

# Group and Team Coaching

The Essential Guide

Christine Thornton

**E**  
ESSENTIAL  
COACHING  
SKILLS AND  
KNOWLEDGE

## Strategies for tackling problem behaviour

### This chapter

This chapter is concerned with tackling, as it arises in the moment, behaviour that disrupts the work of the group. 'Problem' behaviour offers teams golden opportunities for learning. We consider how to deal with anger, distress, domination, silence, and other challenges. The additional learning opportunities for a team are described fully in the section on dealing with anger, and can then be inferred for the remaining topics.

### When a highly task-focused team cannot collaborate

Problem behaviour provides individual learning opportunities in any group, but for a team there is the added

### This chapter contains:

- This chapter
- When a highly task-focused group cannot collaborate
- Process breaks and process skills
- Developing skilful discussion
- Dealing with overt anger in a group
- Holding the group or team through conflict and struggle
- When someone is crying or distressed
- Dealing with people who are dominating
- When someone is silent or over-quiet
- When someone is playing 'yes but'
- When someone's contribution is always boring
- When someone cannot acknowledge anything but logic
- When someone is so self-centred they cannot work on the task

benefit of having their dynamics worked with 'live'. Even very task-focused groups can be persuaded of the value of understanding their team dynamic better, when their work is disrupted by problem behaviour. With teams resistant to the idea that collaboration is a necessary work skill, use problem behaviour as an opportunity to educate them. Working with these issues may reveal more complex underlying problems. See further 'Dealing with unspoken expectations and dynamics' in Chapter 6 and 'Working with unconscious and unspoken conflicts' and 'Working with conflicting messages' in Chapter 10.

**Process breaks and process skills**

A process break allows a team or group time out to review *how* they are working together to achieve the task as well as working directly on the task. Use it with teams who need to communicate more openly, and invoke it when something seems to be getting in the way of the task, either something unspoken or some eruption of apparently inapposite emotion.

The process break gives teams permission to speak about and make use of emotional and non-conscious information (see 'Communication' in Chapter 3), and so is a useful device in training them to do so. If necessary, stress that it is in the service of the task.

As teams develop more robust communication, the process break more rarely needs to be invoked. In a team that has learned to value fuller feedback as part of its collaboration on shared tasks, it becomes automatic to share thoughts and feelings in the course of the work, including sharing questions and disagreement in a robust way.

With task-focused groups, simple conceptual frameworks can spell out what is involved in collaborating effectively, or underline its importance. The box shows one, a simple but flexible collaboration framework with many uses. It sets out desirable collaborative behaviour when engaged in a group discussion task. Some points are directly task-directed, and some help the task by improving group process.

Working together effectively	
Activities that forward the task directly	Activities that forward the task by sustaining the group
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defining the issue and summarizing</li> <li>• Questioning and clarifying</li> <li>• Asking for/giving information</li> <li>• Making suggestions</li> <li>• Discussing pros and cons of suggestions</li> <li>• Testing relevance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Testing for consensus</li> <li>• Encouraging participation</li> <li>• Acknowledging others' contributions</li> <li>• Releasing tension, expressing feeling</li> <li>• Mediating.</li> </ul>

This tool can be used in several ways to educate task-oriented groups in the value of attention to process in forwarding the task. Use it early in the coaching relationship to set parameters. It can be used as a tool within process breaks. It can be shared with a group at the start of a session, and used for a group evaluation towards the end. Using the simple form overleaf, you can set up a 'fishbowl' exercise with part of the group participating in the discussion and part observing, with a plenary discussion to improve understanding of the behaviours. You can use it over several sessions to focus on improving collaboration skills.

**Developing skilful discussion**

Another set of ideas that may help in these circumstances, particularly with very assertive and competitive groups, is Senge's<sup>152</sup> idea of *skilful discussion*. It usefully emphasizes the value of a questioning stance in improving the quality of decisions and goal achievement.

Skilful discussion is predicated on *dialogue*, a reflective conversation aiming at a meeting of minds, not simply

## TASK ANALYSIS

TIME/PERSON	Defining the issue or objective	Summarizing and clarifying	Asking for/ giving information	Making suggestions	Discussing pros and cons of suggestions

## GROUP SUSTAINING ANALYSIS

TIME/PERSON	Testing for consensus	Encouraging participation	Supporting others' contributions	Expressing feeling, releasing tension	Mediating

## Tool for group observation

discharging a role: exploration, not decision, is the objective of dialogue. See also the discussion of large group dialogue in Chapter 5. Skilful discussion allows people to bring some of the qualities of a dialogue to a decision-making process, particularly an easy pace and genuine curiosity about the views of others (as opposed to relentless advocacy of one's own views).

Essential to skilful discussion are enough time, the ability to stay with uncertainty, and each person bringing their unique perspective to bear. The quality of interaction, rather than getting through business as quickly as possible, is crucial.

The obstacles to collaboration may go deeper than a simple non-awareness of its processes. If it becomes clear that a group cannot simply learn these new skills, then you are getting nearer the organizational dilemmas crippling it. See 'Dealing with unspoken expectations and dynamics' in Chapter 6 and 'Working with unconscious and unspoken conflicts' and 'Working with conflicting messages' in Chapter 10.

**Dealing with overt anger in a group**

Anger in the group presents a technical challenge for the coach, in balancing the usefulness of members tolerating a wider range of expressed feeling and maintaining or restoring a sense of safety. There is no single correct approach, because the most appropriate course will depend on the maturity of the group and the tolerance of its individual members for angry behaviour in others. Whatever the situation, however, the opportunity for everyone to express their reactions is central and must not be skipped over.

The coach must use her/his sense of what will work best with this particular team or group, but must also be prepared to act authentically and with authority. Some kinds of angry expression are beyond the acceptable, and the coach must back those who challenge the crossing of a line, or take the lead in doing so if the group members do not.

In dealing with anger in a group or team, there are two distinct stages. The first is to contain the explosion, and allow the angry person time to cool down. Engaging in

debate or reasoning is likely to lead to a row. The first objective is to allow the anger to run its course and get the group to the point where members can again engage constructively with each other. Only once in twenty-five years have I needed to ask someone angry to leave the room for a while, but it is helpful to remember that this is an option. More likely is that the angry person will spontaneously leave, and that the group will need help to decide how to deal with that.

The second stage is to help the group learn from the experience so as to move on and return to task. A central question is how the anger relates to the task.

### *Immediately*

- *Take the time.* Accept that to deal with the anger will take time. Give up other objectives for the moment.
- *Hear them out.* Do not try to shut up a very angry person; to listen silently for a while can often allow the anger to run its course. When you judge that the angry person has become responsive again, ask a question to allow the discussion to start.
- *Forbid abuse.* If the person becomes abusive to you or someone else, challenge the abuse. Be careful to challenge the abusive behaviour, not the angry feeling or the angry person. If behaviour is excessive, you can ask them to leave to cool down.
- *Do not touch.* Do not touch the person or invade her/his physical space.
- *Listen and acknowledge.* Listen carefully. Acknowledge the anger by feeding back what is conveyed, including the feelings. When anger is heard, the need to express it diminishes somewhat.
- *Be realistic.* Facts will have no impact on angry feelings. Reasoned argument will fall on deaf ears. Let the person cool down first.
- *Do not allow the angry person to become a dominator.* If the person cannot regain control after several minutes, ask what would help them to cool down, or suggest they sit quietly for a few minutes.
- *Respect the conventions of the group.* In a structured

exercise or learning process such as action learning or a Balint group, stick firmly to the time boundary, and use the review process (which can be extended if necessary) to think together about what has happened. Make sure to consider the link between the anger and the work situation being discussed.

While all this is going on, there is some time to think. Below are some questions to consider. This is preparation for the second stage of dealing with anger, helping the group to make sense of the explosion and to use it as far as possible to contribute to achieving the task. When the group can discuss again, these and further questions can be discussed to normalize the situation and to learn from what has happened.

### *Allow your curiosity free rein*

- How does it affect you if someone is angry with you? How does it affect you if someone is angry with someone else in your presence? Fear is a common response to anger, and can prevent us thinking. Stay aware of how you are usually affected by someone expressing anger at you, and give yourself time to think.
- Who is angry with whom? What appears to have caused it? Does everyone see it in the same way?
- What is the angry group member expressing on behalf of the group? If two people are angry at each other, what conflict are they playing out for the group?
- How comfortable is this group with conflict? Do they normally disagree robustly, politely, or not in words at all? How far outside their normal way of operating is this incident?
- How does the anger relate to the work being discussed, relationships in the team or group, and/or the broader organizational context? What information does it bring in that was not fully realized before?

When you are working with a team, the second stage of discussing an angry outburst is a particularly useful learning opportunity, since people who work together regularly have to cope with friction and mutual irritation. Understanding

and learning from the anger can become a task shared between the angry person and everyone else, encouraging a reintegration of the team.

***Team conflict: when it has become possible to discuss things again***

- *Encourage expression of feelings.* Remember that many people fear or dislike the expression of anger. When things get calm enough for others to become involved again, encourage people to say how they felt during the angry conflict. It is important for everyone, including the protagonist(s), to say something of their own reaction to what has happened. This allows the angry person to express feelings other than anger.
- *Encourage the team to learn from the anger to improve its performance.* It is your role to help the team refocus on its task, including making sense of the anger and their reactions to it. Again, your curiosity is your friend. What has led up to this explosion? How does this experience affect their view of the task? What needs to be taken into account in going forward? What is the next step in going forward?
- *Encourage the team to learn about effective disagreement.* Incorporating disagreement and dealing with conflict is an essential skill for every successful team. The angry incident gives this team a chance to think about how they want to go about their disagreeing. Make full use of the opportunity. It is likely that someone will suggest agreeing some conflict 'ground rules' (better than you proposing it). What would they like to happen next time someone feels so strongly about something? What would they prefer to avoid? How can they make sure important disagreements about the work are expressed? What would help them raise and discuss differences before someone reaches boiling point?
- *Encourage the team to learn about coping with conflict.* Ground rules are useful, but not sufficient. What would each individual like their colleagues to know about how they react to anger? And about how they behave when

they feel angry? What is the best way for others to treat them when they are angry?

- *Join up thinking and feeling about the source of the conflict.* Encourage everyone to express their understanding of the angry conflict. If it is a team relatively unused to talking about feelings, consider introducing the idea of the 'process break' to give members a mechanism that validates discussing *how* they work together, reminding them that this gives very practical support to getting the job done.
- *Notice patterns in the team's dynamics.* If this kind of thing happens regularly, what does it mean? What does the individual gain by it? What does the team gain by it? What is avoided by the angry conflict?

**Holding the group or team through conflict and struggle**

Some groups are more difficult to hold than others, and most groups will 'have their moments'. The well-known Tuckman taxonomy of a group's life 'forming, storming, norming and performing' suggests that disputes and struggles will arise once the group feels safe ('formed') enough to do so, though one should not take the idea of 'stages' of development too literally.<sup>154</sup> In these circumstances a steady hand and a clear voice will be important, as well as the confidence *not* to act when the group can resolve things without intervention.

**Some of the group coach's tools are:**

- willingness to acknowledge the conflict and resulting feelings
- considering how the context of the group contributes to the conflict
- willingness to act with authority
- willingness to intervene if necessary
- willingness to take the 'flak'
- confidence to challenge unacceptable behaviour.

How best to work with a group in conflict is a question of cases, affected by factors such as the maturity of the group, the degree of organizational stability, whether it is a stranger group where everyone is equal or a team with existing power dynamics, and so on.

#### **Vignette: Calling a spade a shovel**

Misandra, the newest member of the supervision group, was presenting an in-house counselling team she had been supervising for a year and a half. Ralph and Lisa had recently left the counselling team suddenly after six and ten years respectively, and the team was reacting badly, people sniping and snapping at each other. They had agreed to spend some of their supervision time on their team dynamics.

Daniel missed the session altogether. Alan was present, even though his father had died the week before. Jessie was angry with Ralph for leaving; Liz felt that in the previous session saying 'goodbye' she was forced to be polite to Lisa, not express her true feelings; Meredith recalled her mother at her father's funeral 'presiding over a mockery'. The atmosphere was tense.

Liz spoke about not liking Lisa, and other members competed to chime in with stories of the endings of difficult relationships. During the discussion Misandra asked the group 'So it's about the necessity of hate?'

**JESSIE:** Hate! That's a hard thing to say so near the end

**MEREDITH:** Not a good thing to end on.

**MISANDRA:** I don't see hate as the opposite of love – it's another way of being involved.

**ALAN:** You mean love/hate?

**MEREDITH:** I think hate is close to anger.

In the supervision group, there was a mixed response. Annabel immediately said she thought Misandra's intervention was a mistake: 'I would never use the word

'hate' with clients.' The sniping of the counselling team was reproduced in the supervision group.

At the following session, the team were withdrawn, until:

**PAUL:** I want to challenge you about what you said about hate.

**MISANDRA:** Go on.

**PAUL:** It's a strong word to use – I don't like it.

**JESSIE:** Yes – it's strong.

**MEREDITH:** Children say it in the playground – I hate you – but they're friends the next day – it's not in the true meaning of the word.

**MISANDRA:** What is the true meaning?

**MEREDITH:** To do with anger – I don't know really – we need a dictionary.

**JESSIE:** Ah well – I looked it up in a dictionary actually – I was thinking quite a lot about what you said – something about what we didn't want showing us what we did.

**MEREDITH:** What did the dictionary say?

**JESSIE:** Lots of stuff – but something about things being opposed. And I realized that I hate things about my mother – how suffocating she is.

**ALAN:** I hate my Dad at the moment – for leaving us. I know it's not right, he couldn't choose, but...

**MISANDRA:** It doesn't change how strong the feeling is –

**ALAN:** That's right.

**PAUL:** When I used that word to Avril, it finished the relationship.

**JESSIE:** Maybe you need to sometimes. Human resources have been behaving much better since I had a go. Maybe you were right Paul.

It was fitting end to a conversation that had started with Paul, for the first time, challenging Misandra. There was a

sense of relieved tension. The team, who had been stuck in mourning the loss of their colleagues, now were able to move on. Their attention moved back to their client work, and at their subsequent sessions they reported, and evidenced, better working relationships.

Misandra's supervisor congratulated her on having developed a 'good feel' for what was needed by the group: it was a correct decision to allow some time to study the group dynamics, and speaking of 'the necessity of hate' had allowed the feelings underlying the covert rivalry in the team to be acknowledged and discussed. The provocation allowed Paul (on behalf of the group) to be angry with Misandra, and so for the anger to be explored.

There is a strong relationship between loss, mourning and destructive feelings. Every loss reactivates earlier losses, and can impede 'moving on'. The team members were able to express their anger, and so free themselves of the repetitive low-grade conflict through which they had been communicating it.

#### When someone is crying or distressed

- *Take time.* Distress will take a little time to deal with, so let go of other objectives for the moment. Offer tissues if appropriate, and allow the person to talk and calm down. In a work situation many people will be further distressed or embarrassed at showing their distress. See also the passage concerning a crying team member in 'Holding difficult feelings: using all the information about work' in Chapter 2.
- *Encourage expression in words, and acknowledge it.* Gently encourage the distressed person to put what they feel into words. Acknowledge what is said, and encourage others to express their responses. Empathy in the room will help the distressed person feel more normal again.

- *Be aware of your own feelings.* How does it make you feel to be with someone who is crying? Be aware of your own response.
- *How does the distress relate to the work?* The distress may be relevant to the work in hand, and be useful information for learning. What information does the crying carry? How could understanding it contribute to the task in hand?
- *What feeling underlies the tears?* Remember for example that some people cry when they are angry.
- *Respect the conventions of the group.* In a structured learning group, it is most likely to be the turn-taker who gets distressed, and the distress is likely to have relevance for the learning; when the worst of the distress has passed, encourage her/him to make the connections. If it is someone other than the turn-taker who gets distressed, you need to signal that the turn-taker's 'slot' will be protected, perhaps by taking 'time out'.
- *Protect the distressed person's right to their feelings.* Sometimes distress is made worse for the distressed person by others. Through the empathic sensors of our implicit knowing, the distress of others puts us in touch with our own vulnerability. Some people as a result deny or dismiss the distress of others. If this happens, comment on and discourage it.
- *Encourage the group to learn.* This is a learning opportunity for everyone on the group, to reflect on how they are affected by encountering the distress of another person. Encourage each person to reflect on their reactions and their behaviour. How do they behave when they are distressed? What would be a helpful response from colleagues?
- *Protect the goals of the group.* If the distress does not abate in several minutes, ask the person what would help them recover their capacity to continue working in the group; they may want to take a few minutes out of active work. If they can manage to stay in the room while doing so, it generally allows an easier reintegration.
- *Notice any manipulative patterns.* If someone regularly cries in group meetings, you may be dealing with



something quite different to ordinary distress: a bid for attention, an avoidance of a difficult discussion, or a plea for special treatment. Here your reactions and your curiosity will guide you. When does the distress arise? What feelings are evoked in other people? What does the person gain from the delay or diversion caused by the distress? What does the team gain from it? Is it always the same person – if yes, why doesn't anyone else seem to feel distress? Does the crying have any relation to demands made on the person by the group? See the vignette about manipulative crying below ('The limits of coaching').

### Dealing with people who are dominating

Dealing with a dominator in a group is no time for the group coach to be a 'shrinking violet'. People who speak too much need active help, first from you and ultimately from the group, to gain a more realistic picture of their effect on others, and to modify their behaviour.

### Opening gambits

- *Notice when and with whom it is happening.* Near the start of the group? In a group with strong tensions? Some people talk too much when they are anxious. Consider tactics to make the group feel safer, such as giving a stronger lead yourself.
- *Be active in challenging.* Dominating behaviour will undermine the group if you allow it to go on. You must be active in challenging it and, where it is persistent, train the group to be active in challenging it too.
- *Interrupt.* Summarizing the last point the speaker made, or building on it, and asking others to give their response.
- *Bring others in.* Asking others to give their view; invite specific individuals to speak if you have observed someone who seems to have a view.
- *Use gesture.* Put your hand up as the dominator begins and gesture to another member to speak.
- *Restate the fundamentals.* Restate that all sides of a

question can only be explored if everyone has the opportunity to put their perspective across.

### If it goes on

- *Point out the dominance and invite the group to resolve it.* With marked or persistent dominators this is your main strategy. To open the discussion, say something like 'We seem to be letting xxx do too much of the work. What do others think about...?'
  - *Comment on the pace.* To have a fruitful discussion it is important for people to have time to think, which cannot happen if the pace is too fast and furious. Ask everyone to limit the length of their contributions. This allows you to be more direct in challenging the dominator when they transgress.
  - *Try humour.* Point the behaviour out in a humorous way; be careful to challenge the *behaviour* rather than putting down the individual. Humour is less likely to be useful than an explicit approach, but it may be appropriate with some groups, particularly where there is a limited capacity or willingness to think about process. You can sometimes use humour with individuals, particularly when your other signals to speak less have been ignored.
  - *In a structured learning group.* Remind everyone of the protocols, especially the primacy of the turn-taker's reflection and learning, and the need for a calm pace in order to think.
  - *Be persistent.* A persistent dominator will need persistent correction. Be prepared to be the broken record. Your modelling that the dominator can be stopped will encourage other group members to do it too.
- Although the first task is to shut the person up so that others can speak, this is only a stopgap. It helps the other people in the group in the short term, but does not change the underlying feeling that makes the person speak so much. They are likely to repeat the pattern. If you continue to be the only one to shut them up, the group is likely to become less free in its responses in general. The whole group needs to be involved. If they continue to

leave it to you, become curious about why that is. Here are some further strategies.

- *Give feedback.* It will be necessary to draw attention to the pattern to help the dominator realize what s/he is doing, and what the effect is on the group. Dominators lack empathy and so need feedback.
- *Contrast communication and speech.* Paradoxically, sometimes people speak a lot as a way of avoiding communication. The spate of words bemuses the listeners and only confusion is conveyed. Make the confusion explicit and involve the group in becoming more thoughtful about how each of their communications contributes to the task. You can also use this to check the flow from the dominator – how does what they are saying contribute to the group's progress on the task?
- *Ask about what the others in the group get out of it.* Dominators can only dominate if the rest of the group let them. How does everyone else gain? Are they let off the hook? Are they afraid to challenge a boss or senior colleague? Are they relieved of the need to take a risk? Raising the question of what the rest of the group gains is an understated way of making the domination an explicit group problem, and involving the group in resolving it.
- *Become curious about what the dominator gets out of the domination.* Is it status? Is it reassurance? Is it attention? Is it control? Is it an avoidance of the issues? It is helpful to clarify your own ideas about the source of the over-activity. For group coaches, it is usually *not* helpful to make these ideas explicit, but an opportunity may arise to invite the dominator to reflect on their own behaviour.
- *Take the dominator aside.* The problem must be resolved in the group, but some dominators may benefit from one-to-one feedback and an opportunity to reflect – in effect individual coaching to help them work more effectively in the group.

### When someone is silent or over-quiet

In any group, some members are more active than others, and engagement should not be confused with speech. The

group coach aims to allow each member of a group to govern their own style of involvement at a level balancing safety and risk.

Although silent group members may benefit by witnessing and identifying with the efforts of more active members, particularly in short-term groups, they can nevertheless gain more by achieving a more active role. Research has demonstrated that the most vocal group members tend to gain most, irrespective of what they say, through a sense of involvement, the regard of others which leads to self-regard.<sup>155</sup> In other words, active group participation is self-rewarding. Further, the group or team is impoverished if some members are almost always quiet. Their viewpoints are simply not available.

Silence, like any other group behaviour, is a communication: it means something. People are quiet for many reasons: fear of expressing too much emotion or self-disclosure; fear of self-assertion, or provoking conflict; standards of perfection so exacting that the risk of falling short by speaking is too great; a need for distance or superiority; expressing annoyance (sulking); or, like the dominator, a bid for attention, albeit in a very different style.

The group coach needs to stay as connected as possible to the meaning of the silence, which may of course change over time, paying attention to non-verbal cues and what speech is offered.

Learning the courage to speak up in a group is an important life skill, of which the quiet member needs at least some ('Practising courage and freedom to act' in Chapter 4). The middle way is wisest in dealing with quiet members: putting them on the spot, but not too much. This can be done:

- with eye contact
- by gesture
- by inviting comment on someone else's contribution
- by question
- through a 'go round' where *everyone* must comment
- through structured exercises that demand and equalize participation.

With persistently quiet members, especially in a team, it is likely to be necessary to comment more directly on the silence and its impact, by acknowledging it ('Are you open to being prodded today?') or by inviting others to reflect on their understanding of the silence, and then referring their thoughts to the silent member for judgement. See the vignette, 'Developing courage' in Chapter 4.

#### **When someone is playing 'yes but'**

'Yes but' is a 'game people play' recognized by Eric Berne in his classic book.<sup>156</sup> Someone playing 'yes but' first asks the group for help by presenting a problem, but then rejects any help offered. Her/his problems are insurmountable, and every attempt to help fails. In an extreme form, the group member will be interested only in her/his own problems and will relate to the group only as the one most in need of help.

The other group members try to help for a while, then become irritated, then frustrated. The 'yes-but-ter' can be very subtle in their refusals of aid, sometimes rejecting help overtly, sometimes covertly, and sometimes appearing to accept while ignoring what is offered. If the behaviour is allowed to continue, it can undermine the effectiveness and cohesiveness of the group.

'Yes but' needs tackling in the same way as persistent dominator behaviour (see 'Dealing with people who are dominating' above), through identifying the pattern, and regular feedback from all members on its impact. It may also be helped by a paradoxical injunction, such as the coach agreeing with the member that it is all quite hopeless.

#### **When someone's contribution is always boring**

We are idiosyncratic in our boredom. Still, sometimes in our work with groups we come across someone whose lack of spontaneity and risk-averseness renders their contributions quite deadening. They say what is safe and unlikely to give offence to anyone. Their self-censorship is instinctive, and their conflict-aversion extreme. They are burdened by an

excess of the social sensitivity that inhibits most people some of the time.

The task of the group coach is to help the inhibited group member to reduce their editing of their responses so as to express some of their truer and more spontaneous responses. This is likely to take time. A paradoxical injunction here is likely to come off as sarcastic, and too direct an approach as intimidating. Tact is required. Sometimes light-hearted structured exercises, particularly early in the group's work, can help this individual to 'speak a true word in jest'. In general, understated questioning and encouragement to say what they really think is the way forward, together with praise when they do take a risk.

#### **When someone cannot acknowledge anything but logic**

At times in coaching groups or teams we come across individuals who seem to have a very limited emotional range, and appear unmoved by emotions in circumstances where most people would be. Since, as we have seen in Chapter 2, emotional content is a component of every interaction, such people can find themselves isolated and distant from others. They are unlikely to volunteer for coaching groups, but may be obliged to come, by managers who perceive their need for greater skill at interacting with colleagues. If so, it is helpful to discuss their motivation openly and see if logic can offer some reasons why they should try to engage.

What we are talking about here goes well beyond the risk manner thought to demonstrate efficiency and competence in many business environments. It is a suppression of feeling so thorough that very little ever breaks through. In team coaching we meet these individuals sitting always somehow at the edge of the group, sometimes literally as well as metaphorically. They feel indifference to most ordinary events and relationships. They have often won a place by their consistency, or their capacity to apply thinking to their own range of work, but have little empathy for others, or for the broader vision. Colleagues who have at first attempted a closer connection have given up, and they are regarded with

incomprehension and, at best, a kindly tolerance. In any team coaching exercise they are highly task-focused because, to them, interaction is a foreign language best left unlearned.

To integrate these people more fully is a long-term undertaking, small step by small step; the group's acceptance is an essential precondition. The 'logical' ones do not completely lack feeling. If they acknowledge some small emotion, like minor irritation or hurt, ask them to look at it through a microscope and describe it. Observe expression and other non-verbal cues carefully and ask about them. Help them to observe and comment on the reactions in their own bodies – butterflies in the tummy, clenched fist. An apparently small step here is really a giant one, so limited objectives are realistic. Perseverance is essential, and as the group coach you can model to the rest of the group or team how to help the individual gradually become more involved.

#### **When someone is so self-centred they cannot work on the task**

Such a character does not need much describing: they are so self-centred that their conversation is always about themselves. In a team they will not cooperate readily or understand the needs of others; in any group situation they are likely to be either disruptive or withdrawn. If they do participate they will monopolize the conversation and likely be critical of the undertaking if any challenge is made. They will either be overly sensitive to criticism or impervious to any criticism because of their conviction of their own specialness.

#### **Vignette: The limits of coaching**

Rebecca was the last to join the corporate events team. She professed herself a team player but in fact did far less than anyone else on the many shared tasks, though she made a point of always being visible to senior people

Every shared task she did take on, she talked about endlessly, complaining of others' laziness. In team coaching sessions, whenever she was challenged about this, she would burst into tears as the rest of the team looked on helplessly. The coach gave her space to calm down and despite several attempts could not oblige her to engage with the feedback. Rebecca simply began to cry again. The coach acknowledged the impasse in the group, and privately advised Ginny, the manager, that Rebecca's problem went too deep for tackling through coaching.

This is an example of an inappropriate use of team coaching, on two counts. Ginny was trying to use the sessions to manage Rebecca's failures of performance, properly a one-to-one activity; and Rebecca's problem was too deep-rooted to be resolved through normal coaching.

This kind of problem is beyond the scope of coaching. Sometimes coaching can curb the self-obsessed behaviour, through feedback and through the kinds of tactic used with eliminators, but the underlying problem is likely to reassert itself; it is a problem that can be managed, not solved.

In this chapter we have looked at how to deal with problematic individual behaviour in groups. In the next chapter we consider how to approach groups who do not collaborate effectively.

## Groups that do not work: understanding and tackling dysfunctional patterns in group behaviour

### This chapter contains:

- This chapter
- Anxiety in groups
- What if... there is lateness and absence?
- What if... a number of people look bored, restless or disengaged?
- Bion: a theory of group dysfunction
- The 'basic assumptions' of working with unconscious and unspoken conflicts
- Teams declared 'dysfunctional'
- The drama triangle
- Working with conflicting messages
- Argyris' theory of organizational defences
- Finally

### This chapter

The previous chapter was concerned with problematic individual behaviour encountered in groups; this chapter discusses groups that do not work. It reviews the impact of anxiety on group functioning, and goes on to discuss a couple of typical problems. It introduces Bion's ideas about underlying patterns in non-functioning groups. Through extended consideration of a vignette, it looks at the dynamics of teams declared 'dysfunctional', and outlines the 'drama triangle' dynamic. It discusses unspoken conflicts, and the implications of Chris Argyris' theory of organizational defences for group coaching practice.

### Anxiety in groups

Anxiety is a major reason for groups not working well. The conditions in an anxious group are precisely opposite to those in a group that is well-held: people do not feel confident to take risks, and so it is difficult to learn.

#### People are more likely to feel anxious in groups:

- the larger the group gets, particularly larger than ten people
- when members don't know each other well
- meeting infrequently
- with an inconsistent membership
- that have no clear structure/accepted way of doing things
- when the group cannot achieve its aims, or when there is disagreement about aims or how to achieve them
- when there is pressure from outside.

How we deal with anxiety is central to coaching a group. At the start of the life of any group, most members, and perhaps the coach, tend to be anxious: the coach must help members feel less anxious, so as to be able to work. Members need to feel that the coach is relaxed, and has clear goals and expectations about the work, and from them. (If you do not feel relaxed, at least take steps to *look* relaxed.) This leadership role can be gradually relinquished as the group settles to its task.

Even if it were possible to remove all anxiety, it would not be desirable. A degree of anxiety helps us perform, but the degree is all-important. You want group members to feel safe enough to take a risk (which temporarily increases anxiety) in the service of the task. Sometimes a group is too comfortable, and the coach will need to challenge complacency.

### What kinds of behaviour in a group suggest anxiety?

- Lateness or excessive earliness
- Talking too much
- Withdrawn silence
- Intellectualizing
- Poor listening demonstrated by irrelevant or inappropriate questions or contributions
- Inappropriate use of humour
- Whispering to a neighbour
- Smoothing over all difficulties
- Continually apologizing
- Finding fault with everything.

There are many, many kinds of behaviour in groups that indicate anxiety, often completely outside of people's awareness. The coach must be aware of the influence of anxiety, acknowledge and normalize its presence, and start work with the group anyhow. This will allow the conflicts hindering work to emerge and be examined.

### What if . . . there is lateness and absence?

*Warning: The remarks about punctuality may not translate in all cultures.*

The prime working time of any group is when everyone is in the room together. Setting the correct tone from the start is the key factor in dealing with absences and lateness. Stressing from the start the importance of everyone being present for the whole coaching session communicates your seriousness about the group's work, and puts a pressure on members to do likewise. Naturally, travelling and other difficulties do arise, and at times the group coach must help the group manage members' lateness. 'Business as usual' is usually the best approach, with a brief pause as the latecomer arrives. Absences are more problematic, for both the

### Vignette: Setting the tone

In the first meeting of an action learning set, one of the members announced that she would have to miss the next session. It was no accident that she was the most ambivalent member of the group. The coach insisted on a protracted negotiation to find a date that would work, without success. The discussion emphasized, however, how seriously the coach took attendance. No one else missed a session, despite some serious professional and personal challenges: members always gave notice of late arrival, and rarely were more than a few minutes late.

absent member and the others. The coach must have in mind the question of the meaning of the absence, and the question of how the group reintegrates at the next session.

Norms about lateness vary. An experienced corporate coach was shocked at the 'relaxed' attitude to timekeeping she found in parts of the voluntary sector, and beat a hasty retreat! In any sector, however, it is important to make explicit the impact, at the very least in terms of working time lost, of lateness, drop-ins, early departures and so on.

Routine lateness and absence among several members is serious: members 'voting with their feet'. This is best tackled at the level of the group as a whole, by wondering about its meaning. Remember, every event in the life of a group is a communication (see 'Communication' in Chapter 3); this is a shout. There may be several reasons, either in the organizational context or in the group itself. Engage honestly with what comes up, and engage the whole group in the process of deciphering the meaning. Doing so will usually have the side-benefit of improving attendance and punctuality.

### What if . . . a number of people look bored, restless or disengaged?

They probably are. Like every event in the life of the group, this is a communication. Try to understand it. Since group coaching is about making meaning more articulate, check out your perception and see what can be uncovered. Listen and watch carefully to catch the emotional tone as well as the words. It is best to take this up with the whole group rather than homing in on individuals.

Allow paranoia to be on hold, and do not assume that the responses are about you or your style; they are just as likely to be about the organization, or perhaps each other. Are you sure that these people are volunteers, or were they sent? Are the coaching goals, goals to which they are committed? Do people in the group have any previous history that needs to be understood before proceeding? Anger often underlies boredom: what might they be annoyed about? (People are often more willing to acknowledge annoyance, irritation or frustration than anger.) If they are angry about some organizational injustice, what could they do to put things right?

Address the group where they are, and go for a quick win. For instance, 'what would help this team work together a bit better?', 'how would you know if that had happened?' are more useful questions to a struggling team than 'what would it take for this team to be the best in the company?'

If the group members were 'sent', what could they get from the experience that would be valuable to them? One coach uses the concept of 'prisoners, tourists and enthusiasts' in his workshops. He shares the idea with the group and uses it to engage individuals in monitoring their own motivation.

If people are discontented with some aspect of the coaching group, engage them in defining how to improve it - by redefining goals, roles or operating rules. If they are discontented with you, encourage them to clarify what role they want you to fulfil. Often this simple discussion will get things moving again. Agree how to review things if the problem recurs.

### Bion: a theory of group dysfunction

Wilfred Bion defined three 'basic assumptions'<sup>157</sup> that impede a group's work, founded on his observation of groups. Bion was a visionary whose work is about deeply unconscious processes of which group members will mostly be unaware, but which can at times be observed in group behaviour. The basic assumptions are ways of group members managing repressed anxiety, a flight from reality and the difficulties of being in a group. The three basic assumptions are:

- fight/fight
- dependency
- pairing.

Anxiety, fear, hate and love are common to all three group states, but fight/fight is characterized by anger and blame, dependency by guilt and depression, and pairing by unfounded messianic hope. The root of the basic assumptions is an instinctive fear of group disintegration, perhaps surviving from a time when individual survival was only possible through group survival. All three aim to preserve the group at the expense of members' individual well-being, or the group's ability to work. They apply in groups of all sizes, but are felt more keenly in larger groups.

### The 'basic assumptions'

• **Fight/fight.** A group that has gathered together for fight/fight is a united group - united against a common enemy. Its unity is emotionally satisfying. If the group has no obvious 'enemy', then the next best thing is to find a leader to whom the enemy is obvious; if the enemy is 'within' the group, it is scapegoating.

• **Dependency.** The assumption in a dependency group is that one person, often the group leader, will supply the needs of the group members; other members are in a position where their needs are to be supplied. There is little mutuality in the arrangement.

• **Pairing.** The group met together for the purposes of 'pairing off' provides temporary relief from the trials of the other two basic assumptions, but is no more productive.

Sometimes it is expressed through two group members engaging each other in an exclusive conversation, while others watch. Through pairing the survival of the group will be secured. There is a sense of unjustified messianic hope.

The basic assumptions are deeply unconscious; group members will not articulate them or be directly aware of them, but they will act as though guided by the currently dominant assumption. The coach can sometimes name the assumption so as to help the group escape its grip.

#### Vignette: Fight/flight

An outreach team in the Mental Health Trust was told that it had been selected for closure, its functions to be taken over by another department. The staff group of thirty met together a few days after the announcement, which had been insensitively handled. Reactions ranged from overwhelmed disbelief, to feeling that their work was neither understood nor valued by the senior Trust officials who made the decision, to concern for the patients, some of whom were severely depressed or suicidal, to considerable anger against the managers, the staff of other departments, the government, and society for not caring for its most vulnerable members. Junior staff and leaders were united in their feelings, though their analysis of the situation differed.

The group coach let the discussion run for some time. Then she commented 'You seem to be united against the common foe, which might lead to things being over-looked'. The group paused as though to digest something. In the ensuing discussion plans were made to represent the dangers of the proposal forcibly to people who might influence the outcome; one or two members aired unconnected work concerns, which had the effect of reassuring those with similar challenges, restoring 'business as usual', and helping the group recover its ability to work.

In the vignette, the 'uniting to fight' had some basis in reality. The coach's intervention about 'fight/flight' was effective in part because the discussion made the observation hard to deny. In many cases the 'uniting to fight' has little relation to reality, as with the team busy blaming some other part of the system (HR, production or HQ) for their lack of productivity. The blaming stance is a defence against thinking, often facilitated by someone's willingness to be its spokesperson.

While any of the basic assumptions dominate thinking, the group is unable to work freely and creatively, nor can members act with autonomy. Group behaviour and decisions are governed by the assumption. The assumptions are more likely to operate at times of stress. The basic assumption may shift from one to another three times within an hour, or one basic assumption may hold sway for months. A shift to a different basic assumption will create short-term relief, but the group is still avoiding work on its task.

#### Working with unconscious and unspoken conflicts

Groups get stuck in a non-working position because they are unconscious of the conflicts that impede them. A team can collaborate despite mutual hostility, but not when the hostility is hidden or unconscious. It will constantly disrupt the work. Similarly, positive feelings towards each other may obstruct work, through an unwillingness to upset each other by raising unpalatable facts.

Conflicts are amplified in the group through the mechanisms described in Chapter 3. The group coach is therefore in a good position to study them: a group conflict will communicate itself to the coach, often through the invitation to play a role or occupy a position rather different to what was written in the contract. The invitation will be not be communicated in words. Here are some roles for which the coach may not have intended to audition:

- cheerleader to the apathetic
- the enemy
- allied with the enemy
- behind a soundproof screen



- politely ignored
- powerless babysitter
- the fount of all knowledge
- rescuer
- persecutor
- victim.

Clients can be very resistant to noticing or acknowledging these forces. In the vignette opposite, the coach had shared his analysis of the work needed during contracting. The sponsor, the HR Director, had agreed to the dual objectives of the programme, including the priority of tackling the hostile stance of the managers. At review she disowned this view and concentrated on the subsidiary training goals. After its resolution, the very existence of the conflict was denied. See also the discussion below.

### Teams declared 'dysfunctional'

When a team has been declared 'dysfunctional' or, worse, has come to adopt that view of itself, members' expectations of coaching are likely to be low. It is helpful to speak individually with all team members to gauge where the levers for change might be. Clear and rigorous goal-setting is important, but the key work will be to clarify the paradoxical or conflicting beliefs and goals as they emerge. Bear in mind that the team may well be carrying 'dysfunction' for the larger organization, and so the resistance to changing the label there, may be at least equal to the resistance in the team itself.

If the dysfunction centres on overt conflict within the group, see 'Dealing with anger in a group' in Chapter 9.

The organization in the vignette is a good example of a culture in which there is an oscillation between dependency and fight/fight basic assumptions. All the managers had an expectation that the organization would look after them, strengthened by their feelings about losing the autonomy of their small agencies. The new CEO was disliked not only as the rather controlling agent of change, but also because failures by the new organization were experienced as failures

### Vignette: Management development with a 'dysfunctional' group

Jerry has been hired by the HR Director for a not-for-profit organization providing services to victims of crime. The members of the group previously ran small independent agencies, now amalgamated into one regional organization of which they are branch managers. 'Disaffected' does not adequately describe their position; they are hostile and so locked in conflict with the new regional centre that there is little communication. The CEO, the driving force behind the change, wants a management development programme to improve standards of work, and to get the branches in line with the new regional centre.

Jerry explains to the HR Director that the group will have to trust him for the process to work, and that the programme's dual objectives will require a flexible coaching approach where the needs of the participants have higher priority than the formal training targets.

At the opening event, the managers are highly critical of the CEO as 'very controlling and ambitious', and of many aspects of the new arrangements, as not supporting their services adequately. They let off a lot of steam, and by the end of the opening day express themselves ready to move on. They start the programme with enthusiasm. Jerry adopts a pragmatic coaching approach and helps them function more effectively together, both in tackling their grievances with regional office and in sharing their new learning.

He introduces the drama triangle as a way of thinking about the dynamics in the organization, with the roles of persecutor, victim and rescuer moving around between region, branches, him, the CEO and HR. He emphasizes the need to be conscious of this 'dance' in order to step out of it.

As time goes on, members become more open, and it is clear that there are very different positions in the group. Some managers are genuinely engaged and keen

to sort out the problems and go forward with improved services. Some are willing to try to make things work, and test progress step by step; this is the largest group. A few are interested only in maintaining a sense of grievance, and encouraging as many others as possible to join them.

By the end, Jerry is satisfied that the group overall has made good progress. Members have pooled resources and expertise, and developed a habit of thinking together about how to tackle problems. They think more strategically about their services, and have made some progress against the training goals. The attitude of most of the group to the regional centre is now questioning, rather than irrationally hostile.

At the programme review with the HR Director, Jerry finds that her view is less positive. She seems uninterested in discussing the improvement in relationships between branch and centre that was her main goal before. She focuses instead on the training goals, in particular on the ones that she doesn't feel have been met. Jerry resists this analysis, reminding the HR Director of the goals of the programme.

of care for which she was responsible. She had united the managers to fight her, and the group Jerry encounters at first is united only by this common hatred. As the basic assumption shifts, differentiation emerges within the group and different stances can be expressed.

The drama triangle (see opposite) was a useful metaphor because the explanation freed some of the managers to achieve a more adult position, where they made their peace with the change and began to negotiate for what they needed.

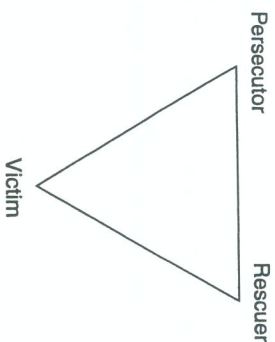
By the end of the coaching, all the managers accepted the new structure as a fact, and the majority were better equipped to manage, were sharing expertise and help, and were negotiating together to get what they needed from the regional centre. The disaffection of a few managers,

however, was more entrenched. They continued to blame regional' for all problems and refused to take responsibility for improving things. So had Jerry done a good enough job?

On the one hand, coaching cannot replace normal performance management. Peer pressure can improve performance, but the responsibility for dealing with persistent poor performance lies with the organization, not the coach. On the other hand, had the group's resistance to change 'located' itself more firmly in the individuals apt for it, through the process? The reluctant acceptance of the new status quo by most of the team was achieved in part by their sense of 'there but for the grace of God go I' as they listened (again) to their recalcitrant colleagues.

### The drama triangle

Jerry used the drama triangle,<sup>158</sup> a conceptual tool derived from transactional analysis. The roles of the players in the drama are shown below.



### The persecutor

Sets unnecessarily strict limits	Blames
Criticizes	Keeps the victim down
Is mobilized by anger	Has a rigid, authoritarian stance
Is intimidating	Is inquisitorial

*The rescuer*

Rescues when doesn't really want to	Feels guilty if s/he doesn't rescue
Condescends	Keeps the victim dependent
Is self-righteous and holier-than-thou	Expects to fail and allow the victim to fail
Is well-intentioned	Loves to help

*The victim*

Feels helpless, hopeless, powerless	Complains
Whines	Seeks a rescuer to keep up powerlessness
Denies responsibility and blames	Depends on rescuer
Manipulates	Takes 'dejected' stance

The drama triangle still held some members of the organization in its grip. The disaffected managers persisted in seeing themselves as victims, with 'regional' as the persecutor and Jerry as an (inadequate) rescuer. The regional centre, represented by the HR Director, saw themselves as victims of this recalcitrance, again with Jerry as an inadequate rescuer. The dynamic of real (criminal) persecutors and victims in the organization's work made the dynamic particularly pernicious and entrenched.

The dynamic shifts constantly between the roles. Jerry was in danger of being 'victimized' by the HR Director for perceived failures in his work. The adult stance achieved by the majority of the group was perceived by the HR Director as a failure, because the CEO, insecure in her new role, had been unconsciously hoping for compliance – that Jerry would 'knock the managers into shape'. An unintended outcome of the coaching was that the managers as a group were

more assertive in asking for the functional support that it was the regional centre's role to provide.

The regional centre was not keen to acknowledge its own weaknesses highlighted by the process, and so tried to project the failures into Jerry and his 'training'. Since she could not challenge Jerry on his coaching of the managers, the HR Director challenged him on not meeting the training goals of the programme, which had been agreed in advance to be secondary. This illustrates the resistance to change in the broader system when the 'dysfunction' shifts from the team in whom it has previously been located. The contract was only to work with the branch managers, and its success met with (perhaps predictable) resistance in the regional centre.

Jerry's robust resistance to the HR Director's characterization kept the victim role at bay, but she was unable to shift from her position, either as victim or as persecutor. If the regional centre continued to ignore its own 'dysfunctions', what Jerry had achieved with the managers would be under steady pressure. The meeting, and the contract, ended in an 'agreement to differ', and Jerry remained ambivalent about the long-term value of his work.

**Working with conflicting messages**

Some of the conflicts in the vignette were overt. The managers and the regional centre blamed each other for ineffectiveness, and the managers were unhappy about the loss of their small agencies' autonomy. There were further, less explicit conflicts that emerged as the work progressed, and the lack of any coaching for the regional centre presented an obstacle unresolved at the end of the assignment.

When coaching a group, the coach must win enough confidence from the group that the members are willing to engage on the explicit task; they have to feel some commitment to the goals. Jerry was candid with the managers from the outset, and encouraged them to make use of the coaching group as an opportunity for their own development, both individually and as a team.

In working with a conflicted group, it can be a good course to start work on something that relates to the explicit goals, and then await a challenge.

When the challenge comes, engage with it so as to encourage the group to express their real dilemmas. Most stuck groups are in a double bind seeking to obey conflicting messages, which keeps them stuck. Making the conflict explicit can release the knot, allowing an embracing of both sides of the paradox. Working with paradox (see 'The necessity of paradox' in Chapter 5) requires not 'choosing' one side, but keeping both sides while maintaining the tension between the two. This is an adult position and the one towards which the coach seeks to assist the group. In the vignette, two of the inconsistent messages were the managers' beliefs:

- 'regional should look after us'
- 'regional is complete crap and doesn't/can't look after us at all'.

By allowing these beliefs to be aired (explosively at first which suggests the force with which their undiscussability had been previously maintained), Jerry helped the managers to move to a more mature position where they identified the functional support they were entitled to expect from the regional centre, and negotiated to improve it where it was inadequate.

Conflicting messages and their inconsistency must be brought into the light of day, and discussed. Thus the goals and methodology of coaching 'dysfunctional' groups and teams are the same as the goals and methodology of all group coaching: to make the communications ever more articulate (see 'Translation' in Chapter 3).

### Argyris' theory of organizational defences

In Chapter 6 we examined Chris Argyris' concepts of 'espoused theory' (what I say) and 'theory-in-use' (what I do). Theories-in-use in companies have been found to be remarkably consistent around the world, encapsulated as Model I theory-in-use.<sup>159</sup>

- 1 achieve your intended purpose
- 2 maximize winning and minimize losing
- 3 suppress negative feelings
- 4 behave according to what you consider rational.

This theory-in-use restricts 'learning' to issues that are already discussable, so that underlying defensive routines are not threatened. Discussable problems are identified and solutions generated. These solutions may enjoy limited or initial success, but do not address the underlying problem. Those concerned now have a conflict: if they face the undiscussables, they also have to make public their previous failure or refusal to face them; Model I is then reinforced, as people deny their share of responsibility for the failure.

Argyris has elaborated his theory of 'organizational defence routines' to explain how members of an organization reconcile conflicting views and keep themselves stuck.<sup>160</sup> He encapsulates it in four 'rules':<sup>161</sup>

- design a message that is inconsistent
- act as if the message is not inconsistent
- make the inconsistency in the message and the act that there is no inconsistency undiscussable
- make the undiscussability of the undiscussable also undiscussable.

The defence routines are therefore also undiscussable. Argyris has further elaborated the ways in which inexpert attempts to modify the theory-in-use can actually lead to its reinforcement, and the development of even more sophisticated defences against learning. 'The freedom to question and to confront is crucial, but it is inadequate. To overcome skilled incompetence people have to learn new skills, to ask the question behind the questions.'<sup>162</sup>

Argyris wryly comments on the wide adoption of his idea 'double-loop learning', often 'without serious attention to the behavioural conditions for its achievement'.<sup>163</sup> Double-loop or deuterio-learning,<sup>164</sup> making changes both to performance (single-loop) and to the criteria by which

performance is measured (double-loop), can only be sustained by an ongoing commitment and capacity in the organization to engage in rigorous *enquiry*, always seeking to reduce the undiscussable areas. This also requires commitment to rigorous enquiry from coaches, even when they fear it may lose them their clients.

Facilitation alone cannot resolve undiscussability. A facilitator may help by highlighting inconsistencies, naming 'upsetting' messages and clarifying dilemmas. This is however a short-term fix, and the group will revert to old habits as soon as the facilitator is gone. Espoused theories can easily change, theories-in-use more slowly. Team members themselves must learn to recognize and tackle the paradoxical messages that bind them, and develop their capacity to raise and discuss the previously undiscussable. The coach can make several contributions to the development of these skills in the client team.<sup>165</sup>

### Surfacing the undiscussables

- Encourage the team to examine inconsistencies and gaps in their reasoning
- If they deny the inconsistencies, surface and make explicit the 'theories-in-use' that can be deduced from their actions
- View bewilderment and frustration as further communications concerning learning<sup>166</sup>
- Create opportunities for the group to practise Model II (valid information, informed choice and responsibility for implementation) enquiry methods to reduce defensive manoeuvres.

Model II theory-in-use requires team members to question the obvious and the taken-for-granted, and to take personal responsibility for their part in maintaining organizational defences. They must seek new learning as actively as reassurance. Skilled holding by the coach (see 'Holding' in Chapter 2) will ease this process.

So how difficult is it to change theory-in-use? The skills are not acquired quickly, but can be acquired through practice, given the will to do so. Argyris comments that 'most people require as much practice as is required to play a not-so-decent game of tennis'.<sup>167</sup> Medium- to long-term group or team coaching can leave the group in a position where their communication is more robust, and where they need the coach only for 'refreshing' or tackling problems of new depth or intensity.

How can a coach avoid bolstering Model I thinking while seeking to change it? There are no guarantees of success in this field, but skilled and psychologically informed supervision offers the coach a sustained and sustaining space in which to examine her/his own 'theory-in-use'. Better yet, a supervision group could help fuller understanding of team and organizational patterns. Success depends in large measure on the impetus for change in the team and in the broader system, as Jerry in the vignette discovered the hard way. A key factor is how defensive the client is. The wise coach looks carefully, and tests her/his diagnosis with the client, before leaping in.

### Finally

Dysfunction in a team must always be understood as an expression of dysfunction in the team's broader organizational context. Accepting the label 'dysfunctional' is a risky business for the coach, as the dysfunction may not all be where it is currently 'located'. All group and team coaching contains difficulties, and difficulty is a matter of degree. Changing thinking and behaviour takes time, but understanding the psychological and interpersonal processes in Chapters 2 to 4 can help us be aware of the unspoken conflicts and defensive routines we must surface. With practice we can become more expert and courageous at helping teams disentangle their difficulties. Our chances of success are highest where conditions in the team and in the broader system support change.

**Working with difficult groups and teams**

- Use supervision or consultation to develop and maintain understanding
- Understand the broader forces
- Educate the client about the implications for the broader system
- Be rigorous about making the client clarify goals
- Start work on explicit goals
- Highlight paradoxes
- Be prepared for challenges
- Use paradoxes and challenges to surface the group's dilemmas
- Be prepared to tolerate discomfort
- Be rigorous in surfacing the dynamics, incongruities and gaps
- Be prepared to intervene to restore thought if the work of the group is threatened
- Attend to developing group members' capacity to express the undiscussables.

In the next chapter we examine how managing the beginnings, middles and endings of group coaching interventions can improve the chances of a good outcome.

## Managing beginnings, middles and endings: boundaries of the group

11

**This chapter**

This final chapter is concerned with managing the boundaries of group coaching interventions to maximize the chances of a good outcome. It focuses particularly on the time boundaries, and the physical environment.

Coaching groups have a beginning, a middle and an end. How we manage the beginnings is critical to the group's degree of mutual trust and therefore to members' ability to learn from each other. An important part of getting the beginning right is attending to the environmental and structural factors that can contribute to learning – the 'system administration'. How we handle the middle affects how well the group works to achieve its desired outcomes,

**This chapter contains:**

- This chapter
- System administration: getting the conditions right
- Time and the group
- The physical environment of the group
- Other system administration issues
- Beginnings, middles and endings of group sessions: tasks and indicators
- Beginnings, middles and endings of sessions: good behaviour
- The beginning of the coaching assignment
- Setting a new group up right – the first meeting
- The middle of the coaching assignment and the transfer of learning
- Transfer of learning and good intentions
- Kolb and learning
- The ending of a coaching group
- Psychological dimensions of endings
- Unconscious feelings about endings
- Dealing with early departers
- In the final session
- Finally

and contributes to members' applying what they have learned in their normal work setting. How we manage the endings makes a difference to how members handle other work endings, and to how they remember this group.

### **System administration: getting the conditions right**

It is not the group coach's job to get the job of the group done; group members are responsible for that.<sup>188</sup> The group coach's responsibility is to ensure that the conditions are as favourable as possible to work. This 'system administration', attending to the total environment of the group, includes the impact of time on the group, the physical setting, membership of the group, and liaison with the organization.

### **Time and the group**

Time, and the consciousness of time, is an important area of coach skill. In a coaching group, the coach is holding the tension between helping the group work at a pace conducive to thinking (that is, an unhurried pace) and the consistent awareness of the time limits on the work – its beginning, middle and end. The group coach must balance working with both kinds of consciousness of time. Managing time for the group is an important part of the coach's system administration role.

Always finish on time. Members then know they can rely on it. At a non-conscious level, this reinforces group members' awareness of the real time limits on the work, helping them to stay focused and motivated.

Always start on time. If there are not enough people in the room to start on the main task, say so and make a start on something – usually possible with a little ingenuity – that can be done by a few people. With a new group, it is a good idea to have such a task in mind, in case you need it. If you choose to delay starting by a few minutes, be explicit with the group about it, so that those present know that you have noticed and that you are respectful of the time they have set aside.

Good group settings have never been more important than now, when many people work in organizations where it is almost impossible to get everyone together to work on a task, where it is commonplace for meetings to be interrupted by phone calls, members working online while in the meeting, and members arriving late or leaving early. The impact of these disruptions on work is routinely underestimated. Core working time for a coaching group is when everyone is in the room together, fully attending to the task.

A coaching group will be less effective if we accept these working conditions as normal or inevitable. An important part of the group coach's role is to stand up for the importance of uninterrupted time for the group's work, and the need for everyone to start and finish together. S/he must negotiate to secure the best possible agreements for work to take place. The time pressure is also on the coach: if late arrivals, early departures and interruptions reduce a coaching session from three hours to one and a half, s/he will find it much harder to achieve the coaching outcomes. If shifts in the pace of working life have indeed changed the bigger picture irrevocably, it is all the more important to be aware of their impact, and to protect the working space of the group.

### **The physical environment of the group**

It is important to get the setting right to be conducive to work. The physical environment has an impact on the effectiveness of the group; a good environment – consistent, quiet, comfortable, well-equipped – will add value to an effective group, though by itself it will not make an ineffective group work. As a group coach, be particular about where your group is to work, and secure the best possible working environment for it.

The checklist overleaf shows several aspects of setting to consider. Not all will be relevant to all circumstances, but the checklist offers a 'gold standard'.

## Other system administration issues

**Physical environment***The group's meeting place*

- Is it always the same room? This will contribute to a sense of consistency and continuity
- What is the general character and ambience of the room?
- Is the lighting adequate and pleasant?
- Does the organization or building in which the group meets ever create or allow intrusions?
- Is it the normal workplace of group members? If so, is the group's uninterrupted working time respected?

**Chairs**

- Are all the chairs the same? The ideal answer is 'yes'
- Is there the correct number of chairs for the group?
- Does anyone always sit in the same place?
- Where do you like to sit?
- Where do group members like to sit?
- What happens when someone is absent – does the group sit with an empty chair? How does this help or hinder the group in making sense of an absence?

**Physical focus**

- Is there a table and is it the right size and appropriate for the work of this group? A board-style table does not help a group trying to remove barriers to communication
- If there is no board-style table, is there a small table or other point of focus in the centre of the group?

**Ground rules**

- How are group ground rules arrived at?
- If you are using a particular method, such as action learning, how are its protocols refreshed?

**Messages**

- How are messages to the group communicated?
- How is their impact managed? As the group coach it is your responsibility to manage this for the group.

**Time boundaries**

- Are the start and finish time boundaries of the group understood to be binding on everyone?
- How are any variations handled?

**Contact outside sessions (learning groups only)**

- Is there any contact between members between group sessions?
- Is there any contact between the coach and any member between group sessions?
- If there is contact, how is the impact of the contact on the group thought about?



### Beginnings, middles and endings of group sessions: tasks and indicators

Stage	Beginning	Middle	End
Tasks	Arrive, be welcomed, settle down, get basic information	Start work, share ideas, discuss context, issues, approaches and solutions, sometimes make decisions	Summarize decisions and next steps, tie up loose ends, evaluate and celebrate, say goodbye
Problems if too long	Over-cosy, frustrated, feel discussion is unreal	Getting nowhere, locked in conflict, overwhelmed, frustrated, attacked	'Already gone', time wasted, bored
Problems if too short	Anxious, uninformed	Frustrated, unable to get a word in, uninformed, cheated of a full discussion	Things too neatly wrapped up, solution doesn't cope with problems

### Beginnings, middles and endings of sessions: good behaviour

At each stage of the group there are specific behaviours that the group coach is keen to encourage in group members. Especially at first, s/he may need to do so by example. Not all these will apply to every situation.

#### Activities that help at the beginning

- Welcoming people
- Raising issues
- Suggesting ways of tackling a problem
- Asking for and/or giving information
- Listening carefully
- Noticing who wants to speak/encouraging others to speak.

#### Activities that help in the middle

- Offering ideas/views/opinions
- Asking questions
- Differentiating information from opinion
- Acknowledging contributions
- Suggesting structures for discussion
- Clarifying your ideas or other people's ideas
- Building on your ideas or other people's ideas
- Confronting differences
- Seeking others' views and feelings
- Enthusiasing others
- Seeking consensus.

#### Activities that help at the end

- Evaluating ideas
- Summarizing arguments and facts
- Formulating proposals
- Acknowledging what has been done, and what remains to do
- A definite ending.

### The beginning of the coaching assignment

What the coach does at the outset of a group coaching assignment is critical; s/he has to set the tone that is going to be most productive for this group, promoting a learning culture safe enough for people to take risks, taking account of the task, the organization's habits and culture, the individuals involved, and the relationships between them outside the group. See also 'Holding a group' in Chapter 2 and 'Anxiety in groups' in Chapter 10.

Here is a checklist for a coaching group's first meeting.

### Setting a new group up right – the first meeting

- Your core objective is to ensure that everyone wants to come back next time
- Welcoming
- Explaining the group's objective and the process
- Consult them about what working agreements would help them work well together
- Acknowledging feelings, especially anxiety – do not say that you feel anxious, but acknowledge that it is 'normal' for 'everyone' at the outset
- Modelling – for instance, showing interest in others and their views
- Be explicit about what you want from them – for instance, that you want everyone to make a contribution and hear their own voice in the group
- Reinforcing members' positive behaviours
- Being observant of individuals
- Encouraging everyone to speak
- Keeping boundaries firm – use of agreed protocols
- Keeping boundaries firm – start and end on time.

### The middle of the coaching assignment and the transfer of learning

Coaching assignments have time limits. Time limits are useful in focusing and refocusing the group on the task, and encouraging the transfer of learning to normal working life. The core skill is to hold the end in mind from the beginning, including having a sense of where the group is in the process. Be explicit with the group about this at times: 'we have four more sessions to sort that out'. Encourage individuals and teams to break their goals down into smaller steps and review how they are doing towards achieving their main goals.

It is helpful always to 'bookmark' the midpoint of the assignment. It helps people notice that they are now in the second half of the work, and stimulates thought about the end, and what they are taking forward from the process.

As the middle becomes the late middle, you can raise the question, 'how will you keep this up after the coaching group has ended?'

There is a line to be walked here requiring subtlety and skill. It is also an important part of the coach's role to protect unhurried time for thought, for the work to be done. The skilled coach can balance this paradox of unhurried time versus limited time through pace shifts in different parts of the session. There is also a pace to change to be respected. New insights take time to digest. Don't rush too quickly to 'how will you put that into practice?' or you run the risk of the idea not being fully grappled with, and the action being inadequately thought through.<sup>189</sup>

The transfer of learning is achieved in the middle of the group, not the end; it is in how the learning has been internalized. The process of summing this up at the end is a reinforcement of work that has already taken place, or it is meaningless.

### Transfer of learning and good intentions

The question of how to ensure that things that we have learned stay learned is a perennial and familiar challenge for coaches and allied professionals. We know from our own experience that truths self-evident in the clear light of the coaching session can evaporate on return to normal work routine; shifts in behaviour celebrated in the group will certainly be under threat when the individual is under pressure, since we all regress to primitive ways of relating when we are under stress.

Good resolutions get broken sooner or later. Paradoxically, if the coach can help the team have tolerance of some failure in changing behaviour, it is easier for people to return to the new behaviour. The team coaching in the example 'holds' the issue of how people behave to each other through the change period. In this way failures can be understood and overcome, and improvements reinforced, over time becoming 'normal' or habitual. If it had ceased after the creation of a list of desired behaviours, this would not have happened.

**Vignette: Planning for failure**

Mary coached the team through a difficult negotiation about how they could improve collaboration, requiring changes in behaviour from everyone. By the third session everyone had clarified what others expected from them and what they wanted from each of the others.

**MARY:** So you have agreed your team ground rules. What will happen when someone breaks one of them?

**FRED:** What do you mean? We don't intend to break them.

**SHAZIA:** We don't *intend* to ... but we need to know what the sanctions are when someone does.

**MARY:** Well, I wasn't thinking so much of sanctions as how to get things back on track.

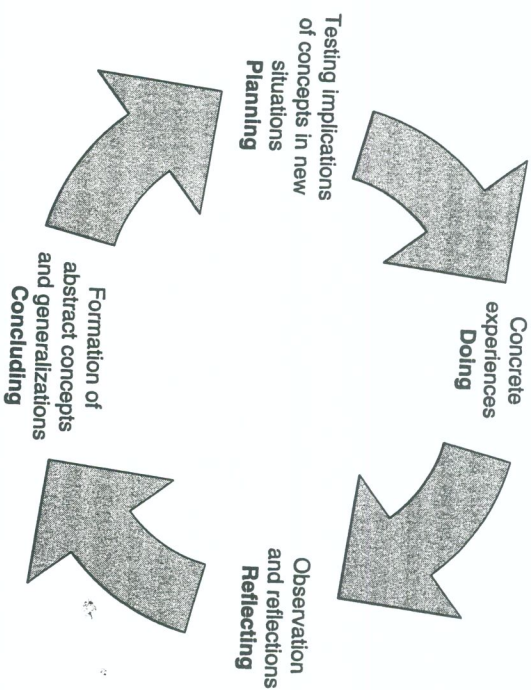
**TOM:** We could talk it over at once.

**KERRY:** That would be best – ... or if there wasn't time, just 'bookmark' it to discuss at our next coaching session – like we have done so far.

When they returned, George said 'it was a good thing we talked about what to do when we didn't stick to the new rules. I felt dreadful when I snarled at Kerry and Fred, but as it was I didn't despair, I just picked myself up, tried to do better, and I knew we could talk it through here.'

**Kolb and Learning**

Kolb's well-known learning cycle<sup>170</sup> in its original form offers a simple model for thinking about the transfer of learning of group members. The cycle is continuous, and learning begins at any entry point. We can use the model in a formal way or informally as an internal checklist.



Optimal learning involves using all elements of the cycle, so it can be used to ensure that individual and group learning is thorough, engaging fully with each perspective. It is also useful in gauging individual learning styles, to tailor how to work with individuals to take advantage of their preferences, and challenge them to use their least preferred ways of learning.

**The ending of a coaching group**

If the beginning of a group is a defining moment, the ending is also very important, but in a much less conscious way. Endings are one of the most common areas where personal feelings can undermine the work. Most of this section is concerned not with celebration but with loss and the deficit side of endings, because that is where the pitfalls lie for the coach in 'holding' the group steady.

Ending on time is crucial, in each session of the coaching assignment and as regards the assignment as a whole. Firm time boundaries evoke the 'holding' that makes the group feel safer, and makes challenging interactions more tolerable.

If a group coaching assignment is extended, it should be through an explicit and relatively formal discussion involving the group in reviewing its goals and timeframe together before it is confirmed.

### Psychological dimensions of endings

A prerequisite for working effectively with group coaching endings is for the coach to be aware of her/his own feelings about them. Endings are often difficult. If something is good, why would we want it to end? Or was it so challenging that our most positive feeling is relief at its conclusion? While most people can respond to the idea of a new beginning, for many of us endings are problematic, at a non-rational level.

This is to do with the way our brains work. We automatically link all new experiences (such as the end of a learning group or team coaching assignment) to previous experiences that have similar components. There is an association in our minds between this ending and all the other endings we have ever experienced. By the middle of life this will for most of us have included some painful losses such as bereavement, divorce, redundancy and so on. There is therefore an association between endings and pain. Some people will go to great lengths to avoid pain, and therefore habitually avoid endings. We all know people who 'don't do goodbyes'.

Involvement in a good coaching group is demanding and as it comes to an end, some people who are still physically present will withdraw and begin to focus their attention on 'what's next' – they are 'already gone'. It is a bigger problem in learning groups than in intact teams since the team will usually be going on – it is only your involvement as the coach that is coming to an end. Conversely, in a learning group, you have greater influence over how the ending will be managed.

For a team, it is important for them to notice what they are losing with your departure, and what they are gaining. What has your work meant for them? What have you represented (at a psychological level)? Have you become in some sense a part of the team, so that it is a loss to which they

need to adjust? What are your own feelings at the end of this assignment – what are you losing?

You should not be surprised at people discovering an urgent conflicting appointment so that they need to miss the final session, or leave it early, even if the coaching group has been the most positive of experiences. Some people will go further and simply not turn up. This is the most damaging response, for these individuals and for the group as a whole. The section 'dealing with early departers' below addresses this.

### Unconscious feelings about endings

The difficulty in working with endings as a coach is that most of these feelings about endings are unwanted, non-rational, and not very conscious. Members may therefore not be very receptive to thinking about them. Indeed, probably at least a percentage of coaches reading this are thinking 'what is she on about?'. If these are your honest feelings, you are unlikely to work with endings at this level. Instead, stick with what you know. Do make a point of marking endings definitely, and allow people to reflect together as they say goodbye.

So, why try to help coaching group members towards a more conscious way of dealing with endings? After all, we are not working as therapists. Well, for one thing, modern organizational life requires an unprecedented volume of endings and new starts. People manage this in various ways, perhaps most commonly by 'getting on with it'.

But to begin something new in a clean way, we need to have finished with what came before, or it will continue to preoccupy us and perhaps colour our judgement in the new role. 'When I was at xxxx we did it like this' can only persist for so long. The ending also has an impact on how the group experience is remembered and subsequently metabolized. Therefore to reinforce more conscious, mature and positive styles of ending is of great value at work, promoting better performance. We can however only do this if we are ourselves conscious of the personal impact of endings.

Your core aim at the end of a group coaching assignment is to encourage members to express as honestly as possible how they feel about the ending, both positive and negative feelings. This takes us back to 'holding'. You cannot take away difficult feelings, but you can make having and expressing those feelings OK.

Most people, including coaches, have at best ambivalent feelings about endings. It is helpful to the coach to accept that her/his success rate at helping people manage mature endings is likely to be lower than in general.

### Dealing with early departers

It is important at a non-conscious level that the members end together, as well as the more obvious need for having all their voices in celebrating and reviewing the learning. Coaching groups can achieve a depth and range of communication unusual in organizational life, and usually are experienced by members as important in their development.

The non-conscious impact of early departures from final sessions is therefore significant for those who remain. The departure may be experienced as dismissive, rejecting, or disrespectful, even though the early leaver intends none of this. S/he is simply leaving the difficult business of ending to everyone else. Other members may well respond 'politely' rather than honestly, even if they are conscious of these feelings. Perhaps negative feelings about someone leaving early go back to archaic times, when every member of a group was needed to bolster the chances of survival.

Resist members' impulses to leave early, and insist on the importance of completing the work together. You will not always succeed, since some people will simply present you with a *fait accompli* or have a genuinely difficult dilemma. You will succeed more often, however, if you help the dilemma to be expressed and worked on in the group.

Even more than for the group, it is important for the person who wishes to leave early to think through the meaning and impact of their wish, and perhaps to overcome it and stay. Is this a regular pattern of behaviour for them? What is gained by it? What do they think they lose? What do

they think others lose? What would happen if they were to take the risk of changing the pattern and seeing something through to the end?

It is easier to deal with people who let you know beforehand that they want to miss or to leave early on the final day; it allows time to think about and discuss how to handle things.

At times someone will choose to prioritize something over the group and you, and everyone else, will see the force of their argument. This actually compounds the group's difficulties, since the more negative feelings will then be harder to express. It is your role to take these feelings seriously and encourage the group to voice them. It may help to transpose the question to an ordinary working situation such as the loss of a team member. What feelings do people have in that situation?

Always expect the group member to convince you that the need for early departure is genuine, particularly for the last session. Skilled avoiders of endings will have some very good reasons why it is imperative. Although it runs against ordinary politeness, maintain an agnostic posture towards these.

If you cannot persuade the early departer to stay the course, the group will not end together, and you must help the group manage that. How can the others say goodbye to the early leaver? How will s/he say goodbye? How can the impact of the departure be aired?

### In the final session

The aim of the final session is for everyone to sum up their learning, clarify what they have gained and what they still need to learn, and to say goodbye. The focus of the last session should be a detailed review of individual gains and losses and of the development of the group.

For a team, the goodbyes may only be to you, the coach. For a learning group, everyone is saying goodbye to everyone else. When people have had important learning experiences together, the loss can be felt deeply.

### Some questions to ask in ending a coaching group

- What has this group been like – its strengths and weaknesses?
- What have I liked or disliked about it?
- What has helped me?
- What have I (the coach) represented for you?
- What have the individuals represented for each other?
- What have individuals gained?
- How can they take forward what they have gained?
- What did they hope for?
- Did they get it?
- If yes, how could they go on getting it/keep it?
- If no, was it realistic? Where else could it be sought?

At the end, people may need to express sad feelings at the loss of the group, or relief that it is over; reminisce about the group's successes, or say how they have felt about each other or helped each other. If needed, it is easy to devise simple exercises for marking endings. The box shows a few.

### Ending rituals for coaching groups

- Saying what has been most important to us about the group
- Saying 'one thing I did and one thing I didn't get'
- Naming one positive change in how we act at work as a result of the group
- Naming one thing we are taking forward from the group in our work
- Saying one thing the person to my left has contributed to my understanding
- Saying one thing I have appreciated about that person

- Cloaks – each person wears a flipchart on their back, and everyone else writes one true, positive thing on it (water-based pens only)
- Form a circle to pat each other on the back.
- Group make a picture poster showing what it has achieved (one flipchart and lots of pens) – no words allowed on it.

If you do propose an ending exercise, it should be consonant with the group. Coaching uses words a lot, and so most of the exercises in the box are verbal. If however you have used other methods, continue that way. Remember too that what is communicated non-verbally in the last session is at least as important as what is communicated in words. It is important that everyone participate, so choose an exercise that will not exclude. For example, touch is problematic for some people, so if you are not sure it's OK, don't. Even the 'collective pat on the back' in the box, as apparently unthreatening as a touch exercise can get, may be difficult for some.

### Finally

End on time. Attending carefully to the time boundaries of our groups helps provide members with a secure base for productive work.