# SENSITIVITY TRAINING IN "COUSIN" GROUPS

*a confrontation design*

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Increasingly, sensitivity training is being applied in on-going organizations. Perhaps the basic model provides for successive experiences with T-Group dynamics in this progression of contexts: "stranger" experiences → "cousin" groups → "family" groups or organizational teams. Family groups are composed of individuals who work together directly; cousin groups are composed of individuals who are from the same parent organization but do not usually work together. Frequently, also, the usual progression is variously short-circuited in direct applications to work of the laboratory approach. Indeed, experienced observers have argued convincingly that the usual progression ought to be reversed, with cousin or family experiences preceding any stranger laboratories.[1]

Whatever the basic learning model, however, it seems very probable that increasing attention will be given to cousin and family laboratory experiences. This article derives its major motivation from that probability.

Working with "cousin" groups raises some crucial issues, some of which this article deals with in describing and discussing a design for a cousin laboratory that has proved to be useful. The cousin groups were undergoing a first laboratory experience preliminary to a possible "family" group phase, and the design has been replicated three times, with consistent and intended effects.[2] Each replication involved one-week laboratories of two T-groups of 10 members each. This design requires at least two T-Groups. Our guess is that the design can be used with multiples of two T-groups, but with some learning costs. That is, N = 2 permits fully working through trust issues that are especially relevant in cousin laboratories.

## GOALS OF THE DESIGN

The basic laboratory design outlined in Figure 1 attempts to meet a number of goals simultaneously, and they may be listed briefly.

First, the design is intended to provide a positive experience for "tough" groups. That is, our clients were individuals who had minimal working relations but who were likely to be cautious because they came from the same parent organization. Developing trust in T-Groups, *and* testing it at several levels of organization, consequently, were seen as the basic design imperatives. In addition, the client groups were expected to have a large proportion of individuals whose work stressed rational-technical analysis. Consequently, as a secondary design imperative, considerable attention was given to theory inputs that could help T-Group development. These inputs provided conceptual handles for the laboratory experience and hopefully they also suggested extensions of that experience relevant at work.

Second, the design attempts to create a kind of stereophonic effect in a short time. The intent was dual: to induce an intense experience in T-groups, while working with a variety of situations analogous to those encountered at work. The objectives of the laboratory were largely restricted to interpersonal and group here-and-now phenomena. Back-home applications were the subject of another phase.

Third, the basic analog underlying the design centered around multiple, simultaneous and at least potentially-conflicting loyalties in the laboratory setting. The purpose was to confront the issue of trust directly. Too often, cousin laboratories provide a good experience that is restricted to individual T-Groups. Cousin laboratories to us have often seemed fragmented, with too little work on testing in a variety of settings the trust and skills developed in T-Groups. The useful real-life analogs, of course, lie in precisely such extensions. Most people have plenty of experience in organizational settings in which internal cohesiveness essentially rests on mistrust of other units, if not hostility toward them. Reinforcing that experience would be perverse.

# Figure 1. A Confrontation Design for Sensitivity Training in "Cousin Groups."

| | Sunday | Monday | Tuesday | Wednesday | Thursday | Friday |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 9:00-10:30 | | Clusters with assigned Cross-T-Group pairs: observation only | Clusters with assigned Cross-T-Group pairs: Alter Ego Option | T-Group | Clusters: Group to Group Feedback | T-Group |
| 10:30-11:00 | | | | | | |
| 11:00-12:45 | | T-Group | T-Group | | Pair Confrontations | Closing Session: —Feedback to staff —Re-administration of questionnaire |
| | | L | U | N | C | H |
| 2:00-3:30 | | General Session: Jo-Hari Window | General Session: Feedback Guidelines | | General Session: Confrontations in Organizations | |
| 3:30-5:00 | | T-Group | T-Group | | T-Group | |
| 8:00-10:00 | Clusters with assigned Cross-T-Group pairs: observation only | T-Group | T-Group | | T-Group | |

Fourth, the design attempted to provide experiential learning in ways that would permit easy transfer to the back-home situation. The underlying model was a confronting one. Basically, confrontations were within a T-Group and between pairs, but possible extensions of the mode to large organizations also were illustrated. Our specific intent in the laboratory was to emphasize processes and cognitive insights that were easily transferrable without spending time on working directly on transfer issues.

Fifth, to reinforce the confronting modality, explicit attention was given to three broad categories of skills. They were: observation skills; feedback skills; and helping/consulting skills. Again, the focus was on the transferrable, rather than on transfer.

Sixth, substantial time was devoted to the presentation of cognitive materials. The basic focus was on feedback processes, since they are so central for confronting effectively. Tentative extensions of cognitive materials to the back-home organization were made, but the focus was on the pairs and particularly on the T-Group.
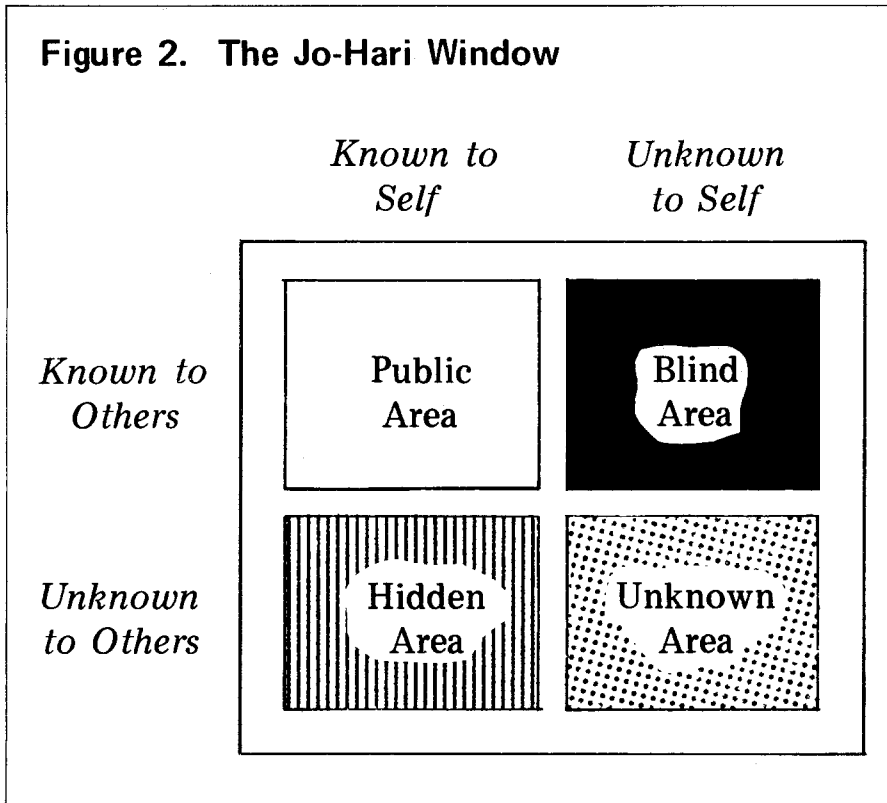
## SPECIAL FEATURES OF THE DESIGN

Some features of the design are well known, but several are noteworthy.

First, the design makes heavy use of a basic group-observing-group model, or clusters. The rapid group development associated with clustering is its most prominent consequence. Our experience is decidedly that the effect holds even for cousin groups, and we almost write "especially for cousin groups." In several other cousin laboratories, staff seemed very concerned with "keeping things in the T-Group" because of the cousin status of participants. Our experience argues for confronting the inevitable issue of trust inherent in multiple loyalties. Avoiding the issue

not only may inhibit the development of individual T-Groups, but it very probably also inhibits any cross-T-group activity. The possibility of doing the latter, of course, is perhaps the major analogical learning of cousin laboratories. For if cross-T-Group relations cannot be developed in the laboratory setting, this augurs only pure woe for attempts to develop more difficult back-home relations between units of organization. Participants get that message, loud and clear, no matter how stimulating the T-Group.

Second, the use of Cross-T-Group pairs tends to induce learning that has analogs back-home. The pair-partner provided another set of reactions to individuals, who seemed delighted with the opportunity to cross-validate feedback received within their T-Group. The pairs seemed to intensify, rather than to dilute, the laboratory experience. Note that pairs were intentionally limited in their formal interaction until

## Figure 2. The Jo-Hari Window

|  | *Known to Self* | *Unknown to Self* |
|---|---|---|
| *Known to Others* | Public Area | Blind Area |
| *Unknown to Others* | Hidden Area | Unknown Area |

the Pair Confrontations. Pairs were used gently before then, only to accustom participants to the linkage. Our rationale was to build T-Groups first, and to use the Pair Confrontations as a personal measure of the accumulated learning relevant to observing, providing feedback, and helping/consulting. The purpose was to test multiple loyalties while preserving trust.

Third, two early theory sessions emphasized the role of feedback. Both sessions utilized the same basic approach, and the opportunities for safe testing they provided we see as very valuable in the total design. The basic purpose was to encourage and to facilitate self-disclosure that was appropriate, timely, in the here-and-now, and whose underlying motives could be tested in safety.[3]

The Jo-Hari Window[4] was used first to encourage initial openness and levelling. (See Figure 2.) The approach was standard, roughly encompassing all knowledge about the self in the four cells of a 2 x 2 matrix, as illustrated.

The four areas of the "window" were described and illustrated. Then the presenter requested the total laboratory to provide on notepaper anonymous examples of Hidden and Blind behaviors

they had observed in the laboratory. A sampling of these examples was read and discussed, the patent goal being to model and reinforce openness and levelling under quite safe conditions.
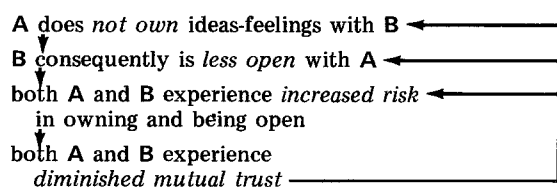
The second theory input stressed guidelines for feedback. The introduction discussed the relations between openness, owning, mutual trust, and risk, as sketched in Figure 3. The basic point was that feedback cycles can be degenerative or regenerative. The laboratory goal was to develop experience and skills relevant to preserving regenerative feedback cycles and reversing degenerative cycles. The Guidelines in Table I were presented as highly relevant to this goal.

Specifically, the presenter emphasized that the design of the General Session was to minimize risk and hopefully induce increases in the other three variables.

The details of the theory session are uncomplicated, although execution is critical. Thus the entire laboratory population was asked to contribute a piece of feedback they had not wished to risk in the T-Group or in their first Pair meeting. The item was to be written on notepaper, *in dialog form*, and with the sender's guess as to the probable reaction of the receiver. Then the six guidelines for feedback in Table I were introduced and illustrated with a hypothetical example. The piece of feedback-dialog used for the initial run-through on the guidelines was: "Charlie, you are a stereophonic SOB. And I know why. I'll bet your father rejected you as a child." Then the individual notepapers were read, with the

### Figure 3. Schemata of Degenerative and Regenerative Feedback Cycles.

#### a. Degenerative Feedback Cycle

A does *not own* ideas-feelings with B
B consequently is *less open* with A
both A and B experience *increased risk* in owning and being open
both A and B experience *diminished mutual trust*

#### b. Regenerative Feedback Cycle

A *owns* ideas-feelings relevant to B
B consequently is *more open* with A
both A and B experience *reduced risk* in owning and being open
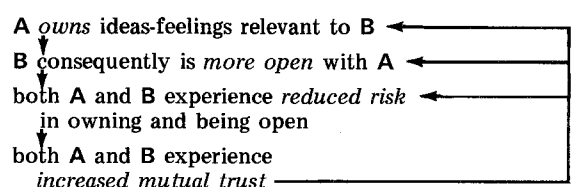both A and B experience *increased mutual trust*

## Table I. Six Guidelines for Regenerative Feedback Cycles.

1. The feedback should emphasize here-and-now occurrences.

2. The feedback should emphasize the individual act, rather than the "total person" acting.

3. The feedback should be "non-evaluative"

   —that is, feedback should report the impact on the self of the perceived behavior of the other.

   —that is, feedback should not be judgmental or interpretive.

4. The feedback should serve multiple ends in relation to possible behavioral change

   —that is, the feedback should encourage "unfreezing" the behaviors that the trainee comes to feel are undesirable.

   —that is, the feedback should encourage, reinforce and report the effects of practice of replacement behaviors.

   —that is, the feedback should help "refreeze" new behaviors that the trainee comes to feel are more functional for him.

5. The feedback should emphasize "trust in levelling" roughly that condition in which participants feel that any information they offer will be used to help them and to make known their needs and resources.

6. The feedback should emphasize creating and maintaining an "organic community," built on trust and recognizing the full resources of group members.

total laboratory population participatively measuring the examples of feedback dialog against the guidelines. In general, participants could easily and with great relish evaluate feedback fragments as they related to Guidelines 1-3. They required more help with the last three guidelines.

Fourth, the Pair Confrontations were an important part of the design. Basically, individuals were asked to respond in writing to three questions, answers to which they compared with their pair-partner.

1. How do I see myself?

2. How does my pair-partner see me?

3. How do I see my pair-partner?

Pair-partners then compared their written products with each other, with a charge to use the images as bases for help/consulting the pair-partner to be a more effective member of his group. The design also provided for an early and gentle introduction to the associated complexities of helping/consulting, in an Alter Ego option on the basic cluster design. The option permitted a member of the outside group in a cluster to temporarily take the role of someone in the inner group, to express some idea or feeling that the latter was seen as having but was not expressing. We were prepared to repeat the option, should it fail to generate appropriate behavior, but each of the three replications saw great Alter Ego activity and no repeats were considered necessary.

The Pair Confrontations were designed for two basic purposes. We desired to build on the work in T-Groups, as well as on the cognitive inputs related to feedback. In addition, we wanted to provide a test-site that would constitute a mild analog of back-home situations. Hence the choice of cross-T-Group pairs. Hence also the scheduling of Pair Confrontations near the close of the laboratory, but not so late as to preclude opportunities for two important kinds of learning. First, we wanted to provide an opportunity for testing the basic confrontation model in the T-Group as well as in the Pair Confrontation. Second, we also felt it important to provide ample opportunity for tying together any major loose-ends from the Pair Confrontation. Since the Pair Confrontations

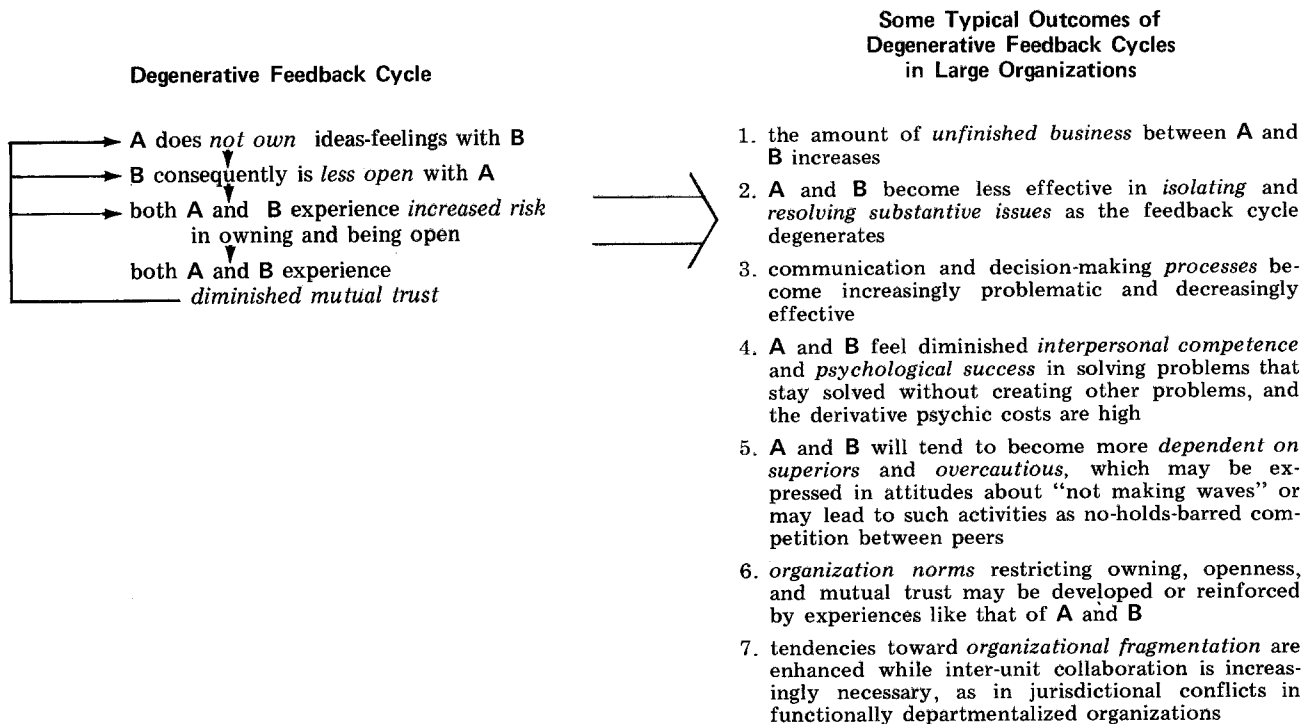could not really be monitored by staff, the latter opportunity was considered particularly necessary.

Fifth, a theory input was scheduled as the laboratory activity following the Pair Confrontations. The purpose of the Thursday afternoon General Session was multiple. First, the theory session generalized the confrontation model to complex organizations. Specifically, time was spent in describing and illustrating the kinds of organizational products that are associated with degenerative feedback cycles. Figure 4 outlines that argument,[5] which attempts to generalize upon the earlier theory inputs concerning feedback. Second, the theory session outlined in some detail the methods and the results of using the basic confrontation model in a complex organization,[6] the purpose being to provide some conceptual ways of generalizing from the Pair Confrontations which the participants had just experienced. Third, the firm's training director then discussed recent experiences with the basic confrontation model, e.g., variations used with the firm's president, within divisions, and between divisions. The obvious purpose was to outline the possibilities and the problems of extending laboratory work in the confrontation modality into the back-home situation.

Sixth, data-gathering was an important activity built into the laboratory design. Thus each participant was to bring with him a completed Problem Analysis Questionnaire,[7] and a post-administration of the PAQ was one of the laboratory's closing activities. Participants were told that the data would permit us to estimate the degree of attainment of laboratory goals, certainly an element of significance given the resources being devoted to the training program.

## CONCLUSION

The confrontation design above, as well as its supporting rationale, have proved useful in a number of replications with "cousin" groups. Data based

**Figure 4. A Degenerative Feedback Cycle and Some Typical Outcomes in Large Organizations.**

**Degenerative Feedback Cycle**

→ A does *not own* ideas-feelings with **B**

→ **B** consequently is *less open* with **A**

→ both **A** and **B** experience *increased risk* in owning and being open

both **A** and **B** experience *diminished mutual trust*

**Some Typical Outcomes of Degenerative Feedback Cycles in Large Organizations**

1. the amount of *unfinished business* between **A** and **B** increases

2. **A** and **B** become less effective in *isolating* and *resolving substantive issues* as the feedback cycle degenerates

3. communication and decision-making *processes* become increasingly problematic and decreasingly effective

4. **A** and **B** feel diminished *interpersonal competence* and *psychological success* in solving problems that stay solved without creating other problems, and the derivative psychic costs are high

5. **A** and **B** will tend to become more *dependent on superiors* and *overcautious*, which may be expressed in attitudes about "not making waves" or may lead to such activities as no-holds-barred competition between peers

6. *organization norms* restricting owning, openness, and mutual trust may be developed or reinforced by experiences like that of **A** and **B**

7. tendencies toward *organizational fragmentation* are enhanced while inter-unit collaboration is increasingly necessary, as in jurisdictional conflicts in functionally departmentalized organizations

on Oshry and Harrison's PAQ yield a consistent pattern of statistically significant pre- and post-administration differences on dimensions associated with personal and interpersonal learning.[8] We invite others to further replicate the basic design, and particularly in laboratories where more than two T-Groups are involved. Such replications would test our guess that the learnings are diluted when $N > 2$, particularly because of problems with unresolved issues associated with trust. If so, this would be a major design guideline for cousin laboratories.

For those readers who are largely consumers of behavioral science applications, the description above should serve several purposes. First, it should provide a possible model for various organizational applications of sensitivity training, as in moving toward "interface" groups representing two or more units of organization that desire closer collaboration. Second, the description reflects considerable successful experience, and in that sense can serve as a reference point from whose several parts design extensions might be made to suit specific situations. Third, finally, the description should serve to explicate the kind of logic that underlies organizational applications of sensitivity training, which sometimes exude a mystical quality.

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