

UNDERSTAND & MANAGE TENSIONS WHEN BUILDING COMMUNION - TRACK 2

Introduction

In inter-group interactions, the various boundaries between groups sometimes turn into dividing lines because of a trigger and split a group into sub-groups and silos.

What are some of these triggers that may cause otherwise dormant boundaries to turn into divisive walls, whether in hierarchical structures (vertical), across peer groups (horizontal), conflicting diversity (demographic), regional cultural and other differences (geographical) or between stakeholders?

How can we pre-empt or minimise the tensions caused and turn it into a platform to build communion instead?

3 TRIGGERS

#1: Difference in Treatment

A breach occurs when the members of one group feel they are treated differently than members of other groups. Identity and intergroup differences are highlighted and the groups pull further and further apart with each interaction.

This was the common type of trigger found in the research data. It often happened when there was a perception that rewards, punishments, opportunities or resources were given to one group but not the other. One group was valued or perceived to be valued while the other was not.

In-group and out-group members interpreted these types of event differently. Members of the out-group interpreted this as favouritism and bias, whereas members of the in-group often perceive the events as expression of loyalty to their group. This sets the stage for further divisions and distrust.

#2: Difference in Practices

A side-swipe occurs when one group offends, insults, or humiliates another group. In some cases, the offence is a mistake or misunderstanding, but in other cases, comments or actions are blatant attempts to put down or demean another group. Even if they initially involve only 2 people, this can quickly escalate to become a great divide.

#3: Difference in Identity

A 'submersion' most commonly happens when one group is expected to act just like another to blend in, fit in with others or assimilate. The members of the group that are expected to blend in feel that their identity or sense of self is threatened; they are expected to change who they are, along with their values, beliefs and practices. The group that feels threatened or excluded often reacts strongly to this expectation to change their behaviour or cultural preferences to be more like the other. They tend to fight back in an attempt to hold on to their group identity.

How to understand boundaries and foster inter-group respect?

Intergroup respect increases when:

- Group members understand the similarities and differences that exist between groups
- Similarities and differences in values, perspectives, backgrounds and beliefs are honoured
- Groups treat one another with positive regard

5 TACTICS

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| 1 | <p>Create opportunities for groups to listen and learn about one another</p> <p>There are many ways you can enable members of one group to learn more about other groups: getting to know who the members of another group are through meetings or socials, getting to know what they do, participating in the other group's events and activities, site visits, taking on their roles, inviting leaders or members from other groups to explore possible synergies, have exchange arrangements, joint projects for a common area of interest and so on.</p> |
| 2 | <p>Uncover differences by asking what is the Group's narrative of 'Them'</p> <p>By asking the following questions, we seek to uncover the roots of the challenges faced by groups when trying to build the kingdom of God together: the values, assumptions, perceptions and emotions that may lead to conflict rather than collaboration.</p> <p>What are 3 key characteristics of these questions? They (i) invite exploration (ii) resist easy answers (iii) invoke strong passions.</p> <p>Why is this type of questions important for fostering inter-group respect by understanding perspectives and sharing experiences across boundaries?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • brings out the "elephant in the room"; create an opening for groups to reveal and talk about the differences that cause tension and prevent collaboration, but are not being discussed. • allows deep identity differences to surface: groups may discover nature and source of differences • debunks off-base assumptions or gain insight about the other that build positive regard <p>Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a) What values are guiding your thinking? What is 1 value you are unwilling to give up? What is 1 value you believe both Groups share? b) What is an assumption that you hold about the other group? What is the source of this assumption? How could you further test or explore this assumption? c) What does your group say about the other group? What do you believe they say about your group? d) What is something about your group that the other group does not know? What is something you'd like to know about them? e) What is a concern you have in working with one another? What is an aspiration? |

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| <p>3</p> | <p>Let commonalities emerge from differences When groups begin to try understanding each other, they realise they have much more in common than they originally thought. Digging into and understanding differences often uncovers similarities that lie underneath. Thus it is important to continue to create opportunities for groups to uncover and share their world-views.</p> <p>It is important to start with a discussion on differences and then allow the conversation naturally to uncover similarities. If you jump into looking for commonalities too quickly, you may miss them. It is only through sharing differences that we realise they are actually smaller than the aspects of identity which we share in common.</p> |
| <p>4</p> | <p>Counteract the tendency for groups to want to make 'Them' like 'Us' Working across boundaries require accepting the differences that separate groups. But energy and resources are wasted when a group tries to collaborate with another group by attempting to make Them more like Us. This almost always backfires. Groups just dig in their heels. Instead, encourage your group to accept one another and focus on change from within.</p> <p>A line is crossed when one group tries to change the core identity of another group. Identity is not about what we do or how we do it, but who we are. Asking groups to abandon important aspects of who they are will only create a larger chasm when groups feel threatened. When engaging others, intentionally counteract this tendency in yourself and others by encouraging groups to accept the values, needs and viewpoints of another.</p> |
| <p>5</p> | <p>Perspective-taking before Problem-solving How do we help groups to engage in perspective-taking, exchange knowledge, learning, reflection and pondering? Help them avoid the temptation to move straight to problem-solving of a shared mode of operation too quickly. Instead, invest time to engage in dialogue, with the aim of understanding different points of view, perspectives and ways of operating.</p> <p>Encourage others to uncover facts, assumptions and emotions. Ask groups to listen actively and accept the idea that underlying beliefs have merit and validity on all sides. By taking a more holistic and complete look at the situation, you may uncover new insights and alternatives to solve a problem and foster greater awareness and respect between groups as they learn to appreciate their distinct knowledge and charisms.</p> |

Tool to identify potential triggers

Leaders must continually evaluate the 'temperature' to ascertain the heat, energy or tension between groups:

- Determine how likely it is that negative energy will erupt when groups collide
- Harness positive energy and use it effectively

Questionnaire

1. Does one group feel that they were treated badly compared to another group?
2. Does one group see a behaviour as favouritism while the other group sees the behaviour as loyalty?
3. Does one group hold the perception that they do not access to the same opportunities that other groups have?
4. Is there a power struggle between groups or access to resources?
5. Does one group feel it faces barriers to growth because of its identity or status?
6. Is there a perception of, or, real bias against a group?
7. Is there an unequal allocation of rewards, punishments, benefits, opportunities?
8. Does one group feel it lacks a "place at the table" or feel excluded (lacks voice or input)?
9. Does one group feel insulted, left out, hurt, or offended but the other group?
10. Does one group attempt to put the other "in its place" by demeaning members of the other group or the group itself?
11. Is an out-group feeling that it must give up its identity to be a part of larger community?
12. Is the in-group feeling that out-group members do not want to be part of the community?
13. Does one group expect the other to act like them?
14. Does one group try to do things or have difficulty doing things differently than the other group?
15. Does one group feel threatened by the other group?
16. Is one group afraid of losing its identity or status?
17. Is one group not able to practice or express its values or beliefs?

Reference:

- *Boundary spanning leadership*, by Christ Ernst and Donna Chrobot-Mason
- *Boundary spanning in action: Tactics for transforming today's borders into tomorrow's frontiers*, by Lance Lee, David Magelian Horth and Christ Ernst

The 'Pearl of great price' (Matthew 13:45-46)

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he finds one of great value, he goes and sells everything he owns and buys it."

The kingdom of heaven is compared to a pearl, a much-valued possession. The pearl indicates the beauty of the kingdom. To be in the kingdom is no grim and gloomy matter but **true, good and beautiful**.

An oyster, which is a type of mollusk, have 2 shells. Each shell has a protective layer that covers the oyster's organs. This protective layer is called the mantle and its role is to safeguard the vital organs that keep the mollusk alive. Oysters make pearls in response to an irritant, such as a grain of sand or another object. When an irritant makes its way between the mollusk's shell and mantle, the oyster produces nacre, also known as mother-of-pearl, a protective coating that helps reduce irritation. This is made of microscopic crystals of calcium carbonate and lines the interior of the mollusk's shell. Nacre coats the irritant (grain of sand or object) in concentric layers, eventually forming an iridescent gem, the pearl. A 'pearl' is a natural gem produced by a living organism. It has become a metaphor for something rare, fine, admirable and valuable.

For the prized pearl, the man embarked on a lengthy search. When he finds it, not only is he filled with joy, "he goes and sells all that he has and buys it".

Communion-building can sometimes be demanding. The irritation and pain triggered by diverse parties having to encounter each other at close quarters as we labour in the vineyard of Jesus Christ are the very genesis of the 'pearls' of our lives, forged by irritation, pain, effort and beauty all in one.

Yet Jesus Christ himself has brought us together intrinsically as a Body by virtue of our baptism in Him and He commissioned us is to be a sign of love to the world - one, holy catholic and apostolic Church - in union with Him. How generous are we to give of ourselves in the work of communion, in order to obtain this unsurpassed pearl of great price?