

Chapter 1.

The What and Why of Group Career Counseling

So what are we talking about when we use the term group career counseling (GCC)? How is it different from group counseling or from group guidance and why should counselors consider using such an intervention in their work? This chapter attempts to answer these questions and to provide a framework for understanding the unique properties and approaches of GCC.

Definitions of Group Terms

Group guidance. Group guidance is a term that has been around as long as the guidance movement. Frank Parsons (1909), the founding father of the guidance movement, used the term early in his writings. Group guidance is considered to be an approach aimed at providing helpful personal, emotional, and/or occupational and vocational information to groups of individuals. The information usually is delivered in a workshop format. Discussion is not considered to be a primary feature but is not prohibited. The goal of the counselor is to pass on information and to build practical skills. The typical setting is the classroom, with the number ranging from 15 to 30 members.

Group guidance goals are generally directed at enhancing (1) interpersonal communication and relationships, (2) fitness and health, (3) problem solving and decision making, and (4) personal identity and life purpose. Guidance groups emphasize skill building that members can take away from the group setting and apply to their daily lives (Trotzer, 1989).

Group counseling. Corey (2004) views group counseling as an interpersonal process that stresses conscious thoughts, feelings, and behaviors with a focus on discovering internal resources of strength. Gazda, Duncan, and Meadows (1967) defined group counseling as a dynamic interpersonal process focusing on conscious thought and behavior and involving the therapeutic functions of permissiveness, orientation to reality, catharsis and mutual trust, caring, understanding, acceptance, and support. Mahler's (1969) definition of group counseling emphasized these key characteristics: (1) problems with developmental tasks are the members' main concerns; (2) group interaction is the primary process for achieving goals; (3) the climate within the group can allow the lowering of defenses so that feelings can be revealed and explored; and (4) self-

understanding and self-acceptance are the goals of the group.

In group guidance, the counselor acts as lecturer and teacher to provide information. In group counseling, the counselor stimulates and facilitates clients' insight by having group members verbalize and work on their issues as part of the group process. Furthermore, in group counseling, the counselor spends less time talking and more time facilitating discussion. One way to determine whether or not a counselor is conducting group guidance or group counseling is to note who is doing the majority of talking; the counselor or the group members. If it is the counselor, then the session would more accurately be described as group guidance. If the group members share feelings and do the majority of talking with the counselor as a facilitator, then the session would be considered group counseling.

Group career counseling. So where does this leave us? Tolbert (1974) was one of the earliest to use the term group career counseling as a tool in educational settings. He listed the following elements of GCC: (1) career planning and decision-making require input about occupations; (2) accurate data about self (abilities, interests, and values) are needed; and (3) the process offers opportunities to explore personal meaning, identify and examine subjective aspects of the self, get feedback from others, and try on roles. Wittmer and Loesch (1979) view career guidance as part of the group counseling process and as dependant upon the "personalization of information." They do not separate group counseling from group guidance but focus on the "personalization" of assessment and occupational information.

Within this definition, group guidance is more associated with a workshop format where teaching and skill building are accomplished in a relatively large group (more than eight). Due to the larger group size, the extent of the personalization and processing of members' feelings and concerns are limited. The smaller group offers the counselor the opportunity to attend more fully to feelings and to facilitate depth of thought and personal interaction.

From this we can see that GCC and group counseling are very similar, but there is also a difference. Table 1.1 (page 2) shows that trust and acceptance among group members and comfort in sharing personal information are inherent to both approaches. The major difference is that GCC includes the

process of personalizing externally based occupational and assessment information. Therefore, GCC has all the same complexities as group counseling with the added challenge to the counselor of helping members personalize and process external information.

In conducting GCC sessions, I have been challenged to use all of my counseling skills to build trust and confidence so that each individual will feel comfortable in disclosing career issues and challenges. Once this trust is established, members begin to verbalize a need for information about the world of work. It is difficult for the counselor to work through this need without external assessment data and occupational information. It is at this point that the counselor facilitates group members' desire to obtain personal profile information in areas such as interests, abilities, and values in relation to occupations. This is the added external dimension of GCC not inherent in group counseling.

The Use of Exercises in Group Career Counseling

As will be noted in the examples provided throughout this book and specifically with the GCC model in chapter three, exercises are integral to most GCC sessions. Structured exercises help participants to access information and data on the world of work as well as provide the benefits of improved career decision-making.

As group counseling emerged in the 1960s,

Carl Rogers and others did not advocate the use of exercises. However, currently most group leaders view the use of exercises as invaluable aids to the leader, the members, and the group process itself (Corey et al., 1982; Dyer & Vriend, 1980; Yalom, 1995). Indeed there are several distinct advantages to the use of exercises in group counseling (Jacobs et al., 1994, p. 163), which will often (a) generate fruitful discussion and group participation, (b) focus or shift the focus of the group, (c) provide an opportunity for experiential learning, (d) provide the leader with useful information about the group members, (e) increase the comfort level of the group, and (f) provide a source of fun and relaxation.

Rationale for Group Career Counseling

There are many advantages to working with groups in general and GCC in particular. These include: (1) enhancement of career counseling outcomes; (2) time, efficiency, and cost-effectiveness; (3) feedback; (4) personalizing information; and (5) enjoyment and variety.

Outcomes. All counselors are interested in achieving the outcomes which are generally prescribed for the career counseling process. These include helping an individual with a career decision, the development of decision skills, and general adjustment (Montross & Shinkman, 1981). All three of these goals can be met within the group format. The

Table 1.1
Group Counseling and Group Career Counseling

	Group counseling	Group career counseling
Source of information	Primarily internal, e.g., self-knowledge	Internal and external, e.g., self-knowledge and facts about educational and occupational options
Group process goals	Build trust Stimulate thinking Clarify internal information Increase comfort with decision-making skills	Build trust Stimulate thinking Clarify internal and external information Increase comfort with decision-making skills Develop action plan
Outcome	Decrease anxiety level Enhance self-confidence Modify behavior(s)	Decrease anxiety level Enhance self-confidence Enhance career awareness and adjustment

third goal, assisting in general adjustment, is particularly appropriate to a group setting. Because peers and group member relationships are a major part of the process, multiple individuals can support each other's adjustment concerns. By hearing others' concerns and problems, the inclination of a member to see himself or herself as the only person with a career problem diminishes. Everyone has a need to feel that they share with others the frustrations and anxieties inherent in their humanness and in their career challenges. Empathizing and sharing with others is known to be beneficial to life functioning as well as career functioning. Because of the participation of peers, such an outcome is more likely in a group format than an individual setting.

Time and efficiency. The fact that more than one person's needs can be met within the same time frame provides further evidence of the value of group career counseling. This has implications for cost-effectiveness and the effective use of counselor time.

Feedback enhancement. The fact that the counselor can call upon others to assist in self-understanding and/or to use information others have generated is particularly valuable. The group presents a broader perspective and larger mirror of the individual than the counselor alone can provide. The counselor can call upon and use the diverse and varied personalities within the group as part of the learning process. The adage, "two heads are better than one," certainly applies to GCC.

Personalizing information. In an age of information, individuals need assistance in personalizing massive amounts of data and facts and turning it into useful information for career decision-making. Because career counseling includes the use of data from external sources, such as assessment results or computer-assisted guidance systems, it is particularly important to provide individuals with assistance so that they understand the data and put it in perspective. Such can be accomplished in an effective manner within the group. Participants have the advantage of

hearing others' assessment results. This puts individual information about interests and values into perspective. By using techniques that draw out the personal and affective domain (discussed in chapter two), the counselor can assist in the personalization of information. Group members can make such personalization even more powerful because of the influence of peers' comments and feedback.

Enjoyment and variety. Probably one of the major advantages of working with groups is the enjoyment that counselors receive from the challenge and variety of working with several individuals at one time, and the same goes for the members of the group (Gazda, 1978). I have worked closely with several counseling staffs and found that most counselors like working with groups as much as they like individual counseling. Individual personality characteristics are presented in a fuller and more dynamic manner within a group than in individual counseling. As a side benefit, adding group counseling to a counselor's repertoire can be an antidote to professional burnout.

Summary

A comparison of group counseling and group guidance provides insight into a working definition of group career counseling. A key to defining GCC is understanding that the processes and skills are the same as those of group counseling with one difference. GCC requires the counselor to help members integrate external data such as occupational information and personal assessment results with internal thoughts and feelings. The use of structured exercises to generate insight is an important and acceptable approach for the counselor to use. The extent to which a group session is GCC versus group guidance is the extent to which the group members are talking and sharing feelings. There are many advantages to GCC, including improved counseling outcomes, time and cost efficiency, feedback enhancement, personalization of information, and enjoyment.