

You be the difference!

By William Peterson

Everything we have spoken about thus far has had something to do with relating. We are now going to shift the focus to how we do this in groups: at home or at work. This is a vast topic so we will make a start. We will address this topic again to cover other key areas in the future.

Mind the gap, passenger or participant?

We all spend a lot of time relating to others in groups, meetings and forums, whether the context is in our families, social gatherings, community meetings, formal and informal meetings at work, or sporting teams, etc.

In these different situations you are either a passenger or a participant. In the passenger role you are being taken for a ride and you might not like the destination. In the participant role you are involved and you play a co-creative role in mapping out the route and you are involved in the “territory” of the experience.

Whatever house I enter, I shall come to heal.

The Hippocratic Oath

Some people have had terrible experiences in groups due to the conflict, infighting, posturing, hidden agendas, bullying, insensitivity and grandstanding. All of these experiences left them totally apathetic about the value and positive influence that can be derived from groups, meetings or forums. So they just “hunker down”, act invisible and hope nobody messes with them or presses their buttons. Or, they become the lone voice, risk taker who with conviction has to tell the Emperor he is wearing no clothes. Often a hard and lonely place to work from and be in.

However, from this place you redeem yourself and the group.

In the “jungle” of being in groups, forums and meetings you have learnt to hone your own set of poisonous blow arrows which you tactically and discreetly launch in the hope of rendering your enemy paralysed. You of course are not the only one with a well-honed arsenal of poisonous blow arrows attacking in the dark and chaos of the group. This tit-for-tat reprisal attacks only leaves the group paralysed in its ability to relate, transform and achieve its goals.

If you choose to become a participant and not a passenger in your group or community setting then there are a few insights I would like to share with you.

There are a number of important things to understand about the team or group that you are a member of and what is present in its composition, atmosphere and dynamics. There are a myriad of situations, experiences and differences held by individuals. To make it slightly more complicated, you must not take it for granted that everybody acts and reacts from a place of conscious awareness. In other words, sometimes people will say and do things that they may not be fully aware of at the time. For example, when a particular subject/issue is raised or someone in the group speaks out, they have a reaction – it’s like their “buttons” are being pressed. Until you point it out to them, they may remain oblivious to their reaction.

Going Deeper

To go deeper you need to be aware of the iceberg analogy. This analogy suggests that what you see in the actions of others may only be 10% of the actual issue. And this represents the 10% of the iceberg. You also need to understand and appreciate the 90% below the surface (which is substantial). This

90% often constitutes the attitude, intention, history (narrative), background and truth. So when you or others enter a group you bring all of who you are with all of its complexities. Practice the discipline of awareness which is seeing below the surface in order to recognise and appreciate what is brewing at the bottom.

Be careful not to be triggered by every action and reaction you receive, rather find out what sits behind the action. You will need to show immense compassion, remembering that compassion means to be moved to action. In other words, you need to move toward the other and leave behind your preconceived ideas.

Therefore, compassion is never passive and indifferent. Sandra Bullock in her latest Movie, “The Blind Side”, in a scene when the black boy, “Michael” she adopts, runs away and does not want to come back to their home, she does not go off into a tirade of how good she has been to him and how ungrateful he is. Rather, she gets down onto the floor with him and inquires from him what she may have missed. When he finally confides in her, a new and deep trust is infused into the relationship. She finally understood (was accurately informed) when she allowed herself to see what was happening below the surface of Michael’s iceberg (the tragic story of his life). Sandra Bullock showed us how to demonstrate compassion in action when relating to the other.

All realities belong

The soul is always beautiful,
The universe is duly in order,
Everything is in its place,
What has arrived is in its place and
What waits shall be in its place.

- Walt Whitman, complete poetry

In your group, individuals will experience various levels of realities. This will give the

group its unique atmosphere, personality and dynamics. For the group to function well and be healthy all of these realities must be acknowledged and allowed expression. If any of these realities are suppressed then the group will not function optimally. The first reality – **(Task Orientation)** – This reality concerns itself with the group’s ability to plan and execute its charter: goals, objectives and task assignment and execution.

The second reality – **(Ghosts and Elephants)** – This reality concerns itself with difficult issues in the group that everyone knows exists but are fearful of addressing head-on. So the issues go underground, subterranean and manifest itself in covert dysfunctional group behaviour. However, as with volcanoes their fissures find their way to the surface and deliver their payload which is seldom constructive. In these situations you will find some group members tiptoeing on eggshells afraid to point out the “ghost” or name the “elephant” in the room. This results in the group’s energy and life force being cut off. The group is rendered sterile, impotent and mediocrity and dishonesty sets in.

The last reality – **(Essence of the Group’s Common Humanity)** – is recognising what binds everybody in the group together, what defines the soul of the group, that golden thread. This is very hard to experience if the other two realities are not allowed their full expression. When thinking about these realities and their expression in groups, it’s not an “either-or”, but an “And and Both”.

Individuals, who are trapped at these levels with their voices silenced, cannot perform at their best nor can they bring their giftedness to the fore. If they are not heard or if there is a tendency in the group to avoid dealing with conflict or face unpleasant issues, then these individuals will be isolated in their silence and eventually disconnected from the group and

its charge. As mentioned earlier, some of these individuals will go underground and carry out guerrilla warfare sabotaging the group and its objectives. I have often observed how exemplary and well-intentioned leaders often lead almost exclusively from the level of their group's charge (**Task Orientation**) and this at the expense of the other realities also present within the group. This is often due to bad education or just being scared of working in the place of feeling, emotion and conflict. They then wonder why there is no commitment in the group or why the group's performance remains mediocre.

To illustrate: I was facilitating a very large and intense team process in which a group consisting mainly of African Black participants were invited to tell their personal life stories. They did this in a most moving, dignified and inspiring way. One Senior Manager present in the group, after also sharing his moving story expressed the following sentiments, "After listening to your stories I now know that after all, beyond our superficial physical differences we are all brothers and sisters...we all long at a deep level for the same things." This leader in allowing the ghosts and the elephants in the room to be expressed through the life stories of the group members, connected with the essence of the group's common humanity. It was therefore far easier to gain collective commitment in getting the group to execute its tasks because they were in a place where they felt appreciated at the deepest level of their humanity. In other words, they felt at home.

In a similar exercise also with a largely Black group, a White Afrikaner man in his late fifties came over to me after the sharing, with tears in his eyes and with deep sincerity said, "I never had the opportunity to sit like this and listen to their stories. I have lived so disconnected from them all my life and now their stories have shown me how much I have

missed and how wrong I have been about them all my life. I want to get to know and relate to them, please help me to change." As he stepped over and through his "challenge", for the remainder of the workshop he became the beloved among the largely Black participant group. They embraced him and accepted his spirit. Largely, because he dared to show his vulnerability and his humanity. This experience gave the group the energy to produce great work that day. Why, because the group had allowed the silent narrative about the "ghost of Apartheid" and its impact to be spoken about.

In this group all realities were allowed their expression and their reward was deep awareness, commitment to transform and above optimal execution of tasks.

For those of you who are familiar with the work of Honey and Mumford's learning styles i.e. Activist, Reflector, Theorist and Pragmatist, these four phases are the way in which the author's say we learn and engage with information. According to the authors we all tend to prefer a learning style which eventually becomes our preferred/dominant style of learning. We however, are cautioned to give consideration to the remaining three styles as we learn. They are crucial in enriching and making wholesome our learning experiences.

This is equally true of the different levels that exist in the groups. Keep watch in your group when there is a tendency to only give attention and value to the one reality to the exclusion of the others. This will isolate and disconnect the group. Sometimes we stop the group from making great break-throughs and growing new shoots because we are afraid of the initial chaos and risk that generally comes with the preparedness to navigate between these three realities. Just imagine our world if we were to stop the four seasons from colliding

into each other naturally. Groups have a natural wisdom and intelligence, just trust it, trust yourself as it wishes to engage with these different realities.

Stepping through the fear:
Whoever can see through all fear will
always be safe.

LaoTzu, Tao Te Ching (Mitchell)

Breaking through the fear

I wonder if you have ever observed a situation in your group or meeting where you noticed someone struggling to complete saying what they needed to say. They either mumble their words, become too wordy, speak too fast or simply just cannot get the words out, silence! But if you listen with care you will notice the emotion that often sits in their tone.

In one such group situation, I observed a person who had promised to report back on a task she had promised to tackle. Her promise was to make time and be reconciled with her father. When it was her turn to report back it was clear that she did not succeed in meeting with him to begin the conversation toward reconciliation. However, what was unknown to the group, was that she was also going through the most difficult career crisis of her life – dreaded retrenchment. So when the group asked her to reset a new date to meet with her father she was unable to make the promise. She wanted the group to notice that she was going through a very difficult period regarding her work and that talking to her father would be added pressure that she was not able to carry at the same time. She needed a postponement until she could resolve her career crisis, but she did not know how to articulate this. She was struggling to make herself vulnerable to the group through fully disclosing what was really going on for her.

A member in the group recognising her difficulty stepped into her “situation” and articulated what they felt she wanted the group to acknowledge about her situation. When the group member checked in to see if his interpretation was accurate, the woman with much relief agreed with the interpretation. In helping this woman to find her own voice, she was encouraged to restate and articulate her situation which she bravely did. In other words, she was encouraged to make herself vulnerable and offer full disclosure around her situation. This brought her into alignment with herself. The group was moved with compassion. The quality of the meeting and conversations which followed this incident became real and humane. The group recognised her difficulty and helped her to be vulnerable and move beyond her fear. She was transformed and so was the group.

In your group you may be required to help the other person get over the difficulty that prevents them from speaking clearly about what they are truly feeling or needing. If push comes to shove, you may even have to articulate it on their behalf. **Caution:** Always ask for permission to speak on their behalf and check in with them that you have made the correct interpretation.

Trying to dodge “landmines” blindfolded

In another example: “Nothing is taboo”, read one of the ground rules of a group I had the privilege of working with. However, when one of the members angrily confronted another member about an issue and chose to tackle it in the open, an uncomfortable silence fell upon the group and members seemed to retract into themselves like tortoises do when threatened. Eyes and heads dropped and it seemed that people were even afraid to make eye contact. There were intense emotional feelings on both sides which sadly was not sufficiently acknowledged and mediated.

Since then, the group avoided open confrontation. They struggled to find their *joie de vivre*; their joy for and purpose of being part of the group, evaporated. We had to stop and deal with the matter. We knew if it was left unmediated we ran the risk of not achieving the group's task.

Dealing with conflict and difficult issues in a group can be a frightening experience for many people. However, if the feelings and views of both parties are competently mediated then it becomes a gateway for the group to enter into deeper and more authentic relationships. The path onto the "road less travelled" is often avoided because people tend to shy away from attending to doing the difficult work in the group i.e. engaging with conflict and difficult conversations. If the group postpones or ignores these subterranean but charged situations it will only grow bigger and later explode. This can threaten the life and effective functioning of the group. So what we avoid and run away from are often our gateways to new and great opportunities. There is an African story that illustrates this so well:

In the savanna grasslands of Africa when lions are ready to hunt, a male lion runs to one side of the grassland to prepare for the attack. A group of lionesses, known for their accuracy and hunting ability, slowly move in on the other side of the grassland and wait stealthily behind the thick reeds and grass. Unaware of their surroundings and the impending attack, their prey – flocks of zebras, wildebeest, and gazelle – graze quietly in the centre of the grassland. Then, the male lion lets out an almighty roar to signal the hunt.

In an almost instinctive knee-jerk reaction to the roar, the prey scatter from their herds, running as fast as they can **away** from the roaring lion behind them. What they don't realise is that they will run **straight into** the

group of lionesses who have moved into position, now ready to pounce, attack, and kill. There is something very peculiar about the lion's hunt. If the lion's prey grazing in the savanna grasslands would just run towards the roar of the lion, they would easily get around the single lion by their sheer size in number and speed. Instead they run away out of fear, heading straight into an even more deadly situation.

When we fear to face the roar of our fears we often face greater dangers ahead as a group.

Awareness about your rank

Another matter I want to share with you is one of rank, in groups. It may be a useful practise in awareness to know that all of us enter groups with a certain amount of power that comes with our "rank" or "station in life". Some people carry their rank like medals as if on a grand march pass. You ignore the power and privilege that comes with your rank at your own peril. People generally use their rank for their exclusive advantage.

What does it mean to be promoted into leadership position?

Frankly, it means we now have the authority to serve people in a special way.

Anonymous (Van Ekeren, The speaker's Sourcebook)

Some people are born into this position of privilege while others have worked hard to acquire it. Being born into or having acquired this privilege/rank does not automatically make you bad or suggest that you should now harbour feelings of guilt. After all, why would you want to feel guilty about being a man, Senior Manager, White, spiritually enlightened, physically able, South African, heterosexual, first language English speaker, middle class or rich, etc. With all of these various positions of rank you can either choose to remain unconscious to its impacts

or you can be awake to the privileges it brings and use it for the good.

If you are unconscious to your rank and privilege then your behaviour and words will trigger others because you would have naturally organised your experiences and perspectives according to your world. You will be unable to see things through the eyes and experiences of the other. Your words will unintentionally cut deep and hurt. Your lack of empathy will render the other invisible and “explained”. You will perpetuate your rank in the most subtle and unconscious ways and only those without rank will feel its direct impact and effects. You will not know why people try to avoid or even despise you.

Rejoice! – when you are woken up to your privilege through crisis, challenge or loss. When you step into any group, team or forum you are bedecked with your rank and privilege and immediately the landscape of relating in that situation will be set up in a particular way. The “old ways” of relating will continue in the group unless you recognise your privilege and choose to relate in an enlightened way without having to really forgo your rank.

I was part of a workshop where a manager kept on disappearing during crucial parts. This started giving the rest of the staff the message that he was “above” the workshop and that they were the ones in need of the learning experience. It also gave them another message, that if you are a Senior Manager you do not need to explain to your staff your movements, you can just come and go as you please. This was despite the fact that the workshop’s ground rules spoke clearly about showing respect. This manager was totally unconscious to the etiquette of excusing himself and explaining to the group why he had to leave the room so often. The group observed his behaviour and felt the impact of being dishonoured but no one among them

had the courage to speak up. Needless to say, until the behaviour of this Senior Manager was addressed the energy during the workshop remained low and interest in the content rapidly dissipated. As a member of the facilitator team, I raised the Senior Manager’s awareness to the impact he was having and his immediate reaction was that we were being over-sensitive and that his staff knew he meant no disrespect. When we invited him to hear how the staff really felt about his behaviour he was surprised. He sincerely apologised, explained the crisis he was dealing with and with their permission negotiated to attend the next course where he could be fully present.

The team learnt with the guidance of the facilitator to break their silence and speak directly. The manager was woken from his deep slumber of privilege, and made aware to the impact of his behaviour. The group felt invigorated because they spoke through the “unspeakable”: “respect us and our time; don’t behave as if we are invisible”. The workshop continued with renewed vigour and energy and the way of relating in the group was robust, real, lively and honest.

How often do we do this to others, allowing our rank to anaesthetise our sensitivity towards them? Also, how often do we sit in meetings or groups like passengers allowing ourselves to be dominated, silenced and rendered mere passengers? What is important is that when you address issues of this nature in your group it is crucial to give both sides an opportunity to fully express themselves. The idea is not that one side wins and the other loses. If so, we merely perpetuate the cycle by another name and the suffering continues. We would have achieved very little.

Last night as I was sleeping, I dreamt–marvellous error!– that I had a beehive here inside my heart. And the golden bees were making white combs and sweet honey from my old failures.

Antonio Machado. *Times Alone*

This article has been a journey in awareness towards your understanding of what happens in the groups and forums in which you participate and relate. I am sure that you would have found yourself both as a passenger and a participant while reading the various scenarios and concepts. My wish is that where you found yourself as a passenger in this article, you now have enough awareness to begin to move towards participant. We will be talking some more in the future about how to make a difference in the groups and forums we find ourselves. Remember, that making a difference only comes when we are prepared to become awake and aware. Until next time, engage authentically.