

THE SECRET LIFE OF GROUPS

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The Hedgehog Effect: The Secrets of Building High Performance Teams

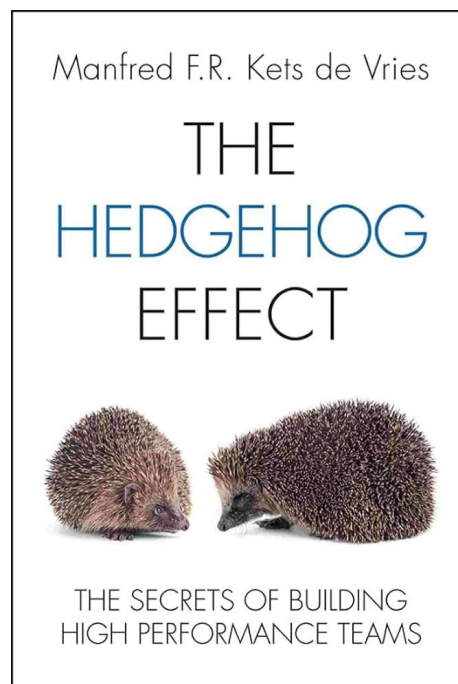
by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries

In *The Hedgehog Effect*, Manfred Kets de Vries presents the case for leadership group coaching as an experiential training ground for learning to function as a high performance team. His group coaching model, incorporating living case studies, has been developed over more than 20 years of delivering programs to top-level executives and sets the standard in the field of leadership group coaching.

Written for coaches, consultants, leadership development directors, and anyone working in or with teams, *The Hedgehog Effect* begins with an in-depth analysis of what teams and groups are all about. The intricacies of leadership coaching are illustrated with an elaborate example of a team coaching intervention. In Part Two, the author applies a psychodynamic lens to the dynamics of teams and groups, taking a close look at relationship patterns, how groups evolve, and the phenomenon of the group-as-a-whole. Part Three takes a more systemic perspective, addressing the challenges that change processes pose for people in organizations, and how to create best places to work. Kets de Vries supports the whole with the story of an organizational change initiative accomplished through group coaching.

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There are basically two types of people. People who accomplish things, and people who claim to have accomplished things. The first group is less crowded.

Mark Twain

The greater the loyalty of a group toward the group, the greater is the motivation among the members to achieve the goals of the group, and the greater the probability that the group will achieve its goals.

Rensis Likert

We could learn a lot from crayons: some are sharp, some are pretty, some are dull, while others are bright, some have weird names, but we have to learn to live in the same box.

Anonymous

The unconscious is the ocean of the unsayable, of what has been expelled from the land of language, removed as a result of ancient prohibitions.

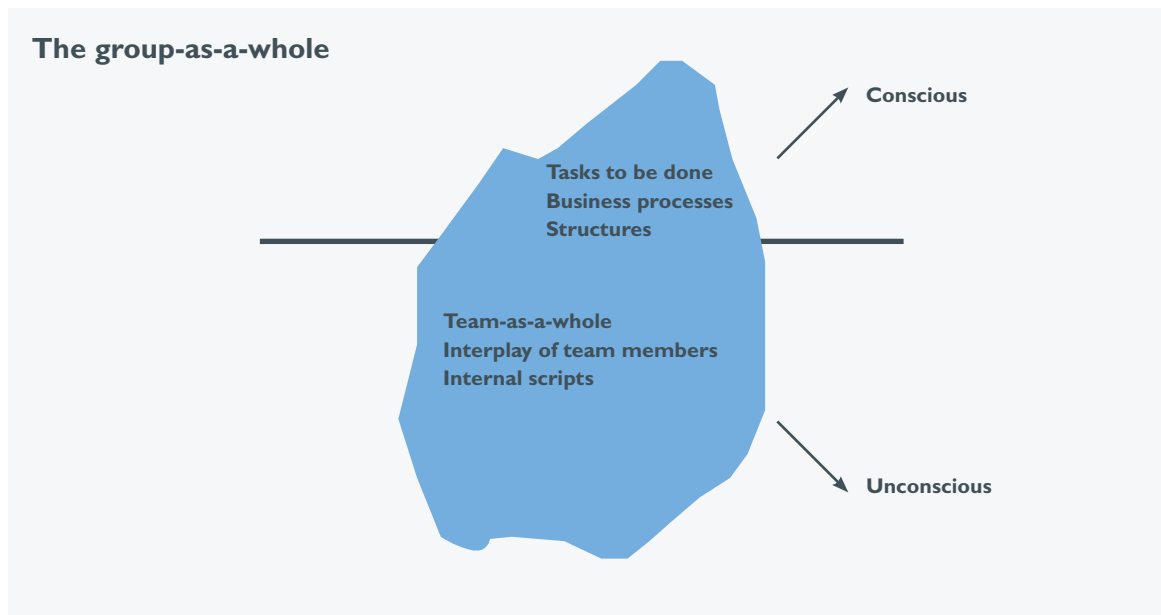
Italo Calvino

The “group-as-a-whole”

Because all the scripts in the actors’ internal worlds vary, the way they interact and are integrated will determine the dynamics of the group-as-a-whole. The “underworld” where the attachment patterns of the various members interface gives each team interaction its special character. This explains why specific themes pop up and are acted out when a group or team is together, and why the sum of the group’s collective consciousness is greater than its parts.

This notion of the group-as-a-whole is one of the concepts that people interested in group dynamics can apply in making sense of what is going on in the group with which they are working. Other terms have been used to describe similar phenomena, such as social network, living system, group matrix, social unconscious, group mind, reflective space, or, to use another term, collective “cloud” consciousness. All these terms have in common the concept that groups or teams can also be seen as highly complex, interactive entities in and of themselves. A group or team, therefore, is more than the sum of its parts; it is a place where people often simultaneously meet on several levels, conscious as well as out-of-awareness.

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The kind of dynamics that take place in the group-as-a-whole may resemble those that took place in participants' families of origin.

Given the durability of some patterns, group members cannot help but engage in family re-enactment. The dynamics of the group-as-a-whole offer an opportunity for members to understand better past relationships with parents, siblings, and others.

To illustrate, in one executive team in which I was intervening, one of its members, the VP marketing, continually complained about being excluded. Her complaints were not restricted to missed invitations to a number of social occasions; she maintained that she had been left out of important meetings in the company. In one team coaching session, she suggested to a few of the other members of the team that they should include her regularly in meetings of their own teams (in order, she said, to make the executive committee function better). She mentioned a number of specific meetings to which she had not been invited and which she viewed as important. From their facial expressions and comments, it was clear that the other members of the team found her complaints tiresome, particularly because, as they tried to point out, most of these meetings were not part of her mandate. One team member, the VP finance, reminded her forcefully that she had frequently asked to be left out of sessions since she was already overloaded—a statement she denied. At one point, the discussion became so intense that the CEO intervened to try to calm things down.

While this was going on, I was asking myself a number of questions. Was the exchange just part and parcel of a typical day's work for this team? Was this simply a misunderstanding between two people? Or was there more to their argument than met the eye?

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As it happened, I knew something about the personal history of all three, which supplied another level of understanding about the clash. I (and some others in the team) realized that all three might be reenacting specific family dramas.

The VP marketing was the middle child in a family of three very competitive sisters. She had always felt that her elder sister was the favorite of her father, and the younger of her mother, which left her with a perpetual feeling of being left out, or excluded. Although being left out can be a reality, as an adult she was unconsciously going out of her way to recreate situations where she could righteously declare that people had done it to her again—that she had been excluded. As for the VP finance, his colleague's moaning reminded him of his older brother, who was always trying to push himself forward and get the better of him—small wonder that the behavior of the VP marketing grated on him and that he reacted so irritably when she went on automatic pilot. In fact, the VP finance was on some kind of automatic pilot himself, since he too failed to recognize his own unconscious dramatizations when provoked.

Clearly, both parties had negative transference reactions toward each other—easy to ascertain from their body language and verbal communication. To complete this messy picture, the CEO would never allow conflict within the team to work itself out and always stopped it prematurely, leaving everyone highly dissatisfied. His preference was to push difficult issues under the carpet and leave things unspoken. Although he was only subliminally aware of this behavior pattern, he had unconsciously cast himself in the role of peacemaker—a role familiar to him from his childhood when he had been the peacemaker between two parents who fought like cats and dogs.

All three parties were acting out inner scripts that may have been fairly relevant in childhood but were no longer effective or appropriate in the here-and-now. I realized it was high time that they recognized the extent to which they were caught up in scenarios of the past, made new beginnings, and selected more appropriate and constructive scenarios.

As this example illustrates, the shared unconscious territory of the group-as-a-whole brings with it all the unconscious assumptions brought into a team by individual members, assumptions that manifest themselves as transference patterns that are derived from important family relationships in the past.

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How good are you at reading the team as a whole?

Answer the following questions YES or NO.

- Are there times in a team when you experience bizarre fantasies and ideas that help you make sense of what is really going on?
- Are you effective in expressing and deciphering these fantasies and ideas in a time-appropriate manner?
- Do you recognize quickly that certain people in your team act out specific roles?
- Do you know how to deal with silences when you are engaged in teamwork?
- Are you astute at assessing the mood of the team and effective at getting it unstuck?

If you answer YES to most of these questions, you are talented at moving a team forward.

Although groups are normally set up to pursue sensible and realistic goals, inevitably, from time to time, they deviate from actual work and fall into a kind of madness. .

They can become entities preoccupied with primitive, archaic fantasies. Such powerful emotional processes will block and sidetrack real work activities. For example, a group can be completely derailed by the notion that there is a “traitor” among them, giving rise to paranoia and destructive anger. Or, feeling lost, they may be looking for a “savior” that will get them out of their mess.

People often assume, at an unconscious level, that the leader or organization can and should offer the protection and guidance our parents offered us in our early years.

Groups subject to this dependency assumption are searching for a strong, charismatic leader to give them direction. They are readily prepared to give up their autonomy when they perceive help at hand. While unquestioning faith in a leader contributes to goal-directedness and cohesiveness, it also impairs the followers’ own critical judgment and leaves them unwilling and unprepared to take any form of initiative. Once a leader on whom followers have leaned on is gone, bureaucratic inertia may take hold. People may be frozen in the past, going through the motions, wondering what their departed leader would have done.

Some typical remarks of groups subjected to this regressive dynamic include, “What do you want me/us to do?” and “I can’t take this kind of decision by myself; you’ll have to talk to my superior.” Such comments reflect team members’ anxiety, insecurity, and professional and emotional immaturity, albeit imposed or learned over time in a stifling organizational setting.

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Another common unconscious assumption among teams can be that the organizational world is a dangerous place.

In teams subjected to the fight-flight assumption, a stance of avoidance or attack predominates. When the fight-flight mechanism takes hold, there is a tendency to split the world into friend or foe. Fight reactions manifest themselves in aggression against the self, peers (in the form of envy, jealousy, competition, elimination, boycotting, rivalry, fighting for a position in the group, and privileged relationships with authority figures), or authority itself. Flight reactions include avoidance of others, absenteeism, and resignation (that is, giving up). In some cases, group leaders inflame their followers against real or imagined enemies, using this division to motivate people and to channel emerging anxiety outward. Leaders who encourage fight-flight mechanisms by radiating certainty and conviction create meaning for followers who feel lost. The resulting sense of unity is highly reassuring. As followers eliminate doubters and applaud converts, they become increasingly dependent on their leader.

Remarks typical of people in a fight-flight situation include, “Let’s not give our data to our finance people; they’ll just use them against us,” or “Our organization would be in good shape if it weren’t for some of the idiots who run the place.”

Other group members rely on a pair within the group for all creative efforts.

Two people in a small group may come to dominate its process by interacting closely, or exclusively, with each other, and are allowed to do so by the other members. Wanting to feel secure but also to be creative, people who experience the pairing assumption fantasize that the most effective creation takes place in pairs. This association can help group members cope with feelings of anxiety, alienation, and loneliness. Unfortunately, pairing also implies splitting up. The inevitable diversity within groups may result in intra- and inter-team conflict.

In the pairing mode, grandiose, unrealistic ideas about innovation may become more important than practicality and profitability. Typical remarks heard within a team susceptible to the pairing assumption include, “Leave it to the two of us, we can solve this problem,” and “If only the CEO and COO had a better relationship, our company would be in really good shape.”

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Look at the way your team operates under stressful conditions.

What patterns can you recognize? What is happening in your team?

Study the following statements and label them TRUE or FALSE.

1. The members of our team seem to have stopped thinking for themselves.
2. The members of our team appear to be looking for a magical leader to solve all our problems.
3. The members of our team seem to come together to gratify their dependency needs rather than to do real work.
4. Fighting or withdrawal have become means to avoid dealing with the task at hand within our team.
5. The members of our team seem to be gathered to fight with leadership or to flee from it rather than to join in effective work.?
6. The team seems to be preoccupied with some common enemy either within or outside the group.
7. Our team seems to be looking for some kind of messiah to solve all their problems.
8. Team development is frozen by the hope of being rescued by members who pair off and create new leadership.
9. The team seems to look for miraculous solutions to our problems instead of facing and overcoming difficulties through collaborative effort.

If you answered YES to questions 1, 2, and 3, your team has a dependency nature. If you answered YES to questions 4, 5, or 6, your team has a fight-flight nature. If you answered YES to questions 7, 8, or 9, your team has a pairing nature. Combinations of basic assumption groups are also possible.

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Social defenses

When the three basic assumptions (described above) prevail in the workplace, they offer strong proof that the organization's leadership is not dealing adequately with the emerging anxiety of working in a social setting. As people try to deny or to avoid these primitive fears and anxieties, the team's and the organization's primary task becomes distorted. One of the consequences may be that members of the organization develop specific communal mechanisms to defend themselves against the emergent basic assumptions and anxieties inherent to working within the system. When such defenses are adopted organization-wide, we call them social defenses.

Social defenses—systems of relationships reflected in the social structure of the organization—function like individual defenses but are woven into the fabric of an organization in an effort to assure participants that the workplace is really a safe and accepting place. But their real purpose is to transform and neutralize strong tensions and affect, such as anxiety, shame, guilt, envy, jealousy, rage, sexual frustration, and low self-esteem. Effective social defenses can help team members to deal with disturbing emotional experiences.

When the level of anxiety rises in an organization, existing structures are reinforced to try to tamp it down (e.g., more regulatory complexity).

When social defenses take the shape of bureaucratic routines and pseudo-rational activities, they gradually obscure personal and organizational realities. Task forces, administrative procedures, rationalization, intellectualization, and other structures and processes are increasingly used to keep people emotionally uninvolved and under control. Teams may show symptoms of the presence of social defenses. For example, under certain circumstances the formation of teams can be better understood as a ritualistic or routine response to anxiety-provoking situations, rather than as a rational response to a specific problem. But as a result, people may detach themselves from their inner experiences. They engage in regressive defenses, such as splitting, projection, displacement, and denial.

In groups (or teams) dynamics, interconnections between individuals and among the group-as-a-whole may play out unconsciously.

When such interconnections occur, members of a group—apart from having to deal with their own peculiarities—also need to tap into a shared unconscious territory, with all its archaic assumptions, remnants of previous transference reactions, and a multitude of possible unresolved conflicts.

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To take an example, one member of the executive team I was working with, reflecting on the previous day's activities, mentioned that he had had a frightening dream that night: "I was looking at myself in a mirror and barely recognized myself. I looked as pale as a corpse, but what really bothered me, seeing my mirror image, was that I had become almost bald. It was like I had had cancer radiation treatment. A few clumps of hair were still sticking to my head but most of the hair had fallen out. I got so upset that I smashed the mirror. I woke up immediately. The combination of the fright about what I had seen in the mirror and my violent reaction resulted in intense feelings of anxiety when I woke up."

He told the team that he had been thinking about the dream in the context of what had happened the previous day, when—although he had kept quiet—he had been very upset about what was happening in their organization. (The previous day's discussion had been about whether their mandate in the organization was being threatened by a number of powerful sub-groups.) Some time before, the team had been asked to set up an entity comparable to a skunk work, a project that had become extremely successful. But with success came envy from some of the more established departments in the company. A number of powerful interest groups in the organization felt threatened by their success. During the previous day's discussion, some of the team members had said that they felt a number of senior executives in the company were colluding against them. These people wanted to kill the project. If they succeeded, it would mean the end of the team.

I pointed out to the group that the dreamer, as spokesperson for them all, might have dreamt this dream (and presented it) to symbolize their sense of impotence about the situation. I wondered how angry the other members of the team were feeling, as what was happening was extremely unfair. Yet during that discussion there was not much anger shown. Instead, they circled around the topic of what would be good for the organization, as if they were sidestepping their anger on the matter. The dream could be interpreted as a representation of what was being done to them—a cancerous attack that made them feel "castrated" (castration represented by the baldness)—but it also contained the growing anger felt by the members of the team.

This example is an illustration of what drives the social co-creation process: the individual's dynamic unconscious contains many basic desires that may not be realized at a conscious level, for fear that they may get out of hand. Consciousness has been withdrawn for defensive reasons. Since individuals are socialized in relatively similar societies, it is reasonable to assume that some of these warded-off conflicts are common to us all. This holds true no matter how heterogeneous our concerns are, because of the common biological properties of our species and our culturally embedded values and reactions. But these unconscious concerns can easily be activated.

What kind of emotional processes do you recognize in the group-as-a-whole?

- Attachment behavior—feelings of love and wanting to be close
- Fear of emotional closeness
- Feelings of pain and grief
- Feelings of shame
- Feelings of anger
- Feelings of guilt
- Feelings of envy

Reflect on the ways these feelings express themselves.

Recall incidents—what thought processes were taking place?

Here I like to add that to view the group-as-a-whole as a completely separate entity dominated by regressive forces (as some scholars have done), detracts from the reality in the here-and-now. Focusing on the archaic parts of the members of a group (or team) is only helpful when tied to the group's real-time exchanges, by working through the themes and issues that preoccupy its members. What happens in the here-and-now also contains essential information.

The blind men and the elephant

In the interchange between the group-as-a-whole screen and the individual, the inside affects the outside, and the outside the inside. The part is always connected to the whole, and the whole determines what happens in the parts. In terms of the “sum” (the group-as-a-whole) and its “parts” (the individual members), there is an interesting exchange between the inner theater of the individual and the “acting out” of individuals' scripts within the group-as-a-whole. The drama made up by the group-as-a-whole affects individual members, and individual dramas affect the group-as-a-whole. Similarities between the members of the team are constantly disrupted by differences, and differences constantly disrupted by similarities, creating a constant state of flux and tension.

Six blind men were asked to determine what an elephant looked like by feeling different parts of its body. The man who felt a leg said the elephant looked like a pillar; the man who felt the tail stated that the elephant was like a rope; the one who felt the trunk announced that the elephant was like a branch of a tree; the one who felt the ear thought the elephant was like a fan; the one who rubbed the belly stated that the elephant was like a wall; and the man who felt the tusk maintained that the elephant was like a solid pipe.

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Of course, each of them was right, but none of them was completely right—and none of them was completely wrong. The tale illustrates the inadequacy of traditional human reasoning. It points out that people will understand only a tiny portion of reality and then extrapolate from it, each claiming that their interpretation is the correct version.