



Metatheorie der Veränderung

Guiding Processes of Team Dynamics

Team Dynamics

By team dynamics we mean the process by which a social system, comprising of 3 to 15 people with a common goal or task, organises itself in such a manner that the goal is reached and the task is accomplished. This can only happen so long as the preservation of the group is simultaneously assured. Therefore, any team must always work on both, the set goal and the preservation of the team. For this reason, a team does not 'consist' of people, but rather of the pattern of relationships which they establish, stabilise and change amongst themselves, including their goals and how these are handled. At the same time, you can only speak with actual people in a team. Metatheoretically, **six guiding processes** can be identified in which the self-organisation of each team takes place: decisions over goal setting, interaction patterns, team preservation, goal processing, team parameters and team reflection. These decision-making processes form patterns which shape every situation, including the ability to perform and the atmosphere within the team. Those who lead or advise teams can utilise the knowledge of these guiding processes to influence, systematically and on a sound theoretical basis, the dynamics of teams and, where necessary, enable changes.

Guiding Process Goal Setting (stabilising versus changing the goal)

In a team, it is just as important to define a goal, as it is, when necessary, to change or renew it. The question, whether this is necessary, forms one of the six guiding processes of team dynamics. The guiding distinction consists of the question; "**Do we maintain the set goal or do we adapt it?**"

A team is formed only when it has a shared goal. Its purpose arises from tasks which cannot be solved individually. The goal and the related tasks must either be kept **stable**, or **renewed** in the case of changes in the external or internal environment. This decision – does one adhere to the goal or does one adapt it? – is continuously made, explicitly or implicitly. If the common goal ceases to exist or if it is no longer functional, then the social system 'team' also ends.

The existential dependence of each team on the choice and processing of its primary task should be kept in mind by every form of team management, counselling and development, because all further guiding processes are characterised by the decision about the goal and its continuous adaptation. A team is a social system for processing a task, not a collection of people! Clearly, therefore, the way the task is undertaken (is it specified in advance or influenceable?), how the team members describe this task, including their attitude to it, has a major effect. Occupying itself with these questions substantially affects a team.



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Stabilisation of the Goal

When the entire world is in motion, active engagement is needed to achieve stability. The setting and stabilisation of the goal (or goals) is necessary to focus the attention of the team members, and to organise the tasks so that at the end they can deliver consistent results. The primary goal is generally specified by the organisation to the team more or less clearly, more or less precisely or more or less open to discussion.

For the team the guiding process 'Setting of Goals' begins at that moment in which this goal is actively transferred into activity within the team. This is because the team members usually also have critical opinions about the goal, including its usefulness, its chances for success and the availability of resources and competences. In addition, in many organisations one can constantly reckon with a change to the team goal (moving targets!). This creates the need to stabilise the goal and to protect it from external criticism and interference, as, otherwise, useful teamwork is not possible and the members no longer have a common attention focus.

Changing the Goal

The world does not stand still. Therefore, each team faces, repeatedly, the decision as to whether the goal to date should be changed or maintained, rejecting possible alternatives in the process. To make this decision it must be established whether alternatives exist, if they are relevant and what effect ignoring them may have. For this purpose, continuous awareness regarding changes in the environment is necessary. Otherwise the generated stability could become rigidity. The adaptability of the team is then limited and its existence threatened.

Therefore, a decision-making model is required inside the team, which enables regular reflections upon members' perceptions on the change in their environments. This requires an exchange of ideas about factual news ("the complaints are increasing"), social news ("the competition is laughing at us") and seasonal news ("we must not miss this innovation"). Often, news is presented as criticism by individual employees or by the rest of the organisation. Immunisation against criticism is therefore dangerous for teams. It is the role of management to prevent this.

Guiding Process Interaction Patterns (Confirming versus sanctioning)

To form a pattern which regulates all interactions within a team is one of the six guiding processes of each team dynamic. The guiding distinction lies in the question: - **"What is permitted in collaboration and what is not?"**

For collaboration to take place, complexity-reducing structures are required, i.e. patterns. This commences with a team creating common rules. Those who work in teams know the effects of a stranger with different customs and habits arriving. Everyone has seen those alienating glances, where a person does not know the team rules and doesn't behave appropriately. Every team has patterns which its members quickly adhere to, consciously or unconsciously. By and large these rules can be identified on a non-verbal level: How and which information do I pass on and when? To whom? Who do I approach with problems? How do I seek help? How do I express criticism? How does one celebrate and how does one deal with failures? Or with competition? These are just a



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few of many questions which are settled in every team and which any new members 'absorb' within a few days. The retention and validity of these rules is constantly reviewed. They are generated, varied, strengthened or weakened according to the situation. Each interaction is positively **confirmed** or negatively **sanctioned**. Without the order, created and cultivated in this way, the team would collapse. One could say that its existence depends upon the maintenance of its interaction patterns. Counselling of teams therefore also means that one recognises these patterns, reflects upon them regarding functionality in achieving its goals, examines the motivation of its members and, if appropriate, helps to change these.

Confirming

For an interaction pattern to form in the team, individual interaction events must be repeated. For such interactions to repeat themselves, they must first be confirmed as useful, possible, right, appropriate and more. On the other hand, what is perceived by team members in the interactions can be shown on many levels and in many forms. The process of confirmation is first executed implicitly and then takes a direction-dependent form: That which is established, will establish itself still further through usage (like a path on a parking meadow, which, once established, will instinctively be used by almost all people). At some stage it becomes clear who is popular with the boss and who has difficulty, who makes inappropriate jokes and who is no longer taken seriously. In each team there are innumerable implicit patterns like this. They are very stable and can (like all decisions) be functional and dysfunctional. The process also runs explicitly, where expectations are formulated and are either diffuse ("Are you engineer, too?") or specific ("The filing system here works like this!"). Expectations communicated in this way develop into rules, norms and values. Usually, counsellors are very quickly confronted with these patterns. As counsellor, one can therefore recognise the patterns of the team by one's own reactions and then use these as a basis for intervention.

Sanctioning

The alternative to confirmation is sanctioning. Within teams, this is practiced in two forms. One is the negative reaction. This can be a simple "no", a sharp "No way!" or a raised eye brow. The more subtle the reaction, the more effective, as the uncertainty is higher; it causes concern and thus the possibility of a counter reaction is less (how can one respond to a raised eyebrow?). The other, even greater, possibility for sanctioning, is ignoring. As interactions consist of inter-relatedness (double contingency), the refusal to acknowledge something is the most powerful tool in team dynamics, (some people may be familiar with how it felt when their parents no longer spoke to them). It should not surprise that bullying utilises the method of ignoring. Alongside sanctions, teams also always form a pattern as to who is permitted to sanction. These are not necessarily only the people with leading roles, they can also be 'normal' members of the team. Social psychology presents a great deal of research about who is permitted to sanction, and about how diverse, unpredictable, and different the rules, which members can be exposed to, are within each group.

Guiding Process Goal processing (problem-orientated versus interests-orientated)



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When it comes to working on goals, each team must make decisions regarding its problems and interests. Therefore, goal processing is one of the six guiding processes of team-dynamics. The options which have to be processed are these: **“Does it solve problems or work on interests?”**

Each problem in organisations is subject to **conflicting interests** – and every **conflict of interest** will be rekindled again and again by certain problems. Therefore, each team must decide if it should focus on developing a technically good solution. With this, though, they take the risk of ending up with something which damages so many interests that it is not desired or is not enforceable. Alternatively, it can insist upon consulting everyone to search for meaningful compromises (e.g. with other teams), only to find out that this compromise will not solve the problem, but will constantly rekindle it.

The dealing with this guiding process usually generates conflict, which is often the cause for seeking counsel. In this process it is also critical (!) that the counsellor can maintain an overview of both sides of the paradox.

Problem-orientated

When choosing whether to work on goals in the direction of problem solving or interest orientation, most teams (and people) have preferences. In the theory we call these ‘decision premises’. Teams that like to solve problems can be recognised by complaints about the so-called ‘politics’ within the organisation. They believe that a problem is best solved when one views a difficult, complicated and complex task from a factual viewpoint. (If this is done from a social dimension, the task becomes one of furthering interests). On the basis of this decision, one examines the task with regard to the competences, resources and time needed to find a solution. One generates solution variants, analyses the advantages and disadvantages, chooses the most functional one and then implements it. This is the preferred choice, particularly for engineers and scientifically-orientated persons (and teams).

This is followed by a lot of further decisions. These affect the organisation of work processes, meetings, agendas, distribution of tasks and roles, presentations, road maps, the adherence to decisions etc.. Should a team be fixated on the side of problem solving, it is threatened, despite best efforts, with not necessarily being successful. This is because neglecting interests leads to a situation where other teams, persons, organisational units are involved too little, too late, too clumsily or not at all. Where this happens, there is no overview of their concerns, fears, worries about effects, perceptions of competition, envy, jealousy, or the potential to offend. Therefore, what would be the best solution is often not politically enforceable.

Teams require both abilities – problem solving and interest orientation – and they need the competence to decide when, where and how the two are to be applied and executed. But for this there are no rules, it is situation dependent.

Interest-orientated

When choosing whether to work on goals in the direction of problem solving or interest orientation, most teams (and people) have preferences. In the theory, we call this ‘decision premises’. Teams that like to work on interest situations dislike getting caught up in details and often find the problem-solvers slow, convoluted and unrealistic.



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They believe one ought to solve an interest position by viewing a difficult, complicated and complex task from the social dimension. Then their view immediately turns to which interests are at stake, which interests can be served or hurt and who the powerful players are in the respective context. A team which processes its goals in this way is trying to sell its own interests to others as being good for them, too. If that does not work, it seeks consensus or compromise. It seeks to save face, cares for the possible losers (or those which see themselves as such) and is not very dogmatic. Eventually it will give in, even when it is considered factually incorrect. Better a bad compromise than none, is the motto. Accordingly, the team utilises its resources for communicating comprehensively, cultivating or 'massaging' key actors, and awaiting the appropriate points in time for delivering certain messages. This poses the danger of demotivating specialists, as they are not really listened to, especially when they say: "You mustn't, or can't do it like this!". Finally, it may come to a solution which doesn't solve the problem, or creates a new one (e.g. lack of quality). Thus, teams need both abilities, problem solving and interest orientation, and they need the competence to decide when, where and how to use and apply them. But for this there are no rules, it is situation dependent.

Guiding Process Team Preservation (team-members-orientated versus organisation-orientated)

For team preservation it must decide how it respects the interests of its members, but also that of the organisation. These conflicted decisions form one of the six guiding processes of each team-dynamic. The guiding distinction consists of the question: **"Is this being decided for the benefit of the organisation or for that of the employee's environment?"**

This question, or rather, the need for a decision may, at first sight, seem unusual. But if one assumes, as is metatheoretically deducible, that the interests of the external environment (rest of the organisation, customer etc.) are principally different to that of the inner environment (team members), then each team is characterised by how it deals with this conflict in expectations. In all that it does, it is then either **team-member orientated or organisation-orientated**.

Therefore, for counselling, an understanding of these correlations is critical, because the counsellor otherwise quickly runs the danger of connecting solely with the interests of the team-members and thus threatens to damage the team and the organisation.

Team-member orientation

Members of teams use these to satisfy their needs. Expectations are connected with this. If the team does not wish to have problems, it must fulfil these. So far, so good and as such nothing exciting or new. However, because the members absolutely don't follow organisational interests in teams, the matter becomes difficult: people in teams (potentially) wish for recognition, appreciation, confirmation, security, a feeling of competence or at least not the feeling of being overburdened, autonomous working, a pleasant work place and chances for promotion (these are just the most important). None of these interests, per se, correspond to the interests of an organisation. And some of these interests,



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such as being valued by a superior, are more an expression of unfavourable self-direction by employees, rather than an appropriate requirement in the work context.

As a result, the team is, on the one hand, overwhelmed with the interests of the employees and must frustrate these, simply for reasons of time pressure and lack of resources. On the other hand, it cannot ignore the needs of the employees, because it depends on their motivation. From an organisational perspective, anything which does not lead directly to achieving performance would be a waste, if it were not for the needs of the employee. Thus, no team can escape the decision of how it utilises the organisation's resources, such as time and money, in order to satisfy the interests of the team members as much as possible.

The team leader is, therefore, in a permanent conflict of roles. If he appears to the team as the representative of the organisation's interests, he risks losing the support of his people. But if he positions himself as the representative of the team's interests, he risks losing the support of the organisation. From this theoretical viewpoint, therefore, each team, and not just its leader, is entrusted with the task of maintaining the motivation of the team, even when the organisation does not function as would be desired.

Organisation-orientated

Organisations use teams to accomplish their goals. Expectations are connected with this. If it does not wish to have problem, the team must fulfil these. So far, so good and as such nothing exciting or new. But motivating the organisation about the fulfilment of the expectations and the achievement of goals has its difficulties. On the one hand, these expectations are contradictory and on the other hand they very often stand in opposition to the expectations of the team members. Team members usually orientate themselves by sympathy, whereas the organisation rather directs itself by competence and suitability to the situation.

Team members desire self-determination, the organisation wants decision making processes and structures. Team members want to do it the way they think fit, but the organisation requires overreaching processes of control and supervision. Click [here](#) for a small chart relating to this.

Teams, therefore, inevitably react allergically in some respects: "Now what are they dictating from above?" All impulses from 'above' threaten to limit the team's autonomy, to disturb well-established conditions, to prohibit popular methods or, from the viewpoint of the team, to enforce disturbing activities (e.g. controlling reports!). It is, therefore, anything but easy, or self-evident, to serve or comply with the requirements of the organisation. Here the danger is that the team splits: the team leader feels responsible for the interests of the organisation, whereas the team members engage themselves for the interests of the team. If the team leader doesn't engage himself for the organisation, he is in danger of threatening himself or his career. Therefore, for the maintenance of the team it is of great significance that all, together, take responsibility for the motivation of the organisation.



Guiding Process Team Parameters (inside the team versus outside the team)

A team must regulate how one becomes a member and how one loses this status or gives it up. The guiding distinction lies in the question: **“By which means does one belong or not?”** No team can avoid the decision about being inside and being outside the team.

Without this decision, the social system would have no boundaries. One would not know which communication belongs to the team and which does not, who to acknowledge, which impulses would affect, endanger, strengthen, define or change one's own membership. The parameters of a group are thus created by the relevance of a group member's communications. When a team member is fundamentally passed over, then this is an exclusion from the team, even when that person is still formally a member of the team (see 'team or group?').

Therefore, admission and exclusion are, in most cases, connected with clear signals and rituals as well as with (marked) feelings among all parties involved. Admissions and exclusions from the team can be functional and dysfunctional regarding the accomplishment of goals and the maintenance of the team. For counselling, therefore, the question for whom a change within the membership of the team is dreamt about, desired, prevented, longed for or feared, is an essential observation focus.

Inside the Team

A team must have insiders and outsiders, just like a person must breathe in and out. Interestingly, being 'inside' consists of two processes which are mutually dependent:

The team, as a team (in the context of an organisation), belongs to its members. It is a formal act (employment contract, ID card, etc.), generally preceded by a selection process. It is not insignificant whether, in this process, the entire team was involved, or only part of it, whether only the leader, or no one at all. As a group, you belong to a team if all the other group members identify you as a member of this group. This means that the new member of the group is recognised as one of their own ("He/she is one of us!"). How does this recognition become established? An asymmetry can be observed here. In a social psychological context, belonging is created spontaneously by most people through similarities. It is easiest to observe this within youth cliques. They listen to the same music, they dress the same. It is a drama, therefore, when the insignia of sameness cannot be reached, i.e. expensive designer clothing. It is very possible that heavy obstacles can impede the recognition of sameness. Therefore, the subject of diversity in organisations is also prominently discussed. When employees become more and more diverse (language, culture, origin, interests, work, style, gender), conscious activities are required to establish an 'us' feeling in new and different ways. These two different forms of being inside lead to each team consisting of the formal team (job chart) and an informal team (belonging).

Outside the Team

A team must have insiders and outsiders, the way a person must breathe in and out. Interestingly, being 'outside' consists of two processes which are mutually dependent.



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For a team, as a team, to shed a member, they must be dismissed or transferred. Whether and how the team members take part in this decision process, how transparent the organisation's reasons are, whether there is a formal goodbye in which his contributions are honoured, all this has far-reaching consequences. At the same time, a decision is required which releases the member from the membership of the group. There are cases where someone has not been a formal member of a team for years, but is still regarded as belonging (and thus his opinions count and are considered as before!). As the departure is regarded so negatively (except in the case of promotion), it plays a major role for team dynamics whether processes exist, from which one can tell that the membership has come to an end: expressing what remains to be said, expressing thanks, celebrating and commiserating, all these are important rituals which a team can utilise. The less such rituals are nurtured, the less cohesive the remaining group will be. The more often a team has the experience that suddenly 'someone is missing', the more anxiety-ridden the group boundaries will be for all. This can have profound effects on the performance capabilities of the team.

Guiding Process Team Reflection

Every team decides which subjects (factual, social, seasonal) can be discussed officially and openly. Here the guiding process team reflection can be seen. The guiding distinction consists of the question: **“What is reflected upon explicitly and what remains implicit?”**.

You can tell that this decision is being made by the fact that there are subjects in each team which are not discussed. Sometimes no one knows why, sometimes the taboo is justified and sometimes nobody knows why one ought to discuss something (in a way, the subject is then solved). Such communication barriers (“We won't even start on that subject!”) can be helpful. But often they can also have a detrimental effect on motivation and work results. Thus, teams are required to systematically reflect upon what should be **reflected upon** and what one should cease to reflect upon – and, then, to simply act. Reflection is directly related to the ability of the team to direct itself explicitly. For counselling the question presents itself, therefore, as to which subjects can be and should be brought up, who has an interest in this and who not, who gives the impulse or the mandate for it and with which objectives does one broaden the reflection framework.

Reflecting

It is only possible to purposefully alter a decision pattern (of any kind), when that, which has been excluded from the decision pattern, is reintroduced into the system as a feasible choice possibility: “Could it not be completely different?” On the one hand, the process, whereby a team is concertededly occupied with that which it has so far neglected, considered undesirable, not achievable, changeable, or defined as meaningless or unnecessary, is called reflecting. On the other hand, it can concern itself with whether that, which one has so far viewed as correct, true, skilled, competent, without alternatives, neat, appropriate or successful, can and should be still seen in this light. Reflection offers new alternatives to a system. This means that the degree of freedom grows and the complexity increases. While one reflects, the possibilities for action are usually somewhat limited and the ability to perform is reduced. When, then, is reflection



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required? It is required when one must assume that something is changing in the team's environment. If one continues as before, it can be fatal or deadly when the environment changes. To put it another way: nothing is so dangerous as success in the past. Those who were successful in the past usually believe that it is not necessary to reflect. But past success is not necessarily followed by future success, particularly not in highly dynamic environments. Therefore, nowadays, it is more advisable for the team to routinely put itself through a reflection process (=team exercise, special meetings) and to come up with impulses which stimulate, challenge and test things which are taken for granted.

Leaving Unreflected

The option to leave something unreflected upon is necessary for survival, because otherwise one would not be able to function anymore. Every system, including a team, can only selectively afford reflection, or else it would be overextended with its inner complexity. Therefore, anything which serves the preservation of the team and aids the accomplishments of its goals can, in principle, remain unreflected upon. But to preserve this unreflected state becomes dysfunctional or dangerous, when not only little signals, but also more massive events (high sickness levels, large staff turnover, quality problems, competition is quicker, better or cheaper, costs are too high, time limits not adhered to) are simply accepted with the shrug of a shoulder. If this happens, it is, seen from the outside, usually a sign of communication blockages. How are such blockages explained, when non-members of the team, the organisation or the counsellor with limited impressions, can assert, astonished, that something is not right and that the team members ought to speak to each other?

The answer is relatively simple. There are no rational reasons for this, only emotional ones: fear of failure in conflict, fear of offending, fear of being excluded, fear of being discovered as incompetent, fear of losing recognition, fear of being overloaded etc.

As the famous emotional intelligence is not always as well developed as necessary, the team then avoids the necessity for reflection, and, in a worst-case scenario, it moves, together with its members, all the way to a collision. At the same time, it is frequently still the case that there is a realistic assumption that the team is overextended with reflecting upon tricky subjects ("This would cause the whole thing to blow up!"), and because of that, it does not seek external counselling support. Even the fear of obtaining help is wide spread.