

Boundary Issues in Teams and Workgroups

by John Bernard Harris

Adapting a phrase of Peter Philippon's [Topics Vol. 2 No. 1, p. 13], the basic thing about a Gestalt approach to team-building with teams and other work groups is that it explores the team's processes of contacting/withdrawing and of awareness at a number of important contact boundaries.

These boundaries exist at different levels of group interaction. At each end of the contact relationship we have one of the following: individual team members, pairings and other larger sub-groupings, the team-as-a-whole and the team's working environment - which includes physical surroundings, the actual work practices, and other people such as service users. Add to this, the facilitator(s) and her interaction with the team, and we can see that the picture is enormously complicated, with many different boundaries operating at the same time.

At each boundary, team members are presented - both at work and in the team-building situation - with a range of choices, or contact possibilities. I see these as potentially of two kinds: I/we can act in ways which are creative or restrictive. Creative responses open up further possibilities for good and nourishing contact between team members; they improve communication and satisfaction levels. Restrictive responses are often the habitual ones both for individuals and for teams - playing the old familiar records - and, though they often feel safe because we are used to them, they are essentially avoidances of contact, and are unlikely produce anything new.

At each boundary, the range of choices presents us with on-going dilemmas for action. So in terms of the individual-team boundary, the dilemmas are about how I survive and thrive as a team member, just one of many. Some individuals may then focus on issues of inclusion/exclusion, and the question is: "How can I be seen and valued as a worker by other team members and the team as a whole?". Others may bring other interpersonal needs to the forming of 'their' particular dilemma, such as the need to control/be controlled; or to be close/distant [Schutz 1968].

A simple exercise which highlights this issue of 'being seen' involves asking team members to group themselves with others who share the same job description, and produce a poster which advertises themselves, stating what they do in their job, what they don't do, and what their group motto is. These can then be presented to the whole team.

Within teams, there are often important sub-groupings between people who do different kinds of work. The boundaries between these can also be explored by a continuation of the above exercise. The suggestion is: "Staying in your workgroups initially, decide on some things you want from other groups or individuals, and find a way to present them to those concerned". This is presented by the facilitator as the start of a two-way communication and negotiation process. Some ground rules, and information about the process of negotiation may be usefully presented and left available on flip-charts throughout; but the exact nature of interactions can be left to emerge spontaneously.

Teams in which there is poor communication will need to take this exercise very slowly; they need to have time in their group to get a sense of themselves as a group, and what they want. Once ready to 'move out', they are likely as individuals and groups to go into their habitual responses: "I went to see Maggie, but she was talking to another group. I suppose we'll have to forget about her". Giving up in this way may be accompanied by 'negative' feelings of resentment or despair, and is a restrictive response to (temporary) environmental frustration. The facilitator may wish to indicate that other ways of making contact are possible: making an appointment to see Maggie; going back to her and making sure she understands how important the meeting is, and so on. When there's a will...

An important feature of such an exercise is making time to reflect upon and process what has happened, possibly during, and certainly at the end of the process. In this review process, team members share information and observations and the facilitator helps draw out the learning and formulate ways of continuing the process, now or at a later date.

In team-building, the boundary between the team and the facilitator is potentially a major source of learning for the team. In the way she acts and in what she says, the facilitator models alternative ways of being and behaving - assertiveness rather than aggressiveness, democratic rather than authoritarian leadership, for example. Her response to events will be closely scrutinised. When criticised, will she become defensive? Can she share feelings without crumbling?

In addition to this modelling role the facilitator has an important practical task, which also has a strong symbolic meaning: she 'holds the boundaries' of the group. One way of doing this is by setting clear ground rules which have the potential to create an environment in which people feel safe enough to experiment. Sometimes she will demonstrate this role by dealing firmly with outside 'interruptions' - by supporting a team member in refusing to be called to the telephone while the team-building is in process, for example.

In some chaotic teams this boundary-holding role is especially crucial. If this 'outer boundary' is experienced as secure, then some of the inner boundaries within the team can be more easily relaxed and explored.

As a team-builder working on both process and task issues, I try to keep in mind the many different boundaries that are in operation, and collect information from the team before and during the event which will give me some clue which ones need most attention on the day. I use the contact-withdrawal cycle to give me some idea of the stage of development the team are at in regard to contact at that boundary, and help them to identify existing restrictive solutions, and find new, creative ones. I use, as far as possible, the team's here-and-now interactions at the different boundaries, working with what happens from moment to moment.

As with work with individual clients, work with groups and teams has a simply stated theme: we are working to improve contact in on-going relationships of different kinds. But the complexities of group life generate constant challenges in the practical work of facilitating change for individuals, sub-groups and the team as a whole. It's hard work; but I love it.

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References

W. Schutz, 1968 , Joy (Grove Press)