

# T-Groups

## History

In 1947, the National Training Laboratories Institute began in Bethel, ME. They pioneered the use of T-groups (Laboratory Training) in which the learners use here and now experience in the group, feedback among participants and theory on human behavior to explore group process and gain insights into themselves and others. The goal is to offer people options for their behavior in groups. The T-group was a great training innovation which provided the base for what we now know about team building. This was a new method that would help leaders and managers create a more humanistic, people serving system and allow leaders and managers to see how their behavior actually affected others. There was a strong value of concern for people and a desire to create systems that took people's needs and feelings seriously.

T-groups were widely used in church training programs from the 60s into the 80s and since 2000 have been resurrected in several church networks.<sup>1</sup> There also seems to be a renewed effort coming from NTL about T-group training.<sup>2</sup>

## Objectives of T-Group Learning

The T-Group is intended to provide you the opportunity to:

- Increase your understanding of group development and dynamics.
- Gaining a better understanding of the underlying social processes at work within a group (looking under the tip of the iceberg)
- Increase your skill in facilitating group effectiveness.
- Increase interpersonal skills
- Experiment with changes in your behavior
- Increase your awareness of your own feelings in the moment; and offer you the opportunity to accept responsibility for your feelings.
- Increase your understanding of the impact of your behavior on others.
- Increase your sensitivity to others' feelings.
- Increase your ability to give and receive feedback.
- Increase your ability to learn from your own and a group's experience.
- Increase your ability to manage and utilize conflict.

Success in these goals depends, to a large extent, on the implied contract that each participant is willing to disclose feelings that she or he may have, in the moment, about others in the group, and to solicit feedback from the others about herself or himself. The focus is upon individual learning; some participants may learn a great deal in most of the above areas, others learn relatively little.

## Method

One way of describing what may happen for a participant is --

1. Unfreezing habitual responses to situations -- this is facilitated by the participant's own desire to explore new ways of behaving and the trainer staying non-directive, silent, and providing little structure or task agenda
2. Self generated and chosen change by the participant
3. Reinforce new behavior by positive feedback, participants own assessment of whether what is happening is closer to what she/he intends, supportive environment, trust development

## Sources of Change in Groups

- Self-observation - participants give more attention to their own intentions, feelings, etc.
- Feedback - participants receive information on the impact they have on others
- Insight - participants expand self-knowledge
- Self-disclosure - participants exposes more of themselves to others
- Universality - participants experience that others share their difficulties, concerns or hopes
- Group Cohesion - participants experience trust, acceptance & understanding)
- Hope - participant see others learn, achieve their goals, improve, and cope more effectively
- Vicarious Learning - participants pick up skills and attitudes from others
- Catharsis - participants experience a sense of release or breakthrough

## A Description

The T-group provides participants with an opportunity to learn about themselves, their impact on others and how to function more effectively in group and interpersonal situations. It facilitates this learning by bringing together a small group of people for the express purpose of studying their own behavior when they interact within a small group.

A T-Group is not a group discussion or a problem solving group.

The group's work is primarily process rather than content oriented. The focus tends to be on the feelings and the communication of feelings, rather than on the communication of information, opinions, or concepts. This is accomplished by focusing on the 'here and now' behavior in the group. Attention is paid to particular behaviors of participants not on the "whole person", feedback is non-evaluative and reports on the impact of the behavior on others. The participant has the opportunity to become a more authentic self in relation to others through self disclosure and receiving feedback from others. [The Johari Window](#) is a model that looks at that process.

The training is not structured in the manner you might experience in an academic program or a meeting with an agenda or a team with a task to accomplish. The lack of structure and limited involvement of the trainers provides space for the participants to decide what they want to talk about. No one tells them what they ought to talk about. The lack of direction results in certain characteristic responses; participants are silent or aggressive or struggle to start discussions or attempt to structure the group.

In the beginning of a T-Group participants are usually focused on what they experience as a need for structure, individual emotional safety, predictability, and something to do in

common. These needs are what amount to the tip of the iceberg in most groups in their back home situation. By not filling the group's time with answers to these needs, the T-Group eventually begins to notice what is under the tip of the iceberg. It is what is always there in any group but often unseen and not responsibly engaged. So, participants experience anxiety about authority and power, being included and accepted in the group, and intimacy.

Depending on forces, such as, the dynamics of the group, the past experience and competence of participants, and the skill of the trainers -- the group, to some extent, usually develops a sense of itself as a group, with feelings of group loyalty. This can cause groups to resist learning opportunities if they are seen as threatening to the group's self-image. It also provides some of the climate of trust, support and permission needed for individuals to try new behavior.

As an individual participant begins to experience some degree of trust (in themselves, the group and the trainers) several things become possible --

- The participant may notice that his/her feelings and judgments about the behavior of others is not always shared by others. That what he/she found supportive or threatening was not experienced in that way by others in the group. That how one responded to authority, acceptance and affection issues different from that of others (more related to one's family of origin than to what is happening in the group). Individual differences emerge in how experiences are understood.
- The participant may begin to try on new behavior. For example, someone who has always felt a need to fill silence with noise and activity tries being quieter and still.
- Participants begin to ask for feedback from the group about how their behavior is impacting others.
- Participants may find that they are really rather independent and have a relatively low level of anxiety about what is happening in the group. They will exhibit a broader range of behavior and emotions during the life of the group. In fact their leadership is part of what helps the group develop.

### The role of the trainers

- To help the group and individuals analyze and learn from what is happening in the group. The trainer may draw attention to events and behavior in the group and invite the group to look at its experience. At times the trainer may offer tentative interpretations.
- To offer theory, a model or research that seems related to what the group is looking at.
- To encourage the group to follow norms that tend to serve the learning process, e.g., focusing on "here & now" rather than the "then & there".
- To offer training and coaching in skills that tend to help the learning process, e.g., feedback skills, EIAG, etc.
- To not offer structure or an agenda. To remain silent, allowing the group to experience its anxiety about acceptance, influence, etc.
- To be willing to disclose oneself, to be open with the group. On occasion being willing to offer feedback and challenge a participant
- To avoid becoming too directive, clinical, or personally involved.

### Possible Problems

- T-Group methods usually encourage self-disclosure and openness, which may be inappropriate or even punished in organizations. This was an early learning. When managers thought they could take the T-group method into the back home organization, they discovered that the methods and the assumptions of a T-group did not fit. T-groups consisted of participants who were strangers. They didn't have a history or a future together and could more easily focus on here and now behavior. Another issue was that in the organization there were objectives, deadlines and schedules related to accomplishing the work of the company or group. Groups with a task to accomplish could not take the same time that would be used in a T-Group. These difficulties helped lead to the development of Organization Development and team building. What had been learned in T-Groups was combined with other knowledge and these new disciplines emerged as ways to address the values raised by the T-Group experience.
- The T-Group experience can open up a web of questioning in a participant. Ways of behaving that the person has used for many years may be called into question by others in the group and oneself. This has in some cases brought the participant to question relationships in the family or at work. While this can be a very constructive process that leads to the renewal of relationships, it has on occasion lead to the breakdown of a relationship. While such a breakdown may have, in time, come to the relationship without participation in a T-Group, it remains a painful and possibly damaging experience.
- Participants being forced or pressured to attend, by an employer or other person with influence, are on the whole less likely to have a positive learning experience. Employers or others who want to require the participation of others may enhance the chance of having a productive outcome if -- they attend a lab themselves before sending others; they speak with the lab coordinator before the event to discuss what might realistically be expected and what the leader could do to assist in the learning process when the participant returns home.
- Very rarely there have been situations in which a participant has a psychiatric problem. One report said "The possibility of negative psychiatric effects of ST, and especially its role in inducing psychiatric symptoms, is yet to be clarified." This reinforces the value of participation based on intrinsic motivation; a norm that discourages people in therapy from attending without the approval of their therapist; and trainers staying focused on the learning areas suited for T-Group experiences.

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**Human Relations Training** - Several programs that use T-groups along with other methods to help participants do focused work on emotional intelligence. All are lab education programs.

1. [National Training Labs](#) - Offers a large number of experiential training workshops.
2. [Center for Emotional Intelligence and Human Relations Skills](#) - Training in emotional intelligence and human relations skills for seminarians, clergy and religious leaders
3. [CongregationalDevelopment.com](#) offers occasional labs

4. [Group Facilitation Training Program](#) (Graduate School of Business, Stanford University)

[Additional background on T-Groups and related issues](#)

[Kurt Lewin: groups, experiential learning and action research](#)

[Working with T-Groups? - A section of "Working with Groups"](#)

[What is Kolb's model of experiential education, and where does it come from? - By Richard W. Shields, Dorothy Aaron, and Shannon Wall](#)

[A Social History of the T-Group](#)

[National Society for Experiential Education](#)

[UA Experiential Learning Cycle model](#)

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<sup>1</sup> T-groups in church systems – The Episcopal Church was among the first religious organizations to involve itself in this new way to understand and influence organizations. In the field of Organization Development the Episcopal Church has been seen as an “early adapter” along with the militaries of the US and UK, the National Education Association, TRW systems and General Mills. The church’s first efforts were in sending large numbers of clergy to T-group training. In the 60’s into the 80’s training programs are offered in many church systems, several networks were established -- MATC (Mid-Atlantic Training Committee, led by John Denham), NETI (New England Training Institute, led by John Swanson, now John Julian of OJN), LTI (led by Bill Yon) -- strongest in the late 60's through the mid 80's; "three phase training" is at the core (human relations, group development, experiential education design skills). See the [History of Congregational Development in the Episcopal Church](#) for background.

<sup>2</sup> NTL has been doing more promoting of T-groups and now offers a program to train trainers.