# ARL™ NEWS

Groups, Teams and Boundaries
by Thomas Sewerin

Boundaries and Permeability

I nteraction is all there is" says the social scientist John Law. When coaching teams and solving problems and conflicts in groups I have found it most convenient and practical to look for remedies and openings not in systems and procedures, but in relationships. I have come to see that most difficulties and challenges do not occur within the parts, the particulars, or the individual members of a group. **It is rather when they meet and interact** that both obstacles and opportunities arise. I have come to look more at the quality of the connections themselves than at what they connect. I see myself working in the *in-betweens*, the fields between the parts, to unleash creativity and development in teams.

A common saying is that it is impossible to change people. If this is true, one way to realize the possibilities of group development is to help and coach people to engage and relate to each other differently. And there is quite a difference between these two approaches. In my work I do not pursue the road to blame or find faults with individual parts in the system, but rather look at how connections, linkages, relationships can be made differently.

One way of looking at connections and relationships in groups is in terms of *boundaries*. In any group dynamics. there are always boundaries between the individual parts, and between the parts and the whole. With boundaries the members can establish affinity with each other, and basically there are three types of boundaries. Two of them are always destructive to the team effort, and one is constructive to the same end.
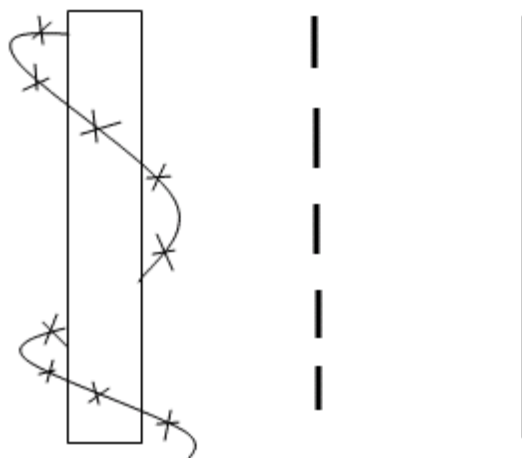
There are ***thick boundaries.*** These have very little permeability. They create distance, territories and make communication and establishing a relationship difficult. When they occur and develop in organizations and groups, they will generate much destructive energy, an "us-and-them" culture, prejudice, avoidance and untested assumptions about each other.

There are also ***thin boundaries.*** These have too much permeability. They result in instances where individuals and functions are too close, where responsibilities and expectations are unclear, with too little differentiation in thought. They can lead to a homogenous body where everyone thinks and acts alike and no where no one dares voice his own opinion.

Finally, there are ***firm and clear boundaries*** which assert what is me and what is you. They clarify expectations. They are permeable enough to establish a fair flow of communication. They are firm enough to establish differences, and each individual's unique position, competence and contribution to the rest of the group. These appropriate boundaries create and maintain an intricate balance between independence and dependence, between the parts towards each other and between the individual parts and the whole.

This concept of three types of boundaries can also be used to identify some characteristics of a well functioning high performing team.

Three kinds of groups

1) *Groups with territories in them*

In this type of group there are very thick boundaries between the individual parts. These individuals guard their territories by keeping a constant distance from the others. They seldom inform each other and there is minimal communication between them.

When this kind of territorial tension occurs in a group or an organization there is always, at the same time, a very thin boundary holding the parts together. It could be a vague boss, someone with a blurred presence who has limited communication and decision-making powers. It could be an uncertain business idea, a shapeless *raison d'etre* for the group, or indistinct goals and objectives. It could be a combination of all these. As a result, in this type of unclear situation, the parts of the groups are bound to distance themselves from each other.
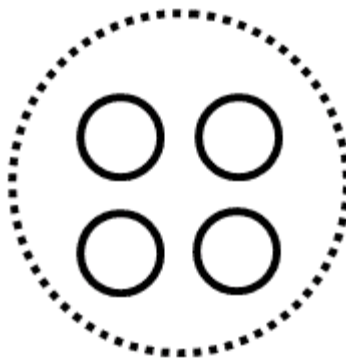
As a consultant I am often asked to intervene in **territorial conflicts**. It is expected of me that I should work with the thick boundaries so as to stimulate the parts to engage with each other, and to communicate and cooperate in a better manner. In my experience my interventions are much more successful if I ignore the thick boundaries and work with the thin ones. ***As soon as the team's***

purpose, goals and leadership become clarified, the individual parts become interested and engaged with each other. Almost automatically.

This experience is well known in statecraft politics and other power situations. It is not uncommon that as soon as there is strife and tension between the parts of an organization, the leader helps find an external enemy or a threat. For instance, when the Argentine junta in the early 1980's was breaking apart, the Falkland Islands were invaded. For a moment there was cooperation within the government. They had a common enemy. When the war was lost, the government disintegrated.

It seems as if a hesitant "us" needs a "them" to feel a "we". But this maneuver is short term happiness (solution?). As long as that enemy is there, the individual parts find it in their interest to cooperate. When the external threat disappears, there is a reversion to turf issues and territorial jealousy.

A group where there are thick boundaries between the parts is not much of a group. It is rather a collection of individuals egoistically pursuing their own individual good.

2) *The uniform group*

Another type of group has the opposite situation. Here the boundary holding the group together is very thick.
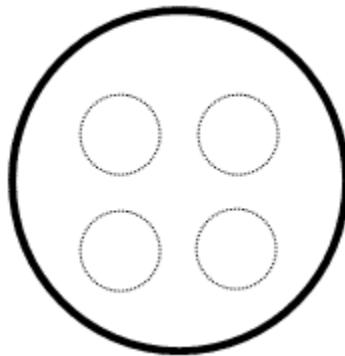
This could be the situation with a work group run by a dictator. When he arrives at work, usually half an hour later than anyone else in his group, everybody stops working and listens to his footsteps coming down the corridor. When he slams the door to his office, everyone looks at each other, sighs and contemplates sadly, "Oh boy, it's going to be another one of those days!"

In cases like this, there is precious little differentiation between group members. They all have exactly the same story, the same thoughts, feelings and behavior. Thus, with a thick boundary around the group, the boundaries between the parts are usually very thin. It is as if all have become one person. They think, feel, and act alike.

Another example could the army. The soldiers wear *uniform*, i.e. have the same form in many respects. They march in step and in line. The military logic is to decrease the amount of individuality in order to have a predictable unit. In that case there is, of course, also a thick boundary around the military unit: logic based on a real or an alleged enemy out there.

In situations with a thick boundary around the group, individuality and the uniqueness of the separate parts are blotted out. Each member becomes one with the group and individual boundaries

more or less disappear. As a member of a crowd at a football match, it is a wonderful feeling, when your team scores, to temporarily disappear among thousands of others with the same thoughts and the exhilarating feeling of winning. If you are part of a group of coworkers, under the suppression of a dictatorial boss, it is a sad fact to be an undifferentiated part of a collective suffering.

If the first illustration of thin outer boundary and thick inner boundaries depicts a group which is hardly a group, this latter picture is of a group which is, perhaps, too much of a group. This latter group needs to develop its individual parts, to give reign to its members' originality and special character.

The tension between freedom and security, between independence and dependence, influences the expression of group dynamics. Sometimes a group becomes frozen in one form – as rigid silos in a vague larger picture, or as a tightly-knit group without visible separate parts. Sometimes groups oscillate from one to the other.

3) The dynamic group, the team

There is a third type of group formation which might be looked upon as ideal. It unites the positives of the two other types and succeeds in maintaining a balance between the parts and the whole, between the individuals and the team.
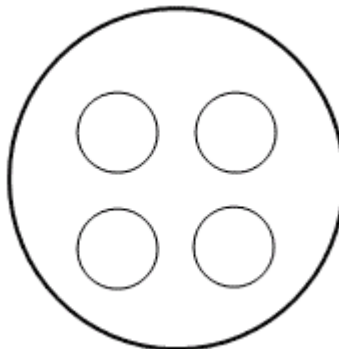
Both the team and its members are distinct and open. The individuals define their identity by means of their personal integrity, needs, motives and tasks. Further, in a concurrent process, the group defines and establishes its own set of norms and objectives. The contract sounds something like: We have a great thing going together **and** we are separate individuals within that frame, or context.

This state of group existence is desirable and at the same time difficult to maintain. It is a state of constant dynamics and conflict. Compared to the other two types of group existence, which are non-dynamic and stable and more primitive, this third type takes a great effort to maintain.

Conflicts and tensions occur because the different members of the team have different positions, contributions, and needs. While these are expressed and pursued they need to adapt to each other's needs and to the needs of the whole. Jean Paul Sartre, the French philosopher who developed a theory of groups, used the concept "project". In paraphrase, Sartre stated "as soon as I start to express and develop my personal project I bump into you who are doing the same thing. If our resources are limited, we need to negotiate and settle our differences." That sums up the whole idea of a dynamic group life: Welding more less highly individual projects and different contributions

into a joint effort. It does not occur without tension. And that is what life in a group, and an organization is and should be.

An example could be a jazz combo. When they are playing it is as if they are making conversation.. Each musician has his own story to tell and yet they are playing together, within a frame of beat, melody and tone. Another example could be a clinical team at a hospital, a team, where members of different professions link together for the well-being of the patient. They see and emphasize different things, and some of their findings and views might conflict, but, by voicing the differences and having a means of conversation that can bridge them, the team effort works for the good of the patient.

Such a team has the capacity to acknowledge and celebrate differences. Here it is possible to express singularities and use them as resources for creativity and strength, so that the team becomes more than the sum of its parts. Here difference and distance produce proximity.

This situation is something like Booker T. Washington, the African-American civil rights spokesman once said in a speech:

In all things that are purely social we can be as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to human progress.

Because team dynamics are naturally unstable and full of creative tension they become hard to maintain over time. Sometimes a single event or pressures of some kind – external or internal - cause the team to revert to simpler ways of being and working. The team members might dig trenches to start a 'war of attrition'. Or, they might appoint a 'commander' to whom they all can submit their wills and revert to one of the two earlier described ways of boundary management. The two former types of groups seem easier to spontaneously adhere to. The third type takes continuous efforts to build and maintain.

It is difficult to get a team going and to keep it going over time. However, it is rewarding when it happens.

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