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Preconditions: fostering peer supervision and action learning

When it comes to preconditions for peer consultation, it may be useful to remember the acronym ‘FOSTER’, which summarises six boundary conditions that all seem to be important to address and monitor: Freedom, Openness, Safety, Trust, Expectations and Relevance of issues. I tend to check all six preconditions with group members, not only during the formation of a consultation group, but also regularly and explicitly during its lifetime. I have come to believe that, together, these six preconditions help to ‘foster’ the learning of the group and its participants.

Freedom
In many service organisations, professionals agree that they will attend at least four (or six, or even ten) peer consultation sessions a year and commit to that as a prerequisite for accreditation. This does not alter the fact that, even in these cases, the professionals attending the sessions do so freely. To a large extent, they decide themselves what to place on the agenda, in what depth to discuss issues and what conclusions to draw for themselves. The main priority is that professionals should learn from this, and learning thrives most if they are intrinsically motivated and determine for themselves the consequences for their actions. At most, they draw each other’s attention to situations in which certain professional standards or rules of conduct are at risk of being disregarded.

For the facilitator, ‘freedom’ is one of the points to bear in mind by, for example, making sure that participants do not use their position or authority to impose their ideas on others (see also Chapter 12).

Openness
Peer consultation should be an open invitation to reflect, prepare action, and learn. Openness to sharing issues and engaging in the issues raised by colleagues is a minimum requirement for peer consultation. The initial openness to the process should be sustained in the exploration of issues, questioning, and the giving and receiving of suggestions.

E. de Haan, Learning with colleagues
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Safety

It is important that issue holders should perceive the atmosphere in the peer group as sufficiently safe. By contributing a work issue to the group, a participant makes him/herself vulnerable. Safety is guaranteed if colleagues refrain from prescriptive, denigrating or judgmental comments. The aim, after all, is to help someone!

One point to consider here is the composition of the group. If management participate, this may be perceived as threatening because there is a hierarchical relationship between the participants. Sometimes it is difficult to discuss the subject of safety in the group, precisely because the atmosphere in the group is not safe enough. It may be helpful to do this outside the group. The facilitator can approach the participants individually to ask how they experience the sessions in this respect.

Safety can also be furthered by preparation and after-care. Preparation concerns practical matters such as:

- clear agreements
- invitations
- a (usually informal) agenda, with issues for discussion
- suitable premises: a room that is large enough for the group and where it can work undisturbed
- aids (flip-chart, handouts illustrating the steps of the methods to be used, logbook forms, etc.)
- tea/coffee
- preparation of work issues by group members, from session to session (to ensure balance in the group, it is advisable that each member should ‘take a turn’ regularly).

It is also a good idea to devote attention to after-care:

- follow-up of practical agreements
- openness to individual participants sharing reflections afterwards
- passing on certain issues to management (only if the whole group decides to do so of course)
- keeping records of when sessions took place
- keeping records of who attended, and who did not
- keeping a personal logbook (see Appendix B).

Trust

During a peer consultation session, people describe work issues they are struggling with. Personal aspects are often involved. It is a good idea to agree that matters raised during a session are in principle not discussed outside it.

The facilitator takes ‘trust’ to heart by establishing a confidentiality agreement. There are three clearly distinguishable options: