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# COG'S LADDER:

## A MODEL OF GROUP GROWTH

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*In this article a model of group growth known as "Cog's Ladder" is proposed. It consists of five stages. First is a polite, get acquainted stage, followed by a searching for a purpose stage. Next, comes a struggle for power which grows into a cooperative and constructive stage. Finally, the group develops a strong feeling of unity and esprit.*

**M**ODELS of human behavior are criticized as being too simplistic. However, models help conceptualize abstract relationships, provide a point of departure from which to draw similarities and differences, and help the serious researcher to formulate meaningful experiments. Models, such as Johari's Window, are especially useful in teaching basic courses in applied behavioral science.

The original Cog's Ladder model as discussed in this article was developed in 1965. It has been tested in T-Groups, Grid groups, intercultural workshops, and weekend seminars. Men and women have participated equally. Students from over 30 foreign cultures were included to determine whether the model is limited or modified by culture. Over 1,000 people have contributed to the data including businessmen, students, engineers, secretaries, nurses, lawyers, priests, teachers, contemplative religious, teenagers, and others. Members

of different professions placed emphasis on different parts of the model, but the model generally reflected the growth of all groups. Training sessions which were designed on the model were notably more successful than training sessions which violated the model.

### *The Model:*

Franklyn S. Haiman (1951) suggested that a group goes through a process of growth similar to the maturation process of individuals. Zenger (1970) developed the analogy of group and individual maturation. During the past eight years, I have been researching this single question. In 1965, I developed an hypothesis which has been only slightly modified over the years to a coherent, concise model. This model of group growth consists of five steps.

The first step is called the "polite stage." In this phase, group members are getting acquainted, sharing values and establishing the basis for a group

structure. The group members need to be liked.

The second step is "why are we here?" During this phase the group members define the objectives and goals of the group.

The third step consists of a "bid for power." On this step of the ladder to maturity, the group is composed of individuals attempting to influence other group members by changing each other's ideas, values, or opinions. This stage is characterized by competition for attention, recognition, and influence.

The fourth step is cooperative. It is the "constructive" stage. In this phase, group members are open minded, listen actively and accept the fact that others have a right to different value systems. This stage might be referred to as the "team action" stage.

The fifth and final step is one of unity, high spirits, mutual acceptance and high cohesiveness. It is the *esprit* stage.

This model is referred to as a ladder and is called "Cog's Ladder."

#### *Polite Phase:*

The first step of Cog's Ladder is the "Polite" step. The initial item on every group's agenda is to get acquainted, whether or not the leader of the group allows time for it. Generally, a T-Group will begin with members introducing themselves. Name tags are provided to other groups to aid in the process of "getting to know you." Polite conversation includes information-sharing which helps group members anticipate each other's future responses to group activities.

During this phase, some group members rely on stereotyping to help categorize other group members. A group establishes an emotional basis for future group structure. Cliques are formed which will become important in later

phases. The items on the hidden agenda of group members stay hidden and do not usually affect behavior at this time. The need for group approval is strong. The need for group identity is low or completely absent. Group members participate actively, though unevenly, and usually agree that getting acquainted is important to the group. Conflict is usually absent in this phase. The rules of behavior seem to be: keep ideas simple; say things that will be acceptable to all group members; avoid controversy; avoid serious topics; if you share feeling, keep feed-back to a minimum; avoid disclosure.

The best exercises to accelerate the polite stage are non-verbal. By eliminating words, group members respond only to non-verbal behavior. When conversation and bodily gestures transmit conflicting signals, the polite stage slows down and group members must spend time to sort out the signals from the noise.

There is a cultural emphasis which is important. Asian and Latin cultures seem to want to prolong the Polite phase of group growth. Edward T. Hall (1959) outlined the cultural patterns of getting acquainted in Latin America. He described days or even weeks during which groups of businessmen relate to each other over dinner, soccer games or polite conversation before getting down to serious business. During this interpersonal by-play, the American businessman in a Latin milieu often becomes impatient to "get on" with the job at hand. It has been observed that an American relating with his fellow Americans will greatly shorten the Polite phase and sometimes eliminate it entirely.

All groups participating in the study of Cog's Ladder displayed an expectation for getting acquainted, and group members took an active part in this

initial phase of group maturity. In groups where the Polite phase was omitted, this study found that the group members were uncomfortable and had difficulty relating. In groups which broke up and reconvened, this Polite phase invariably re-occurred. Even when a fully mature group reconvened; the group members started the group process with a few minutes of polite interaction.

Groups I have studied usually allotted 1-5% of their expected life to the Polite phase. T-Groups scheduled for 2 weeks usually spend 1-5 hours sharing names, backgrounds, interests, hobbies, professions, etc. In a 2 week advanced human relations laboratory the trainers decided to extend the usual non-verbal exercise from several hours to several days. Although the group showed dramatic progress through the Polite stage, strong reactions from group members occurred when the exercise was prolonged to 3½ days, significantly in excess of the 1-5% expectation of the group for step one of Cog's Ladder.

#### *Why We're Here:*

When a group is ready to grow beyond the Polite stage, it usually enters the "why we're here" stage. Group members want to know the group's goals and objectives.

Some members demand a written agenda. A branch of managerial science (Management by Objectives) focuses on this step of group maturity. A task-oriented group needs to spend more time in this phase than a personal growth group. For example, while T-groups will usually discuss establishing a purpose but will not agree on one, a Blake Grid group<sup>1\*</sup> finds that agreement on goals is essential to group success.

In the second phase cliques start to

wield influence. Cliques grow and merge as clique members find common purpose. Hidden agenda items begin to be sensed as group members try to verbalize group objectives most satisfying to themselves.

Identity as a group is still low. The need for group approval declines from what it was in the Polite step as group members begin taking risks and displaying commitment. There is usually active participation from all members.

Many groups will look to another group for a purpose during this phase. In a T-Group, it is not uncommon for trainees to look to the trainer to supply a group goal or objective. Structure appears to evolve in this phase.

The time spent in this phase varies widely. Some groups omit this phase completely while a few groups will spend most of the allotted time in this phase. Much seems to depend on the task to be done. The easier it is to define objectives, the faster a group appears to agree on them. When purpose comes from outside the group, the members will still discuss it in order to gain understanding and to build commitment. The group also needs to know that the purpose agreed on is important.

Some groups can function for years without advancing to the second stage, e.g. some neighborhood discussion groups or neighborhood bridge clubs. In such groups, it appears that group members have agreed not to grow or that they are simply content to relate in the Polite phase.

#### *Bid for Power:*

The third stage of the model is characterized by competition. I call it the "Bid for Power" stage.

In this phase a group member tries to rationalize his own position, and to convince the group to take the action he

\*All footnote references appear at the end of this article

feels is appropriate. Members are closed-minded and are accused of not listening. Conflict in the group rises to a higher level than in any other stage of group growth. A struggle for leadership occurs which involves active participation by all subgroups. Typical attempts to resolve this struggle involve voting, compromise, or seeking arbitration from an outside group.

The group does not feel a strong team spirit during this phase. Rather, some members may feel very uncomfortable as latent hostility is expressed. I have noticed some group members, who contribute willingly in phase I and II, remain completely silent in this phase. Other members relish the opportunity to compete and will attempt to dominate the group. In T-Groups these members may be accused of "bulldozing."

Cliques, or subgroups, take on greatest importance in this phase. Through cliques, the group members find they can wield more power.

Hidden agenda items cause a behavior change in this phase. Members who easily concealed their hidden agenda in earlier stages now find that other group members are becoming aware of it.

Feedback from T-Groups in this phase can have a sting to it. Disclosure is cautiously attempted. The need for group approval declines below the level it had in step two. Group members are willing to go out on a limb and risk the censure of the group. In all groups, creative suggestions fall flat<sup>2</sup> because the group projects the feeling that the author wants credit (Power) for the suggestion.

The group still does not build an identity in this phase. The range of participation by group members is the highest of any phase. That is, the difference between the air time of the least and most talkative will be numeri-



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cally higher in this phase than in any other phase.

The need for structure will be strong. In T-Groups the content during this phase may well be whether to elect a rotating chairman, recording secretary, or a group leader. The process is, in reality, a bid for power and is the third step of a group's ascent to maturity.

Roles are important in third phase activity. The group building and maintenance roles are most important. The harmonizer, the compromiser, the gatekeeper and the follower try to maintain an acceptable balance between the needs of individual group members and the needs of the group. The level of conflict is reduced by the harmonizer to offset the tendency for conflict levels to rise due to the aggressor.

Some groups never mature past this stage. Nevertheless, these groups can

fulfill their task. My data indicate, however, that solutions arising out of third phase activity are not optimum solutions. Also, the solutions never satisfy all group members and, at best, are products of compromise. Dr. Blake's 9-1 managerial<sup>1</sup> style typifies the active group member who enjoys relating in third phase activity.

#### *Constructive Phase:*

The transition from third stage (Power) to fourth stage (Constructive) is characterized by an attitude change. Group members give up their attempts to control and substitute an attitude of active listening.

In the constructive stage, group members are willing to change preconceived ideas or opinions based on facts presented by other group members. You hear group members actively asking questions of each other. A team spirit starts to build. Cliques begin to dissolve. Real progress toward the group's goals becomes evident. Leadership becomes a "shared leadership." Group identity starts becoming important to the group members. The range of participation by members narrows. When conflict arises it is dealt with as a mutual problem rather than as a win-lose battle. At this point in a group's growth, it may be increasingly difficult to bring in a new member.

Depending on the talents of the group members and the problem to be solved, an optimum solution can result from fourth phase interaction. This optimum solution can be better than any solution offered by single group members. For this reason some businesses are attempting to organize for fourth phase "team" group activity.

McGregor's theory X (1960) would seem to apply to a group positioned at step three on Cog's Ladder while his theory Y would seem to apply more to

a group in phase four.

The important difference between phase four (Constructive) and phase three (Power) is the willingness of group members to listen and to change based on what they hear. Because of this willingness, a group in phase four will often use the talents of any individual who can contribute effectively. In phase four practical creativity can be high because the group is willing to accept creative suggestions from group members. Furthermore, creative suggestions are solicited by the group, listened to, questioned, responded to and, if appropriate, acted on. For this reason, group decisions arising out of phase four activity are almost always better than decisions proposed by a single group member<sup>3</sup>.

Any group exercises which enhance the basic values of group cooperativeness are proper for groups in this phase. Exercises based on sharing, helping, listening, anticipating group needs, questioning, and building are all appropriate. Competitive exercises here will tend to be disruptive of group growth as they will apply gentle pressure to regress back to phase three (Power).

Group leaders can be most effective in phase four by asking constructive questions, summarizing and clarifying the group's thinking, trusting the group to achieve its maximum potential, trying to blend in with the group as much as possible, and refraining from making any comments tending to reward or punish other group members. An effective group leader will also recognize that group members will vary widely in their abilities to contribute to the group's goals. The effective group leader will be tolerant of this variety.

#### *Esprit Phase:*

The fifth and final phase of group growth is the *esprit* phase. Here the

group feels a high group morale. Relationships between individuals are empathetic. The group feels an intense group loyalty. The need for group approval is absent because each group member approves of all others and accepts them as individuals. Both individuality and creativity are high. The overall feeling is "we don't always agree on everything but we do respect each other's views and agree to disagree." From this flows a non-possessive warmth and freedom of the group member to express his individuality. Cliques are absent.

The group may demand an identity symbol. The members participate as evenly as they ever will. The need for structure depends on whether the group is an action group or a learning group. Learning groups have no need for structure if they have evolved to phase five.

In phase five, there is a strong closedness of the group. It is impossible to bring a new member into a phase five group without destroying the feeling of camaraderie and group *esprit*. A period of group regression sets in while the group must grow from an earlier stage back up to the *esprit* stage, carrying the new member with it.

A group in phase five continues to be constructive and productive. In fact, such a group usually achieves more than is expected or than can be explained by the apparent talents of the group members. Examples of unusually high performance coupled with high *esprit* are legion in the world of team sports such as football, baseball, hockey, etc. It has been suggested that the difference between an average professional football coach and the coach of the national champion is his ability to encourage the group to grow "beyond" stage four (play football) and to grow into stage

five (identify as an intensely loyal team).

Although hidden agenda items are present in phase five, they do not seem to detract from the *esprit* and group loyalty. One reason which has been suggested to explain this is that group members have granted to each other, including to themselves, the *right* to have hidden agenda provided it is productive. Group members then work to make their hidden agenda items productive not only for themselves but for the group. Another reason may be that the trust level has risen so high by phase five that the group trusts each member not to misuse the group loyalty. Still another reason may be that, by this time, the group is well aware of each member's hidden agenda and the group matured to phase five because it saw no threat from anyone's personal hidden agenda.

### Inter-relationships

The step from the Polite phase to the Why We're Here phase seems to occur when any single group member desires it. Simply by saying "Well, what's on the agenda today?" the group will usually move to phase two.

The transition from phase four (Constructive) to phase five (*Esprit*), however, seems to require unanimous agreement among group members. This study has not observed any group in phase five which had not included *all* group members.

The transition from phase three (Power) to phase four (Constructive) can be permanently blocked by a strong competitive group member or by his clique. Conversely, the bridge between these two phases is the ability to listen. This ability to listen has been found to be the most important human trait in helping groups move from phase three

to phase four. There have been cases where the group as a whole desired to relate in fourth phase while several members stayed rooted in third phase. Some groups have been observed to reject members for this behavior.<sup>4</sup>

Every group studied moved from one phase to another in an uneven, sometimes fitful flow. Many task-oriented groups regressed from a later stage to phase two for a better definition of the problem. In one 20 minute exercise, 8 regressions from phase three to phase two occurred.

In most groups studied there appeared to be a dominant group phase with other members relating in adjacent phases. Many observations made were of groups where most members would be relating in phase three (Power) while two group members would form a small clique and be discussing purpose (phase two-Why We're Here) or even engaging in polite conversation such as weather or vacations (phase one-Polite). Group cohesiveness seems to depend on how well the group members are in the same phase at the same time.

A group will grow through these five stages only to the extent that its members are willing to grow. Therefore, it seems appropriate to discuss the interrelationships between group growth and individual willingness to allow the group to grow based on what each member has to give up at each stage. To grow from stage one (Polite) to stage two (Why We're Here), each member must give up the comfort of discussing non-threatening topics. He must now risk the possibility of conflict. To grow from stage two (Why We're Here) to stage three (Power) he gives up continued discussion of the purpose and he risks commitment to a purpose with which he may not be in complete agreement. He must now further risk

personal attacks which he knows occur in phase three.

To grow from phase three (Power) to phase four (Constructive) requires individuals to give up the comfort of defending one's own views and risking the possibility of being wrong. Phase four demands some humility. To grow from phase four (Constructive) to phase five (*Esprit*) demands trusting oneself and trusting other group members. To trust is to risk a breach of trust. It has been noted in this study that groups find it difficult to grow much beyond phase three (Power).

The emphasis by profession on different steps of the Ladder is interesting. Scientific professions were notably in the fourth phase (Constructive) except for groups who felt incompetent, out of their field or unchallenged. They typically became third phase (Power). Members of religious groups, priests and nuns, etc., were almost universally interested in phase five (*Esprit*) and how to achieve it. Teenagers and some non-professionals were most interested in phase one (Polite). College students seemed to place most emphasis on phase two (Why We're Here).<sup>5</sup>

Members of the teaching profession and politicians related well in phase three (Power), while businessmen varied widely from phase one (Polite) to phase five (*Esprit*). Salesmen seemed to be comfortable in phase one, while outstanding managers understood the Cog process intuitively and, by example, led their group through the necessary steps to achieve phase five.

This study could find no correlation between educational level and need to relate in any given phase. In other words, each of over 1,000 people involved in this study naturally gravitated to a phase most comfortable for that person but there appeared to be no



connection between phase number and educational level of the participants.

### Conclusions

In designing a group session, the model of Cog's Ladder is helpful. During this study when certain phases were deliberately skipped or suppressed, the groups invariably became disoriented. Skipping phase one (Polite) can be especially harmful to a group.

The design of group sessions should be flexible, but should chart a course up Cog's Ladder with each group exercise proper for the phase the group is in at the time. For example, introducing a structured listening exercise<sup>6</sup> early in phase one might not be as effective as waiting until the group is ready to mature to phase four (Constructive).

The degree or intensity of the feeling in phase five (*Esprit*) is directly proportional to the group's accomplishments in phase four (Constructive). The more a group feels it has accomplished in phase four, the greater the *esprit*. Managers who gauge the productivity of their businesses by "morale" are, therefore, using an apparently valid correlation.

Conversely, some groups have as their main purpose to develop *esprit* in the group. Without another purpose, such as personal growth, this is not possible. In other words, it is not possible to skip phase four (Constructive) and still grow into phase five (*Esprit*).

Cog's Ladder may seem intuitive to a good leader; however, by developing cognitive awareness of the Ladder,

group leaders can do a better job of planning group exercises. Cog's Ladder has been extremely valuable when used within volunteer groups. In any business, meetings can be planned which lead to more productive results when the leader is consciously aware of the steps in Cog's Ladder.

Organizational development in business concentrates on improving group effectiveness. A knowledge of the Cog Model can be especially useful in firms considering "Team Organization."



### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup>The Managerial Grid is a concept published by Doctors Blake and Mouton in 1964, which includes styles of management.  
<sup>2</sup>Typically, met with total silence.  
<sup>3</sup>The committee which is accused of designing the camel probably is a group which has matured only to phase three (power) and has stopped short of maturing to phase four (Constructive).  
<sup>4</sup>Del Vecchio (1970) demonstrates this dramatically in Lesson 5 of INTERACT.  
<sup>5</sup>During a two day weekend seminar, students from over 30 cultures expressed a strong need to stay in phase two (Why We're Here) for almost 1½ days.  
<sup>6</sup>The best listening exercises include both content and feelings and are designed to improve empathy.

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