

Integrated Model of Group Development through Research and Practice

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The purpose of the paper is to understand the group dynamics of a group, interpret the experience using relevant literature on group dynamics and formulate a model based on the observations. Group development has been studied using various interventions and in variety of contexts. The current paper utilizes a storytelling format to describe the observations of an unstructured group in a classroom setting. The paper then proposes a new model of group development that is a combination of the various traditional models but provides a unique perspective on some aspects of group dynamics. The paper also provides limitations of the study and gives directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Group dynamics involves the interaction among various components of a group like members, leader, processes, boundaries, structure, norms, values etc. In order to understand group dynamics it is important to understand these individual components within a group. Group dynamics has been studied in various settings like laboratory, therapy, and training. Research has also developed group development models like linear, spiral, polarity, punctuated equilibrium model, etc. based on the analysis of these group dynamics. Similarly, the current paper will investigate the developmental processes in a small unstructured group. The paper will borrow Goffman's perspective of theatrical performance to describe the group dynamics of the group observed. The paper will then try to understand the observations using group dynamics literature. Based on the analysis, the paper will also derive a model of group development.

The Story

It was the day of the big event. Everyone was ready for the event to begin. The stage was set. Everyone took their respective positions, the curtain was drawn, and the play began. This was the first experience for all of them to be on the stage, unprepared.

The scene was that, a group of fifteen people were sitting face-to-face self-reflecting and observing group behavior in an unstructured environment. They were confined to the place for three hours until the interval after which they had to play their parts again for three more hours. Everyone was worried about their performance but still they wanted to give their best. They knew that the performance could be a catastrophe and yet they hoped for a magical wand to turn the performance into a perfect performance.

Anxiety was at the peak when everyone gathered and took their respective position. Everyone exchanged brief pleasantries and greetings and the performance began. The leader of the group (an authority figure) led the group to start their conversations. Taking the cue from the leader the members began their conversations. It was a smooth transmission and reception of information among group

members at the beginning. Everyone put up a front of being smart, well read and belonging to the group. A front is that part of individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance (Goffman, 1959). Though there were slips, and occasional mistakes initially; they were well covered up and put aside. The overall performance was good. Members did have a challenge of presenting their true self and presenting a self that they wanted the audience to see, however this transition also went smoothly.

After the initial fear and anxiety members became more comfortable with the situation. They thought they could easily put up this front for three hours and even gain some mastery in the task. However, this comfort was short lived as some members gained confidence and even over confidence. Some bold members in the group initiated the conversation and challenged the performance of other group members. They prompted them with questions that were difficult to answer and sometimes even difficult to understand. The immediate reaction to this was to look at the authority figure who had not spoken a word after the initial conversation. The quiet demeanor of the figure did not change and he remained silent in his position.

There was a pause and a silence for five seconds. It was a disturbing moment for the group members. They had so much relied on the authority figure to be the savior and help them from these bold members in the group but they were helpless. The silence made them even more uncomfortable. Finally, a member changed the topic and brought up a new conversation starter. Oh! What a relief! You could almost hear the members heaving a sigh of relief. Members enthusiastically started participating in the conversations but they still had a feeling of dejection and disappointment for the leader for not answering the question. Some even tried to show the leader that they did not want his authority and that they were not dependent on him for anything. They had already gained mastery in the performance and even started enjoying each other's company. They really did not need the leader. The leader was thus ignored. The three hours passed and the interval was used by members to get out of the performance, reflect on what they said and what they should say thereafter.

After the interval the group members again resumed with the discussion. They were well prepared now and knew what to expect. The leader again initiated the discussion but this time members were not dependent on his instructions. Members had built trust in each other. Again the front was well displayed. Previously members were more cautious on broaching a subject but now they were comfortable with each other. They even revealed their true self at times. The performance continued. Members brought up topics after topics, shared their experience, provided advice. Everything was going smoothly until, she asked that question.

The question was a dramatic turn in the performance. The façade that the group members were portraying for such a long time was shattered. Members were bewildered and confused. Why did she ask this question? The fear of uncertainty again enveloped the members. A group member had asked a question that was related to a very sensitive topic, almost a taboo to be discussed in a social setting. There was a brief pause after the question. But this time members responded quickly to the situation. They knew from the past experience it was not worth depending on the leader and it was better to reason out sooner in order to get the members out of the discomfort posed by the question. Members did their best to provide answer to the question. The group member who had posed the question also felt guilty and apologized for bringing it up but felt it was necessary for her to do so. The members comforted her and interestingly the leader who was quiet for all this time also provided an answer to the question. Due to this reaction from the leader he was more accepted by the group members and was considered as one of them. The group members continued with their discussions. Now the members started developing a bond among them. They were more comfortable with each other. The compulsion that they had before of answering the question was no longer felt. They also readily accepted the pauses rather than thinking of them as intrusions and instead took their time to introspect and self-reflect during these pauses. Gradually the conversations became scarcer and scarcer. Members felt the exhaustion of a long working day. They were satisfied with their performance and the day concluded.

This story describes three concepts of group dynamics:

1. Self identity in a group
2. Behavior towards a leader
3. Salient behavior in the group

The emphasis will be on understanding these concepts in the light of the literature of group dynamics.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As defined by Schein (1988), a group consists of two or more interacting persons who are psychologically aware, share a common fate and are face to face. Group is also defined as consisting of “two or more interacting persons who share common goals, have a stable relationship are somehow interdependent and perceive that they are in fact part of a group” (Paulus, 1989, p.143.). These definitions of group state that, to form a group, members have to feel that they are a part of the group and this feeling needs to be mutual. Even if one member feels he is a part of the group and if there is no reciprocal reaction, then individual members will be only physically present together face- to-face, but working psychologically independently. One way of building this mutual trust is being aware of how one feels about the group and how others react to one’s self. However to understand other’s reactions one needs to be aware of one’s self.

At the beginning of any group development, members are in an ambivalent state (Bion, 1961; Tuckman, 1965; Fisher, 1970; Wheelan, 1990) Members have conflicting thoughts like do I belong to the group? Will the group accept me? Will my experience in the group be fruitful? Will I like the members of the group? The more a person tries to resolve this conflict the more he becomes anxious and stressed. The immediate reaction to any stress or anxious situation is fight or flight (Berkowitz, 1987). Thus we noticed in the unstructured group that, the anxious feeling of being in the group resulted in members either being actively involved in a situation or a withdrawal from social interaction. The withdrawal reaction results in more self evaluation and understanding of how the conflict can be resolved. However sometimes members like to test the waters before they get involved in the group. If the reaction that they receive from the group confirms to their identity then they feel wanted and a sense of belonging to the group is developed. On the contrary, if they receive a negative response then they will hide back in their cocoons. (Shutz, 1958; Bion, 1961; Schutz & Allen, 1966)

Moreover as observed in the group, members who are aggressive at the beginning of the group and readily participate. They do so because they want to hide their anxiety and preserve their identity. This can be supported by Smith & Berg’s (1997) paradox of courage that only when an individual is uncertain can one’s actions be courageous. Members are courageous because our society accepts, encourages and rewards people who are courageous. Therefore this is also an attempt to belong to the group in an acceptable way. They also feel that showing anxiety is in a way is showing their weakness which could threaten their individuality and in turn their belongingness to the group.

Although researchers have stated that preserving individuality vs. being accepted in the group is a paradox, in reality these two concepts are in a causal relationship. Only when a person starts respecting oneself or preserving self identity, the group members readily accept him in the group. However is this acceptance of the true self of the individual or the self which the member wants to portray is debatable. Goffman (1959) proposes that a member portrays himself only in ways which is accepted by others or from which he will get a desired response. Similarly, developmental psychology theories argue that initially a child has no sense of self. The child observes others’ reaction to his own behavior and develops clues about himself as a person. Questions like; who do others perceive me to be and who I must become to gain membership in this group are attempted to resolve. And this results in ‘As I have become what he perceives me to be so must he become who I perceive him to be (Srivastva, S., Obert, S.L. & Neilsen, E.H, 1977). Or as Goffman (1959) states that society is organized on principle that individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value & treat him in an

appropriate way. Thus there is a wide interplay of questions and answers that individuals go through while making an attempt to belong to the group.

The initial state of anxiety between self identity and group involvement is also characterized by the next concept which is behavior towards a leader. In the present group, the leader was an authority figure. As we saw at the beginning, the group frequently depended on the leaders supports. A leader provides protection to group members' insecurities and group members use the leader as a scapegoat to project their fears, discomforts, negatives (Gemmill, 1986). However if members continue to project these anxieties on the leader and if the leader is unable to provide a desired response then it again results in fight or flight response which results in the vicious cycle of self identification and group membership. In order for the group to develop; members need to face their ambivalence toward authority that appears in the form of dependence and counter dependence and abandon the need to define the self in relation to authority to achieve a more realistic view of the leaders (Srivastva & Barrett, 1988). As we noticed in the unstructured group; members were dejected in the beginning when the leader did not answer their questions but they overcame their frustration over the leader. They had evaluated their relation to the group and the leader's role in the group. If they had not resolved this conflict then members would have been isolated and the group would not have developed.

Traditionally, leadership is defined as the ability to influence a group toward the achievement of goals (Robbins, 2004). The situational leadership as defined by Hersey & Blanchard is based on the followers' readiness to accept or reject the leader. Without a leader it is assumed that a group cannot achieve what it needs to achieve.

There are certain myths about leaders like (Gemmill, 1986)

1. he is the only one who can give direction, vision, protect member
2. he can have the vision to determine the correct direction
3. he can protect from truth and avoid reality
4. he is omniscient and omnipotent (God-like figure)

This concept of leadership is deeply rooted in everyone. In all organizations, in our daily experiences in groups, we find that there is always a leader and members are expected to follow the leader. Thus if a leader does not behave like a leader the natural reaction is to make him behave like a leader, to expect him to take control and charge. There is a constant fear if the leader does not take charge then the members will fail. Also, as Bennis & Shepherd (1956) have said that if the leader does not help then members do not feel that he is incompetent in fact they secretly feel that the leader is purposely leading them in the direction they should be going by not saying anything. There is also a secret wish that the leader should stop this and take his proper role.

For example, as a child is learning to walk there is a need for someone to hold the child's hand. If the hand is not removed the child will never be able to walk. At the same time the child has a feeling that if the parent does not hold her hand, she will fall. Therefore, even if the parents try to remove their hand the child will continue holding the hand. Likewise, if a leader does not lead and guide the group, the group members become insecure and make the leader lead. Nevertheless, a child gains confidence and realizes that she can walk by herself and so does the group. The group also realizes that they can perform without the leader. This realization makes them more comfortable about the leader's role.

The initial disappointment of the leader results in a revolt against the leader. As we saw that members either rejected the leader completely, or members mocked or ridiculed the leader. Furthermore some members in the group purposely asked questions to the leader to get an answer from him. As Bennis & Shepherd (1956) have said that those with a counter dependent orientation strive to detect in the trainers action elements that would offer group for rebellion and may even paradoxically demand rules and leadership from him because he is failing to provide them (Bennis & Shepherd, 1956).

In Slater's view (Slater, 1966 as cited in Srivastva & Barrett, 1988) the group revolt against authority is an essential phase in the development of the group. The group moves from preoccupation of the leader to preoccupation of personal relations (Bennis & Shepherd, 1956). This transition is due to the fact that the realization that authority is not going to help them so they should look at someone inside the group.

Confrontations with the leader serve to establish inter-member solidarity and openness (Lundgren, 1971; Mills 1964, Slater, 1966 as cited in Wheelan & Mckeage, 1993). Members start looking for similar others. As Srivastva et al. (1977) states, members start to become responsive to others who fall into similar categories of age, gender, occupation, social status or reasons for participating in the group.

According to Bion the basic assumptions again resurface. We can see that members start looking for similar people (pairing). After members get satisfactory responses from each other they no longer feel helpless or isolated and the authority figure is neglected. By this time the group has discovered their identity. The authority figure is treated largely as just another member (Srivastva, et al., 1977) i.e., he should neither take more nor less responsibility for whatever happens in the group than any other member. His task expertise is recognized and his input is valued and accepted when it is appropriate (Srivastva, et al., 1977). It was observed that when there were discussions about issues that were external to the group, not only members but also the leader supported the group norm. As stated by Srivastva et al. (1977), if there are difficulties in relation to organization environment, the group engages in power struggle with other groups to secure the identity. The authority figure acts on behalf of the group in these confrontations for the issue involves status and prestige of his group in the organization. Thus we see a gradual change of dependency on leader to a sense of belongingness to the group. The third factor that is important in understanding group behavior is the turning point that occurred in the group discussion.

A turning point came when a member of the group asked the question which was not socially acceptable. This was the most salient behavior in group. Why did the member ask the question? What instigated her to ask the question? Was it her true self? What would have happened if she had asked the question in another phase of the group development?

As Goffman (1959) has stated unmeant gestures, or intrusion are sources of embarrassment which are typically unintended by the person who is responsible for making them and which would be avoided were the individual to know in advance the consequences of his activity. These are called as scenes. The previous and expected interplay between the teams is suddenly forced aside and a new drama forcibly takes its place.

First, this behavior by a group member could be because she wanted to be included more in the group. Therefore a member could revolt against the group norm by asking questions to attract attention (Gibbard, G., Hartman J., Mann, R. 1974).

Second, another explanation for the group member's behavior is that she had realized that everyone had the question in mind but were afraid to bring it up and so she thought that in order to resolve this underlying conflict she had to bring it up and get it over with. This can also be supported by Goffman's statement that the individual offers his performance and puts his show for the benefit of other people (Goffman, 1959).

Third, the individual must have wanted to convey some unapparent or obscure feelings that had been bothering her and that she wanted to get solved in the group. Therefore, the individual relies on making it dramatic to grab everyone's attention. Goffman (1959) states that for if the individual's activity is to become significant to others, he must mobilize his activity, so that it will express during the interaction what he wishes to convey. And this is an important point that the performer may be required to do so during a split second in the interaction.

Finally, the member could have experienced the second reality crisis as described by Brower (1989). The member was probably experimenting with her power in the group. The second reality crisis occurs when the leadership or power structure does not meet members' expectation. The strategies that members use to cope with the crisis are dependency, quitting, powerlessness, emotional withdrawal or experimenting with their own power in the group. This crisis usually occurs after the group has been meeting a fair amount of time though within the first half of the total time the members have together. This is the most functional way of dealing with crisis as suggested by Brower. It is important to note that the crisis brings the members of the group closer. Members also become more intimate and disclose personal issues. And this was also apparent in the unstructured group as the belongingness to the group grew stronger among members after the question.

The next part of the paper will look at the some of the traditional models of group development and propose a theory based on these models.

Model of Group Development

Research shows that there are four basic types of models: the linear model, the spiral model, the polarity model and the punctuated equilibrium model. The linear model is an orderly succession of phase or stages that follow a predefined sequence (Bouwen & Fry, 1996). For example, Bennis & Shephard have defined three phases of group development. Phase I – dependence and sub phases Dependence – flight, counter dependence – flight, resolution- catharsis, Phase II – interdependence, sub phase enchantment- flight, disenchantment-fight, consensual validation. Similarly, Brower defined group development as three stages: turning to the leader, turning to the self, developing shared schema. The unitary sequence model consisting of forming, storming, norming and performing as proposed by Tuckman is also a linear model. Finally, Schutz defined three phases of group development which are inclusion, control and affection. The group working for a short period of time will go through a) an orientation phase b) an evaluation phase based on the available information and then c) a control phase where the emergence of the decision is central (Bouwen & Fry, 1996).

The second model which is the spiral model is the one proposed by Bion. He regards the basic assumption activities of dependency, fight/flight, pairing as recurring alternatives of work. On similar grounds is the Slater's model which talks about role of revolt in establishment of group cohesion and recurring quality of individual and boundary concerns through the life of the group with the group constantly dealing with efforts to maintain equilibrium (Gibbard et al., 1974).

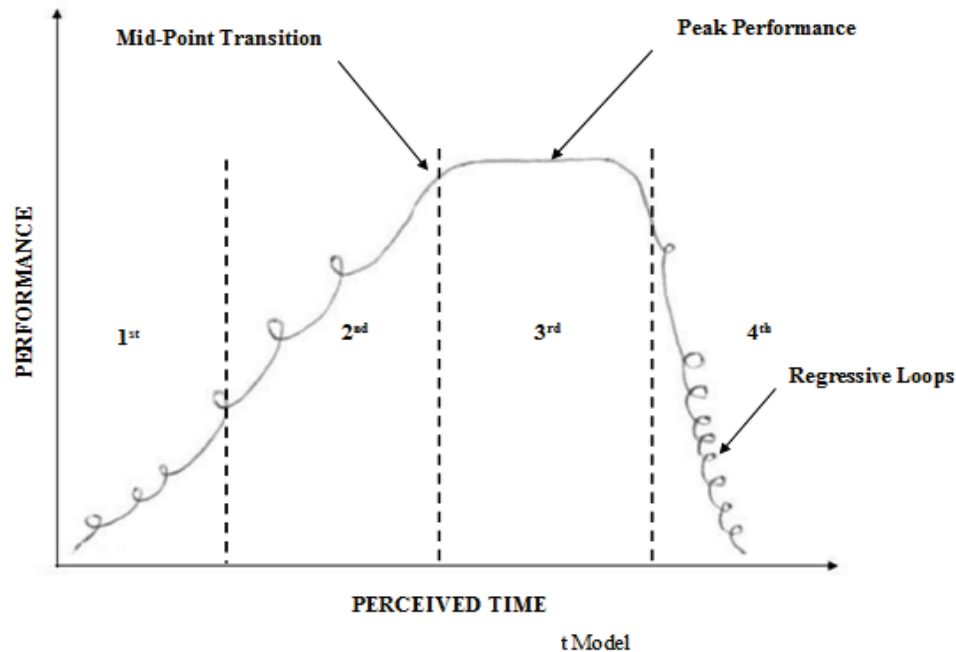
The third type of model which is the polarity model is the one stated by Smith & Berg (1997) about equilibrium forces: individuality vs. sociability or dependency vs. independency etc. or Srivastva et al. (1977) proposed five observable stages of group development: safety v anxiety, similarity v dissimilarity, supports v panic, concern v isolation, interdependence v withdrawal can also be considered as polarity model.

Finally, Gersick (1988) stressed the importance of awareness of time and deadlines that triggers group process and that teams progress in a pattern of punctuated equilibrium.

Although, these models are labeled into four distinct categories many of these models are overlapping. For example, the Schutz model can be considered as linear as well as spiral model. Similarly, based on our group experience it was observed that groups move in a progression at the same time there are recurring phases in the group development. Also there were conflicts like belongingness vs. self identity, as well as spurts of high performance due to awareness of deadline. Thus the current model suggests a combination of all four models in the group development process.

Initially, the group started with high anxiety. Members were constantly struggling with the conflict of individuality vs. group membership. The performance was gradually increasing as groups were trying to resolve the conflict. However, even though the performance was increasing, the group frequently resorted back to the basic assumptions of dependency, pairing, and fight/flight. In the current model this pattern of going back to basic assumption will be called as the regressive loop (see Figure 1). The regressive loops are when group members go back – forth from task performance to basic assumptions, due to which the perceived time as experienced by members to perform a given task decreases i.e. members perceive that they have gone back in time even though in reality the actual time does not go back. Due to this going back in time, performance decreases and the members have to resume their performance from that point where they had left it before going through the regressive loop (1st stage). This regression is due to what Bion has said that the groups provide a temptation to avoid work and individuals in groups are easily swayed into precisely such regressive behavior (Gibbard, et al., 1974).

**FIGURE 1
INTEGRATED GROUP DEVELOPMENT MODEL**



A deeper analysis of why members experience the regressive loops can be done by using Kurt Lewin's force field analysis. Based on Kurt Lewin's force field analysis, behavior is a function of person and environment (Weisbord, 2004). The driving forces like inclusion and intimacy towards the group and the restraining factors like status, racial differences, prejudices, and personality factors of the members reach equilibrium or a status quo line. Lewin proposed that the only way to reduce conflict is reducing the restraining forces. Thus many team theories propose that the initial selection of its members is a critical factor in the development of a high-performance team.

Teams must have complementary skills to do their job. Skills like problems solving, technical and interpersonal are said to be important while choosing members in the group (Katzenbach & Smith, 2003). Also Brower (1989) points out that the importance of selecting appropriate mix of members for the group's purposes becomes very crucial from a shared schema perspective. A schema is a cognitive representation that helps to encode, store and retrieve information of the world (Baron, et. al. 2001). When members perceive an event in the same way they are able to work in unison however if they do not see it as same then there are conflicts. The more the members experience conflict the more they regress and performance decreases.

The regressive loops were experienced along the way in group development. However it was observed that as soon as the group came back from the regressive stage there was a sudden increase in performance. This was probably to make up for the time lost due to being in a regressive state. The regressive loops became fewer and fewer as the group approached the maximum performance (2nd stage). The performance was the highest at the point which is half way or the midpoint transition as stated by Gersick (1988). Since the present group had a limited time frame; the midpoint transition was distinctly observed in the group. The midpoint transition is awareness of the end or the deadline which results in high performance. Moreover the peak performance was not really a peak but a plateau. The performance was stable for a period of time wherein members did not regress to basic assumptions (3rd stage). At the same time, there was a high sense of belonging to the group. A strong feeling of inclusion and acceptance of self and group was observed during this stage. All anxieties regarding the leader were resolved during this stage and the leader was more accepted by the group and was considered as a group member.

After this heightened performance there was a sudden drop in performance which could be a result of exhaustion, lack of resources, and completion of the goal (4th stage). Members again went back to loops to check and recheck their performance and to reconfirm their acceptance in the group. Some of the conflicts resurfaced and members even showed aggression towards other members, a lack of interest or departure from group participation. The leader was also sometimes ridiculed.

This reappearance of regressive loops was an interesting phenomenon that was observed in the unstructured group. It should be noted that the purpose of this regressive state was different from that of the regressive state that occurred at the beginning. In the beginning, the regression was more due to not knowing the group members or of not being included in the group. The conflict between self identity and belongingness was the cause of the regressive loop. The second regression was more due to over inclusion or intimacy with the group. As members knew each other they were more comfortable with conflicts. These conflicts were constructive for the group development as members understood the underlying reasons behind group member's behaviors.

We often find theories stating that conflict is healthy to group development. From this observation, we can conclude that conflict is constructive only when the group has overcome the basic assumptions and the group members regard themselves as a group. At this point it was observed that, even though performance was low as members had mostly accomplished their goal the group inclusion was not a concern. The regressive loops were frequent in this final stage of group development, but the conflicts were resolved effectively.

Thus, for a healthy group development it is important to understand the nature and timing of conflicts in the groups. A leader can play a pivotal role in the managing the conflicts in the group. At the beginning stages of group development, the leader should provide minimal opportunities for conflicts among group members. The leaders should instead focus on enhancing the understanding among group members and increasing the feelings of inclusion and belongingness in the group. As the group progresses and defines the roles, norms and tasks, the leader can permit conflicts among the group. The understanding that the group has developed in the initial stages results in better conflict resolution at later stages and a healthy dialogue among the group members. If the leader allows conflicts at the initial stages; the group might never progress in the performance. On the contrary, if the leader does not allow conflicts to resurface the group development can be stifled and the group may never achieve the optimal performance.

CONCLUSION

Even though it was found that most of the time group development process confirms to the basic linear, spiral, polarity models, there were some distinct characteristics like perceived time loss, reoccurrence of regressive loops and constructive conflict that was observed in the current group development process. However, the observation was based only on an isolated group which was not operating in a real organizational context and therefore the current findings need to be generalized by caution.

Another limitation of the theory is that the observation was from a single person's perspective which could be biased. Hence, research needs to be done on groups occurring in different context with multi-observers. Since group dynamics does not occur in vacuum, environmental factors that mediate or moderate group dynamics must be studied. Finally, another area of research could be selecting members on certain personality and environmental factors and then observing regressive loops and performance in the group.

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