

Getting to Grips with the Great 'Small Group' Conspiracy

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The concept of a small group was once a pure and scientific concept with a meaning. It has degenerated into a fashion and a fad and almost any situation that includes more than one person is now called a 'small group'. Nothing could be more meaningless and in fact destructive of what was once a heuristic concept.

'Small group' was also once a useful and practical concept. Its proven usefulness arose from two streams of practical theorizing; from those whose job it was to help the sick and socially inadequate, and from those who realized that it is the structure of society which is sick and needs restructuring. These were not mutually exclusive streams but simply varieties of purpose within a learning network of action researchers.

What is a group really? It is some people who are commonly engaged on a task, sharing without status distinction the responsibility for:

- completing the task to some agreed level of satisfaction; and
- their own control and coordination. If anyone of these elements is lacking, the aggregate of people gathered together in the one place is not a group.

'Small' is variously interpreted as somewhere between four and 15 people. The most misunderstood and misnamed situation is that where there is a gathering of people with a leader. This is by definition not a small group. This situation was originally designed by the therapeutic stream where the goal was to restore to the sick their capacity to function fully as human beings in society. The aggregate and their leader only became a group when the sick had become strong enough to negate the status distinction between themselves and the leader, either by throwing her or him out, or by making it quite clear that the leader could be a member of the group on strictly equal terms; i.e., cease to be the leader.

Bion's classic studies of the development and dynamics of groups make quite clear the fact that people wish to be members of self managing groups but in the early stages of coming together are no more than an immature form or prototype. In fact, Bion's work was as a therapist with war casualties and his job as the leader or therapist was to bring his immature groups out of the grips of the 'group assumptions' into a consistent stage of mature group function; self management. The 'group assumptions' of Dependency, Fight/flight and Pairing are the assumptions an immature group makes about its relationship with its leader before they have the confidence to become a well functioning and independent group. This Bion called the Work Group because it could and wanted to purposefully do a task important to all its members. It is now called the Creative Working Mode because it is only in this mode that we see sustained creativity. These group assumptions or emotions are consequences of structure (Bion, 1952, 1959; Emery M, 1982, 1986).

Today we rarely see in the fashionable form of 'small group' work, the case of a leader being deposed. There are several good reasons for this. One is that most leaders enjoy the status and power of being the leader and consciously or unconsciously manipulate the situation so that the hierarchical distinction is maintained. The second is that the leader who is genuinely intending to use the situation for therapeutic or democratic learning purposes must have exceptional skills, knowledge and personal abilities. This is a rare combination and a lot of people who 'run' groups these days wouldn't know what I'm talking about. The groups they are 'running' have nothing to do with democracy. They do have a lot to do with subtle autocracy, laissez-faire and the group assumptions.

The genuine therapist's task is made even more difficult when they operate in a society whose members have been socialized from birth to accept and revere status distinctions and the concept of a 'higher authority'. A leader in such a situation who is themselves infected with the spirit of a 'higher authority' or who does not have the requisite skills to decontaminate their clients, is doing no more than reinforcing the sickness of authoritarianism which exists in the structure of the society at large.

This very simple fact appears to have been lost in the great rush to 'go into groups' for every conceivable purpose, many of which do not in fact constitute tasks; e.g. at conferences, to have a discussion. No wonder many normal healthy people come out of this feeling angry and frustrated. Many walk out of sensitivity or team-building 'groups' feeling the same way and for the same good reasons. They are suffering from the group assumption of fight/flight brought on by being denied the right to exercise some control over a situation in which they find themselves and/or being asked to perform a non-task in the same circumstances. They practice the assumption in the flight mode because the situation contains nothing worth fighting for. But they won't put up with being treated as less than human and exercise their right to leave.

Why has there been this phenomenal stampede into the fad of 'groups'? First, because most people survive the bureaucratized society relatively undamaged but very aware that there must be something better: they search and they end up in 'small groups'. Second, because those reared to believe that some are more equal than others see in the 'small group scene' opportunities for maintaining the status quo and procuring a top spot in it for them, by the manipulation described above. The phenomenon bears all the hallmarks of a profession bent on imperialism. The motto could well be 'keep them busy and involved' (but keep them infected with respect for the leader).

This aspect though covers only the experiential, high visibility side of the strategy. The other nine tenths of the iceberg, the culture of silence, is widely shared. Almost nowhere in our Western culture is there any opportunity to learn conceptually and cognitively about structure. Yet it has been learnt and known for centuries that for knowledge to become 'understood' and therefore usable, it must be conscious and conceptual as well as experienced. If the 'small group' practitioners were to start arming their clients with the conceptual tools to analyse and understand the structures of the 'small groups' they are running, they would quickly do themselves out of a job.

Let's do away with all the mythology and trappings of the great 'small group conspiracy' and start being honest with ourselves. If we really want a society where people can exercise their so-called democratic rights to take responsibility for themselves and start functioning as full scale human beings, then we have to do two things. We have to:

- start helping people learn about the concept of structure and it will involve the direct transmission of some information (a no-no for some 'group trainers' dedicated to learning experientially);
- provide situations where they can practice with the genuine article, the genuine small group.

Perhaps we are worried that self managing small groups won't fulfil the claims made for them, or that perhaps people don't want to take responsibility for themselves and share the decision making about control and coordination with their mates. Be reassured, they do and they do. Anybody who has ever seen a group take the bit between its teeth when they were given the chance to start making these decisions in the interests of the whole, and the ways in which they react if they suspect later that the exercise was not genuine, won't need my reassurance.

Mind you, if a group suspects from the start that a project is a con and if it does not have sufficient sanctions to safeguard their whole hearted participation, they will practice fight/flight, usually the second half. While this is actually a rational response, it can be taken or interpreted as a refusal to accept responsibility. But once a group or organization does have the bit between its teeth, it is a

brave or foolhardy manager who will attempt to turn back the clock. As was said above in the introduction, it is hard to put down ideas which really fit with people's expectations and nature.

There is also more to the concept of structure than what a genuine small group looks like and what happens inside it. Organizations, institutions and societies also are and contain large systems, and small and large systems are systematically related. We must also teach structure on this scale. To do less is once again misleading and can be downright destructive.

To turn a small number of people into a genuine small self managing group through experience but without any conceptual understanding, and send them into a hostile and ruthless environment, which is what a large bureaucratic organization becomes when it is challenged or senses a threat, is courting defeat and damage to the people and leaves the bureaucratic organization unchanged. It is even worse to take an individual and send them back alone. But that is exactly what is happening and what many 'small group' practitioners are promoting as in the interests of democratic learning for democracy.

If we are really going to change this society we must embark on a strategic educational campaign reaching eventually all its members, of all ages and at all levels in the current pecking order. And we must provide them with an education which is both conceptual and experiential. It is possible.

References

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