

Defense Mechanisms in Teams

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Teams are groups with tasks. The role of the team manager is to mobilize the group so that it can carry out the task. Thus one of the responsibilities of the manager is to maintain and improve the functioning of the group. Teams like any group are subject to destructive processes which can impede their effectiveness. The greater awareness managers have of these processes, the better they will be able to counteract their force and ensure productive functioning. This paper will examine some of these processes and explore steps that can be taken to work with them.

Bion's Basic Assumption Group Theory

Wilfred Bion worked with traumatized soldiers in Great Britain during World War II and from his work developed a theory of groups that can help us understand some of the things that happen in them. He postulated that any group is working at least two levels at any one time: the conscious, rational, task-oriented level and the more primitive emotional level. He called the former the work group and the latter basic assumption groups. Sometimes the work group will function well; at other times emotional needs will be too great and the basic assumption groups will take over. We have all come away from meetings which we felt were a waste of time or worked with a group that we found frustrating. Perhaps they spent all their time in conflict and got nothing done; perhaps they spent a lot of time on what seemed to be side issues; perhaps there was a mood of apathy that couldn't be shifted. It is these sorts of issues Bion addressed.

Bion suggested that when a group is in a basic assumption mode, there is some threat that a majority of people are feeling that results in their behaving as if certain conditions applied. Somehow there seems to be a basic assumption in the group that they do. These basic assumptions relate to primitive instincts whose function has been to help us survive. These instincts are always with us and are automatic and unconscious. They are active when we feel social threats as well as physical threats, and they will be unconscious processes in the group.

The first of these he called Basic Assumption Dependency. This will be related to the real life experience that all of us have had in childhood of needing to have someone look after us if we were to survive. We will also have had experience in school of needing adults with knowledge of the world to pass it on to us. With the basic assumption dependency the team may behave as if they must have a leader to tell them what to do and show them how to do it if they are to manage to carry on. When this is operative, the manager may frequently experience all eyes turning to her when information is needed, decisions have to be made or action taken. On the

flip side, if the manager takes over the direction that is seemingly asked for, the team may resist with objections, or by wanting further discussion or by complaining outside the appropriate forum.

The second basic assumption group is Fight/Flight. When this is operative, there will be some issue present which will most likely not be articulated, which the team feels to be threatening. It behaves as if this is a threat to its survival which must be fought or run away from. In the fight mode members may be in an uproar fighting amongst themselves, expressing a lot of anger at the organization, or attacking the task as it is laid out. Alternatively, in the flight mode they may spend too much time on side issues, and there may be a lot of lateness or absenteeism. In either mode, the team may latch onto issues that have varying degrees of relevancy, and they may tend to ride them as hobby horses and never arrive anywhere. These issues may be such things as parking spaces, who makes the coffee, lack of resources or new work demands from the organization.

The final basic assumption is Pairing. This occurs when the team seems to rely on a twosome in the group to think through issues, come to conclusions and take actions. The group behaves as if this pair have the capacity to generate the recipe which it needs to keep it functioning. The rest of the team members remain relatively inactive and pay rapt attention to the work of the two. It may seem that the team is doing some valuable work, but in fact it is only being done by part of the team.

The apparent behavior of each of these assumption groups may be present at times in the team and not be destructive. With a new inexperienced team, we would expect a period of dependency. Any team must go through a stage when its differences must be addressed, and conflict will be a result. The team might quite rightfully object to organizational demands that they feel is unrealistic or inappropriate. They will need periods of social interaction that have nothing to do with work. Two people may for a period be the focus of the team's activities. The problem arises when these modes become predominant and are hampering its effectiveness.

With both the dependency and pairing assumption groups there is a kind of polarization happening in the team. All the members are behaving as if some people are highly skilled, knowledgeable and effective and some are lacking in all these qualities. Some people may complain about the state of affairs, but everybody will have some investment in the status quo. The task is to help the latter group become more aware of the skills they do have and the former to give up some of their monopoly on effectiveness. Associated with this will be fears: fears of taking on responsibility and fears of losing control or of having to acknowledge times of feeling incompetent.

The dependency mode is more likely to be entrenched than is pairing and less easily addressed directly. This may be compounded by the fact that it is liable to be the manager who is the object of the dependency, and she is in the Catch 22 of having to do something to make the group less dependent and thus potentially perpetuating the pattern. The manager will first of all need to look at the part she is playing in the process. What is she doing to hold onto the strength and power in the team? This may require help from a third party since the manager will be caught up in the problem and may have difficulty distancing herself. After gaining clarity on this issue, the most effective solution may be in refraining from being directive with the group, but by working with different structures. It may be that the team has relied on regular meetings with full group discussion and consensus decision making. The team may want to have a day out in which there are exercises to build trust and help people see one another more equally. A skills inventory for each member might help them all to see their strengths and developmental needs. The team might want to set up a different structure for meetings in which there is more meeting of subgroups to prepare for full team meetings. Essentially what is needed is to cut across the patterns which are keeping the dependency alive.

It may be possible to deal with pairing directly. The manager may want to point out what is happening and what the effects are on the team. It would be important to give members an opportunity to explore the effects on themselves and what their investment is in keeping it going. It is vitally important that this be done in a non-judgmental way that avoids blaming people for shirking their duties or hogging the show. It must be seen as a whole team issue which does not lie in one or two individuals. Alternatively, looking at changes in structure or allocation of responsibilities as discussed above may be tried.

With fight/flight, the team is experiencing more directly some threat or fear. It could be that changes are being demanded by the organization so that the team faces having to change its way of working or may feel that its existence is threatened. It could be that there are issues around between people that need frank discussion. Somehow the threat feels more that people can deal with openly, so their fears get expressed in behavior that restricts their effectiveness. The first task of the manager is to identify what she thinks is the source of the disturbance. What are the fears that are being acted out? Once some clarity is gained on this, then the problem needs to be addressed in the team. This will take time. The very nature of the basic assumption group is that the team members are feeling threatened. Attention will need to be paid to trust building, and time will be needed for discussion of the issues that are troubling people.

Splits in a Team or Work Group

Any time splitting occurs, the people involved are having to deal with ambiguities that carry sufficient conflict that they feel unable to hold them together. When we split we find a solution

that divides one side from the other and provides us with greater clarity. This is a natural process and one that enables us to make sense of the world and to learn. However, splitting can be defensive. In this sense it arises from the inability of immature aspects of ourselves to tolerate ambiguity. This will be an unconscious process and will involve assigning good and bad values to the various sides. We all do this to a greater or lesser extent - more when we are feeling threatened. We can see it operating when a person tends to see things in black and white. Perhaps, she sees certain people as either all good or all bad (usually there has to be one or two of each) or thinks you are being unfair because you do not treat her just as you have someone else. We have all probably worked with a someone who describes previous organizations, bosses, or consultants as completely useless, with the implication that we are equally good. Or the opposite may pertain, with the previous experience being wonderful and our guidance worthless.

The splitting we encounter in a team may come from a number of sources for a number of reasons. We will look at the following areas: divisions in the team, scapegoating, idealization, splits in leadership, and Messianic fantasies. These are all ways that a team may be dealing with the difficulties of coping with ambiguity, and after they have been described we will explore ways to respond to them.

Divisions in the Team

Divisions in a team will not necessarily denote splitting. There are divisions that will occur in any group which result in subgroups and affect the team's life. One may be between smokers and non-smokers. People in these two groups will naturally spend more time together, and this might prevent the team from jelling as well as it might if people mixed more flexibly. Other divisions may carry more feeling, and if these become entrenched, then the manager needs to think more about defensive splitting. For instance, I once worked with a team that was made up of women of strong feminist persuasion and men who held very traditional perspectives on male/female roles. There was no one on the team who took a more moderate viewpoint. The men tried to understand the women's position, but they constantly undermined themselves with their blind spots. The women found themselves continually feeling frustrated and angry. Each side saw the other as being the 'problem'. The work of the team was disturbed by this division, which was eventually resolved by the men leaving. The team had become polarized, people had lost empathy with one another, communication across the divide was very difficult, and in fact, general communication in the whole team became less effective.

Scapegoating

Scapegoating occurs when certain issues are around in a team that members find difficult to acknowledge and somehow the 'problem' gets located in one person. Other members of the team do not notice any aspect of the problem in themselves, see it in the elected scapegoat

and then attempt to solve it by getting the scapegoat to change. If the scapegoat leaves then usually someone else is quickly found to carry these unwanted parts.

Scapegoating usually centers on an issue that is both important and worrying to team members. For instance, the question of competency often lends itself to scapegoating. We all care that we are and are seen to be competent. What can happen is that all the concerns about competency get located in one member, often the newest, least experienced person. The scapegoat always has enough of the 'problem' for a connection. This person becomes the subject of a concerted effort to coach and correct. The person may come to feel more and more incompetent, while the rest of the team display their knowledge and skills and become frustrated and irritated with him or her.

It can be difficult to know if what is going on is scapegoating or if the individual is in fact disturbed or not suited to the work. If, however, there is a 'problem' person on your team, the possibility of scapegoating always needs to be considered. A clue may be the amount of energy the other team members put into trying to change, ignoring or belittling the person. Scapegoating is a whole group phenomenon. The whole team has an investment in the problem lying in the scapegoat, and will resist efforts to see it as a more general one.

Idealization

With idealization, team members may see themselves as carrying out good and useful work in a world that is largely antagonistic. They may have latched onto a particular model of working that they religiously believe in and adhere to. Relationships within the team will be exceptionally good; however, they may lose the capacity to criticize themselves. In order to maintain this equilibrium, the team will need to have a bad object somewhere which may be a scapegoat, senior managers, the administration, or an uncaring world.

Splits in Leadership

Whenever there are two or more people who carry leadership responsibilities in a team, there will be an element of competition between them. Their openness and ability to cooperate may well overshadow this, but it will be around. It may happen that these leaders become polarized and unable to work together or to agree on anything. The rest of the team may experience little overt conflict, but there will be a major sentiment that the leaders need to sort out their difficulties.

As with scapegoating, this may be a whole group phenomenon. In this case, the conflict that is around in the whole team is getting focussed onto two people. The other team members can avoid noticing any conflicts in themselves because it is located in their leaders who are acting it out for the whole group. For example, I once managed a team in a residential mental health facility. The deputy and I were split over organizational demands. She took an angry position

over what she considered were unreasonable requirements and lack of flexibility in staffing support. I took a more understanding position because I recognized the constraints on the organization which came from low government priorities. We were both right. The work was under-funded, and senior members of the organization did pass the problem down to the workers. Somehow because of our temperament and perhaps our positions on the team, we became polarized on this issue. Certainly, the nature of our difference must have represented a conflict in the team. All members must have thought that their work was undervalued by priorities of society, and they must have felt angry with the organization as well. However, if they were to deal with their heavy work loads and maintain care of clients, they needed to keep this conflict subdued in themselves. In a sense, it suited the group for this conflict to be located in the leadership.

Messianic Fantasies

This is related to charismatic leadership and involves a collusive relationship that helps maintain the team in a dependent state. The members remain in a state of admiration which emphasizes their incompetence and inadequacy. If the leader has left, then the team maintains the equilibrium by being in a state of mourning, looking back to the wonderful old days, and hoping for another leader to arrive to bring them salvation. It can be a difficult team for a new leader to take over.

Responding to Splitting

Defensive splitting is an unconscious process that involves gaining certainty by seeing ambiguous situations in a way that divides perceived good parts from perceived bad ones and by attributing the bad to some people and the good to others. Bad aspects not noticed in one side nor good in the other. A consequence for teams is that members may become polarized or the team may see itself as a polar opposite to the organization or to the world outside. In any case, all empathy is lost between the two sides.

Dealing with any splitting involves enabling members of the team to acknowledge in themselves those things they are projecting onto other people, whether they be good or bad. This can be especially difficult for people who are holding the good side of the projections. As in the illustration on scapegoating, it can be painful for team members to recognize the feelings of inadequacy in themselves that they are noticing so clearly in one person. There might, however, also be problems for people holding the bad side. Members of a team with a charismatic leader will have fears about being as able to work effectively without that person.

A manager's first task is to recognize the splitting. This can be easier said than done, especially as she will be caught up in the process to a greater or lesser degree. Consequently, some processes will be more difficult to identify than others. For instance, she will be able to pick up scapegoating much easier than messianic fantasies in which she is so fully involved. A manager

needs support in thinking through processes in the team. This could be a supervisor, an outside consultant or a peer support group. Having said this, we can recognize some of the symptoms from previous discussions. We can also know that problems emerging from these processes will be entrenched and seemingly unsolvable, and that people will be polarized over them.

Splits can be dealt with more easily if the way has been paved before they become a serious problem. The team that develops a common knowledge of the sorts of things that can happen will be readier for them. The team that understands that destructive processes happen with all of us and are not a sign of guilt or failure will be more able to reflect on its process. Destructive processes are a natural response to the stress and anxiety of work. People are not to be blamed if they fall into them, but they do need to make an effort to communicate openly and to change. The task in all cases is to try to break the pattern and to get people talking across the divide.

Scapegoating

The word 'scapegoat' should be avoided. It seems to imply guilt to people and immediately throws them on the defensive. The manager will need to ask herself what function the scapegoat is fulfilling for the team. What is the scapegoat doing that other members are avoiding experiencing in themselves? The first benefit of looking at the problem in this way is that the manager distances herself from the process and immediately gains more empathy with the scapegoat. The second is that the manager may discover what issue is troubling the team so that it can then be addressed in its own right. Thus if the manager identifies that fears about competency may be the issue, then she will want to bring it up and talk about it in a way that people can explore it. To avoid further splitting, she will need to include herself in this issue too, for she will have concerns about competency as much as anyone else.

Other Splits

A similar thing can be done with divisions in a team or splits in the leadership. The team divided by gender issues was in a fight/flight mode. The group was experiencing some threat or perceived threat, and they needed to identify it. With leadership splits, the two people may find a way forward by looking at how their conflict is serving the team's needs. In doing so they depersonalize the issue, and are more able to explore their roles in the team's unconscious process.

Idealization of the team and the collusion between a charismatic leader and dependent team will be more easily seen by outsiders than it will to members of the team, including the team leader. However, managers need to be aware of symptoms that have been described and of their potential for destructiveness. This is where monitoring the team processes with a supervisor or a support group can help to gain perspective. Once again, this needs to be done in a non-judgmental way that encourages exploration.

Dealing with destructive processes in a team can be a difficult and sometimes lengthy task. The manager will always need to balance off how much effort must go into maintaining working relations against that put into the work tasks of the team. The manager must judge whether the team's effectiveness is being hampered sufficiently to warrant a look at process. All this will be clearer to her if there is a culture of enquiry in the team that acknowledges that destructive processes exist and that the team will work better if it maintains an awareness of them.

Structural Manifestations

Relationships between people on a team lie at the bottom of a hierarchy of structures that need to be in place for effective functioning of a team. This hierarchy has been described as goals, roles, procedures and relationships. If goals are not clear, then it is difficult for roles and procedures to be clear. If roles are not clear then it is difficult for procedures to be clear. The presenting problem may be interpersonal, but may have its source in lack of clear goals, poor role definition, or unclear procedures. A well defined, flexible structure reduces the fertile fields in which destructive processes can prosper.

Staff Burnout

Current concerns about global competition, increase in the ease and volume of communication, demands of customers, demands of the organization, and the commitment of staff to the work they are doing can come together in such a way that team members may find that they could work all the hours in a week and still not get everything done. Sometimes people do not manage boundaries sufficiently well to keep from being drawn in to this. They work too long hours and do not take regular breaks, and may end up exhausted, cynical, and feeling they have no personal life. Illness can be a result.

Prevention measures may include careful selection of staff, limiting hours that they work, making sure they take regular vacations and days off, ensuring they have periodic training and contact with other teams. It is also important to create a supportive environment that recognizes that stress is inherent to work and that team members do not feel they have to appear invulnerable.

Conclusion

All groups are subject to destructive processes that interrupt and prevent them from accomplishing their tasks. Often people will try to ignore or override them and get on with the job, however these processes will continue to undermine the work of the group unless they are addressed in some way.

Good leadership is essential to help contain the power of these processes. The first leadership task is to ensure that the team is on track with its primary goals and to provide the structures and role clarity that the team needs to do its job. A second major task is to help the team

manage its boundaries and protect itself from destructive impulses to overwork. Next is the task of establishing a non-judgmental, non-defensive culture of enquiry. The leader must understand that this will be difficult at times and require time, and that she will be hampered by the fact that she is caught up in the processes as well. She will need support in the form of an outside person -a supervisor or consultant - or a group of peers to gain distance and clarity. If she can develop her awareness and learn to intervene in these processes, she will be more effective than if she responds solely with task or smoothing interventions.

References:

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