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DEFINITION

T-Groups constitute a set of experiential, educational designs for understanding the self in relation to others, with the small-group membership providing both the context for learning as well as crucial feedback and emotional support for the learners. T-Group designs can vary significantly (Golembiewski and Blumberg, 1977), and are viewed as a major species of the genus "laboratory approach to learning" (Benne, et al., 1975). Often referred to as "sensitivity training," T-Groups usually are trainer-led, but can be member-led experiences that employ tape-recorded instructions.

Here-and-now events in T-Groups permit individuals to experience and test their awareness of self and others, of group processes and culture. This requires developing a temporary community with appropriate norms, a unique social order in whose psychological safety participants can test how they come across to others. Members also often consciously seek to expand the choices available to them, through experimenting with new behavior; they develop skills useful in diagnosing group and organizational behavior; and gain insight about the conditions that inhibit or facilitate effective group

functioning.

T-Group is definitely not shorthand for Therapy Group, although trainers must be alert to the possibility of psychologic trauma. T-Groups focus on educational experiences in which participants must experiment with and improve interpersonal skills while therapy often emphasizes the genesis of ideas, feelings, and behavior. Hence, ethical solicitation for T-Group participants should routinely advise caution for those experiencing unusual stress due to significant problems in everyday coping. The experience could produce information overload because the T-Group can be emotionally arousing — although tolerably so for most — and because it deals with the full range of events in a particular group's life, sometimes mercurially, and often at multiple levels. Finally, T-Group training neither preaches openness as a life-style nor prescribes disrespect for those who opt to be reserved. Both charges can be legitimately leveled against numerous varieties of "let-it-all-hang-out" experiences. T-Groups would focus on the choice between degrees of openness or closedness by specific individuals, and on the consequences of that fundamental choice.

HISTORY

Under the basic sponsorship of the National Training Laboratory, in Bethel, Maine, T-Groups impacted on the world's consciousness after 1947. In

fact, no less an observer than Carl Rogers sees the T-Group and its variants as the most significant educational development of the twentieth century. Today, group experiences are available widely; pop-health variants abound in diverse growth and encounter centers; and quality-control issues loom large. To provide guidance for consumers, as well as to develop certification policies and procedures for the growing number of professionals, the International Association of Applied Social Scientists was founded in 1971. Applicants seeking certification periodically undergo a review process testing their knowledge, experience, and philosophy.

TECHNIQUE

The major elements of the T-Group process are well known (Blumberg and Golembiewski, 1976), and a large battery of exercises exists to facilitate their emergence and analysis (e.g., Pfeiffer and Jones). Basically, that process is conceptually rooted in Kurt Lewin's observation that behavior and attitudes suggest an equilibrium, often reinforced by groups, whose common costs include inflexibility and infrequent experimentation. Lewin proposed a three-step process for choice or change that acknowledged and used his core observation:

> • unfreezing or altering the forces acting on the individual, especially by reducing some of the threat in choice or change via a supportive group

• testing old or new attitudes or behavior in a safe environment

• refreezing or the integration of the changed or rechosen attitudes or behavior into one's relationships, as reinforced by group resources

Essentially, the T-Group process rests on the formation of a temporary group with specific norms that support choice or change. Unfreezing begins early, as trainers generally refuse to play the conventional leadership role, and as members seek to establish their identities in a new setting. As interpersonal liking and attraction to the group develop — aided by trainer interventions that highlight central processes and values — participants typically loosen their defenses, develop trust in fellow group members, and acknowledge ownership of behavior.

Testing begins after the movement from fear to trust has progressed sufficiently, the two central features being disclosure and feedback. Disclosure tends to increase the capacity to relate to others, helps individuals isolate areas of concern, and also raises the probability that others will provide data necessary for effective problem solving. Feedback reduces an individual's blind spots. By increasing the availability of inputs from others, one may learn more accurately the consequences of his actions and behavior (Golembiewski, 1972) and might choose to adopt the behavior or attitudes the he comes to see as effective and personally beneficial.

APPLICATIONS

T-Groups have been used in many environments for diverse purposes, as standard references illustrate (Golembiewski and Blumberg, 1977; Solomon and Berzon, 1972). Complex organizations have hosted most applications, although the present trend favors the use of such spinoffs of the laboratory approach as a team building, role negotiation, and confrontation designs (Golembiewski, 1972). T-Groups also have dealt with a broad range of issues in the classroom, race relations, community relations involving police, schools, and jobs programs, and conflict among nations.

The diffusion of the T-Group strategy raises two concerns, the first being unintended effects or casualties. The trainer's style often contributes, perhaps even with unique force, by overstimulating or inadequately protecting members. Casualties vary from substantially less than 1 percent of group members in most cases, to an astounding rate in one study of approximately one of six participants.

The transfer of any learning to back-home sites constitutes a second major issue raised by the diffusion of the T-Group strategy. Transfer is a function of several intervening variables. We can give only a sample here.

First, characteristics of the individual seem central in transfer. Persons most likely to carry back skills and to maintain learning seem to have a

healthy regard for self, a willingness to accept affection, a positive view of friends, and a willingness to risk, in order to gain further understanding.

Second, participants successful at transfer tend to develop strategies that maintain their drive to learn. The strategies include:

1. Experimenting with new behavior

2. Refining new responses in the light of the reactions they evoked

3. Talking with others in depth about the changes they have experienced

4. Taking an active stance toward important events in one's life (Lieberman, et al., 1973).

Third, the degree of transfer of learning also depends upon the back-home situation. An individual's high status, tenure, and authority or autonomy often will help maintain learning, but great differences between the back-home and learning environments can cause learning fade-out. Essentially, forces inhibiting change will tend to become more prominent when the individual leaves the training situation, and practitioners and theorists must find ways to compensate for these barriers to applying the skills or behavior learned in T-Groups.