Enhancing Performance with Teams, Families and Systems

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Introduction: The Many Levels of Groups

We are always individuals, in relationships, embedded both in intergroup dynamics and in communities. For this reason, all of us exist and experience ourselves, simultaneously, at four different levels (Pierce, 1999):

- **The Intrapersonal Level:** as individual persons ("Fred", "Wilma")

- **The Interpersonal Level:** embedded in relationships (husband and wife)

- **The (Sub)Group Level**: in subgroups, chosen & not chosen (women/men, "Flintstones/Rubbles")

- **The System Level**: within greater communities or "systems" ("Bedrock", "the U.S.A.")

Each of those four levels (individual, relational, (sub)group, system) can serve as different "lenses" through which to take in our experiences, all of them valid and important ways of viewing the world. For the most part, we take in and process information about the people, relationships and communities in our lives automatically. The teams and groups that we join benefit from such automatic processes.

With limited time and energy, however, it is overwhelming to attend to all of those at once. Very often, we filter what to notice according to our own proclivities, rather than according to what is most salient or useful. To put this another way, we filter the world through our own lenses, and to some degree see what we expect to see. Huckabay (1992) describes the dynamics that can occur in groups if one of these levels receives insufficient attention: it goes underground, becomes unconscious, and will be of more limited (though not necessarily zero) value. Conversations, teams and groups can bog down with surprising speed when levels are not attended to. Individuals can get irritable; interpersonal tensions can build; subgroups such as "management and labor" or "the popular and the outsiders" can find themselves locked into power struggles; on teams and in communities, "stuck areas" and "groupthink" can emerge to reduce adaptability. Here are some examples of levels being eclipsed from view:

- **Intrapersonal occludes Interpersonal**. With text-based communication, the Interpersonal Level becomes easy to ignore because non-verbal cues are hidden from view. As a result, relationships can get strained and conflicts flare. Meeting in person (focusing on the interpersonal) is one way to restore balance. Similarly, when couples argue, there is often an undertow to focus upon what's "mine" and "yours" (the intrapersonal) rather than "ours" (the interpersonal). Among the useful skills for conflict resolution are active listening, empathy, remembering that you care for one another, seeking agreement and compromising... all ways of keeping the relationship front-and-center.

- **Interpersonal occludes Group**. If the pursuit of smoothly functioning relationships (or a *simpatico* environment) encourages conflict aversion, then frustrations and personality conflicts can build up over time. Overvaluing the Interpersonal Level can thus, paradoxically, jeopardize relationships and teams in the long-term by encouraging the formation of "taboos" around certain subjects that then build up until they are too large to contain. Creating a safe place to express disagreements and issues can help a group to process and address these conflicts.

- **Group occludes Intrapersonal**. When individuals feel that their ideas and concerns are not being heard or valued by groups and organizations, they can become unmotivated, obstinate and resentful. Undervaluing the Intrapersonal can thus weaken systems, groups, relationships and individual performances; directing attention back to individual contributions in key areas can repair morale.

What is notable about these levels, therefore, is not that they exist, but how often we choose among them instead of *paying attention to the levels that are most important in a given situation*. When we don't place our attention wisely, we can end up wondering, "How did we get here?!?" On the positive side, however, these levels also hold the key to getting out of "stuck" places on teams.

Why They Matter

None of these levels are in any way superior to the others; all have their uses, all have their frequent practitioners and proponents. In fact, *all levels are necessary for the healthy and adaptive functioning of any individual, family or team* (Huckabay, 1992). An impoverished level may or may not cause problems at a given moment, but eventually a needed skill set will be missing. This framework can therefore be very useful in:

- becoming aware of one's own attentional biases and blind spots
- building high-performing teams
- directing meetings
- managing organizations
- moving past the "stuck" places that can crop up in teams and families
- understanding family dynamics, and how to fit into them "choicefully"
- helping individuals to be more aware of their blind spots
- overcoming roadblocks to success of all kinds

As a result, developing greater facility at observing, and working at, each of the levels brings advantages.

- Communications become more effective when communication can be best heard and taken aboard *by the listener*. By communicating at a level that is more natural and familiar to the audience, you increase the chances of your ideas being understood and incorporated.

- By identifying the levels at which we each habitually work, we come to know ourselves, know our teammates, and track our own strengths and weaknesses in groups. Most of us have a level that serves as a "home base", the place to where we return our attention in times of crisis, if not more often. If we can learn to use ourselves *as required by different groups* (instead of according to what comes naturally), then we can augment group functioning and maximize high-performance teams.

- We can come to better know and assist the families, teams, communities and groups of which we are a part, by observing, recognizing and strengthening the different levels of a group, all of which are *always* operating simultaneously. When one level is impoverished or over-emphasized, groups will show predictable patterns of high-functioning behavior and blind spots. Although one or another level can be more easily observed in a given moment, *all levels operate at all times and in all groups.* The ability to recognize the action at each one of these levels increases the effectiveness, potential for action, cohesion and performance of groups of all kinds.

We will address each of these three areas (improved communications, self-awareness and aiding teams to be high-performing) in turn. Although all of these levels are necessary for each one of us, sometimes groups are formed in which there is a preponderance of attention or energy directed to only one or two of these levels. Different people also have different degrees of need for, and skill with, each of these levels. An awareness of these areas is especially important when an essential ingredient is insufficiently available to a group: as a group leader, your ability to guide the group towards a given level will be critical.

How Communications Attend To Different Levels

We've all had friends reach out to us when in need, perhaps in the event of a death in the family. *From identical motives*, we can choose among responses at different levels. Whereas one person might try to commiserate with an **Interpersonal** response, perhaps with eliciting questions such as "What do you need? Do you need to talk? Have you called your parents?", another might respond with something **Intrapersonal**, like "You must feel awful. My father died last year, and sure did." (Although the last sentence is about the other person, notice how the phrasing is an attempt to jump "into the head" of another individual, a common intrapersonal phenomenon.) A third person might go to the **Group or System**, inquiring "You should have your family around you. Where do your siblings live? Can I call anyone for you?" Although all of these responses are about me with you, and all are empathetic, the language differs in both focus and primary level of emphasis.

All of these responses can be useful, depending upon with whom you are speaking and *how that person can best relate to you*. By the same token, all of them can be dysfunctional when overused, and give off a mistaken impression of selfishness (the Intrapersonal), neediness (the Interpersonal), partisanship (the Group) or flakiness (the System Level). Very often, such impressions represent nothing more than the imposition of unfair

labels over individuals who simply lack some flexibility in choosing at which level to communicate... or do so differently from the listener, from identical motives.

I have had several managers who tended to communicate at the Interpersonal Level. Conflicts on their teams were rarely expressed, because disagreement was perceived as threatening relationships, rather than as an opportunity to raise the intensity and bring targeted solutions to bear upon persistent problems. On those occasions when issues were named directly on these teams, conversations were often closed down too quickly for us to get on the same page. Team members then had too little data to make informed decisions, because the unspoken rule was that all feedback ought be positive feedback. Subordinates rarely had enough information to make informed choices, while expectations and frustrations often went unshared. Projects suffered when deliverables needed to be reworked and redone.

Similarly, I can think of a friend of mine who typically communicates at the Intrapersonal level. I've learned to "translate" because I realize that she does care about our relationship, does care about me, and in fact has proven herself a good friend over the years. Nevertheless, the energy required of me to translate her statements into an interpersonal connection drains "juice" from our relationship, and the way that she begins all of her statements with "I" can become distracting. Had she been a colleague rather than a friend, this behavior would have seriously affected my ability to team effectively with her.

Most likely, people communicate as they do because those choices have been functional for them and not because they are irrational (Minuchin, 1984). If these choices didn't serve some function, the individual would have learned to do something else. However, choices that serve a function at one level can have fall-out that is quite different at another level. For example, consider gossip. As a short-term strategy, gossiping can raise an individual's status and lower the status of others; it can also draw others towards the gossiper by promoting a sense of being trusted with information. Intrapersonally, it makes sense. In the long-term, however, what comes around goes around, and there can be negative interpersonal consequences overall.

Identifying The Level of the Group at Which We Work

Based upon observations in many different groups and teams, we assert that most of us have a "home base", a "default setting" or "fallback position" to which we return most often. Whether intrapersonal, interpersonal or system-level, this is the place to which we most easily revert in a crisis, or when under stress. Just as people can overuse other behaviors to their own detriment (such as argument, or being shy, or giving in, or being competitive), so most of us habitually overuse one awareness or another. In so doing, we fail to recognize that focusing upon a different level might sometimes prove more adaptive than the most familiar level.

Another way of thinking about this is that people also bring learned behaviors from past groups to new groups that they enter. As any roommate or newlywed can tell you, negotiating "the rules" when people from dissimilar backgrounds get together can be a difficult process, because of unshared assumptions about the rules from both parties. Some people habitually find themselves taking charge; other people may find themselves in caretaking or nurturing roles a lot of the time; still others may take the devil's advocate positions in many groups and teams in their lives. Often, the source of many of our role-related behaviors lies in our historical families of origin, but not necessarily only there.

To say that most of us have a "default setting" is not an exercise in labeling. There are likely people with strengths in more than one area, and as we will discuss later, very often individuals with "primaries" at one level have "secondaries" at another (predictable) level. What follows, then, are some of the hallmarks that identify the level of the group at which an individual works. They explain how individuals experience the movement of the group, and the place from which we build relationships in it. All three of these levels exist in all of us, but the "primary" is the one that we fall back upon in times of crisis.

For the purposes of identifying a "home base", we've collapsed the four levels into three. The hallmark of the **Group Level Person** is a tendency to either take on, or feel very intensely, what is going on for an entire group. Whether this occurs at the System Level (i.e., a kid acting out in school while an entire family is having difficulties) or Intergroup Level (i.e., siding with the other kids in the family against the parents), the process of being attuned to a collective affective tone is the same.

People who experience a group from an **Intrapersonal Level** generally:

- are grounded in an individualized & autonomous self, feeling strongly differentiated from others.
- enter a group (or relationship) thinking about how it affects them personally.
- often introduce themselves by relating why they've come or how they can be useful.
- in a crisis determine their own commitment first and then, once a decision is made to stay, usually think rather clearly about options for action.
- are often among the most resistant to this framework initially, perceiving it as the imposition of a label from the outside or as ignoring the fact that they also value relationships.

People who experience a group from an **Interpersonal Level** generally:

- are grounded in connections with others, experiencing themselves in relation to another/others.
- enter a group thinking about to whom they are connected or unconnected. They have a high degree of awareness of themselves in relation to others on a one-to-one basis.
- often introduce themselves to a group in terms of who invited them there and who they know.
- in a crisis, are first aware of the effect it may have on relationships and tend to any relationships that may be in jeopardy. If a relationship with someone involved in the crisis is jeopardized, it will be difficult to continue to work until this relationship is safeguarded.
- are often among the quickest to recognize their place in this framework, being clear that their relationships and connections take center-stage.

People who experience a group from a **Group Level** generally:

- tend to be individualized until there is trust in the group, at which time they identify with or merge with the group.
- enter a group focusing on the whole, not themselves or other individuals.
- may employ intellectualized or metaphorical language to describe their experience of the group.
- in a crisis think first of the group and whether it is in jeopardy, finding the energy of the crisis itself painful. They often have a somatic "body" awareness of the group, speaking quite literally about bodily sensations that sound, to those at other levels, somewhat "woo-woo" or "hippy dippy".
- may avoid groups, since other levels so easily misunderstand &/or invalidate their experience.
- initially hesitant, once they recognize their level they often react with relief to being finally validated.

No level is inherently superior to any other. All levels are <u>necessary</u> for true adaptability and high functioning.

There is nothing in this framework to imply that an **Intrapersonal Level Person** will be selfish or antisocial, or that an **Interpersonal Level Person** cannot have strong self-awareness or assertiveness, or that **Group Level People** will avoid relationships 1-on-1. **Intrapersonal Level People** don't always cast themselves in the starring role: they are as prone to think about your individual needs as their own. There are also **Interpersonal People** whose relationships are not healthy ones; there are plenty of **Group Level People** who, finding groups overstimulating, avoid groups. This framework makes no comment upon the *quality* of such areas of global functioning. However, it attempts to explain the habitual *manner* in which people relate to one another, and in so doing, call attention to diversities that can go unrecognized and lead to tensions.

As an example, consider how empathy might be expressed at each level. The prototypical **Intrapersonal Level Person's** empathy takes the form of "putting myself in your shoes." Neither intrusive nor selfish, at the **Intrapersonal Level** we emphasize through the lens of personal experience. The prototypical **Interpersonal Level** experience of empathy is offering a friend a willing ear or someone to whom to talk. **Group Level** empathy might consist of making sure everyone's glass is full, or that everyone can reach the snacks.

> → Because all teams are made up of individuals, in relationships with each other and with the team as a whole, high-functioning teams will need individuals who are "minding the shop" at all three levels. When one or another level is absent or weakly represented, problems will result at those levels, and can spread to difficulties elsewhere. (This is the subject of the next section.)

For those at the other levels, the most difficult to understand can be the **Group Level**. I remember a **Group Level** colleague with whom I co-facilitated a group a few years ago. In one group meeting, a member of the group told her that she was boring, was "only some HR woman" who had not been admitted to his elite graduate program, and so not worthy of any more airtime. I was (silently) appalled on her behalf. When we had a chance to speak privately, I asked her why she had not responded to such a deliberate provocation. She looked surprised and said, after a reflective moment, "Huh. I had not thought of that. He did put me down, didn't he? I just thought it was interesting that the group was rejecting authority."

At a subsequent meeting of that same group, I asked her if everyone had arrived so that we could begin, to which she replied, "I don't know." Like a good **Intrapersonal**, I began counting heads. I lost count, and started over. As I did this, she turned from another conversation to say, "I think someone is missing." I asked who. "I don't know, maybe a woman?" I dutifully began counting the women present, asking, "Who?" She replied, "I don't know." Just a few seconds later, one late-arriving woman entered breathlessly and apologized for being late. While I had started by counting heads and moved on to counting females, my co-facilitator started with a sense of the entire system (that felt incomplete to her) and moved down to the (sub)group level to note that a woman and not a man was missing... but she did not know which individual. Left to ourselves, we probably would have gotten to the same answer in about the same amount of time... but took our separate paths.

It also bears mentioning that my co-facilitator was the only **Group** in a department of **Intrapersonals**. Although we appeared to work well together and to enjoy each other's company, she did not enjoy her colleagues' tendency to share their individual histories. She did not return to this department after the conclusion of the project... despite the fact that her viewpoint, so different from everyone else's, was essential in making that staff such a high-performing team. Because we did not recognize and validate that there were other ways than the intrapersonal way, our team lost a valuable resource.

Recognizing the Different Levels of a Group

We live in an individualistic culture, one that does not often like to admit that groups have an impact upon individuals. Regardless, the evidence that groups do influence behavior is all around us. Families teach their members specific ways of acting and feeling, such that visitors and in-laws are often bemused by "how things work". Similarly, whole generations grow up sharing particular tastes in clothes, style, music and thought... with many exceptions, to be sure, but also with a significant number of people who do fit the trend.

One of the consequences of that diversity, however, is that groups and teams function best when their members contribute all sorts of different outlooks and skills. High-functioning teams tend to have more, and not less, diversity. When no members of a group have one of these levels front-and-center in their awareness, groups can get "bogged down" in particular ways. As a leader, group member or professional, knowing how to recognize and augment an impoverished level can be a profoundly valuable tool in steering past both personal difficulties and team boondoggles... but it can't be done without knowing your proclivities and capacities for effective action at each level.

With all of this activity going on, it is practically impossible to track everything that is happening at every level of a group. At the Stanford Group Facilitation Training Program (Huckabay, 2002), an oft-mentioned goal for facilitators is to be aware of 15% of what is happening in a group... the most that any one person can be expected to witness. While highlighting the importance of soliciting multiple points of view, this also explains why tracking the activities at all of these different levels is exhausting: it is an impossible task. However, it is possible to hone an awareness of which 15% is most critical in a given moment.

Groups also change over time. When groups encounter new situations, enter new contexts, see the entry or exit of members, or move through developmental stages, they must also readdress questions of inclusion, control and dependence to arrive at new answers as they evolve to meet changed conditions. One of the few constants in group dynamics is that, although groups will resolve these questions in different ways and in different orders, for the most part groups begin to answer these questions almost immediately... and often, without conscious awareness from its members.

Groups can operate in highly functional ways without any conscious intent from group members. As an example of an overlooked-yet-very-functional group process, I once facilitated an encounter group between MBA students that, in its fourth session, was clearly approaching open discussion of some high-risk topics. Group members "just happened" to call for a bathroom break. After we all returned, offline chit-chat continued around a member who had "left the heat on in the attic this weekend." When he got back home, "the heat was almost unbearable" and he was "scared to use the computer, for fear that it would overheat." The group broke an established norm about using time efficiently to laugh about this for about ten minutes. Eventually, it was noticed that the group had all returned, and then a group member brought up some feelings of anger that she'd

been feeling towards another group member as the group continued with its work.

Without any sign of conscious awareness on the part of the members, talking about how hot it was in the attic allowed *the group to tell itself* about how concerned it was that difficult topics might be upping the ante and "overheating" the group. It also allowed the group to ready themselves to "go into the attic". From the viewpoint of the stated content goals of this group, we were wasting time. However, looked at from the group level, these minutes were not only useful, they were probably essential to the continued ability of the individuals in the group to perform. And yet, when this interpretation was offered, reactions ranged from confusion and frowns to anger at "all that psychobabble."

In my experience, significant and metaphorical conversations such as these happen all the time in groups of all kinds: families and classes to be sure, but also on teams, in organizations and at meetings of the Board. Learning to listen to more than just one level can be profoundly valuable to a manager or leader, in that it provides both an early-warning system for trouble and a constant source of hypotheses about "what is going on" that might be amenable to solution. Although many of those hypotheses won't be borne out, those that are will likely have a great impact.

Group (System)[*] Level, or Coincidence?

At this juncture, I'd like to introduce an unproven (and possibly unprovable) assertion: in groups, there are no such things as a coincidences. There can be serendipity and spontaneity, and certainly there can be patterns that don't signify anything important. The group level can be thought of in a variety of ways, most of which sound "hippie dippie" because, in an era of individualism, these concepts are associated with old-world, traditional values and are often not often discussed separately. One metaphor for the group level is a sort of collective unconscious. It can be thought of as an energy that fills the spaces in and around group members, or perhaps as an entity that is born out of, but acts independently from, the group members.

This may already sound "hippie dippie" to your ears. However, because the group level has no "voice" of its own, it can only utilize "what comes up" to make itself known, and serendipitous occurrences in groups *rapidly take on meaning* if they are congruent with some purpose of dynamic of the group. Looked at in a certain light, the same is true of any unconscious process, including individual ones: such dynamics make themselves known through slips, accidents, predispositions, expectations and dreams… "coincidences", if you will.

At the group level, this is often expressed in very indirect ways. Who sits next to and across from whom, for example, is often meaningful because the member across the table from you is the one you meet eyes with most often. Often this signifies either an alliance or a concern, as in "I'd best keep him in view at all times", just as the people we sit next to are often the ones we are least wary or concerned about because we like their company, but also because we can least easily see them when our eyes are facing forward. In many situations where people are free to seat themselves in a random fashion, subgroups will gather together physically at moments in the group's life when those particular sub-groupings are about to become figural. I have been in countless groups in which men and women seated themselves in a segregated fashion, only to find "gendered" topics such as sexual harassment, attraction or Mars/Venus dichotomies taking central stage moments later. These "coincidental" patterns are group-level communications that emerge in where no one is paying attention… by definition, where the group finds its separate voice.

I was once part of a group in which a rodent kept dashing across the floor, usually when one particularly anxious group member had the floor. This anxious little rodent darted across the room day after day at the same time, perhaps "coincidentally" representing nothing more than some rodent circadian rhythm, or a feeding schedule invisible to humans. Soon enough, however, the rodent took on several meanings. The member in question, who happened to be Chinese, eventually shared that he had been born in the Year of the Rat. And, he said, he hated that rodent. To him, it represented the scared, meek, anxious parts of himself that he had never liked… and that had gotten him into trouble during the conversations that were ongoing almost every time that the rodent appeared! Whether coincidence or no, the mouse became associated with that particular member… and, oddly, stopped appearing once he was not feeling anxious.

Common Pitfalls and Their Solutions

The stereotype most often applied to the Intrapersonal Level Person is selfish. However, the intrapersonal person doesn't necessarily attend to only *their own* needs; sometimes they are focused upon the individuals needs of others, and are often found in leadership positions for this reason. However, when upset they can revert to the self, as can we all. Therefore, remembering to attend to relationships -- rather than assuming that the

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[*] Since groups and systems can be nested within other groups and systems, the distinction between the two can be somewhat fuzzy depending upon the breadth and type of dynamic being examined. For example, a committee may be nested within a division, in turn nested within a subsidiary, corporation, industry and nation… identification as a group or system depends, in part, upon context.

relationship doesn't need tending, even when upset -- often helps those with this style. Not so much because they don't care, but because to those at other levels, the assumption that we'll be OK seems as if the relationship is not being attended to! The remedy is to make it clear how important the relationship is, or why else would I care enough to engage?!?

The stereotype most often applied to the Interpersonal Level Person is clingy or dependent. In groups, often find it difficult to forget all of those other eyes: can help to pretend the rest of the group is not present. Similarly, conflicts represent a particular hurdle since it can seem as if even having a conflict puts the relationship in jeopardy. Helps to recall the safety that comes from being able to trust each other enough to have a conflict, to trust that we'll both get through it and to a better place.

The stereotype most often applied to the Intrapersonal Level Person is woo-woo or hippy dippy. If you can honor and trust that the sensations in your body are real *before* there's an explanation, and getting curious about where those sensations are coming from *in the group*. Another helpful technique is metaphor, a way to put out what is occurring in a de-identified fashion. How the situation impacts your body, statements that begin "It feels as if…" and even how it smells can be helpful auxiliary informational channels.

Some Professional Examples of Augmenting the Team

As stated earlier, when all three levels are being attended to, groups will be more functional. Because individuals tend to have a "home base", a level to which their attention goes most easily, most often or when in crisis, the proclivities of group members impact the skills most readily available to groups. When an ingredient is insufficiently available, enormous progress can be made when a group member can "shift" their style enough to provide the missing ingredient.

On a non-profit Board that I once led as President, the vast majority of the Board members and the membership were **Intrapersonal Level** people. We all had similar goals, but could not get on the same page to accomplish them. After mounting frustrations impeded everyone's ability to work, I put the two most Interpersonal members we had in positions of authority, in a bid to intensify the **Interpersonal Level**. As a result, we had our most successful year ever. On the other hand, those two members were doing the interpersonal work for everyone, and efforts to recruit more **Interpersonal Level** folks to the organization did not succeed. One of the Interpersonal members burned out and quit; at which point the organization (and my Presidency) dissolved over a series of personality conflicts and pitched battles among subgroups. These conflicts were also gendered, in that there were women advocating values of equality, and men advocating values of equity. The remaining Interpersonal level person, a woman, was eventually elected President.

At the transition meeting, I decided to enter discussions only in the most Interpersonal manner. More work got done at that meeting than at any I had ever attended previously. Unfortunately, the new President continued to provide most of the Interpersonal "glue" herself, until she, too, burnt out. Although this non-profit still exists, there are only two current members who were members during that time a few years ago… and the membership has shrunk to less than a fifth of its former size. Interestingly, the core that remains is now composed almost exclusively of **Interpersonals** who have no difficulty in getting on the same page. Putting the **Interpersonal** in positions of authority was effective in the short-term, but more interventions were needed to sustain change.

At this point, you may be asking why this framework matters at all if levels of groups can operate adaptively without conscious supervision. After all, in the examples given above, individual group members seemed unaware of what was transpiring at some levels, but the work got done. There is a difference, however, between consciousness and skill. One's unconscious mind can be as skilled or incompetent as one's conscious mind, and the same is true for groups.

I remember another workgroup in which one group member was having a lot of stress in his life outside of group: a career transition, an in-law who died suddenly and a stressful work situation. This member was often emotional, and was labeled as "the problem child" by colleagues who did not wish to see these issues impacting their professional work together. This form of scapegoating also happens in groups, and is an example of a less competent group unconscious. Not only do other members lose opportunities to learn themselves, but one member can be left doing the "heavy lifting" in some area for all of the others. The point is not to place blame, in that all group members have an oar in the water during any group dynamic… including the scapegoat. However, naming dynamics such as scapegoating can often bring them to conscious awareness, and thus change the dynamic. In that particular group, none of us named the dynamic. As a result, the dynamic continued right through the workgroup's final meeting, in which this "problem child" was given some final feedback by every other group member… and then the group decided to adjourn before he could give feedback to anyone in return.

These anecdotes suggest several important lessons. One lesson is that group dynamics can be shifted by changing what is attended to. If a team is stuck around an interpersonal conflict, it can often be resolved by

bringing the rest of the team into the conversation and reframing the issue as a group dynamic rather than an interpersonal conflict. If a team is bogging down because one member doesn't fit in well with his colleagues, a conversation at the Interpersonal Level can often remove the roadblock, whether that conversation is compassionate, supportive, critical or blunt.

Other tools that can help to remove such "roadblocks" are raising difficult topics, speaking in a different manner, changing member roles, adding or removing members, or by investing or disinvesting in relationships. Simply naming a group dynamic for discussion can be a powerful tool. Since many organizations and teams don't afford very much time to consider their own processes and patterns (or hand that task to disempowered HR departments), many of them bog down in unhelpful processes.

These anecdotes show that you have to work with what is resident in a system. If what is on the table is not sufficient, then the system might need to change to get to some desired level of functioning. Change can be a tall order if there are members in the system who do not want to change, as is likely to be the case: systems are homeostatic in nature, meaning that their operations and functions tend to support the status quo (Minuchin, 1984). Finally, it is possible to use yourself as a tool to highlight levels that are less comfortable, to help teams of which you are a part to achieve positive outcomes.

In psychology, work with children has been heavily impacted in recent decades by a theoretical orientation called Family Systems, which draws explicitly upon a similar set of concepts for individuals, relationships, subgroups and systems. The individual is seen as both inextricably bound into his family and social context, and involved in dynamics that affect the group as a whole. (The child is often referred to as "the identified patient", reflecting the concept that the identified patient or "symptom bearer" may not be the person who needs to change to address the symptoms.) Instead, symptoms can be placed within a broader transactional framework.

Consider a child who has been brought to therapy for "acting out." Her therapy will be very different if she acts out because she is terrified of the changes in her body at puberty (the Intrapersonal) than if she acts out because she is being verbally abused (the Interpersonal) or because she has realized that she alone in the family is a lesbian (the Intergroup). If her acting out is adopted as a means of distracting the family from troubles elsewhere, such as talk of a divorce between the parents, then it serves a System-level purpose even if it also had an entirely different motivation at another level for the child.

Examples like this can be found in many families. Most family members take on habitual roles. One family member can be the breadwinner, the peacemaker, the disciplinarian or the bully; others will take on roles like information gatekeeper, provocateur, protector, disturber of the peace or victim. (There are countless possible roles.) Family members may not always play just one role or even the same roles, to be sure, but roles often are apportioned out in set patterns or configurations. Although roles can be traded among the members of a family, more often they seem to get "fixed" onto specific individuals who take those roles whenever they are present (and, interestingly, leave them for others to take up when they are absent.) As a result, some of the regressive behavior that occurs in families can be explained as a system-level dynamic, a reversion to roles that individuals find familiar and that they are inducted into by the other members of the family. Despite this, in most Western European cultures, individuals will usually heap both blame and credit upon other individuals... including themselves.

A Caveat

These concepts of Intrapersonal, Interpersonal and Group Level people are not intended as exclusive categories. One of the most useful aspects of this framework, in fact, is that it highlights still another form of adaptability that can be of use in achieving goals and creating high-functioning teams. The more adaptable you are, the greater the number of situations in which you can be effective. Additionally, I have observed that for the most part, people whose "primaries" are at each level also have a predictable "secondaries."
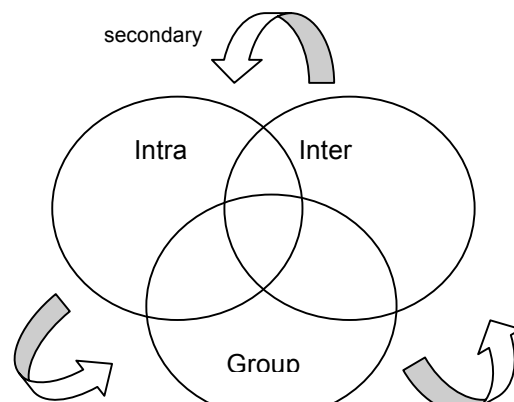
Interpersonal Level People tend to have their secondary at the intrapersonal level, since they are attuned to the individuals at the other end of their 1-on-1 relationships. **Intrapersonal Level People**, with clear boundaries between self and others, usually see the system with some clarity. As a result, they often have a "secondary" in the group level. **Group-level Level People** often have a "secondary" at the interpersonal level, where they still experience a group of two.

A Note on Gender, Ethnicity and Social Justice

The astute reader will note that identity impacts people's development at the different levels. Women in many cultures are nudged towards the Interpersonal, whereas men in many cultures are nudged towards the Intrapersonal. Asian cultures traditionally place much more emphasis upon the Group and System Levels than European-derived cultures, which today often focus on individualism at the expense of more collectivistic, traditional values. Latino cultures place more emphasis upon the Interpersonal level, for both genders. In Malay culture, an "I statement" can be considered quite rude, in that it preferences the individual over the needs of the group. In Bahasa, the 1st person plural is considered the appropriate form of asking many questions, such as "We eat now, eh?" To say "Would you like to eat with me?" carries the implication that the individual will eat no matter what impact it might have upon others, and as such can be considered rude.

Conversations about around prejudice, racism, homophobia and sexism can be profoundly affected by being viewed in this framework. Such conversations are often difficult to conduct because, among other reasons, statements made by subordinated groups at the Group Level ("I'm angry that the majority in this culture has been given so many privileges that I have to work for or can never attain…") can be interpreted at the Intrapersonal Level ("Well, I haven't had an easy life, either, because…"). The two quotes may *both be true;* they simply do not contact one another, since one is a System Level statement about institutional prejudice (experienced at the Group Level) and the other is a statement of personal history (experience at the Intrapersonal Level). When individuals do engage in Intergroup conversations around prejudice, racism and homophobia, there is the significant risk that individuals will get hot under the collar with one another (the Intrapersonal) while relationships get strained (the Interpersonal). Justified or no, more careful sorting of the implications of statements at various levels can help everyone to stay on the same page.

Similar conversations can be had around almost any kind of prejudice, injustice or lack of equality. These particular topics are particularly difficult to process exclusively at the intrapersonal or interpersonal levels, because our intrapersonal experiences are so firmly embedded in the collective heritage of racism, patriarchy and heterosexism of our culture. And yet, disagreements in these areas are often chalked up to "politics" (intrapersonal values) and "personality conflicts" (interpersonal transactions) rather than recognized as institutional and System Level conversations that carry an added charge for that reason.

These sorts of dynamics go on in companies, too. I once worked at a technology company in which most employees were male. Although recruitment eventually addressed the gender imbalance, successful women continued to be very male-identified, often as a consciously-adopted strategy to get ahead. I once saw my manager emerge from a meeting looking disgusted. She said, "We were discussing who had landed the biggest sale this quarter. I've never seen so many grown men throwing their things out on the table to measure them at the same time." Empowering one subgroup over another at a critical, formative period had established a lasting aspect of corporate culture.

Conclusion

Much effort in psychology gets expended in determining which theoretical orientations are better than the others, when they are better and for whom. In seeking to validate therapies empirically, psychologists more and more look only at which treatments are effective for which pathologies… as if someone's illness were the only important thing about them. This is a result of the "medical model" that psychology inherited from psychiatry: "cures" are provided once a professional has diagnosed "the problem."

In contrast, many seasoned clinicians and therapists claim that a variety of approaches can work synergistically, based not only upon what is wrong with someone, but also upon what is right with them. In the opinion of this not-so-seasoned author, the fact that we all exist as individuals, in relationships and in communities explains why no one approach will ever truly prove superior to all of the others… including this framework. Rather, this framework can be useful in taking a "snapshot" at a given time and place, and in determining which of many "next steps" would be valuable for an individual, relationship or community.