

Why Organization Development (OD) Consultants Need To Be In T-Groups.

By Robert Crosby

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.

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 an almost daily T-Group. They were led by W. Warner Burke and Goodwin Watson and the training 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 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. 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. Warren Bennis, Ronald Lippitt, Matthew Miles and several eminent others were contributors. *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, not just the individual, but the group dimension. Gordon Allport wrote about Lewin, "His unifying theme is unmistakable: the group to which an individual belongs is the ground for his perceptions, his feelings, and his actions (Kurt Lewin, 1948, 1997, p5)." This integrated setting pulls together the best about EQ, touches deftly on one's family/culture of origin and its influence, helps conceptualize and engage participants in the practicing of various situational conflict styles, and 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.

Further, when done 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

And observe and influence the group's patterns/dynamics while remaining aware of the *here & 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 s/he feels in order 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.

In our unique business adaptation, as described elsewhere ("T-Group as Cutting Edge", Fall Issue 2013, ODPractitioner.), 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. He had neither learned about this critical dimension in that conference nor had he competence in performing the skill to our standards when he started our T-Group.

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; behavioral description accurately states 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, behavior description affects the Anterior Cingulate (AC) 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*. The affective (values/emotions), and the motoric (skill development) domains must be engaged.

Another key distinction needed by OD consultants is an in-depth understanding of openness. *Openness*, defined to mean my ability and willingness to share what I'm aware of in the here-and-now (I'm sad, glad, mad, afraid), is an awareness and skill missing for most. Openness also means data flow. In a survey of 600 companies a question that almost always scored poorly was, "I have a hard time getting the information I need to do a good job!" The T-Group's primary goal is to increase openness and can do so, but usually not without some frustrating moments as this ambiguous learning unfolds. *Unskilled trainers turned openness into personal confession, which everyone already knows how to do*, and which is counter-productive in business settings! While openness is about what's happening between us now, *personal confession* is the sharing of private stories from outside the group such as past history (e.g., I've been married four times). That lack of clarity is but one example of how the original intent became lost in recent decades. While the sharing of secretly held stories may be important in certain therapeutic settings, it was not the original intent of the T-Group.

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.

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-group's in 1947 after Lewin's untimely death. The work they initiated is constantly evolving and also continues, at least, through NTL, Stanford, Crosby & Associates, and in the religious domain. Currently the EQ & HR (Emotional Intelligence & Human Relations) Center, formed six years ago by trainers from various churches, offers training to Faith-based groups in several locations. Directed by the seasoned Lutheran Pastor Roy Oswald, it offers quality training in the T-group tradition.

For an initial "train the trainer," done surrounding our industry adaptation of the T-Group (which we call Skill Group) we offer our own T-group based sessions, which I lead twice annually in Seattle. While most of our application of T-group methodology occurs within organizations as part of our broader culture change interventions, the Seattle sessions, using our industry adaptation, and an annual Kingston Jamaica session are open to the general public. You can learn more about our offerings at www.crosbyod.com.