

# Chairing

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**T**his issue of the *CJNL* has a number of articles on leadership – not inappropriately, given the title and orientation of the journal. I want to comment on one tiny slice of leadership: chairing or leading a group. The groups I have in mind are usually committees of some type. I spend a considerable part of my life in committees, and I have come to dread the “incompetent” chair. The person who doesn’t get the committee started appropriately cannot manage the discussion, frequently allows one person or more to dominate and doesn’t facilitate any sense of closure. It is hard to find a more frustrating way to spend time and accomplish little than being a member of a poorly chaired committee. Chairing a committee is probably as much art as science. It requires a set of skills and a sense of timing of when to intervene to ensure that the group works. It is helpful to have a theory, and I find Bion’s theory of the work group a useful one. Margaret Rioch’s interpretation of Bion (1970) is easier to digest than Bion himself (1961). Bion

was a British psychoanalyst who became interested in how groups function through his work in the British army in World War II. He introduced the concept of the “work group” and the basic assumptions that members of the group collectively make at an unconscious level that help them escape the task that the group is assigned to accomplish.

Task avoidance occurs because focusing on the task is hard work. It is hard to get a group to stay focused on reviewing material, examining alternatives, excluding some possible courses of action, and finally coming to a decision that may require compromise. Bion labels the way groups avoid the task as *basic assumption behaviour*. The assumptions include dependency, which usually manifests as members’ looking to the leader or something else outside themselves to rescue the group and make a decision; fight or flight, that is, either fighting among themselves or discussing something outside the group’s purview, thus fleeing the focus of the group; or pairing, in which the group “pairs” with an idea that permits avoidance of the task, or focuses on pairing by two members who share an idea that does not help the group accomplish its task. Bion also introduced very pragmatic ideas. For example, starting and ending meetings on time minimizes basic assumption behaviour. Perhaps the most important concept of all is that the authority to work on the task lies in the task. Anyone can assume leadership of a group at any time by refocusing the group on the task.

This may seem more a lecture than an editorial, but it helps me make a point: I think basic leadership skills should include the ability to chair a group, and chair it so that the task of the group is accomplished. Being a member of a group with a superb chair is a wonderful experience, especially if you are a student of “chairing” behaviour. Groups can tackle difficult and complex tasks and come to decisions if they have a competent chair. These same groups can be frustrated, take an extraordinary amount of time and never reach a conclusion that satisfies them if the chair does not lead.

I can’t think of any situation in which the actual chairing of a group or committee is taught. Perhaps the topic is covered in MBA programs. Group dynamics courses, which may be required in both undergraduate and graduate nursing programs, tend to focus on the dynamics of the group rather than

the pragmatics of leading a group. Where do the best group leaders/chairs learn their skills – through a course or through experience? Do the best chairs have role models? Do they work from a theory or set of theories? Which one(s) serves them best? There are numerous essays and endless lists of “how-to’s” on chairing a committee; are they helpful? I attended a Tavistock Seminar in Leeds, England, back in the early 1970s in which we spent six days studying group and organizational processes. I am still recovering, and I don’t recommend this route as the best or only way to learn about groups. But the experience did teach me about Bion, and I learned some principles that serve me well today when I am charged with leading a committee.

I want to declare a moratorium on poor chairing and declare that leaders should have, among their basket of skills, the ability to lead a group so that the group’s task is achieved and group members feel a sense of accomplishment through the course of their work. How do we make this happen?