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## T-Groups as a Catalyst for Individual, Group, and Organizational Change

By Gilmore Crosby

The longer I practice Organization Development (OD), and I have been doing so since 1984, the more evident it is to me that group change is the key to individual and organization change. When collective knowledge is tapped, transformation happens. When responsibility is spread, empowerment happens. Peer pressure is a powerful influence, for better or for worse. When a group shifts, individuals shift.

People are different in private than they are in their work relationships. Most development work happens outside actual team and reporting work relationships. Fear that people won't “be themselves” reinforces this separation. Development while they are “being themselves” in their work relationships is strategic for individual, team and organization development.

There are many possible group interventions both large (whole system) and small (intact teams, etc.). This article focuses on T-Groups (known originally as “basics skills Training groups”). T-groups were invented by Kurt Lewin (1890-1947), Director of MIT's Research Center for Group Dynamics, and regarded by many as the founder of OD. “Lewin and the others realized a group that scrutinized its own process as it formed and changed

was something new and valuable” (Bennis, 2010). The essence of the T-group, a group observing its own behaviors and processes, was born.

Group dynamics exist in every group. The questions are (a) whether group dynamics are noticed, and (b) whether they support the highest possible performance for the group. Group dynamics include but are not limited to: Who talks to whom? Who talks the most? Who talks the least? Is there balance of participation? How does the group “decide” what to talk about? Is there a norm of passively accepting whatever gets brought up first? Do members look and talk directly to each other? Do members “interrupt?” How does the group handle differences/conflict? How is tardiness or absence managed? How do gender, ethnicity, and other physical and social differences influence group behavior?

Kurt Lewin, having fled Nazi Germany, had a personal passion about the group dynamics of authority. Lewin's research showed that people placed in positions of leadership lean towards being too authoritarian or too permissive. In his studies, group members knew how to be passively compliant in the face of authoritarianism, whereas permissive leadership led to the emergence of dysfunctional authority

within the group. Lewin concluded it was a rare individual who knew how to lead while allowing appropriate influence (Lewin, 1939). Effective authority requires exactly that: the capacity to be clear while empowering the people below and supporting the people above. In our experience, T-groups can teach these skills.

Group dynamics impact the quality of dialogue and problem-solving. This was a major focus of the original T-group.

### The T-Group Movement

T-Groups are "... the most significant social invention of the century"  
—Carl Rogers

In the 1960s and 70s, T-groups became immensely popular. Many "T-groups" lost the focus on group dynamics and gravitated towards focusing on individuals, not unlike a loose form of group therapy.

Eventually, in the hands of a wider and wider circle of facilitators, too many T-groups in organizational settings were marred by ugly confrontations, and the T-group "movement" nearly died out. Of the remaining facilitators, some handled the controversies by only allowing T-groups to be populated by strangers. However, the original T-group participants were not strangers to each other. They were community leaders who knew each other before and after the workshop. This is not to say that there is anything wrong with conducting T-groups populated by strangers. Either approach in the hands of skilled facilitators can result in deep learning.

Only a handful of OD practitioners, including my father and mentor, Robert P. Crosby, mastered and continued to successfully use T-groups within organizations.

### T-Groups Adapted for Organizations

Following his first T-group in 1953, my father created a broad OD strategy using T-groups, along with leadership coaching, conflict management, work with intact teams within a system, and "whole systems" large group facilitation, all in service of results as measured by the organization's own metrics.

While each facilitator must follow their own instincts, the T-group model discussed here is grounded in a reliable approach that includes alternating between "theory sessions" and time spent in T-group. The theory sessions are an ever-evolving blend of Emotional Intelligence (EQ), Behavioral Science, and Systems Thinking.

During T-group activity the group is given a consistent task: each person is to articulate their wants, their thoughts, their emotions, and their observations of group dynamics, all with a focus on the "here and now." The facilitator helps the participants incorporate this task, even while discussing whatever emerges, such as work problems and dynamics. Dialogue deepens as participants take responsibility for their own reactions, for active listening, for clearing up misunderstandings, and more. Shifting from theory to T-group and back again helps the group manage the intensity of T-groups while applying the theories.

Authority is worked live through any reporting relationships that are in the group, and through interactions with the facilitator. The facilitator is an authority figure during the workshop, and as such is a blank screen for all the projections and reactions that the participants carry towards leaders. Rich learning comes from exploring reactions to the facilitator. Unlike traditional teachers, that keep themselves separate and above their students, these T-group facilitators are part of the process, and hold themselves to the same standards that they are teaching.

Intensity and learning are also managed by pairing participants with a "learning partner" and using a "fishbowl" method during T-group activity. While one group is engaged in the T-group task, the learning partners silently watch and take notes on their partner in the T-group. This observation sharpens the skills of describing behavior that are critical to effective feedback. Because the notes are written, it allows the facilitators to coach on the observations. The observers also track their hunches about their learning partner's emotions. After each round of T-group, the partners give feedback in private. The learning partners alternate between spending time in their own T-group and

**Gil Crosby** has practiced Organization Development since 1984. His OD is rooted in Kurt Lewin's action research methods, and Edwin Friedman's systems thinking. His second book, *Leadership Can Be Learned: Clarity, Connection and Results*, was published in 2017. He can be reached at [gil@crosbyod.com](mailto:gil@crosbyod.com).

spending time observing their partner's T-group. This structure builds feedback skills and engagement. Introverts more readily engage in the privacy of their pairs, and reluctant participants are pulled along as their learning partners and T-group peers genuinely work on themselves.

### Conclusion

Individuals, groups, and organizations have identified T-groups as a catalyst for change. Specifically, they've seen increased skill to: foster a productive and safe work environment by giving clear direction, take accountability, nurture communication up and down the hierarchy, manage conflict, connect with emotional intelligence, and continually develop themselves, others, teams, and the organization. A critical mass of such cognitive and behavioral change creates culture that reliably achieves tough organizational goals.

### References

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