THE USE OF TRAINING GROUPS (T-GROUPS) IN RAISING SELF AND SOCIAL AWARENESS AND ENHANCING EMOTIONALLY INTELLIGENCE

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ABSTRACT

The application of training group (T-Group) dynamics in teaching emotional intelligence (EQ) offers a promising methodology for raising self and social awareness, for practicing authentic communication among group participants, and for enhancing emotionally intelligent behaviors. This paper discusses how the particular needs of an EQ-training program can be effectively served with a well-managed T-Group experience. It also addresses questions about “why are we doing this?” which inevitably emerge from the frustrations of T-Group participation.

The T-Group has been a viable learning modality for 60 years, and has seen myriad changes in its intended use and its application procedures over that time. This paper presents a model that is significantly truncated from the original T-Group format, and, as such, is more adaptable to short-term training interventions, as well as to MBA and management development courses that meet in short sessions.

A COMMENT ON THE CHOICE OF VOICE

Emotional intelligence (EQ) is about being aware of your own emotions, being aware of the emotions of others, respecting and appreciating the importance of emotions in daily interactions, and learning how to manage your own EQ behaviors to enhance your relationships at work, at home, and in your community. Note in this opening sentence we employed the second-person possessive “your” four times, a conscious decision to address the reader personally in this discussion – a discussion that is inherently personal and person-specific. We believe this choice of voice in our text is more efficient, more effective, and less abstract than the awkward third person in addressing a topic that is best understood in reference to one’s (“your”) own experiences in human relations. The issues germane to emotional intelligence resonate with everyone --and with everyone differently. We each come to this learning space with a unique package of skills, beliefs, values, needs and formative experiences, as well as our own level of effectiveness on the spectrum of emotionally intelligent awareness and behaviors.
GOALS OF TEACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

In a nutshell, developing emotional intelligence is about learning how to “show up as yourself” – and by doing so adding the most value that you are capable of adding to your organization, to your family, and to your community. It is about being in sustained relationship with your colleagues, family members, and friends, and about showing up in those relationships as an autonomous, individuated, authentic self.

To get the most from its workforce, every organization needs to have authentic, differentiated individuals showing up as themselves – telling their truths, saying what they mean, facilitating open communication, and implementing authentic data flow that is critical to the organization’s success.

In teaching emotional intelligence, we begin by positing the model of an intersection of interpersonal relations that juxtaposes competing innate tendencies to be both connected and separated, the Conviction/Connection Model (see Diagram 1). We all have a fundamental desire, and need, to be differentiated individuals, having our own thoughts, beliefs, values, desires, and feelings. We call that tendency “conviction” – where we are embracing our individuality in the face of other people and other forces. In Diagram 1, the conviction axis runs from the polar extremes of fixed rigidity to complete malleability (“wishy-washy”). We also have a competing fundamental need to be connected to other human beings, to be part of a social system. We call that tendency “connection” – where we gravitate toward relating to the people around us. In Diagram 1, the connection axis runs from the extremes of total “cut-off” to total fusion.

Conviction and connection are inherently opposing forces, and the goal of teaching emotional intelligence is to help individuals balance these tendencies. By “balance”, we mean mitigate the extreme positions and lean toward the intersection of these opposing forces. The center of this model is a space where you know who you are and are open to receiving ideas from others (conviction), where you are present, engaged, and value the feelings of others while also being aware of your own feelings (connection). Whether in business or personal relationships, achieving this balance of fundamental needs allows you to make your authentic contribution, to remain in sustained relationship, and to be at your most valuable and productive. Diagram 1, courtesy of the management-consulting firm Teams & Leaders, depicts this tension and provides a visual mapping for the goals of emotional intelligence training – specifically helping learners to move toward the intersection of these axes.
Diagram 1
Courtesy of Teams & Leaders (www.teamsandleaders.com) Seattle, Washington

Conviction / Connection Model

Rigid
- My way or the highway
- My view is the right view
- My view is all that matters

I have a strong opinion and if you push me, I'm outta here physically and/or emotionally

I have a strong opinion but am hyper focused on your emotions – to the neglect of my own.

Cut-Off
- “I’m Outta Here”
- Physical Checkout
- Emotional Checkout

I take no clear position and I disengage as the intensity between us rises.

I take no clear position and/or will change my position based on your emotional reaction

Wishy-Washy
- I Have No Opinion
- What do you want to do?
- Nothing to push
In summary, enhancing one’s EQ is about moving toward the intersection of conviction and connection, and being there, in sustained relationship, with one’s authentic self – with the true values, beliefs, wants, feelings and thoughts that comprise that self. That is why self-awareness is foundational to emotional intelligence. We need to know who we are, authentically, in order to show up at that intersection as our true selves. What is our essence? What do we value, care about, want, feel, think, and believe?

THE AUTHENTIC SELF

While the imagery of moving toward the intersection of conviction and connection is helpful to grasping the essence of EQ, it is important to realize that you can move to that intersection as an imposter. You can approach the intersection as someone else, or as a phony self – saying what you think the other wants to hear, saying what you want the other to hear, parroting the party line, or recycling the company’s official Newspeak and Doublethink (apologies to George Orwell, 1949). To be of maximum value to your organization, as well as to yourself, your job is to be at that intersection as yourself, saying what you believe, what you want, what you feel, and what you think. In three words, your organization needs you, and your colleagues, to “tell your truth.”

Hence, much of EQ training is about learning to perform in the role that you were cast to play in this life – in the role of you. Is that so hard? Is that asking too much? For many, the answer is an emphatic “yes.” The role of “you” is comprised of what you value, care about, want, feel, think, and believe. In a cultural model that places the highest value on what you think and do, grasping and presenting a more complex authentic self may be a most challenging role to master. In order to frame this exercise in mastering this most personal of roles, we take a brief historical, philosophical, and artistic diversion.

The 19th Century Russian poet, Alexander Pushkin, is credited with saying that “the goal of the artist is to supply truthful feelings” (Binyon, 2002). One of his young contemporaries, the dramatist Konstantin Stanislavski, adapted Pushkin’s entreaty to the theater and gave birth to what we loosely refer to today as “method acting” (Benedetti, 1989). The Stanislavski system of acting involves becoming “full” of the character you will be portraying – becoming that character, understanding his motivations, absorbing his personality, feeling his emotions, adapting his mannerisms, and living his values. When the accomplished method actor walks on the stage, he is so absorbed by his character that his portrayal is almost effortless and unconscious – because he has become that character.

A fundamental step in developing elevated EQ is to give a Stanislavskian effort toward understanding the character that you were hired to portray – indeed, that you were born to portray – so that you can unconsciously show up at the intersection of conviction and connection as your true self. Ironically, it is so much easier for a good actor to remain in character for a stage role, than to show up with similarly consistent characterizations of his true self.
“All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

As You Like It, Act II, Scene 7

With all respect to William Shakespeare (1599), you have one character to play at any stage in your life. You may have many exits and entrances, and show up in many acts and scenes, but in every entrance, the emotionally intelligent individual shows up as the same person – that is, as his authentic self.

“The privilege of a lifetime is being who you are”
Joseph Campbell (Osbon, 1991)

BEING SELF-AWARE, SELF-ACCEPTING, AND “ENOUGH”

Self-awareness is the foundational quadrant of emotional intelligence (see Diagram 2), and it is a precondition for learning how to play that critical role of “you” effectively. True self-awareness begins with self-acceptance – by acknowledging and accepting that what is true is in fact true. A significant step toward self-acceptance is recognizing that emotions are always true and should not be assigned values of right or wrong. The feeling of fear and insecurity called jealousy is culturally assigned a wrong or negative value, but feeling something cannot be wrong or false. Self-acceptance is accepting that feelings simply are; actions and responses are where values of right and wrong come into play. Beginning with this assumption allows us to eschew an adversarial relationship with ourselves, replacing “I should not feel” with identifying and accepting our emotions. After all, self-acceptance is not a barrier to change; it is the prerequisite to change. Moreover, beginning with the premise that feelings are inherently true will allow the foundation of self-acceptance to be laid.

All of self-awareness, no matter how accurate, is ephemeral, transitory – it will be different two hours from now than it is now. Right now, you may be aware of a deep resentment toward the authors of this article as a result of something we wrote a page or two back that was upsetting and offensive to you. An hour from now you may see us differently and be aware that your resentment is gone, or perhaps intensified. Self-acceptance also plays a role in self-awareness when awareness allows you to recognize difficult emotions. Being aware that you feel angry when you shut your finger in a door may be easy to accept, while being angry over the death of a loved one, or jealous of the success of a spouse, may pose more of a challenge.
Tell yourself the truth in this moment – about yourself, about how you feel, about what you think, about what you value, about your strengths and challenges. The primary belief that you are always and inherently “enough” right now, yesterday, tomorrow, on the day you were born, is foundational to self-acceptance. Embrace that what is – is, embrace your inherent right to exist, just as you are. Without a primal level of self-acceptance, no amount of change or success or accomplishment will lead to effective emotional intelligence.

With the notable exception of those with mental illnesses or disabilities, most of what we are, in any moment, is the sum product of the set of choices that we have made over our lifetimes. Moreover, that set of choices is in constant change, as new choices are added onto old choices. Who you are right now, while being enough, is only the final word on your life if you want it to be and choose it to be. Nevertheless, failure to acknowledge and embrace your fundamental right to exist – which is the essence of being enough – precludes your moving forward with new choices and changes that will ultimately deliver healthy self-awareness and self-acceptance.

In order to take the first steps toward enhancing your EQ, or even toward being open to change, you must eschew “personal fundamentalism” – the kind of thinking that says “I am the type of person that (insert your own self concept)” with a sense of finality. You are the type of person you choose to be. You are the product of the aggregate set of choices you have made up until this moment – and that set of choices is constantly growing as you add choices onto your portfolio of personal decisions – free choices that are made of your own volition.

Yes, to be sure, there are exceptions. If you are schizophrenic, manic-depressive, obsessive compulsive, or otherwise delusional, you may not have the mental freedom to exercise conscious choice. As a psychotic, your awareness and reality may be so distorted by delusions that the concept of choice is illusory. Yet, even under these extreme circumstances, you may be or become capable of exercising conscious choice. One of the truly memorable and moving moments on CBS’s *60 Minutes*
came during an interview conducted in 2002 by Mike Wallace with Noble Laureate and mathematician – and schizophrenic – John Nash. He told 60 Minutes that while he has never been able to vanquish delusions from his life, in old age he has been able to choose not to believe them (CBS, 2002). For anyone familiar with the ravages of schizophrenia – and the extremes of Nash’s debilitation were vividly dramatized in the Academy Award winning movie A Beautiful Mind (Howard, 2002) – that moment was both inspiring and profound.

If someone with disabling psychosis can choose not to believe his delusions, how easy it must be for the rest of us to choose against our own tendencies to remain stuck in ineffectual patterns of thinking -- for example, to remain beholden to decisions and actions that flow from our tendencies to be dependent, controlling, and competitive in ways that do not serve us.

Recognizing that you are the type of person that you choose to be is very powerful and crucial to the self-awareness that provides the foundation for EQ learning. Also important to the foundation is beginning to accept yourself as you are with all of your imperfections, allowing yourself to identify your emotions without judging them, and believing that you have an inherent right to be just as you are. The incorporation of these insights imparts a level of acceptance and awareness that provide the foundational quadrant of emotional intelligence, the pre-requisite to building successful EQ skills.

THE “T-GROUP” – SOME BACKGROUND

The “T-Group” has been used as a training tool for over a half century, having originated in the National Training Laboratories (NTL) in Bethel, Maine, in 1947. The principal pioneers in developing T-Groups were Kurt Lewin (although he died before the T-Group became the basic training format for the NTL’s Human Relations Laboratory), followed by Kenneth Benne, Ron Lippitt and Leland Bradford (Benne, 1964).

In brief, the T-Group is a vehicle for learning about yourself, about your impact on others, and about adopting behaviors that enhance your effectiveness in group and interpersonal encounters. This is accomplished by assembling a small group, usually from six to eight individuals, to explore their own behaviors when they are interacting with each other in a closed system. The process of personal exploration and evaluation is augmented by feedback from a second group of individuals who observe the members of the first group as they interact with each other. In addition, a T-Group trainer provides structure to the group, and serves four key functions that are critical to a successful T-Group learning experience: emotional stimulation, caring, meaning attribution, and executive function (Lieberman, et al, 1973).

When we look at a partial list of the goals of T-Group training, it becomes readily apparent that this is a good fit for pedagogy in teaching emotional intelligence:

1. To increase awareness of your own feelings in the moment
2. To increase awareness of the impact of your behavior on others
3. To enhance your skills in giving and receiving feedback
4. To enhance your skills in managing and learning from conflict
5. To gain knowledge of group dynamics and team development
6. To gain and practice skills in facilitating group processes
7. To heighten your awareness of and sensitivity to the feelings of others
8. To hone your interpersonal communication skills
9. To clarify responsibility for your feelings, thoughts, and actions
10. To learn to make conscious choices, in the moment, that reflect your authenticity

Participants in T-Group training are coaxed and coached to be mindful and authentic. The structure and basic ground rules are both simple and frustrating. Participants sit in a circle and engage in spontaneous interaction. They are told to remain in the present and in the confines of the circle – in the here and now. They are coached to be present with their own feelings, thoughts, wants, and sensory awareness – in essence, to be mindful of their authenticity in the moment. A facilitator or facilitators will intervene, intrusively and often irritatingly, to keep the participants in the “here and now” and authentic with their verbal and nonverbal interactions.

To say the least, beginning practitioners find the format frustrating, irritating, uncomfortable, aggravating, challenging – and a bit weird. After a modicum of practice, however, most participants rise to the challenge, begin sanctioning their own departures from the “here and now,” and appreciate the learning that emerges from this unique methodology. In addition, they begin to see the connection to enhancing EQ behaviors, especially the constant struggle to remain in sustained relationship while showing up as authentic, autonomous individuals.

**T-GROUP BASICS**

Before we describe what a T-Group session might look like, let us clarify some basic rules about what a T-Group is and does, and what it is not and does not do. A T-Group:

- DOES encourage participants to share their emotional reactions to their fellow participants’ words and gestures - that is, to share truthful feedback.

- DOES NOT encourage participants to share opinions, judgments, or conclusions - that is, to offer evaluative and subjective feedback.

- DOES encourage participants to remain in the “here and now” with their fellow participants.
DOES NOT encourage digression to the “there and then” to a space and time away from the present time and present circle of participants.

DOES encourage participants to be their authentic selves – to show up as themselves.

DOES NOT encourage participants to be phony – to show up in roles other than as themselves.

The T-Group trainer intervenes to help participants speak their truths (to be themselves) and remain in the here and now. A skillful trainer helps participants learn from what is transpiring in their group. He or she creates the physical structure for the group. Specifically, the trainer helps the group commit to norms and rules that support the learning process (for example, an agreement to stay in the here and now), monitors compliance with these group norms (for example, intrudes when a group member drifts from the here and now), and supports the T-Group development with training in communication, feedback, coaching, and listening skills.

We realize that this brief description of the leader’s role leaves much to the reader’s imagination. Without many hours of practice both as a participant and as a T-Group facilitator, much about the workings of T-Groups will remain somewhat abstract and inaccessible. The brief simulation of T-Group interactions and leader interventions that follows may at least pique your interest in this training innovation. Regrettably, it will not make clear and comprehensible the structure and dynamics of an effective T-Group experience.

DEALING WITH RESISTANCE

We have yet to launch a T-Group process that did not meet with initial and sometimes protracted resistance. Sitting in a circle with a half dozen fellow participants, with a “coach” observing your words, gestures, facial expressions, and vocal inflection, is uncomfortable for all but the most attention-loving improvisational actors. Add to this awkward structure the entreaty to stay in the here and now, the absence of a conversational agenda, and the presence of a trainer ready to intervene (participants will use the word “interfere!”) if you stray from the rules – and you have the perfect formula for producing participant frustration, anger, and “push back.”

“What is the point of this?”
“Why would we meet without an agenda?”
“I am not allowed to explain myself!”
“What am I supposed to say? I am not feeling anything and I do not want anything!”
“So – where are you going with this?”
“What are we supposed to be learning? Why are we doing this?”
Some of this “push back” comes from performance anxiety. Most of our participants are accomplished professionals and MBA students and they are accustomed to mastering the skills they need for success on the job and in the classroom. One of the skills they are least likely to have mastered is the ability to engage spontaneously and authentically, in the here and now, in the absence of a group agenda. They want to do it “right” and they do not find the format adaptable to the skills that have heretofore served them well on the job and in their studies.

So they become angry and frustrated with the trainer (despite barking “I’m not feeling anything” when asked by the leaders “what are you feeling right now?”). They have paid their course fees and budgeted their time and now expect the program leaders to teach something – not just create a structure and a set of group norms and expect the participants to create learning for themselves.

This is a tough spot for the trainer. It is hard to explain, with any modicum of precision or clarity, what the participants will learn from an extended T-Group experience. Telling an angry group member that he is likely to become more “self aware,” and more cognizant of the impact of his behaviors on others, will not likely win over his enthusiastic embrace of the T-Group. Yet those very words may ultimately be the ones he uses when looking back upon his T-Group work and trying to describe what he gained from the experience.

Knowing that we never can give very satisfying answers to these angry and frustrating inquiries (although we keep trying), we rely more on a plea to “willingly suspend disbelief” and trust us that something good will ultimately come chucking out of the T-Group meat grinder. Of course, we can never promise that the T-Group experience will work for a specific individual, but we can attest to its effectiveness over 60 years of iterations over tens of thousands of participants. We also sometimes drop names. For example, Carl Rogers, one of the most-respected psychologists of this era, reportedly described the T-Group as “the most significant social invention of the (20th) century” (Elliot, 1984).

The frustrations that group participants experience in the early T-Group iterations often mirror frustrations that are “on the surface” in other group venues in their lives. In general, people want a dependable structure in their lives, along with emotional safety, predictability, and shared mission with their group colleagues. The T-Group inherently does not satisfy these insipient needs and wants, and hence participants experience anxiety about authority, about where power resides, about being included and accepted by the group, and about intimacy (Gallagher, 2001).

MOVING BEYOND RESISTANCE

As group members become more comfortable with their T-Group sessions, and replace resistance to the group encounters with buy-in, they begin to notice patterns of behaviors – their own and those of their fellow participants – that contain important information. For example:
A participant may notice her instinctive need to “rescue” members of her group from perceived attacks or misunderstandings – and respond by consciously adopting a new response that short-circuits her typical rescuing response.

A participant may notice his anxiety when other group members are in conflict, and his tendency to assuage his anxiety by making a joke or otherwise bringing levity to the group. He responds by trying a new reaction – to let his fellow participants take their interaction to a serious place.

A participant may notice (with the help of the trainer or fellow participants) that he triangulates out of discomfort with addressing a member directly (“I think what Jill is trying to tell you, John, is that ...”), and is coaxed to address Jill directly (“Jill, are you angry with John for …”).

A participant may be surprised at feedback he is receiving about the impact of his words and gestures on his fellow participants – and respond by requesting more feedback to learn about his impact on others.

**RELATIONSHIP TO TEACHING EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE**

Since every group member, as well as every group, is unique, it is impossible to be specific about what any particular individual will learn from a T-Group experience. However, we can generalize about what T-Groups produce and by doing so we see how appropriate the T-Group is for teaching emotional intelligence. In general, T-Groups contribute to the following EQ-associated learning:

**SELF-AWARENESS**

T-Group participants consciously observe their own feelings, wants, intentions, and values – and that mindfulness enhances self-awareness, the foundation for EQ. In addition, feedback from fellow participants and from the T-Group leader adds to and validates self-discovery and self-awareness. By adhering to ground rules that demand staying in the present, and differentiating thoughts and feelings, participants begin to recognize constructs they may use to justify, blame, or otherwise disconnect from what they feel (see examples in Appendix 3).

**SELF-MANAGEMENT**

As we have discussed in the previous section, T-Group members respond to their feedback and to their self-discovery by adopting new behaviors that more effectively serve their authentic needs and wants. The T-Group provides a laboratory for trying and practicing new skills and behaviors. Within the T-Group rules,
participants have to stop and think to identify a feeling and convey it to the group in the present. This practice sets precedence for identifying and accepting a feeling, then deciding on an action, rather than failing to engage fully in a process by relying on patterned responses.

SOCIAL AWARENESS

The T-Group provides a continuous flow of authentic “data” (feelings, wants, and sensory awareness) among group participants, compelling the members to be conscious and mindful of the thoughts, feelings and wants of their fellow participants. Feedback shared among T-Group members inherently raises each member’s social awareness, even without a mindful focus on that awareness.

RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT

Hearing honest feedback about how your words and actions land on your fellow participants gives you important information from which to adopt and hone more effective relationship management skills. Receiving the feedback that your actions are producing unintended and undesirable impact provides you with motivation and commitment to change those behaviors – and, by doing so, manage your relationships more effectively.

Finally, the best visualization for appreciating the application of T-Group work to EQ training is the Conviction/Connection Model (Diagram 1). As we discussed earlier in this article, becoming more emotionally intelligent is about moving toward and being at the intersection of conviction and connection, and being there in sustained relationship as your true, differentiated self.

In essence, that is what you are tasked to do as a participant in T-Group training – to stay in that circle as your authentic self, in the present moment, telling your truth. It is not easy. Playing yourself on stage is not easy – and that is precisely what you are doing as a T-Group member. The stage is a small circle of T-Group colleagues. Each member is on that stage, challenged to portray him or herself as accurately and convincingly as possible. The “here and now” is when the curtain rises and the stage lights come up – when the trainer says, “go” and you have ten minutes to just be yourself, in this moment, in this circle, with these colleagues.

Through repetitions of T-Group experiences, we change. We learn to disengage the autopilot in our brain that directs us to do B when we are confronted with A. We learn to pause. We learn to make conscious choices where we once took actions impulsively, and over time, our brains change. In the past few years, we have come to better understand and appreciate the viability of mindfulness training, whether it is individual mindfulness training through meditation, or interactive mindfulness training.
training through T-Group practice. Our acceptance of the brain’s plasticity in response to mindfulness training is a relatively recent development, yet a development that is unarguably irreversible (Schwartz and Begley, 2002). That knowledge makes the T-Group even more important, and potentially more potent, than we ever realized during its first half century of application. After all, changes in emotional intelligence are rooted in changes in the neurotransmitters of the brain’s limbic system, responsible for our feelings, impulses and drives (Goleman, 1998). The plasticity of the limbic system responds to extended practice, focused repetition, timely and accurate feedback, and commitment to replacing old habits with new and more effective behaviors. The T-Group is tailor-made for training the limbic system.

We can think of no more appropriate laboratory for training in emotional intelligence than the 60-year-old “innovation” known as the T-Group. In its essence, the T-Group tasks its members to be more emotionally intelligent – and through protracted practice and feedback, leads to the changes that need to be made. For us, this adds an indispensable tool to our already substantial methodology for enhancing emotional intelligence (Weis and Arnesen, 2007).

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Appendix 1
Basic T-Group Structure

A’s = Group members in T-Group Session
B’s = Observing coaches (seated across from the A’s they are observing)
L = Group leader

A’s sit in a close circle facing each other. In this schema, we assume a T-Group comprised of six participants, with a second group (the B’s) seated as observers in the outer circle. The B’s are positioned so they can see the faces and front gestures of their counterpart A’s (as depicted in Appendix 2). The leader (L) moves about the circle, and can move up to the inner T-Group circle (A’s) to intervene with immediate observations, questions, suggestions, or other input as he or she deems
appropriate. While the times and iteration orders can vary widely, the standard duration of our T-Group sessions is 10 minutes, and one group (e.g., the A’s) generally goes into two 10-minute sessions consecutively, with each session followed by a 5-minute coaching interlude with the observers (the B’s in this diagram). After those two sessions, the roles are reversed. A couple minutes is usually designated for sharing goals with observers before the T-Group participants begin a session.

Appendix 2

T-Group members with coaching lines

A’s = Group members in T-Group Session
B’s = Observing coaches (seated across from the A’s they are observing)
L = Group leader
In this schema, lines depict the coaching/observer relationships between the two T-Groups. As in Appendix 1, the B’s are serving in the roles of observers in this diagram.

Appendix 3

T-Group Simulation

Examples of Leader Interventions

T-Group participants (the inner circle) are told that they have 10 minutes to interact with each other. They have been coached and cautioned, through pre-T-Group training sessions, to share their in-the-moment feelings (emotions), thoughts (opinions) and sensory awareness (fatigue, physical comfort or discomfort, etc.). In addition, they have been told to stay in the “here and now” -- that is, within this circle of participants in this moment in time. Finally, they are reminded of their own personal responsibility, and authority, for what transpires in the 10-minute T-Group drills.

The observing coaches (the outer circle) are instructed to observe every aspect of their assigned participant’s actions while in the T-Group circle. They are to make note of the participant’s words, reactions to the other participants’ contributions, body language, vocal inflection, facial expression, and anything else that can be shared with the participant in the 5-minute feedback period immediately following the T-Group interval.

While it is entirely possible for a T-Group to run for 10 minutes without a leader interruption and intervention, it is rare that 10 minutes will pass without one or more opportunities for the leader to intervene with helpful, in-the-moment observations, suggestions and questions. What follows are some typical leader interventions prompted by the words and actions of participants.

SCENARIO 1

Fred: I feel like we’re lost without an agenda …
Leader: “Like we’re lost” is not a feeling – it’s an opinion. Do you have a feeling related to that opinion?
Fred: No, I don’t think so.
Leader: How about frustration – which is a variation on both anger and, sometimes, sadness. Do you feel frustrated?
Fred: Yes, I guess so. And I feel some anger about doing what seems like a pointless exercise.

Discussion: This intervention encourages the participant to express his thoughts (opinions) as thoughts and his feelings as feelings. It reminds him of his personal responsibility for expressing his personal truth – for putting his self “out there.” It brings to his attention that he does have a feeling – even when he disclaims having one. He may not
instinctively be aware of or in touch with his feelings – the leader’s intervention helps him become more aware.

SCENARIO 2

Ben: It feels really weird to be in this …
Leader: “It” can’t feel anything. You can feel something, Joe can feel, Anne can feel – but there is no “it” in your circle feeling something.
Ben: OK – I feel weird about …
Leader: Is “Weird” a feeling? Is it a feeling associated with mad, sad, glad or afraid? So – tell me what “weird” feels like.
Ben: It feels …
Leader: “I” feel …
Ben: I feel --- I don’t feel anything.
Leader: Would you be willing to say, “I’m not presently aware of a feeling” instead of “I don’t feel anything?”
Ben: No, I’m not. I just don’t feel anything.
Leader: How do you feel about my interrupting you like this?
Ben: Pissed. Irritated.
Leader: So – angry, mad? That sounds like a feeling.

Discussion: The participant is struggling with both acknowledging (even to himself) and expressing his feelings in the moment. The intervention helps him become aware of what he is feeling in the moment, and helps him name and express that feeling.

SCENARIO 3

Anne: I think Joe has checked out and that frustrates me.
Bill: I disagree, Anne. I think Joe is just not talking …
Leader: Wait! Wait! Joe is sitting right there. Joe, what are you thinking and feeling right now?
Joe: I’m feeling invisible – everyone is talking about me, and not to me.
Leader: Anne, why don’t you check out your assumption about Joe directly? Would you do that?
Anne: Joe, I think you’ve checked out. Is that accurate?
Joe: No, it’s not. I’m just quiet –but I’m paying attention and fully engaged. And I’m sorry that this frustrates you …
Leader: Are you really “sorry” that your reticence frustrates Anne or is there another feeling attached to this?

Joe: I suppose I’m a bit irritated that my being quiet is misinterpreted by Anne, and that she gets frustrated by it.

Leader: Would you be willing to tell her that?

Joe: Anne, I’m a little miffed that you are frustrated with me for being quiet.

Anne: I can understand that. And I regret that I jumped to my assumption about your checking out.

Leader: Joe, how did you feel when Bill came to your defense after Anne expressed frustration with your quietness?

Joe: I appreciate his defending me, but … I feel good about it.

Leader: What do you feel right now?

Joe: I feel – what’s the word – a bit emasculated. I can defend myself.

Leader: So – you didn’t really need to be rescued by Bill?

Joe: No – I can speak for myself. I appreciate Bill’s support – but it made me feel helpless.

Leader: Bill, how is that comment landing on you?

Bill: A little hard. I didn’t think of my words as disempowering, or rescuing, Joe. But I can see how maybe they were.

Discussion: A lot is going on in this leader-interrupted discussion. First, Anne addresses the group, instead of Joe, regarding his “checking out” and its impact on her – despite his being right there in the circle. The leader encourages her to address Joe directly and personally – and to check out her assumption. Triangulation in T-Group conversations is common – talking about rather than to the person who is affecting you. To compound the triangulation, Bill jumps in to rescue Joe, hence creating an extension of the conversation that is about, but does not include, Joe himself. The leader intervenes to re-direct and re-connect the lines of communication – getting Anne to address Joe directly, and finally bringing into Bill’s awareness the impact that his rescuing behavior had on Joe. In short – this brief scenario highlights how the T-Group can create learning around the unintended impact that our words and actions may be having on others.

**SCENARIO 4**

Jean: You know what it’s like when someone says …

Leader: What’s it like for you right now? In this moment and place?

Jean: I feel alienated – I guess that’s a form or anger, or sadness.

Leader: So – say more about this.
Jean: Well, when Bill cut me off …
Leader: Right now. What are you feeling and why?
Jean: I’m angry right now. I’m angry because Bill cut me off.

Discussion: Jean is challenged to stay in the “here and now” when she begins with a very indirect (and very much NOT here and now) “you know what it’s like” instead of speaking her own truth in the moment. The leader interrupts Jean twice to bring her back to the present – and to the concrete and direct from the mushy and indirect. She has some important feedback for Bill that could have easily been lost in the abstract and hypothetical.

SCENARIO 5

Lisa: I feel like we’re losing the camaraderie that we had yesterday when …
Leader: Lisa, that’s not a feeling.
Lisa: I think we’re losing our camaraderie.
Leader: Good – and – is there a feeling associated with that?
Lisa: It feels like a loss …
Leader: Lisa, “it” doesn’t feel. But you might feel. And – “like a loss” is not an emotion.
Lisa: I feel sad because I think we’re losing our closeness.
Leader: What do you want?
Lisa: I want to be connected to this circle. I don’t want to lose that.
Leader: Maybe this would be a good time to check out what the others are feeling and thinking.
Lisa: How are the rest of you feeling?
Anne: I feel similar – sad that we’re getting distant.
Joe: Me, too.
Leader: So – how are you creating this distance for yourselves? And why?
Lisa: I think it started when we were forced to sit in this dumb circle and talk about nothing …
Leader: So – I’m responsible for the disintegration of your group camaraderie?
Ben: (Laughing) Yes – you are breaking us apart.
Leader: So – how can you stay together despite my best efforts to break you apart?

Discussion: T-Groups are frustrating encounters and they often get the blame (along with the T-Group leader) for unresolved conflict that arises from the T-Group interactions. Lisa began by expressing her disappointment – albeit indirectly – about the loss of group cohesion. When she was coaxed by the leader to express her feelings (sadness) at this development, the conversation gradually moved to scapegoating – in other words, to
abrogating responsibility and authority for what happens in T-Group exchanges. The leader gently reminds the participants of their personal responsibility for what happens among them in T-Group work.

There are endless variations on common themes of dialog emanating from T-Group training. These few brief scenarios are presented simply to illustrate how and why a leader may intervene and interrupt a T-Group session. In the early iterations of a T-Group, as the members struggle with the structure, format, norms and expectations, leader interventions tend to be frequent and pointed. As the group members become more familiar with and more accepting of T-Group dynamics, the need for leader interventions wanes. With practice, T-Group members sanction their own behaviors (“we’re getting away from the here and now – let’s get back”) and learn to self-manage their adherence to the norms of the group, and to the accepted strictures of the T-Group training model.