

Why understanding group dynamics improves leadership

[In my view](#) / 10 April 2013



We play a part in several groups over the course of each day.

Throughout our life, we join and leave hundreds of groups, we change our roles, status and positions in a group and we develop 'our style'. We make choices about what type of group member or group leader we want to be – effectively acting as undercover behavioural psychologists applying the results of a lifetime spent in research.

Through these experiences, we hone our personal (pet) theories and expectations about groups and group members – what is 'normal', who are the good/bad guys, what gets results, what doesn't. So beneath the surface of any group is an invisible and often unexamined pool of assumptions, experiences, behaviours, preferences and desires to which all group members contribute (even if they are sitting in silence).

Shared goals

The best facilitators learn how to work with this 'pool of psyches'. As well as having a well-stocked toolkit of models and techniques, they are also acutely aware of how their own personal psyche influences the group. They seek feedback to understand what from the deep pool of psychological material is supporting progress, and what is getting in the way or even moving the team away from their shared goal.

As Peter Senge observed in *The Fifth Discipline*, the collective intelligence of a team in a learning environment can greatly exceed the sum of its members' contributions, but in a dysfunctional team, the collective IQ can be substantially lower than that lowest scoring individual.

Becoming a high-functioning team does not mean we need to share our innermost experiences or have a group hug. We develop and refine coping mechanisms and communication strategies for valid cultural reasons (fitting in and keeping our jobs), practical reasons (few opportunities to get to know each other in real depth) and personal reasons (guarding our psychological blind spots and sore spots).

Learning more about the invisible assumptions, experiences and behaviours of groups is an essential leadership skill, says Bella Mehta, founding director of Association of Facilitators

As a trained scientist leading my first project in the world of consultancy, it soon dawned on me (with a degree of fear) that 'group dynamics' were going to influence our achievement much more than the quantity of our research data or the qualifications we all held.

From not really grasping what the woolly-sounding concept of 'group dynamics' meant, and even less so how 'facilitation skills' might help me navigate the terrain, I have come to view this knowledge as a vital part of the professional toolkit for all managers and all leaders.

In fact, in the following article I refer to *all* managers and leaders as 'facilitators' to emphasise an important part of their role that is often overlooked – supporting groups and teams to achieve a task.

On any typical day, we play our part in several groups. We might wake up in the family home, head to work, lead a team debrief in the morning, meet colleagues for lunch, report to the leadership team in the afternoon, and after work join up with a group of friends or a sports team.

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In many cases, our boundaries and defences are appropriate and serve us well, especially at work. In other cases, they may be unhealthy – for example, where we unconsciously view a person or event through the lens of an old experience, which hinders our performance. In the absence of feedback and reflection, these hindrances remain outside of our conscious awareness, but are often visible to others (ie our defences don't work as well as we think they do).

results of a lifetime spent in research

Bella Mehta, founding director of Association of Facilitators

In the same way that team members have defences and blind spots, so do managers and leaders. They can develop a reputation that is often based as much on their unhealthy defences as their healthy defences and their strengths, and this in turn has an impact on the groups that they manage and lead. And just as the personality, reputation and behaviour of a leader sets the scene for good team performance (or otherwise), mastery of facilitation skills can greatly influence group – and hence organisational performance. Without good quality feedback from others, they are often unaware of their standing in the eyes of others, and are unable to see and attend to their blind spots.

High quality facilitation skills training and group supervision/mentoring opportunities provide a safe environment in which facilitators can honestly reflect on their capabilities and competencies, bring defences into awareness and examine and enhance their personal style.

So far from being soft and fluffy, there are hard business reasons to learn about group dynamics and hone facilitation skills, and developing these skills should be a priority for those looking to lead effectively.

The Association of Facilitators is dedicated to the training, supervision and accreditation of facilitators. To contact Bella Mehta, please email: bella@associationoffacilitators.co.uk

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