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Blossoming Workshops and Seminars Guaranteed to Succeed

Practical Tips for Practical Usage
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3. Scientific Principles and Their Significance for Workshops and Seminars

How comfortably or uncomfortably this phase runs depends heavily on the similarities of the individual styles and needs that exist within the group.

The following photos were taken during my seminars where the participants, having had the theories of group dynamics explained to them, portrayed the individual phases (with representative figures made by my son).

The second phase – the *storming* – predominantly covers the recovery of individuality and independence. As the name implies, potentially negative reactions to the leadership can occur during this phase. These are designed to reduce the perceived dependence on the moderator or trainer. Struggles for position can break out (see Chapter 3.1.2, theories of rank dynamics). The group is looking for clarity on the hierarchy within the group. As moderator or trainer you would be well advised to act more or less as a mediator in any conflicts. If you do not do this the group will probably not survive this phase and will potentially break down.

Once it is more or less clear how, who ticks and which position they have, roles can be allotted during the third phase – the *norming* – and the group is well on its way to working together to achieve objectives. The whole process is made easier with game rules. Ideally you should establish these together with the group and write them on a flipchart.

You can refer to them then if need be. I would however recommend that you do not impose rules without having first agreed on them.

During the *performing* phase one lives and experiences cohesive action. This leads to deeper relationships, group tasks are solved through the sensible application of different talents. The group can, thereby, achieve more than the individual – “performance” is therefore carried out together, collective steps are established towards the goal. This leads to a feeling of “WE”.

The fifth and last phase – the *adjourning* – begins as soon as the purpose of the group has been fulfilled or the time has run out. In the case of projects, it would now be the task of the group to decide on its future. If everything has gone well – also after a workshop or seminar – there often arises a sense of belonging and the participants often wish to continue together. In this respect it is a case of acknowledging that which has been achieved, i.e. not just letting the event taper off but rather, to finish using a constructive “closer” (see Chapter 6.4), rounding off and putting the “achieved” into a doggy bag.

Should, however the composition (one participant drops out or someone new only joins on the second day) or the purpose of the group changes, then the cycle starts again at the beginning (at least in a shortened form). If someone joins later, make sure that this person is welcomed with open arms, maybe even with a ritual that the group thinks up.

In summary it should be noted that each phase (Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning) comes with its own challenges which you, as moderator or trainer, can stimulate and use well.

3.1.2 Rank Dynamics According to Raoul Schindler

In your group, however, there are not only different phases your participants are going through but there are also different positions / hierarchies. These positions develop mainly in phase two, the storming. Here I would like to emphasise that these positions are not taken but only lent: it is only through acceptance on the part of the others that a member of the group attains a certain position (nobody becomes a leader without the others following her/him). These positions are therefore changeable.
In his rank dynamic model, Raoul Schindler describes different positions which define the existence and effects of power within a group.

- **C** – Counterpart or opponent, group task (the effective force of the group is directed at this so-called “external construct”)
- **α** – Alpha (leader)
- **β** – Beta (expert)
- **γ** – Gamma (simple member of the group, does the work)
- **Ω** – Omega (counterpart to Alpha)

The occupants of these positions together with their actual behavior have a decisive impact on the well-being of your individual participants as well as, ultimately, on the successful conclusion of your workshop or seminar. As moderator or trainer you should recognize these and know how and why they act as they do. Moreover, you should be able to deal with each individual position since you are the “Meta-α”, an extra position which I have designated as such and have been able to observe over many years of experience. This is described as follows:

As previously mentioned, in my opinion there are two α: the one who officially leads the group, e.g. a moderator or trainer and the other α who has the informal lead within the group. This, then, looks as follows:

Rank dynamics can be explained excellently using the example of the group of mountain climbers. Imagine you are observing such a group whose aim (group objective) is to climb Mt. Dachstein (Austrian mountain, nearly 3000 m high). Wonderful, isn’t it?

The mountain guide (Meta-α) leads the way, followed by ten mountain climbers of differing levels of fitness (γ) who are nevertheless adopting a brisk pace since they trust their guide and have completely accepted the proposed route. They willingly follow the instructions of their guide. You also notice, however, that one member of the group distinguishes themselves from the others. She appears to have some form of leadership role within the group. (α) Furthermore, you notice another person who obviously has some reservations (Ω) about the route and also voices this. Finally there is a further person who is somewhat behind (Ω, here called straggler) and is desperately trying to keep up with the
some other person who knows everything there is to know about Mt. Dachstein (β).

Somewhat later you notice that the knowledgeable person (β) has joined the straggler (Ω) and is telling her stories about Mt. Dachstein. This seems to encourage and the pace picks up. Presumably our Ω is no longer thinking about lagging behind. Moreover you notice that the guide (Meta-α) includes her thoughts into her instructions, such as, for example, “I could well imagine that you might consider this ascent risky. However, at this point I should already point out that it is only 30 m long and extremely well secured.” (This, by the way, is known as an Ω transformation – more on that later). From this moment our grumbler (Ω) stops grumbling, as there is nothing more really to be said since the mountain guide (Meta-α) has already pre-empted the misgivings.

Let us now examine this constellation in somewhat more detail:

The mountain guide has the official leadership. She is our Meta-α. She is the leader of a group and represents the latter to the outside. Her goals are the goals of the group. In our example she is leading the group via a safe route towards their objective – the summit of Mt. Dachstein. In terms of events, she ensures that the workshop or seminar objectives are reached. In other cases she manages the potential confrontations with counterparts, for example, during project negotiations with the funding agency. Nevertheless it is important that the Meta-α shows affiliation to the group and is useful to the latter, otherwise there is the risk that its actions will be anxious and insecure.

If groups are formed without any official leadership then sooner or later an α will emerge depending on how many people vie for the position during the storming phase.

Let us return to the example on Mt. Dachstein:

The β-position (in the case of our group of mountain climbers it would be the person who knows everything there is to know about the mountain) possesses expertise in a certain relevant field and thereby has a certain authority. The α in the group has to acknowledge β otherwise the former risks turning the group against him or herself. Moreover the β is a candidate for a potential α position. Classically the β is an advisor, sometimes also a so-called “éminence grise”, i.e. an influential person who does not, or rarely, appears publicly and usually pulls strings in the background by giving advice and forming opinions.

The β also often looks after stragglers (Ω) without being explicitly asked to. One can use this purposefully – especially in seminars. If you have the impression that someone is not able to follow you totally, ask a β – i.e. a very knowledgeable participant – to befriend this person. In this way you not only value the β but you also prevent the straggler (Ω) from becoming so frustrated that they potentially give up or, which would be worse, infect the other participants (γ).

3.1 Leading Groups in Workshops and Seminars

In the case of my train-the-trainer or moderation seminars, the β were those people who already had a lot of experience with seminars or workshops and had maybe even already attended seminars with context relevant content. In the case of project management seminars they are those who have already managed projects, but have not heard any of the theory.

So what does one do with such experience? Should you ignore them and talk as much as possible in order to emphasise your own competence? Precisely the opposite: invite these people to bring in their experience to a certain extent and appreciate this! If, for example, you are holding a seminar on the subject of “how do I submit a successful EU research proposal?” and you have a participant who has already managed three EU projects then the only thing I can say is “wonderful!” Get them up onto the stage and let them share their experiences. This won’t detract from your competence; rather the opposite. It also doesn’t mean that you are relinquishing the steering wheel, in case that’s what’s worrying you. (By the way, the β is the only position that does not occur in every group).

Let’s now come to the γ. These are simple members of the group. They belong entirely to the collective, identify themselves with the α and define themselves through work without any personal leadership ambitions. γ are the ants, the worker bees, those who carry out the “hard graft,” in fact the performance providers. We, as moderators or trainers, appreciate these people since they simply take an active part. No sooner has one introduced a technique the γ are jumping up to get started. But it would be boring if we only had these sort of people, wouldn’t it?

Nevertheless, the challenge is already given as every group has its Ω, whom I shall describe thus: Ω harbours the reservations, the resistance to reaching the objective. Ωs have an important function in the group: Amongst other things they highlight blind spots. Sometimes this also hurts and nobody wants to accept it. For the γ the Ω endangers their identification with α and therefore Ω is often seen as a disruption, is attacked and sometimes even excluded. You do, however, need to remember that if excluded, a new Ω will appear since the group needs this position. Often they are difficult to handle but a positive mindset (see pages 19–21) is half the battle. This means that you shouldn’t regard Ω as troublemakers, but rather it is better to accept that they are an important indicator of quality. Literature on the subject denotes Ω as “an independent external view on ‘G’”.