

## **Facilitator's Toolbox**

### **Role Play As a Training Tool**

*By Susan Hollister, UU Small Group Ministry Network Board Member*

An important part of facilitator training is preparation to manage the inevitable covenant breaches that arise during group sessions. Despite the group covenant, any one of us can occasionally be the “problem child” in our group. Maybe we had a stressful day and we don’t feel like talking. Maybe we’re so distressed or excited about a life event that we go on and on about it. Or maybe we’re so focused on what a group member is sharing that we blurt out, “And then what happened?”

Anticipating and knowing how to manage disruptions is key to facilitator confidence, preserving the safe environment of the covenant group, and keeping the session running smoothly.

At a recent facilitator training workshop for the East Tennessee Cluster of congregations, we decided to present challenging scenarios in the form of a role play. We brainstormed about problems and chose five common ones: lateness, intellectualizing, advice-giving, passivity, and going off-topic. Then we chose actors to play the parts and gave them funny names: Tara Tardy, Alan Analyzer, Anna Advisor, Frank Fine, and Rhonda Rambler.

The role play was to last about fifteen minutes. We positioned a semi-circle of chairs where everyone could see and hear. The group used a real session plan with an abbreviated check-in: *Tell us in one word how you feel about being here tonight*. There was no rehearsal; the actors ad-libbed their parts. The group leader, Flora Facilitator, was responsible for reacting on the spot and managing the behaviors. As the group started Check-in, “Tara” burst in, waving at everyone. “Flora” briefly welcomed her, told her the group was in the middle of check-in, and that her turn would come later. “Anna” had a solution for everyone, “Rhonda” wandered off on a tangent, “Alan” referred to a book he had read, and “Frank” had nothing to say. At the appropriate times “Flora” reminded the group of their covenant to not give advice, to use “I” statements, to arrive on time, to stay on-topic, and to participate fully. She encouraged “Frank” to contribute by gently asking him to comment on a question.

The audience caught on immediately and there was a great deal of laughter in the room. At the end of the performance, the actors stood to bow, holding up a card bearing their actor name. Not surprisingly, they got a big round of applause. The energy in the room continued as we segued into an open discussion of “what ifs” and how to manage situations. We learned a lot from each other that day, first as we spoofed common behaviors, and then as we shared possible solutions.

A role play of this kind could be used in a training session for new facilitators, as a skill builder at a Facilitators Meeting, or in an enrichment workshop for experienced facilitators. The fun part comes with creating silly names and exaggerating the problem behaviors. The learning part comes with observing the management techniques and adding them to your Facilitators toolbox.

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