



## **Harnessing the Energy of Group Dynamics** **by Joel DiGirolamo**

Stereotyping and prejudice are human behaviors which tend to have negative connotations. However, a deeper study of group dynamics such as these can provide two powerful tools to harness group energy, enhancing team and organizational productivity to achieve superior results.

### **Our Inherent Attraction to Groups**

Let's begin from an evolutionary psychology view. We know that humans are more likely to survive by collaborating. Groups can achieve goals that individuals alone cannot. An important factor in collaboration is trust. If groups did not exist then we must trust everyone—a state of altruism.

Sadly, genuine altruism does not work as a long term strategy. Therefore, groups form as a collection of individuals whom we can trust. It serves to limit our cost, a sort of conditional altruism.

### **Ingroup & Outgroup Dynamics**

Secondly, let's look at the background of what psychologists call ingroup and outgroup dynamics. The ingroup is any group that we are a part of and the outgroup is anyone outside that group. Stereotypes and prejudices often surround outgroups.

One of the most potent ingroups is our family of origin. Both Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud based much of their work on early childhood experiences. All of us have specific values indoctrinated or embedded into us during our formative years. We generally carry

these values throughout our lives and they frequently crystallize into firmly held beliefs that can either help or hinder future relationships.

Whether we like it or not our values lead to bias and a propensity to favor individuals within our ingroup and question, or even shun individuals outside our group. We are frequently unaware of these biases.

Do you think like-minded people will form stereotypes and prejudices of one another? They will, and there is likely a reason for it.

### **The Relationship to Learning**

Let's think for a moment how we learn. When a new concept is introduced each of us first attempt to compare it with known models. In the field of psychology we call this a 'schema.' When a new concept fits well with a known model, or schema, we tend to learn it quickly. If the new concept is a radical departure from our existing knowledge it takes more work for us to assimilate this new knowledge.

Now think about people we meet whose background is unfamiliar to us. As we get to know them we begin to put them into buckets; smart, light-hearted, easy to talk to, etc. As we know a few more people from the same group we tend to make generalizations which then become the kernel of bias or prejudice.

### **An Experiment in Prejudice**

One of the most fascinating illustrations of bias is an experiment with twenty-two 11 year-old boys at a camp in Robbers Cave State



Park in Oklahoma during the summer of 1954. The boys were placed into one of two isolated groups. Norms and a hierarchy formed within each group. Near the end of the first week the experimenters allowed each group to become aware of the other. The energy in each group instantly rose and motivation increased dramatically.

Then the groups were allowed to intermingle and competitive events were held, pitting each group against the other. The weeklong series of contests were manipulated to maintain near parity to allow rivalries to emerge. Despite the fact that these boys came from similar middle class, religious families prejudices and stereotypes quickly formed. After a week of competition not a single boy wanted to be involved with anyone from the other group, their outgroup.

The experiment illustrates how quickly and for little reason rivalry and conflict can occur. The experimenters then spent the third week furtively introducing goals which could not be achieved by each group alone, thus encouraging the two groups to work together. The interactions slowly dissolved the prejudicial barriers between groups and conflict was significantly reduced.

### **Harness the Power of Outgroups - Competition**

So how can we as leaders harness some of this energy to our advantage? The experiment clearly illustrated a phenomena frequently employed to motivate individuals—create a contest or an enemy. We see this occur from the organizational level up to the national level.

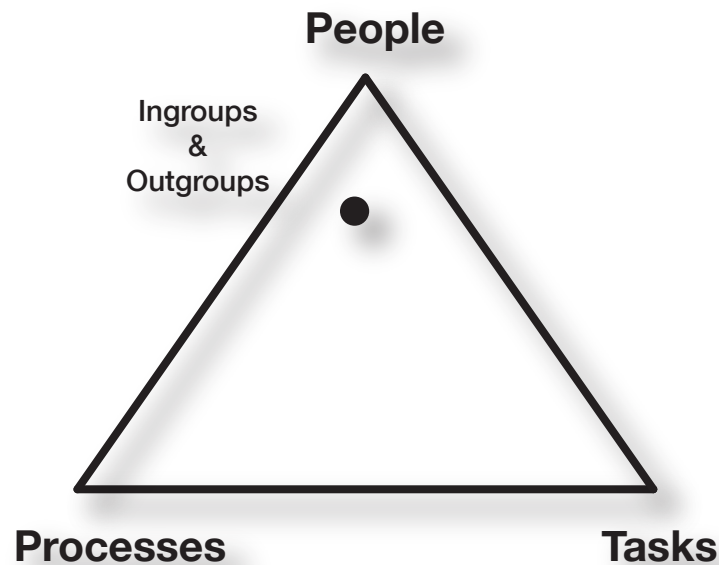
Just as in the experiment with the 11 year-old boys, the tool you can use to increase the energy and enthusiasm within your team is to highlight a competitor and their products or technology. Whether viewed as a matter of survival or simply a well-spring of competitive spirit, a competitive comparison will almost assuredly enliven any project and inject emergent energy into the team.

### **Transcending Ingroups - Collaborative Goals**

All but the smallest of organizations have internal groups. The extent to which they collaborate is dependent on the organizational culture. Some cultures intentionally pit one team against the other in order to fuel competition as described above. However, this causes a problem and the dark side of ingroups emerges.

By their very nature, ingroups tend to cause outgroups, although they do not always have to maintain acrimonious relationships. We often hear the term NIH, or Not Invented Here. From now on, whenever you hear this term think of the ingroup and their prejudice against anything from the outgroup. This is the source of NIH.

The second tool at our disposal is to transcend outgroup prejudices and create goals which cannot be met by a single group acting alone. This forces collaboration between groups. If you believe in metrics to measure and motivate group performance you can easily set goals for each group alone as well as collective groups. The collective group goals will encourage collaboration and assist in achieving higher organizational performance.



Digressing for a moment to explore how to reduce global conflict, we find a reasonable theory of conflict reduction which consists of:

- Equal-status groups
- Common goals
- Intergroup cooperation
- Support for a legitimate authority
- Potential for individuals to become friends

Regional and national leaders would be wise to use this list as a guide to leading groups toward peaceful relations.

### **People, Processes, and Tasks**

In the context of our people, processes, and tasks model, we know that people are at the heart of group dynamics. The processes we leaders put in place will have a

huge influence on whether intrinsic human behavior is harnessed and used to enhance the team productivity or ignored, allowing teams to devolve into disarray or acrimonious dysfunction. Artfully created tasks can be employed to enhance team cohesion and force teams to work together toward elevated goals.

Some individuals view constant competition as a sign of toughness and strength, a way to keep people energized. They may also view collaboration as soft and accepting of others, taking the easy way out. I propose a balanced view. Use competition to motivate and energize your team and collaboration to achieve superior performance toward higher organizational goals.



## **turbocharged leadership**

THE ART, SCIENCE, AND PSYCHOLOGY OF MANAGEMENT—AN INTEGRATED APPROACH

Joel DiGirolamo heads the firm Turbocharged Leadership and can be found on the web at [www.turbochargedleadership.com](http://www.turbochargedleadership.com).

- Leadership & motivational speakers
- Leadership development workshops
- Team development workshops
- Executive & management retreats
- Coaching
- Resolving organizational challenges



## References and Recommended Reading

- Allport, G. W. (1954). *The nature of prejudice*. Cambridge, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Brewer, M. B. (1999). The psychology of prejudice: Ingroup love and outgroup hate? *Journal of Social Issues*, 55(3), 429–444.
- Gilbert, G. M. (1951). Stereotype persistence and change among college students. *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 46, 245–254.
- Lundberg, G. A., & Dickson, L. (1952). Selective association among ethnic groups in a high school population. *American Sociological Review*, 17(1), 23–35.
- Paluck, E. L., & Green, D. P. (2009). Prejudice reduction: What works? A review and assessment of research and practice. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 60, 339–367.
- Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751–783.
- Pittinsky, T. L., & Simon, S. (2007). Intergroup leadership. *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18(6), 586–605.
- Sherif, M., Harvey, O. J., White, B. J., Hood, W. R., & Sherif, C. W. (1961). *The Robbers Cave experiment: Intergroup conflict and cooperation*. Norman, OK: Institute of Group Relations, University of Oklahoma, reprinted by Wesleyan University Press, 1988.
- Sidanius, J., Haley, H., Molina, L., & Pratto, F. (2007). Vladimir's choice and the distribution of social resources: A group dominance perspective. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 10(2), 257–265. doi:10.1177/1368430207074732
- Stewart, T. L., Laduke, J. R., Bracht, C., Sweet, B. A. M., & Gamarel, K. E. (2003). Do the “eyes” have it? A program evaluation of Jane Elliott’s “blue-eyes/brown-eyes” diversity training exercise. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 33(9), 1898–1921.