

⑥ The Situation

What do you do when leadership feels it is held hostage by the culture of the organization?

Signs and Symptoms

Significant numbers of leaders state that they can't make changes because of the resistance of key people in the organization.

Leaders report that there are a few significant people who are called the "keepers of the culture."

Underlying Causes

An underlying value is being violated in the organization.

There is a persistent pattern of perceived disregard by leadership of the needs, interests and values of a small influential group of people in the organization.

A group of influential people are not involved in the key decisions of the organization – decisions that directly impact their work and positions.

One of the most interesting and impactful times I used this process was with a 45-member school district leadership team located in central California. I was contracted to work with the team at their two-day planning session in Monterey. They quickly indicated to me that the main reason that they were experiencing such low results for special education students was that there were very few significant and respected "keepers of the culture" who, by their influence, were holding the whole district back from making significant improvements for students.

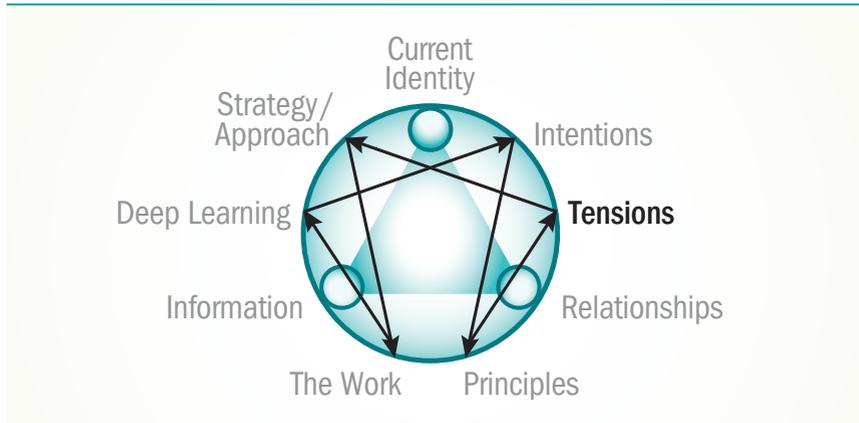
This was the perfect application for the Handling Difficult Group Behavior exercise. As the group went through the process they realized that it was the patriarchal approach of leadership that contributed to the staff feeling alienated and manipulated and leading them to resist the changes proposed by the district.

This breakthrough allowed the leadership team to have a very productive two-day planning conversation about how to shift the paradigm of leadership ("below the green line") as they accomplished the critical "above the green line" work of education.

THEORY

On the
Enneagram

TENSIONS



PRACTICE

HANDLING DIFFICULT GROUP DYNAMICS

What Process
Do I Use?

Process Description

It has been my experience that a large percentage of difficult dynamics are actually a reaction to the leader, leadership culture, agenda, facilitator or the facilitation process, rather than a person being difficult for the sake of being difficult.

There have been a few exceptions to this

and these people were true saboteurs.

The most common difficult people dynamics that participants have identified include:

- A person who dominates the conversation.
- Passive aggressive behavior.
- An angry or aggressive person in a group.
- People agree to a plan in a meeting and then go out and do something different.
- A person who continually tries to hijack the meeting.

This process can be used when a group is in the blame mode regarding the behavior of other people who they believe are holding the organization or team hostage from making progress.

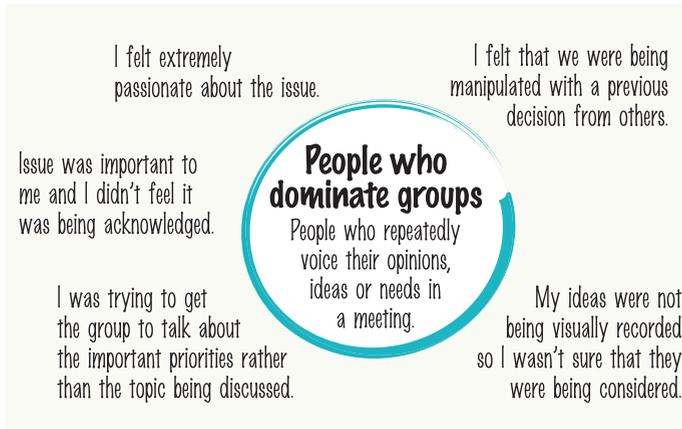
It is particularly useful to break the current mindset regarding the reasons behind difficult group behaviors. This process tends to shift the understanding from blaming and labeling people to looking at the facilitation, leadership or system as the possible cause behind the difficult group behavior. The primary mechanism that allows for this shift in mindset comes from demonstrating that at some time everyone has exhibited these difficult behaviors – that is to say that they were not being difficult or purposely trying to sabotage the group or process.

The process consists of seven steps:

- Step 1:** The team identifies the difficult group dynamic or behavior that they believe is holding the organization hostage. This may mean brainstorming all the possible dynamics and selecting the top priority.
- Step 2:** On a large whiteboard or wall covered with flipchart paper, draw a circle in the middle and write the difficult dynamic in the center of the circle.



- Step 3:** Now ask group members to identify the behaviors they witness that show evidence of this difficult dynamic. These are written inside the circle (moving from judgement to specific behaviors).
- Step 4:** Ask each person (or small groups of people when you have more than 12 people) to identify a time when they, themselves, demonstrated some or all of the actual behaviors. Then ask them to identify what their reasons were for exhibiting these behaviors.
- Step 5:** After all these reasons have been posted, ask the individuals or small groups to think about what reasons underlie the difficult group dynamic. What is it about the team, process, facilitation or the organization that contributes to these difficult group dynamics?
- Step 6:** Once all the input has been charted, ask the small groups to again engage in a 10-minute discussion. This time they are to discuss what new insights they have about the meaning of difficult dynamics in groups.
- Step 7:** As a final step, ask the group what new insights they have about the meeting process, and what steps the group might suggest to improve the quality of the meeting process.



Rational Outcome

The intent is to identify the underlying values and assumptions that cause negative behaviors in teams and organizations.

Experiential Outcome

The intent is to break the blame paradigm in a team or organization, and to develop understanding and compassion for those previously identified as difficult people. The process will mobilize a group to take constructive action in order to change group and organizational patterns.

HANDLING DIFFICULT GROUP DYNAMICS



Process Tips & Reminders

The process takes about 45 minutes and should be completed in one meeting. This should only be used when large numbers of people in a team or organization are stuck in a blame paradigm.

It is very important to go visual when using this process. It keeps the group focused on a “third point” and on the logical sequence of the questions and responses. If the third point is not held, a group can begin to personalize the content and fall back into the blame mode.



Next Steps for the Team

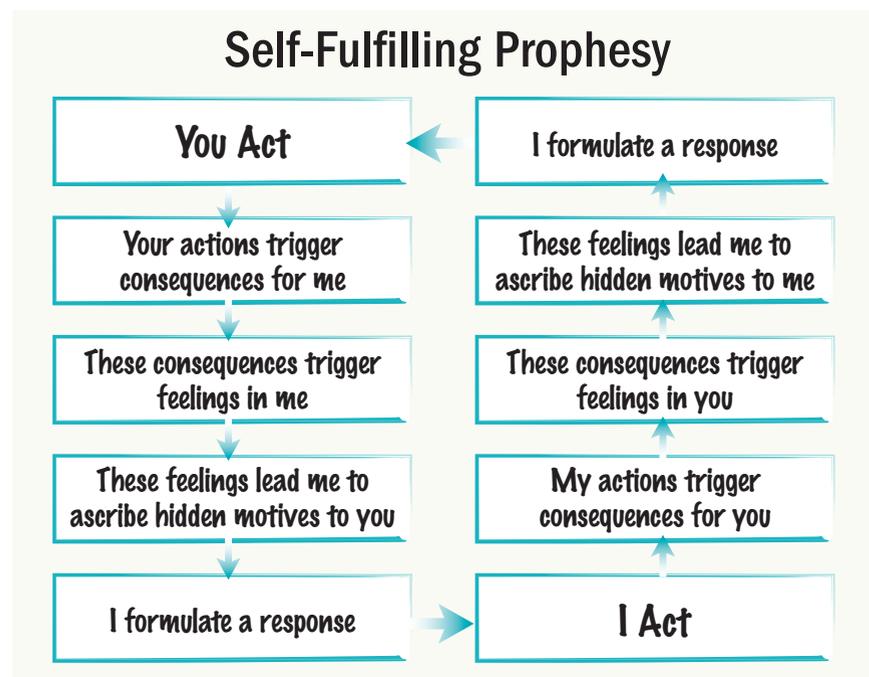
After completing this process there is a natural bridge to working on design principles followed by some conversations about engagement strategies. The design principles conversation might best be handled either through the Appreciative Inquiry Process or Totems, Taboos and Repetitive Interactions. Depending on the desired experiential outcomes, the engagement strategy conversation could be handled through a variety of approaches listed under Strategy on the Process Enneagram (*see page 121*).

Alternative Approaches

You might consider either one-on-one interviews or focus groups designed to surface the underlying motivations for the difficult behavior patterns. A second alternative would be to utilize the Workshop Method. In this instance you would need the people who demonstrate the behaviors to be part of the session. The facilitator would indicate that the outcome of the session would be to identify the underlying causes behind some of the difficult group dynamics experienced by the group.

What if this Process Doesn't Work?

The process challenges peoples' underlying assumptions behind why other people act the way they do. In many cases the experience of seeing that all of us have acted in these ways from positive motivations (we were not being saboteurs) is enough to cause a shift in perspective and behavior. This process does not guarantee that the behavior will shift. In these instances it would be essential for the leadership team to experience direct negative consequences between their continued behavior patterns and an escalating pattern of negative results. To accomplish this, additional leverage could be gained by using either the Negative Vision or the Mental Models Processes.



In utilizing this process it is often helpful to talk about “self fulfilling prophecies.” The diagram demonstrates this psychological dynamic. A “difficult person in a group” (You Act) displays what is believed to be difficult behavior. These behaviors trigger consequences for the facilitator – and team – as well as strong feelings (anger, frustration). These feelings lead the facilitator to ascribe hidden motives to the difficult person – “they are trying to take over control of the meeting.” This causes the facilitator to act (I Act) in ways to minimize the difficult person. This minimization has consequences in the group for the “difficult person” and they ascribe hidden motives to the facilitator and have strong emotional reactions and responses. Usually this leads the “difficult person” to exaggerate their behaviors, which then causes the facilitator to respond in kind. This goes round and round and the behavior and group dynamics worsen over time. Unless this cycle is broken by exploring the reasons for the behaviors in an open way, the cycle worsens over time.

This can become a real paradox for leaders. Many times a leader looks out at their teams and sees apathetic employees who need to be pushed to action. The leader then takes charge and holds people accountable. What they then experience is employee compliance rather than ownership. The system starts to experience positive results. The leader then sees that the only way to get results is to continue to push the system. The system becomes even more apathetic and it gets more and more difficult to get results. Eventually you have a polarized system of “us and them” with little opportunity for creative and innovative solutions.

Sustainability Reminders