Transformative Learning Theory and Its Relevance to Managing Group Dynamics in a Competitive Work Environment

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Abstract: In any environment, group dynamics would exist. How we deal with it in a competitive work environment defines who we are using transformative learning. The focus of this paper is to explore transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and its relevance to managing group dynamics in the competitive business environment.

In today’s competitive business environment, leaders face a constant struggle of finding innovative and effective ways to improve the performance of their workforce. With companies operating across various geographical locations, and with the collapse of boundaries within the work sphere, the effective use of work groups in the execution of critical tasks continues to provoke great interest. The focus of this paper is to explore transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1997) and its relevance to managing group dynamics in the competitive business environment. With organizations seeking to strengthen their market share, the focus is not only on acquiring cutting edge technology but also on securing the best talent capable of championing the desired change. Companies are interested in nurturing high performance work groups, and we believe that the subject of perspective transformation offers valuable insight into improving the relationship between and among members of a group (Mezirow, 1991).

Overview of Transformational Theory

Mezirow’s transformational theory (1997) involves critical thinking, which includes conducting an internal investigation into one’s views and philosophies to transform one’s life into a new significant way. Research has shown whether the new way of thinking is improved (Dirkx, 1998). According to Clark (1993), transformational learning is defined as learning that induces more far-reaching change in the learner than other kinds of learning, especially learning experiences, which shape the learner and produce a significant impact, or paradigm shift, which affects the learner’s subsequent experiences. Transformation can only take place when individuals are able to look at their selves, reflect on the beliefs that they possess, recognize that a change can be made, and make changes on their beliefs.

Transformation usually takes place when individuals have experienced such a radical change in life, that their beliefs and values are transformed. For example, a significant event such as September 11th 2001 can trigger a transformation with those who have experience the devastating event. The beliefs and values or even their ways of thinking can be transformed because of the negative experience. Another example that could have inspired transformational learning theory could be Hurricane Katrina. People who were affected by this event could have changed their ways of thinking, or their beliefs and values after being either victims or bystanders of this tragic event.

Jack Mezirow (1997) changed the name from the transformative learning theory to perspective transformation to reflect a change within the person. Perspectives are made up of beliefs, values, and assumptions (Dirkx, 1998), and they are all shaped by our life experiences. Our experiences are sometimes viewed from our own perspective, but do we sometimes look at
them through other person’s lens? What shapes our beliefs, values, and assumptions are not just what we experience, but is shaped by our interactions with others.

Critical reflection is a key element in the process of perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1990). During this stage, individuals are able to critically look at every angle of the situation or experience, including other person’s point of view in order to avoid a one-sided transformation process. This level of reflection is essential because individuals can easily neglect the whole scenario and focus solely on their own psychological development. The benefits of critical reflections, within the context of perspective transformation, can be helpful to avoid one-sided or unilateral decision-making within groups or workgroups. Several theorists like Bion (1961) and Rioch (1970) who focus on group development, share the view that the group as a system must reinforce actions that support group decision-making. This is in no way an attempt to give prominence to the idea of groupthink. It is a sign of group maturity when ideas though unpopular can be aired and contested without members thinking they are being attacked.

**Group Development and Dynamics**

Tuckman (1965) identified five stages of group development. These are forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. In the early stages, the members seek to build rapport. This is construed as small talk where limited information is shared. The storming stage occurs for any number of reasons and is identified as the tension that exists between or among the members of the group. One causative factor, often overlooked by organizational leaders, is the lack of clarity with respect to the objectives of a project. Diffusing such tensions will necessitate a mechanism that would be introduced to manage the emotional outbursts and expectations of the members. The norming stage captures the maturity of the group. Tasks are completed in a supportive and nurturing environment. This stage acknowledges the contributions of members and members feel invested in the outcomes. At the performing stage, members operate at a level of mastery. The group attains synergy and is able to call upon the different skill levels of its members. Synergy affords the creation of superior ideas because decisions are built on the contributions of the members. Loyalty appears to be high and output is held against established standards. The final stage, adjourning, occurs when the group has completed the task it was put together to manage. Tuckman (1965) explains that at this stage, the group may encounter fears and insecurities associated with the completion of the project. The termination of the group task can be interpreted as an end to the familial support that would have been a by-product of an engaged group. Following up on Tuckman’s five (5) stages of group development, one needs to understand that not all groups get to the stage of performing as they may encounter dysfunction that prevents them from achieving their goals.

Dalton, Hoyle, and Watts (2006) suggest that a “group consists of two or more individuals who are aware of one another, interact with one another on a regular basis and perceive themselves as a group” (p. 227). In an organization, this description is likely to be accepted by most as an apt description of the group process within a physical or virtual work environment. Inherent in the definition is the idea that individuals move along a continuum, subjugating their individual identities and adopt the identity of the group to which they belong. The aim is to achieve a sort of group fitness that conforms to the expectation of a larger system. For example, an organization faced with several challenges that is affecting its productivity, will seek to pull the best talent at its disposal from several departments to form a risk assessment group. The members of the group are expected to meet current goals of the company, that of putting forward cogent strategies to address untoward events. In this scenario, group members
who never worked cross teams or departments might find this work dynamic challenging, resulting in low productivity or undelivered outcomes.

In an effort to understand the behavior of groups, Bion’s (1961) work is valuable. He is best known for his work as a psychoanalyst and is credited for insightful theories gained through his work with the Tavistock Clinic. Bion (1961) advanced the view that two issues are at play in the group process: the work group and the basic assumption group. The work group demonstrates the conscious level of the group process. The members understand what is required of them; they understand why they were brought together; they understand the purpose of the structures/boundaries that are in place and acknowledge that they are accountable to not only each other but to the leaders of the organization.

Lipgar (2002) underscores that tasks are central to the group’s identity. It is what anchors the individual to the group. In the absence of clearly defined goals, Bion (1961) observed that his patients operated in chaos. Lipgar suggests that it takes a group to make a task. This view was constructed from Bion’s decision to organize his patients around a task-oriented goal. To aid his patience recovery, Bion (1961) suggested that they “make the study of their tensions a group task” (p. 29). This approach indicated a shift away from the psychologist being a central figure in the therapeutic session and now included the patients as active participants to their recovery. Applying this discovery to the organization one can appreciate that tasks, when properly developed and articulated, have the potential to engage members of the group and the focus on an activity or series of activities is likely to take primacy over work assumptions.

Taking this a step further, there may be learning outcomes from group tasks that set the tone for amendments to the behavior of individuals and in the end, the group’s transformation toward a high functioning work group. Mezirow’s (1997) account of perspective transformation is an important body of literature to the conversations about organizational change, particularly at the group level. Therefore, there is a need to pursue research that could assess what conditions would improve group performance at the organizational level.

We cannot, however, discount the power of the basic work-assumption. “The basic work assumption is described as the unconscious group process where individuals adopt measures aimed at protecting themselves from the discomfort of working in groups” (p. 29). Examples of strategies adopted by members operating at the work assumption level include hidden agendas, challenging authority of the leader as well as being tardy for meetings. Bion (1961) explores the power behind three basic assumptions and exposes the potential risks to developing a healthy group encounter. The first is the dependency assumption. This behavior is characterized by the group’s need to feel a sense of security. In achieving this state, the group needs to feel as though they are protected by someone who will assume the leadership role and attend to all decisions on behalf of the group. An engaged leader will seek to reframe the relationship by reinforcing the specific talents of each member of the team. He or she will have to be open to reflecting on his or her own biases, controlling the impulse to act on them whilst attending to the creation of an environment that encourages the other members to see themselves as not mere followers but active contributors to the process. The dependency assumption is likely to be reduced if the organization makes a conscious effort to recognize and celebrate the performance of successful groups.

The second assumption is fight/flight (Bion, 1961). The groups rely on the leader to provide the appropriate kind of leadership at different times. The leader is expected to provide the right guidance to the group when threats surface. Rioch (1970) in her assessment of Bion’s work makes the point that the emerging group leader “should have a bit of a paranoid element in
his makeup if he wishes to be successful, for this will ensure that if no enemy is obvious, then the leaders will certainly find one” (p. 60). This observation appears to speak directly to organizations that are labeled as toxic environments because the leader is seeking to remain relevant to the group by employing strategies that endears him or her to the group. If the leader fails in his or her role, the group will become bored with his or her efforts, thus rendering the leader useless to their needs.

The last assumption is pairing, which speaks to the act of reproducing (Bion, 1961). Sigmund Freud’s (1926) influence is present in Bion’s assessment of the group with the reference of pairing as a sexual encounter. Groups are expected to create a new reality. In many organizations, groups are created for a variety of reasons and toward a specific end. In some instances, the groups are formed after an untoward event or established to address possible threats. The actors may be pulled from different departments with the objective of creating a new raft of responses. The group’s purpose is geared towards transformation. They are conscious of the task at hand; however, the basic assumptions can be distracting if not clearly understood. As the group adjusts itself, its members are being forced to put aside their own needs. Differing worldviews are at play, and although the group is task focused, they still have to navigate the complex paths toward harmonizing their effort. In mitigating threats, the group overtime, develops a response to external and internal stimuli. The group experience aids the interpretation of the environment, which is central to the learning outcome.

**Transformation Theory and Group Dynamics and Processes**

The process advanced by Tuckman (1965) explains the group’s transformation from merely members with their own agenda to cooperative team players anchored to the successful completion of a task. How then can organizations incorporate the benefits of Mezirow’s transformation theory (1997) with that Bion’s (1961) early work and Tuckman’s (1965) five stages of group development to produce an effective work team? What connects the three is the need to contain the erratic impulses at the individual level. There is also a conversation about change (transformation of the self) to an adaptive culture that positions the group’s role as superior to that of the individual’s needs. The strategies used to address group harmony must be deliberate, and to achieve this, the group has to evolve from being simply distinct members of the group, to a unit that is involved in the creation of new realities. The threats and tensions must be resolved for the group to reach the difficult stage of performing.

Bion’s (1961) work allows for us to reframe how we interpret the various tensions encountered by groups. Lipgar (1993) observes that Bion works as an “analyst/consultant/therapist and serves as a container for group projections” (p. 42). He adds further that “working with these projections in the resonating, complex and emotion laden context of a group requires a profound awareness of the self and others” (p. 42). The awareness that is discussed here connects with Mezirow’s thoughts (1997) on the reflective nature of an individual after experiencing an untoward event. The outcome of his reflection will inform how he engages with others and with larger systems. Slaatte (1968) introduces the concept of paradoxical problem solving, which adds some value to the discussion at the level of the group’s experience. He describes a paradox as

an idea involving two (2) opposing or propositions which, however, contradictory, are equally necessary to convey a more imposing, illuminating, life-related or provocative insight into truth than either factor can muster in its own right. What the mind seemingly cannot think it must think; what reason is reluctant to express it must express. (p. 4)
Paradoxical Problem Solving

Group dynamics vary according to the different personalities that exist. Not very often would you have a group where there is a full 100% equal effort from all individuals. When we are told that we have to work in groups, the majority of individuals cringe at the thought because of the bad experiences that occurred previously; bad experiences are usually filed away and we take to new groups our old way of thinking.

However, in examining our thought processes, why not reframe how we react to present events (new groups) instead of trying to change the actual dynamics of the group. Transformation in this sense is to adjust our perception and response to the group dynamics. Instead of trying to change other individuals in the group, which is very difficult, why not instead alter the way we perceive our reactions and our thought processes to the group (Cloke & Goldsmith, 2011).

For example, in a group where an individual is portraying a very strong personality and taking control of the entire project, other individuals might perceive this as a negative attribute and might not be as engaged in the group project. How does prospective transformation work in this scenario? Individuals in the group should examine the individual who has the strong personality and adjust their own expectations to that of something positive, instead of looking at it as a negative. At a specific point in time, the individual, while examining and looking at oneself, might see their life as existing in a paradox (contradictory realities). The individuals in the group see a conflict but there can also be some resolution.

According to Cloke and Goldsmith (2011), paradoxical problem solving consists of the following:

- Recognizing the multiple, typically conflicting truths that shape and inform our problems.
- Challenge us to deploy higher-level skills and intelligence, to discern multiple truths and discover fresh ideas in the complex, contradictory nature of our problem.
- Turn problems into evolutionary imperatives and opportunities. (p. 171)

How are these paradoxical problems solved in a way that is conducive to perspective transformation? In a world where contradictory realities exists, Cloke and Goldsmith (2011) examine how a person can use the following five (5) steps in order to solve creatively while at the same time, transform:

1. Admit that a problem exists (person with a strong personality in the group)
2. Examine and clarify the elements and nature of the problem (the individual with the strong personality controls the group not lending space to those who have opinions or suggestions).
3. Investigate, analyze and prioritize the problem (why is the individual portraying such a strong personality? Are the other members of the group showing signs of wanting to be delegated? Is no one giving suggestions? Was a leader of the group chosen?)
4. Look at possible solutions that satisfy everyone’s interests without being attached to any solution (can the group participate and give suggestions? Can the group use suggestions from the ‘leader; and improve on them? Can the group look at these suggestions as a starting point in working together as opposed to looking at the ‘leader’ as a bully in the group?)
5. Jointly act, evaluate results, acknowledge efforts and celebrate success (the group as a whole use the results in Stage four (4) and act on the ones that benefit the group and as a result the individuals a well. (p. 188)

When examining the stages above, it is observed that during the whole process, perspective transformation takes place by individuals examining and looking at their selves, reflecting on the beliefs that they possess, recognizing that a change can be made, and then lastly, making the changes on their beliefs.

How do we look at ourselves in the competitive work environment and at the same time try to transform? Some elements that we need to consider are: ethical principles and shared values; what do we stand for? What do we as a group, want to ultimately achieve and as a continuation? What do I want to achieve? Who are w and what are our strengths and weaknesses? What stands in the way of us achieving what we want/need to achieve? How do we overcome barriers that exist? What do we perceive as our future achievements? How do we achieve our goal?

If an individual is able to answer each of these questions, perspective transformation can occur. Looking at the end result is a key element in transforming our way of thinking and seeking new values and beliefs. In the previous example, when trying to work with an individual with a strong personality and who has taken on the leadership role, the group can use this personality trait to their advantage by turning it from a negative experience to a positive experience. This result can have such a significant impact on the individual that it causes the leader’s future experiences to be impacted as well.

**Implications for Practice**

Organizations, as complex structures, are beset by many challenges brought on by internal and/or external factors. The collapse of a number of entities has been blamed in part on the failure of leaders to motivate and develop the talent of potential high performers. The importance of creating and sustaining the qualities that inform a successful group is relevant to the discussion of perspective transformation. Work units do not work in isolation of each other. The members, although employed for specific skill sets, are called upon in today’s competitive environment to be adaptive. There is the expectation that our behaviors must conform to the will of the group and not our individual needs and aspirations. Taking Bion’s (1961) observations into account, there is a desire to manage the group process so as to minimize the intrusion of behaviors that will undermine the efforts of the larger system. Because basic assumptions are unpredictable and focused toward fantasy, it will require an engaged leadership that will contain the various forms of destructive behaviors.

For organizations to realize their true purpose, the authors submit that group harmony is an essential part of high performing teams. As a consequence, effective strategies ought to be developed to manage the tensions within the group. Mezirow (1997), Bion (1961) and Lipgar (1993), suggest that organizations will need to engineer a set of strategies that will seek to minimize incidents associated with the basic assumptions that veer groups off target. This view is accommodated by both Mezirow (1997) and Bion’s (1961) theories which point to a shared interest in developing healthy group dynamics and further adds value to the discourse on organizational development.

Mezirow’s Transformational theory (1997) and Bion’s (1961) perspectives on group development provide a key to assist organizations in their management of group dysfunction. The areas of cooperation are as follows:
1. Identify the underlying work assumptions that would prevent the group from meeting the desired goal. This will mean that a mechanism would have to be developed that will inspire trust among the members, whilst paying attention to the skill sets that will move the project forward.

2. Create a culture of recognizing success, where the individual is encouraged by the group’s achievement ahead of his/her selfish needs.

3. Provide opportunities for members of various departments to work on projects where their talents are best suited. As members become more active in the affairs of the organization (matching their specific skills), the more conscious they become of how they impact the results. Such opportunities allow for discoveries about themselves and their capabilities. It is through experiential learning that stereotypes are neutralized and greater opportunities for partnerships realized.

4. Cultivate leaders who are able to provide guidance that is imbued with their experiences that can help the team develop skill sets that will benefit the organization’s goals. Transformational leaders can be instrumental in championing improved relationships among group members by nurturing those behaviors that are consistent with a high performance work team.

The list above is not exhaustive but offers a look at what is possible if organizations can have the member explore his or her shortcomings as a part of a group. The shift in thinking is as a result of a process of engagement with others, where the goal is not only to complete the given task but to develop the requisite skill sets that will make it easier to perform in other group settings.

References