

Group Dynamics at the Heart of Leadership Skills

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**First-class leadership begins with an understanding
how groups work**

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The major challenges faced by today's corporate leaders include finding ways to achieve higher levels of engagement, attracting and retaining top talent, and improving overall team performance. While every leader must pay close attention to key subordinates on an individual basis, I have noticed that they frequently give insufficient care to group dynamics and the resulting behavior. This is despite the fact that enhancing constructive "groupness" is a powerful way of tackling these same challenges.

Groupness can be defined as the sense of belonging which develops once three or more people get together and find similarities which link them. We've all experienced this when, for example, joining a new department. We listen to the conversations around us and decide within a few minutes if we feel comfortable there. At the same time, we are figuring out whether the group wants us to be one of them. But how does this happen?

From the earliest times, people lived in small groups of 20 to 30 members. As numbers grew, new groups would form, based on the strength of family relationships, friendships or common interests. As a result, the splinter groups eventually came to exhibit behavioural or physical differences. When conflicts arose, similarities within one group (assimilation) and differences from the others (differentiation) were exaggerated. These particular characteristics became a way of distinguishing friend from foe and led also to the evolution of different languages and dialects.

Modern context

Using this point of reference, we can say that being accepted by a group depends on the established members, especially those who most influence opinions. They notice similarities which are in line with their norms and accepted behavior, or their culture.

Within a large organization like a company, division or department, sub-groups are likely to develop and compete with each other. In the modern workplace, this can lead to disruption and divisiveness. However, the problem can be overcome by creating a high degree of groupness across the whole organization and by aligning the culture of the sub-groups with the broader company goals. I call this "con-groupness" (constructive groupness) and contrast it with "dis-groupness", which occurs when separate group goals do not match those of the leader.

We can illustrate this by taking the case of a technology company in which engineers from different departments met informally once a week to discuss the latest issues. It turned out to be a perfect example of con-groupness and resulted in innovative thinking and successful new products being developed for the company. How, then, can a leader maximize this effect and minimize the risk of disunity?

When I first recognized the factor in early 2004 in a book about child psychology, I noticed that all great leaders are able to create a high degree of con-groupness among their followers. A key to doing this is perhaps the unconscious application of the major themes which influence groupness, all of which are related to the processes of assimilation and differentiation. In essence, these are providing a clear and compelling

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direction in terms of vision, mission, values or strategy; describing what makes the difference when compared with competitors; and creating a clear self-image and style of behavior (corporate culture).

Three conditions

Any leader can consciously make use of these factors by applying them to a specific context and area of responsibility. However, to lead a group successfully, a person must not only have the willingness and ability to lead, but also the permission of group members to assume the position of authority.

All three conditions are interdependent, since the ability to lead increases the chance of gaining permission to do so, while the willingness to lead makes someone more inclined to learn and enhance their ability. Among first-class leaders, 10 key competencies can commonly be identified which relate to enhancing con-groupness and harnessing it for the benefit of the whole organization. These are:

1. Giving direction
2. Communication
3. Feedback and "feed forward"
4. Coaching
5. Rewarding performance
6. Selecting and retaining top talent
7. Employee participation
8. Innovation
9. Charisma
10. Integrity

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Individuals who develop these competencies have the best chance of forming strong teams and, in time, becoming outstanding leaders. They will be able to overcome dissent more effectively and to influence the key opinion makers in sub-groups to focus on the bigger picture and the greater good. Such first-class leaders have the ability to establish a successful corporate culture that supports the goals of the organization through a high level of con-groupness. The consequences are greater staff commitment, top talent preferring to remain with the company, and better levels of overall performance.



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In 2004, he initiated the Master Coach Alliance (see <http://www.master-coach-alliance.com>) in Hong Kong, a network of professional Life, Business and Corporate Coaches. End of 2004, he started authoring the book "The Groupness Factor" (see <http://www.progressu.com.hk/Groupness-book.htm>) which got published in August 2005.

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