The Power of T-Groups and Experiential Learning

Overview

If you are reading this paper you are preparing to embark on a unique learning journey. The majority of that learning will occur in a T-group-- a small, unstructured group with an ambiguous task and no leader. This paper is intended to help you better understand the pedagogy, the reason we use it and how to best prepare to get the most out of your Interpersonal Dynamic experience.

T-Groups, or Training Groups, were developed by NTL (National Training Laboratories Institute for Applied Behavioral Science) over 50 years ago and further expanded at the Graduate School of Business at Stanford University. The famous humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers said that T-groups were the most powerful educational innovation of the 20th century. We would argue that this methodology is even more relevant in the 21st Century since learning to develop effective interpersonal relationships and high performing teams (especially with people who are different than us) is among the most critical competencies a leader needs in this era of globalization and interdependence.

What is a T-group?

Describing a T-group to someone who has never participated in one is a bit like describing how one learns to ski to someone who has never seen skis or snow. We acknowledge that no matter how much detail we provide and how much we explain, it will be difficult to fully grasp this form of learning until you have actually experienced it.

Learning in T-group is likely to be frustrating (at least initially) because learning *how* to learn in a T-group environment is unlike any other learning we have ever done. To return to our skiing analogy, when we learn to ski we fall down often in the beginning and it takes a while before we feel the exhilaration of remaining upright long enough to feel the wind in our face as we glide effortlessly down a hill. A lot of the learning occurs by trial and error and in fits and starts.

A T-group is a learning laboratory in which group members explore and learn leadership and group membership skills by participating freely with

one another, sharing "here and now" experiences and reactions and giving/receiving feedback to/from each other. T-groups are the purest form of experiential learning. Participants work in a small group (roughly 12 participants who do not know each other and are very unlikely to work together in the future) with two experienced facilitators (aka trainers). The group meets for about 20 hours over the span of five days in multiple two- to three-hour sessions per day. During these sessions, participants learn from their interactions with each other and through the exploration of their own and others' reactions, perceptions and behaviors. While general sessions with the full cohort provide conceptual material in formats that are more familiar to participants, the deepest and most important lessons occur in the T-group.

T-Groups are different than any other group in that they create an intentional "organizational vacuum" for the explicit purpose of drawing out central interpersonal issues. A T-group, by design, initially lacks three characteristics that are necessary in order for a group to function: 1) there is no formal leader (the faculty, when in the role of facilitators/trainers, will not play that role), 2) there is no set task (other than the amorphous assignment of "building a learning group"), and 3) there are no established rules of procedure.

How Learning Occurs

No group can be successful without some type of initiative/leadership, purpose, or norms regarding how people are expected to behave. In filling the vacuum that has been deliberately created in a T-group, group members feel internal pressure to reduce ambiguity and work out a myriad of issues such as:

- How can we get to know each other in meaningful ways? How can we connect across our differences?
- What are the topics that are most likely to provide learning (vs. just fill the air to pass time)? And how do we change topics when one isn't especially interesting?
- Can we share our feelings (of being bored, dissatisfied or bothered)?
- How can we learn to communicate more effectively and authentically?
- How much of ourselves should we allow others to see?
- How do we make decisions?

- What does it take to be accepted as a valued group member?
- How is influence shown, and how can each of us be influential?
- How do we reconcile member responsibility to the group and freedom of the individual?
- What is legitimate pressure vs. coercion?
- How can we challenge/be challenged without this becoming an unsafe place?
- How can we give and receive feedback that is helpful and not destructive?

As members struggle to resolve these and other issues, they start to have reactions to others and to what is occurring. The "learning laboratory" springs to life. Here is an example of how that might occur:

- The trainer might begin by saying, *"Our task is to build a learning laboratory where we can learn from each other. I don't know what each of you came to learn, so it is our collective responsibility to decide how we are going to operate."* And then lapse into silence. *"What should we do?"* asks Rob? "*What do you think would be helpful in building a learning group?*" the trainer responds. Joe suggests that people say where they are from. Jerry objects, "*We can read that in the roster*" he says somewhat curtly. Another moment of silence ensues. A second suggestion is made that it might be more meaningful to return to the prior evening's structured activity and more deeply explore why everyone came to this program and what each person hopes to get out of it. Several members answer until Jerry says, "*I feel pressured into responding and I am not ready for this yet.*"

- As time goes on, Mary is starting to resent the way that Joe seems to be taking over the group, but is unsure whether it is OK to show annoyance. Rachel is bothered by Jerry who seems to block most suggestions, but is not sure what to say because she had trouble with a few of those suggestions herself. Sam is resentful of the trainers who he thinks are manipulating the group, "know the answer" and are holding out on disclosing all they know. Joe has now proposed two ideas that were ignored entirely and is not feeling very valued by the group; he muses that this is often what happens to him back at work. Jane is feeling excited about what is happening but is afraid

that she would be seen as trying to ingratiate herself to the trainers were she to express her excitement.

Group members then begin to experiment with sharing their reactions and providing feedback to each other. As member involvement increases, it provides additional potential for learning. The feedback from others is not only on what is annoying or dysfunctional, but also on what is useful and appreciated. For example:

- Henry often introduces remarks with sensitivity and care that helps the group deal with conflict.
- Bob sees that Marie has grown somewhat silent and seems detached from the discussion so he invites her back in to the discussion.
- Conversation in the session has been dragging; Bill points that out and helps the group identify what would be a more meaningful discussion topic while also acknowledging Joe's efforts in having introduced the original topic.

As the week progresses a greater number of interpersonal exchanges occur among more of the participants. Group dynamics become more and more complex and participants learn, through experience, how to be more interpersonally effective and build a strong learning group. This results in increased awareness of the impact of different behaviors on different people, an incentive to test new behaviors (and thus broaden one's range) and the joint development of a venue that facilitates real time feedback as participants learn to name what is working and what is not.

Much of our behavior (certainly at work) is heavily influenced by our role, as a manager or employee, or by our function (e.g. Marketing, Finance, Production). In a T-group, these role demands are removed. What is most likely to emerge under those circumstances is a person's dominant style. Does Joe have a tendency to "take-over" without checking with others? Does Jerry often resist authority or others who step in to accomplish tasks in ambiguous situations? Is Mary conflict-avoidant? Does Bob often bring others who are feeling marginalized at work into the discussion and not realize what an asset he is to a group? These styles and preferences might not surface in a typical training program where participants can sit back with a workshop leader who sets the learning agenda and "runs the show". In a T-group participants develop their own learning goals and share the responsibility for collectively building a learning laboratory. That means

every group member is expected to contribute; it is hard for anyone to stand by and only play the observer role.

Though we generally know what we do and don't do well, we often don't understand the specific behaviors (or the impact of those behaviors) that underlie our strengths and weaknesses. Among the most important outcomes of a T-group experience is the feedback every member receives from fellow groups members. Often we learn there is a gap between what we intended when engaging in a particular behavior and the impact of that behavior on the other person.

Beyond specific feedback received, equally critical outcomes of a T-Group are learning how to raise difficult issues in a productive matter as well as connect effectively with others. For example:

- How to raise concerns with someone else in a way that is direct but not destructive.
- How to help someone else learn how to leverage their strengths.
- How to express one's needs and be fully heard.
- How to build a climate where interpersonal learning can occur.
- How to understand ourselves and what we do that helps us gain (or lose) influence
- How to communicate in a way that results in others feeling closer and more trusting of us (vs. distanced and not trusting.)

Why the T-group Pedagogy?

Most executives will freely admit that the interpersonal aspects of their job are far more challenging than those that are technical. Furthermore, Executive Search firms estimate that over 80% of leaders who are terminated lose their job as a result of insufficiently developed interpersonal skills. Even those who do not lose their job find their inability to become more interpersonally skilled career-limiting.

Of the many pedagogical approaches that exist (e.g. cases, role-plays, group projects and simulations), 45+ years of experience at Stanford's Business School has shown us that the T-group methodology is the best way to significantly broaden skills in building and maintaining highly functional relationships. T-groups are uniquely valuable because:

- <u>The focus is on what is happening in real time among the participants</u>. Even though the topics in a case discussion can be important, they are distant from what the participant faces *here* and *now* in the group. Case discussions also tend to explore issues at a conceptual level without addressing the feelings and consequences that arise. In a T-group, the participant has no choice but to address issues in the moment. For example: *I have to resolve this conflict with you, right now, in this room*. Or, *I have to figure out how to contribute to building a functional group*. Or, y*ou are really different from me in so many ways; what do we need from each other in order to find some way to connect so that we can work well together?*

- <u>Everyone is a witness to what has occurred</u>. This makes for a very rich and complete data set to be "mined" for learning. For example, Ted might be trying to make a connection with Harry that doesn't seem to be going anywhere. Others can share how they would react to Ted's approach (with Ted) and/or some might add that they, too, have had difficulty connecting with Harry. Ted and Harry will learn much, much more about how they are perceived and what behaviors help or hinder their ability to connect with others in this setting than they could in a case or a role-play.

- <u>The learning is "self-referential" and individualized</u>. Different participants have different learning needs. Sam has a tendency to over-control a group while Stan tends to hold back. Sally finds it difficult to disagree with others whereas Susan tends to focus on the negative and rarely comments on what others do well. Jerry tends to give way to authority whereas Jean is likely to fight it. Sooner or later in the group, situations will arise where members can find out what elements of their style are effective and what elements prevent them from achieving their goals. This is what we mean when we say learning in a T-group is "self-referential". Every participant sets and works his or her own learning goals.

- <u>They are learning laboratories in which participants can experiment</u>. People walk around with certain assumptions – "mental models" – about how the world works, what is and isn't effective and what we should and shouldn't do. Examples of mental models include: *"If I am upset at your behavior and say anything, it will damage our relationship." "If I admit a mistake you will think I am weak."* Or, *"I*

will lose credibility if I express any emotion." It often feels too risky to test whether these beliefs and assumptions are accurate in organizational (or even family) settings. Mental models that serve us early in our careers often cease to be as useful to us later, but leaders rarely have a venue to test and/or update these limiting assumptions. A T-group provides such a venue because of its inherent safety (given that participants in a group are selected such that they are never from the same organization and highly unlikely to ever work together.) Furthermore, the evolving nature of a T-group makes it an excellent site to test additional behaviors. "Additional" because we don't mean to imply the key to effective interactions lies in giving up "tried and true" ways of behaving entirely. There is a difference between continuing to use what has served us and relying *exclusively* on a few patterns of behavior. The goal is to expand our behavioral repertoire—this is what provides us with a broader interpersonal toolkit.

- <u>They help us answer: Why should anyone follow me?</u> It is too easy to be influenced by images of "successful" leaders as portrayed in the media. Case studies help us learn about leadership by studying *other* leaders. This can lead to feeling pressure to show a "presented self" that is far from whom we really are. The paper on the role of authenticity in effective leadership explores this topic in much greater depth. Here we simply want to point out something we consistently see in T-groups-- the more congruence, appropriate disclosure and authenticity members are willing to exhibit, the more attractive and powerful they become to others. This is both validating and freeing.

Getting the most out of a T-Group experience

Experiences by themselves are only experiences. Value occurs when one is able to distill learning from what has happened. In T-groups, learning occurs in four major ways.

1. **Learning from observation.** Observing how others behave can provide us with options we might not have considered before. Observing ourselves can be equally if not more useful. How did we respond (or not respond) and what do we stand to learn about ourselves from those choices?

2. **Learning from our reactions.** One especially important aspect of our response is rooted in emotion. emotional based. By noticing how we

feel in response to different events (what makes us comfortable/anxious/safe/happy/sad or scared), we can understand ourselves more fully.

3. **Learning from feedback.** This pertains both to the feedback we get from others as well as the feedback that we give to others. How we respond says something about us as well as about the other.

4. **Learning conceptually**. We can make more sense out of our experience by integrating it with readings, lectures, and class discussions.

We have listed conceptual learning fourth, deliberately implying that it is the least important of the four methods. Conceptual learning is important (which is why we have readings and short lectures) but it is limited. So are past experiences from other groups since they only provide partial answers about what *generally works*. Another gift in the unstructured nature of a T-group (in addition to presenting members with real interpersonal problems to resolve) is that each person's (and each group's) resolution will be somewhat unique based on the group's composition.

Tips for Working in T-Group

As mentioned at earlier, there will be times when you will feel frustrated and wonder whether you are making any progress during your T-group experience. In addition to the tips listed below, we suggest you consult the FAQs you will receive on Monday of the program as well as re-reading this paper a few days into the week, at which point some of what is written here is likely to be easier to understand.

- Learning in T-groups is maximized when participants take an experimental stance and "try things out" rather than "try to get it right."

- "Trying things out," means taking risks. Our experience tells us that there is direct correlation between risk taking and learning. Consider the learning that results from you taking a risk and saying something about the impact of someone else's behavior on you and the opportunity lost for you, them and the group by not taking that risk.

- The most productive learning comes from stating what is "here and now" in terms of your feelings and reactions (either self-directed or in response to other participants' behaviors) as opposed to "there and

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then", which is characterized by stories about people or situations "back home" that nobody else in the group know.

- Fuller self-expression of feelings and reactions enables people to connect better across differences.
- Since this is an inter-dependent learning situation, it is ok to surface issues even when you don't have answers.
- Each participant is responsible for his/her own learning and every member of the group shares equally in their responsibility for building a learning environment.
- Asking for and/or giving advice, in this context, is the **least productive** source of learning.

Conclusion

The extent to which learning is personalized in a T-group makes for a rich and exciting experience. Participants learn not only how to communicate more authentically, but also discover that doing so allows them to raise issues early and resolve them in a manner that benefits all parties. They learn how to build a supportive group where members can be more fully themselves and learn from each other. In spite of initial concerns some might feel about the feedback they receive, most people emerge with a wider range of self-expression and behavioral choices to draw upon when interacting with others.

Finally, one of the more exciting outcomes of a T-group is that members build, in less than twenty hours of meeting time, a high-trust, cohesive team. More often than not, this is a team in which there is more openness and support than members experience in any back-home work group. Participants thus learn not only what they need to do to become more interpersonally effective, but also gain first-hand knowledge regarding conditions required to create environments that foster higher-functioning and higher-performing teams.