



The Goal & Growth Group

The Basics

The Goal & Growth Group is a format to support people in their personal growth and goal-attainment. The group usually has from 3-7 members. There are three main rounds. Each member usually makes a 1-2 minute “report” in each round which may be followed by brief comments from the other members. The three rounds are followed by an “Interchange” round that can be structured in a variety of ways. People usually set goals for up to four months. A four-month time frame is long enough to learn or achieve something significant in your life, but short enough to not seem far away. That’s why it’s recommended that people in the group to commit to meeting for four months.

First round: Practical learning. Share on *one* of the following questions:

1. What did you study since the last meeting to help you toward your goals?
 2. What insight did you have since the last meeting that was significant for you?
 3. What is the greatest challenge facing you? What are you studying so as to overcome it?
 4. What information do you need right now to help you toward a goal of yours?
- Again, each person takes a turn or passes.

Second round: Progress and Plan

1. What progress have you made toward your goals since the last meeting (or this last week)?
2. What are do you expect to accomplish by the next meeting? Please make these specific by telling “how,” “how much” and “by when.”

Third round: Appreciation. Share on *one* of the following questions:

1. What’s one thing you’ve appreciated since the last meeting?
2. What’s a positive emotional experience that you had recently?
3. How are you feeling now?

(Optional) The Interchange

After the three rounds, if there's time, an "Interchange" can take place. Based on any common themes that arise during the three rounds, someone in the group can suggest a discussion or exercise to remove some obstacle to goal-attainment or personal growth. Examples of themes are dealing with stress, time-management, resistance and procrastination, improving relationships, and how to keep motivated. To be effective, the Interchange topics need to be relevant in a practical way to those participating.

Everything but the Interchange can be done in about 45 minutes. Here's how: If there are four people in a group and if people start on time, then they each have about 11 minutes total (45 divided by 4). That equals about three and a half minutes per report since there are three reports. Aim for two minutes or less, and that will allow time for one or two brief comments from others. Two minutes doesn't sound like a lot, but it's plenty if you prepare ahead of time. For the same reason, keep your comments during other people's turn very short. If you have more to say, you can always talk with that person later. Nevertheless, you can say an awful lot in two minutes and can walk away feeling that you were truly heard if the others pay full attention.

(Optional) Feedback: Some form of evaluation can take place at the end of the meeting in order to improve future meetings, and nurture individual growth.

Guidelines

1. Prepare ahead of time so that you don't ramble and so that you can listen fully to others.
2. You don't have to speak; you can "pass" if you want to.
3. Limit each report to two minutes or less.
4. Make the best use of your time by sharing on the most important goals, thoughts and feelings — except don't share on anything too personal until trust has grown.
5. Keep what is said in your group confidential so that trust will grow. You can tell people outside the program about what was said, but don't name names or give so many details that a person's privacy could be compromised.
6. If you want to disagree, do it respectfully. Say "I believe/think/feel..." rather than "You're wrong/dumb/crazy..."

7. Keep your comments during other people's turns short. Although people often feel like they'll burst if they don't share a similar experience or give helpful advice, know that the number of cases of people actually exploding from bottled-up advice is much lower than commonly believed. The best responses are brief empathic comments.

8. When reporting on your progress or plans, be specific. For example, say, "I will jog *three times a week for at least 20 minutes*" not "I will start jogging this week." When working on personal relationships, you can't control the outcome, so you shouldn't set a goal like "my goal is for a happy marriage." But you can make a goal for what you put into the relationship, such as "my goal is to spend a half hour of quality time a day with my spouse." Similarly, you can't measure a relationship's improvement because it's too complex. But you can make *indicator* goals, for instance, to have 50% fewer arguments.

Sometimes you may not be clear on what you should do the following week. If that's the case, you might want to make a goal *to explore* options or create a plan for what to do. In any case, make the goal clear and specific, for example, "My goal for next week is either to come up with a written plan for getting a job or to spend at least an hour doing so."

If someone in the group didn't make a clear goal, you should ask them to make it specific. But if they can't do it right away, the group's time shouldn't be wasted while they brainstorm.

9. During the round on learning and removing obstacles, it's permissible to ask for advice or a resource if you think someone might have access to the knowledge you need to remove an obstacle.

10. If someone goes over their time limit for a round, gently ask them to summarize.

Fine Points

11. To help you prepare, feel free to make notes. If you do, write a phrase or two to jog your memory instead of writing it out word for word and reading it.

12. Even though you're probably working on several goals and projects at once, it's best to talk only about only one or two goals – the ones for which you need support. If you give a long list of goals and accomplishments, most people will stop listening. If you need support on a lot of goals, get a support buddy.

13. If you didn't reach your goal, don't spend time in the meeting blaming yourself, others or bad luck. However, it is worth mentioning whether your failure was because of circumstances you couldn't control or something you could control but didn't. Also, making excuses in order to feel okay about yourself can be counterproductive; but acknowledging failure and then making a better plan for the next time is.

14. When someone fails, it's not productive to show 'parental disapproval,' give unsolicited advice, or say things like "There, there. You'll do better next time!" Instead, the best response is "communication empathy." (You can read either a one-page description on communication empathy called *Listening Well* or a longer treatment with exercises in the *Integrating Communication Skills* skill upgrade.)

15. The second round asks you to report on action or learning toward the removal of a major obstacle toward your goal. It's best if you choose the biggest obstacle, but don't waste time if you can't figure out which is the absolute biggest. If you work on something major, it will become easier to figure out your greatest obstacle.

16. Group size is best at about four to six people. At seven people it's time to think about splitting into two groups. This is often hard, but the urge to stay together because you're friends is putting social pleasure ahead of personal growth and mutual support. In larger groups, quieter people often get neglected, meetings take longer, and people have to listen and concentrate longer and remember more details.

17. It's easy to fall into a pattern of just setting goals from week to week and losing sight of your long-range goal. That's why it's recommended that you occasionally remind yourself and the group members of your long-range goals, not just your plan for next week.

18. J. Pfeiffer, in his book *Theories and Models in Applied Behavior Science* presents nine positive group norms. These are qualities to maintain in the group: (parenthetic comments were added by T. Cimino.)

- a. Feedback
- b. A supportive climate
- c. Experimentation (allowing people to test new behaviors)
- d. Practice and Application
- e. Goal Clarity
- f. Group Growth (the group has needs beyond the needs of its members; it needs some time to mature)
- g. Group Maintenance (periodically taking time to evaluate and appreciate the group as a whole)
- h. Good communication (using tools like *Listening Well* on the website.)
- i. Structure and procedure (following the structures, or using a fair and open process to change the structure as needed.)

19. It helps to understand that groups usually go through a life cycle. One psychologist, B. W. Tuckman, calls the stages Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning. These are not fixed in stone, but in general, at first people need to become comfortable with each other and the group's procedures and methods. Then during storming, there is often either disagreement with the some part of the group, or personality conflicts. (These can be minor, but realistically you can't expect group

members to be perfect beings.) Then during “norming” a sense of cohesion develops. Then during “performing” people are productive at supporting each other and reaching goals. Finally, the group comes to an end. This is “adjourning,” when the group’s mission is accomplished, or when the individuals’ goals are reached.

In an open Goal & Growth Group format, people may come and go and so there is a mixing of stages — for example, one member might be adjourning, while another member who is newer might be norming. “New blood” gives energy and freshness to the group, but members have to sacrifice some of the group spirit and intimacy to accommodate the new members. Because members come and go, open Goal & Growth groups can go for years.

20. Attendance. As a courtesy, if you can’t make a meeting, you should let someone in the group know ahead of time. When people aren’t there, it affects the energy of the group. Also, if you feel that you need to stop meeting, you shouldn’t just disappear, instead, you should give the group as much notice as possible, or at least relay to one of the group members the reasons you are leaving the group.

21. Dealing with group members in crisis. Most people experience crisis at some time in their lives. Loss of a loved one, a sudden job loss or a major health problem can cause disruption in someone’s life. The group should be supportive and flexible. Perhaps it’s not possible for the person in crisis to come to a meeting, but support can be offered one-to-one until the crisis passes or can be managed.

22. Dealing with self-centered group members. A requirement of the program is that people set some goals to help others. “Others” doesn’t just mean the other people in the group, “others” primarily means those who are suffering greatly and cannot help you in return. You can set goals to help directly, for instance, volunteering to help someone in need, or indirectly, for instance, by addressing a political or environmental situation that harms people. In any case, the action should not just be *any* good deed, but action that is highly strategic — likely to produce significant and lasting change.

While one theme of the program is that you first improve your own life and skills so you can do more for others, some people may be tempted to use this as an excuse to remain self-centered. That’s why all members are expected to work on some other-oriented goals, unless they are in crisis. So, if there is a general feeling in the group that someone has only self-serving goals, or worse, goals that will harm people, they should either be asked to take on some altruistic goals or be voted out of the group. Careful discernment is needed, however. Some people just need feedback and encouragement. Others are immature, and need small challenges. But some people are terminally self-centered. They will ask for help from the other members, and give little or nothing in return, saying that they have to get their act together first. In some cases they are fooling themselves; in other cases, they’re attempting to manipulate the other group members. In rare cases, this is a psychological disorder; certain individuals don’t have a conscience.

If there’s a consensus that a person is being self-centered, there are a few options: If you can imagine the person changing, and hints have been ignored, then one group member can speak to the person “on behalf of some of the members of the group.” You

should first point to specific behavior, and then ask for new behavior. (It's too touchy and nebulous to talk about perceived attitudes.) If you don't believe that the person is capable of change, then you can ask the person to leave, citing their behavior. If you feel that the person could be dangerous, then the group members may want to fade away, one person at a time, and reform the group at another time and place.

If people tolerate self-centered members, then the group's standard for action will drop. If you're invited to a group of people that has become essentially self-serving, please leave it as soon as you can to find or start another group.

23. Dealing with poor communication skills and inappropriate behavior. Some people are poor listeners. Others talk too much. One way to deal with poor communication skills is for someone to suggest that the whole group study a certain skill during the Interchange. Another way is gentle assertiveness, for instance, "John, we seem to be running low on time. Could you summarize in a sentence or two?" If someone does something inappropriate and it's minor but a repeating pattern, then a group member could talk to the person one-to-one, both to help the person save face and to avoid disrupting the meeting. But in some cases, it's important to intervene immediately, for instance preventing someone from being verbally attacked.