

The Dance of Me and We
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As we have become more global, interconnected and mobile, we find ourselves navigating multiple groups, organizations and cultures in the course of our day-to-day work. Like a great Tango, there is a push and pull between who I know myself to be, and what feels acceptable within the context of the group I find myself in. The dance metaphor offers a way to think about how to navigate the push and pulls of the “me and we” in group relationships. What follows are several key observations about the types of tensions we experience in groups and positive ways to work with this tension.

What does this tension look like? Group life is permeated with contradictory thoughts, actions and emotions. Smith and Berg (1987) in their classic work, *Paradoxes of Group Life*, describe three categories of individual-group tension:

- 1) **Belonging:** These tensions have to do with how much we identify with a group; how much we choose to engage and involve ourselves while retaining a sense of our individuality; setting and having boundaries that separate the self from the group.
- 2) **Engaging:** These tensions are associated with how much of ourselves we are willing to disclose; our level of trust and intimacy; how much we project our past experience/assumptions about relationships and groups onto the group.
- 3) **Speaking:** These tensions relate to individual versus collective voice; how much authority we feel we have; how independently we choose act, our level of comfort with creating the new/destroying the old; our courage to disclose ourselves and fully engage while also protecting ourselves from harm.

These are very similar to areas described by a personality inventory called the Firo-B, which assesses preferences individuals have in their relationships for:

1. **Inclusion:** the need to establish and maintain interactions with others
2. **Control:** the need for authority, dominance and influence with others
3. **Affection:** the need for interpersonal closeness or distance

For example, when we enter a group that is new to us, it is a common pattern to question whether we will “fit in”, whether we want to participate and to what extent, and how close we want to be to other members of the group. These are examples of the paradoxes of belonging to a group. We experience both a drawing towards and a pulling away within ourselves and with others. It is through engaging in this tension that we ultimately find a sense of our belongingness within the group.

As the group develops, other tensions emerge related to how close in or intimate we will be, how much influence and authority we will have in decisions that get made; whether our voices will be heard. We bring all of our past experiences to a new group and can struggle with how much to speak out when the group challenges us in new ways. As groups go through change, we experience tensions between holding on to what has been established, and letting go to create something new.

To get unstuck we need to build the group's capacity to hold the tension, and not become overwhelmed by the anxiety or fear often associated with conflict. Exploring the relationship between what can seem like opposite positions and staying in the tension ("intentionally") can be rich and rewarding for both individuals and the group. For individuals, staying in relational tension helps us understand more deeply our own biases and grow in our ability to be flexible and adaptable. For groups, staying in the dance strengthens the engagement of all members.

What can groups do to help members stay engaged in the me-we dance? Five relational practices help groups recognize, engage and work with their tension points:

1. *Acknowledge conflicts that tap the group tension points.* It is liberating for groups to be able to name their differences explicitly and acknowledge when one of their tension points has resurfaced. One board I worked with generated a list of the topics that generated recurring conflict among their members. They then decided to hold a meeting to explore some of the "taboo" areas of unspoken tension that revolved around their use of money, power and language.
2. *Make the rules of engagement explicit.* Generating agreements about how we work together helps limit the negative assumptions and meanings we ascribe to behavior that doesn't match our own preferred ways to engage. In the example above, the board established a set of agreements for engaging each other that included being fully listened to (without interruption), creating times for silence, and explicitly asking for different perspectives to be brought forward.
3. *Create environments/cultures that support relationship (hospitality, care, beauty).* This is the invisible work of building an organizational context that will help people to stay engaged through challenging times. In the board example they recognized the importance of balancing the amount of time spent challenging each other with a greater amount of time appreciating one another. They also took time to set the right context and atmosphere for

difficult conversations. And, they set their meeting space to create a circle with a beautiful center, using symbols of their group's history and culture as well as symbols as reminders for how they wanted to engage on another. These included a "Judge Doll" as a reminder not to judge each other, and a stuffed elephant to encourage naming the "elephants in the room".

4. *Stay in inquiry without prematurely reaching for closure.* Traditional organization practices for navigating tension are based in unification and hierarchical thinking, which focus on swiftly getting issues resolved. This can result in a singular set of beliefs, values or individuals dominating, driving those with different perspectives to disengage. Staying longer in an inquiry builds people's capacity to notice and change outmoded beliefs and assumptions. It enables a group to notice when "we" tensions are surfacing and to create space for the non-dominant voices to be heard. At times, the group discerns when NOT to move forward, to allow fallow time for new ideas to gestate and reach acceptance across the group. Decision-making may look slower, but in actuality, the focus shifts from forcing a solution to finding incremental ways to take the next step.

5. *Focus on where the energy is and move forward incremental action steps.* Tensions often erupt in conditions of complexity, change and chaos. By paying attention to what is necessary and vital for the group, we keep the group's work, and its energy, in motion. Some things can be set aside to be examined another day. Some things need action. The group learns to focus and discern, and to maintain the vitality of individual members and of the group as a whole.

These five practices help us navigate the tensions of group life, tensions that are not only inevitable but, necessary for individual and collective growth.