Developing Shared Leadership through Encounter Group Training

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ABSTRACT

One milestone in the development of leadership theories is that of shared leadership. This concept brings about the function of leadership being shared amongst team members through the collective development of vision, shared responsibility, shared work goals, trust and free flow of information. The key to the success of shared leadership lies in open communication. Encounter group training is a powerful tool to open up team members and bring about the free communication and trust that will allow interpersonal sharing. This training methodology can play a significant role in shared leadership by developing the very qualities necessary for it to happen. The article is divided into five sections. After the introduction, a section is devoted to the concept of shared leadership followed by a section on encounter groups. The next section elaborates on the working of encounter groups followed by a case study of an encounter group session conducted by the author. The last section contains the concluding observations.

1. INTRODUCTION

The corporate sector today differs greatly from that of three decades ago. Changes in technology, markets and firms have impacted almost every aspect of its functioning. One aspect that has persistently been the focus of research is effective leadership. Very simply put, a leader is interpreted as someone who sets direction in an effort and influences people to follow that direction. How they set that direction and influence people depends on a variety of factors.

A significant step forward is the recent development of the concept of "shared leadership". This article discusses how the encounter group training methodology can play a significant role in developing shared leadership by enhancing sharing and promoting open communication between group members. Executives can be helped to truly listen and understand their own and others' interpersonal styles. This improved understanding of behaviour can help sharing of responsibility and work goals.

2. SHARED LEADERSHIP

A group functions more effectively when all its members accept responsibility for the work and life of the group. This shared sense of responsibility is also known as shared leadership. This does not in any way diminish the need for skilled, effective team leaders. While most work teams will continue to make use of designated leaders, team effectiveness can be significantly enhanced by shared leadership since the resources of all can be engaged. In this understanding it becomes part of the designated leader's role to equip others for shared leadership.

In shared leadership the designated leader need not always be the proposer of goals, the clarifier of the task, the timekeeper, and the emotional encourager of the group. Any one who sees the need for these functions at a particular time may perform those functions. Thus, shared leadership is a process of building relationships that nurture and engage members to share responsibilities:

- Shared leadership is a process of building relationships
- The vision and the goals of the group are defined collectively
- The work to be done is identified

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collectively
- The responsibilities are shared
- The key to its success is communication
- When done properly, it satisfies the members and gets the work done

In work settings where members lack trust and hide information, it is difficult to build deep enough relationships that allow collective visioning and sharing of responsibility—thereby undermining the very roots of shared leadership. Encounter groups can help overcome this obstacle.

3.   ENCOUNTER GROUPS

Encounter groups (also known as sensitivity training) is a method of changing behaviour through intensive group interaction.. In such forums, a group of people get together with the aim of shedding their polite social masks and expressing their real feelings. The group sets out to study itself and its members are taught to observe the nature of their interactions with others and of the group process. This enables participants better to understand their own way of functioning in a group and the impact they have on others, which would enable them to become more competent in dealing with difficult interpersonal situations. The group usually emphasizes verbal interaction that encourage open displays of approval, criticism, affection, dislike, and even anger and tears. The assumption in these groups is that the individual will grow in a positive way by interacting with others honestly and openly.

This training methodology grew out of conferences on small-group dynamics held at the National Training Laboratory in Bethel, Maine, in 1947. Originally, these were designed to help executives and managers become more sensitive or aware of the needs of their employees. The emphasis has shifted towards individual growth in healthy people. Encounter groups can achieve the following objectives:

· Increased understanding of group development and dynamics.

· Better understanding of the underlying social processes at work within a group
· Increased skill in facilitating group effectiveness.
· Increased interpersonal skills
· Experiment with changes in behavior
· Increased awareness of feelings in the present moment; and to accept responsibility for one's feelings.
· Increased sensitivity to others' feelings.
· Increased ability to give and receive feedback. .
· Increased ability to manage and utilize conflict.

Encounter groups most often have a trainer experienced at getting people to open up. There are many variants of the methodology ranging from where the group may meet for several hours a week over some period of months, or it may meet as a marathon group for 24 continuous hours or more, with individuals dropping out for naps. The goals of encounter groups include examining one's behaviour and interaction, learning about people in general, becoming more successful in interpersonal relationships, and developing conflict resolution skills. Feedback and encouragement are provided by the trainer.

4.   THE WORKING OF ENCOUNTER GROUPS

As with most other of the humanistic approaches, the encounter group does not focus so much upon the group as a group, but more on individual work within the group. So at one time the focus will be on one person, at another time on another person, and the trainer will usually continue to work with the one person until the particular point at which the issue is resolved in some way. The rest of the group will participate vicariously, following the rule that the deeper a person goes into his or her individual experience, the more universal will be the material which emerges. Members of the group may also be brought in to play roles, or may speak or act spontaneously in ways

which express their own response to what is going on.

The success of encounter groups lies in the processes of unfreezing, moving and refreezing:

1. "Unfreezing" relates to the mindset of a person where he/she is jolted out of his comfort zones and made to realise that his current state of thinking requires drastic changes. This happens by the participant's own desire to explore new ways of behaving. In this stage the trainer stays non-directive, silent, and provides little or none agenda/structure.

2. "Moving"- This stage relates to the process of choosing a new behaviour by the member. It may involve experimenting with new behaviors. The trainer helps in this and also focuses on discussing the possibilities and feelings associated with these behaviours with the group.

3. "Freezing" relates to reinforce new behavior by positive feedback, supportive environment and trust development. Members assess whether what is happening is closer to what he/she intends.

These three stages help the member to deeply introspect himself and ultimately change his behaviour. Because of its emphasis on directness and openness ("say what you mean and mean what you say") the encounter group quite often leads to experiences of getting in touch with the real self. The basic value in an encounter group is truth, truth to one's own experience. Anything which interferes with this is less good in this context and is not real encounter.

Participants frequently struggle with making decisions about how to spend time profitably and how to provide structure and leadership. They have time to resolve their struggles and examine their group life. As they do, they begin to get insights of the forces that are at work — leadership struggle, group structure, group objectives, accommodating individual objectives to group objectives, group standards to guide their conduct, what lessons the groups apply to them, how decisions will be made, how to handle the participation of the members, and how the behaviour of other members of the group is influencing their own behaviour.

The trainer's task is to show that these effects are worth studying, can be studied and taken into account, and lead to useful and acceptable feedback. Simultaneously, the trainer's role is to emphasise the effects of being indifferent to other's feelings. Group work, risk-taking, emotions and anger take on a new meaning as they integrate the emotion and human factor in their work and social life. It would be prudent to mention here that the moods of the members, along with external pressure and family problems greatly impact the training. Depending on the individual these pressures may actually contribute to increased introspection resulting in accelerated learning.

5.   CASE STUDY

The author conducted an encounter group session of thirty hours with nine management members in Delhi. Nine participants were selected on the basis of four criteria, namely, high intrinsic motivation to gain insights into their own and others' behaviour; a relatively strong ego that is not overwhelmed by internal conflicts; defenses which are low enough to allow the individual to hear what others say to him; and the ability to communicate thoughts and feelings with minimal distortions.

Pre-training was conducted so as to align the expectations and motivations of the members to what they would receive in the training. This was done through two stages. In the first stage, a briefing (both written and verbal) was given to each individual on the goals and results of the training. In the second stage in-depth informal 'chat' sessions were held after a few days separately with each of them to determine

the reasons why they were interested in the training and what they expected to gain from it. This was to be utilised during the training process for self-direction purposes as well as to help the trainer to relate to their individual needs. Finally, the group was called together to clarify doubts and mutually decide the schedule of the sessions.

In the main course of training the group was brought together for two hours approximately daily for fifteen sessions. From the very beginning as per the requirements of the process the trainer deliberately gave no direction at all and let the members decide on whatever they wished to pursue. So the group was to decide its own agenda, its own way of functioning and its own dynamics. This surprised the members, to put it mildly, and made them very uncomfortable as their initial expectations were dashed. Many felt very irritated on having to come early morning just to have, what they called, "directionless chats". (Later they realized that this was important to enable them to unfreeze their old values so as to be receptive to broadening their visions.)

The irritation was a natural and an expected outcome as the members were at a loss and felt themselves in a vacuum. To fill in the vacuum and to run away from their uneasiness and discomfort they expended efforts to absorb themselves in various topics of discussion. These reactions of the members helped them to quickly shed their inhibitions and they began to behave in their usual and characteristic ways, some quiet, some dominating, some impulsive, as they began to joke and discuss whatever they found relevant. Thus, their natural behaviours began to seep through in their interaction.

As the discussions became more intense, they exhibited their natural behaviours, and these were then used by the trainer as jumping points for analysis and discussion. Various interventions were employed and can be roughly categorised as exhibited in table 1.

Wide ranging topics emerged during the discussion relating to their personal lives, work problems, self-images and interpersonal problems. Many times the discussions formed no cohesive link with another and the group rarely concentrated on a topic for long. The trainer utilized these opportunities through selective interventions to help members gain insights into their individual and group behaviour (i.e. the process) as the group went on discussing the topics (the content).

The trainer's interventions focused on the process (i.e. their interpersonal behaviour and its impact) rather than on the content (i.e. the subject of discussion) so that new values could be imbibed. Emphasis was laid on their becoming aware of their own selves, their feelings, other's perceptions/feelings and simultaneously promoting analysis being done by the group. This emphasis on the process rather than content by the trainer helped the members gain individual and group insights and at the same time disrupted the flow of discussion on the prevailing subject. Again they would initiate discussions followed by selective trainer interventions and got deeper insights (this stage being called 'moving').

The continuous alternation between unfreezing (wherein discomfort arising from the unstructured situation made members receptive to stimulus) and moving (wherein members learnt from their own behaviour) formed the mainframe of the process and was interspersed with periods of consolidating their learnings and insights (called refreezing). The cumulative effect of this process was that each individual through his/her own active participation, experience and thinking learnt specific insights about himself/herself and others. Following this, post-training was conducted which consisted of four parts, namely, understanding the process of the training; understanding the problems they would encounter in transferring their learnings to their everyday life; consolidating their insights through diary discussions (each one had been asked to maintain a diary of their

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feelings about a session after every session) and finally a self-appraisal of their own learning was done by each evaluating their learning.

The post training began with detailed discussions on what actually was being done by the trainer and this was supplemented with relevant handouts. Critical incidents and behaviour of the members were compared with specific behaviour exhibited by other students attending similar sessions in the University of California and Los Angeles. (Detailed case studies were available with the trainer.) Once this had been done, the members were enlightened into the plethora of problems they would face to implement what they have learnt. They were made to realize through their own participation that they would face a prolonged struggle in retaining their learning for their long-term benefit. They understood that their learning was not to be implemented in each situation and they were to use their judgement when to behave in their traditional ways and when to implement their new techniques. They also understood that the people they interact with would probably be great obstacles to their implementing what they had learnt.

During the training, the participants had been asked to maintain daily diaries where they were to have expressed their feelings. These diaries were now taken up and each person's diary was discussed along with every one else's. The focus was to be able to relate their learning with the post-training problems they were to encounter. They were also made conscious of what they learnt, since many times learning took place unconsciously. The members were given the leeway to disclose only what they felt comfortable with. Some participant learnings are shown on the exhibit (figure 1) alongside to bring out the kind of experiences and insights gauged by the members in this experience. Please see Figure 1.

6.   CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

The encounter group methodology shows how phenomenal growth can take place in the way members interact, and communicate. The methodology creates an appropriate supportive climate as the group members draw insights from their own behaviour with the help of a trainer. They come to see their own and other's behaviours in an enlightened perspective. The process of training itself is a very natural process with multifaceted effects/impacts. It cannot be sped up, or made to happen — only an appropriate supportive climate is to be created and the rest happens naturally and steadily.

It can be seen from the participant learnings (in figure1) as well as the process of encounter group training that it is a very useful technique to foster shared leadership qualities (openness, sharing, communication and trust). A closer look at the participant learnings reveals their increased awareness of themselves and others, thereby giving them the confidence to open up and share. They have also begun accepting other's viewpoints and perceptions, thus paving the path for open communication. Communication and sharing are the very keys to shared leadership; encounter group methodology is, therefore, a useful tool to foster such leadership amongst management teams.

Table 1
Trainer interventions employed and their proportion of usage

Interventions Employed	Use
What can you say about the *way* he/she said?	20%
How did you *feel* when he/ she said?	40%
Do you understand what they are trying to say *react* to what was said?	20%
What can you say about the group *interaction* today?	5%
Miscellaneous interventions related to specificissues	10%
How is the general impression forming?	5%

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Figure 1: Participant Learnings

Towards the end of post-training each participant was asked to describe the learnings he/she received from the training. The trainer received these both verbally and in handwritten form from them. A few selected learnings as per the members are shown below:

Participant #:
* " listening has increased."
* " now more open and frank."
* "learnt to be punctual."
* "learnt to recognise my weaknesses."
* "am better in interacting with others

Participant #:
* " different people have different perceptions for the same situations"
* " my attitude is so negative"
* " I am very judgemental about people."

Participant #:
* "I should give myself some air to breathe. Allow myself to make mistakes."
* "Should accept myself "
* "When criticise (others) be very supportive "
* "Only those with good communication get noticed."
* " I got good insights into group dynamics "
* " To handle an emotional person, make him speak his feelings, show his feelings are natural and then give your rational viewpoint."
* "Most conflicts are on an illogical basis "

Participant #:
* "Non-recognition in a group is not because of others, it is because I have a wrong way of intervening."
* " To control yourself .when angry, make yourself aware that you are angry "
* "Try giving direction to the group, rather than complain that we have no direction."

Participant #:
* "Am not able to express my feelings properly."
* " Before, I could not speak in a group."
* " I think diary writing will help me introspect better."
* "speak less, listen more"
* " think from other's point of view and accept it."
* " have suppressed 'ego' to a certain extent."

Participant #:
* " completely closing down (on interaction) is not the solution."
* " frankness should come late in a relationship."
* "better listener after the exercise. Found better ways to react and show that am truly listening."
* " enjoyed (listening to colleagues) opening up"

Some significant aspects deserve mention here. The insights above were based on their experiences and interaction in 29.5 hours and are their own personal realizations. Moreover, these insights are directly of use and relevance to the growth needs of the particular individual and cannot be broadly generalized for all.

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