

Maria Spindler

## **Mind the form of living systems! <sup>1</sup>**

What leaders of organisations need that can be learned in group dynamics training groups

### **Introduction**

Group dynamics training groups? Who can afford to sit around in a circle for a week and just talk? Who has that much time and money? This is the twenty-first century, and we are overwhelmed by the complexity of organisations and society! I argue in this article that group-dynamics can facilitate relevant exemplary recognition and action learning for today's form of leadership in complex organisations, when the training group involves special characteristics. Group dynamics is not just group dynamics; rather, various areas of concentration have emerged. Here I primarily refer to the understanding of group dynamics as developed ÖGGO<sup>2</sup> in the last forty years. I base this article on three presuppositions:

- First: group dynamics offers a learning setting that has the potential to change society.
- Second: Group dynamics is a form of action learning.
- Third: Organisations function as transformers<sup>3</sup> of complexity.

The key question of this article is: What can group dynamics<sup>4</sup> contribute to the development of complex living systems, so that potential learning for leadership and organisation can be manifest? The main focus is learning to learn to recognise forms of leadership principles and patterns as interplay between actions and conditions of actions: principles that we meet and create in our daily leadership actions within the organisation, such as strategies, structures, processes, leadership cultures, etc. This article is based on the group dynamics concept that focuses on the “group-as-system”

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<sup>1</sup> This article is published in: ÖGGO (2013) Here and Now. Verlagshaus Hernalts. Vienna.

<sup>2</sup>The ÖGGO (Association for Group Dynamics & Organization Consulting) group dynamic has its roots in Kurt Lewin's developments. It developed the understanding of group dynamics further through a linking of theory, empirical research and practical development.

<sup>3</sup> See Luhmann (2006) and Spindler (2012).

<sup>4</sup> Further to group dynamics team development, see also the publications of Wimmer (2006), Heintel (2008) and Lackner (2008b).

level as presented in the article by Spindler and Wagenheim in this book<sup>5</sup>. A group dynamic which is aimed at active formation of the interplay of individual – interaction – system develops learning potential for the formation of conditions and possibilities in forms necessary for complex leadership requirements. Attention is directed to the form of communication as perception and experience. In Part 1 of this article I support my assumptions of exemplary learning about the form, Part 2 deals with the complex leadership requirements of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and Part Three discusses the learning potential of group dynamics as leadership principles.

### **1. Group dynamics training groups as exemplary action-learning for forms of living systems**

Training groups are regarded here as a learning opportunity to facilitate complex, case-related, exemplary learning. We are talking here about the form of communication and action learning. In this context, case-related, exemplary learning<sup>6</sup> refers to the development of internal, complex connections within a group as a communications system in which the learner gains exemplary general, transferable knowledge, skills, capabilities and insights. During this process, operations such as precise, differentiated perception, comparison and evaluation, recognition of commonalities and differences, shared and distributed action and reflection and orientations and emotional involvements for participation are seen and experienced.<sup>7</sup> From this, structural truisms and principles are deduced fundamental orders of the form for living systems (see Part 3 of this article). Practice in recognising principles and connections cultivates formal-operative whole-system thinking for living systems that construct communication patterns. Exemplary form-recognition and experience and their evaluation opens to leaders the possibility of transferring them to other social situations in teams, organisations and society.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “The difference in focus: How to create ‘group-as-system’ level learning in t-groups as a special focus of the ÖGGO-approach,” Spindler & Wagenheim (2013).

<sup>6</sup> The concept of exemplary learning comes originally from physics. According to Wagenschein, the laws of natural science, through observation of reality or experiments, can either be developed through research or discovered, that is, unlocked using the genetic principle. The sphere of influence of the example extends to all events which are subject to the same natural laws which are structurally the same. This concept was further developed for educational purposes by Klafki (1959). It speaks of “structural educational principles”; in individual cases, the typical principle is learned.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the concept of action-learning (Scharmer 2009).

<sup>8</sup> This learning is known in German as “Bildung”.

In this context, complexity means the relationship of the individual parts to the whole: the more complexity there is, the more creative space is provided for the individuals and group as system. The keyword is shared creating within the open space.<sup>9</sup> The more undefined and questionable space, the more shared development and the more participation and shared sense-making can be constructed and the more learning can be generated for complex leadership situations<sup>10</sup>. The more complex and unpredictable the leadership situations are, the less the leadership requirements can be explained simply by the characteristics and actions of the individual parts and the less helpful unquestioned patterns are for observing, interpreting, planning and acting. These systems require steering and double and triple loop learning as their operational mode.

“Form” here means:

- The form of communication: Group dynamics operates with the form of communication in a broad sense, as active and emancipatory creation of relationships – as the creation of relationships among the single parts.<sup>11</sup> The goal of group dynamics is to enable shared learning as a system, as active creation, analysis, interpretation and evaluation of the form of communication. On the one hand, patterns are of high importance for organisations as a form of perpetuity of organisational and leadership culture, a sort of definition of decisions, structures, processes, including and excluding, division of work between individuals and areas, inward and outward communication, development of leadership patterns as more hierarchical or more participative, etc. On the other hand, in our fast-moving global era, these patterns must be treated as modifiable when the demands of the environment require this. In this context it is of special interest that the form of communication in group dynamics training groups (t-groups) becomes the content of the learning.

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. Schüller and Zvacek (2013).

<sup>10</sup> These are also indicators for the current modern word 'sustainability' for teams, organisations and society.

<sup>11</sup> Since Kant developed his concept of human understanding, both the world and humans' intercourse with it can be construed increasingly complexly. The concept of complexity is understood to be the conceptual opposite of unquestioned linearity and causality. Systems theory<sup>11</sup> takes up the cybernetic presentation of complex, dynamic phenomena and can, with functional analysis of social, sense-limited, complex, dynamic communications systems (including teams<sup>11</sup> and organisations) provide new concepts of complexity. See further the detailed discussion in Spindler and Steger (2008, 237ff).

- The form of learning: Group dynamics is experience-orientated learning, not mechanical. This learning corresponds to the steering requirements for living and complex systems. Due to the setting, in t-groups this form of learning is mutually developed. Room for individual and mutual development is opened or closed through shared and divided action by the participants. Learning to learn as a system is the goal. The active mutual creation of space for learning and development through mutual action is what is special about learning in group dynamics: learning through and about the self of the system, a form of action learning as system.

## **2. Leadership requirements for living systems in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

What requirements for society, organisations and leadership are we talking about here?

### **2.1. Society and its organisations as complexity transformers**

In order to deal with the complex society of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, an adequate complex concept of organisation and leadership is needed. Organisations become central agents of transformation of our society and of us as individuals. They decide, include and exclude, intensify, transform, facilitate and frustrate. They span the globe with their patterns of action and affect our private lives. Areas of conflict, dynamics, demarcations and borders between organisations and society are a flexible and dynamic hot spot for the development of people and society. Contradictions, conflicts and paradoxes appear on the scene.

Our images and perceptions of organisation and leadership play a major role here, since we cannot change what we cannot observe<sup>12</sup>. A complex organisational concept is offered by Niklas Luhmann<sup>13</sup>: Organisations are constituted as social units through form: structures, processes, decision-making etc.. Ongoing self-referral leads to sedimentation in structures and through that to the building of special patterns over time. On the basis of their patterns, organisations can show more or less complexity in terms of decision-making potential. The observation of own communication (structures, processes,

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Spindler (2012) regarding the conception of organisations as societal transformers.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Luhmann (2006). He developed a comprehensive concept of organisations as complexity reducers for society in his book "Organisation and Decision".

cultures) becomes a factor in the successful survival of organisations in a complex and global environment. Organisations have the potential to counter external societal complexity with internal structural complexity. To use this potential means for organisations to learn to learn to create adequate forms of organised communication.

## **2.2. Forms in communication patterns of living organisations**

For living systems the ability to renew themselves through questioning and reflecting on their own communication patterns is essential. Organisations tend to make their formal and informal communication patterns permanent in order to give themselves internal orderliness. Organised structures sediment differently, depending on which communication and collaboration forms are repeated and which decisions are taken on a daily basis<sup>14</sup>. The patterns may be more or less top-down, made on an equal basis, team-orientated, using the resources needed for task completion in a given situation, self-steering in the sense of 'innovation and learning', customer-, stakeholder-, or employee-orientated. There is no right or wrong structure because right or wrong depends on what the organisation needs in order to reach the desired future. For instance, hierarchy as a sedimented communications structure results in a rather inflexible regularity orderliness that gives the security of repetition. A network in contrast gives orderliness and security through flexibility as it can be expected and trusted to be flux. In the end the question is whether the organisation has the internal leadership capacity to be playfully with our structures and use them for our desired future?<sup>15</sup>

The following overview of structural forms and their effects is listed in progressive order from inflexible and complexity-reducing to complex and flexible types:

- Hierarchical structures show an organisational form with a clear division of labour and strong top-down orientation. Complexity can be greatly reduced through hierarchical decision-making patterns.
- Matrix structures accommodate two or three dimensions, usually centralised products and functions and decentralised markets or customers. This can mean some loss of

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<sup>14</sup> See also Striwerka (2009).

<sup>15</sup> As Markides and Gersoski (2005) show dramatically, different structures and (leadership) cultures can lead to more or less innovation and more or less market share. They make the distinction between innovative, flexible companies that create something new and sensitise the market and those that show a high degree of stability and move into the market as 'fast seconds', thus benefitting from the preparatory work of the innovative companies.

a central reference point but a gain in putting different interests on an equal footing as negotiable and workable. Conflict is then redefined as a difference that needs to be worked out.

- In heterarchical structures, the multi-poled organisation has expert-based units that are coordinated and developed through equally-valued units. The dismantling of the top-heavy structure usually relies on the support of group-wide functional centres of competence.
- In project structures, the organisation is put together for a set period of time in order to accomplish a concrete task. For this reason the functionality of the organisation and leadership is primary. These structures are then functionally subordinate to a task. The task and goals require a central orientation for structure, leadership, and culture. This type of organisation is time-resource-intensive to construct and dismantle.
- In network structures, the conscious development and use of network structure become more important as the structure itself becomes more flexible. The foundations of these structures are competence units that are informally connected with each other through win-win relationships, voluntary participation and trust<sup>16</sup>. The elements that hold the separate units together make network structures an impermanent organisation type on the one hand and a durable one on the other - one that often takes shape through teams and projects.

Situational, functional, and structural aspects influence each other in the realisation of different structural forms. More fragmented and segmented organisations with greater diversity and hybridity of structures and cultural and communication patterns require greater reflection, active designing and creation, and integration and differentiation of those different structures. In order to create and live in these more vivid, playful and flexible structures, leaders and employees need a higher level of social competence, individual responsibility and self-management. A 'helicopter perspective' and shared action learning as leadership system enables to gain an overview and see the entire

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<sup>16</sup> Trust is understood here as a high probability of expectations being fulfilled, in contrast to mistrust, where outcomes cannot be assessed or expectations have been disappointed in the past. See further Luhmann, N. (2006).

picture<sup>17</sup> of different structures and how to deal with those different communication forms.

### **2.3. The functional and dynamic-integrative leadership image for a complex and sense-making future**

Schein assigns to leaders the task of destroying ineffective structure and cultures<sup>18</sup>: “Organisational cultures are created in part by leaders, and one of the most decisive functions of leaders is the creation, the management, and sometimes even the destruction.”<sup>19</sup> Dynamic organisations require organisational learning, which expects leadership to develop structures and leadership-action tailored to their requirements (strategy, goals and needs) and constantly scrutinise them. This means<sup>20</sup> every communication pattern (structures, cultures and values, leadership concepts) is to be and must be questioned. In order to obtain an idea of the complexity of the leadership profile with respect to balancing oneness with structural differences, it is necessary to work with the idea that leadership intervention must move away from unquestioned thought patterns. A dynamic leadership image includes all possible structures and leadership concepts and is able to put them in place as functionally needed. Dynamic leadership embraces structural concepts from hierarchy through network and leadership concepts from command through steering.

**Command** is based on the idea that something can be brought about *directly* in an organisation. The person or unit that commands knows in which direction the business content needs to go, knows what needs to be done step-by-step, and tries to initiate processes, improve operating figures, develop people, etc. In this process they use the logic of causality and linearity. Peripheral matters or issues are in the background. Commands are found above all in less complex structural forms, e.g., in hierarchies. Within ‘command and respond’ leadership culture, the individuals or single units often become the centres of attention and failures or misfits, as the degree of diversity is rather low.

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<sup>17</sup> Spindler, M. and Steger, M., 2008.

<sup>18</sup> Structures are seen here as forms of communication and can be defined as cultural artefacts.

<sup>19</sup> Schein (1997, p. 5.).

<sup>20</sup> The unquestionable form of communication given by God. See also Schwarz, G. (2007) Die Heilige Ordnung der Männer (English: The Holy Order of Men).

**Steering** is based on the idea that it is possible to ensure the survival and the development of the system as one with all its differences, with the idea of surviving as and within an ecosystem. It is based on the logic of homoeostasis; its intention is to keep the actions of others and their otherness in balance, assess them on the basis of superordinate common goals, and steer them by regulating conditions, both limiting as well as enabling. Such a concept takes into account peripheral matters and risks. This means that steering has a role in determining structure. Steering can also embrace command as one necessary leadership approach or structural necessity. For steering to become effective in practice meta-management, the incorporation of a reflective observation perspective is an essential step. When taking this step on the meta-level, one can ask the following functional question: Which structure, which kind of leadership and which culture will help us to move as a whole toward our future?

What is meant by the emerging future in the here and now? How complexity and uncertainty are perceived by leadership influences organisations' ability to deal with the future. "When the future cannot be predicted by the trends and trajectories of the past, we must deal with the situations as they evolve."<sup>21</sup> Scharmer solves the "is state—desired state" paradox through the concept of "pre-sensing". Two selves, "our current self" and our "best future self", meet at the bottom of the U and begin to listen to and resonate with each other. Once a leadership system crosses this threshold, it becomes an intentional vehicle for an emerging future and can serve as a midwife for the self to bring forth vivid forms. Thus leadership is able to play with different forms of communications, structures and patterns, and the future of the organisation can be born anew. He describes the transforming process as "connecting us to the world that is outside of our organisation" and to the bottom: "connecting us to the world that emerges from within" to "bringing forth the new into the world". On that journey "at the bottom of the U" lies an inner gate that requires us to drop everything that is not essential. This is like a letting go of the old self and an emerging of the new self; between these two movements lies a nothingness which demands room to come into the world and to allow

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<sup>21</sup> Scharmer (2009, 61) points out three dimensions of complexity:

- Social complexity: multi-stakeholder approach (actors have different views and interests);
- Dynamic complexity: whole system approach (cause and effect are distant in space and time);
- Emerging complexity: sensing and pre-sensing approach (disruptive patterns of innovation and change).



something new to emerge.<sup>22</sup> This process of letting go (of our old patterns and self) and letting come (our highest future possibility: our new self) is a prerequisite for development. It is a reflection concept that points beyond the present and cognitive reflection; a reflection concept that in delimitation “downloads” the past, speaking about the patterns we know; a reflection concept of the energy for the system that the future self sets free. It is more than learning from the past for the future: action-observation-reflection-design-action. It is learning from the emerging future as the self through leadership as a system<sup>23</sup>.

### **3. The potential of t-groups as exemplary learning for leadership and organisations**

We have often heard how important it is to leave inflexible orderliness behind us. Yes, dear reader, almost every book on leadership begins thus. It is nevertheless a paradigm shift that in many organisations, in my professional experience, can only be carried out fragmentarily. T-groups provide the opportunity to experience this paradigm shift from the predetermined order to the living order of an unpredictable system as mutually experienced participation. I introduce five main principles of leadership for living systems that can be learned exemplarily in t-groups.<sup>24</sup> Leaders can practice these qualifications within a group dynamics lab situation that we (ÖGGO) call a training group (t-group) in which these principles are interwoven<sup>25</sup>.

#### **3.1. Leadership Principle 1: Develop and foster action learning**

T-groups pursue the goal of learning about the form of communication, as communication is at the same time the content of the communication<sup>26</sup>. This switch in focus is unusual for most participants, since the form (how we act) must be produced in

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Scharmer (2009).

<sup>23</sup> With this claim Scharmer (2009) moves as action researcher with his developments beyond the developments of Lewin (1946), Dewey, J. (1933), and Argyris and Schön (1974) as he shifts the focus to the future in the here and now.

<sup>24</sup> In this article I do not specifically go into the limits of t-groups. Above all they lie where the environment as such in its complete complexity has rather been omitted. T-groups orientate themselves in their learning primarily inward. Therefore the entire question of managing boundaries, of system-environment boundaries in their external orientation, will be dealt with in a t-group because the group's boundaries must be dealt with, but on no account in the complexity of the global market situation.

<sup>25</sup> For ease in reading, I describe these principles separately—this is an artificial division.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. Heintzel (2008) with reference to three paradoxes in t-groups. He describes comprehensively the paradox of acting vs. analysing.

order to have material for reflection and further action. Thus the ÖGGO group dynamics setting is a very intensive way of action learning<sup>27</sup> about the form of communication patterns, acting and reflecting on the form at the same time. It is a way of learning by doing and reflecting and doing and reflecting, and if this were not enough, reflecting also becomes a doing that can be reflected on<sup>28</sup>. During the shared inquiry into their own practice, the participants go beyond their interpretation of their own communication. Optimally they follow the action research circle (observation – interpretation – planning – implementation and observation ...and so on). They do this by exchanging their different views and using them to construct their own reality as a unique system. To practice action learning together becomes one of the main learning purposes for the individuals through the group as a system. The participants become practitioners who reflect on and create their own future as community. Thus they are challenged to think in multiple and diverse perspectives, steer opportunities, different and common interests, build coalitions, create and solve conflicts, shape conditions for trust and mistrust, for norms and borders of the system etc.

What the learner can learn through this is the change of the system while being an active part of the system at the same time. Consultants like to call this ‘change while the engine is running’. Participants consciously observe how this change is experienced and created and which consequences the changes have. In the protected, laboratory-like action learning space a customised action learning, an interaction between action and reflection is generated. Thus leaders experience switching roles from actor to researcher and widening their perspectives in order to become systematic researchers of their own practice.

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<sup>27</sup> It is no coincidence that group dynamics and action research both have their roots in the work of Kurt Lewin.

<sup>28</sup> Agyrus and Schön (1974) call these forms of learning double and triple-loop learning.

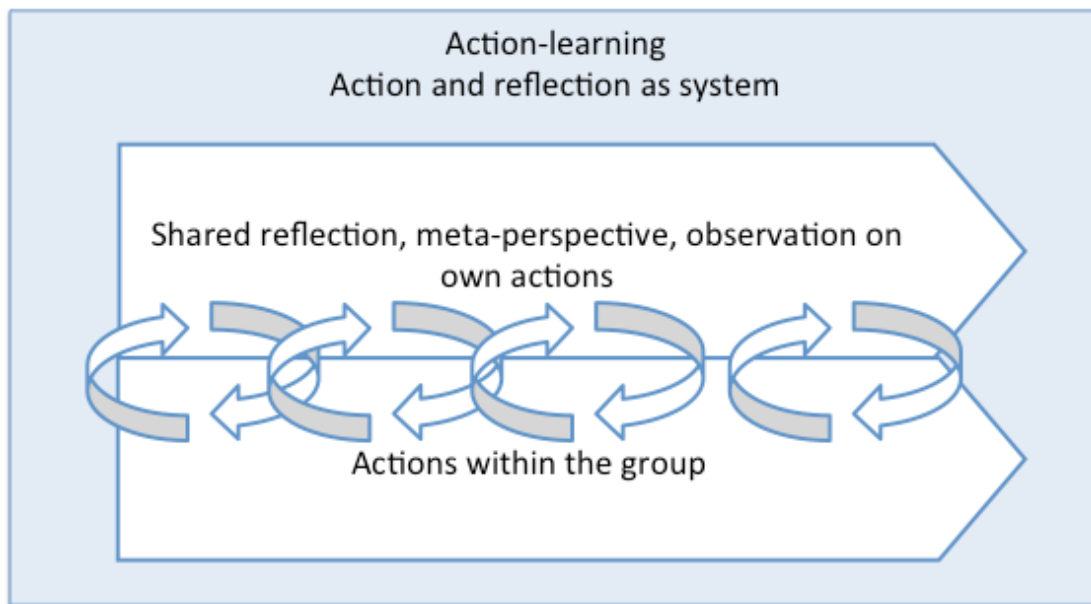


Figure1: Action learning as system<sup>29</sup>

Action learning as a community is an essential leadership qualification, above all in profound change and renewal situations for organisations with fast-moving environments. We build this system, which is our context for action, by acting and inquiring. Leaders learn to:

- Step out of long-established, no longer functional patterns as individuals and as a unit and observe their own situation on the meta-level (from a bird's-eye view).
- Analyse the complex situation together with others, reflect on different stakeholder interests and negotiate and balance different truths and approaches.
- Move as a system with all its differences by learning in the here and now, and create together a tailor-made change solution and their unique identity as a system. This is essential for organisations in terms of strategy development and market positioning.
- Create and inquire into their own future goals, norms and values, create an action learning flow as a system, overcome obstacles within this movement, and go with the flow of the common process.
- Build a temporary form of functional structures, processes and cultures while dealing with uncertainty, as the ability to balance inquiring and creating a system ensures a flexible, stable and sustainable unit at the same time.

<sup>29</sup> By Maria Spindler (2013).

### **3.2 Leadership Principle 2: Provide space for self-creation and sense-making in the here and now**

T-groups can be seen as self-steering and sense-making systems. Through the lack of pre-structuring within the setting, the urge for self-creation for the group is established. To provide and hold this setting is a main responsibility of the trainer, especially at the beginning.<sup>30</sup> Trainers often also call this concept “leadership vacuum”. It tends to cause irritation at the birth of the group because the members simply expect different behaviour from the trainer, since through their own socialisation they have developed certain images of trainers and leadership. This unstructured space within the laboratory setting provides the opportunity for self-creation, self-questioning and tailor-made action learning. Thus the members and the group can experience from scratch how to become a more and more interwoven, stable and diverse communication system.<sup>31</sup>

Free, unstructured space creates uncertainty<sup>32</sup> and is at the same time essential for the development of living systems like groups or organisations. It is a framework that is provided for the opportunity to create. It encourages asking questions within organisations such as: How can we structure our organisation in a diverse and functional way that creates the openness for different perspectives and action logics? Which functions and conditions of communication are suitable for this? How can we develop a shared and distributed leadership approach for the current situation? Which norms, structures, processes and decision-making patterns have we as a system created and what is their impact on our current and future situation? Which conditions we created together have on the system and individual which reactions and actions? Which types of leadership and steering do we want to develop, and how? How and where can we as leaders provide unstructured space and invite others to create together answers for the whole system?

Asking these questions is useful for leaders and organisations as soon as they no longer have the urge to follow unquestioned grown patterns and structures and decide no longer to be either victim or hero, but to create their organisational situation in a shared

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<sup>30</sup> Cf. Schüller and Zvacek (2013)

<sup>31</sup> Cf. (Lackner 2008a)

<sup>32</sup> System theory calls it irritation. The concept of 'creative chaos' refers to this idea as well.

functional way as needed in order to create for the future in the present. Experience in t-groups shows that dealing with one's own historically grown mindsets is an important step towards gaining the action opportunity to create together functional patterns for the future. This requires a "reflective we" instead of an "unreflecting sense of community". In this way, sense and motivation for the active-conscious formation of a mutual future can be generated. Taking over an active role together with others can be learned in t-groups.

### **3.3 Leadership Principle 3: Increase participation, differentiation und integration as system**

Participation is closely related to shared and distributed leadership in the group. When the group learns step by step to perceive differences and consciously work with them, participation increases and so does the "utilisation of the individual". The system as a whole's capacity to act is thus increased, and naturally that of the individuals as well. Through the various contributions and above all the connections among these contributions, more material can be fluidised and thus actively developed. T-groups create a dynamic-integrative and participative leadership system that urges participants to work through differences. The focus on the t-group system as a whole triggers the development of the unit with its differences as resources and foreign obstacles (which turn out to be learning opportunities). This form of learning through differences in t-groups results from the mixture of participants. Their various backgrounds and interests represent different learning requirements and, at the same time, also the learning resources of the system.<sup>33</sup> Differences that can make a difference in the group could be social origin (e.g. nationality, ethnicity, learning experience or profession), rank, position, gender, age, etc.

A t-group always represents social and cultural phenomena and leads the participants to deal with them; the cross-section of society represented can, in turn, be varied: a t-group with members from Egypt is different from a t-group with members from Austria, which again is different from a t-group with members from many countries. The t-group becomes a community in which societal topics can be moved forward through discourse, negotiation and inclusion of differences. Exemplarily observed, as presented in the

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. Scala (2013) He describes the group as system and process working by and through differences.

previous chapter, this poses a question for organisations: How can we as a leadership system increase our ability to act on an organisational level and deal actively and reflectively with increasing opportunities and differences? As described earlier, this requires us to give up the sacred established order: foreignness, uncertainty, differences, dilemma, conflicts contradictions, diversity, inquiry and functionality replace this unquestioned order and give space for a new tailor-made one.

Oh yes, and in t-groups we all experience again and again, and in irritating ways, how the confrontation with foreignness and diversity can trigger highly ambivalent feelings.<sup>34</sup> In t-groups, dealing with these differences is an interwoven development on the following levels:

- Individual: How to deal with individual impressions, hurdles and emotions.
- Interaction: Which differences in the interaction can be mutually reflected on.
- System: Which patterns of dealing with differences in the group as system have been developed? Which widening or limiting activities of differentiation or integration have been developed? These are crucial for the balancing act of contradictions.

For this reason group dynamics is an exemplary setting for learning to deal with diversity which is needed by our more and more complex and global organisations and society in order to:

- Gain courage to touch strangeness and differences.
- Differentiate and include differences.
- Recognise gaps and conflicts by recognising differences.
- Bridge differences by not eliminating them.
- Balance differences, contradictions and dilemmas.
- Serve and develop the system so that it can deal with differences (nationalities, different tasks and interests in teams, hybrid structures, tasks, different subsidiaries and leadership styles).

### **3.4 Leadership Principle 4: Interlink individual and system views**

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Vater, G. (2008).

In the social sciences, systems and individuals can be observed as reciprocally conditional. Theoretically, two mainstream world-views have established themselves that are demonstrated here:

- In terms of systems theory<sup>35</sup> the individual is defined as an environment for the system.
- In terms of subject theory<sup>36</sup> the system, the organisation and society are context and condition for individual and interpersonal action.

In the practical application of the t-group, it depends on the learning requirements<sup>37</sup> that are followed by the group dynamics approach or the trainer. If the linkage of these two world-views is not focused on, then the focus in the group can easily drift to an individual level that we (ÖGGO) no longer call group dynamics, because then what becomes paramount is:

- Therapy and counselling of the past (childhood) and external arena (work situation) of the individuals.
- Giving feedback on an interactive level, e.g. “how I perceive you“ and “how we can improve our relationship”.

In these two situations, the system as a self-developing entity is hardly considered. The necessary skill is to enable and develop the link between the subject-interaction perspective and the system perspective in the group in the here and now: a balancing act for trainer, group members and the system that must first be learnt. For this type of learning, the trainer’s observations and questions are a corridor that can be narrower or wider, because with this framework in the back of one’s mind, the ability to look for various approaches to learning can be opened. When used alone, neither the individual nor the system approach sufficiently exploits the learning potential for leadership and organisation:

- The primarily individual approach loses sight of the system as such, which would jeopardise an organisation’s functionality, quality and success.

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<sup>35</sup> Cf. the comprehensive work of Niklas Luhmann (system approach).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. the comprehensive work of Jürgen Habermas (inter-subjective approach).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Schüller and Zvacek (2013) and Spindler and Wagenheim (2013).

- The primarily system approach loses sight of the individual, the human being, which would jeopardise the motivation, the development of the person and the dimension of value and sense for the employee.

This comprehensive learning standard requires from the trainer not just the theoretical knowledge, but also intervention experience in order to:

- Create a framework to interlink the group as a system and the individuals. This only works when the trainer doesn't 'know better' how 'real learning' works—that would mean that he or she was forcing a learning norm on the group—but rather has the attitude that this space is an opportunity which allows individual, interactive and system learning to establish relationships with each other.
- Provide observations and interpretations regarding the connection according to the relations between individual - interaction - system in this specific t-group. For this purpose it can be useful to interpret the individual as a mouthpiece for important topics of the group as a system. This also helps the individual to connect her/himself to the group and serve for the system as an 'embodied topic' for a while.
- Ask questions about the impact of individuals and interaction on the system level that embrace the individual, interaction and system acting as one. For individuals the opportunity arises to confront oneself with the functional role in the group: to expose oneself to the group and to dissolve oneself, to deal with the system and thus to define the system and oneself anew.

I see these three intervention requirements of the trainer's function as valid for a leader as well, in order to avoid assigning individual blame, ostracism (witch burning) and withdrawal by individuals. This comprehensive intervention fosters a shared culture of error that enables the linkage of system learning with individual learning and opens up motivation for the individual and sense for the organisation.

As expressed with Oevermann,<sup>38</sup> this is optimally an acquisition of 'professional' leadership action: on the one hand, the individual side is considered holistically and humanly; on the other hand, the system side is functionally and in a distanced fashion. Wherever leaders require not just unquestioning organisation and leadership but also

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<sup>38</sup> Oevermann (1996).



welcome diversity, changes of perspective, motivation and sense-making to life, a balance between the individual and the system approaches will be advantageous. This balance dealing with differences requires the integration of contradictions into the whole.

### **3.5 Leadership Principle 5: Create the future here and now through the action learning system**

Living systems have both the chance and the impertinence of a complex and unpredictable future. In t-groups the here and now transcends itself and points the way to the future.<sup>39</sup> Through the t-group setting and shared learning, current perceptions and actions force their way into the foreground as the form in the 'here and now' becomes the content. The accustomed content is withdrawn, like pulling the carpet out from under someone's feet. Thus the created past becomes an object for reflection and with each action and reflection the future is brought into the present. The old solutions are linked to future opportunities through the system group. Spoken with Scharmer,<sup>40</sup> Downloading of old patterns does not long stand a chance, as the shared patterns of the past are 'here and now' content of the reflection for the shared future.

A future-orientated organisation and leadership system scrutinises structural, leadership and cultural patterns and asks on an abstract level: Which structure, which kind of leadership, which culture did we create and what does this mean for our future? Reference to a meta-level and the common whole in all its variety is vital for this. The action learning space that was mutually created (see Principle 1) provides a landing place that allows a shared future self to emerge. Downloading patterns like individual therapeutic approaches of individual history or business topics (see above) side-tracks us in our attempt to create a shared future self for the system. Past and future can begin to listen to and resonate with each other in the here and now.

The t-group as a setting has the potential to give space to the 'nothingness' (leadership vacuum and action learning) where past and future can meet. This is why at the beginning of t-groups trainers tend to ask the question, "What does this have to do with the 'here and now'?" It opens up the possibility of observing one's own selectivity (of

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<sup>39</sup> Cf. Schüller and Zvacek (2013).

<sup>40</sup> Scharmer (2009).

what is observed and how). Dynamic stability means also dealing with these differences by establishing the place for letting the future self emerge and letting go of the old self. We are speaking here of the reflective ability to deal with the future, which leadership as a system develops and which is lengthy and over time an established pattern for change. This requires an action learning self-concept by leadership as a system that equips them for an uncertain outcome. Leadership as a system can be the enabler for the future to emerge as:

- A collaborative leadership system which transforms contradictory truths and pours them in a playful way into various communications patterns like structures and processes without dissolving the contradictions.
- A reflective and future image of organisation and leadership from an observation perspective, in order to be able to recognise the diverse perspectives in their interconnections.
- A preparation for leadership that refers to the increasing dynamic of the future and the increased internal dynamic of the organisation.

#### **4. Conclusions**

The ÖGGO t-group setting as a learning opportunity has the potential to provide support for an uncertain and complex future to leaders who require much of themselves and the organisation: learning to learn, actively intervening in questioning and creating the communication patterns of organisations and society. T-groups interlink action and reflection as a living system and teach us to know when it is important to switch and how to interweave action and reflection. It is sustainable action learning, a form of learning how to learn through one's own experience and reflection. It is a form of self-learning: to think, interpret, act and evaluate on a system level by balancing differences functionally for successful survival of the system and for a holistic integration of the individuals. Thus a t-group is an investment in the expansion of action development for individuals' possibilities and for systems that require dynamic leadership, since in complex dynamic living systems diversity and entity are two sides of the same coin. They are the basis and result of collaboration in which experts' and stakeholders' perspectives are essential.

As exemplary learning, t-groups can contribute to inter-independent, emancipated and participation orientation for action in organisations in a world that is becoming increasingly complex and flux. We are talking here about an active process that unites the perspective of functionality with the perspective of the individual (humanity) in their action logics. This is a “high-end” form of adult, sustainable and playful learning on the level of form, in other words of ‘social grammar’ for acting in complex organised situations, which concentrates on conditions for sense-making forms of leadership collaboration. It is a way of acting that makes possible a second-order change and therefore seems to be appropriate for profound changes. It is also an opportunity and an imposition, a bearing of responsibility for living systems by leadership for a future that is worth living. The conception of a t-group as a system can teach us to develop systems as living forms, which means thinking functionally responsibly for the whole and at the same time acting playfully for our future. This is a serious game. Are you ready for it?

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