

Peer support networks: Can a peer meeting be too big or too small?

Introduction

Members of networks may not always be able to attend meetings, or group numbers may be small. Sometimes the need for peer support is so great that you can have large numbers at meetings. This Quick Guide will help you think about whether a peer meeting can be too big or too small, and what to do if it is either of these things.

Let's make it happen

Too big, too small, or, just right?

A group can only be too small or too big, if the members get no value from it. Check your concern with the group, and work with them to find a solution if they feel they are not getting value, regardless of the size.

What's the issue, exactly?

The first question to ask, if there is concern about the size of your group and its usefulness to its members, is: what exactly is the issue? and what response is possible?

- Very few members - may need some examination of your value proposition, a new recruitment drive, and consideration of how to make meetings, which will be small, useful
- Members not showing up - may need some group thinking about why this is, and a plan for addressing it (and potentially, a recruitment drive)
- Lots of members showing up - an indication that your network is much-needed. The question then becomes how to manage this so all member's get value from the meetings. If the numbers become large then your network could also consider forming two groups so all members have an opportunity to participate.

With your longer-term response to the issue of too small or too big in place, you will still have times where you are facilitating a very small or very large group.

Facilitating small meetings

Some things to consider:

- Does the group wish to proceed with the meeting? People will have taken the trouble to come along, so it is important that all members' wishes are honoured in this. They might like to use the time to do something else if they see little value in proceeding, or they might prefer to go ahead. It's important to test the group's preference, and go with it.
- Change the focus of the meeting. You may not have enough of your members present to make a decision that is needed, or to get updates on actions, or to do the process you were planning. Perhaps the members present might prefer to make this meeting a social or simple information sharing occasion, and postpone the actual meeting until more people can be there.

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- Shift process for the meeting. You can always change how the meeting is conducted if there aren't enough people to do, for example, break out small group work. You could ask individuals to work alone instead of in a smaller group, and then come back with others to contribute their thinking. Or, the whole group could do the work that smaller groups were going to do. Be flexible and willing to shift your plans.
- Remember and remind the group of the advantages of a small group - work can be done more quickly, people have more opportunity to have their voice heard, members can get to know each other better. Focus on the positives!

Facilitating big meetings

Some things to consider:

- Ask for help and support. Ask an experienced facilitator in your group, or your wider network, for help with designing the meeting if you are unsure. Make sure there are multiple note takers and facilitators when needed.
- Get organised well in advance if you can. Make sure you have plenty of materials, enough chairs and food and drink, a quiet space, and lots of helpers who know what they need to do.
- Make sure that people who may feel overwhelmed by the large group have a 'buddy' or someone to keep an eye on their wellbeing, and to support them to have their voice heard. Provide some quiet space if needed, and make sure everyone knows that it's okay to step out for a while if they need to.
- Ask people to keep their contributions short and to the point. Remind the group if needed.
- Shift process for the meeting. You can always change how the meeting is conducted if there are too many people to do the process you planned. For example, if you had planned a whole group circle check in, break people up into small groups for check in, get them to write down their key points, and share when the larger group comes back together. Break people into small groups to discuss decisions, to make the whole group process more manageable, and to give opportunities to connect more intimately. Be flexible and willing to shift your plans.
- Consider more frequent meetings. This may mean you reduce the group size at any meeting, which may make the meetings more useful to some members. Always discuss this with the group first.
- Remember and remind the group of the advantages of a large group - this network has hit a nerve and is therefore very successful, lots of work can be done quickly in break out groups, more perspectives can be heard, members can make more new friends. Focus on the positives!

Where you can find more information

See Quick Guide: Running a peer meeting: some useful facilitation skills

See Quick Guide: Thinking about building a posse

See Quick Guide: Sharing the work around: how to get more network members involved in organising the peer network meetings

Useful web links:

The Centre of Excellence for Peer Support (mental health) has some great resources for peer support networks:

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<http://www.peersupportvic.org/index.php/2014-12-15-22-42-49/2014-12-16-02-22-27/Resources/>

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