

WHY NOT DEVELOP COMPETENCIES IN GROUP DYNAMICS?

2 November 2019

We all collaborate



Most of us work together with others, in ad hoc or longer lasting collaborations, in physical proximity or remote, with people of similar or very different cultural backgrounds. Yet in most organisations and companies, the prevailing mode of managing collaborative work remains through formal job descriptions and placement in an organigram. This creates a division of labour and a formal authority of decision-making but doesn't provide enough clarity on the needed collaboration. Performance remains assessed on an individual basis, largely ignoring the interdependencies between employees, and whether the environment (materially, but also the atmosphere) is enabling and stimulating, or not. Where support is offered, or sought, it is often in the form of individual coaching.

Other starting point, other organisational functioning



A countermovement sees this organisational functioning as belonging to the industrial era and no longer fit for the 21st century 'knowledge' (and 'gig') economy, nor acceptable to the new generations Y and Z. Prominent expressions and manifestations of this are Frédéric Laloux' "*Reinventing Organisations*", '*holacracy*' and '*agile*' ways of working. These are not fringe phenomena: such different ways of working and relating to each other have been taken up by social services providers, by tech and software companies (not only Google) but also by banks, producers of medical diagnostic equipment, manufacturers etc., often of large size, and including listed companies.

A central underlying difference lies in whether you live with a Theory X or Theory Y view of people in the workplace. In a Theory X view you believe that people naturally dislike work and are not motivated or responsible. Hence, they need tight oversight, with regular prompting, and rewards and punishment. In a Theory Y view, you believe that people see work as challenging and fulfilling, are inclined to be self-motivating and take responsibility, and will try to solve problems as they arise.

What is your basic assumption?

In practice, we all have examples of both. At GMI, we have worked with situations where the individual or organisation holding the central power (and responsibility) wanted others to step in and step up – yet met various degrees of hesitation. Organisations that have made the change from functional hierarchies to more agile ways of working, have seen that some will leave of their own accord or cannot adapt to an environment that invites, and requires, greater self-management. Broad experience however suggests that many workers are able and willing to more actively share responsibility, if the overall environment is conducive.

The unit of work however now is no longer the individual, but the workgroup or team. And attention is devoted not only to the task-related performance, but also the team dynamics and team atmosphere.

Understanding group and team dynamics



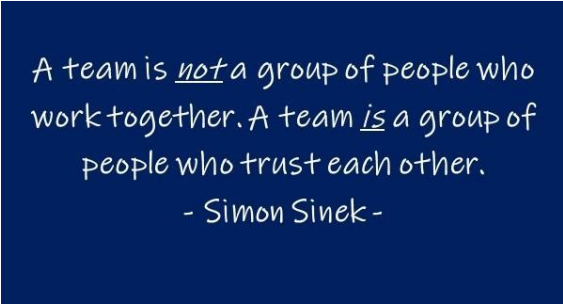
What is surprising then, is how little use is made of available insights and frameworks to understand group- and team dynamics, and how little investment there is in developing team-competencies. Surely, this is relevant for team leaders but also for all team members?

At GMI, we will facilitate group processes, but also, where needed or requested, provide teams and team leaders with such insights and competencies, so they can better self-manage. What may this involve?

Diagnosis of current team functioning: Various instruments are available to do this. Many start with questionnaires that individual team members fill out, after which a collective picture is created by putting all responses together. We call this a "*group selfie*". We use different ones, but enjoy the

[Being at Full Potential team assessment](#), and the dimensions of team attitudes and behaviours it highlights. The 'group selfie' becomes a basis for collective inquiry – which can already touch on sensitive issues, that the group finds it difficult to talk about. The inquiry will pay attention to whether the 'group selfie' is strongly influenced by a current situation (it is after all a snapshot-in-time) or reflects a deeper-seated pattern.

Learning about team-dynamics: The dynamics and atmosphere in workgroups and teams is largely shaped by other drivers or factors than formal job descriptions and placements in an organization. We now have more insights about dysfunctional and effective teams than Tuckman's "forming, storming, norming, performing" that can help us understand this. One core element is a 'psychologically safe environment'. Sometimes this is referred to as 'trust', but that begs the question whether trust is a precondition or an outcome of a psychologically safe environment?



A team is not a group of people who work together. A team is a group of people who trust each other.

- Simon Sinek -

An unduly neglected perspective on group dynamics is through the consideration of 'roles'. Group and team dynamics are shaped not only by positions and job descriptions: For effective functioning, teams, like other social relations, need different roles to be fulfilled. Some of these can correspond to a formal position e.g. the planner or the quality assurer. Problems can arise when formal roles are 'poorly occupied'. Rather than blaming the individual, a more constructive approach would be to explore how the role can be better occupied, or how else they can be fulfilled within the team.

Other roles are not and cannot be easily formalised. Thriving teams need members who bring bigger vision, who draw attention to risks, who draw attention to opportunities, who think creatively and out-of-the box, who finish to the level of detail, who invite attention to key stakeholders that are not in the room, who ensure adequate communication to everyone concerned; who remind the team about behavioural standards, who have specific expertise etc. From this perspective, every contribution is necessary and valued: setting up the meeting room or proofreading a document to be published is as important to the efficiency and effectiveness as bringing a vision.

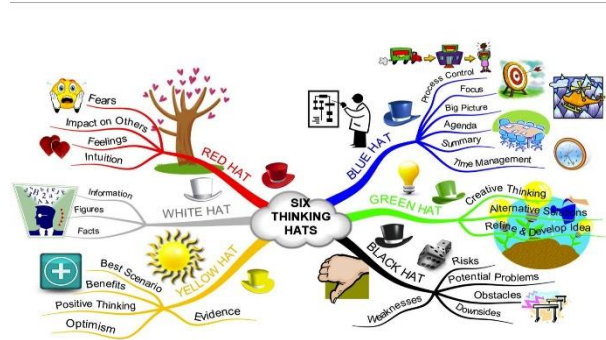
To illustrate with a personal example: Many years ago, one of us was deputy-director in a rapidly growing organisation working in a volatile environment. Some of the director's key contributions were a bold vision, confident out-of-the box innovation and masterful strategies. Three key roles as deputy-director, not written in the job description but necessary for the collective performance, were telling the director that the vision was excellent but would require 12 months and not 3 to implement and seeing the pathway to do so, ensuring effective internal communications, and maintaining internal coherence in a period of rapid expansion and change. Different individuals with the same job descriptions might have found themselves in different informal roles.

Conscious awareness of the different roles required for team performance can prevent individuals suffering from 'role fatigue'. Role fatigue occurs when the same person always must play the same role because the team does not recognise it as relevant for its collective performance, and team members don't share the role. A concrete example from our experience is a workgroup where it always was the same person who had to bring up the question of consistency in the decision-making. Some members of the work group started personalising the issue, making irritated side-comments when the same person raised it again. Understandably, the individual started experiencing 'role fatigue'. It took this workgroup time to recognise 'coherent decision-making' as a collective attention point, and for other members to take responsibility for raising it.

Different voices within a team can be one type of manifestation of different, informal or inner, roles. We can take De Bono's 'six thinking hats' or the theory of 'whole brain thinking' (disputed by some neuroscientists in its claims about the brain) as inspiration to recognise and listen for different 'voices' in a team conversation. Some voices will focus on facts, figures and evidence, others on processes and procedures, yet others on the human side of things. A conscious understanding of team-dynamics recognises that each is a relevant and valuable contribution and that all merit being listened to. In very mature teams, each member may take up the voice that seems missing: sometimes the experimental,

out-of-the box one, another time the procedural and planning one. Individuals are not locked into a particular voice, there is no role fatigue and no unnecessary personalising because all 'voices' are recognised as valuable to the team performance.

'Group-think' can happen. The internal benefit is that it feeds a sense of comfort and belonging, as there are shared perspectives and opinions, which makes agreement easier to achieve. Another group we worked with for example, was responsible for assessing proposed actions. It risked sliding into 'group-think': If the first member expressed a largely critical assessment, others tended to follow confirming or adding negative points. It required an explicit invitation to group members to express both positive appreciation and points of concern or critique, to counterbalance this tendency.



In short, well researched and tested insights exist about group and team dynamics, that we can learn about. We can then use these to better anticipate and understand such dynamics, many of which happen below the surface of formal positions and procedures. That is a first step to more pro-actively and intentionally work on group and team dynamics.

Four dimensions of emotional intelligence



A positive group and team atmosphere or working culture requires growth in each member's emotional intelligence. We need to be good at what we do, but also at how we do it together: '*savoir faire et savoir être*' as it is put so well in French. The quality of our doing (together) is influenced by the quality of our being (together).

Spend some time hanging out at the coffee-machine, with the smokers outside, or listening in to the 'corridor talk' and you get some impression of the atmosphere in a group. Sadly, in many places it is not that positive. Currently, many more media reports come out about the prevalence of sexual harassment and sometimes even abuse, bullying and intimidation in the workplace. Including in the not-for-profit sector. Aggressively competitive behaviours driven by greed and ambition in which fellow-workers are intentionally put down or frustrated in their work, are evidently destructive of any collaborative spirit. There are less obvious negative and toxic behaviours: rolling the eyes in a meeting when a colleague raises something that you disagree with or being busy on your mobile phone when a colleague talks to you, are small signals of disrespect in daily behaviour. These impact on the overall atmosphere. Some of these are deliberate and have malicious intent. But many of them result from limited emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills – and cross-cultural competencies. Fortunately, this can be learned.



Various exercises, and individual coaching or mentoring, can foster greater self-awareness, e.g. of our instinctive reactions when confronted with tension or conflict, with criticism, with uncertainty; of our preferred communication style; of our preferred role in a collective effort; of the signals our body sends; of what triggers us into unhelpful behaviours (to others but also to ourselves); of unconscious cultural assumptions. It can help us become attentive to our ability to listen (are we really listening or already mentally formulating our reply?), and to the choice of words, tone and timing when we raise a difficult issue. Greater self-awareness allows greater self-management, a greater ability to not react impulsively to an uncomfortable situation but respond more wisely.

Group and team competencies



With greater self-awareness and better self-management, and a more conscious understanding of what shapes team dynamics and what highly performing teams need, the team is in a better position to self-manage and self-govern. Rather than relying only on procedures and ground rules to shape the interaction, with the hierarchy to enforce them if needed,

teams can now explore the richer question: *'How do we want to be together?'* Each member can first reflect on: *'What do I need from my colleagues to be able to do my work efficiently and effectively?'* *'What do I commit to my colleagues so they can do their work efficiently and effectively?'* *'What do I need from my colleagues to experience a motivating environment that encourages me to grow?'* *'What do I commit to my colleagues so that they experience such environment?'* Working through this individually and then together, team members can develop a collectively owned *'team agreement'*, to which they hold each other accountable – without having to invoke a formal authority.

Such mature workgroup and team-cultures do not rely exclusively on policies, rules and threats of sanctions by a formal authority to prevent and stop negative behaviours. Behavioural expectations are first and foremost grounded in the positive soil of team agreements, with shared responsibility and internal accountability. This doesn't become groupthink or negative 'bonding' (conformity to the group because we want to be accepted and belong) because diversity is understood to be a source of strength, not weakness.

Team members also develop a better 'eye' for team dynamics: They have learned to be attentive to group dynamics, whether observing it or being part of it, and to ask questions such as: *"What is happening here?"*, *"Does this bring out the best in us as a team?"* and *"How does this serve our purpose?"* without prejudice or judgement, but as an invitation for the group to reflect and take collective responsibility.

Changes in team membership create changes in the dynamics and role contributions. Remaining team members must engage with newcomers on their existing team agreements and the behavioural expectations they embody. Whether they are accepted or recreated with some changes, the purpose is to maintain shared ownership and active responsibility. Consider the example of an informal group that over some years acted as steering committee for a longer-term change process for. One of the key people left and was replaced by someone with a very different style. To the existing members, who had worked very collegially, the new person came across as too pushy and -intentionally or not- too dominant. It is not that easy to find the approach and words to bring this up with the new team member. A more explicitly articulated team agreement about how the team wants to be and work together, would have helped. The reality of changes in composition invites a team to *consider team competencies*, also at the interpersonal level, in the recruitment and selection of new members.

Personal growth in service of the team



Helping a group that is struggling with its own functioning and self-management, requires further development of personal confidence and competencies - all the more so if you are part of that group. It may involve making the situational choice whether to engage directly or support someone else to do so who might be better placed; it means having the skill to identify the right moment, find the right words and tone, and be personally-centred well enough to avoid conflicting body-language. Mindfulness practice can be helpful. Such self-management and interpersonal skills require a good level of comfort with emotions, even when they run strong. That allows us to maintain calm when emotions are vented -also in our direction- because such 'getting it out' is often needed before someone is able again to hear and listen. What used to be avoided as *'difficult conversations'*, now becomes a more normal situation that invites *'courageous conversations'* – something that individually and collectively we no longer shy away from, and that make us stronger.

And of course, these competencies will also serve you well out-of-the office, for example in the youth or sports-club you belong to, in relations with your neighbours, and in your family.

GMI is a value-based and purpose-driven provider of services and advice. We have areas of thematic expertise, but also work actively and explicitly on collaborative abilities, within and between teams or work groups, within and between organisations, and between organisations and social groups. We have extensive experience with facilitating group work and multi-stakeholder processes, and draw on various sources, among them systems-thinking, partnership brokering, Being at Full Potential, Organisational and Relationship Systems Coaching.

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