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HOW CULTURE EMERGES IN NEW GROUPS

The rules of the social order that dominate our day-to-day interactions are the bedrock of culture. We learn those rules as we are socialized into our family and acculturated into our nation and ethnic group. How those rules were created in the first place is difficult to decipher in cultures that have existed for some time, but it is possible to observe this process of creation in new groups and organizations. The best way to demystify the concept of culture is first of all to become aware of culture *creation* in our own experience, to perceive how something comes to be shared and taken for granted, and to observe this particularly in the groups that we enter and belong to. We bring culture with us from our past experience, but we are constantly reinforcing that culture or building new elements as we encounter new people and new experiences.

The strength and stability of culture derives from the fact that it is group based—that the individual will hold on to certain basic assumptions to ratify his or her membership in the group. If someone asks us to change our way of thinking or perceiving, and that way is based on what we have learned in a group that we belong to or identify with, we will resist the change because we do not want to deviate from our group even if privately we think that the group is wrong. This process of trying to be accepted by our membership and reference groups is unconscious and, by virtue of that fact, very powerful. But how does a group develop a common way of thinking in the first place?

To examine how this aspect of culture actually begins, how a group learns to deal with its external and internal environment and develops assumptions that then get passed on to new members, we need to analyze group situations in which such events are actually observable. Fortunately

such groups are created from time to time in various kinds of human relations training workshops where strangers come together for purposes of learning about group dynamics and leadership. When the National Training Laboratories first evolved such group dynamics workshops at Bethel, Maine in the late 1940s, it was not accidental that they labeled Bethel as a “cultural island” to highlight the fact that the participants would be encouraged to suspend some of their learned rules of the existing social order to learn how norms and rules emerge in the microcultures of the learning groups (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Schein & Bennis, 1965; Schein, 1999a, 1999b).

In making a detailed analysis of small groups, I am not implying that group phenomena can be automatically treated as models for organizational phenomena. Organizations bring in additional levels of complexity and new phenomena that are not visible in the small group. But all organizations started as small groups and continue to function in part through various small groups within them. So the understanding of culture formation in small groups is, in fact, necessary to understanding how culture may evolve in the large organization through small-group subcultures and through the interplay of small groups within the organization.

Group Formation Through Originating and Marker Events

All groups start with some kind of “originating event”: (1) An environmental accident (for instance, a sudden threat that occurs in a random crowd and requires a common response), (2) a decision by an “originator” to bring a group of people together for some purpose, or (3) an advertised event or common experience that attracts a number of individuals. Human relations training groups start in the third mode—a number of people come together voluntarily to participate in a one- or two-week workshop for the advertised purpose of learning more about themselves, groups, and leadership (Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964; Schein & Bennis, 1965; Schein, 1993a). The workshops are typically held in a geographically remote, isolated location and require full, round-the-clock participation—hence “cultural islands.”

The staff of the workshop, usually one “trainer” per ten to fifteen participants, has typically met for several days to plan the basic structure of lectures, group meetings, focused “exercises” designed to bring out certain points about leadership and group behavior, and free time. The staff members start out with their own assumptions, values, and behavior patterns in initiating the groups and therefore will bias the culture that is eventually formed. But culture formation really occurs in the T (training) group, the key component of every workshop. The T group consists of ten to fifteen strangers who will meet for four to eight hours every day with one or two staff members. Because such groups typically develop distinct microcultures within a matter of days, what goes on in these groups is crucial to an understanding of culture formation.

When the group first comes together, the most fundamental issue facing it as a whole is “What are we really here for? What is our task?” At the same time, each individual is facing basic social survival issues such as “Will I be included in this group?” “Will I have a role to play?” “Will my needs to influence others be met?” “Will we reach a level of intimacy that meets my needs?” These are in the microcosm the central issues of identity, authority, and intimacy that were discussed in Chapters Six and Nine on culture content.

As the group gathers in its appointed space, the participants begin to display their own coping style for dealing with new and ambiguous situations. Some will silently await events; some will form immediate alliances with others; and some will begin to assert themselves by telling anyone who cares to listen that they know how to deal with this kind of situation. Statements about the goal of “learning about ourselves” have been spelled out in the training literature, in the workshop brochure, in the initial introductory lecture to the entire workshop, and again by the staff member who launches the group. Some people may even have had prior experiences with similar groups, but initially everyone is acutely aware of how ambiguous the words of the staff member are when he or she says: “This is the first meeting of our T group. Our goal is to provide for ourselves a climate in which we can all learn. There is no one correct way to do this. We will have to get to know each other, find out what our individual needs and goals are, and build our group to enable us to fulfill those goals and needs. My role as

staff member will be to help this process along in any way that I can, but I will not be the formal leader of the group, and I have no answers as to the right way to proceed. There is no formal agenda. So let's begin." The staff member then falls silent.

How Individual Intentions Become Group Consequences

The general model for understanding the formation of "groupness" and culture is to observe closely how in the formative stages individuals initiate various actions, but what happens immediately *after* an initial act is a *group* response. If person A makes a suggestion, and person B disagrees, it may appear to be just two members of the group arguing, but the emotional reality is that the other members are witnesses and make their own collective choice on whether to enter the conversation or not. Only two people have spoken, but *the group* has acted and is *aware* of having acted as a group.

Return now to our training group's earliest moments. In the silence that follows the staff member's introduction, each person experiences feelings of anxiety in the face of this ambiguous agenda and power vacuum. Even if that silence is only a few seconds long, it is usually a key "marker event" that almost everyone remembers vividly at a later time. Even though all the members usually come from the same macroculture and share the same formal language, everyone is aware that this group is a unique combination of personalities and that those personalities are initially unknown. What makes the initial silence a marker event is that every person is aware of his or her own emotional response to the sudden silence. Group members can recall clearly at a later time how they felt when the typical crutches of the formal agenda, leadership structure, and procedural rules were deliberately removed as part of the training design. This novel situation heightens members' awareness of how much they typically depend on the structures and rules of the social order. The group is deliberately thrown onto its own resources to allow members to observe their own feelings and reactions as they cope with this initially "norm-less" and "rule-less" situation.

Each member brings to this new situation a wealth of prior learning in the form of assumptions, expectations, and patterns of coping, but, as the group gets started by someone's making a suggestion or revealing a feeling, it immediately becomes apparent that there is little consensus within the

group on how to proceed, and that the group cannot become a copy of any other group. Thus, even though individual members bring prior cultural learning to the new situation, by definition this particular group starts out with no culture of its own. Goals, means, working procedures, measurements, and rules of interaction all have to be forged out of new common experience. A sense of mission—what the group is ultimately all about—develops only as members begin genuinely to understand each other's needs, goals, talents, and values, and as they begin to integrate these into a shared mission and define their own authority and intimacy system.

How does group formation now proceed? Often, the very first thing said by any person in the group will become the next marker event if it succeeds in reducing some of the tension. For example, one of the more active members often will initiate with a suggestion of how to get started: "Why don't we go around the group and each introduce ourselves?" or "Let's each say what we are here for" or "I feel pretty tense right now, does anyone else feel the same way?" or "Ed, can you give us some suggestion on how best to get started?" and so on.

The silence is broken, there is a huge sigh of relief, and the group becomes aware through this joint sensing of relief that it is sharing something unique to itself. No other group in the world will have this particular pattern of initial tension and manner of resolving the initial silence. Members also become aware of something that is easy to forget—that a person cannot, in an interpersonal situation, "not" communicate. Everything that happens has potential meaning and consequences for the group.

If that initial suggestion fits the mood of the group or at least of some other members who are ready to speak up, it will be picked up and may become the beginning of a pattern. If it does not fit the mood, it will elicit disagreement, counter-suggestions, or some other response that will make members aware that they cannot easily agree. Whatever the response, however, the crucial event of group formation has taken place when the group, including the staff member, has participated in a shared emotional reaction. What makes the event *shared* is the fact that all members have been witnesses to the same behavior on the part of one of their members and have observed the responses together. After the meeting, they can refer to the event, and people will remember it. This initial sharing is what defines, at an emotional level, that "we are now a group; we have been launched."

The most fundamental act of culture formation, the defining of crude group boundaries, has occurred with this shared emotional response. Everyone who has shared the response is now, by definition, in the group at some level, and anyone who has not shared the experience is initially not in the group. This feeling of being in or out of the group is quite concrete, in that any person who did not attend and witness the event cannot know what happened or how people reacted. A new member who arrives one hour late will already feel the presence of a group and will want to know “what has gone on so far.” And the group will already feel that the newcomer is a “stranger” who “has to be brought on board.” Members will remember at a later time “how painful it was to get started” and will tell stories of what happened in the first meeting.

Thus, in any new group situation—whether we are talking about a new company, a task force, a committee, or a team—though the initial behavior of founders, leaders, and other initiators is individually motivated and reflects their own particular assumptions and intentions, as the individuals in the group begin to do things together and share experiences around such individually motivated acts, “groupness” arises.

Building Meaning Through Sharing Perceptions and Articulating Feeling

Initially, this groupness is only an emotional substrate that permits the defining of who is in and who is not. For the group to begin to *understand* its sense of groupness, someone must articulate what the experience has been and what it means. Such articulation is again an individual act, motivated by individual intentions to lead, or to be a prophet, or whatever, but the consequences are *group* consequences if the articulation “works,” if things are stated in a way that makes sense and helps group members to understand what has happened and why they are feeling the way they are. For example, to break the silence a member might say “We all seem to be pretty tense right now,” or “I guess we won’t get much help from the staff member,” or “I don’t know how the rest of you feel, but I feel the need to get going, so here’s a suggestion....” Such statements help to make some sense of the situation and are, therefore, crucial components of what we call “leadership” and can be understood as acts of culture creation if the process imparts

meaning to an important shared emotional experience and provides some relief from the anxiety of meaninglessness. Some of the deepest and most potent shared experiences occur within the first few hours of group life, so the deepest levels of consensus on who we are, what our mission is, and how we will work are formed very early in the group's history.

Leadership as Timely Intervention

To help this process of understanding and articulation, the staff member or some group member will choose moments when something vivid has happened and ask the group to reflect and name what they saw or felt. For example, to break the silence one member says, "Let's go around the table and introduce ourselves..." The silence continues. Another member then says, "I would like the staff member to tell us how to proceed. . . ." More silence. A third member then says, "Ed isn't going to tell us anything, we have to figure this thing out ourselves. . . ." More silence. A fourth member then says, "My name is Peter Jones and I would like to learn more about how I relate to other people." Peter looks around expectantly for response but nothing happens. Ed, the staff member, might then say, "What is happening here? Can we quickly review what has just happened in the last few minutes and talk about what we see going on and how we feel about it."

Various members then come in to tell what they observed and how they felt about it. One of the members may point out that the staff member's refusal to be the authority figure has created a power struggle in terms of whose suggestion will get the group going. The silences after the various member suggestions were a kind of decision to resist, *not to go along with what a member had suggested*. By recognizing this resistance, the group members are learning one of the most powerful lessons of how social systems work. *Collectively not acting* on what a member proposes is a powerful *group* decision, a kind of decision that is very common and that received a colloquial name in the workshops—a "plop." In other words, a suggestion to act was made, and it plopped. Plops mean that the group was not willing to grant a level of authority to a given member to tell the group what to do.

At the same time, if the staff member's suggestion to examine what has just happened gets the group going, the group has also learned something very important about leadership—that one can lead by focusing on

the process of what is going on instead of making content suggestions. Such “process analysis” enables the members to speak about their perceptions and feelings in a nonevaluative context and with the sense that everyone’s perceptions and feelings have an equal social value. An individual can have different perceptions and feelings but cannot tell another member that their experiences were wrong or less valuable. In such process analysis, the group is creating cultural neutrality and making it possible to actually observe in a nonevaluative way the different cultural norms members bring to the group from their prior cultural experience. It is this kind of exploratory conversation that makes the workshop a “cultural island.” The T-group is creating a new culture by beginning to understand and act on what members learn about each other’s cultures that they brought with them into the group.

The mission of the group begins to be understood in terms of a shared insight that the learning occurs through a process of shared reflection on whatever action has taken place. But the issues of authority and intimacy don’t go away. The underlying assumptions that members bring to the group around authority and intimacy issues have to be confronted and dealt with if the group is to make any progress toward being able to work on a task together. You can think of this process of group formation in terms of stages as shown in Table 12.1.

Stage 1: Dealing with Assumptions About Authority

Initially, each member of a new group is struggling with the personal issues of inclusion, identity, authority, and intimacy, and the group is not really a group but a collection of individual members, each focused on how to make the situation safe and personally rewarding. Even as they learn how to learn in the T-group, they are much more preoccupied with their own feelings than with the problem of the group as a group and, most likely, they are operating on the *unconscious* assumption that “the leader [staff member] knows what we are supposed to do.” Therefore, the best way to achieve safety is to remain dependent on the staff member and try to find out what the group is supposed to do and do it. This group stage, with its associated feelings and moods, is, in my experience, similar to what Bion (1959) described in his work as the “dependence assumption” and what

Table 12.1. Stages of Group Evolution.

<i>Stage</i>	<i>Dominant Assumption</i>	<i>Socioemotional Focus</i>
1. Group formation	<i>Dependence</i> : “The leader knows what we should do.”	<i>Self-Orientation</i> : Emotional focus on issues of (a) inclusion, (b) power and influence, (c) acceptance and intimacy, and (d) identity and role.
2. Group Building	<i>Fusion</i> : “We are a great group; we all like each other.”	<i>Group as Idealized Object</i> : Emotional focus on harmony, conformity, and search for intimacy. Member differences are not valued.
3. Group Work	<i>Work</i> : “We can perform effectively because we know and accept each other.”	<i>Group Mission and Tasks</i> : Emotional focus on accomplishment, teamwork, and maintaining the group in good working order. Member differences are valued.
4. Group Maturity	<i>Maturity</i> : “We know who we are, what we want, and how to get it. We have been successful, so we must be right.”	<i>Group Survival and Comfort</i> : Emotional focus on preserving the group and its culture. Creativity and member differences are seen as threat.

other theories note as the first issue the group has to deal with (Bennis & Shepard, 1956).

The evidence for the operation of this assumption is the behavior in the early minutes and hours of the group's life. First of all, much of the initial behavior of group members is, in fact, directed to the staff member in the form of questions, requests for explanations and for suggestions about how to proceed, and constant checking for approval. Even if the behavior is not directed to the staff member, group members constantly look at him

or her, pay extra attention if the staff member does speak, and in other non-verbal ways indicate their preoccupation with the staff member's reaction.

Members may share the assumption of being dependent on the staff member yet react very differently. These differences can best be understood in terms of what they have learned in their prior macrocultural experience, starting in the family. One way to deal with authority is to suppress one's aggression, accept dependence, and seek guidance. If the staff member makes a suggestion, members who cope in this way will automatically accept it and attempt to do what is asked of them. Others have learned that the way to deal with authority is to resist it. They also will seek to find out what the leader wants, but their motive is to find out in order to resist rather than to comply—to be “counter dependent.” Still others will attempt to find other members to share their feelings of dependence and, in effect, set up a subgroup within the larger group.

The mixture of tendencies in the personalities of group members is, of course, not initially predictable, nor is any given person inflexible. The range of possible variations in response to the initial leadership/authority vacuum is thus immense in a ten- to fifteen-person group. The early interaction can best be described as a mutual testing out—testing of the staff member to see how much guidance will be offered, and testing by members of other members to see who can influence whom and who will control whom—a process not unlike establishing a pecking order in the barnyard.

Several members will emerge as competitors for leadership and influence. If any one of these members suggests something or makes a point, one of the others will contradict it or try to go off in a different direction. This aggressive competition among the “sturdy battlers” keeps the group from achieving any real consensus early in its life, and one paradox of group formation is that there is no way to short-circuit this early power struggle. If it is swept under the rug by strong authoritarian leadership or formal procedures, it will surface later around the task issues that the group is trying to address and will be potentially damaging to task performance. Interpersonal competition becomes one of many “covert processes” that the group will have to deal with (Marshak, 2006).

From the point of view of the staff member, confirmation that this process is indeed going on comes from the frequent experience of trying to give the group guidance and finding that some members leap at the help, while

others almost blindly resist it. If frustration is high, one or the other extreme mode may build up in the group as a whole, what Bion labeled “fight or flight.” The group may collectively attack the staff member, aggressively deny his suggestions, and punish him for his or her silence, or the group may suddenly go off on its own, led by a group member, with the implicit or explicit statement “We need to get away from the disappointing leader and do it on our own.”

Building New Norms Around Authority

In its early life, the group cannot easily find consensus on what to do, so it bounces from one suggestion to another and becomes increasingly more frustrated and discouraged at its inability to act. And this frustration keeps the shared emotional assumption of dependency alive. The group continues to act as if the leader knows what to do. In the meantime, members are, of course, beginning to be able to calibrate each other, the staff member, and the total situation. As the group learns to analyze its own processes, a common language slowly gets established; and, as shared learning experiences accumulate, more of a sense of groupness arises at the emotional level, providing some reassurance to all that they are being included. Inclusion anxieties are slowly reduced.

This sense of groupness arises through successive dealings with marker events that arouse strong feelings and then are dealt with definitively. The group may not be consciously aware of this process of norm building, however, unless attention is drawn to it in process analysis periods. For example, within the first few minutes, a member may speak up strongly for a given course of action. Joe suggests that the way to proceed is to take turns introducing ourselves and stating why we are in the group. This suggestion requires some behavioral response from other members; therefore, no matter what the group does, it will be setting some kind of precedent for how to deal with future suggestions that are “controlling”—that require behavior from *others*.

What are the options at this point? One common response in groups is to act as if the suggestion had not even been made at all. There is a moment of silence, followed by another member’s comment irrelevant to the suggestion. This is the “plop”—a group decision by nonaction. The member who

made the suggestion may feel ignored. At the same time, *a group norm has been established*. The group has, in effect, said that *members need not respond to every suggestion, that it is permissible to ignore someone*. A second common response is for another person to immediately agree or disagree overtly with the suggestion. This response begins to build a different norm—that a person *should respond to suggestions in some way*. If there has been agreement, the response may also begin to build an alliance; if there has been disagreement, it may begin a fight that will force others to take sides.

A third possibility is for another member to make a “process” comment, such as “I wonder if we should collect some other suggestions before we decide what to do?” or “How do the rest of you feel about Joe’s suggestion?” Again, a norm is being established—that *a person does not have to plunge into action but can consider alternatives*. A fourth possibility is to plunge ahead into action. The suggestion is made to introduce ourselves, and the next person to speak launches into an introduction. This response not only gets the group moving but may set two precedents: (1) that *suggestions should be responded to*, and (2) that *Joe is the one who can get us moving*. The implication of this last response is that Joe may feel empowered and be more likely to make a suggestion the next time the group is floundering. Note that this process happens very fast, often in a few seconds, so the important group consequences are not noticed until a process analysis period reconstructs them. As Joe becomes more of a leader, some group members may scratch their heads and wonder, how did Joe get anointed into this position. They don’t remember the early group events that de facto anointed him.

Norms are thus formed when an individual takes a position, and the rest of the group deals with that position by either letting it stand (by remaining silent), by actively approving it, by “processing” it, or by rejecting it. Three sets of consequences are always observed: (1) the personal consequences for the member who made the suggestion (he may gain or lose influence, disclose himself to others, develop a friend or enemy, and so on); (2) the interpersonal consequences for those members immediately involved in the interplay; and (3) the normative consequences for the group as a whole. So here again we have the situation in which an individual has to act, but the subsequent shared reaction turns the event into a group product. It is the joint witnessing of the event and the reaction that makes it a group product.

The early life of the group is filled with thousands of such events and the responses to them. At the cognitive level, they deal with the effort to define working procedures to fulfill the primary task—to learn. Prior assumptions about how to learn will operate initially to bias the group's effort, and limits will be set by the staff member in the form of calling attention to the consequences of behavior considered clearly detrimental to learning—behavior such as failure to attend meetings, frequent interruptions, personally hostile attacks, and the like. At the emotional level, such events deal with the problem of authority and influence. The most critical of such events are ones that overtly test or challenge the staff member's authority. Thus, we note that the group pays special attention to the responses that occur immediately after someone has directed a comment, question, or challenge to the staff member.

We also note anomalous behavior that can be explained only if we assume that an authority issue is being worked out. For example, the group actively seeks leadership by requesting that some member should help the group to get moving, but then systematically ignores or punishes anyone who attempts to lead. We can understand this behavior if we remember that feelings toward authority are always ambivalent and that the anger felt toward the staff member for not leading the group cannot be expressed directly if the individual feels dependent on the staff member. The negative feelings are split off and projected onto a "bad leader," thus preserving the illusion that the staff member is the "good leader." Acts of insubordination or outbursts of anger at the staff member may be severely punished by other group members, even though those members have themselves been critical of the staff member.

How, then, does a group learn what is "reality"? How does it develop workable and accurate assumptions about how to deal with influence and authority? How does it normalize its relationship to the staff member, the formal authority who is presumed to know what to do and yet does not do it?

Reality Test and Catharsis

Though members begin to feel they know each other better, the group continues to be frustrated by its inability to act in a consensual manner because the unconscious dependence assumption is still operating, and members are

still working out their influence relationships with each other. The event that moves the group forward at such times, often many hours into the group's life, is an insightful comment by a member who is less conflicted about the authority issue and, therefore, able to perceive and articulate what is really going on. In other words, while those members who are most conflicted about authority are struggling in the dependent and counter-dependent mode, some members find that they care less about this issue, are able psychologically to detach themselves from it, and come to recognize the reality that for this particular group at this time in its history, the staff member *does not* and *cannot*, in fact, know what to do.

The less conflicted members may intervene in any of a number of ways that expose this reality: (1) by offering a direct interpretation—"Maybe we are hung up in this group because we expect the staff member to be able to tell us what to do, and he doesn't know what to do"; (2) by offering a direct challenge—"I think the staff member doesn't know what to do, so we better figure it out ourselves"; (3) by offering a direct suggestion for an alternative agenda—"I think we should focus on how we feel about this group right now, instead of trying to figure out what to do"; or (4) by making a process suggestion or observation—"I notice that we ask the leader for suggestions but then don't do what he suggests" or "I wonder why we are fighting so much among ourselves in this group" or "I think it is interesting that every time Joe makes a suggestion, Mary challenges him or makes a counter-suggestion."

If the timing is right, in the sense that many members are "ready" to hear what may be going on because they have all observed the process for a period of time, there will be a strong cathartic reaction when the assumption-lifting intervention is made. The group members will suddenly realize that they have been focusing heavily on the staff member and that, indeed, that person is not all-knowing and all-seeing and, therefore, probably does not, in fact, know what the group should do. With this insight comes the feeling of responsibility: "We are all in this together, and we each have to contribute to the group's agenda." *The magical leader has been killed, and the group begins to seek realistic leadership from whoever can provide it.*

Leadership comes to be seen as a shared set of activities rather than a single person's trait, and a sense of ownership of group outcomes arises. Some work groups never achieve this state, remaining dependent on whatever formal authority is available and projecting magically onto it; but in

the training/learning situation in the cultural island in which the social order is somewhat suspended, the emphasis on process analysis makes it very likely that the issue will be brought to the surface and dealt with.

A comparable process occurs in formally constituted groups, but it is less visible. The group founder or chairperson does have real intentions and plans, but the group initially tends to attribute far more complete and detailed knowledge to the leader than is warranted by reality. Thus, early in the life of a company, the entrepreneur is viewed much more magically as the source of all wisdom, and only gradually is it discovered that he or she is only human and that the organization can function only if other members begin to feel responsible for group outcomes as well. But all this may occur implicitly and without very visible marker events. If such events occur, they will most likely be in the form of challenges of the leader or outright insubordination. How the group and the leader then handle the emotionally threatening event determines, to a large extent, the norms around authority that will become operative in the future (as exemplified in the next chapter).

The “insight” that the leader is not omniscient or omnipotent gives members a sense of relief not to be struggling any longer with the staff members. They are likely to develop a feeling of euphoria that they have been able to deal with the tough issue of authority and leadership. There is a sense of joy in recognizing that everyone in the group has a role and can make a leadership contribution, and this, in turn, strengthens the group’s sense of itself.

At this point, the group often takes some joint action, as if to prove to itself that it can do something, and gets a further sense of euphoria from being successful at it. Such action is often externally directed—winning a competition with another group or tackling a difficult task under time pressure and completing it. Whatever the task, the end result is a feeling of “We are a great group” and possibly, at a deeper level, even the feeling of “We are a better group than any of the others.” It is this state of affairs that leads to the unconscious assumption of “fusion” and brings to the fore the intimacy issue.

Stage 2: Building Norms Around Intimacy

As the group solves the problem of authority, begins to share leadership, and accomplishes some tasks successfully, it begins to operate in terms of another unconscious assumptions that *we are the best group, and we all like*

each other. Turquet (1973) used the term *fusion* to reflect a strong emotional need to feel merged with the group and to deny internal differences.

If this assumption is operating, at the overt behavior level, we observe a marked absence of interpersonal conflict, a tendency to bend over backward to be nice to each other, emotional expressions of affection, a mood of euphoria, and a group solidarity in the face of any challenge. Symptoms of conflict or lack of harmony are ignored or actively denied. Hostility is suppressed or punished severely if it occurs. An image of solidarity must be presented at all costs.

Different members of the group will vary in their need to attain and maintain a high level of intimacy, and those who care most, the “over-personals” will become the most active guardians of the group harmony image and will suppress the “counter-personals” who are made anxious by the implied level of intimacy. In particular, some members will resolve conflicts about intimacy by seeking it and by attempting to maintain harmony at all costs. But other group members, those who resolve their conflict about intimacy by avoiding it, will rock the boat and challenge the harmony image because the harmony makes them anxious. They will complain that the group is wasting time, is being too “cozy,” and is ignoring conflicts that are visible. But their complaints will be ignored or actively put down if the need to prove group harmony is strong.

The staff member is now “one of the regulars” and is labeled as “no different from the rest of us,” which is, of course, just as unrealistic as the assumption that the staff member is omniscient and omnipotent. At this stage, interventions that may be disturbing to the group are simply ignored or laughed off.

The strength of the fusion assumption will be a function of the individual needs of group members and the actual experience of the group. The more the group feels itself to be in a hostile environment or vulnerable to destruction, the more it may cling to the assumption as a way of claiming strength. Or, to put it the other way, only when the group feels reasonably secure can it give up the false solidarity that the fusion assumption claims. Such security comes gradually from increasing experience, success with tasks, and tests of strength against other groups.

The group moods of “fight” or “flight” are likely to arise around the fusion assumption because both fight and flight involve solidarity and joint

action. Thus, if the authority issue arises again, the group may at this point turn collectively against the staff member or may deliberately run away from its real task of learning about itself by rationalizing that it has overcome all of its problems already, that there is nothing more to learn. Or the group may project its negative feelings onto someone outside the group—the administration of the workshop or some other group—and fight or flee from that outside enemy.

What Bion (1959) called *pairing* is also common at this stage because the need for love and intimacy that is operating can easily be projected onto those members who display such feelings overtly. By projecting the fate of the group into the “pair,” by hoping for a magic solution through what the pair will produce, the group can maintain its sense of solidarity. All these responses preserve the assumption that “we are a great group, we like each other, and we can do great things together.”

Many organizations get stuck at this level of group evolution, developing an adequate authority system and a capacity to defend themselves against external threat but never growing internally to a point of differentiation of roles and clarification of personal relationships.

Reality Test and Catharsis

The fusion assumption will not be given up until some marker event brings its falsity into consciousness. There are four group events that have the potential for revealing the assumption: (1) Disagreements and conflicts will occur in the attempts to take joint action, (2) noticeable avoidance of confrontation, (3) overt denial of the fact that some members may not like each other, and (4) eruptions of negative feelings toward other members. The actual marker event that tests the reality of the fusion assumption is most likely to come from those group members who are least conflicted about intimacy issues and who, therefore, are most likely to have insight into what is happening. For example, on one of the many occasions when a “counter-personal” member challenges the solidarity of the group, one of the less conflicted members may support the challenge by providing incontrovertible examples indicating that group members actually do not seem to get along all that well. This introduction of data that cannot be denied will pierce the illusion and thus force the recognition of the assumption.

Realistic norms about intimacy will evolve around incidents that involve aggression and affection. For example, if member A strongly attacks member B, it is *what the rest of the group does immediately after the attack that will create a norm*. The group may immediately move on to another topic or someone may actually say, “We should not attack each other,” and the group may send signals of approval. The norm *we should not attack each other in this group* begins to form. Or the group may join in the attack leading to the norm that *attacking members is okay in this group*. Similarly if one member expresses a higher degree of intimacy by saying to another member something like, “I really like you and want to get to know you much better,” what others do immediately after that will determine whether the group moves toward more intimate revelations or sets the norm that *we don’t get into very personal stuff in this group*.

At some point in this exploration, members will realize that not only is liking and disliking each other highly variable within the group but, even more important, *liking each other is not the learning goal of this group*. Instead, members realize that they need to *accept each other enough to enable learning and joint task performance*. Liking and personally more intimate relationships may occur, especially outside the group meetings, but within the group, they only need to be intimate enough to enable the group to fulfill its mission of learning. A crucial learning is that a person can *accept* and work with another person without having to *like* him or her.

I have frequently observed similar events in more formally constituted groups. A work group in a growing company erupts into a hostile confrontation between two members. The manner in which the group handles the ensuing tense silence builds a norm for future expressions of feeling. If the group or the leader punishes either or both combatants, norms get built that feelings should be kept in check; if the group or leader encourages resolution, norms get built that hostility is okay and that feelings can be expressed, as was consistently the case in DEC. The moments when these norm-building activities occur are often very brief and easy to miss if one is not alert to them. But it is at those moments that culture begins to form, and the eventual assumptions about what is appropriate and right will reflect a long series of such incidents and the reactions to them.

The T-groups differed greatly in the degree of intimacy that evolved in them just as they differed in the kind of influence and authority system they

evolved. Such differences reflected both the personalities of staff members and participants, and the actual experiences of the groups in their efforts to learn. But all groups developed fairly stable norms that collectively could be labeled microcultures. The evidence for this conclusion was the observed differences in how the groups dealt with tasks that the workshop required them to perform and in how it felt when visiting a group.

Which Norms Survive? The Role of Experience and Learning

How are norms reinforced and built up into the assumptions that eventually come to be taken for granted? The two basic mechanisms of learning involved are (1) positive *problem solving* to cope with external survival issues, and (2) *anxiety avoidance* to cope with internal integration issues. For example, if a group challenges its formal leader and begins to build norms that support more widely shared leadership and higher levels of member involvement, it is an empirical matter whether or not this way of working is effective in solving real-world problems. In the T-group, members decide whether or not they feel that such norms are enabling them to fulfill their primary task of learning. In formal work groups, it is a matter of actual experience whether or not the work gets done better with a given set of norms that have evolved.

If the group fails repeatedly or is chronically uncomfortable, sooner or later someone will propose that a new leadership process be found or that the original leader be reinstated in a more powerful role, and the group will find itself experimenting again with new behaviors that lead to new norms of how to work with authority. It then again must test against reality how successful it is. The norms that produce the greatest success will survive. As they continue to work, they gradually turn into assumptions about how things really are and should be. As new norms form around authority, there is also an immediate test of whether the members of the group are more or less comfortable as a result of the new way of working. Do the new norms enable them to avoid the anxiety inherent in the initially unstable or uncertain situation? If the leader is challenged, gives up some authority, and shares power with the group, some group members, depending on their own pattern of needs and prior experiences, may feel less comfortable than before. In some groups, a greater comfort level might be achieved by norms

that, in effect, reassert the authority of the leader and make members more dependent on the leader and less intimate with each other. The needs of the leader will also play a role in this process, so the ultimate resolution—what makes everyone most comfortable—will be a set of norms that meets the many internal needs as well as the external experiences. Because so many variables are involved, the resultant group culture will usually be a unique and distinctive one.

The stability of the assumptions that evolve out of a group's experience will reflect whether or not the learning has been primarily the result of success or the avoidance of failure. If a group has learned primarily through positive successes, the mentality will be "Why change something that has been successful?" However, if what the group does ceases to be successful, that will be visible and will be a potential stimulus to change and new learning. If a group has learned something in order to avoid pain or failure, the mentality will be "We must avoid what has hurt us in the past," which will prevent trying out new things and thus discovering that they may not any longer be hurtful. Assumptions about what to avoid are, therefore, more stable than assumptions based on success. At the personal level, we know this from how phobias work in our own experience.

Stage 3: Group Work and Functional Familiarity

If the group deals successfully with the fusion assumption, it usually achieves an emotional state that can best be characterized as *mutual acceptance*. The group will have had enough experience so that members not only know what to expect of each other—what we can think of as "functional familiarity"—but also will have had the chance to learn that they can coexist and work together even if they do not all like each other. The emotional shift from maintaining the illusion of mutual liking to a state of mutual acceptance and functional familiarity is important in that it frees up emotional energy for work. Being dominated by either the dependence or the fusion assumption ties up emotional energy because of the denial and defensiveness required to avoid confronting the disconfirming realities. Therefore, if a group is to work effectively, it must reach a level of emotional maturity at which reality-testing norms prevail.

At this stage, a new implicit assumption arises, the work assumption—"We know each other well enough, both in a positive and negative light, that we can work well together and accomplish our external goals." The group now exerts less pressure to conform and builds norms that encourage some measure of individuality and personal growth, on the assumption that the group ultimately will benefit if all members grow and become stronger. Many groups never get to this stage, leading to the erroneous generalization that all groups require a high degree of solidarity and conformity. In my own experience, high conformity pressures are symptomatic of unresolved issues in the group, and the best way to get past them is to help the group to a more mature stage of mutual acceptance, using individual differences as a resource instead of a liability.

Groups always have some kind of task, even if that task is to provide learning to its members, so the need to work, to fulfill the task, is always psychologically present. But the ability to *focus* on the task is a function of the degree to which group members can reduce and avoid their own anxieties. Such anxieties are intrinsically highest when the group is very young and has not yet had a chance to build up cultural assumptions to control the anxiety. Therefore, the emotional energy available for work is lowest in the early stages of group formation, a crucial point for leaders to understand so that they do not force task pressures prematurely, that is, before the members have worked out their authority and intimacy issues. On the other hand, the quickest way for the group to lose its ability to work productively is to question some of its cultural assumptions because such a threat re-arouses the primary anxieties that the cultural solutions dealt with in the first place.

Stage 4: Group Maturity

Only a few remarks will be made about this final group stage because it will receive much more focus in later chapters. If a group works successfully, it will inevitably reinforce its assumptions about itself and its environment, thus strengthening whatever culture it has developed. Because culture is a learned set of responses, culture will be as strong as the group's learning history has made it. The more the group has shared emotionally intense experiences, the stronger the culture of that group will be.

Given these forces, a group or organization inevitably will begin to develop the assumption that it knows who it is, what its role in the world is, how to accomplish its mission, and how to conduct its affairs. If the culture that develops works, it will ultimately be taken for granted as the only correct way for group members to see the world. Conformity pressures arise once again and that produces the dangers inherent in “group think,” the avoidance of exploration of ideas and actions that may be counter-cultural. The inevitable dilemma for the group, then, is how to avoid becoming so stable in its approach to its environment that it loses its ability to adapt, innovate, and grow.

Summary and Conclusions

To understand organizational or occupational cultures, it is necessary to understand cultural origins. In this chapter, I have reviewed how this happens in a learning group by examining the stages of group growth and development based on social psychological concepts and what we know about group dynamics. By examining in detail the interactions of members, it is possible to reconstruct how norms of behavior arise through what members do or do not do when critical incidents occur. The basic socio-psychological forces that operate in all of us are the raw material around which a group organizes itself both to accomplish its task and to create for itself a viable and comfortable organization. Thus every group must solve the problems of member identity, common goals, mechanisms of influence, and how to manage both aggression and love through norms around authority and intimacy. Norms that work gradually become cultural assumptions. This process is most visible in the learning groups, but the same issues of group growth arise in regular work groups. How these processes of culture formation work out in organizations will be examined next.