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Discussing the undiscussable

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Summary

Conversation proceeds according to a set of rules, usually implicit. One of the functions of these rules is to define what may be discussed, and what may not. The taboos against certain topics, however, can inhibit the airing of issues which are important to group functioning. In this workshop a structured process is used to help participants become more aware of the topics which are usually undiscussable in normal conversation. The implicit rules which define what is discussable are then identified.

Keywords: structured activity; rules of interaction; group dynamics

The workshop

This is a workshop in which participants will be able to identify some of the topics which are undiscussable in normal interaction. They will also begin to understand the extent to which these undiscussables fuel some of the more harmful interactions between people.

The workshop process is guided by a detailed workbook which takes participants through a step by step dynamic. Participants can then later use the workbook as a guide to designing and running similar processes with other groups.

Implicit in the workshop are certain concepts drawn from the work of Argyris and Schön, and certain processes which slowly allow the undiscussable to be identified and perhaps discussed.

The concepts

One of the more influential books we have read appeared in 1974: *Theory in practice*, by Chris Argyris and Donald Schön. In this, they offered concepts, later developed in other work such as Argyris and Schön (1978) and Argyris (1985) among others. They describe interpersonal and organisational dynamics in such a way that the links between thoughts and feelings, interpersonal interactions and system behaviour is apparent.

An important concept in their work is that of *theory of action*. They argue that people have theories, sometimes implicit, about which actions will achieve certain outcomes. There are both *espoused theories*, and *theories in use*. A person's espoused theories are what she thinks she believes; her theories in use are the theories that are implied by her actual behaviour.

In translating their concepts into processes, certain *undiscussables* make their presence felt. That is, interactions are characterised by taboos which proscribe certain topics. For present purposes, two taboos are important. The first of them

forbids revealing that we have observed a gap between a person's espoused theory and theory in use. The second proscribes discussion of our own assumptions about the motives of others, and the feelings which we develop towards them.

The effect of these proscriptions can be very damaging to relationships and interactions. We are denied accurate feedback of how others perceive us; it is therefore difficult for us to correct the misperceptions others develop of us.

Frequently, self-fulfilling prophecies arise from unstated motives. When these are negative prophecies, their undiscussability hinders understanding and improvement. You might say that there are rules of interaction which cause some problems to be unresolvable. The first step to resolving them is to understand the role of the undiscussable in this.

The workshop process

The process had its origins when one of us [Tim] was given the task of increasing the level of openness in a group of people. It was subsequently developed by both of us, separately and together, by using it to identify the undiscussables which play an important role in the theories of Argyris and Schön. In its present form its main aim is to help people realise the undiscussables and their effects.

It depends upon the use of three lists of information. The "A list" consists of information which is presently discussable. The "B list", while presently undiscussable, has the potential to be discussable under some conditions. The "C list" consists of information which is presently discussable and likely to remain so.

The understanding and openness of participants is aided primarily by two mechanisms. In considering which items might be promoted from one list to another, people improve their understanding of what is undiscussable. In discussing the nature of the undiscussables, they aid each others' understanding and increase their openness and trust.

In overview, the activity has nine main sections...

- 1 *Select small groups.* Subgroups, if required, are formed.
 - 2 *Individually list undiscussables.* Some of the undiscussables are privately identified. Each participant makes a private list of items which form the basis for her work during the activity.
 - 3 *Categorise undiscussables.* Participants categorise this information into three lists, the “A”, “B” and “C” lists, as described previously.

All three lists are of items which are relevant to group and individual satisfaction or performance, and which are to some extent not usually discussed.
 - 4 *Discuss nature of undiscussables.* There is a group discussion of the *nature* of the items on the various lists. There is no requirement that the items themselves are discussed. This helps participants add to the items on their A, B and C lists. (If the whole group is large, this may be done in subgroups.)
 - 5 *Consider moving items between lists.* Working individually, participants decide if there are borderline B items which they might consider moving to the A list, or any C items which they might consider moving to the B list. It is not necessary that they actually *move* any items, only that they consider doing so.
 - 6 *Individually identify conditions which aid movement.* Working individually, participants identify the conditions which would make it easier to move B items to the A list (and perhaps C items to the B list).
 - 7 *Discuss conditions.* There is a group or subgroup discussion of the conditions which would do most to change some B items to A items (and perhaps C to B). An informal discussion follows on the possibility of agreeing to these conditions. In lengthier activities there may be a structured “climate setting” activity in lieu of the informal discussion.
 - 8 *Again consider moving items between lists.* Working individually, participants decide if there are any B items they would *now* choose to move to the A list, and perhaps C items to the B list.
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- 9 *Final discussion.* There is a discussion about the *number* and *nature* of any items which were moved (not necessarily about the specific items themselves).

Throughout the activity, three important conditions apply...

- 1 *Private lists.* The lists of discussables and undiscussables remain private: each participant's list is for that person's use only.
- 2 *Participants decide what to reveal.* Each participant decides what, and to what extent, she discusses any of the items on their lists. (The *nature* of an item is often discussable when the item itself is undiscussable.)
- 3 *Participants decide what to move.* Each participant decides which items, if any, are moved from list to list. Recognising what makes an item easier or harder to move is more important than whether they are actually moved.

References

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