The Situation 9

How do you create more understanding and compassion among team members who may be at odds with or blaming each other?

Signs and Symptoms

People are critical of each other's behavior in a group or team.

The specific behavior patterns of one or more members of a team are reported to get in the way of progress of the team.

The contribution of an individual team member is minimized by other members in order to get work done in the team.

Underlying Causes

People lack understanding about the core values of all group members and are unable to make allowances for individual differences.

Members in a group evaluate the behavior of others based on what it would mean to them if they exhibited such behavior.

The first time I thought to use the Life Stories Process was for a client based in Australia. Top leaders from around the world were coming together to engage in a corporate sponsored Leadership Development Program. During one of the program components, participants were asked to work in teams of eight people to design a meeting they would have with the CEO of the firm on the final day of the program. Participants were told that the primary outcome was not in the final design, but in learning about how they work with other powerful leaders.

We gave the teams about 2-2 ½ hours for the task of designing the meeting. When I checked in with one group, they were basically at each other's throats. The walls were completely plastered with charts and everyone was talking and no one was listening. I asked if they needed any help and they practically bit my head off. I left them alone for another 20 minutes until I couldn't stand the pain any longer and I intervened.

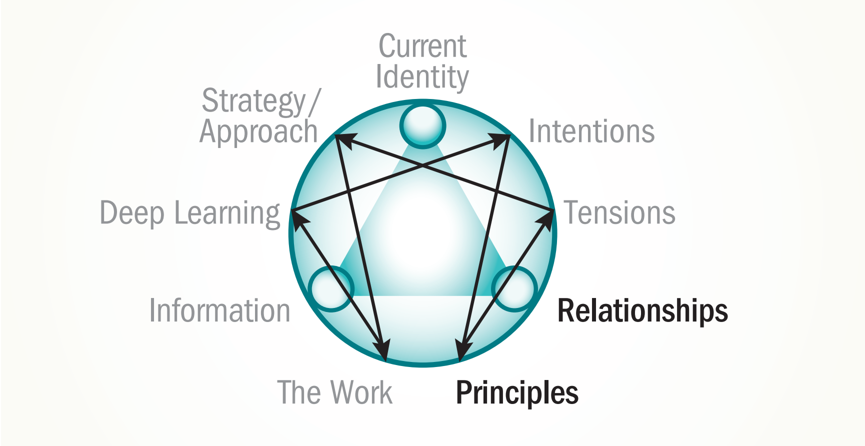
I asked them each to spend a few moments and reflect on the most significant events in their life that led to their current leadership roles in this global concern. They could draw a picture, develop a life journey map or simply tell a story.

After the first few people told their stories I thought I had made a colossal mistake. Each of the first three people used a life journey map format. They just told of the events over a timeline with no personal stories or explanation of the significance of the events. I thought we were sunk, along with my credibility as a facilitator. I couldn't really stop the process or judge the validity of what was being shared so I endured for another hour. As it turns out, during the fourth story people started to cry, and during the debrief after the final story had been shared, they had all agreed that it was one of the most powerful experiences they had ever had in their professional lives. It was a huge learning moment for me about my own judgements and about the power of self-disclosure in groups. After we finished the debrief the group very calmly and collaboratively finished the assigned task in about 15 minutes.

THEORY

On the Enneagram

RELATIONSHIPS
PRINCIPLES



PRACTICE

What Process Do I Use?

LIFE STORIES PROCESS

Process Description

This is a wonderful and deep process for developing relationship and principles in a team. The process involves each person telling a part of their life story within the context of a team goal or challenge. The story might be about leadership, it might be about the origins of certain beliefs related to the work of the group or it might be about team cohesiveness.

The process is fairly high risk for the group and requires a high degree of facilitator permission. The process should always be accompanied by a confidentiality agreement that protects the privacy of participants.

The process generally involves the following steps:

Step 1: **SETTING THE CONTEXT**

The facilitator references a specific team outcome and indicates to the team that the most effective and efficient way of moving toward the outcome is for people to share some personal information (self disclosure) – stories about themselves that will give insight to the other team members that are relevant to the outcomes at hand.

Step 2: CONFIDENTIALITY

The facilitator asks members of the team to keep confidential about what is disclosed in the process. "What is shared by people about themselves stays in the room." Unless confidentiality is granted by all parties, the process does not proceed.

Step 3: MODELING

The facilitator then shares a personal story specific to the focus of the request. The story should be more revealing than might be shared by others in the group. This sets the bar for the group.

Step 4: STORY TELLING

Each person in turn then tells their story. No one can talk during this process except the storyteller.

Step 5: DEBRIEF

After all stories have been shared, the facilitator debriefs the process by asking the following questions:

What themes emerged from the stories that inform the team about the goals or issues we are exploring?

What agreements or decisions might we want to make based on what we have learned?

LIFE STORIES PROCESS

Outcome

Rational Outcome

The purpose of this process is to utilize common experiences, values and beliefs among team members to find new ways of operating together. Most importantly, it surfaces behavior patterns as well as the underlying values of team members that have been previously hidden and misunderstood.

Experiential Outcome

The process invariably creates a deeper understanding and sense of compassion among team members and explains the deeper meaning behind behavioral patterns. It also creates a closer sense of connection among team members.

Tips and Reminders

Process Tips & Reminders

This process should be used when a team has some very difficult work to do over a period of time and their personalities and behavioral quirks seem to be getting in the way of doing the deeper work.

The facilitator must have significant credibility and permission with the group in order for the group to be willing to go through the process. The facilitator must be completely congruent with the process – they cannot show any anxiety or nervousness about the process.

The request to share life stories needs to be very carefully couched or embedded in the issue at hand. As an example, if the group is a leadership team that is blocked from moving forward by the lack of connections between team members, or due to apparent leadership style issues, the facilitator might design the following sequence of steps for the process.

Keep in mind, each person goes through all the steps before the next person shares:

- Each team member shares their most difficult leadership experience.
- Next, they identify the underlying value involved in the experience.
- Finally, they trace this value back to a story that reveals the origin of the value (often in childhood).

The process must be completed in one meeting. Time must be sufficient to properly allow all people to share. The process can take up to 1 ½ hours for 10-12 people to share.

The facilitator must be comfortable with silence. There are often several minutes between stories.

If it is obvious that someone is too uncomfortable with sharing at this point in their life (detecting non-verbal cues), the facilitator should extend them a “lifeline.” This can be done by first acknowledging that not everyone is able to share because of current life circumstances. The person or persons are then asked to comment on what it has been like listening to the stories of others – what has resonated with them. It is important that all people on the team contribute inside the process.

Next Steps for the Team

The next step after completing Life Story Process is to formalize the agreements coming out of the last part of the process. This can be done using TTRI or through a simple appreciative conversation process.

Alternative Approaches

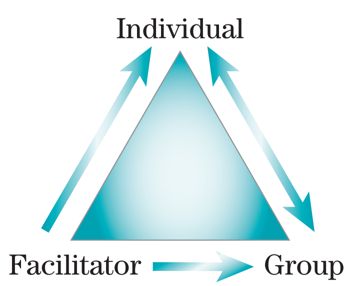
The Life Stories Process is bulletproof, but it takes a significant amount of time. It is generally used when tensions have built up to a significant degree. As a *preventive step*, the appreciative conversation also accomplishes some of the same outcomes. The group can be asked what they most appreciate about each other and then asked to talk about what behavioral traits are most difficult for each group member. The group would then move into creating group agreements based on what has come out of the conversation. Another alternative would be to use the Needs Set Exercise. In this case the various needs that get placed on the inventory would come out of one-on-one interviews from all team members *(see Needs Set Exercise page 184)*.

What if this Process Doesn't Work?

The most common reason this process may not work is that the difficult behavior pattern has gone on too long and the individual has lost all credibility and permission with other group members. Taking the time in such a process would turn the whole group against both the individual and the facilitator. In this instance it would be important for the facilitator to meet with the individual and give them specific behavioral feedback about what they, as the facilitator, see that leads them to conclude that there is a loss in credibility and permission. The facilitator would then talk to the individual about whether and how they would like to approach the whole group with this new understanding. Often if such an individual engages the group with this level of self-disclosure, it will create some compassion among other group members.

Sustainability Reminders

It is important to remember that one of the most important goals for a facilitative leader is to support their teams in becoming high functioning. High functioning teams know how to talk with each other, how to listen to each other and how to deeply question each other while remaining in full rapport. Such teams don't really even need facilitation. Getting a team to this level of effectiveness is no small feat. Michael Grinder uses a simple graphic as a reminder to facilitators about their role.



The role of the facilitator is to connect to the entire group; connect with each individual in the group; and at times, make sure that each individual is connected to the group. In many cases the facilitator will need to coach individuals and also spend some of their own credibility on an individual who is having difficulty connecting to the whole group. The micro skills are essential tools to assist the facilitator in recognizing these dynamics and accomplishing these outcomes.