



The Research File

Information for professionals from the Canadian Fitness and Lifestyle Research Institute

Group Leadership Skills

Motivating people to be more physically active is a tricky business. There are several stages in the physical activity “adoption” process and a range of behavioural strategies to help individuals overcome hurdles en route to healthy active living.

Social interaction, group dynamics, exercise, and education all play a part in a program in Finland described by Rinne and Toropainen in a recent issue of *Patient Education and Counseling*. Their style and approach will be of great interest to anyone charged with helping others become more active.

Going with a Group

“Starting physical activity in adulthood involves many problems which are difficult to solve for a person with little previous experience,” note Rinne and Toropainen. “For many it is easier to start in a group than alone.”

They favour what they call a *promotional group for health-related physical activity*. The optimal group size is 12 to 15 individuals, given that the goal is to “activate” group members and guide them individually. Sessions once or twice a week over a 10- to 12-week term are ideal.

Exercises and activity are at the core of the program, but it’s not necessary to be active every session. Learning about the health benefits of physical activity and proper training techniques and approaches are also key elements. Knowledge in the ways and means of physical activity help group members become more confident and self-sufficient in their efforts.

As is typical, the instructor is responsible for planning the resources (space, facilities) and the initial implementation methods. However, participants are encouraged to take part in planning the sessions from the very beginning. “The object of this is to help the group members realize their own responsibility and possibilities to move further in the process.”

On completion of the formal session, group members decide if they wish to carry

on together after a planned break of a few weeks. They may decide to continue activity as a group or just maintain social contact. In any case, the work of the leader becomes less significant. Group members take the responsibility for further action.

Leadership Styles and Roles

Using a variety of leadership *styles* is deemed important at each instructional session and over the life span of the group. Different styles add variety and allow the leader to handle the group as a whole despite differing individual needs and levels.

Rinne and Toropainen identify five helpful instructional styles:

- **Command style** is instructor-centred, suitable for the early stages when new exercises and training techniques are taught.
- **Practice style** allows participants to work independently and at their own pace.
- **Guided-discovery style** is useful in conveying educational information in an informal approach to learning.
- **Self-check style** allows the instructor to explore how well concepts have been learned and adopted by group members into their daily habits.
- **Inclusion style** respects the heterogeneity of the group members and allows for flexibility and personalizing of programs.

Different combinations of leadership styles are appropriate depending on each individual’s stage in the adoption process, with the stages being: pre-intention, intention-building, initiation, or continuation.

The leader’s *role* varies as well throughout the process. Roles include *expert*, *decision-maker*, *analyzer*, and *motivator/facilitator*. Here are the suggested roles based on the stage of adoption:

- **Pre-intention** – the leader is a motivator.
- **Intention-building** – motivator, expert, and decision-maker.
- **Initiation** – analyzer, decision-maker, and expert.
- **Continuation** – motivator and analyzer.



The success of the group process depends largely on the attitude and skills of the instructor. The appropriate style and roles are effective when carried out in an enthusiastic and friendly manner. At the base of it all is a sound technical knowledge, giving the instructor confidence and ensuring that accurate and appropriate information and advice are being provided.

Best of Both Worlds

The best intentions often fail, and too many people drop out of a new activity regime soon after they start. This happens with people who join upbeat exercise classes led by enthusiastic instructors moving to the beat of good music. And it happens with people who go it alone, perhaps walking or following a simple home-exercise routine.

A program such as the one described by Rinne and Toropainen may be the best of both worlds. It provides a positive social atmosphere for participants, while at the same time increasing their knowledge about physical activity and nurturing a sense of self-responsibility. For many, it could be the approach that turns “dabblers” into committed activity enthusiasts.

For More Info ...

Rinne, M., & Toropainen, E. (1998). How to lead a group—practical principles and experiences of conducting a promotional group in health-related physical activity. *Patient Education and Counseling*, 33, S69–S76.

