the training event a positive title by using active, appealing terms, such as "Getting Your Health Needs Met," "Medical Empowerment Training Session," and "Assertiveness with Your Healthcare." Be creative - it is important to be hopeful and optimistic to attract people. Don't use negative terms in relation to doctors or healthcare. Many disabled people love their providers and depend on them.

Creating an Effective Outreach Plan

Devising an effective outreach plan to promote the planned training session or event is just as important as giving it a positive title. Outreach or recruitment for groups can be done with flyers, bulletin boards, email or postal mailings, newsletters, and ads in newsletters and websites. Also, you can promote empowerment training sessions with announcements and presentations at community centers and events and by word-of-mouth via already interested members.

Specifying the Meeting Logistics

Planning session logistics include selecting the meeting place, determining scheduling issues, arranging for appropriate accommodations, and providing the necessary materials. You will need to decide whether the training session will be a one-time event or an ongoing series of several events, such as a weekly class or monthly meetings. It is also important that you consider the length of each session, with a focus on participants' attention spans and their needs for taking breaks. The facilitator or a volunteer may need to be responsible for reminder calls or emails, rides or transportation, and parking. A key logistical component is disability access. Consider the range of necessary disability accommodations for learning needs and personal assistance services for bathroom and other personal needs. Consider financial aspects, whether or not there will be refreshments, and who will set up, clean up, and lock up.
Part Two

Handling Training Group Dynamics

As in support groups, interpersonal difficulties can sometimes arise in training sessions. See Facilitating Support Groups for discussions on Dominating Members, Handling Conflict between Members, and other topics that are relevant for training sessions. Plan or brainstorm with a partner for possible pitfalls with your target audience in mind.

Devising a Welcome and Opening

On the day of the first scheduled session, gather your attendees and welcome them with a warm introduction, such as, "Thanks for coming! I'm really glad you could make it." Offer some brief introductory comments, referring to the logistics of the meeting and the goals of the event.

If appropriate for this population of disabled people, and the size and time allocated for the group, open the session by getting all present involved. It is usually good to start with something positive. For example, facilitate the opening by asking participants: "What's something good in
your life?" Or, "What's something positive (or fun, or interesting, etc.) you've done or seen recently?" If participants don't know each other, ask for their names. You might ask people to say something about what attracted them to this event. Keep these opening questions light and pleasant and try to avoid intense or personal topics. The facilitator might start in order to model answering the questions posed.

If you want your group members to share personal information, it is often useful to wait until they are more comfortable with each other. Opening the session with requests for personal introductions can be intimidating or make people feel "put on the spot." Also, participants will be able to pay better attention to each other if they are more relaxed.

**Determining the Central Activity**

The central or primary activity addresses your learning objectives for each session. This activity may involve presenting new information through stories or multimedia tools, such as a video or PowerPoint presentation, or other activities you devise. If you are inexperienced with facilitating training events, you might want to rehearse your central learning activity with a partner or, if you have one, a co-facilitator in advance, so you can anticipate possible responses of your group and brainstorm about potential confusions, distractions, or other challenges.

**Incorporating a Secondary Learning Activity and Breaks**

An optional secondary learning activity can help participants integrate the objectives of the primary learning activity. It might be something you can alternate or switch to for variety of focus. A secondary empowerment activity could be socializing; playing a game; exercising or moving around; using guided meditation; engaging participants in creative activities, such as crafts, singing or joking; laughing; serving refreshments; or allocating more time for personal or general sharing. The secondary learning activity can be helpful to reinforce the session's objective. It can connect group members to each other, allowing them to apply the new information they are learning in the context of relationships with others. The secondary learning activity can be fun and entertaining as well and thus help break the stereotype that learning is a stiff and boring activity.

**Facilitating Support Groups** has two sections, one titled Creativity, the other, Humor, which offer ideas for secondary activities. Adequate breaks are not optional! With or without refreshments, they also offer opportunities for participants to interact with each other. When scheduling breaks, make sure to not only include adequate time for bathroom breaks and rest, but also informal time for participants to get to know each other.

**Using Socializing as the Main Focus**

Consider having a party for empowerment purposes. For some disabled group members, the central empowerment activity will be socializing and conversational communication. Both will be useful for individuals who are relatively isolated or inexperienced with social events, have difficulties meeting others, or who just need additional time to get to know their fellow group members before feeling comfortable engaging in other activities. For some groups, this kind of socializing will be enhanced by involving a few more experienced people, volunteers from the
peer group, for instance, who can circulate and help connect participants with each other in conversation.

**Indicating Plans for Follow-up Activities**

Before the end of the training session or event, make time to mention or discuss plans for any follow-up activities. Let participants know whether or not there will be another meeting, homework of any kind, or an evaluation.

**Preparing and Collecting Evaluation Forms**

Evaluation by group members not only helps you improve the training activities but it also empowers the trainees. Suggest and create opportunities for participants to offer constructive criticism or suggestions and allow adequate time for them to be considered and explored.

If trainers want or need specific feedback, distribute a brief and easy to complete evaluation form, and give participants enough time to fill it out with any assistance they might need. Evaluation forms are often distributed haphazardly at the end of an event, left in handout packets on tables near the exit doors for participants to grab, for example. Some participants may need to leave early and/or forget to fill them out before they leave. To avoid either scenario, you could mention the evaluation forms several times during the training event, so participants become and remain aware of them.

Your first mention of the evaluation forms, as well as when you plan to distribute and explain them, could be at the beginning of the session, right after you have made the introductory comments and addressed the logistics and the goals of the event. Your second mention of the forms will likely happen towards the end of the session, when you will actually hand them out and address any questions or concerns participants might have about completing them. Giving out a token prize, such as a plastic whistle or pen, for completing and returning the form is surprisingly effective. You can also distribute a certificate of training or participation in exchange for the evaluation form. Whether or not you decide to use incentives, you need to make sure to collect the completed evaluation forms.

**Using a Focused Closing**

Training sessions benefit from a positive focused closing, such as having each group member briefly share a comment, a positive reflection, for example, on the event. A focused closing helps participants reflect on the experience and gives them the opportunity to hear how others think or feel about the training session. A structured closing can also work as a brief review of the session, because participants will usually share different points.

Here are some suggestions for closing questions:

- Share one aspect of the session you found useful.
- Describe one way you plan to apply something you've learned today.
- What is the next step in your learning about empowerment training?
Avoid closing questions that invite evaluative or critical comments at the very end of a session, when there is no time left for facilitators to respond. Negative feedback given under these circumstances can easily degenerate into complaints or unfounded criticisms, and with insufficient time to address them, they can cause the whole session to end on a sour note. Of course, participants may have constructive criticism. If that is the case, they do deserve more than cursory time to articulate their comments and suggestions. However, if a participant launches into a lengthy critical comment, interrupt her with, "Thanks, we'd love to hear your ideas, but we are closing now. I (or the co-facilitator) would be happy to meet with you for a few minutes after we close to discuss your ideas."

Thank participants for having come, for their involvement in these important issues, and, if appropriate, for the group relationships they have developed. You may also express your hope of seeing them again in the future. Also, take the time to express your gratitude to all. For example, as your concluding remarks to all present, you could say, "Thanks to all participants for your commitment to this important work. You are making an enormous difference!"