The Secret Life of Groups

In the early 90's, when I was first starting out as an organizational development consultant, I worked with a man who seemed to have X-ray vision. When it came to working with groups, he was able to see things that no one else could see. He saw patterns in their interactions, he could predict what was going to happen, and he knew how to help them become more effective.

His name was [David Kantor](#). An original thinker and contributor to the field of [family systems theory](#), he applied what he had learned about individuals and family systems to working with leaders and leadership teams. I was so excited to work with him and learn from him!

For over 20 years, his way of thinking has been one of the key lenses through which I work with leadership teams. In a recent [Groupaya Brown Bag Lunch](#), I shared a few of the basic concepts. Please note: this is only the tip of the iceberg of a large and complex body of work. While it takes years to master, an individual or group can benefit tremendously from understanding even this small piece of it. The following is a short summary. The good news is that David has a new book coming out in the spring called, *[Reading the Room: Group Dynamics for Coaches and Leaders](#)*, so you should be able to learn more there.

David Kantor's Group Lens

In any group meeting, there are many levels of conversation one can pay attention to including (but not limited to):

- **Content**: *What is the group talking about?*
- **Goals**: *What is the group trying to achieve?*
- **Emotion**: *What is the general tone of the conversation?*
- **Process**: *How is the group trying to achieve its goals?*

Another level, which David calls action, answers the question, "What are the actions people take in a conversation?" The level includes:

- **Move**: T*o initiate.* "I propose that we get into the Brazilian market."
- **Follow**: T*o follow someone else's move.* "I think that is an excellent idea, and here is why…"
- **Oppose**: T*o oppose, disagree with, or correct another's move.* "I think it is too risky to go into Brazil right now, because …"
- **Bystand**: T*o notice when the group gets stuck, name it, and make a suggestion for moving forward.* "I see that we are going around in circles, perhaps we should do more research, and then reconvene."

Every conversation is a combination of some sequence of these actions. Simply through watching the patterns of these actions, we can predict the quality of conversation and therefore the quality of thinking that a team will do.

When I am working with a team for the first time, I focus on the following questions to assess how solid they are as a team and where they need to develop conversational capacity to become a higher-performing team.

Is there variety in the actions that people take, or do people have a tendency to favor the same action over and over again?

In other words, is Jane mostly "moving" and rarely "following" anyone? Does John always "oppose" and never initiate a "move"?

If people are stuck repeating an action over and over again, I will encourage them to consciously practice taking alternative actions. For example, if someone mostly "moves," I will assign them the practice of "following" three times a day. I'll then ask them to reflect on how that feels to

them, what they notice, and if, over time, this shifts their interactions with others.

Is there variety in the order in which actions happen, or are the same sequence of actions happening over and over again?

For example, do many of their conversations begin with Jane making a move, then John opposing, then Sally following John's oppose, then Terry following Jane's move, and then Jane, who is the boss, concluding the meeting with a move, through announcing her final decision?

If the conversation tends to follow a familiar pattern that is dissatisfying to many and doesn't lead to optimal thinking, I will ask the group to name the pattern, and help them interrupt it and try a different sequence of actions. For example, I will coach the boss, Jane, to tell the group what she wants to talk about ahead of time so they have time to think about it. I will also suggest that she start her meetings by asking each person to share any critical thoughts on the topic and make any proposals they have before she and the group respond.

Is bystanding happening? If so, what is the quality of it?

When the team gets stuck, is someone able to name how they are stuck and make a suggestion for moving forward? And does the team listen to them and follow their suggestion for getting un-stuck? Does everyone on the team bystand or does it tend to be the same person over and over again?

If only one person is bystanding, I will point that out to the team and suggest that I call "time-outs" and ask the team to notice what is happening and for someone different to say what they see and what they suggest.

This is just the tip of the iceberg. The next level of seeing a team is to notice in what domains they take action. Do they

take action in *meaning* (ideas*)*, *affect* (people) or *power* (making stuff happen)? And what cultural frame do they come from? *Open* (orienting toward the group, valuing participation and adaptation), *closed* (orienting toward the leader, valuing order and stability) or *random* (orienting toward the individual, valuing exploration and improvisation?)

Think about the following:

- What kind of actions and in what domain do you take most often in your primary group at work?
    - Are you a "mover" in "power," proposing ways for the group to make progress on its goals?
    - Or are you a "bystander" in "affect," noticing when someone looks unhappy with the conversation?
- What kind of actions do you take in your boss's meeting?
    - Are you a "follower" in "affect," highlighting how proposals will positively impact employees and clients?
    - Or are you an "opposer" in meaning, providing data that shows why certain "moves" aren't a good idea?

What actions do you take the least often? Identify one new action to experiment with once or twice a day for a few weeks. Notice how it feels. Write down your reflections at the end of each day. After a few weeks, notice if you start getting different results. Notice if people start responding to you differently.

I'd love to hear what you learn about yourself, your family, or your teams.