
AN APPLICATION OF THE SENSITIVITY CYCLE TO ORGANIZATIONAL GROUPS

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Ron Kurtz's Sensitivity Cycle is a powerful model for understanding the behavior of individuals (Kurtz 1983). I have enlarged his model so it begins to encompass some optimum behaviors of groups. I call this enlarged version the Holistic Group Model. My colleagues and I have found the Sensitivity Cycle and the Holistic Group Model to be very helpful in working with groups in organizations. (I would like to thank in particular Craig Beasley for his help in bringing these ideas to the workplace). In this article, I will describe the Holistic Group Model and discuss some of its practical applications.

My colleagues and I have used the Holistic Group Model primarily with groups of employees brought together for two-day "teambuilding" group process sessions. Each group has represented a diagonal slice of the organization and has included both management and union employees. For many participants the teambuilding sessions were their first ever "group" experiences. With this mix of people the Holistic Group Model proved very helpful in elucidating group behavior and stimulating discussion. Our experience suggest that the Sensitivity Cycle/Holistic Group Model could be useful in working with other types of client groups as well.

In what follows I will develop the Holistic Group Model much as I would present it to a

client group.

I usually start by asking group members to think of the most positive group experience they have ever had (e.g., the most effective and satisfying sports team, work crew, social service group). Then I ask them to describe what made that group or team so good. I record on a flipchart all the adjectives/qualities they give me. Then I say that I will give them a model that will be one good way of summing up all their descriptions of what makes a group satisfying and effective. (One indication of the validity of the model is that typically most of the descriptors supplied by the group can be related, sometimes word-for-word, to the model.)

Next, I talk about individual behavior. I present the Sensitivity Cycle. (For a detailed description of the Sensitivity Cycle, see: Kurtz, 1983). I've modified Kurtz's depiction slightly by renaming two of the stages. "Awareness" replaces "Clarity" and "Action" replaces "Effectiveness". I've done this for two reasons. First, the new words are equivalent expressions which may have more pragmatic appeal to business clients and, second, the alliteration and rhyming in the new set of words aids memory (See Figure 1).

As an example of the Cycle, consider the

simple act of drinking a glass of water. First, one feels thirsty. This is Awareness. Next, one gets a glass and fills it with water and drinks. This is Action. Then, the thirst is quenched - Satisfaction. Next comes a latency period in which the thirst has faded from the forefront of consciousness (In gestalt terms: the gestalt has closed) and there exists a fertile void in which the next awareness (answering the phone, getting back to work, etc.) has room to emerge. This is Relaxation.

Everyone flows through cycles within cycles. For example, a person who builds his or her own house flows through a long period cycle of Awareness ("I want a new house"), Action (building the house), Satisfaction ("The house is finished!"), and Relaxation (housewarming party, "unwinding").

Within this cycle are several medium period cycles associated with erecting each wall: Awareness ("the wall must go here"), Action (erect studs, hammer nails), Satisfaction (step back, admire work), and Relaxation (sip cold beer).

Within each of these cycles in turn are many very-short period cycles associated with driving each nail.

In explaining the Cycle to a business audience, I often use the analogy of a four-stroke engine. The cycle of a four-stroke engine goes: Intake, Compression, Power, and Exhaust. Only one of the strokes actually produces power. Just so in the Sensitivity Cycle. Only one phase produces results ("Action") but the results won't keep coming without the other three phases.

After presenting the Cycle of individual behavior and discussing it with the group, I present the following ideas about the Cycle as it pertains to groups:

1. Every member of a group will cycle through these phases during his/her participation in the group. Furthermore,
2. the group as a unit will cycle through these phases. Yet,
3. the group's cycle will sometimes not

coincide with individual cycles, (and this has implications about levels of participation). And, most importantly,

4. to facilitate group functioning the group can structure itself so as to help itself and its members move effectively through their respective cycles.

5. This structure can be diagrammed as in Figure 2, where the inner ring represents the cycle and the outer ring represents the structure. I'll discuss the structure in more detail in a moment. The basic principle underlying the structure is that:

At each phase of the cycle certain conditions will facilitate or enable movement to the next phase of the cycle: Safety/Trust facilitates Awareness. Empowerment facilitates Action. Recognition facilitates Satisfaction. And Permission facilitates Relaxation.

6. A group existing in an environment of Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition and Permission will tend to be an effective group. The Safety/Trust etc. can come from both the group's own normative behavior and from outside the group.

In the following discussion I'll concentrate on the group aspects of Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition, and Permission. Each of these can also be created internally by the individual for him or her self. But for optimum group functioning the group as a whole must develop a working environment of Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition, and Permission.

SAFETY/TRUST is the entry point into the cycle. When a new group forms, the question underlying all activity is "How safe is it for me to be here?" Behavior starts out polite and formalized. People cluster with friends and avoid strangers. Small risks are taken to test the waters. As trust builds, more true communication starts to happen. (Weber, 1982). Trust is so fundamental that it is the first crisis that the newborn has to resolve on the road to maturity (Erikson, 1963). (See also Ron Kurtz's discussion of Safety in Kurtz, 1983.)

A sense of safety promotes trust and trust

promotes awareness. This is why: Awareness when it is blocked, gets blocked by defense mechanisms: avoidance, denial, projection, displacement, rationalization, etc. Defense mechanisms are energized by fear, real or imagined. Building trust lowers fear which reduces the strength of defense mechanisms which in turn increases the opportunity for awareness. (Building trust also increases the energy available for awareness because less energy is tied up in maintaining the defense mechanisms.)

To help build safety/trust in our teambuilding groups my colleagues and I usually begin by asking group members to pair up with someone they don't know and get to know that person and then to introduce their partner to the group. We also often employ the common O.D. (organization development) technique of asking the group at the start of the session to come up with their own ground rules or "conditions for success" for the session. We record these conditions on flipchart paper and post them on the wall for the duration of the session. By the time we present the model, we have already recorded "conditions for success" for the group so we can use the "conditions" as a practical example of a way to start developing safety/trust.

Action is not possible without EMPOWERMENT to act. How does the group empower or disempower its members and itself? These are key questions. In a work group, empowerment can come from authority being commensurate with responsibility. It can come from having the appropriate skills or receiving the appropriate training. It can come from a group norm of members generating at least two possible solutions for every problem they come up with.

Empowerment is often a core issue for organizational groups. One technique for helping a group work through this issue is called Power Mapping, developed by my colleague Mary Miura and myself. Power Mapping consists of drawing a large circle on a flipchart pad and telling the group that this circle represents "all the power there is" in the system (unit, division, project, company, etc.), then giving the group the task of reaching a consensus on the size of

circle that would represent the group's power within the big circle, and the task of drawing that inner circle. Power Mapping brings out a lot of good discussion. Power Mapping takes a while to process so we don't introduce it when presenting the Model. It often seems most appropriate on the second day of a two-day teambuilding session. In our experience Power Mapping often results in the group empowering itself.

RECOGNITION enables satisfaction to occur. Effective groups make use of this fact. Peters and Waterman report that "the systems in excellent companies are not only designed to produce lots of winners; they are constructed to celebrate the winning once it occurs" (Peters and Waterman, 1982, p.58).

In working with groups one can look at group norms about recognition. How does the group reward success? How does it celebrate? Does it celebrate at all? Is recognition from this group an unmitigated satisfaction? Or do poor communications, jealousies, and fear promote "warm pricklies" and "cold fuzzies" - mixed messages of recognition and attack. ("Congratulations, you succeeded - for once.")

In our teambuilding groups we ask each member to tell the group how he/she likes to have his/her contributions recognized. We ask the group to respond by giving that member a round of applause. This always seems a bit awkward and artificial at first, but it makes the point. Plus, group members learn a lot about each other. Here again we do not interrupt the presentation of the Model for this exercise.

Relaxation can't happen without PERMISSION to relax. Otherwise, relaxation becomes guilt-ridden. Going on vacations, going for walks, and staring into space for a few minutes from time to time should be OK. What behaviors do the group norms support? Is humor encouraged or discouraged?

One group exercise we use in connection with Permission is massage. We teach group members how to give each other arm massages. For most people an arm massage is the least threatening form of massage. In most business settings being told that it's all right to give an arm massage represents a

wildly extravagant form of permission. Connecting massage with a theoretical model starts to heal the mind-body split. People love it. We usually follow the massage with a break so we can demonstrate another form of permission.

After explaining the conditions of Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition, and Permission, I point out that a common problem is short-circuiting the cycle by shuttling back and forth between Awareness and Action and leaving out Satisfaction and Relaxation. The Awareness-Action loop represents the "Burnout Cycle".

The presentation of the cycle of individual behavior and particularly of the "Burnout Cycle" usually stimulates a valuable discussion among group members. Typically they talk about what happens for them at their workplace and about which conditions are missing - Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition, and/or Permission.

The last piece of the Holistic Group Model is, metaphorically, the axle around which the cycle revolves. This axle is Purpose. (See Figure 3.)

A group is effective if it is both "productive" at its task (winning a game, running a household, making a product, etc.) and a satisfying life experience for its members (fun, growthful, etc.) Effective groups have a sense of purpose. They cycle through the basic functions necessary to fulfill their purpose without getting stuck or causing pain for their members.

Abraham Maslow suggests that people are most satisfied when they are "self-actualizing" (Maslow, 1968). Another way of saying this is that people are happiest when they are doing what they are here to do; when they are expressing or manifesting their purpose in life. Kurt Wright makes a useful distinction between goal and purpose and gives good working definitions of these terms. He says that a goal is "what I'm going to do" and a purpose is "why I'm doing it." Purpose is the intuitive intangible feeling force that pulls and guides me toward my destination (Wright, 1985). Purpose is the sine qua non of human endeavor. If a group can help

enable a person fulfill his or her purpose in life, the group will be effective on one of the two criteria.

Experience suggests that a sense of purpose is as important to groups as it is to individuals. Purpose is "why we're here." In their book In Search Of Excellence, Peters and Waterman say that if they were asked for "one all-purpose bit of advice for management, one truth" they would be tempted to reply: "Figure to your value system. Decide what your company stands for." (Peters and Waterman, 1982, P. 279). Groups that are "productive" at their task have a sense of "why they're here." Work groups need a sense of mission. Families need a sense of life purpose. Neither can function optimally without purpose.

If the group and its members have a sense of Purpose in addition to Safety/Trust, etc., the group will be optimally effective.

In our groups we first spend time helping individuals gain clarity about their own life purpose, and second, helping the group gain clarity about the group's purpose. We devote a lot of time to helping people come up with at least a "rough draft" of a statement of their purpose in life. When entered into seriously, this has been a profound experience for many. This work usually takes the group to a new level of trust and mutual appreciation. The exercises we use for clarifying group purpose involve such O.D. activities as picturing an ideal future state and developing a credo or a mission statement for reaching it.

In summary, Figure 3 shows a model of an effective (that is productive and satisfying) group. The model is congruent with Hakomi Therapy. The key elements of this model are 1) the conditions of Safety/Trust, Empowerment, Recognition, and Permission which facilitate cycling through the Sensitivity cycle, and 2) Purpose, which provides an axis or direction. This model has been helpful to groups in organizations for:

* Enhancing a group's self-awareness, particularly awareness of ways a group can help itself succeed.

* Empowering a group to eliminate and/or reduce barriers in its process.

* Clarifying the burnout mechanism.

Based on our experience the Model may have further applications for other types of groups.

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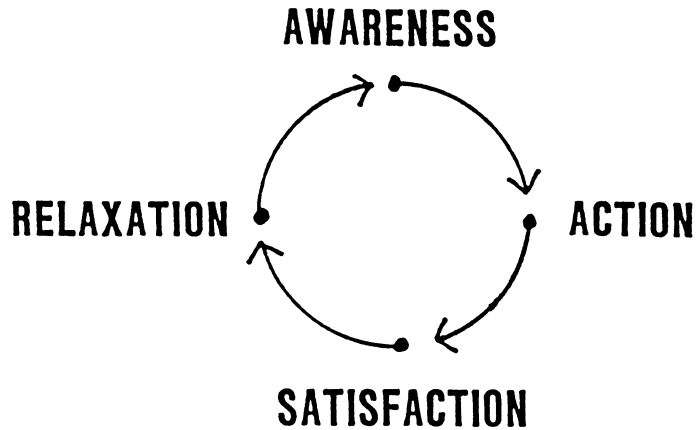
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FIGURE 1



HOLISTIC GROUP MODEL

FIGURE 2

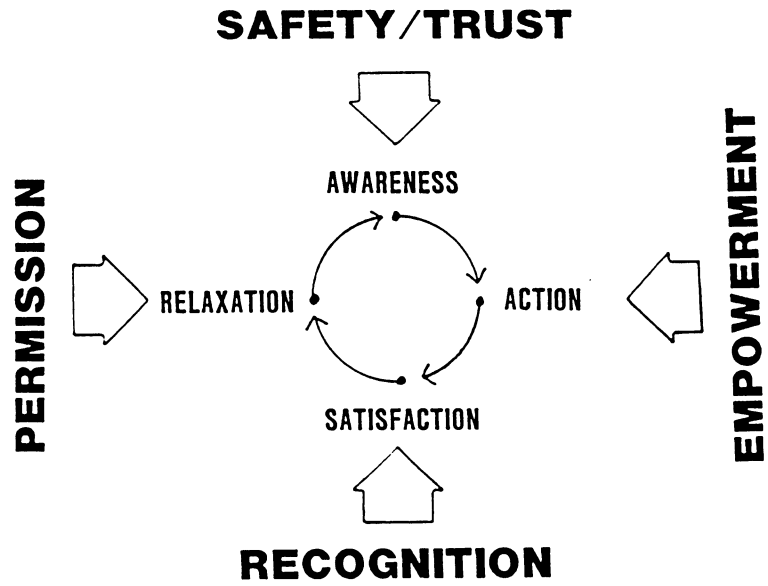


FIGURE 3

