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RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN A GROUP LEADERSHIP

John Boyes

After a long and varied career in management education and consultancies, John Boyes is executive director of the Christian Brethren Research Fellowship. Here is his distilled wisdom on the subject of relationships within a group leadership.

This short background paper summarizes some aspects of the dynamics which affect the performance of groups of leaders in different decision-making settings. It should be recognized that merely bringing together a number of individuals, however personally capable, does not constitute an effective group. There is a clear need for growth into a team relationship in which members can exchange ideas freely and clearly, and feel involved in the decisions and processes of the group. Nor is its effective functioning dependent on the leader alone. Contributing to the total task of leadership is the responsibility of every member.

Perhaps the most apparent leadership body for readers is the eldership or oversight of a local church—a plural college of peers with supportive and complementary roles to perform. There are, of course, other leader groups within the church—the deacons, the Sunday school teachers, the fabric committee, etc—each with its own distinctive set of objectives to achieve in corporate working and decision-making. There are certain recognizable aspects of behaviour shared by all purposive groupings of people in any setting. A simple model consists of three of these aspects:

1. *Task achievement:*
processes which enable the group's aims and tasks to be accomplished;
2. *Group maintenance:*
processes which enable the groups to work together supportively and to stay the course;
3. *Individual needs:*
processes which are self-oriented and impinge on other members and the group tasks.

These aspects of behaviour interact with each other and must be balanced to achieve satisfactory working; they throw light on the positive and negative forces which bear on the group at work. The first two are

described as 'functional' in that they build together the two main progressive aims of the group: to get the work done and to hang together as an integrated body. The third aspect is often called 'dysfunctional' in that such behaviours detract from the others and thwart the growth of teamwork.

In the first category of task achievement, activities would include *initiating*: proposing tasks and goals, defining problems, suggesting procedures and ideas; *informing*: seeking and offering facts of relevance to the problem; *clarifying, elaborating, summarising*: interpreting issues, defining terms, indicating alternatives, restating discussion, etc; *decision seeking and taking*: invoking procedure when the group is ready. But by majoring on these processes alone to the exclusion of other aspects, a working group can soon become an unattractive decision-making machine, susceptible to manipulation by some of the members.

In the second category, there are important social behaviours which encourage the group to remain in good working order, with a good climate for task work and maximum use of member resources. These would include processes of *harmonizing*: reconciling disagreements, reducing tensions, exploring differences; *gate keeping*: opening channels of communication to facilitate taking part, sharing with others; *encouraging*: warm, friendly, responsive acceptance of others' contributions; *compromising*: modifying views in the interest of group cohesion, yielding status in conflict; *standards*: setting and testing levels of group satisfaction with its work.

Groups newly established or with new members need to spend some time in these dimensions of behaviour before confidence and trust has grown sufficiently for task processes to become efficient.

The third category of self oriented behaviour is, perhaps, the most recognizable aspect of groups at work and the source of much impediment to group achievement and satisfaction. They would include *dominating*: attempting to assert authority or superiority in manipulating the members' decision making; *aggressing*: stubborn blocking of others' ideas and suggestions or attacking them as persons; *recognition*: help-seeking calling for sympathy in confusion, insecurity, deprecation, thus holding up the group action; *pairing up*: forming sub-groups to force through particular views, pleading special interests as a cover for prejudice or stereotypes desired by some members only; *withdrawing*: removing sources of discomfort by psychologically leaving the group.

These problems of self-oriented behaviour arise mainly for certain individuals in their roles as group members, based on problems of

1. *identity*:
who am I in this group?

2. *goals*:
do the group goals coincide sufficiently with my own?
3. *control*:
how much will I be influenced by others for good or bad?
4. *intimacy*:
how much of myself am I expected to put at the disposal of others?

We cannot afford to ignore these undercurrents, and a good group learns how to integrate its members' needs with its corporate objectives. Thus it develops high cohesiveness (attractiveness to its members) and works towards *consensus* decision and not by imposed, minority crushing processes.

However, in many highly cohesive groups, another collective dysfunctional behaviour often manifests itself. In its search for authentication and security, a group can easily obscure facts and ignore situations which are essential elements in its decision-making. This danger is known as '*groupthink*' and is a drive for consensus at any cost, suppressing dissent and appraisal of alternatives. It tends to occur when cohesiveness is high and members are insulated from external influences; it often occurs in authoritarian leadership situations even when members do not wish to conform.

Some of the symptoms of this syndrome are: illusions of invulnerability, discounting warnings, belief in inherent rightness of group's views, pressures on members against dissent with group 'loyalty', self-censorship by members of their inclinations to doubt and deviate, illusion of unanimity ('silence means consent?'), emergence of self-appointed mind-guards who protect the group from adverse information which might shatter shared complacency, etc—perhaps a moderate level of group cohesion is best, so that solidarity is not confused with conformism and that members can be themselves and not 'yes men' to others. It has to be realised that 'complete conformity is as unpractical as complete individual freedom' (McGregor).

Learning to live with differences and to handle them effectively is a continuing group responsibility. We need to understand the positive aspects of conflict of views and learn to avoid 'win/lose' situations which fracture group cohesion.

There are three basic strategies available for handling differences, of which the first two are not to be commended in this study:

1. '*divide and conquer*' in which the 'boss' discourages inter-member exchanges and coalitions. His is the preferred viewpoint which he promotes in a vertical, one-to-one direction with weak colleagues who are only nominally members of the group;

2. '*suppression*' by ignoring or declaring 'irrelevant' arbitrarily the issues which members raise. The chairman calls for 'objectivity', urges 'rally

round', 'let's not be divisive' and so the group ends up as an agenda processing machine with formalized procedures in which the members protect their interests;

3. '*working through*' which calls for a mature, committed *team* who have learned trust and role responsibilities. This may well be a slower process with decreasing need for leader arbitration and voting procedures. It calls for tolerance of ambiguities and a true release of innovation and creativity, with relationships which avoid mutual antagonisms, secret planning, playing politics, currying favour, ego-defences, needs for 'checks and balances', etc.

Striving for this kind of all-member, resource-using teams is worth a lot of hard work by those concerned. There is sound experimental evidence that it is the members' abilities and interactions that are the main determinants of corporate success—the leader alone cannot determine the group's effectiveness no matter how skilful, capable, competent or even 'charismatic' he may be! There are many other aspects of group development issues which cannot be included here in this summary study, eg, sensitivity training, organisation development among others, but for those who would study further in this field, the following introductory texts are suggested:

1. J. Boyes, 'Corporate Leadership in the Oversight', *CBRF Journal* No. 30 (1980)
2. P. Honey, *Face to Face; a practical guide to interactive skills*, *IPM* (1976)
3. I. L. Janis, *Victims of Groupthink*, Houghton, Mifflin, Boston (1972)
4. D. McGregor, *The Professional Manager* McGraw Hill (1967)
5. E. Schein, *Organisational Psychology* Prentice Hall (1972);
E. Schein, 'Process Consultation' Addison Wesley (1967)
6. N.W. Summerton, *Harvester* articles May/June 1985
7. Training Information Paper No. 4 *The T-Group* (P. B. Smith) 1969 HMSO; TIP No. 7 *Interaction Analysis* (Dyar & Giles) 1974