

A Proposal for a New MPA Structure: Ideas on the formation of Support Groups  
For the October MPA Conference

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In the good old early days of MPA, when we were too small to be an institution, or even a para-institution; there were greater feelings of closeness and contact among the members. Then, we could all meet in one room there were fewer business items, more time for people to express themselves.

In the intervening years, things have slowly changed. As the membership grew too large to congregate in one small room, we have not taken steps to replace the old structure. Hence, feelings of alienation and demoralization within the group. I feel them strongly.

One thing MPA has never systematically done is to develop a program of "therapy" (except for the few "encounter" groups which, though important, involve only a tiny percentage of the members). In the early days the closeness of the MPA community constituted a therapeutic setting. Since then we have allowed ever-widening gaps to grow between us. It has seemed to me as if the machine has set off on an irreversible course.

The purpose of this proposal is to contribute to discussion about the possibility of changing direction.

To change direction I don't believe it is enough merely to try to change attitudes of members. That is a possible solution in a very small community, but not in one as large as MPA. We need a structural change to serve as the soil in which new attitudes can grow.

At present MPA's structure is defined almost entirely in terms of work areas, not in terms of people. Responsibility is felt to do such and such a chore (order coffee, write a report, do house shopping, drive people to an activity) but not to provide ongoing support for those who most need it.

It is easy for everyone to say, "That is not my job."

Although not formally defined as their job, it is the best intentioned people who try to help very freaked-out members. These "helpers" are few in number and quickly burn themselves out because they do not have the necessary back-up support. They also tend to leave the group when they feel the futility of trying to help so many people. (I should note here that the points I have been raising apply mainly to the drop-in center rather than the residences. They may apply to the residences too, but I am less familiar with them.)

I keep coming back to this irrefutable fact: we are spending more of our energy doing secondary than primary tasks. This is the situation with most bureaucracies. They expend more time perpetuating themselves than performing the function they were established to do.

As long as people gravitate to the few "amateur" therapists, the general feeling will remain that you can't really get the help you need at MPA. The amateur therapists (amateur, by the way, comes from the Latin, amor, meaning love) cannot handle the demands alone. And who do they turn to when they freak-out?

In case we have forgotten, MPA is a self-help group, meaning that we are all supposed to help each other. But we need a structure within which that goal is possible. The meat of this proposal is to suggest a structure in which we can put the primary goal first, i.e., of supporting each other.

There is a certain amount of necessary paperwork that must be done to keep MPA going. But we can cut it down to a minimum, and, as an experiment, we can set up small support groups which any member can join voluntarily. Much of the work energy that is now put into areas like transportation, activities and political action would be put into sustaining the support groups.

Here are a few guidelines I suggest for the support groups:

- 1) They be made up of 5 to 7 people, including members and coordinators.

- 2) The members make a commitment to meet at least once a week for at least one hour. (Several other activities can be scrapped to make room for these support group meetings.)
- 3) The members make a commitment to try to get to know each other and to open up to one another. But this should not be used as a demand to pressure others into speaking when they don't want to. People can choose at any time to remain silent.
- 4) The members make a commitment to try to support one another in all areas of their lives, i.e., that they try to learn to turn to each other first when a problem of crisis arises. This means that everyone will try to learn to support others and to learn how to accept support.

One purpose of this proposal is to ensure that people don't get lost in the shuffle at MPA; that the less outgoing and more freaked-out members will have an opportunity to share their lives with, and receive support from, others.

I think if we adopt this structure, which is really a very simple idea based upon the "buddy system" (a terrible name) used by other groups, we should start out with a very simple set of demands on the groups. The structure should be seen as an experiment with each group given maximum freedom to explore its own needs and functions.

There will probably be some resistance to this proposal because these groups may cut across certain natural groupings at MPA, e.g., friendship groups and residence groups. I think, however, that there should be some randomness in the composition of groups. This is to avoid the situation where the stronger, more popular people end up in the same group, which would only reinforce the cliqueishness and exclusion which already exists to some extent.. There should be some self-selection in the support groups,

but we should guard against the possibility of shy or freaked-out people being excluded or being all lumped together.

To begin, I suggest that 10 to 15 people be chosen to serve as the nuclei of support groups. It will be the responsibility of each of these core people to find 4 to 6 others to join their groups, i.e., people who agree to the commitments listed above.

I don't want to get too far ahead of myself, but I think some thought should be given to regular reviews of the structure to see whether it's working. Perhaps there could be biweekly meetings of support group representatives to review the structure.

This paper is just a skeleton of a proposal to begin overcoming the alienation and distance that exists in MPA. I really think this is the sort of idea we have to have the courage to try if we are to break through the inertia and conservatism that has bogged the group down.

I strongly believe that the conference should endorse the key ideas in this proposal and try the new structure experimentally for six weeks, at which time a full review should be held.

We have little to lose by trying it; and it may provide the first step in the solution of many of the problems that have been plaguing MPA for a long time now.