

## **Key Concepts in Group Relations**

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### **Leadership**

Leadership The defining characteristic of leadership is not simply the activity of gaining authority and influence -- although these may be important tools -- but the mobilization of people to clarify aspirations and to solve difficult problems (Vroom & Jago, 1988; Heifetz, 1994). This often involves getting groups and individuals with different problem definitions to incorporate one another's perspectives and evidence to some degree. This requires an ability to face the internal contradictions in our own lives, communities and organizations. Such a challenge by its very nature requires social learning and leaders who can guide, interpret, and stimulate the involvement of relevant parties rather than "lone warriors" who attempt to provide all the answers.

### **Systems Theory**

Any individual, group or organization can be thought of as a living system. The systems approach conceptualizes human behavior in organizations in terms of multiple systems levels -- individual, interpersonal, group, intergroup, and organizational. All actions and decisions are a part of an ongoing process of interacting influences that include both individual and situational factors. It will be useful for participants to view this course/conference as a system that is subject to influences from countless other systems such as the University within which it is embedded and the multiple societal groups to which participants and staff belong. A simple conversation between two people that might take place in the course/conference, when viewed from this systems perspective, is revealed to contain a vast array of interrelationships and variables. The individuals are continually influencing and being influenced by one another and by the larger systems of which they are a part. The course/conference-as-system notion argues that participants can derive learning relevant to their work in other systems from their actual experience as members of the course/conference system.

### **Social Defenses and Work Avoidance Mechanisms**

The processes of denial, splitting and projection are basic human reactions to pain, anxiety or conflict. Group relations theory maintains that these same processes also operate on the level of social systems. Just as individuals develop defenses against difficult emotions which are threatening to acknowledge, so do institutions (Jaques, 1955).

Wilfred Bion (1961) observed that groups, like individuals, function on two levels at

once. He labeled one level “work” and the other “basic assumption.” The work level consists of rational activity and the basic assumption level consists of unconscious motives. It is possible for these two levels to operate in an harmonious, complementary fashion. At other times, irrational and unconscious basic assumptions can erupt in a group and interfere with task performance on the “work” level. While individual responses to anxiety may take a variety of forms, Bion observed that groups and organizations tend to get stuck in three basic ways when confronted with uncertainty and anxiety. Some become what he calls “dependency groups, in which individuals stop thinking for themselves and become overly reliant on authority. Others become “fight/flight” groups, in which they attack authority figures either overtly or by withdrawing. Still other groups insist on excessive conformity among members in order to resist and defend themselves from outside enemies. Certain organizational structures and social arrangements may often be created primarily to reinforce these defenses and to protect the group or organization from painful realities.

Menzies (1960) was the first to use the term “social defenses” in conjunction with her study of nurses in a general teaching hospital in Great Britain. Menzies’ study focused on the high level of anxiety associated with the nurse’s role which involves prolonged and persistent exposure to difficult issues of pain and death. She discovered certain practices and policies that seemed to be aimed more at minimizing or preventing anxiety than at improved patient care. Frequent shifts in the rotation of nurses and certain charting practices, for example, prevented nurses from developing close relationships with patients. These practices also contributed to a “fragmentation” of patients who came to be identified in partial, disembodied-embodied terms, such as “the leg in Room 6.” These procedures, justified on the basis of efficiency and professional conduct, served to reduce anxiety by shielding the nurses from the pain of forming warm personal relationships with people who were suffering or might even die. By shifting the anxiety into the social area where it was less threatening to deal with on one level, it created a rigid and repressive social system that failed to recognize the importance of warm personal relationships as an aspect of both the healing process and a satisfying work environment (Meissner, 1971). As a result, the hospital experienced an extremely high drop-out rate among its most skilled nurses.

In this example, one can observe the institutionalization of the primary defense mechanisms. Denial of feelings, for example, was achieved by means of task lists that assigned nurses to perform a certain repetitive task for many patients in assembly-line fashion and by instructing them in an “ethic of equivalence” whereby it was not supposed to make any difference to them which patients they nursed. Splitting and projection took the form of rigid distinctions between junior and senior nurses. Incompetence and irresponsibility were projected into the former group, and “responsible” tasks were reserved to senior nurses. As a consequence, the more gifted junior nurses soon dropped out of the program. The example illustrates how social defenses serve the purpose of reducing anxiety, but also create other stresses that detract from the group’s ability to perform its primary tasks.

Different organizations or cultures will have different responses to stress. Some will be

productive, others destructive. Heifetz (1994) cautions us that it is often difficult to distinguish defensive structures and routines which lead to “work avoidance” from those structures, procedures and customs that exist in order to help the group achieve its purposeful tasks. Gillette and McCollom (1995) suggest that one way to test what is going on is to move toward anxiety and disturbing phenomena in order to seek further confirming or disconfirming evidence. Heifetz (1994) suggests other “rules of thumb” such as paying particular attention to when responsibility for a problem is blamed on a convenient target or when some new decision or action suddenly seems to discharge the tension and makes everyone feel good.

### **Authority and Holding Environments**

The notion of a “holding environment” was initially used by the British psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott (1960) to describe the parent-child relationship. He understood the primary purpose or task of the relationship as providing a supportive environment to foster the basic development of the child. The notion of “holding” is used metaphorically to encompass much more than the physical action of holding a child. The parents’ task is to shape an environment that serves as a containing vessel for the developmental challenges, problems, crises and stresses of growing into maturity. Psychoanalysts adopted the term and applied it to the therapeutic setting where the therapist “holds” a patient or client in a process of developmental learning that, by analogy, mirrors the way parents “hold” a child in a maturation process.

Group relations theorists extend the term to the social sphere to describe the kind of secure environment needed to foster developmental learning processes in groups, organizations and communities. That environment includes the network of connections, structures, codes, shared traditions, and authority relationships that facilitate adaptive work, and help to contain the inevitable stress and tension that get generated in the process (See e.g. Gustafson & Cooper, 1985; Smith & Berg, 1987; Alderfer, 1990; Shapiro & Carr, 1991; Monroe, 1992b; Heifetz, 1994).

Not all stress, of course, is destructive. When there is too much comfort, there is little incentive to make the effort to change. Some holding environments are too safe. As with over-protective parents, they stress stability and predictability to the extent that new learning and risk taking is squelched. Other holding environments fail to contain the level of stress within a tolerable range. In this case, increasing levels of anxiety inevitably trigger social defenses or work avoidance mechanisms that interfere with the group’s ability to meet the adaptive challenge productively.

Like all living systems, groups naturally seek to restore equilibrium, so the temptation to avoid stress-generating adaptive work can be strong. Heifetz (1994) compares an effective holding environment to a pressure cooker. Nothing will cook unless there is some heat generated, but if the pressure exceeds the cooker’s capacity to contain it, the whole thing will blow up. Effective pressure cookers have strong walls to contain the heat and pressure as well as valves to release steam if the pressure becomes excessive. In much the same way, groups doing adaptive work need a strong pair of arms (i. e.

trustworthy and secure boundaries) to embrace and contain the productive chaos and confusion that often accompanies progress, but they also need ways to release excessive and unproductive levels of stress before the system explodes.

Establishing an effective holding environment in which work can be done is a key part of the authority role (Rice, 1965; Alderfer, 1976, 1990). Existing research and organizational practice identify certain conditions that appear to foster and support effectiveness in newer, more flexible, and less hierarchical organizations which are sometimes referred to as post-industrial, boundaryless, or self-managing organizations. These include a clear and engaging sense of purpose, identity and direction; enabling structures that facilitate coordinated action and help people take up appropriate roles; good working relationships free of disabling conflicts (this is not the same as conflictfree); and, sufficient resources such as enough money, adequate space, sufficient time, proper equipment, and access to necessary information (See e.g., Walton & Hackman, 1986; Hirschhorn & Gilmore, 1992). Those in positions of formal authority need not do all of these things personally, but it is the responsibility of authority to ensure that these functions are fulfilled. While the assertion sounds a bit odd, the appropriate use of authority is critical for creating the conditions of “empowerment” that enable individuals and groups to take responsibility for doing adaptive work.