

Group Dynamics

Three Phases – Thoughts on Self Managing

AN INTRODUCTION TO BEING IN A MEN'S GROUP

The difference between a group and a collection of individuals is that members of a group have emotional bonds with each other. Emotional bonding requires members to have some significant experiences together. During the formation of a group, before bonds have been fully developed, it can be difficult for a group to get rolling. Certain patterns of "group dynamics" can get in the way and interfere with the development of a healthy, productive and satisfying group.

Two of the most difficult dynamics for a newly formed group to manage are power and decision-making. Groups can get so caught up in trying to work out how to decide things that nothing gets done. This is most pronounced in "leaderless" groups. Groups without a formal, designated leader often go through an uncomfortable and potentially destructive time before they work out how they will manage themselves. The events that take place during this time can be so disturbing that the group falls apart. Groups that work through these "birthing pains", however, and become self-managing, can be highly effective and satisfying for their members.

GROUP DYNAMICS AND BUILDING SUCCESSFUL GROUPS

When groups form, they go through 3 predictable phases before becoming fully self-managing. These phases are called Inclusion, Influence and Intimacy.

INCLUSION

During the inclusion phase members are most concerned about how they are being seen and treated by others. People want to make a "good impression", and act so as to be seen as significant and worthwhile by others. How people try to get included varies widely. At one extreme is the person who talks incessantly. He believes that if people are listening to him he must be included. At the other extreme is the person who says nothing. He believes that if he is asked for his opinion, he is included. During the inclusion phase members are very polite and conflict is rarely expressed. People are most concerned about looking good and keeping the peace. How people act during the inclusion phase is never a very good indication of how they act normally, so it is a good policy to not pass judgment on people when the group first forms. To pass through the inclusion phase, everyone has to feel that their presence is noticed in the group; that they belong.

INFLUENCE

Once members feel that they do belong to this group, the next phase arises. Here attention turns to how much respect and credibility people feel they are getting from others. In almost all groups, some individuals have held back expressing dissatisfactions during phase 1 to keep the

peace. Now these will begin to surface and can, at times, escalate into roaring conflicts. Sometimes these conflicts appear to be about some issue in the group but are really about people not feeling like they have enough influence in the group. For example, a conflict over what the group should do, early in its life, will probably have more to do with people feeling like their ideas are not being listened to, and less to do with the actual activity being discussed. For the group to mature into an effective unit, everyone must feel that their opinions will be heard and respected and that they can influence the group for its own good. To move past the influence phase it is necessary for the group to experience a successful conflict. A successful conflict is one in which people fully express their thoughts and feelings, and find a resolution that leaves everyone feeling better than they did before the conflict was expressed. Often, this will be conflicts over group activities. It may also be a "personal" conflict that arose due to mis-perceptions or mis-communication.

INTIMACY

Once members feel comfortable with their level of influence, they begin to wonder about how close they want to get with each other. Different people will want different degrees of openness and closeness with others. Implicit norms (unspoken rules) about how "deep" and emotional it is OK to be, that were created during the inclusion phase, will be challenged and new levels of intimacy will be experimented with.

After the group has spent some time in the intimacy phase, deeper issues of inclusion and influence will surface. Inclusion, influence and intimacy are issues at all times in a group's life. At certain times, however, one issue will be more salient. These issues never get permanently resolved; they are always present. As a group matures, however, members are better able to name what the issue is and to work it through more easily.

In general, successful, self-managing groups have the following attributes:

A) People tell the truth - about what they are really thinking and feeling. If they don't like what is going on in the group they say so. If they are feeling bored, left out, ignored, beaten-up, patronized, or whatever, they say so. The group cannot develop if people hold back the truth in order to be polite, not create waves, not hurt someone's feelings, etc.

B) Conflicts are expressed, win-win solutions are found. People avoid fighting for the sake of winning or beating the other guy. People don't accommodate simply to "be nice" either. People operate under the assumption that if we all tell the truth, avoid attacking each other, and are willing to take the time, we can find solutions to conflicts that satisfy everyone concerned.

C) People feel valued. Members treat each other as worthy of respect. People are supported in being the best they can be. No one is treated in a way that leaves them feeling small, inadequate, or ashamed. People tell the truth in ways that do not violate others' sense of worthiness.

D) Leadership is shared. Everyone feels personally responsible for the actions and success of the group. Things aren't left up to one person. Everyone performs acts of "leadership", like clarifying

tasks, gathering information, offering and soliciting opinions, mediating conflicts, reducing tension, and anything else the group needs to be productive and fun.

Building successful groups is about getting people to tell the truth, getting conflicts into the open and resolving them, making sure everyone feels personally responsible for the success of the group, and everyone feels valued by the group. If you want to be a group builder, the first step is to do these things yourself. The second step is to encourage others to act this way and to support them when they do.

THINGS ABOUT MEN'S GROUPS

A group composed entirely by men for the purpose of supporting the growth and development of men faces some issues peculiar to itself. Here are some things we have learned from experience.

A. Containment and Sacred Space.

For men to really get into deep places with each other it is necessary to create a special kind of atmosphere. We call this sacred space. This is a space where men feel safe enough to delve into frightening things. Sacred space requires building a leak proof container. You can only "cook" if the ingredients aren't leaking out. Seriously consider the need for the following ingredients to ensure that you build a leak proof container:

The space the group meets in must be free from any possible intrusion. No spouses, children, phones, etc.

All members should attend all meetings. This is especially true for the first few meetings while the group is still forming. It will be impossible for the group to develop firm ground if the members change at each meeting.

Begin and end meetings at your agreed upon times. Ending on time greatly helps to increase the containment of your vessel. If you find that things only start to get rolling near the end, do not let the meeting go overtime without deciding as a group to do so.

Any rituals or special observances used by the group should be kept secret, known only to members.

No guests, unless they are considering joining the group and carefully consider whether you want to allow new members at all.

People should not describe or repeat what members do or say in the group to non-members.

People should not discuss really special, highly charged, profound, or painful events that occur in the group with non-members.

B) Talking and Doing.

While the main mode for self-help groups is talking, men often need to do things together. Men can experience a deep sense of intimacy working together without talking at all. Seriously consider spending time as a group doing things as well as time talking with each other. Time spent close to nature, such as camping, sailing or hiking creates a special kind of energy. Time spent doing physical work or play also creates a special energy.

C) Moving Past Fear.

Men fear each other, probably with good reason. For thousands of years, men who were not of the same clan were potential enemies. For some, this fear is unconscious. Being unconscious makes it a more powerful inhibitor to developing close relationships. Robert Bly and Michael Meade have observed that men do not begin to trust one another until an opportunity for violence has passed untaken. Violence here means not only physical, but emotional and mental. Probably the most frequent type of violence men do to one another in our society is public ridicule and humiliation. Trust is not going to get built if everyone is safely hiding behind some mask or in some cave. An opportunity for violence must pass untaken. Members will have to risk and put themselves in situations where they might get hurt in order for the group to develop trust. When members take a risk, they will have to feel supported by others, or distrust will develop.

D) Assigning Responsibility.

Experience shows that simply meeting regularly and hoping that something significant will happen doesn't work. The group needs to program activities for itself but it can become a real drag if you spend too much group time discussing what to do. A common solution is to assign one member responsibility for leading the next meeting. Leading a meeting does not have to be an elaborate task. Simply providing some way to get people talking together, in a way they normally don't, works great. Support those who take responsibility for programming activities and those who risk designing new and "weird" activities.

E) Learning to Appreciate the Irrational and Intuitive.

Men, for the most part, tend to err on the side of being too concrete, rational and pragmatic in their thinking. We tend to naively take things at "face value". We tend to focus on what a person actually says and not what they mean to say. We tend to believe that rational, logical thinking is the only kind that matters. We have highly developed heads but we can't feel our hearts. To plunge into men's work requires that you start looking squarely at all the irrational things you do in your life, and learn to love them. The point is not to try and take control and make everything rational, but to allow the irrational, intuitive side of you back into the picture, to balance head and heart, thinking and feeling, to start paying attention to the meaning behind appearances, and to start listening to your inner knowing.

Excerpted with permission from Vancouver Men's Evolvment Network by Gervase Bushe
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