Kari Murto

LEADING THE PROCESS

TOWARDS THE PROCESS CENTERED DEVELOPING OF WORK COMMUNITY

FOR ANNUKKA AND MIIKKA

CONTENTS

5.4. When common meetings do not work

In the starting stage of common meetings it often happens that people feel, especially in larger groups, as if they were restrained by the group. Instead of being able to act and speak freely, people are nervous, distressed, they monitor themselves and the others, and they are afraid to open their mouths. According to an observation by Wilfred Bion, a British group analyst, in any group whatsoever, 20 % of the participants are active and talkative, and 80 % are more or less passive, acquiescent and silent. Instead of acting as a tool for the present community members, the group seems to form functional chains.

The following example describes the phenomenon, even though it actually does not come from a working place, but from an evening get-together of a two-year-course, and the analysis of the evening. The participants and the teachers had agreed to have a get-together during a training period that took place halfway through the course. Some participants had prepared themselves by making agreements for food and coffee with the kitchen personnel of the training center, and by arranging program for the evening. The majority came to a "prepared meal". The evening commenced with eating and having coffee. The program with community singing and small scale performances followed. During the program there was an atmosphere of gaiety, but right after that it started to fade. Some participants started to tell jokes to warm up the party. But it was like giving artificial respiration. The situation was made even worse by another get-together within earshot: THEY seemed to be having much more fun. Not even the blaze of the fire and the otherwise cozy setting could warm up the atmosphere. People sat on their chairs that were arranged in a V-shape towards the fireplace, and they mainly talked to those who sat next to them. Only a few had brought a bottle or two of beer with them. Gradually some started to complain weariness, and they went to their rooms. The party ended in a lifeless spirit.

The following morning we analyzed the party of the

previous night in a common meeting, and the discussion lasted up to the lunch break. In the beginning of the conversation someone stated that the atmosphere had been quite lifeless. Most of us agreed. Then we discussed the reasons for the lifeless atmosphere, and considered proposals for improvements. The following points were brought up:

1. Lack of booze.
2. Lack of snacks.
3. Sitting arrangements were poor.
4. Preparations were inadequate. Even the copies of the lyrics for the songs were made in the last minute.
5. Weariness after a long day of training.
6. The topics of the day were still on their minds.
7. Family background.
8. Congregational premises - uncertainty about bringing alcohol.
9. Long time since the previous meeting.
10. Not knowing each other yet.
11. The "other group" that had more fun.

Remarkable in this situation was that most people wanted some change, but nothing happened. One of the hindrances to change was of course the newness of the situation. This was the first get-together of the course. The participants' behavior was on the one hand directed by an "internalized formula", i.e. how one normally acts in a situation like this (booze, snacks, etc.), and on the other hand by the active group that was expected to organize the whole evening and to arrange entertainment to others. Even though everyone was not having fun, no one had the courage to say it out loud or to make suggestions to the group - there was no risk taker.

I asked the course participants to think about what could have been done in the situation that would have helped. Among other things they proposed:

- each one could have brought his chair where he wanted to sit;

- games where everyone would have been able to participate.

A female participant stated that they should just have started to talk about their experiences and feelings. And that's right. We had come to the conclusion that games, eating and singing had only brought a temporary lightening to the situation. More games and similar activities would hardly have helped the situation any further. We should have started to talk about what we had experienced and lived through together, to really talk about feelings.

   Psychiatrist R. N. Hinshelwood (1987), a British therapeutic community researcher, has analyzed community meetings from the point of view of a psychodynamic frame of reference. According to Hinshelwood, the treatment of fantasies and anxieties that arise in a large group and often remain unconscious belongs to the aspect of verbalization and dramatization. By dramatization Hinshelwood means treating threatening emotions and fantasies with the aid of collective, functional defense. This means clothing individuals' fantasies in 'drama', in which they get involved without their noticing it, without a conscious decision. Since what we have in question is a defense mechanism, dramatization does not bring a solution to a community's problems, but it most often makes them worse.

   Adapted from Hinshelwood, the relationship between verbalization and dramatization can be presented in a simplified way as follows:

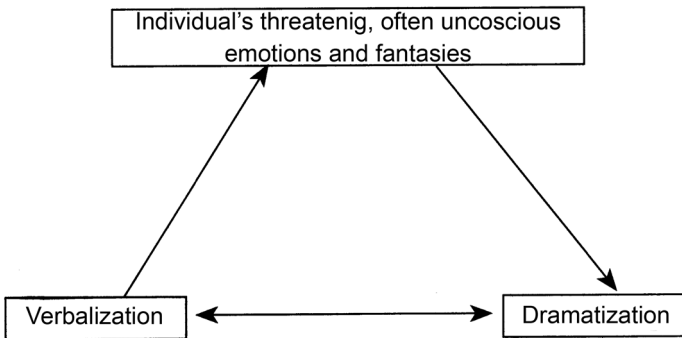   Individuals' threatening, often unconscious emotions and fantasies

Figure 16. Threatening, unconscious emotions and fantasies can be treated with the aid of verbalization or dramatization.

The get-together described above illustrates how the course participants 'become drawn' to a situation where feelings of anxiety and dissatisfaction (hatred) are dramatized (games, songs, jokes). In the meeting of the following morning (review) it was possible only through discussion to get away from the suction of dramatization and to see that through clothing the emotions in words (verbalization) they could have been able to free themselves from the bond of the situation and to change it. This kind of ability to verbalize the feelings and experiences aroused by a situation requires not only courage but also ability to detach oneself from the suction of the situation, to see it from a distance, from outside, listening to and understanding one's feelings. It is good to notice that dramatization also comprises talking like telling jokes. Verbalization means talking expressly about <u>feelings and experiences aroused by a situation</u>. (Hinshelwood, 1987, 245-251).

Chris Argyris pays attention to the same fact by using the concepts <u>reflective and defensive strategy</u> when he talks about an individual's behavior. His starting point is the thought that when people have to interpret and to react to a new situation, everyone tends to make use of their previous similar experiences and the theory-in-use they have taken in from them. Resorting to this kind of an

interpretational frame of reference happens mostly automatically, without our noticing it. When we are not conscious of the theory we are using, we consider our conclusions as self-evidently true. A person not knowing that he is wearing green glasses believes that reality is green. Just as well the interpretational frame of reference we have adopted directs our conclusions of ourselves. When two people have made the same mistake, one blames the circumstances, the other concludes that the fault was his: I was stupid. The common thing for both is that they consider their conclusions as true because they have internalized their own interpretational frames of reference early in their lives and are not aware of them.

The theory-in-use Argyris describes controls our observations, conclusions and reactions/behavior. It is in the background of our daily habits and routines. In order to become aware of them and their effects, we have to stop to study our reasoning and interpretation processes stage by stage, as if from a slow motion picture. To learn new kinds of acting models we need alternative interpretation models. Facility and courage to try out new interpretation and acting practices separate the individuals' adopting strategies: the defensive strategy that hampers learning, and the reflective strategy that encourages learning.

Reflective strategy
Typical for the reflective strategy is that interpretations and conclusions of situations are made openly and aloud. This way mistaken views, conclusions and things that have gone unnoticed can be seen and corrected. Open discussion of the relations between people and of each one's reactions to other people makes self-examination and noticing one's own distortions possible. An essential part of the reflective strategy is the learner's/participant's active role and readiness to try out and evaluate new courses of action. Attitude towards mistakes and failures is positive. They are seen as challenges and chances to learn.

Problems and conflicts are studied together and openly, as well as the responsibility of oneself and the others.

Defensive strategy

The defensive strategy is characterized by the learner's/participant's passive role of a receiver, which reduces the risk of failure and wounding, but at the same time prevents the questioning that promotes learning. Withdrawal is typical to behavior as well as calling others to account for the withdrawal: "I don't get a chance to talk since the others talk all the time." "What's the use of my talking since you never listen to me anyway." This is how one tries to avoid mistakes and failures, which are seen as causes for blame and as faults that have to be concealed.

Negative feelings like disappointment or anger are concealed, for it guarantees that one can keep his own opinions and courses of action without the chance to study them together. One defends his behavior and attitudes tightly and one-sidedly. The defense often takes place on a very abstract and general level. Whatever, even a momentary explanation serves to support one's own opinion. When the individual is asked to give reasons for his opinion, he will jump to another one. When this comes under surveillance, he will jump to a third one, which can even contradict the first one. To save one's face one is careful not to give concrete and unambiguous feedback to others. Criticism is presented so softly and discreetly that the target of the criticism will not find out what he was criticized for. This will not, however, help the person who is being criticized, but it can even make the situation worse. He may start to wonder if he has made such a bad mistake that the others do not dare to give direct feedback. Criticism can also be clothed as self-criticism through which others are criticized in an indirect way.

One of the practices of the defensive strategy is that own views are expressed in the form of feelings and that counter-arguments are rejected: I do have a right for my own feelings. The feelings of another person are, according to Argyris, the sacred cow of our culture, and no one should question them. Another part of the defensive strategy is seeking support from and giving it to the defensive behavior of other members of the community. A passive person thinks that it is the others' responsibility to give him a chance to participate and to guess when he needs

it even when he does not say anything. An active person may feel guilty about his activeness, and he starts to help the passive ones by acting as a moderator or by asking them for opinions. This kind of help may, however, prevent the passive ones from learning to take responsibility for their own participation on their own initiative.

If withdrawal or concealing negative feelings prove to be mistakes that have to be avoided, resorting to these strategies has to be disguised by a new kind of defensive behavior.

Based on the strategies described above, we could make the simplified conclusion of the learning of an individual and of a community, that by teaching reflective strategies we best promote learning to learn. In practise this teaching has proved very problematic. Conscious control of reflective strategies is not automatically transferred to people's actions, to their theory-in-use. By knowing reflective and defensive strategies we can see defects and faults in other people's behavior, but at the same time we remain blind as regards to our own behavior. We can consciously aim at using reflective strategies, and inadvertently pass on to defensive strategies. This is especially likely to happen in situations we find threatening.

Expansive discussions and massive training have led to the fact that for example superiors and managers already stand by open, democratic and human centered management style on the attitude and opinion level, but the everyday actions are still far from that (Perkka-Jortikka, 1992, 109-112). In an illustration of foremen's actions on a construction site it could be seen that the foremen used only 27 % of their working time on actual supervision of work and on talking to their subordinates. A typical feature of the discussions was that the foremen gave very little feedback to the performances of the subordinates, and when feedback was given, it was positive only once out of four occasions (Hyttinen, 1991). It is likely that the managers and the superiors consciously aim at democratic and rewarding management, but that they in practical situations drift to other kind of behavior without noticing it.

According to Argyris, if our own theory-in-use does not

work, it is revealed when the end result is contradictory to our aims. When we try to settle a conflict with a colleague, it only seems to get worse. When we try to criticize a subordinate in a constructive way, he takes offence rather than heed of it. The defects of our theory-in-use are revealed more clearly to the other members of the community than to ourselves. Giving mutual feedback is another way to become aware of and to study our theory-in-use. Awareness in itself is not an adequate prerequisite to learn a new kind of course of action, the reflective strategy. It also calls for practise for instance with role plays. By role-playing difficult and problematic situations and by discussing them with the work mates we can assess our own actions and try out alternative forms of behavior. (Argyris, 1985).

Well then, how can the community meetings be successful in the midst of uncountable factors (brought up by Hinshelwood and Argyris among others) that threaten the development and change of a community, and how can the desired change be realized? I have emphasized that the most important prerequisites for the development are the common forums and meetings, but aren't they threatened by the same routinization as all individual and communal actions? To depict this kind of harmful routinization and to examine the community dynamics that control the meetings I think it is absolutely necessary to study the meetings together.