

Working with Large Groups and Teams

Introduction: The Department

Some months ago a colleague and I facilitated an 'away day' with a group of 41 people. They all work for a further education institute, and together form a single Department which I will call 'Student Services'. The Student Services Department has a single line manager, and consists of a number of different individuals and teams with a collective responsibility for different aspects of student welfare at the college. They include development officers, nurses, counsellors, nursery staff and administration staff. The Department's members are based in several work locations on two main college sites several miles apart.

It is clear from this description that this group cannot be considered a team in the usual sense of the word: "a group of people who rely on each other to get work done". This definition implies face-to-face, day-to-day contact; but what we have here is a large-ish group of people, some of whom do work closely with others in this way, others of whom are much more loosely linked in terms of work and other relationships.

Our brief for the day, discussed beforehand with the Department manager, was twofold: to help people get to know each other better; and to do some work on teams and teambuilding of which they could make some practical use. We also learned that they had met as a group once before, and enjoyed the experience; naturally, they again wanted to have fun on their day out together.

If this large group is not a traditional team, how do we set about teambuilding with them? Like most groupworkers, much of my experience and training has been in work with much smaller groups, of between 5 and 15 people, and it's by no means obvious that the ideas and methods that work with a group of 8 will work with a group of 41. Indeed, it seems intuitively obvious that the issues and problems faced by a facilitator are quite different, even if we are not sure how exactly.

How do we start the day, for example? With a small group, we might sit them down in a circle, and have a round of names and introductions. But 41 people would make a very large and cumbersome circle. First, it would take the best part of an hour to do introductions; by which time everyone would be quite fed up with waiting to start. Second, it is actually quite difficult to hear and see people across the room. Third, sitting down removes one useful possibility at the start of a group: physical movement and more active interaction between people.

So, when you have 41 people who wish to meet and get to know one another, sitting them down in a circle is not necessarily the best way to do it (and this applies even more if the group is even larger - say, 150 people). So we decide instead to use a 'greeting' exercise and suggest that everyone get up, move around and greet everyone else in whatever way seems appropriate (including sharing names), allowing ten minutes for this to happen. This enables everyone to move about and make contact actively with others, as colleagues or strangers. This 'starter' also fulfils two aspects of our original brief: everyone gets to make some face-to-face contact and share names with everyone else, however briefly; and they have fun chasing after each other and trying to remember who they have missed out!

Developing a New Paradigm

I want now to talk more generally about working with larger groups, before

moving back to describe the rest of the day. In order to work fruitfully with larger groups, it is necessary for me to have some kind of theoretical underpinning for my practice. This is provided first by Gestalt Therapy theory, which has a number of emphases especially relevant here - for instance, field theory, and boundary work; and second by the ideas on groups which Peter Philippon and I have developed over the years [Philippon & Harris 1992]. Let me briefly outline them here.

Our ideas have developed from participation in various large group experiments over the last fifteen years. Our experiences have led us to question some of the conventional wisdom about group dynamics, the theory and practice of which has largely been developed in relation to 'small, closed groups' (we call them 'circle' groups, for short). A way of thinking about groups and group processes has developed, which has the characteristics of a *paradigm*, in the sense of Thomas Kuhn [Kuhn 1970]. A paradigm is, in essence, a way of looking at the universe - or the bit of it that interests us. It not only offers us definitions of key terms, but a particular way of structuring and viewing the field in question. From within the paradigm, I not only tend to give certain sorts of answers to group problems; but, more profoundly, I pose the questions in certain sorts of ways. In Gestalt terms, a paradigm structures the field in certain ways. From within the paradigm, with that particular pair of tinted spectacles on, 'non-paradigm' phenomena are non-existent, meaningless or false.

Consider, for example, the question: "Does it matter if we don't know who is in or out of the group?". This doesn't arise in circle groups: we always know who is a member, and what the criteria are. But now consider the Department. Here the issues of membership become more complex - such a group is inherently fuzzy-edged - and also less crucially important.

The old paradigm, then, is largely based on the idea of small, closed groups. On this paradigm a group (or team):

- ideally has between 3 and 15 members;
- consists of people who are spatially adjacent (e.g. sit in a circle);
- often meets in a setting with clear and semi-permeable physical boundaries (a room);
- has things arranged so that everyone can witness all that goes on (in a circle);
- makes a sharp distinction between members and non-members;
- has a single, shared task;
- develops in a regular and predictable way over time (e.g. the stages of group development);
- ultimately seeks cohesion and intimacy (confluence);
- only exists when it is meeting; and so on.

If I now consider a more natural group such as the Department, it seems plain that I cannot - on this paradigm - consider them a group/team. Here I note:

- * Many people here do not know each other at all, or well, and most do

not usually physically meet in the course of their work, though some communicate *via* the telephone, fax, letter computer or memo.

* There is no single shared work task, but a wide variety of sometimes very different ones. Furthermore, there may be no overall, shared view on what the various tasks are.

* Membership of this large group is not fixed - people will come and go, with varying effects on the whole.

* There are many different kinds of relations involved in their interactions: some are colleagues, friends, some are related, some share leisure activities - and any combination of the above.

* What goes on in work (let alone in formal work meetings) is only a small part of the overall team process which is most usefully regarded as carrying on continuously, and not just 9-5.

* Finally, as I look at them, I am far more conscious of the many *differences* between them as people and as workers, than of similarities. To aim for 'group cohesion' here would be ridiculous.

It is at this point that the 'new paradigm' can be stated. This is based primarily on the idea of *communication*, and on it a group is defined as:

"any collection of people who are aware of the possibility of inter-communication"

Now this is a broad definition, and allows us to regard as a group all sorts of things that would not normally be regarded as such. This Department, for example...

Working from the new paradigm, I am now aware of other features of the 'gestalt' of this large group. First, there are many different kinds of formal and informal sub-groupings in existence. There are work teams, friendship groups and so on. Some of these groupings are 'visible', known to others; some are not. Second, I know that the overall process of the section is extremely complex, and will be affected by both individuals and the various sub-groups mentioned above, as well as by the 'external environment' - the college, students, management decisions, the state of the nation etc.

So what interests me, and lays down guidelines for our day's work with the Department are questions such as:

- Who know whom here; how do people generally communicate (or not)?
- How do the physical/spatial relationships in and between workplaces affect this?
- What are the various sub-groupings, and who is in/out of which group? What feelings does this produce?
- What inter-group dynamics are in operation?
- Which groups do people primarily identify with - and who is excluded (defined as an 'outsider') in this process?
- What is the nature of the boundary between the Department and the rest of the world - other college departments, agencies etc.?

Developing the Day

Having outlined some of the theoretical ideas I bring to my facilitation, I now return to my account of the day. After the opening greeting exercise, a lot of lively energy has been created. While people are on their feet, we move into another old favourite, the 'swimming pool' exercise [Harris 1994] This is another exercise which involves movement, and continues the process of sharing information, in this case about how people feel about the day.

We decide that it is useful for everyone to have a rest and take further stock of who is here, and institute a quick round in which everyone says their name and where they work. We also ask them to mention something in their lives which currently excites or interests them.

With a group of this kind, our (new paradigm) sense is that they will find it useful to get some sense of how they currently function as a Department by exploring existing communication and relationship patterns at work. These are likely to be based on the existing working teams. So we ask people to get into their primary working group, and give the groups 15 minutes to devise a two minute presentation in any form or medium they want for the whole Department which makes a statement about their work - what it is, how they feel about it etc.

Not only is everyone soon busy with this task, but they can also see (unusually) others working at it too in the spacious room which we insisted on for the day. Some are excited and playful; others serious and competitive, trying to see 'how they are doing it'. Not everyone is working in a sub-team; some people work on their own; others are members of more than one sub-group and I tell them to choose one to stay with one, or move about, as they wish. The presentations are varied - including posters, songs and dramas - and extremely lively and amusing. Each receives loud applause. My colleague and I conclude proceedings by performing a little song and dance we have just concocted - "You say 'either, I say 'either'..."".

Before the break, we consult with the Department as to where they want to go from here. We had originally planned to do input and exercises related to team-building; but we have had second thoughts, based on our observation (which we share) that if we do that, they will continue to stay in their sub-teams for most of this work. Our sense is that they have most energy for continuing to explore the dynamics of the whole group in some way. So we offer them an alternative: an exercise (which we have yet to devise) which will instead explore the inter-group rather than intra-group dynamics of the sub-groupings. This appeals to them much more - they are seemingly very interested in actively considering the question of in what sense the whole Department is a team, and if so what kind of team.

During the break, we devise an exercise. This involves first, each sub-group reforming and then finding some way to represent their team and its relations to other teams in the Department. Then, the whole Department must together produce a map or picture which combines each team's view. The time allowed is one hour, with a half-hour review at the end. Any medium or material available can be used - I have made sure to bring adequate supplies of paper, pens, scissors, tape etc. We extend the space available to include some landing space outside the main room, and (as it is a sunny day) some lawn outside the hotel.

Again, a fascinating and varied scenario unfolds. We wander round noticing how the half-dozen groups are working; how they see the task; how (if) leadership is emerging; whether, when and how they interact with other groups. It is not until fifty minutes have passed that a couple of people

become mindful of the whole group task and try to 'bring it all together' - with mixed results. Eventually, however, the whole Department ends up sitting in a (rough) circle. Someone finds a ball of string, and this is passed round the circle, so that each person is holding on to a part of the string. For us, as observers, this is somehow powerfully symbolic - though exactly what it symbolises is not yet clear!

During the review, the nature of the interaction (or lack of it) between groups, and how people felt about this, is explored. People share observations and feelings, illustrating different perspectives and interests. Some of these differences continue to be graphically illustrated during the review in non-verbal ways. For instance, some people grasp tightly to their bit of the string as they sit or talk; others attach it loosely to their chair or just drop it. When the review finishes, some are determined to cut off and keep their bit of string; others don't care and head off to lunch.

We have a long and enjoyable lunch - after all, their primary task of mixing and getting to know each other better will be continuing just as well at lunch as in 'formal' session. After lunch, various sub-teams take the opportunity to publicly share news about a college re-organisation and how it affects them, and there is general discussion of what is going on and feelings about it. We then go, at their request, into a traditional feature of 'away-days' for them, a hat contest, which they enter with relish and creativity. Everyone gets a prize, awarded by us.

As we move to the close, I have a strong sense that something is missing in terms of the format of the day; and then realise in discussion with my co-worker what it is. The team have spent the day mostly in their everyday work groups (and the large 'plenary' group), and so haven't had a chance to escape from these habitual groupings and mix themselves up a bit as an experiment. To enable this, we decide to ask them review the day and what has been learned by forming 'stranger' groups - small groups of people who *don't* normally work together and probably don't therefore know each other well. We ask them not to rush into groups, but to take their time in forming them, being aware of and discussing the choice-process as they go along. Then, once formed, the first task of the group is to discuss that process, getting (we hope) some insight into how Department members relate to 'strangers', before getting on with the review of the day.

In the final review, the 'new' groups feed back their observations on this process; and then on the day as a whole. From both sets of observations some of their processes as a large group are now much clearer - for instance, some people are keen to meet others and to improve communication; others less so. The former start talking about making plans to visit other working places, set up 'social' meetings and so on. Various plans are mooted to achieve this. As the plans are enthusiastically developed, members of the other group also begin to put in their twopenn'oth; they are less keen on increasing inter-Departmental communication, seeing this as 'unnecessary', for various reasons.

After discussion, a broad consensus is reached that either option is OK. Those who want to socialise and mix more can do so, and those who don't, won't, and will stay much as they have been. Summarising the debate, we suggest (to many nods from the floor) that the Department is richer precisely because of its diversity on this (and other) issues. Individuals and sub-teams value their overall identity; but wish to develop themselves as they choose within that broad working and administrative framework. Some very positive feedback about how much they have enjoyed the day follows; and on that positive note we end.

Conclusions

The 'New Paradigm' for groupwork that we have been developing is far more than a set of ideas, and an abstract definition of 'group'. It has a practical value, as I hope this article demonstrates, by providing a theoretical framework which begins by posing new questions about the nature of the larger group or team; and then goes on to suggest practical ways of working with it. Within the new paradigm, we bring different perspectives on what is of interest to group members which stress *live* issues of sub-group identity, inter-group activity, group boundaries and so on. These are the issues that actually concern people when they consider themselves in the context of larger groups. The structures and exercises we devise (often spontaneously) in working with larger groups are aimed at allowing them to become more aware of the nature of their existing patterns of communication. The emphasis is not usually 'how do we become more of a team?' (old paradigm), but 'how do we currently function as a large group?', on exploring *what is*, in all its conflicting richness and diversity. Then, if they choose, they can experiment with new approaches, both as individuals and sub-groups. They create, in short, a rich and stimulating 'open learning format'¹ for the team.

The structures and exercises we use to achieve these goals are based on 'the Street' [Philipsson & Harris 1992]. Typically they:

- (i) Use a large and varied spatial boundary, which involves a main room, and also other adjacent spaces;
- (ii) Have a time boundary, and a period for process review at the end of it;
- (iii) They may, or may not have a task or theme, depending on circumstances;
- (iv) They include a wide range of resources in the form of pens, paper etc.;

Within the agreed boundaries, participants are free to interact as they wish. They may stay on their own, interact with others or experiment with both. They may play or be serious - often they do both at the same time. Some enjoy the relative lack of structure; some react and create temporary structures of their own. Issues such as leadership and authority, inclusion and exclusion, can all be explored, knowingly or unknowingly.

What is by now obvious, I hope, is that such exercises more closely reflect the circumstances of everyday life, in which conditions are far more fluid than in 'circle' groups, and personal and social boundaries are constantly changing and shifting, sometimes unpredictably. In short, there is constant interaction, and even when people are trying not to interact, this is part of the overall process. Using such exercises with large groups is a rich source of instruction for them, and seldom fails to create a sense of new possibilities which they can exploit as they choose back in the workplace.

Footnote

1. Though I am primarily talking about team-building with larger groups here, the 'Gestalt Open Learning Format' (as I call it) is capable of being used with large and small groups as a training tool. I have run 'themed' workshops (one over two days) in which there was no pre-prepared structure. In this format group members agree to work together to learn as much as they can about the chosen topic, and decide not only the detailed content of the workshop, but the means by which the group will try to achieve their individual and collective learning goals. This way of learning has two great advantages: it caters for a wide range of learning styles, and allows participants to learn experientially not just about the

workshop topic, but about their process of 'learning to learn' around the theme.

References:

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