



*How Consumers Can Make the
Most of “Time-Limited Groups”*

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How Consumers Can Make the Most of “Time-Limited Groups”

This chapter offers examples of time-limited groups, identifying advantages and challenges as such “special and finite” entities engage with a multiplicity of problem solving/solution seeking tasks in the mental health field, where more hierarchical approaches have not succeeded.

Time-limited groups in the mental health sector have many beneficial aspects - sometimes including the very fact that they *are* time-limited, as this often means that they are under pressure to “get the job done” without delay and to keep highly focused on key objectives. These objectives might take the form of overseeing or co-designing plans or strategies for developments within mental health services; a time-limited group might be a stakeholder reference panel for a systemic change process, which may include consumers, carers, clinical services, Community Mental Health Support Services and other organisations.

Being time-limited does not need to equate with being ineffective - in fact, many small ‘steering committees’ or ‘taskforce’ power-packs of energy can and often do provide breakthroughs relatively quickly, because of their added flexibility, autonomy, freedom for creativity, removal of hierarchy, operating in a more “*decision-free zone*,” experimenting without sanctions of “failure” and capitalising from team bonding.

Another important element is the potential for an ‘advisory’ or ‘steering group’ to be able to co-design, oversee and help process consultation and feedback processes with consumers, carers, services and other stakeholders about a range of issues and developments and to ensure that the consultation is high quality, inclusive and authentic. As there is a growing interest

in consumer and carer views among service providers and a growing common language developing about improving practice, in line with recovery-oriented services, peer support and a range of partnerships, time-limited groups may play an important role stepping in such consultation roles.

Flexibility and involving leading “knowledge holders”

Time-limited groups and committees can often process matters at levels above and beyond the more constrained practices of the public service. They can, however, also be stymied by under-funding, vague or inadequate terms of reference, conflicting demands, extremely rushed timelines and deadlines and securing strongly committed and deeply knowledgeable membership, possibly making it difficult to influence change and development.

Importantly, the time-limited set-up can mean that the best available “*knowledge holders*” across a wide area are more likely to be able to be involved, as their involvement will likely be shorter and defined. Indeed, such groups can bring people to the table, with knowledge about particular issues in processes of deep dialogue, which can assist in bringing changes to the system to some extent. For all of the unfortunate headlines and strange and sometimes stigmatising views in the community,

in recent years, the mental health sector has been something of an exemplar of change-oriented participatory democracy and the consumer movement has played a large role in this.

Committees and other time-limited groups can be very interesting and creative places, leading to genuine innovation and change (and sometimes even friendship and fun!). The idea that committees are dull, irrelevant, boring and pedantic or that “*the camel is a horse created by a committee*” are somewhat unfortunate and misleading; they are an important part of the “*engine room*” of society, in government, business, or community contexts - and many challenging and rewarding processes are taking place.

Examples of time-limited groups:

Some examples with brief descriptions of time-limited groups follow:

- **Special consultancies including Consumer Consultants:** Research/Development/Evaluation projects with linked sub-committees of Consumer Representatives, playing the role of liaison agents with primary consumers at local services (e.g. substantial RFV consumer participation scoping project in 2000; the NEAMI Consumer Participation and Leadership Audit in 2010.³⁷)
- **Focus Groups:** Generally meeting in small groups (see previous chapter), often as part of a research or evaluation project, covering a range of shared issues, facilitated using closed-questions, testing particular propositions/options/proposals/comparisons. (see Y. Wadsworth’s suggestions about evaluation in the previous article)

- **Critical Reference Committees:** Groups advising on research or evaluation projects, aimed at holding them to respond, authentically, to the key values and stated needs of the populations being researched/evaluated. Membership would be from the groups of stakeholders being the ‘subjects’ of the research/evaluation: either consumers, family/carers, GPs, community leaders, service staff, etc.
- **Workshops:** Generally small groups of people intending to examine and discuss issues of interest, facilitated in an open and participatory way, encouraging the dynamic generation of ideas/solutions/insights and understandings. Whilst there may be ‘input’ given by the facilitator or via presentations, the emphasis is on all participants’ contributions and the strength of their discussions.
- **Project or event steering groups:** Overseeing and guiding the development of conferences, programs, campaigns or courses; usually representations of all intended or hoped for stakeholders is assured as well as the necessary combination of requisite skills to run the event or project (consumers, staff of relevant agencies, government representatives, etc.)
- **Advisory Groups:** Consumer Consultants, specialist staff, departmental representations, NGO representatives, etc. providing specialist advice for service provider project development, preparation of project funding applications, service re-design, etc.
- **Planning days - Strategic ‘Think Tanks’:** e.g. in support of longer-term Consumer Groups or Organisations, including Consumer

Advisory Groups in Mental Health services (see previous chapters). Could include performance evaluation or the examination of emerging problems/constraints for groups or programs, the consideration of strategic aims and objectives, new projects, resources, avenues of support, etc.

- **Consumer Peer Support groups:** an emerging feature of some Mental Health service settings, group sessions often revolve around information provision to promote better community access, sharing life stories, shared problem solving from lived experience, guest speakers, informal social gatherings, the latter as important as the formally organised occasions.
- **Search Conferences:** often organised as a short-term and time-limited event or meeting intending to develop an agenda for existing groups or programs or policy development, e.g. for CAG groups or for group needs assessments, feeding into a new program or to develop a Lived Experience Workforce or a training calendar or planning fundraising activities.
- A varied mix of skills, backgrounds, lived experience, vocational backgrounds and areas of interest among consumer-workers can be brought into groups; principles of Experience-Based co-Design and variants of Participatory Action Research are important methodologies to assure appropriate and expert contribution by consumers.
- Consumer representation from “socially diverse” areas of the community is essential (e.g. CALD, gender and GLBTI, ATSI, cross-disability etc.). While local members of such constituencies would be preferable, if necessary, recruiting from relevant organisations should be considered if the former are not available.
- Sitting fees for consumers participating in committees, including time-limited ones, are widely acknowledged as best practice. Amounts of such fees are low (e.g. \$20 - \$25 per hour during meeting time only and generally not extending to preparation or follow-up) but consumers remain fearful as to their effects on Centrelink payments. Voluntary attendance at meetings - whilst useful as learning and confidence-building opportunities - should remain the exception.

Some considerations regarding the participation of consumers in time-limited groups:

- Consumer membership in time-limited groups is important and needs careful consideration - members need to have genuine interest and knowledge about the key areas being dealt with. Having interview/discussions with proposed participants can help make clear duties and expectations, and involve the person in the decision making about this.

Some practical tips for time-limited groups:

- Time-limited groups are usually fairly task-oriented and tend to rely on a careful balance of structure, content and process.
- The facilitation style needs to be creative and flexible: knowing when to encourage discussion to fan outward and when to encourage it to be drawn in. A variety of group

work modalities can be used in the discussion and to process issues, including a mixture of warm-up games, role plays, visioning exercises, etc. and ideas created can be inserted into the aims, objectives and outcomes of the group process. Warmup exercises are numerous and readily available from a range of electronic and hard-copy sources.

- Matrix-building exercises on key issues (using a variety of questions/matching statements resulting in participants standing in quadrants corresponding to their “positioning” on an issue and in proximity to people sharing similar views).
- Brainstorming; whiteboard/butcher’s paper exercises in plenary or in small groups; table-top discussions and small-group breakout sessions, followed by report-back by group nominees;
- Strategic Questioning; a range of participatory decision making methods.³⁸

Getting Strategic; some suggestions for involvement

Strategic Questioning is a straightforward but powerful method of social inquiry and problem solution-seeking readily adaptable to many types of group work; the approach has been developed by social change activist Fran Peavey. Its strength is that it encourages creative and original thinking as it strips away pre-programmed assumptions and conventional thinking, bringing each matter back to basics. This involves an appeal to personal responsibility in relation to making practical differences, to a range of social, economic and environmental issues.

Peavey wrote extensively on Strategic Questioning, much of which is easily found on the web and in her Strategic Questioning Manual³⁹. The approach would typically begin with: “*What would it take... for you/or a specific community to make a difference to... [the problem or issue.]?*”

Yoland Wadsworth’s “*Human Inquiry for Living Systems*” is another resource for creative forms of Participatory Action Research methodology in social inquiry; the latest version of her thinking appears in her most recent book⁴⁰ which also draws from her consumer consultancy work in the landmark Understanding and Involvement Project (U&I) at Royal Park Hospital, from 1989 to 1996, in ongoing collaboration with Merinda Epstein. The extensive series of project reports drew strong parallels between PAR methods, consumer participation, the growth of the consumer movement, the development of the recovery paradigm and the PDRS sector which followed de-institutionalisation.

Wadsworth’s book deals extensively with “*building a culture of inquiry*” into organisations and in the ways groups (including limited-time groups) are run and facilitated, particularly when applied to mental health consumer participation, evaluation and community-based Participatory Action Research. The implementation of thought-through methodological structures in group processes, whilst applied more specifically to evaluation and research projects, can inform those readers who need to organise time-limited groups for any purpose in the Mental Health sector:

- detailed principles for research, evaluation and more generally, working in complex human service organisations, when viewed as “living systems”;

- sequences and examples of “research cycle questions” which can be creatively harnessed in working towards “intelligent systems” which could also become self-adjusting; and,
- promotion of the development of more (truly) human services, partly through service providers being encouraged to open up to listen carefully and without flinching to the expressed hurts, unmet needs, and creative thinking of consumers.
- It is important to allow adequate scope for development and room for discovery in limited-time group - but to resist allowing processes to stray outside of the defined purpose (i.e. “mission creep” can happen from a group’s idealistic and in some ways understandable urge to solve all the problems and issues it identifies “*in one grand sweep.*”)
- New “break-out” questions or areas of likely discoveries can be set aside for later examination, in a bracketed list of suggestions for further exploration - “offcuts” -- might be useful; such notes can be filed away and could be used towards future funding applications.

The Importance of Setting Clear Terms of Reference

Formulating Terms of Reference (TOR) is especially important for time-limited groups and discussions to design and influence this stage are important. The setting of TOR can make or break a project in terms of its working structures and processes and poorly-drafted TOR based on certain pre-existing biases are barriers to democratic expression and social justice.

- Time-limited groups need to have a “real purpose”, which its members really want to translate into reality and that the organisations and communities behind the groups want to happen.
- It is important that a project should have “*key deliverables*” set out in writing from the beginning.
- There should be a step-by-step plan drawn up, stating the aims and objectives, stages of progress, progress reporting intervals, who is responsible for what actions, accounts, insurances, contingency plans etc.
- Aims and Objectives are important elements to be set early in exploratory styles of group work, as a continuing touchstone for group processes.

Meeting Ground Rules:

Setting agreed ground rules/guidelines for the group can also be helpful in time-limited groups. While these sometimes may run to a long list, principles associated with “*Treat each other with respect*” will often suffice. Consumers and others - by and large - are capable, as adults, to show courtesy and respect to others and lots of goodwill exists within the consumer movement.

Ground rules should not be too onerous or have connotations with distrust; however, if it seems likely that a more elaborate setting of ground rules might be needed for a particular time-limited group - if particularly contentious issues are likely to arise or if group members request more comprehensive ground rules - it can be helpful to assist the group to work through additional ground rules. *This process in itself can be a terrific warmup exercise for the group.* Finally, *housekeeping matters*; e.g. toilets, smoking areas, coffee and tea facilities, local key landmarks such as public transport hubs, etc.

Some typical ground rules may include:

- Treat each other with respect.
 - Please do not interrupt or “talk over” someone who is speaking.
 - Indicate by hand to the facilitator/chair that you wish to speak and speak in the turn indicated.
 - Discussion and difference of opinion are normal occurrences at all kinds of meetings and emotions are all human; however, for the sake of the group’s functioning, it is important that members try to refrain from expressions of anger or personal abuse.
 - It is of prime importance to respect the person’s *“lived experience.”*
 - Different people have a variety of tolerances to things like swearing, violent terminology, discriminatory language, etc. and these need to be avoided.
 - Address the issue - not the person.
 - It’s wise to remember that people are individuals, as well as being interested in “consumer matters” at a meeting. In many ways, the consumer movement can be seen as a diversity of diversities and a cross-section of many parts of society. This is often a “good thing” - not just another reason for vigilance.
 - The group might have other suggestions.
- they can talk to the facilitator or co-facilitator (or relevant staff members) to clarify how they see the issues and the direct impact on them, based on their experiences or those of others;
 - if appropriate, two participants who may have come into conflict, may wish to make peace/ or apologise/ or in the spirit of cooperation, promise to each other that for the greater good, they will think about what the other said. If the facilitator is at the centre of a conflict, they need to take a similar path. Other options might be suggested by a group.
 - It is critically important that if a consumer participant suddenly takes flight from a meeting, that they should not be simply “allowed” to leave the premises, without being given the opportunity to de-brief or at least clearly state that they will be OK. Other meeting participants may tend to worry about them otherwise and there are very real and critical duty-of-care implications. Transport arrangements, or encouraging the participant to contact a trusted friend, should be considered.
 - Some committees can develop problems. On some committees relating to large projects or several linked projects within mental health services, sub-committees or special task groups can start “multiplying like amoebas” and some caution may be needed for the tasks not to become too dispersed or the project losing direction.

If any member or members find themselves in a situation of emotional distress, for whatever reason, they may request:

- an adjournment of the meeting for a short while, for a “smoko” or coffee break and have some wind-down time;

Endnotes

37. NEAMI: Consumer Participation and Leadership September 2010

38. Kaner, S. with L. Lind, C. Toldi, S. Fisk and D. Berger (2001) Facilitator's Guide to Participatory Decision Making. New Society Publishers, Gabriola Island.

39. www.humanecology.com.au/StrategicQuest.pdf

40. Wadsworth, Yoland (2010) Building in Research and Evaluation: Human inquiry for living systems. Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest NSW/Action Research Press, Hawthorn.