

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS: DIAGNOSIS & INTERVENTION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is about diagnosing organizational events. It describes four levels of analysis and explores the implications of each for effective and humane actions in organizations. The four levels are individual, interpersonal, group and intergroup. How we diagnose organizational events shapes our choices about managing them. The more limited our facility with generating explanations at all four levels, the more limited our choices and our effectiveness. The paper aims to expand the ways we might understand what happens in organizations in the service of expanding our data collection and intervention options.

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INTRODUCTION

Organization members, no matter what their roles, make choices about how to act many times each day. Some of these choices are made easily and without much deliberation. The more important these choices are, the more they affect the organization's performance and the well being of the people involved, the more we hope we are able to step back and reflect on what is happening around us so as to choose the best course of action. How we "diagnose" what we see and feel can have a significant influence on what we do. This paper is about diagnosing organizational events. It is an attempt to expand the ways in which we understand what happens in organizations and thereby expand the choices we have for acting effectively and humanely.

LEVELS OF ANALYSIS

Consider the following vignette:

A newly appointed team leader calls the meeting to order. There are seven other team members present. The Team Leader is about to update the group on a variety of proposed changes in policy and practice.

During the meeting, John, a man slightly older than the rest of the team (2 women and 5 men), starts to ask "nit-picking" questions that you think are more annoying than enlightening. He is also making snide comments and jokes during the meeting that elicit giggles and guffaws from the rest of the team members. The meeting seems unproductive and combative.

The team leader approaches you at the end of the meeting and says, "What the hell was going on in there?" You imagine her next question to be "And what should I do about it?" How would you explain what happened during the meeting?

When a group of undergraduate students or mid-career executives or mental health professionals begins to offer possible explanations for this generic yet quite familiar organizational event, they invariably start with half a dozen statements describing something about John. “John is in a bad mood,” or “John is feeling insecure,” or “John was passed over and is angry.” This seems to be a case of a disruptive team member. But slowly these groups of people, all of whom live and work in organizations, begin to suggest other explanations. First, the person of interest changes. “Perhaps the team leader does not have control of the team,” or “There is conflict between John and the team leader.” Then someone notices that the other team members are giggling and when encouraged might say, “Perhaps the group is upset about the changes,” or “The group doesn’t like the team leader.” Eventually people in the room begin to notice other aspects of the situation, the demographic make-up of the team, the gender of the authority figure and her main antagonist, the “newness” of the situation, the absence of any historical information about the team and even the fact that there is someone else involved, the case writer.

The discussion of explanations that unfolds from this case illustrates at least four different “levels of analysis” that can aid in our diagnosis of organizational events (Rice, 1969; Wells, 1985). These four levels are discussed below. It also illustrates that we all have “favorite” explanations, ones that we go to first when presented with an organizational situation. In this case, and in many such cases, the favorite explanation involves a person’s characteristics (e.g. “John is in a bad mood” or “The team leader does not have control”). As we shall see, this favorite explanation restricts both our ability to collect information relevant to an accurate diagnosis as well as our range of choices about how to act in the situation. Only by being able to consider alternative explanations, explanations that go beyond individual characteristics, do we have a chance of diagnosing the system level dynamics that drive much of what occurs in organizations.

Individual level of analysis.

The *individual level of analysis* explains group and organizational events in terms of a single person's traits or behaviors. Words such as "style" or "personality" or "nature" are used to describe this level of analysis. If an event or series of organizational events could be explained completely by this level of analysis it would stop if we either removed the person or replaced him or her with someone else. In the case described above, there are two main *individual* explanations that emerge most frequently, those involving John and those involving the team leader. *Individual* explanations predominate organizational life. The first explanation articulated by most people in organizations is personal, an incompetent boss, subordinate or peer. In the United States, where individualism is deeply embedded in our culture, we most often blame or praise a person. Even when we complain about the "system" we are often holding a person responsible for that system's failure.

The individual level of explanation leads to a number of possible types of action. Most common are two broad approaches based on this diagnosis; remove the individual or change that individual's behavior. The first approach by those with formal authority to act includes firing or transferring the person identified as the "problem." The second approach involves coaching, training, counseling or educating this person. Most educational and training activities in organizations, private businesses, public agencies, schools, hospitals and private not-for-profit, are founded on the individual level of analysis. If we can successfully educate or train people we will change their behavior and thereby change what happens in our organizations (presumably for the better).

There is rarely a single explanation for events in organizations. Individuals are embedded in groups, departments, organizational cultures and larger systems. The three levels of analysis described below inevitably contribute to the behavior of individuals in important and powerful ways. But if after further data collection we were to

conclude that the individual level of analysis was the single or most compelling explanation, then the removal or behavioral modification of the individual involved should resolve the situation at hand, in this case a disrupted and unproductive meeting.

Interpersonal level of analysis.

The *interpersonal level of analysis* explains an organizational event as rooted in the relationship between two specific people. In the case above an interpersonal hypothesis might posit a troubled historical relationship John and the team leader or might explain John's behavior as the consequence of his desire to attract the attention of one other person on the team. "Personality conflicts" is an example of the language used to express a latent interpersonal hypothesis. The key to this level of diagnosis is that involves two *specific* people rather than two *types* of people. "John and Sally do not get along" or "John and the team leader (Joan) have a problem" are forms of this level of explanation.

Here again, it is unlikely that this explanation captures everything about a specific organizational event (though we may believe this is the case), but if we were convinced by further data collection that the relationship between two specific people was causing the organizational event there are two broad courses of action open to us. First, we could separate the people involved since this would, *ipso facto*, cause the problem to disappear. In our illustrative case, if we believed John's behavior was a result of a problematic relationship with the team leader we could move one or the other to another team. Second, we could ask the pair to "work out" their problem, with or without consultative help (Walton, 1969), usually off line, so as not to disrupt meetings or work flow.

There are two factors that can make generating interpersonal explanations difficult. First is our tendency not to implicate ourselves in "negative" cases. We are much more likely to locate a "relationship" difficulty in the other person involved since recognizing the

interpersonal nature of a situation necessarily involves looking at both parties (Heider, 1958; Miller and Ross, 1975). By definition, what distinguishes the individual level of analysis from the interpersonal level is the relational aspect of what is being observed. Take John and put him in another setting and, if the accurate diagnosis is interpersonal, *John will not behave the same way*. But if the interpersonal explanation involves us we are quite likely to prefer an explanation centered on the other person exclusively. If, for example, we imagine ourselves as the team leader in our case, it would be much more difficult for us to consider an interpersonal explanation that involved us than to explain the event in terms of John (his personality, style, needs, problems, history). In any interpersonal conflict, both parties are apt to assign responsibility for the problem to the other and to wish for or act upon an individual level course of action, i.e. remove or change the other person involved.

The example of the team leader illustrates the second difficult aspect of formulating an interpersonal hypothesis. When hierarchy and power are involved, the tendency described above to see only individual level explanations can have real and substantial consequences for the lower power person in the relationship. When two people with relatively equivalent power (defined as the capacity to compel others to do something) enact an interpersonal difficulty, they may not solve the problem because they are each explaining it in terms of the other's individual traits and thus never accurately diagnose and address the issue, but they are not in a position to cause each other significant damage either. In the case of formal power differences such as those involving a boss and a subordinate or a doctor and a patient or a teacher and a student, the failure to generate an interpersonal hypothesis can have significant consequences for the subordinate, patient or student. In these cases the lower power person, even if he or she can formulate an interpersonal explanation is less likely to offer it for fear of the consequences of suggesting that the boss or doctor or teacher had something to do with the situation. As a result the difficult job of formulating interpersonal level explanations in circumstances

where there are power differences falls disproportionately on the boss.

Group level of analysis.

The *group level of analysis* explains organizational events as originating primarily in the shared concerns or issues existing in a group of people. These shared concerns or issues can be *conscious* and *explicit* or *unconscious* and *implicit* (Bion, 1961; Bennis and Shepard, 1956; Smith and Berg, 1987). Conscious issues can be anything from the assignment of roles and responsibilities (“who is going to take notes,” “who’s in charge of this meeting,” “who would like to speak first”) to questions or critiques pertaining to the reason for the meeting (“why was this meeting called,” “nothing is ever accomplished in these committees”) to the emotions that accompany a shared context (e.g. economic uncertainty, new procedures, change in expectations from the group).

In our case John’s behavior could be an expression of the group’s *shared* concerns about the proposed changes in policies, *shared* anxiety about the team’s ability to implement these policies and procedures or *shared* discomfort with the situation of a new team leader. In each of these examples we are treating John as spokesperson for the group. Why might we make this shift from treating John as an individual, unconnected to the people around him? First of all, the entire case is written about a *team*. There is a presumption on the part of everyone involved, including the reader, that these people have a shared task and that they depend on each other in some ways for the effective completion of the task. This could easily lead to shared concerns about the task or the means to accomplishing it. Perhaps more compelling is the observation that many of them are actually acting in concert. We are not sure about the reason for their concerted behavior but we can see it (if we alert to the possibility of group level dynamics).

For example, when John asks what the case writer considers nit picking and annoying questions and makes snide comments and jokes,

what do the rest of the group members do? They giggle and guffaw. What could they have done? They could have done nothing. Silence is often a collective response to individual behavior in groups. They could have told John to pipe down or that his comments were not appreciated. Instead, the group members, *more than one*, laughed at John's behavior. In this case, it is the giggling which suggests that others in the group support John's behavior and it is the giggling that leads us to hypothesize that there is something of concern to this *group* that is being expressed by John.

Groups also experience shared concerns or issues that may not be in any individual's awareness or that individuals may not be aware are shared. The anxiety in new situations is often out of each individual's awareness unless or until it is acknowledged publicly. Even when individuals in a group are aware of their anxiety, it may take an explicit discussion for the members of a group to become aware that it is a *shared* experience. People who work with abused spouses or children, for example, may not be aware of the traumatic impact of this kind of work on them. Only when time and skill are devoted to surfacing this issue can their shared emotional experience be examined, evaluated and addressed (Kahn, 2005).

There are many such unconscious, shared issues that arise in the life of all groups – concerns about rejection and acceptance, conformity and individuality, influence and efficacy, leadership and followership – and any one of them can be powerful enough to drive behavior in a group (Smith and Berg, 1987). In our case example, it is possible that every person in the situation feels unqualified to implement the new policies and procedures. It is also possible that if asked, every person's explicit answer to the question of whether he or she feels qualified, especially if posed by a person in authority, would be a resounding "yes." John's behavior, his *role* in the group at that moment, may be to give expression to that shared anxiety in hopes that someone will notice it and do something about it.

But why John and why in such an indirect way? If someone is

worried about his or her competence, why not just say so?

Why John? If there is a shared concern anyone could become the spokesperson. If it is a shared concern, everyone feels it to some extent. The spokesperson could be feeling it more strongly than others and this might explain his role. But is also likely that the person who “volunteers” for or is “enlisted” in the role has a *valence* for the role. Taken from chemistry into the description of group dynamics (Wells, 1985), a valence is a person’s propensity to bond with a certain role in groups. As a result of personality traits, previous experience in groups or general comfort and discomfort in social systems, different people are willing to take different parts in the drama of any group’s dynamics. John may be more willing to confront (albeit indirectly) people in authority roles. Another person in the group may be more willing to take the role of smoothing over brewing conflict or encouraging the group when its task becomes overwhelming. A person in the group may “volunteer” for a role thereby addressing a shared need or concern in the group (e.g. “OK, I’ll ask the stupid question in class that no one else seems willing to ask. I don’t mind.”) or she might be “enlisted” for the job by the behavior of others (e.g. “No one else is willing to answer the instructor’s question. I cannot bear the silence any longer. Here goes.”).

Groups, by virtue of the number of people in them and the power of both the conscious and unconscious concerns that need to be addressed, usually find someone to represent these concerns. In some cases the concerns are expressed to an authority figure in the group (e.g. “We do not understand the explanation on page 8” or “The workload for the interns is crushing them.”). At other times, the concern is expressed to the group as a whole (e.g. “We need to figure out how we are going to attack this problem” or “Who is going to take this issue to the boss?”). When the concerns are out of conscious awareness, the process for finding a spokesperson, someone to raise the issue of shared concern, is more subtle and harder to observe.

Here are two examples of these unconscious but purposeful

negotiations in groups centered on enlisting someone to express a shared concern. In the first case the group is new and the topic presented to them is difficult. The concern, shared by everyone, is how to start the conversation. No one wants to start because they are all afraid of creating a first impression that will dog them for the rest of the group's life and they are similarly all afraid to say something that the authority figure might think is negative or misleading. But the group knows that someone must start the conversation or the silence itself will embarrass that authority and there is a risk that this embarrassment leads to a "cold calling" someone and that someone could be anyone. Collectively and without explicit coordination the members of the group remain silent. In due course Sally finds the silence unbearable and speaks. The group's silence propels Sally to speak, for if someone else had spoken within the first few minutes Sally would not have. She was enlisted for the role by the group's silence. Why Sally? Perhaps because, as she confesses later, she cannot stand silence in a group and so has a valence for speaking during silences. Once the group has formed and knows this about Sally, it is easier in the future to enlist her for this role.

In the second case, a class that has been together all semester is dissatisfied with the quality of the instructor's teaching. They have been complaining to each other in the hallways after class and in private conversations in between class sessions. John has been a part of many of these conversations. Ask anyone in the class who is most likely to challenge the instructor on anything and everyone identifies John. That's just who he is. By talking to John about their shared concerns, the class members are enlisting him for the job of expressing their frustrations. When he does, the others remain silent when the instructor asks if others share John's concerns, but when class is over his classmates come up to John to thank him for speaking up and for them.

It is clear that John has a valence for challenging or criticizing authority. And in a group where people know each other, it is also clear how John was enlisted to express this shared concern to the

instructor. But why was the group silent when the instructor asked others to weigh in on John's criticism? This is a paradigmatic example of scapegoating; the process by which a group acts as if a group's shared concern or anxiety is located exclusively in one person. Scapegoating enables a concern to be expressed without endangering the group members, all the group members except the scapegoat. From the perspective of the other group members, this may be the best possible outcome, especially if the problematic consequences of expressing a criticism or concern are perceived as significant.

This group dynamic, in which an individual expresses a shared concern that is "disowned" by others, is what makes it especially difficult to diagnose organizational events at the group level of analysis. Often the observer or the boss or the team leader misdiagnoses the *group level of analysis* by focusing on the *individual* delivering the message. Instead of entertaining the hypothesis that the individual is expressing something shared (and finding ways to collect data about that hypothesis), we often rush to the individual level to explain the question, the criticism, the joke or the anxiety. As a result, the shared concern cannot be addressed (because it is just John's concern) and John risks developing a reputation as a difficult or disruptive individual (e.g. "I've got this guy in my class...").

When we consider what actions to take when addressing events that seem to be rooted in the group level of analysis, the options are harder for most people to generate. What exactly does one do with a group that is having difficulty working together effectively? Should we have a "retreat" and engage in team building? We have heard these terms but many people may not be sure what they mean. The major objective of any action taken in response to a group level hypothesis is greater understanding of the shared concern or issue. Since group level issues are often expressed in ways that appear to be an individual's issue and are often out of the conscious awareness of group members, the work of understanding these issues is the primary task of any intervention (Schein, 1969). Until these issues are identified any attempt to manage the situation in the group is likely to fail.

As a person with some formal authority in a group (boss, team leader, convener, consultant) one step that can be helpful in gaining a greater understanding of the group level issues is to treat individual actions, especially those that are disruptive or counter-normative as potential indicators of something shared by others in the group. Whether these actions involve a joke that pokes fun at a situation the group faces (or at the formal authority in the group), a side conversation that persists, a recurrence of one or more individuals failing to attend the group meeting or showing up late, long periods of silence after an open-ended question, persistent subgroups or frequent digressions from the topic at hand, approaching these group events as expressive of a group level issue allows for further diagnosis. It is important to note here that the recurrent nature of the examples listed immediately above is further evidence that group level issues are likely present. In the case we have been using in this paper, the fact that John keeps making jokes and snide comments and that the group keeps giggling suggests that the team leader might try to find a way to inquire about what might be of concern to the group as a whole.

It is possible, for example, for the team leader to pause after one of John's snide remarks and, instead of ignoring or rebuking him (in hopes that one or the other of these strategies will cause him to stop) she could turn to the group and say, "Let's take John's snide remark seriously for a minute. Does anyone else share the concern that is beneath his comment? It is important for me and for us to know if there are concerns about what we're doing here." It may take more than one such an attempt to convince the group that the team leader is serious about finding the *group* concerns rather than delivering a disguised *individual* chastisement, but over time the message the team leader is delivering is that she is using her authority to further explore the group's concerns if they have any. Her question may even prompt people to think consciously about concerns they might have otherwise ignored within themselves by emphasizing the importance of expressing concerns in the group.

As a member in a group the challenge is even greater. The "out-of-

awareness” nature of shared concerns in groups means that while we participate in enlisting others (and volunteering ourselves) to express shared concerns, we are also largely unaware of this unconscious process. Our lack of conscious awareness allows the process to function by convincing all involved that the issue is not a group level issue but rather an individual level one. We do not have to experience our anxiety because only John is anxious. We do not have to experience our anger at the team leader (on whom we depend for our employment or future advancement) because only John is angry. So while we are encouraging John to act on our behalf (because we want our anxiety or anger addressed) we also disown our connection to him. As a result, there is very little John can do to remove himself from the role or to reflect back to us our participation in his behavior. The more he protests (if he protests) that he is not alone in his actions, the more we disown our connection. The first time the team leader asks if anyone else feels the way John does (either in the group or later, in private) we say no because at that moment we consciously feel no connection to John. (If we did, we would behave differently and as a result so would John.)

It is possible for individuals in groups to explore their connection to the “deviant,” “scapegoat” or “outlier.” Doing so requires a commitment to the theory that sometimes an individual’s behavior in a group is expressive of a shared concern, that sometimes a deviant is representing something in all of us. This commitment can translate into an act of self-reflection that enables us to discover the shared issue and then to speak up. Reclaiming that which we have disowned provides the person in the leadership role and the rest of the group with information about what is happening in the group. It expands the group’s explanations to include a group level hypothesis when only an individual level hypothesis was being entertained.

Take the example of the student in a large lecture class who asks a “stupid” question. At the moment that he asks the question, anyone sitting in the back of the classroom can feel the reaction in the room. There is clearly a shared sense that by asking the question the student

has broken some norm. In some cases the room holds its collective breath to see how the instructor will respond. In one scenario, the instructor tells the student that this material was covered last week or was explained on page 67 of the text or is quite basic and cannot be repeated today. She may deliver these messages with more or less disdain for the “stupidity” of the question. She may or may not also take note of the student who asked the question. At that point the other students say nothing, afraid to be similarly “instructed” and potentially labeled as the one who asks stupid questions. Perhaps at that moment, many of the other students believe that the question asker has indeed asked a stupid question. The instructor moves on while the asker feels alone and a bit humiliated.

In another scenario, the student asks his question but when the instructor delivers her admonishment another student raises her hand and says that she too did not understand this material. At this point the instructor might entertain the (*individual level*) hypothesis that there are two stupid question askers in the class and she might repeat her instructions (and take note of the second student). But in this scenario a third person raises his hand and says that while he does understand the material, he does not always understand everything and he thinks it is important to treat questions like this as worthy indicators of going over the material again. At this point the instructor is probably forced to consider other, group level hypotheses about what is happening in her class and to act on one or more of them, for although it is possible that she has three unprepared students, this “serial individual level” hypothesis is no longer credible. She now considers the possibility that the material in question was not well understood from the text or from her previous lecture and that there may be more students unsure of the material but afraid to speak up. She may even decide to take a few precious minutes to review.

Admittedly this is an unlikely sequence of events in a class where first one and then another student asks a “stupid” question, but its unlikely occurrence makes the point. Sitting in a group in which one has no formal authority it is possible to change the way the people

involved, students and instructor alike, think and act. It requires a commitment to *considering* individual actions as representing shared concerns and it requires no small measure of courage because the structural vulnerability of students, employees, subordinates and those at the lower levels of any hierarchy is real.

Intergroup level of analysis.

The *intergroup level of analysis* explains organizational events in terms of the current or historical relationship between groups or their representatives (Rice, 1965; Smith, 1982; Alderfer and Smith, 1982; Alderfer, 2011; Berg, 2011). The key to diagnostic hypotheses at this level is that we consider individuals as representing one or more groups in their interactions with others in the organization. In some cases the individuals involved see themselves and the others around them as representatives as in the case of labor-management negotiations or cross-functional task forces. In other cases some of the parties see the role of intergroup relations and other parties do not. Women are more likely to see gender playing a role in their experience of organizational life than men. In the United States, because of the legacy of slavery and racial discrimination, African Americans are more likely to see the influence of race relations, past and present, on their organizational experience than white people. In still other cases, neither party is aware of the possible influence of group memberships on the organizational events in which they are involved. Neither students nor teachers are consciously aware of the fact that male teachers call on male students disproportionately more often than female students or that resumes for jobs from fictitious female applicants are rejected more often than identical resumes from fictitious male applicants.

In our case example there are a number of possible intergroup explanations for John's behavior. Since he is slightly older than the rest of the team, it is possible that his behavior represents a discomfort working with younger people or with a younger boss. For this to be an *intergroup* hypothesis we would treat John as a representative of

“slightly older people.” This means that anyone slightly older would have this discomfort (or more accurately, the average person from a slightly older cohort). When articles are written about trying to understand “millennial” the perspective of the article is an intergroup one, treating people born around the turn of the millennium as belonging to a group with shared experiences and similar relationships with other groups (e.g. parents and employers). Another *intergroup* hypothesis in this case is that John, as a man, is uncomfortable working for a woman. This can be distinguished from the *interpersonal* hypothesis that John is uncomfortable working for this particular team leader (though it is often misdiagnosed in precisely this way). Here again the intergroup hypothesis in its purest form assumes that any man (or the “average” man) would be uncomfortable working for any woman (or the “average” woman). Given the historical relationship between men and women in the workforce, there is some possibility that this history has some influence on the behavior of both parties involved.

Each of us belongs to many, many groups and we each relate differently to the groups to which we belong. Most of the groups to which we belong have current and historical relationships with other groups. We learn about these current and historical relationships as part of our membership in these groups (e.g. engineers learn about salespeople, pediatricians learn about surgeons, the British learn about the French, social workers learn about psychiatrists, and men learn about women). Every interpersonal and group situation in an organization is also an intergroup event. The question is not whether group memberships are at play, but which ones and how important is their impact on the situation at hand.

The problem of *considering* intergroup explanations is made more difficult by the reality that most of us actively avoid such explanations. In the United States, with our cultural focus on *individual* rights and responsibilities, there seems to be a collective wish that group memberships should not matter (in spite of evidence to the contrary). This creates a subtle norm against discussing group memberships in public (i.e. mixed group) settings. And someone who speaks about the

possible influence of group memberships at a team meeting is likely to be thought of as prejudiced or worse. Fearing being thought of or called a bigot *for noticing* group memberships also suppresses any conversation about their possible impact. As a result, it is often very difficult to generate intergroup level hypotheses.

Imagine we are watching two people arguing with each other in the hallway. Our first thought might be that these are two individuals who do not like each other or disagree about something important. If we noticed anything about the groups to which these people belonged we might generate other explanations for their argument. One is a nurse and one is a doctor. Perhaps the conflict is rooted in the relationship between their professional groups, a long and complicated one. We notice that one is male and one is female. Perhaps gender is contributing to their argument since once again there is a long, complicated relationship between men and women in organizations. We notice that one is African American and one is white. Perhaps the history of race relations in your organization or town or state or country is influencing the argument. Power differences are embedded in each of these intergroup relations, but we might also notice that one of the people involved is part of the organization's management structure and the other is a member of one of the unions in the organization. All of these group memberships *could* be influencing what we are observing. Each one *could* provide an explanation (or partial explanation) for the argument. Now suppose we collected some contextual data and discovered that the organization is a week away from the expiration of a collective bargaining agreement and that although union and management representatives have been negotiating for months there has been little progress and the atmosphere in the organization is tense.

Generating *intergroup* hypotheses requires more information than is often available upon first observation. Whereas it is relatively easy to attribute personality characteristics to an individual or some problematic relationship to a pair of individuals, group memberships are not always visible. Often we must inquire about these memberships to even be able to develop hypotheses that incorporate this information.

And even an inquiry is not easy. What information do we use to establish group membership? “Objective” data such as position on an organization chart or paid membership in a formal organization? What about background and training? Do we need to know something about how the people involved think and feel about the groups to which they could or do belong? Or do we just need to know how other people are thinking and feeling about their group memberships (or presumed group memberships)? These difficult questions can lead us to a kind of intellectual paralysis, an inability to articulate intergroup level hypotheses. But articulating a hypothesis at this level is not equivalent to validating it; rather it is a first step in collecting information (from those involved, from the characteristics of the context, from historical accounts) that would help us evaluate the contribution of intergroup relations to understanding the situation in the hallway.

Courses of action that follow from a diagnosis (or partial diagnosis) at the *intergroup level of analysis* always include convening the groups involved or representatives of these groups. This can be a daunting task to even consider. Imagine collecting more data and becoming convinced that John’s behavior was prompted by a discomfort, shared by many of the men in the organization, with women in authority positions (e.g. women occupying positions of authority is a recent change in this organization and men, when asked by other men, reported discomfort and resentment). Now imagine that we are asked to address this issue because there is a reasonable chance that it will crop up throughout the organization in the months ahead. What do we do?

Our first reaction (are you a man or a woman?) might be to despair at addressing the issue at all since this is a *cultural* issue! How can we change what is happening in our organization if it is rooted in a broader cultural history of male-female relations? Where do we begin? The first step might be to convene the groups to inquire about their experiences in the organization. Further and more sophisticated diagnosis of how men and women experience reporting relationships might help deepen the understanding by members of the organization

of this issue. It might also suggest ways of addressing it. The diagnosis is complex but it is a process that has been undertaken, refined and written about. It starts by designing an approach to convening and inquiring into the experience of the groups involved (Alderfer, Alderfer, Tucker and Tucker, 1980; Alderfer, 2011).

Following this intergroup diagnosis, taking *action* on intergroup dynamics always, and paradoxically, involves sustained *conversation* both within and between the groups. Because intergroup relations often have long histories and complicated current realities, nothing changes quickly. More important, the possibility of change is founded upon serious discussions of both historical and current events. It might seem that “talk” would be a weak tool to use in addressing the longstanding and often problematic relations between groups. And talk alone is not enough. But talking and listening to the experiences of members of other groups rarely happens in organizations and society. We tend to talk to people who share our group memberships (other engineers, other doctors, other nurses, other men) especially if the topic is some other group. The commitment to talk about the diversity of experience within our own group and to listen to the experience of the members of other groups is a major intervention in most intergroup relations (Alderfer, Tucker, Alderfer and Tucker, 1988; Guinier, 2014; Al Ramiah and Hewstone, 2013).

This sustained conversation, one that will be difficult and often precarious, brings with it the possibility that the groups involved can mutually develop approaches to addressing the issues raised by the conversation itself. The work of bringing groups together or bringing authorized representatives of the groups together can proceed in fits and starts and can take years. Given the inevitable diversity of experience, thought and opinion *within* any group, the process of identifying actionable issues *across* groups is a challenge. But if the source of an organizational event or a recurring series of organizational events is at the intergroup level of analysis, there is no substitute for taking the steps outlined immediately above. The alternative may be easier and quicker to implement but it will not address the issue or

solve the problem.

CONCLUSION

Figure 1 summarizes the four levels of analysis and includes some illustrative courses of action associated with each one.

(Insert Figure 1 about here)

What is not apparent in the figure is the relationship among these different types of explanations for organizational events. Clearly these explanations are not mutually exclusive. John may very well be a insecure and he may be showing off for someone he is attracted to in the group and he may be enacting the group's concern about the change in policies and he may be representing men's discomfort and resentment about women occupying authority positions in the organization. The wrong question is "Which of these explanations is right?" The right question is "What is each of these explanations contributing to this event?" In most organizational situations all of these levels of analysis are exerting some influence. After all, organizations are sets of interacting individuals and interacting groups. Our personalities, interpersonal relationships, team dynamics and relationships with other departments and functions are *supposed* to explain much of what we do in our organizational roles. But especially when something goes wrong or disrupts the work of the organization, it is important that we make as accurate a diagnosis as we can because how we explain an event to ourselves and those around us will determine what we consider doing about that event.

Our challenge when we are embedded in an organization, charged with certain responsibilities, enmeshed in the political and emotional atmosphere while striving to do a good job is to step back

and examine any situation with the goal of determining the relative weight of each of these levels of explanation so that we can direct our change efforts to the issues that will be most effective. It may be easier to fire John or send him for training than to uncover and address the shared concern in the group, but if the shared concern is driving his behavior, focusing on John will not solve anything and may have damaging consequences for John.

Being able to consider and articulate hypotheses at each of these four levels increases our capacity to look for and notice “data” that will help us evaluate the contributions of these four forces to any event we are trying to understand. And being able to generate these alternative hypotheses is easier if we feel skilled and practiced developing hypotheses at all four levels. Most of us feel relatively skilled at the individual and interpersonal levels. They seem to come naturally. The group and intergroup levels are more difficult. This difficulty, if not addressed, can subtly influence our preference for the individual and interpersonal levels of analysis. If we avoid the group and intergroup explanations we will only see data that speaks to the other two levels of analysis. Without a hypothesis to initiate and guide our data collection there is a risk we do not see or accurately diagnose the effects of these forces in organizations.

When we buy a new car (or a used car of a type we have never owned before) for the days immediately following our purchase we are extremely aware of other cars on the road like ours. We notice them (as if there are more of them on the road than there were just a week ago), their color, their model, and the ways in which they are similar and different from our own. Our purchase, our ownership sensitizes us to lots of information about our type of car. The goal of this paper is to help us to “own” all four levels of analysis since this will sensitize us to a data collection process at all four levels. Sensitized to all four levels we will be better able to evaluate their relative contributions to organizational events and then to act.

One final note on action. Just as it is often difficult to generate

explanations at the group and intergroup levels of analysis, it is also often the case that we do not feel confident in our abilities to address issues at these levels. In organizational roles that may put a premium on “competencies” and “deliverables” this lack of confidence may cause us to choose courses of action where we feel confident and competent even if these actions do not address the underlying sources of problematic events. Our wish to avoid feeling incompetent (most likely to occur in the cases of group and intergroup issues) can drive us to diagnose events at the levels where we think we know what to do. We never look carefully at the group and intergroup levels, never let ourselves “own” these levels because it is very difficult to feel incompetent when we have organizational roles and responsibilities.

This is where practice comes in. We must begin to develop our capacities to diagnose and to act and that inevitably means we must start by developing our capacity to tolerate our inadequacies and limitations (Berg, 1998). All practice begins this way, with failure and error. Competent doctors were once medical students. Competent musicians once screeched on their instrument. Competent writers have been edited with a red pen since they chose to refine their craft. So it must be with competent organizational diagnosticians. We must practice to refine our craft and we must cultivate the capacity to accept our limitations if we are to develop our capacity to explain and intervene.

Figure 1: Levels of Analysis

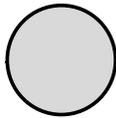
Level of Diagnosis

Courses of Action

Organizational events best explained by....

Individual

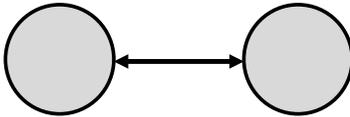
...the characteristics of a single individual.



- Remove
- Coach
- Educate
- Counsel

Interpersonal

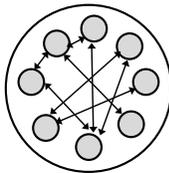
...the dynamics in a relationship between two specific individuals.



- Separate
- Isolate until resolved
- Mediate

Group

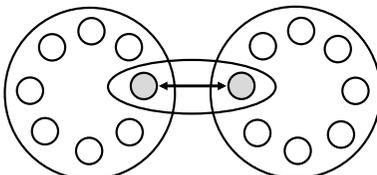
...the existence of a shared concern or opportunity affecting an entire group



- Group diagnosis and intervention
- Process consultation
- “Team Building”
- Use authority to solicit issues of shared concern

Intergroup

...the dynamics involving two or more groups or their representatives.



- Convene the groups
- Intergroup mirroring
- Microcosm work
- Explore history

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