

Chapter 4

Why OD Consultants Should be in T-groups

Any consultant/coach/trainer who has not had several T-group experiences (Tavistock/encounter/intensive) will surely miss some profound intervention opportunities when doing their work! The interventions that competent intensive group leaders make are often on target in any human interaction. However without knowing these, golden moments may be missed.

Why several? Because leaders and group compositions are different and because participants in their first such intensive group leave with distorted beliefs about what the *trainer/leader* did. The more powerful the experience for the individual, the more likely the distortion.

While honoring other *intensive* group experiences, my focus is on the T-group from which sprang, especially the encounter movement but more significantly, OD itself! Thus I claim that the T-group is an essential element in the training of OD consultants. Many groups focus on personal growth. The T-group, while also helping individuals, comes from a multifaceted grounding that also embraces social justice, group processes, and organizational systemic issues with strong roots in Kurt Lewin's passion for democracy. The invention in 1946 lit a spark in the OD practice led by those who initially learned from Lewin. The first OD theorists and practitioners not only attended T-groups, but then led them and thus learned how to intervene in non-T-group settings in a much more profound and existential way.

In 1958 Dr. Edgar Schein, a young MIT professor, attended the Human Relations Lab at Bethel. He writes, "Doug McGregor asked me to go to this Lab so I went to please the

boss, but was not at all optimistic about what I would learn in such a three-week adventure. Later he would write, “Little did I know that this would turn out to be a most significant event, both professionally and personally...This kind of learning enables learners to discover things about themselves, their impact on others, and the deeper dynamics of groups that cannot be learned in other ways.”

As late as 1965 the core training for OD professionals was the T-group. That year I was fortunate enough to be invited to NTL’s first month-long OD Intern program at Bethel, Maine. The core of the experience was a T-group. They were led by W. Warner Burke and Goodwin Watson, and included sessions with a variety of faculty such as Chris Argyris, Robert Morton (Grid Management), Will Schutz, and Joyce and John Weir. There were also opportunities for interaction with Leland Bradford, Ron and Gordon Lippitt, and other legendary leaders in the budding OD/T-group movement. Both lead trainers were Columbia University Professors. Goodwin became the long-time editor of the prestigious *Journal of the Applied Behavioral Sciences*. He was a (younger) colleague of John Dewey. I was in Goodwin’s group.

One of our two basic books was *T-group Theory and Laboratory Learning*, edited by Bradford, Gibb, and Benne. The other, *Personal and Organizational Change Through Group Methods: The Laboratory Approach*, was by Edgar Schein and Warren Bennis. That Schein at about age 37 was co-authoring with Warren Bennis is impressive. He would become a preeminent leader in the field. His books such as *Process Consulting* and recently *Humble Inquiry*, *Humble Consulting* and with son Peter Schein, *Humble Leadership*, and *Organizational Culture and Leadership* have become *must* reading.

Warren Bennis, Ronald Lippitt, Matthew Miles and several eminent others were contributors to the T-group theory book. *It is no accident that OD became prominent with the emergence of the*

T-group, that these early leaders were T-group trainers, and that a month-long OD training planned by the founders of OD had the T-group at its core.

Also, it should not be taken lightly by current students, practitioners, and University teachers of OD that I'm claiming that a T-group experience is essential if you are going to practice anything resembling the early meaning of OD! Without a grounding in the T-group, OD and change management loses its heart and incisive grasp of interventions that highlight deeper dimensions of work and life.

Personal learnings can come from many sources in life, but the T-group encompasses the individual and the group dimension. This integrated training pulls together the best about EQ, touches deftly on one's family/culture of origin and its influence, and helps conceptualize and engage participants in the practicing of various situational conflict styles. It also brings to consciousness group processes such as *decision making by default* and interaction patterns. In addition the T-group supports being your own clear self while increasing compassion for the other which is no small part of why participants consistently rate the experience high.

Edgar Schein writes about his early T-group experiences, "The most important thing I learned is that the very skills I had acquired in the T-group were needed for such successful action in our staff group—good observation, careful listening, insight into my own filters and biases, and, most important, skill in handling disagreement through careful reflection and feedback around observed behavior."

Further, when doing this with intact groups (or among people who work together daily), the conversation comes back again and again to work issues, especially those that are unresolved.

As trainers we don't care what is talked about, but rather, how the participants are engaging with each other. We present the T-group task this way:

Speak for yourself

I want

I think

I feel

Actively listen and engage with others

Notice and intervene to improve the group patterns and dynamics while remaining aware of the *here-and-now* moment as contrasted with the *there-and-then*, i.e. the past or concern about the future.

The lack of awareness of the present moment means that life slips away while I worry about the future or focus on the past. Most participants are not aware of their emotion in the moment. Helpers, whose focus has often been on the helpee, are often stunned to discover that they themselves lack clarity about their own immediate emotional state. One must know what they feel to wisely choose what to do!

We don't care what the immediate subject is. We help them focus on the T-group task.

Thus much is learned about the way they view work issues. Themes of critical importance do arise and we help expedite these in the larger system. Transfer of learning is enhanced as they successfully work on business issues using skills being taught in the training.

In our unique business adaptation, as described in Chapter 5, we have an outer circle which is of equal importance for learning as the inner one. OD consultants desperately need

the skill set expected there! The observer is expected to write what they see and hear without judgments and to hunch the emotionality of the one being observed. It is a rare (1 in 20) person who can do this and yet that ability brings a scientific dimension to both OD and T-group work. Also, if one is confusing judgments with facts, EQ is severely limited. A recent participant joined us shortly after attending an EQ conference. They had neither learned about this critical dimension in that conference nor had built the competence in performing the skill to our standards. Therefore, they had little awareness of their emotionality. *The notion that people can become emotionally intelligent by learning concepts without engagement is an oxymoron!*

The ability to pull back from an accusation/judgment so as to describe accurately what one has seen or heard is a skill woefully lacking and rarely taught. Judgments are in our heads and come from *our* history; behavior description accurately aims to state what is outside of us. That is why the skill of behavior description, coupled with the ability to recognize, name, and own one's emotions, is so essential if one is going to be an OD consultant. Also, it is essential if one is to have a sane differentiated life in a confused undifferentiated world.

Further, as noted on page 50 and 51, behavior description affects the Anterior Cingulate Cortex (ACC) area of the brain which is located between the Prefrontal Cortex and the Limbic area. (O'Conner, 2006) Especially, my capacity to separate my personal judgments from a behavior description of what I sense (see, hear, touch, smell) is a critical element in balancing these two parts of the brain. Children believe that their judgments are facts. Adults remain stuck there unless they learn how to describe behavior, describe and own emotions, paraphrase, and tune in to the perceived emotions of others, all emphasized significantly by John Wallen. Without these skills, emotional awareness is shallow. The T-group, competently led, nails these!

The difference between the T and a traditional discussion/lecture is the same as between swimming and talking about swimming. The T is an experience *in* Group Dynamics and other dimensions mentioned above, not only a discussion *about* them. OD will not be the dynamic it can be if current practitioners attempt to learn by reading and discussion *alone*. OD cannot be taught *on-line* alone. It demands serious time in T-groups and serious time in field work with experienced practitioners. Discussion is *not* an experiential activity unless the participants stop and discuss the interaction itself! Who is talking, actively listening with paraphrase or parrot (repeat back the words you thought you heard). Who interrupts and who is most frequently interrupted. How was the topic chosen? (Please don't say that there was no topic! There is always a topic.) Questions such as these move the discussion from the cognitive domain to the experiential domain. The affective (values/emotions), and the motoric (skill development) domains must be engaged.

Attend a T-group more than once.

It's not about learning to lead them, though we do need a new generation of practitioners, but it's about being a better consultant and human with your clients. It's about broadening and deepening your intervention capability.

Every intensive group is different. Even with the same leader the participants are different. And even if they weren't, there is always a new depth to reach! Our graduate program had a continuing T-group (or intensive group depending on the training of the faculty leading) in each module. A concept such as Wallen's Interpersonal Gap was being discovered by these adult students (average age 45) in greater depth in the 2nd year of the program—and on and on in life I will add!

In Chapter 5, I describe the fishbowl T-group model in detail. Traditional T-groups are quite different. Here is a quote from Matt Minahan (from American University) describing one person's experience at the beginning of a traditional T-group, "Oh, man, are we gonna sit here all day? In this silly circle? I wonder what the agenda is? Why won't they just tell us what we're going to do? If someone doesn't speak up soon, I'm gonna go nuts...And why don't the leaders just lead?"

Matt's quote is an example of the inner monologue of some T-group participants on the first day. He goes on to say, "It does seem like a bit of torture to subject people to a large circle of colleagues and peers or even strangers for several days, without a given topic, without a clear plan, and with leaders who aren't leading in expected ways. And yet, that is exactly the fertile ground in which mountains of learning erupt that make the silence and early ambiguity worth it."

Anxiety increases when there is less up-front structure provided during a T-group experience. Having had extensive experience in both models, I think the classic T-group adds more ambiguity than ours. Ambiguity, but not too much, leads to learning. Our fishbowl model retains its fair share of ambiguity (spelled *life* by us to highlight that life is indeed ambiguous!). The plus for our model is that it more easily can be done in business. The classic T-group, for all its power, appears to have been too ambiguous and therefore too anxiety-arousing in attempted applications to the business world.

By contrast, our fishbowl model has been sustained, with executive support, for years, as in Alcoa from 1991 to 2008, across some 15 plants. In Alcoa, it was initiated by Don Simonic, likely the most successful manager in Alcoa's history. For instance, with Simonic's sponsorship, after two years of T-groups and other work at Alcoa's Addy, Washington plant, Business Week reported a 72% productivity gain therefore avoiding a possible plant closure. That work was conducted

and crafted by wife, Patricia, and I working closely with the internal Human Resource Manager Tom McCombs. Of course, Don Simonic was the plant manager always in the mix driving the intervention.

The OD intervention, which included intact/cousin fishbowl T-groups, was soon being touted by Alcoa's CEO Paul H. O'Neill. A video of a board meeting shows him in front of various logos on the wall which he considered to be symbols of his strategies. One of these was LIOS, the name of the institute that I founded in 1969 to house my consulting work, and the nickname of the subsequent Applied Behavioral Science Graduate program that I contracted with Whitworth University in 1973.

In Don Simonic's next assignment, with Tom internal and several contractors extensively trained in our T-group methods, we did comprehensive OD including Survey Feedback with each *intact group*, across 4000 union and management personnel. Close to a thousand at two plants were in our fishbowl T-groups. Please get it that the T-groups were a part of a comprehensive OD strategy. For that larger strategy see my book, *Cultural Change in Organizations* or Chapter 1 of son Chris's, *Strategic Engagement: Practical Tools to Raise Morale and Increase Results - Vol I*. Chris's two-volume set has most of the other interventions we used to obtain those incredible results. During those two years it was reported that Simonic's two plants (in Knoxville, Tennessee and in Evansville, Indiana) made a third of the world-wide profits among the 165 plants!

What Participants say about T-Groups

Many in the field of leadership, management, and organization development cite their T-group experience as the moment that changed their lives for the better. They said they learned to notice process, to operate in the here-and-now, to test their

observations and inferences before acting, and to empathize with others in way that had not happened previously.

Others say, “I’ve never had such a powerful experience in my life” or, “I expected a traditional management course taught by a trainer, and discovered that my learnings came from myself and the folks in the lab.” “I couldn’t imagine what we were going to do for a week...and though I’m real ready to go home now, I could stay for another week, given how cool this has been.”

“I went through this almost 20 years ago at PECO Nuclear and it is the only training that has ever stuck with me. I use the skills and concepts every day.” –VP, Nuclear Power Industry.

“My employee grew more (in this training) than he has in the previous 24 years I have known him,” Plant Manager, Manufacturing Corp.

So, despite the person who Matt Minahan quoted earlier in this chapter saying, “Oh man, are we going to sit here all day?” the above quotes are very typical of what people say at the end of their first T-group.

Where to find T-groups to attend

Even currently T-groups, reports David Bradford of Stanford, have “...a central role at the Stanford Graduate School of Business. It is seen as one of the *must* electives. We teach eleven sections of the course and about 85% of the students take it. Alumni regularly name it as one of the most important courses they took as an MBA.” Annually, Stanford also offers a high quality 6-day residential T-group as part of the GSB Executive Program.

David Bradford of Stanford is the son of Leland Bradford, who with Kenneth Benne and Ronald Lippitt led the first T-groups in 1947 after Lewin’s untimely death. The work they initiated is constantly evolving and also continues, at least,

through NTL's Human Interaction Laboratory, Stanford, my own consultancy (Crosby & Associates), and in the religious domain.

The Center for Emotional Intelligence & Human Relations Skills, formed in 2007 by trainers from various churches, offers training to Faith-based groups in several locations. The group was founded by the seasoned Lutheran Pastor Roy Oswald, it offers quality training in the T-group tradition.

Twice annually, in Seattle, WA, Crosby & Associates offers our trademarked week-long T-group based workshops (which we call Tough Stuff). At these trainings, participants can take an additional 8 hour seminar called *train-the-trianer* which surrounds the workshop. While most of our T-groups happen within organizations as part of our broader culture change strategy, the Seattle workshops and a shorter crash course we run in Jamaica are open to the general public.

Here are four sources of public T-groups:

Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills
www.eqhrCenter.org

Crosby & Associates
www.crosbyod.com

The NTL Institute
www.ntl.org

Stanford Graduate School of Business
www.gsb.stanford.edu/exec-ed