

## Group Dynamics and Their Contribution to the Diversity Debate

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**In view of the current discussions in organizations on “managing diversity,” or more specifically, on making diversity utilizable, i.e. utilizing differences, it**

**seems obvious and helpful during these deliberations to draw on the**

**insights, learning concept, and the practical experience of group dynamics.<sup>1</sup>**



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Organizations today are filled with situations that trigger highly ambivalent feelings in us. On the one hand, concepts such as the regularity of joint work, a sense of unity, and an entity of maximum homogeneity are closely linked with our notion of functioning organizations (“everyone in one direction,” “a tight-knit community”). On the other hand, it is evident that the diversity in organizations – the replaceability and functionalization of its members, the resulting reduced loyalty, and top performers’ increased readiness to change jobs – has risen strongly in recent years and will continue to do so. Be it in the form of diverse working conditions and thus different forms of affiliation, the various and often coexisting organizational structures, or the manifold side effects of internationalization – today, organizations and their executives everywhere are confronted with the challenge of “managing diversity.”

### Who actually wants diversity?

Managing diversity might sound great, but how exactly is this supposed to work? Is this aspiration even realistic, is it truly desired by the parties involved, or does this excessive diversity only strengthen the need of many of those involved “to finally focus more on the common aspects again?” We are not necessarily born with the ability to respectfully handle dissimilarity – in all its various forms – and to actually be able to utilize it as a valuable resource. Regarding the high demands we face when dealing with diversity, Gardenswartz & Rowe have formulated the following thesis: “The human species resists change, continuing to seek homeostasis. This makes the constant adaptation required by diversity difficult for people already overwhelmed by staggering transitions.” In addition, “human beings find comfort and trust in likeness. There is a tendency to seek the company of those most similar to us.”<sup>2</sup>

Viewed in this light, the particular challenge of diversity management lies in a change of paradigm: given the growing diversity, instead of looking for security as before by drawing on what is familiar, what is known, and what is similar, it is essential to establish – on a higher level so to speak – a new type of security, based on increased competency in dealing with the non-similar, the unfamiliar. What kind of

<sup>1</sup> This is the abridged version of an article featured in a book by the members of the Hernstein group dynamics faculty, to be released in the fall of 2004.

<sup>2</sup> (<http://www.gardenswartzrowe.com>)

support do the different diversity approaches offer here, what special contribution do group dynamics provide, and where do these two approaches differ, overlap, or complement each other? In the following, we will explore these questions.

### What is the focus of these diversity approaches?

The “discrimination-and-fairness paradigm” primarily broached the issue of social injustices and prejudices, thus significantly contributing to raising awareness and lessening entry and advancement barriers in companies. In contrast, the “access-and-legitimacy paradigm” is already based on the idea that it is not only required by law and morally desirable, but also of economic advantage to recruit employees from different social minorities because markets and target groups, for example, are becoming increasingly heterogeneous and therefore must be dealt with in a specific manner.

In contrast, a third approach, the “learning-and-effectiveness paradigm,” sees diversity in a broader scope as “the varied perspectives and approaches to work” which members of different population groups introduce into organizations: “They bring different, important and competitively relevant knowledge and perspectives about how to actually do work – how to design processes, reach goals, frame tasks, create effective teams, communicate ideas and lead. When allowed to, members of these groups can help companies grow and improve by challenging basic assumptions about an organization’s functions, strategies, operations, practices and procedures.”<sup>3</sup>

It is precisely this introduction of different perspectives based on the different backgrounds of the employees which brings the greatest benefit for the companies. At the same time, however, it also represents the biggest challenge because different perspectives are in particular, irritating, inconvenient, and unsettling. They put into question what previously went without saying, stir up deeply rooted convictions, and force people to leave their personal “comfort zones.” How can the acceptance of diversity be increased, and how can one acquire the skills necessary to go beyond mere lip services and to actually be able to cope with this diversity? Group dynamics provide several helpful answers here.

### The beginnings

The concept of group dynamics – here, specifically the T-group as a learning and teaching method – emerged at a time that was marked by the global repercussions of World War II. In view of the devastating experience of fascism, Kurt Lewin and his team comprised of Leland P. Bradford, Ronald Lippitt, and Kenneth Benne dealt with the question of which dynamics can be triggered in groups as a result of different management structures and of how a more mature handling of authority could be rendered possible on the basis of an emancipatory, hierarchy-critical approach and with the aid of a specific setting.

“The discovery that an exchange of observations about current seminar events between all participants

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3 Thomas David and Ely Robin, “Making Differences Matter,” Harvard Business Review on Managing Diversity, p. 36f

strongly influences the further work processes in the groups and the insight that a purposeful establishment of metacommunicative opportunities and a systematic focus on the digesting feedback processes is associated with unique learning opportunities for individuals and groups led in the following years to the development of a special setting for learning (the T-group, editor's note). In this setting, learning from the here and now, the current seminar event, was put in the center of attention."<sup>4</sup>

If diversity approaches are aimed at "thematizing a society's handling of social differences and how they emerge due to different social backgrounds, different<sup>5</sup> religions, gender differences, or national differences,"<sup>1</sup> then group dynamics provide a concrete, proven method and the corresponding theoretical background for recognizing:

- which differentiations one makes out of the multiplicity of possibilities, i.e. which internal maps (mental models) we are guided by in new and uncertain situations and which effects this generates,
- under which conditions these internal differentiations ("prejudices") become discussable and specifiable, and
- how a greater awareness for the usually impulsive and rather prejudiced handling of irritating differences can be achieved through this.

This is accomplished by expanding the observation and behavior repertoire of the participants with regard to the handling of these processes in the respective group, the understanding of these processes, and the group's ability to find a suitable way of interacting when faced with these differences.

### **"Group dynamics" as part of the daily routine – an unavoidable evil?**

In order to be able to actually utilize the repeatedly illustrated advantages of teamwork, which can usually far surpass the problem solving capacity of individuals so long as the team works well together, several basic conditions are needed to support and facilitate the development of this ability to work together. This requires time to establish an awareness of the joint task, the mutual goals, the functionality of the internal structures and role allocation, the space allocation among members, issues of affiliation, etc. This is frequently overlooked and the importance of teambuilding with regard to the ability to work together is considerably underestimated.

In reality, successful teamwork right from the beginning is rather unlikely in a team with very different personalities, interests, affiliations, cultures, etc. The dissimilarity – the diversity – somehow causes problems for everyone. In this connection, the ability to work together means that while collaborating, a group must no longer fight out different levels of influence on content and power struggles. By gradually making these differences discussable and in the course of wrestling for a good solution, the probability rises that all conceivable alternatives are being illuminated without the process having to result in hurt

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4 Rudi Wimmer, "Erlebt die Gruppendynamik eine Renaissance?" in Schwarz, Heintel, Weyrer, Stattler, Gruppendynamik: Geschichte und Zukunft, p. 124f

5 Iris Koall, lecture: "Gender & Diversity: Communication and Culture"

and devaluations on a personal level. Group dynamics and the T-group offer an excellent, sheltered practice space for acquiring the corresponding repertoire, for cleaning one's own "pair of glasses," perhaps even putting on new ones in order to see what important basic questions and basic rules for the collaboration in teams might be and how to better release the potential of groups without surrendering to the often subliminal and unconscious destructive forces.

### Group dynamics: a social innovation

People explicitly making themselves the subject of contemplation and observation is – as stated in a central thesis of the article "Erlebt die Gruppendynamik eine Renaissance?" by Rudi Wimmer – closely linked to the enormously increased level of organized complexity in our society.<sup>6</sup> The less structured the life plans of individuals become, the more frequent the forced reorientation phases, and the stronger the pressure to think about oneself, to reflect on who and what one is and wants to be in a particular phase or situation in life.

In a T-group setting, the task of the group is the group itself – the group makes itself the topic and object of research which, for many participants, is unusual and irritating. As a result of this setting, the participants learn, encouraged by the trainer/-s, to observe the process of social cooperation, to gradually communicate about these observations, to subsequently observe which effects this type of exchange of observations has on them as individuals, on their own behavior within the group, and on the development of the group, and then to exchange thoughts about that, and so forth.

Everything that can be observed can also become a topic of discussion, provided that these observed topics are already discussable and processable: has enough trust been established to give each other feedback about a particular effect? Is there already enough information for us to decide how far we can go? Can we communicate about the feelings unleashed in this setting, about insecurities, fears, anger, closeness, and can we establish trust and gain security through this exchange? In order to establish this trust, it is necessary to dare to take a first step, to have the courage to find out how this action is received and appraised.

### Getting started isn't easy

In the group's formation phase, the participants encounter the challenging yet fascinating opportunity and necessity to completely reinvent themselves, regardless of their usual status and the usual characteristics of the daily job routine. They can and must try out new forms of play in a new situation because, like all the other participants and the group as a social structure, they have not yet established a "history" and "profile" here and are like a stranger entering a different culture.

For this reason, it is necessary for the participants in the training group, unlike in any other form of learning, to negotiate their own place and their own identity within this social structure ("What part will I play in this group? Who am I for this group and in this group?"). Working on the difference or

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<sup>6</sup> Rudi Wimmer, "Erlebt die Gruppendynamik eine Renaissance?" in Schwarz, Heintel, Weyrer, Stattler, Gruppendynamik: Geschichte und Zukunft, p. 126

comparison between one's self-image, the concept and assessment of oneself, and the image that the group forms of the individual becomes a challenging feat. The individual must make radical decisions about taking actions in order to surmount the uncertainty of the initial situation, to overcome the embarrassment of "not being able to see," the ignorance of "how it really works," and to begin structuring this "empty space." From the participants' point of view, the trainers also strongly encourage this arduous and unpleasant initial situation by not taking over the expected and desired action of structuring and facilitating the event. Instead, they pull back and only determine the structure in terms of time and space. Goal setting and the question of the purpose of this "event" is left to the participants. In addition, the trainers try to aid the process of group formation by asking "annoying" questions about the significance of individual actions or the like.

An important learning opportunity provided by this setting lies in the need to develop or perhaps rediscover a language for this unfamiliar space, the "in-between" or, in other words, the space between the participants which is initially unnamable because it seems unfamiliar. The participants often speak of a fog in which they stumble about, despairingly calling for the trainer as the authority to help them by giving clear guidance and putting an end to the suffering by showing them the way. As the individuals become aware of their own desire for dependence and their apparent inability to cope with and put an end to this unpleasant situation on their own, shame and anger often arise. This anger can often be directed against the trainer in different forms since the trainer is perceived as the cause of this dilemma or annoying situation and of the encounter with one's own limits and feeling of helplessness. For many, getting to know their own patterns of interaction is an important learning experience.

### How do I react in uncertain situations?

The extent to which I succeed in withstanding the tension between how I perceive myself and the effect I produce within the group, and the extent to which I effectively utilize this to expand my knowledge about myself and to be curious about it, determines the amplitude of one of the major potential learning gains from T-groups: the opportunity to get a better idea of how I as an individual react in uncertain and ambiguous situations and how and by which means I try to establish security and predictability again. Am I more likely to retreat and try to get my bearings by observing the people and happenings, risking that others will conquer the field and call the shots, even if this doesn't suit me at all? Or do I simply come to the front because I cannot stand this "waiting" and this "idle, senseless sitting around" in the unstructured "space" since I am used to taking matters into my own hands, deciding, and organizing things at the risk that this won't be accepted or perhaps will be criticized, that I am "wrong," or that I will be perceived as too "dominant" and subsequently will have no followers? What do I look at, what are my personal patterns for dealing with this, what can I see, what do I suppress – all this can provide important information, also for my own experiences in and affects on everyday life.

The distinction between "inside and outside" and the issue of affiliation represent another important, basic dimension for the formation of groups. Who belongs (to the group)? How must one act in order to be a member? Does the trainer belong to the group even though he/she keeps behaving differently and "doesn't really play along?" In teams, the question of why precisely he/she was invited and not

someone else is often asked (inwardly). This is about issues concerning the group's identity: who are we? What defines us? What are our (mutual) goals? Here, the norms and conditions of membership are negotiated fiercely in the sense of a necessary demarcation so that this identity formation can be accelerated.

### The dilemma of deciding between group and individual

How well do the individuals and the group manage to infuse the group with their own energy, i.e. "to contribute positively," while the individuals themselves and their own goals take a backseat to the benefit of the common goals? In order to drive the group's progress forward, it is necessary to negotiate and to give clear preference to the group acting as a whole over the goals of the individual persons – a balancing act, of course, since everybody's effort, personal commitment, and eye on the attainment of personal goals are necessary to gain momentum and to continue making headway. The individual serves as a tool for the group and provides everything he/she has to offer as a person so that the "group" can be created. By the same token, the group also serves the individual's own (learning and development) objectives. The individual must invest in the group in order to then be able to personally benefit from it in the form of learning gains. This relationship must be negotiated so that a sound and sustainable basis for further work can be established.<sup>7, 8</sup>

### The group is gaining momentum

As the group evolves, "hotter" topics and differences can increasingly be addressed and discussed. Whether something is discussable and what quality this discussion will have very much depend on the group's stage of development, the trust established thus far, and the particular "taboo boundary" of the group. The individuals, along with their specific backgrounds of experience and personal attitudes, now come into view and enter the discussion. Although a fluctuation between apathy and boredom can often be observed when addressing and dealing with this ("nothing is happening," "the process is dragging on" – usually a sign that the group is facing the next step but has not yet completely decided to take the leap to the next level), the adherence to personal taboo boundaries and discussion boundaries is defended with a high state of alertness and vigilance.

In day-to-day life, many topics that do not lie within the constraints of relevant content are simply removed from view and not thematized.

Here, these topics, which are often neglected because they are conflict-prone, suddenly take center stage for a while. They are examined with regard to their significance and effectuality, their influence on the processes within the group, and their interrelation with the interacting persons. This, for example, involves differences in terms of individuals' influence within the group (Who exerts influence and how, and does this suit me or does it not?), how "authority" emerges, and which structures and roles have

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<sup>7</sup> K. Smith, D. Berg, *Paradoxes of Group Life*, (1997)

<sup>8</sup> cf. Prof. Dr. Rudi Wimmer, *Das besondere Lernpotenzial der gruppenspezifischen Trainingsgruppe*, unpublished manuscript

been formed. Questions arise not only about the varying closeness among the members (Whom do I trust more – or less, and why?) and the resulting effects of such closeness, but also about perceived antipathies. Different ages and affiliations with different generations (Is “age” an asset in the sense of having experience, or does it mean “ready for the scrap heap?”) can be examined as well as the issue of gender significance within the group culture and the ability to work together (Does it make a difference how many men and women are in the group, whether the function of trainer is filled by a man or a woman, etc.?).

### Sources of perception

These perceptions in the here and now can have three sources that have a different relevance within the group at different points in time:<sup>9</sup> perceptions about what this situation triggers in me, “how I feel right now,” perceptions and descriptions of the conduct of others (What do I observe, how do I describe it, and what does it trigger in me?), and perceptions of what is happening within the group (What is going on here between the participants, what patterns do I notice in these actions, etc.?).

Dealing with all these differences and many more is one of the basic resources for the group's development. How are we doing as a group with regard to precisely these basic issues, and how do I come across in each of the different phases and topics?

What aspect of me has become observable? Where was I effective and how? What did I trigger? What do I maybe also know from everyday situations, and do I understand them better now? What situations irritate me especially? And how can I talk about this “social dimension” in day-to-day life in a suitable way and without overtaxing myself, the situation, and others?

The openness and intimacy of the training group make up its great attraction and appeal but as such it is usually neither achievable nor useful in everyday situations. However, knowing how I react in delicate situations, what issues I and others can possibly address in order to drive the teambuilding process forward or to get it going again, and to withstand uncertainty can indeed help considerably and also expand my repertoire.

In all these aspects, the participants exercise their metacommunicative competence. They practice communicating about communication and communicating about what they thematize, how they do this, and what this achieves in the group in each case. Thus, group dynamics provide the participants with the reflexive and communicative tools needed to form a productive group.

### Diversity requires metacommunication

It is obvious that diversity in companies has considerably increased in the past decades, also from the executives' and employees' point of view. Or phrased differently, as mentioned earlier, due to the increased dynamization of the organizational structures, today, they are confronted with considerably

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<sup>9</sup> cf. Prof. Dr. Rudi Wimmer, lecture at the ÖGGO Theory Forum: “Systems-theoretical Approaches to Understanding Training Groups,” 2001

more “relevant” differences, i.e. those differences that strongly influence events and which must be dealt with. For a social system, all these differences potentially lead to snags and conflicts which can be triggered merely by the differing assessments of the relevance of these differences themselves. They influence behavior and facilitate or inhibit teamwork. Each person has preconceptions and preconceived attitudes – solidified on the company level in the form of rules and systems – and these can, for instance, cause that certain persons (or groups of persons) are not even hired or promoted, or that their verbal contributions in meetings are not heard or are devalued, or that the company, unaware of certain cultural norms, loses certain customer groups.

The more heterogeneous the workforce becomes, the more pressing the question in companies: do I get the same level of productivity with this heterogeneous team, does it work just as well, and is the atmosphere just as good as in a homogeneous team? This question is more than justified because the answer often is: no! Diversity is frequently perceived as a threat to the effective functioning of an organization. Being different is still devalued quickly. Metacommunicative competence is required in order to examine that which is “normal,” to see whether it is still functional and helpful or impedimental, and especially, helpful or impedimental for whom, and thus to produce an awareness for differences that facilitate or impair working ability. It is, in fact, precisely this metacommunicative competence that is fostered by group dynamics as one of the key objectives.