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Positive Deviance Dynamics in Social Systems

Maria Spindler and Ganesh Anantharaman

Space-Providers and Space-Invaders: Deviant Co-Leadership in Group Dynamics Training for Our Emerging Future

Abstract

Group dynamics training groups (T-groups) establish space that can foster active, creative and shared lively development as entities embracing our differences. As a form of leading and learning it is rather unconventional, pure and intensive. In this article we elaborate leadership conditions that support awareness-based collective action, co-evolving and embodying co-leadership from and for the whole. The trainer in her/his leadership function establishes a challenging space that invites the participants to co-create the future as collective in the here and now. We focus on what leaders need and do for this unconventional leadership that enables awareness and actions for co-creation and co-evolution of oneself in connection with others and the system as a whole.

Key words: co-leadership, learning space, co-evolution, co-creation, here and now, group dynamics

1. Introduction: Deviant Co-Leadership and Group Dynamics Training Groups

Exploration of leadership within group dynamics training can give us insights into pure grassroots development, as it can be co-led and co-created. T-groups give the space to live five or six days within a collective that develops from seed to flower to bearing fruit. A shared awareness, action and learning process can be experienced first-hand. Our assumption is that the awareness of the trainer(s) for the emerging whole opens the opportunity to permit growth through the active life force of the participants in relation to each other and the entity. The group dynamics setting can boost its potential for

whole system learning when it is able to embrace deviance and co-leadership. Deviant Leadership is the seed for the development of the group that has co-creation for the whole as its goal. In this way the individual and the group develop interdependently.

The empirical data for Part 2 of this article are extracts from an e-mail conversation that show our reflection on experiences and assumptions. They triggered our reflective, hybrid and intercultural endeavour. In Part 3 we establish the focus on co-leadership for the system based on the essential of the whole in group dynamics theory and current leadership theories. In Part 4 we argue the societal importance of daring to show and welcome deviance in order to renew systems and oneself.

2. Empirical Data: Conversation about T-Group Trainer Awareness and Intervention

In the two months following a group dynamics event in December 2013 we authors had an inspiring e-mail exchange. During the event, eight T-groups took place in Hyderabad, India, organised by ISABS[1]. The team was a collegial group of 16 trainers/facilitators[2], two for each T-group. ISABS and ÖGGO share the same T-group background - Lewin's concept of group dynamics.

Our practical experience during this week, the socialisation in and affiliation with the two different group dynamics associations encouraged the exchange of e-mails and this publication. The collegial exchange led to the following empirical e-mail data for this article:

Maria: "The co-facilitation of two experienced facilitators and the peer consulting (what you call clinicing) of 4 facilitators where we focused on the well-being and learning of the facilitators sparked a lot of ideas … I saw the peer

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1 ISABS (Indian Society for Applied Social Sciences) and ÖGGO (Austrian Association for Group Dynamics and Organisational Consulting). The two associations have had an exchange program for experienced trainers since 2006.

2 ÖGGO uses the word "trainer", ISABS the word "facilitator".

consulting each evening after the T-groups as a trainer learning-collaboration and incubator for learning and co-leadership in T-groups … The co-facilitation showed the different perspectives: A[3] worked in the T-group more on the individual level and I more on the system perspective. … By working in the T-group in India I experienced personally how societal conditions impact learning in the group, e.g. different religions, cross-gender distance and housing issues are an important learning background for the leaders who participate. I believe that groups as systems are the transformation platform which connects individuals with patterns of organisations and patterns of society."

Ganesh: "… I'd be very curious and interested to hear from you on whether the points I've made resonate with you, though your own experience at ÖGGO or your recent experience of ISABS. … You made a very interesting point about how the trainer, if she/ he has sufficient clarity and a wide enough range of awareness of group and skills, can convert the same individual or interpersonal intervention into a group-level one. I agree with your hypothesis that individual or interpersonal interventions (including direct feedback to a participant) tend to be more acceptable and comfortable to participants as well as the trainers themselves. … While for some trainers it may only be a question of developing a new perspective of 'seeing the group at all times', I am of the opinion that for many others, it is actually a question of developing sufficient self-awareness and clarity about one's values to be able to stay with the ambiguity that a group-level intervention necessarily involves. A trainer making a group-level intervention doesn't quite know whether it will be picked up at all, or by whom. In contrast, individual or interpersonal interventions are 'safer' as they are more likely to evoke a resonance from the person or persons concerned … Building the group's awareness of itself as a system is a much tougher process that doesn't lead to quick gratification of these (perhaps unconscious) needs in the trainer."

Maria: "… the focus on the intra-personal level stabilises not only the facilitators but also the participants and this can be very useful as a first contact

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3 A was Maria's co-facilitator in the T-group.

with group dynamics … to be in contact builds trust and opens participants for the system perspective. To focus nearly entirely on the group-as-system level (as we do in ÖGGO) irritates the individuals much more and takes away from them more the social belief systems and values which they created within their families, organisations, and society-systems. … Creating the group as learning container requires one to see oneself as trainer in the function of a space-provider and co-creator rather than as the head instructor of the right process. What we sometimes call the enlightenment and growth of the group-as-system requires from the trainer on the one hand being involved in the flow of the process and on the other hand 'just' holding and fostering the space, having awareness and emotions for the growth of the group and the individuals at the same time. This requires complex observations and awareness and a wide range of interventions. One main lesson is how to establish the T-group training setting and make use of the leadership vacuum in a professional way: the vacuum expands when the trainer and the participants can overcome uncertainty between themselves and the uncertainty of the vacuum. The others are a source of trust (the known and expected) and at the same time they are the unknown, the irritation, the difference. And this dilemma has to be overcome again and again.

Ganesh: "So along with developing awareness and skills of intervening at the group-as-system level (which is a critical first requirement), I'd say that the trainer's own self-awareness and self-management capability needs to be constantly developed and refined (what you call blind spots), for the trainer to stay the course on group-level interventions. In my experience, I have seen trainers with sufficient skills of intervening at group level slowly succumb to the pressure from the group members or their own unresolved needs and move more towards individual or interpersonal interventions as the lab progresses."

The main findings of our conversation for further exploration are as follows:

- Dare to believe in the whole, provide and hold the space for the group as system even when there is the feeling of nothing, especially at the begin-

ning, (the place of birth). This is the unexpected feeling of the emerging future of the whole.

- Dare to give away the expected power. It is a situation in which the group process and dynamics, not the trainer(s) are in the forefront and leading. Provide unconventional space and create space. The leadership vacuum is the invitation to all members to expand the space between individual and system was well as between trust and irritation.

- Dare to walk into the unknown with your trainer-partner and dare to engage with each other with your differences. Trainers are role models; they show how to deal with differences and insecurity. In this way the trainers' humanness comes across.

- Dare to connect in order to be able to irritate. Without connection to others there is no irritation and development to open for the whole. This requires self-awareness and clarity about one's values in order to be able to remain an individual, connected in the ambiguity with others and with the system.

- Dare to disappoint expectations, and dare not to be compliant. There is no right or wrong; there is not just one truth. There are different ways to lead and support. Trainer-partners can destroy the one-person hierarchical pattern of leadership-truths and expectations in a positive way.

- Dare to be deviant and act outside patterns, even if the participants cannot understand your approach and interventions. Deviant (not expected) behaviour is the irritation that is needed to support the whole. Deviance is a providing and holding of the current and future learning space. There is more space when the trainer-partners can be comfortable with deviance, discomfort, the unknown and the bewilderment.

This empirical material motivated us to look more closely at the following in the theoretical part.

3. Theoretical Exploration and Discussion

3.1 Acting from the Whole

The 'group as social entity' goes back to Lewin (1947). He coined the term 'group dynamics' and described this notion as the way groups and individuals act and react to changing circumstances. He described a concept regarding the nature of groups, their laws, establishment, development, and interactions with other groups, individuals and institutions. A group is a unified system with new qualities that cannot be understood by evaluating members individually. "The whole is not more than the sum of its parts, but it has different properties. … The whole is different from the sum of its parts. In other words, there does not exist a superiority of value of the whole. Both, whole and parts are equally real … the whole has definitive properties of its own." (Lewin, 1951, 146)

Lewin points out that the goals of group dynamics interventions are to increase latitude for the individuals within the group and to reduce the pressure to conform. He emphasises the need for deviance in order for the participants to become aware and loosen embedded social patterns. These are shared patterns within the T-group which are individual and internalised; at the same time they are societal patterns we see as normal and live as daily routine and culture.

Acting from the whole is one condition for coevolution. The individuals grow closer to each other and interdependently with the growing whole. Differences, strangeness and the unknown can be integrated into the whole in a meaningful fashion, opening and strengthening the whole at the same time. If successful, the group becomes a differentiating and integrating collective through realisation and the inclusion of differences. It brings hidden patterns to light. The focus on the whole unit enables the participants to recognise their differences and the others as resources. The unknown is transformed into a learning experience and a new whole. The more integration of deviance, the more co-creation and co-evolution is possible.

The self-created collective grows through co-creation and inviting the un-certain. Co-creation and shared responsibility is seen at Schüller & Zvacek (2013) emphasise the containment for the whole: to look at our connections strengthens us to deal with differences and the uncertain. Questions that arise are: How are we connected to each other in the group? Which inten-tions guide us? How do we connect with our colleagues? How do we work in the trainer staff - in clinicing? How do we deal with blind spots? Do I have the courage to be and interact in the here and now with the co-trainer?

On the one hand the collective expands space by building more bases through bridging and trust, while on the other hand more variations of differences and deviance are welcome and expected as the basis for complex growth on different levels. Co-evolution takes place among individuals as well as be-tween individuals and the system as a whole (Spindler & Wagenheim 2013)

- The whole system as space and container for development

- The interaction and co-creation between individuals and sub-systems

- The individuals in their inner growth and connectedness with the whole
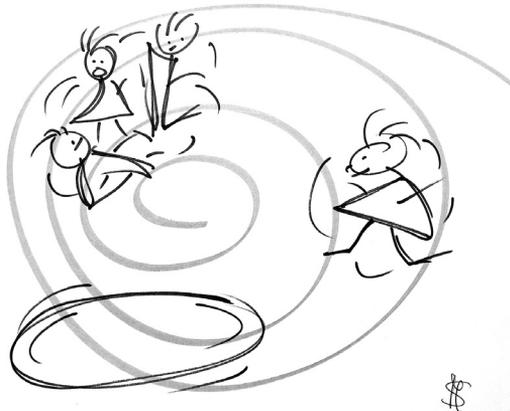
Graphic 1: Co-evolution: Individual – co-creation – system as whole

The individual develops through interaction and co-creation through the awareness of itself in connection with and relation to the whole. Questions that arise are: How do this interaction and co-creation influence me? What is my contribution to this system and what are impacts? What can I add to the whole? Asking questions about the impact of individuals on the whole system embraces the individual, interaction and system acting. This nexus can be used in a reflective mode, or as invitation for sense making for the whole in the meaning of: what is now possible, what opened up for the whole system?

3.2 Co-lead as Space-providers and Space-invaders

The T-group scope as unstructured structure (space for the whole to emerge) provides the opportunity for self-creation, self-questioning, tailor-made action learning and co-evolution. The members can experience from scratch how to become a more and more interwoven, stable and creative collective and even more, how they can integrate and embody the whole in themselves and be integrated in the whole at the same time.

To pursue this process the trainer performs a certain function that is described by Wheelan as leadership vacuum: "The t-group trainer creates a leadership vacuum from the outset of the group. He or she does not assume the traditional, directive leadership role. Instead, she states the purpose of the group – to study its own behavior – and then remains silent. The perceived ambiguity of the stated purpose instantly creates anxiety in members and leads them to seek further clarification from the trainer. He resists their efforts to entice him to lead." (Wheelan 1990, 29).

To provide and hold this setting is a main responsibility of the trainer, especially at the beginning. The leader / trainer in a T-group forgoes the social, cognitive, emotional and normative power and invites the individuals to use the power for themselves to create a shared system, of which the trainer is one part. She/he offers co-leadership and gives away power in order to allow co-creation.

She/he is successful when the space is carried and enlarged bit by bit from a concentrated collective to shared responsibility. Participants (as well as the trainer) become space-providers and space-invaders and co-create a learning field in which the group creates and investigates its own experiences in order to learn about its own dynamics as a group as well as how the individual moves within this dynamic and impacts it.
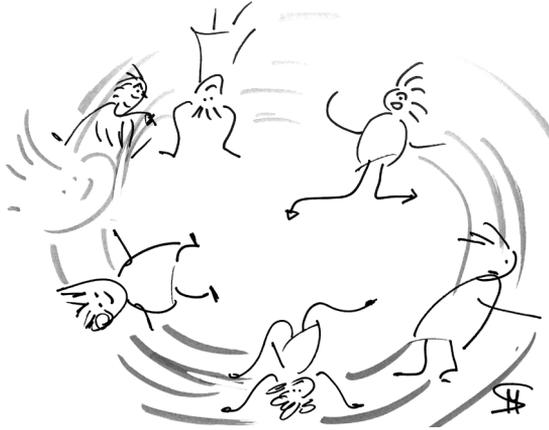
Graphic 2: space provider and space invaders

Providing space and invading and thus co-expanding space are two sides of the same coin. It is leadership that empowers and encourages deviance. The deviant T-group trainer amplifies the invisible, the uncertainty and the unspoken. She/he encourages others to become deviant too, to take detours and meander in the social system. She/he bewilders others, throwing them out of their conventional patterns of awareness, reflection and action. Attraction through deviation and refusing to comply with standards becomes acceptable. The deviant leader reinforces the invisible – in the case of the group as whole, whenever she/he is "there", answers, comments, intervenes, etc., she/he makes the whole visible and perceptible for others as well. She/he acts in a positive developmental way as a role model for deviance: the encouragement of deviant perspectives and actions amplifies potentials and opportunities for

individuals and their connections with each other and the system. Everybody is invited to empower her/himself, take leadership responsibility and become aware of and create the system space for co-evolution.

Leaders are relationship models for leadership support and co-leadership. Schüller & Zvacek (2013) examine the unknown and in the process maintain as many differences as possible. Individual autonomy is necessary for this, so that the trainer duo doesn't end up in wishy-washy harmony. The self cannot open itself for the whole until she/he has self-awareness and identity, is able to remain an individual and be aware of the ambiguity - in relation to the co-trainer and the participants and at the group level. Jain & Anantharaman (2015) emphasise this requirement for trainers as three forms of self-awareness:

- Who I am: focuses primarily on preparation of the self - relating to understanding oneself, this category consists of competencies, primarily those of others and interpersonal relationships.

- What I know: focuses on conceptual knowledge and includes using self and comprehending group level phenomena.

- What I do: focuses on how the interventions at intrapersonal, interpersonal and group levels.

T-group trainers can provide for participants a learning field for losing and renewing themselves in the collective when they have self-awareness and an identity that can be lost and renew itself.

3.3 Embody the New Whole in the Here and Now

The form in the here and now becomes the content: current observations, perceptions, feelings and actions can bring their paths into the foreground and overwrite old well-known patterns (downloads). The leadership vacuum has the potential to provide space for 'emptiness' (not 'nothingness'). It is informed emptiness, uncultivated potential, abundance of opportunities

for mutual creation and generation – a creation that comes from the full and simultaneously empty whole for the future whole in the current whole. The emptiness brings with it limitless opportunities for connections; the potential is embodied in shared acting in the here and now. (See further Spindler 2015).

How much we can let go of old patterns, lose ourselves in the emptiness and become aware of potentials relates to how far we can expand the system in the here and now. The more space we provide and invade by action, reflection, co-creation and co-leadership, the more complexity and uncertainty can make their way into our awareness, opening us to the future whole and its opportunities to grow in co-evolution.

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 to observe one's own perspective, selectivity, intentions, actions and their outcomes. We are speaking here of the inner reflective ability to deal with the future. This requires an action learning self-concept by co-leadership as a collective that equips them for an uncertain outcome.

We enrich here our theoretical exploration of the 'here and now' with the Theory U and 'Presencing' concept of Scharmer (2009) and Scharmer & Kaufer (2013). It is an action learning concept that brings the future whole into the here and now. "When the future cannot be predicted by the trends and trajectories of the past, we must deal with the situations as they evolve." (Scharmer 2009, 61) The "is state and desired state" meet through "presencing". Two selves, 'our current self' and our 'best future self', begin to listen to and resonate with each other – in the here and now. Scharmer and Kaufer (2013) identify the following process stages to act from the whole:

1. Co-Initiating: uncover common intent. Stop and listen to others and to what life calls you to do.

2. Co-Sensing: observe, observe, observe. Connect with people and places to sense the system from the whole.

3.   Presencing: connect to the source of inspiration and will. Go to the place of silence and allow the inner knowledge to emerge.

4.   Co-creating: prototype the new in living examples to explore the future by doing.

5.   Co-evolving: embody the new in ecosystems that facilitate acting from the whole.

According to Scharmer (2009) and Scharmer & Kaufer (2013) downloading of old patterns does not long stand a chance, as the shared patterns of the past are in the 'here and now' content of the reflection and give way for the new intentions, observations and listening. For this initial stage the following are essential: awareness of intentions, pausing in the here and now and listening, harkening to what is becoming evident through me and the others.

We can summarise that once a group as system crosses this threshold of presencing (two selves, 'our current self' and our 'best future self', meet in the here and now and begin to listen to and resonate with each other), the group becomes space and vehicle for an emerging future and can serve as a midwife for the whole self and individual selves to bring forth vivid relationships and forms.

4. Conclusions

In India as well as in Austria many people live in an awareness of undifferentiated sameness. Differences are not seen, deviance is excluded and suppressed in family clans, in castes, in companies and public institutions; or people have a strong ego-orientation: I am right, I tell others what to do and how to think, I am better, smarter, prettier, richer I am the head of or expert for … and therefore my opinion is more important than those of others.

We as a society and also in our organisations and families have often been stuck in old patterns for centuries. How can positive deviance help us to move

beyond this and grow into co-leadership and co-creation in order to renew our awareness and actions as individuals and systems?

When it comes to moving beyond our patterns, to discovering the invisible and daring to see the unknown of our unpredictable future, irritating and deviant actions by the trainer are opening. This behaviour provides co-leadership conditions for systems and individuals to reach a higher level of consciousness. She/he supports this journey by welcoming fragments of new and supports articulation in order to generate collective and individual insight into the concept that we always walk in more than one world at the same time.

Swimming against the current is bewildering, unexpected and expanding space: minutes ... hours ... days ... not filled with old, well-known thoughts, words, actions, reflections, not filled with downloaded well-known patterns. We can see the leader as a ping-pong-ball for co-evolution: Ping: individual, Pong: group as whole and in between the social net of interaction and connection. The deviant leader has all three in focus, illuminates what no one else does and invites others to co-lead. Co-leadership, co-creation and co-evolution requires a consciousness of self, of one's own intentions, values and interventions, and then again for the larger whole, e.g. group, organisation, society, as well as the interdependency.

To offer co-leadership we have to give away expected power and foster space for co-creation. Power for future growth through space-providing and space-invading initiates new connections, and we can use the space with its potential opportunities to allow our current self and our best future self to resonate and bring the future whole into our here and now: listening, informing, feeling and participating in co-creation with others, even when the outcome cannot be predicted. Questions can be asked like: What are our intentions? Which kind of leadership and which culture did we prototype? How do our connections influence us as individuals, or collaborations, our current system? Which future do we desire? What conditions do we want to create? What future do we want to open for ourselves in the here and now?

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