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Group Development Tools Practitioners Can Use

By Matt Minahan and Carrie Hutton


WITH THE PROLIFERATION of pre-packaged teambuilding tools, OD practitioners are exposed to a wide variety of options for helping clients improve team effectiveness and solve group problems. Although the convenience of these instruments makes it tempting for practitioners – new and old – to rely on them, there is often limited evidence of their validity or the theoretical model(s) used to inform them.

Without a strong understanding of group development theory, the practitioner is simply guessing at which tool will be appropriate for a given client situation. For some, the “favorite” tool becomes the solution to every group problem, leading to inaccurate diagnoses and unnecessarily limited opportunities for intervention.

By contrast, the practitioner with a solid grounding in group development theory is in a better position to accurately diagnose group problems, intervene effectively, select instruments and models with some assurance of validity, and refer back to the theories on which their observations and recommendations are based.

This article provides an overview of two of the group development theorists we will feature in our pre-conference workshop in Montreal: Wilfred Bion and William Schutz. (Though not included here, at the Montreal conference, we’ll also explore group development theories by Banet, and Warren Bennis and Herb Shepard, and the team development model of Alan Drexler and David Sibbett.) Use them to identify what is

CONFERENCE CONNECTION



Matt Minahan and Carrie Hutton are presenters at the 2002 OD Network Annual Conference in Montreal at the following sessions:

SS106 Group Development: Meet Schutz, Bennis, Shepard, Drexler, Sibbett, and More With Pearl Acquah, Jeffrey Brooke and Laurie Strait Lemieux
Saturday and Sunday, 8am-4pm

happening within a group, inform your behavior as a consultant, and guide your selection of instruments and interventions.

WILFRED BION (1897-1979)

Bion's theory is based in large part on his work managing a rehabilitation unit for psychiatric patients in the British Army during World War II and later with small groups at the Tavistock Clinic. The central concept in Bion's theory is that in every group, two groups exist: the "work group" and the "basic assumption group". It should be made clear that Bion was not referring to factions or subgroups within the group, but rather to two dimensions of behavior within the group. The *work group* is that element of group functioning that is concerned with the primary task or work of the group. The mature work group is aware of its purpose and can define its task. Its members work cooperatively as separate and discrete members who willingly choose to belong to the group because they identify with the interests of the group. This group tests its conclusions, seeks knowledge, and learns from its experience. Bion notes that this level of maturity in the work group is very rare.

Of primary interest to Bion was the question of why groups employ ineffective and self-contradicting behavior that lessens the effectiveness of the group. Bion suggests that this is because in addition to the work group, the *basic assumption* group is at play. The basic assumption group can be thought of as the "as if" group, meaning that the group behaves "as if" certain tacit assumptions were held by the members. These assumptions are hidden in the group subconscious, outside the awareness of group members. Bion identified three types of basic assumption groups – the *dependency*, the *fight-flight*, and the *pairing* groups.

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BASIC ASSUMPTION: DEPENDENCY GROUP

The primary goal of the *dependency* group is to have its members protected by one individual, usually the leader. The group's behavior implies that the leader is all knowing and all-powerful, and that group members are ignorant, inadequate and immature. The intelligence and power of the leader are never questioned or tested by the group. Because no one can possibly fulfill this role, the leader inevitably arouses the disappointment and hostility of the group. Eventually, the group will dismiss the leader and appoint another group member in her place. Unfortunately, the new leader is destined to face a similar fate.

BASIC ASSUMPTION: FIGHT-FLIGHT GROUP

The *fight-flight* group assumes that it must preserve itself at all costs, and that this can be done only by fighting or fleeing from someone or something. The group has no tolerance for weakness and expects casualties since salvation of the group is more important than the needs of individual members. The fight-flight leader must inspire great courage and self-sacrifice, and lead the group against a common enemy. If none exists, the leader will create one. A leader who fails to afford the group the opportunity for retreat or attack will be considered ineffective and ultimately ignored.

BASIC ASSUMPTION: PAIRING GROUP

The *pairing* group assumes that the group has met for the purposes of reproduction, to bring forth a Savior or Messiah. In this group, two people (regardless of gender) get together to carry out the task of creating a new leader who will solve all the group's problems, save the group from its own incompetence, and bring them into Utopia. A new leader or idea resulting from the union often will be annihilated by the group, allowing the group to maintain an air of hope and anticipation that another, as yet unborn leader will save it from feelings of despair and destruction (both its own and others).

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTITIONER

Because of the complexity of this theory and the hidden nature of the basic assumption group, it is often difficult for a practitioner to identify which basic assumption is at play, particularly in highly structured group settings. An educated practitioner will be more likely to observe basic assumption behaviors in groups that lack structure and organization.

However, elements of basic assumption can be identified at different times within groups. The dependency basic assumption is often at play in the early stages of group life before issues

Table 1 – BION’S BASIC ASSUMPTION GROUPS AND BEHAVIORS

DEPENDENCY	FIGHT-FLIGHT	PAIRING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Members passively look to trainer/leader for all answers ■ Members provide partial or inadequate information ■ Group insists on simplistic solutions to problems ■ Group eventually demonstrates hostility and disappointment toward trainer/leader ■ Group searches for alternative leaders when original one fails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Group demonstrates paranoid tendencies ■ Group refuses to examine itself critically ■ Group creates an “enemy” real or imagined ■ Individual members may be sacrificed or scapegoated for the “good” of the group ■ Weaknesses (as perceived by the group) are not tolerated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Group relies on two individuals for all creative effort ■ Group members express hopeful anticipation using cliches such as “Things will get better when...” ■ Group members are attentive and interested in the creative process ■ Solutions or leaders generated by pairing are sabotaged and destroyed by the group

of leadership and structure have been resolved. It is particularly important for the practitioner to be aware of a group’s dependent behaviors to avoid setting unrealistic expectations or presenting oneself as an omniscient expert figure.

When scapegoating occurs within a group dynamic, it is possible that the fight-flight assumption is at play. Members bond together to fight a common foe, the scapegoat, resulting in the majority of the group sharing a sense of purpose and “groupness” often for the first time. The pairing modality can be suspected whenever two individuals within a group are looked upon as the sole hope of creating a solution to the group’s problems, only to find that the solutions generated are immediately destroyed by the rest of the group.

Just as no group consistently lives up to the ideal of the work group, no group functions completely at the basic assumption level either. Instead, aspects of the work group and basic assumption group are at play at different times and with varying intensity. According to Bion, each of us has a tendency to enter into the unconscious aspect of group life to a different degree, just as everyone has a tendency toward differing levels of cooperation within the work group. For effective functioning in groups, it is important for members (particularly leaders and group facilitators) to be aware of which basic assumption group they lean toward.

With this awareness, organizations can use the basic assumption tendency in a sophisticated and effective way. Examples of this include a hospital’s sophisticated use of the dependency basic assumption to provide better patient care; the army’s use of the fight-flight assumption to train soldiers in combat situations; and the royal monarchy’s use of the pairing basic assumption. For the practitioner, understanding of the basic assumption concepts can shape observations and help group members bring hidden assumptions into awareness so the group can begin to examine them critically.

WILLIAM C. SCHUTZ (1926 -)

Building on the works of Bion and other eminent psychologists, Schutz developed his model, Fundamental Interpersonal Relationship Orientation (FIRO) in the 1940s and 50’s trying to understand and improve the working of submarine and airplane crews. The model attempts to explain interpersonal behavior in terms of the individual’s orientation toward others with regard to three interpersonal needs, *inclusion*, *control*, and *affection*, and the individual’s inclination to either *express* the need to others, or *want* to receive that behavior. According to Schutz, groups develop in response to these dynamics in predictable stages that repeat in a recurring cycle during the group’s time together.

PHASE 1 – INCLUSION

At the beginning of group life, members are primarily concerned with whether the group will accept them or not. To reduce anxiety around inclusion, group members will share harmless facts about themselves and will engage in small talk and joking. Members with a high need for expressed inclusion will initiate conversations with others, involve others in projects, offer helpful information and “tips”, and make sure the accomplishments of others are recognized. Members with high levels of wanted inclusion will try to join in conversations and activities, seek recognition or responsibility, may wear distinctive clothing, or go along with the majority opinion to “fit in”. Members with low levels of expressed or wanted inclusion may resist these activities.

PHASE 2 – CONTROL

Once issues of inclusion have been resolved, the group begins to focus on issues of leadership and structure. Members

with a high need for expressed control tend to compete for air time, assume positions of authority, advance ideas within the group, and try to influence others opinions. Members with high wanted control may ask for help, involve others in decision-making, request precise instructions and defer to the wishes of others. Members with low wanted control may become frustrated with rigid structures and will resist pressure from the team to engage in these behaviors.

PHASE 3 – AFFECTION

During the final phase, group members become concerned with the building of emotional attachments between members. In healthy groups, this often occurs around parting, whether at the end of a group meeting (or segment of a meeting), or at the end of the group’s lifecycle. Members with a high need for expressed affection will reassure and support colleagues, demonstrate concern about the personal lives of others, and share personal and private feelings and opinions. Members with a high need for wanted affection may be flexible and accommodating, listen carefully to others, share feelings of fear and anxiety, and engage in “people pleasing” behaviors. Members with low wanted or expressed affection will find this behavior too “touchy feely” and will become dissatisfied.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE PRACTITIONER

Schutz’ FIRO theory led to the development of the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation-Behavior (FIRO-B) and successor instruments that help people understand their interpersonal behavior. The FIRO-B is a useful tool for management and leadership development, coaching, and team-building. The validity and reliability of this instrument have been well documented, which makes FIRO theory and the FIRO-B instrument a good choice for consultants working with teams and team leaders.

Another strength of the FIRO cycle of *inclusion, control and affection* is that they are predictable stages that most groups experience, and can be applied to the design of development sessions and teambuilding interventions. For instance, at the beginning of a session, when participants are concerned with acceptance and inclusion, the practitioner can incorporate ice-breakers and other activities designed to answer the question, “Who are we, and how do we relate to this task?”

Once tension around inclusion has been resolved, the group will begin to focus on issues of leadership and structure. Signs that the group is in the *control* phase include competition for air time, attempts to redefine the group’s task or restructure its work, attempts to persuade others or build coalitions around ideas or outcomes. The practitioner’s attention to assisting the group in establishing ground rules and processes with which to manage group problem solving are central to issues of control. In addition, paying special attention to the group dynamics in

Table 2 – THE FIRO-B SIX CELL MODEL AND BEHAVIORS		
INCLUSION	CONTROL	AFFECTION
<p>Expressed Inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Talking and joking with others ■ Involving others in projects and meetings ■ Recognizing others’ accomplishments ■ Incorporating everyone’s ideas and suggestions <p>Wanted Inclusion:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Frequenting heavily trafficked areas ■ Seeking recognition or responsibility ■ Getting involved in high priority projects ■ Going along with the majority 	<p>Expressed Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Assuming positions of leadership ■ Advancing ideas within the group ■ Taking a competitive stance ■ Managing the conversation ■ Influencing others’ opinions <p>Wanted Control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Asking for help on the job ■ Involving others in decision-making ■ Requesting specific instructions or clarification ■ Asking for permission ■ Deferring to others’ wishes 	<p>Expressed Affection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Reassuring and supporting ■ Giving gifts to show appreciation ■ Demonstrating concern about other members personal lives ■ Sharing personal feelings and opinions <p>Wanted Affection:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Being flexible and accommodating ■ Listening carefully to others ■ Sharing feelings of anxiety ■ Trying to please others ■ Giving others more than they want/need

Adapted from Sweeney, N. (ed.), *Introduction to the FIRO-B in Organizations*. Palo Alto, CA: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1993.

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this regard will allow the practitioner to make appropriate decisions about when and how to intervene.

During the affection phase, particularly after the group has experienced some success in resolving issues during the control phase, the group will focus on strengthening the emotional bonds with each other with expressions of consensus and a sharing of personal feelings. In healthy groups, this occurs to ease the tension around parting. The knowledgeable practitioner can incorporate into the workshop design a process for

the group to acknowledge each other and affirm its success.

One additional note: the FIRO theory is recursive, in that the cycle of inclusion, control and affection will repeat itself throughout the group’s time together. Typically, this will happen at micro and macro levels during each segment of the workshop. When participants return from breaks, inclusion issues are likely to surface (“Are we all here?” “Can we proceed with the people who are here?”) and the cycle will repeat itself through the control and affection stages. The practitioner who keeps this in mind will be better prepared to identify and respond to the behavior of the group. ■

CONCLUSION

These two models, by Bion and Schutz, provide the practitioner with a much richer understanding of group behavior than most commercially available team building tools, and the popular and well publicized Tuckman (1965) model of forming, storming, norming and performing. The two theories cited here are better based in research and allow for more complete insight into complex group dynamics, selection of instruments, and that interventions are rooted in a sound theoretical base. ■

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