**Spark Coaching and Training**

by Julia Menaul

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**Managing Emotion in Groups**

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# Meet Julia Menaul and about this guide

Hello, I’m Julia Menaul.

As an experienced executive coach, career coach and coach mentor supervisor, I specialise in Learning and Development of people and the organisations they work for.

With over 20 years’ experience and a whole host of coaching and training qualifications, I base my success, and the success of my clients, on my ability to tap into people’s hidden potential and reveal it. Helping them to become confident and effective leaders, managers and coaches.

You can find out more about my career, formal qualifications and accreditations [here](http://www.sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk/about-julia-menaul/).

**I’ve written this short guide to assist you by clarifying some of the factors you need to consider in determining *if and how to intervene* in groups where there are displays of emotion.**

Just before we go on to address these factors in the guide, it is necessary for me to say that I believe it to be normal, functional and healthy for a variety of emotions such as anger, frustration, fondness, anxiety and more to be experienced and expressed in groups.

However, it is only when the experience or expression of such emotions makes it difficult for the group or individual to function productively that intervention and management should be considered.

I’d be glad if you’d let me know if you found the guide helpful and/or if you have any further questions. Please [email me](mailto:julia@sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk?subject=Managing%20Emotion%20in%20Groups) or call 01785 252112.

Best wishes

Julia

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# 4 concerns to be considered when dealing with emotion

Often when asking what difficulties are experienced in trying to manage emotional displays in groups - concerns tend to fall into the following categories:

*“My belief is that a clear (if not direct) response is more desirable than an ambiguous one.*

1. Being unsure about intervening - ***“Is it appropriate?”***
2. What strategies and skills to use - ***“Do I know them?” “Do I have them?”***
3. The ***fear of*** ***damage*** to the individual or group
4. Managing one’s ***own emotions***

Such questions left unanswered can generate ambivalence which in its turn may promote an unacceptable response, or at best a half-hearted attempt at intervention.

Emotionality is often interpreted as a symptom of vulnerability, hence my belief that a clear (if not direct) response is more desirable than an ambiguous one. Ambivalence, ambiguity and lack of clarity can lend to the fear of loss of control which can become a great barrier to healthy expression and management of emotions in groups.

One way to begin to address the problem of ambivalence etc, may be that of trying to determine the appropriateness of intervening. In order to do this it is necessary to define the **context** of any group, and subsequently to clarify with all participants contracts which would enable the group members to function within the defined context.

In order to define context, these are some issues which typically need to be clarified and agreed:

* **The Type of Group**
* **The Prime Function of the Group**
* **The Roles and Responsibilities Within the Group**

The following model illustrates this process:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Type of Group | Prime Function  of  the Group | Facilitator Role |
| Learning Group | Learning | Trainer |
| Quality/Improvement/Problem Solving | Problem Solving/Creativity | Co-ordinator |
| Decision Making | Determining Strategy Planning | Manager |

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Being as clear as possible about issues such as group type, function and facilitator role should make it easier to determine how appropriate it is to intervene by either:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | Facilitating further emotional discharge/exploration | = Opening up |
| OR |  |  |
|  | Directing attention and activity away from emotional discharge/exploration | = Closing down |

For example, in a **Learning Group** the **subject matter** and **the chosen learning method** will determine **appropriateness:**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Lecture | = less appropriate |
| Interactive training | = slightly more appropriate |
| Interactive training, exploring attitudes, values behaviour and their effects | = even more appropriate |

In a **Decision Making Group** it may be less appropriate and less acceptable to focus on emotions

In a **Team Building Group** it would be appropriate and to a larger degree acceptable to **focus attention on the emotion, its causes and its effects**.

*So the main question here is:*

WHAT IS THE CONTRACT?

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## OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER BEFORE INTERVENTION

Other factors to consider when determining whether to intervene or not would be:

1. The **source** of the emotion

and

1. How it is being **expressed**

**When considering source** a variety of possibilities could co-exist:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | the subject matter itself | = CONTENT |
|  | The management of the session or group | = PROCESS |
|  | group members’ motivation and orientation to the group DYNAMICS | = GROUP DYNAMICS |
| NB (some people are SENT into groups) | |  |
|  | the emotions that individuals may be experiencing prior to group entry eg problems at home, at work, etc | = PERSONAL DYNAMICS |
| NB (it is sometimes worthwhile trying to clarify source) | |  |

**When considering how it is being expressed** judgements need to be made in relation to the effect the emotional display is having on:

1. the expresser
2. the rest of the group
3. the objective of the session

* Therefore if the emotion is being expressed in an overt, controlled, acceptable and succinct manner which aids group functioning - the judgement may be to acknowledge it, absorb it and move on.
* However, if the emotion is being expressed in a covert, offensive or destructive manner (for example displacement, projection, aggression, avoidance tactics, etc) a more explorative or confrontational intervention may be required.

Judging whether to direct attention towards or away from the emotion, its source, the expresser and any effect on others can only be made in light of:

1. The objectives of the group session. That is how negotiable, flexible and important
2. The wishes and abilities of the person expressing the emotion and whether willing and able to verbalise the experience.

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Here, I make a distinction between verbalising an experience/emotion and acting it out - verbalising/articulating an emotion provides greater opportunity for managing interaction and enhancing understanding through question and discussion. However acting out the emotions tends to manifest itself behaviourally. Such behavioural expressions are often perceived as being threatening which tends to elicit more negative responses Under such circumstances a more assertive/controlling management strategy may be merited.

*“verbalising/articulating an emotion provides greater opportunity for managing interaction and enhancing understanding through question and discussion*

***However, wherever possible try and get people to say it in WORDS****.*

1. The wishes and abilities of the group - whether willing and able to listen to, explore, and experience such issues as emotions in a group.
2. The wishes and capabilities of the group leader - whether willing, able and comfortable in managing such explanations in a group context.

Therefore unless a group’s initial agreed remit is to operate at a level which includes expression and exploration or emotions, any attempt to facilitate emotional catharsis and understanding may meet with resistance unless the group can be consulted about the above areas and subsequently feel positive about them all.

*So the main question here is:*

*WHAT ARE THE LEVELS OF MOTVATION AND COMPETENCE?*

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# some skills and strategies to consider

One of the first judgements to make here is that of determining how emotional the individual is. So if they are immersed in the emotion eg being distraught, sad, angry, excited, confused, etc, their ability to explore and discuss may be impaired.

If this is the case **an appropriate intervention may be** that of offering comfort and control until such times as the individual is able to speak with some degree of control and congruity.

An equally valid strategy may be that of allowing or even encouraging **catharsis**. The success of the latter strategy will be dependent on the patience, sensitivity and skill of the person making the intervention.

Once a person has acquired some degree of equilibrium which suggests they are able to talk - a decision must be made whether to open up the issue or close it down (see previous section).

**If the decision to explore/open up** is made some effective skills may include:

* attending closely to the individual listening actively
* asking more open questions
* probing
* clarifying
* go at their pace
* try and speak quietly, clearly and slowly to generate calmness
* try and be sensitive and supportive
* avoid being evaluative giving advice or belittling the issue
* be clear and open about your intentions (whether trying to understand why an emotional display has occurred or whether trying to resolve the issue/cause or any combination of the above)

NB While engaged in such a process it is important to be aware of and sensitive towards *all group members*, to make references to, involve, consult and manage them as well as the predominate expresser(s).

**If the decision is to close ‘it’** down some options may include:

* do not allow people to talk about it change the subject matter
* direct attention away from the individual or issue
* change the level at which discussion was taking place - it may be worthwhile moving from a ‘feelings’ level to a more procedural or content one
* change the type of activity or orientation - move from experiencing emotion to thinking or doing modes

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* acknowledge the emotion and move on.

NB Whichever choice is made there will at times be feelings of discomfort experienced. However choosing the option of **opening up may have a greater chance of resolving the issue** and possibly reducing discomfort in most people.

The issues here are:

1. Individuals have the right to share or not, but everyone has the right to be related to with respect.
2. Every individual and group has the right to receive the service contracted for, and hence if there are emotional or behavioural displays which compromise the atmosphere in the group and its product - these then should be managed positively.

## The Fear Of Damage

The fear of **damage** to the individual and or the group is a worthy concern.

However when the contract, clarity and competence exists the risk will be less. Another personal belief is that of people having a much greater capacity for coping that we often give them credit for and providing that the culture is supportive, sensitive, skilled and confrontative - much progress can be made.

The issue here is accepting that there is risk in whatever we choose to do. Not dealing with issues can be quite destructive. However ensuring that all necessary pre-requisites are met before addressing or exploring emotional displays may reduce risk (see previous sections).

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# Managing One’s Own Emotions



I believe that there has to be someone in control when working with emotions in groups. There has to be someone there who knows what they are doing and why; that has the skills, structure and the experience to make the appropriate judgments and interventions. Within this I believe it to be crucial that this individual can control their own emotions and knows when to share them, when not, and how much.

This requires having a fair bit of self-knowledge and having had the opportunity to develop the expertise which enables one’s own emotions, at times, to be consciously hidden without impairment to sensory or responding faculties and without subsequent damage to the self. If the person in control begins to demonstrate loss of control, anxiety, ambivalence or fear - in my experience the consequence is often that of fragmentation of structure of focus, upset or damage.

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a final word

As a final word, what I cannot cover in this handout is that of **Judgment**. It has taken me 20 years of working in groups to develop my judgment and I am still learning. I have worked with some great mentors who encouraged, supported and supervised me closely over a number of years — especially during my early apprenticeship. I took risks. I have had successes and failures. I was supported. I have learned.

And when I find myself in such situations nowadays - it often feels like the first time.

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**[](mailto:support@sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk)I’d Like To Help You ‘Find Your Fire’**

Book an appointment with me for a complimentary, no obligation 30 minute to discuss your own or your organisation’s coaching, training or coach supervision needs.

And don’t forget to check out our website [Spark Coaching and Training](http://www.sparkcoachingandtraining.co.uk/) where you’ll find insightful articles relating to coaching, training, coach supervision and productivity tips. You can also subscribe for our regular newsletters.

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