Group, Vol. 24, No. 4, 2000

Large Group Intervention to Encourage Dialogue Between Directors and Workers in the Context of Organizational Ambiguity

Orit Nuttman-Shwartz[1,2] **and Sarit Shay**

In the postmodern era the entire sphere of employment is undergoing changes that create feelings of ambiguity. These changes are reflected in the use of defense mechanisms such as splits between management and employees, and alienation and dissociation. Occupational social workers are also experiencing insecurity. Although their function is to assist individuals and the organization during crises, they are not able to detach themselves from their experiences. It is more difficult for them resort to bridging and dialogue in order to ameliorate feelings of anxiety. This article will describe how a large group intervention can provide practical experience that raises self-awareness and facilitates coping with organizational ambiguity.

KEY WORDS: large group; occupational social work; organizational ambiguity.

Today's workplace is a far less certain and secure place than ever before. Owing largely to the knowledge revolution and far-reaching technological developments, organizations must compete more fiercely than their predecessors and adjust with increasing speed and flexibility to the flux in the world around them (Lawrence, 1997; Rayner, 1995; Root, 1997). The results include rapidly changing tasks and roles, constant movement of employees from place to place, and loss of jobs. Uncertainty and insecurity are augmented by the difficulty of foreseeing and planning for even the near future. Increasingly, full-time, permanent job tracks are being eliminated and replaced by temporary, part-time, and/or contractual workers, not only at the lower levels, but also in areas requiring great skill, education, training, and experience. These changes in the workplace have

[1]Bob Shappell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University.
[2]Correspondence should be directed to Orit Nuttman-Shwartz, MSW, Bob Shappell School of Social Work, Tel Aviv University, Ramat Aviv, Tel Aviv 69978, Israel; e-mail: shwartz@post.tau.ac.il.

0362-4021/00/1200-0279$18.00/1 © 2000 Eastern Group Psychotherapy Society

been accompanied by changes in the society, notably a decrease in idealism and social commitment and an increase in instrumentalism (Kawel & Gechtman, 1995; Knoke, 1996).

These developments have generated widespread feelings of fear and anxiety among workers and managers alike, which undermine the smooth workings of the organization. Managers generally find it difficult to make decisions in uncertain situations. To overcome their anxiety, they tend to cling to old managerial methods and to distance themselves from their workers, ignoring even their work-related problems. Workers tend to develop a culture of deprivation and struggle, and to combine uninhibited aggressiveness with an avoidance of responsibility and involvement. On both sides there is alienation, disassociation, and a narrow, self-interested focus, as well as decreased commitment, satisfaction, and productivity (Bargal et al., 1992; Brockner, 1987; Lawrence et al., 1996).

Among the tasks of occupational social workers, who are currently employed in many organizations, is to help organization members deal with the difficulties inherent in, and arising from, the ambiguities of the modern work place (Bargal & Katan, 1998; Kurzman & Akabas, 1993; Lewis, 1997). They are required to help both workers and management cope with the stresses induced by change, to serve as a resource for them, and to represent the interests and views of the two parties to one another. However, the fact that the social workers are subject to the same reality, and experience the same feelings of fear and anxiety, often undermines their ability to do their work as well they could.

Anxious about their own jobs, they find it difficult to hear and contain the job-related anxieties of the other workers and to help them cope emotionally with their uncertainties. Nor do they get much help from managers, who, to ward off their own anxieties, often put obstacles in the way of the social workers' presentation of problems or solutions, whether of the employees or the organization. The greater the uncertainty and resulting alienation and polarization, the greater the need for the social worker's mediation, yet the more impediments there are to its implementation.

The literature on occupational transitions offers a range of interventions, from coaching and seminars to job clubs and financial support, to help ease necessary transitions, such as structural changes in the organization, or employee layoffs or retirement (Briar, 1988; Foster & Schore, 1990; Kurzman & Akabas, 1993; Lewis, 1997; Root, 1997). Little attention has been paid, however, to helping people deal with the new trends in the workplace.

Among the few exceptions to this general neglect is the suggestion recently offered by Gladstone and Reynolds (1997) that a single session group intervention be used to help employees cope with the stress of organizational change. This paper suggests another method—single session large group intervention—and describes such an intervention, led by the authors, that was used to help 30 occupational social workers in Israel cope with the anxieties and problems that arise from the pervasive uncertainty of their work world.

LARGE GROUP INTERVENTION: A SOCIO-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

The large group is composed of anywhere between 30 and several hundred participants, intentionally seated in any of several non-normative patterns which minimize face to face contact (Anzieu, 1984; Bunker-Benedict, 1998; Kreeger, 1975; Foulkes, 1975; Lawrence, 1993; Main, 1975; Turquet, 1975). The size and seating make it virtually impossible for the individual to see and be seen and to hear and be heard by most of the other participants. These features make the large group a convenient reflection of the surrounding society and of the organizations that exist in it. The large group also rapidly generates a range of intensely primitive feelings and fosters the unthinking behaviors characteristic of masses (Agazarien & Carter, 1993; Anzieu, 1984; Kreeger, 1975; De Maré et al., 1991). The social-psychoanalytic understanding of the large group is that it reflects the societal conscious and unconscious (Agazarien & Carter, 1993; Anzieu, 1984; De Maré et al., 1991; Hopper, 1996; Foulkes, 1975).

The potential of large group intervention has been recognized both in Israel and abroad, where it has served in the business world to develop managerial awareness of ongoing organizational processes and in the helping professions for the purpose of professional training. The rapid emergence of strong feelings in the large group makes it a setting in which, with proper direction, the participants can be made aware of their situations and responses in a relatively short time (Carr, 1993; Klien, 1993).

Four dimensions of large group intervention may explain the potential usefulness of such groups in helping occupational social workers to come to grips with the reality of their jobs and to do them better (Curry, 1967; Main, 1975; Mumby, 1975; Schiff & Glassman, 1969; Wax, 1965).

1. *Organizational context:* Members of the large group bring attitudes, norms, conflicts, and anxieties which are common to the entire society as well as to the organizations to which they belong. Large group intervention turns the hidden content of events in the society and the organization to events in the here and now of the group, where they are expressed in both latent and manifest contents (De Maré et al., 1991; Foulkes, 1975; Kernberg, 1993).
2. *Social transactions:* The impediments to contact and communication in the large group frustrate the fulfillment of basic attachment needs, create feelings of diffusion regarding the boundaries of the group, thwart dialogue, and make it difficult for the members to give and receive feedback and to interact with one another in a way that might alleviate their discomfort (Curry, 1967; De Maré et al., 1991; Foulkes, 1975; Main, 1975).
3. *Unconscious content:* Large groups generate a sense of chaos and confusion and undermine the integrity of the self. They erode each participant's sense of status, cohesion, and identity, and lead to the devaluation of the

self and others in the group (Anzieu, 1984; Bion, 1961; Kernberg, 1993; Turquet, 1975). These processes, in turn, create feelings of existential alienation and strangeness that even further undermine the sense of group cohesion and the boundaries of the ego. The results may include paranoid anxiety, panic, and regression manifested in heightened aggression, dependency, and, sometimes, in manic, phobic or psychotic-like behaviors (Agazarien & Carter, 1993; Anzieu, 1984; De Maré et al., 1991; Main, 1975).

The heightened dependency needs tend to be directed towards the group leader, who is expected to act as an omniscient, omnipotent parental figure; but the structure of the large group frustrates the fulfillment of these needs in much the same way as it frustrates the need for contact (Bion, 1961; Foulkes, 1975).

To deal with the disturbing feelings that arise, the group mobilizes the defense mechanisms of splitting, projection, fragmentation, and projective identification. Group members split into sub-groups, each identifying with the sub-group to which they feel they belong and cutting off from the rest (Bion, 1961; De Maré, 1982; Foulkes, 1975). This defense increases their sense of security, but also leads to the projection of aggression and other unacceptable emotions onto other subgroups and /or the leader, as well as to the dynamic of projective identification. In the latter defense, the individual splits off and projects important parts of the self onto specific others in the group. This defense causes the individual to feel even weaker and more fragmented, and hence even more confused and chaotic. These processes decrease the group member's contact with reality and impair his or her ability to think rationally and to work in a constructive manner (Main, 1975).

4. *Thinking and dialogue:* The ultimate aim of large group intervention is for the group members to learn to create dialogue despite the physical and emotional barriers erected by the group's size and seating. The function of such dialogue is to transform the intense, often chaotic, unconscious feelings that have been raised to words, thereby enabling the beginning of investigation and awareness of what is going on in the group (Bion, 1961; De Maré et al., 1991). Since the impediments to dialogue in the group mirror those that exist in the society and work place, the dialogue developed in the group enables an examination of not only the group processes but also the social trends in which we live and our relation to them. The dialogue in the group enables the group members to observe and examine their feelings and behavior in their social settings, including their work places, and to apply the understandings thus obtained to the individuals in their social contexts (De Maré et al., 1991).

According to the literature, the first three aspects are integral to all large groups, whether natural or artificially created. The fourth, the development of

thinking and dialogue, depends on the ability of the group to work through the destructive energies and feelings that arise, and then put them into words. The dialogue, in turn, enables the participants to analyze and understand the happenings in the group. And this, in turn, enables them to analyze and understand the attitudes, norms, and conflicts that characterize the social environment in which they live and work (De Maré et al., 1991; Kreeger, 1994). Single session large group intervention can thus be used to foster the participants' awareness of the underlying contents of their social and organizational environment and of the conscious and unconscious feelings and behaviors that develop in response to those contents, as well as to help them to begin to develop more fitting and constructive responses to the difficulties inherent in their work environments.

THE INTERVENTION

This section describes a large group intervention that was conducted in a one day seminar on organizational ambiguity. The seminar was convened by the Occupational Social Workers' Professional Union in conjunction with the School of Social work of Tel Aviv University, Israel. It was aimed at helping social workers to learn more about and to better cope with the ambiguous, anxiety-laden situations that most of them face daily in their work in Israel, as well as elsewhere.

The intervention was held following a lecture to all the participants that focused on the defense mechanisms used by organizations to deal with the anxieties that arise from organizational ambiguity. Its aim was to foster increased awareness of the ways in which individuals and organizations respond to organizational ambiguity.

The Setting

The seats were arranged in the shape of a snail, consistent with common practice for large groups (Bunker, 1998). The two group leaders sat in the first and third rows. The shape limited the participants' eye contact with one another and with the group leaders, forced some of them to sit with their back to their colleagues, and, in general, conveyed a lack of closure and final form. The one-time session lasted for two hours, and was followed by an open discussion between the participants and the group leaders.

The Process

The intervention began with the group leaders describing the setting and reading aloud the following passage, which was especially written for the occasion in order to accelerate the processes that generally occur in large groups:

> You are social workers in a factory. Recently, there have been rumors that the factory is going to be sold to new owners. It is clear to you that the sale will lead to changes in the organization, including changes in the work force. Workers may have to change jobs in the organization. People may be forced to take early retirement. Others may be fired, and so on. You, as social workers, have not yet received any official notice. Place yourself in this situation and respond to it.

At the end of the reading, the group leader asked the participants to respond to the situation that the passage described.

This situation was close to home for most of the participants. Many had already experienced similar changes in the ownership of their organizations. Others were in the midst of such changes, or were expecting them. The uncertainties of the hypothetical situation brought a rapid response to the ambiguities inherent in the group.

The initial reaction was chaotic: emotional, impulsive, fragmented, and full of unthinking acting out. The reading was followed by silence, which quickly gave way to anxious complaints about the ambiguities of the situation. The participants demanded to know why they were there, why the seats were arranged as they were, why the leaders weren't speaking, and so forth. Feeling helpless to clarify the situation on their own, they saw the group leaders as omnipotent authorities who had all the answers, and they sought to fulfill their dependency needs through them. When the needs went unmet, they distorted the reality and projected their aggression onto the leaders. For example, several threw out the accusation that the leaders had not given them any task to perform.

The participants felt acute distress. As one put it, "I don't believe how much pressure I feel." Several expressed a sense of disintegration, asking into the space of the room questions such as, "Who am I?" and "What am I?" Indications of fragmenting, acting out, and destructive motives could be seen as several participants suggested leaving the room and checking with the organizers of the seminar to see whether they could replace the group leaders or join one of the other two workshops that were being given. Splitting became evident as participants began to divide into sub-groups of people who worked in the same organization or who knew each other from outside the group. Perhaps the most extreme response was that of a participant who tried to get the others to change the seating arrangement to enable eye contact and, when they ignored her request, began to scream hysterically in an act of paranoid anxiety.

There were efforts at social interaction, but the strong anxiety and the defenses that issued from it made the efforts inapproriate and ineffective. With little sense of the propriety of the situation, those who knew the leaders tried to talk to them directly, in some cases to tell jokes or otherwise make them laugh. They were not answered. Though the participants asked seemingly urgent questions of the leaders, they did not wait for replies or explanations. They were restless and noisy; they talked to their neighbors, laughed, moved around in their chairs; but they did

not listen to one another or respond to what others said. Rather than make them feel better, these interactions intensified their frustrations.

For the first ten minutes or so, we, as group leaders, refrained from intervening in order to enable the participants to feel and respond authentically to the situation. Our active intervention began in response to the extremism of some of the group's reactions. Our initial intervention consisted in reflecting and interpreting the group's feelings and behavious.

We pointed out the group's acting out, lack of dialogue, and inability to think through and organize with respect to the threat. We explained this behavior psycho-analytically as revealing the group's strong frustration when the leaders failed to provide them with the certainties they craved. We emphasized the group's dependency on the leaders and its need for authority figures to provide them with information and to meet their dependency needs. We also pointed out that the participants were splitting off the competent parts of themselves and projecting them on to the group leaders.

The group became more cohesive and more organized about fifteen minutes into the process, with the fortuitous entrance into the room of a latecomer. Her late entrance gave the participants a certain sense of group belonging, while she herself provided them with an object onto which they could project their confusion. This defense enabled them to get in touch with their own inner strengths and to begin to put order into the chaos. If she hadn't come in when she did, we, as the group leaders, would have had to do more to contain the rising anxiety and to do more soothing and explaining so that the group could move forward.

As it was, the group quickly made room for the latecomer to sit, and let her know what was happening. We viewed this as their first efforts at social interaction. Their response style changed. Although they still made no effort to respond professionally to the situation that had been read to them, they were less prone to projecting their aggression and dependency needs on the leaders, and they began to relate to their current distress in, and with, the large group.

These changes indicated to us that the participants had become better able to rely on themselves. In addition to reflecting and interpreting, our job now became to help the participants think about the quality of their responses. Our comments became more directive. For example, we suggested that the participants examine what was happening in the here and now of the group. We also reminded them of the task with which we had opened the session and asked them to consider why it had been forgotten or ignored. With the help of our comments, the group was able to undergo two important transformations: from feelings to words, and from words to thoughts. A dialogue began to develop among the participants about what was going on in the room. They tried to analyze their feelings. First they tried to explain their anxiety as a normal, initial response to the new and unfamiliar situation that the large group presented with its anti-social seating and prevention of eye contact. Then they began to raise questions about why the setting was thus constructed and

how it related to the uncertainty in the room. They asked: Why are we seated in this way? Are our feelings and behavior the outcome of the uncertainty of the situation? What does uncertainty involve?

Some of the questions were similar to those asked earlier, but here the participants were grappling with them on their own, as they tried to understand the here and now in the room. They succeeded in transforming their strong emotions to dialogue, and began to try to understand what was happening to them.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The development of dialogue and concomitant transformation of emotions is an essential stage of large group intervention, but not the ultimate aim. The ultimate aim of the session was to raise the participants' awareness of the processes at their places of work so they would be able to act more constructively in the future. The idea was that if the participants could be brought to understand the stress that they were under in the group, with its many uncertainties, they would be more empathic to those who were stressed by the uncertainties of the work place.

Obviously, such awareness is unlikely to be fully realized in a large group in the short space of two hours. To accelerate the process, the leaders opened up the closed snail shape to a large U, where eye contact and personal contact were much easier and more normative. We also changed our role from that of leaders to that of coaches, by permitting the participants to ask us questions and engage us in dialogue. Our aim was to help them conceptualize their experience and generalize it to the reality of the ambiguities of the workplace.

We thus proceeded to help the participants to conceptualize the process they underwent. We began by asking them to share their experiences with the others. Most of those who came forth, however, focused mainly on the emotional turmoil that the group had produced in them. Most of them were too upset to be able to step back from their personal experience to relate to the feelings and behavior of the other participants or to the conduct of the group as a whole. They were able to recognize that they had experienced something significant, but, our earlier explanations of their behavior notwithstanding, they could not yet acknowledge the extremity or regressiveness of their responses or extrapolate their experiences in the group to their experiences in the work place.

Our job became to help them analyze the events and dynamics that had occurred in the group. We used the events, which included our reading of the passage, the late entrance of one of the participants, the efforts of another to change the seating, etc., to get them to realize that they had not performed the professional simulation exercise with which we had opened the session and had responded without thinking or using their professional knowledge. This helped them to see the highly emotional and regressive nature of their responses, and to understand that the inappropriateness of their responses in the large group reflected

their inability to provide the professional help that was needed by the people in their workplace.

In addition, we conveyed to them that we had not, and could not have anticipated in advance the events and dynamics that occurred, and that we had thus served as models of functioning in the kind of chaotic, ambiguous situation that paralyzed many of them in their workplaces. We explained that what had helped us to function professionally in the group, that is, to contain their intense emotions and to facilitate the group dynamic so as to help transform the raw experience to dialogue and thought, was our professional knowledge of large group processes.

In the discussion that developed, the participants explored the relationship between their feelings and behaviors in the group and their feelings and behaviors in their places of work. From their realization that the group leaders did not know in advance how they would respond or how events would unfold, they came to realize the extent to which they expected the managers of their organizations to have all the answers, that this expectation was unrealistic, and that they would have to assume more responsibility and take more initiative.

THE AFTERMATH

A single session large group intervention is effective for raising awareness of the professional's feelings and behavior in the here and now of the group and the "there" of their workplaces. In the closing discussion, most of them reported that the experience of uncertainty, confusion, and helplessness of the large group intervention had increased their understanding of the implications of uncertainty in their workplace and of the feelings and behaviors it engenders. In particular, the session showed them that situations of uncertainty naturally evoke basic needs for support, containment, holding, and leadership, and the experience legitimized these needs in themselves.

A single two hour session, however, cannot provide the tools that professionals need to respond adequately to the ongoing uncertainty that characterizes today's work world. Several days after the intervention, our telephones began to ring with participants asking where they could acquire further training, whether in the form of peer group assistance or professional supervision, to help them deal with the alienation and isolation in their work places and to develop viable interventions.

REFERENCES

Agazarian, Y., M., & Carter, F. B. (1993). Discussion on the large group, *Group*, *17*(4), 210–233.

Anzieu, D. (1984). *The group and the unconscious*. International library of group psychotherapy and group process: London.

Bargal, D. (1984). *Social work in the world of work.* Monograph series, Israeli Council of Social Work and Akadamon (Hebrew).

Bargal D., Back, A., & Ariav, P. (1992). Occupational social work and prolonged job insecurity in a declining organization. *Administration in Social Work, Vol. 16*(1), 55–67.

Bargal. D., & Katan, J. (1998). Social Work in the world of work: The Israeli case, In F. M. Loewenberg (Ed.), *Social Work*. Israel: The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University.

Bion, W. (1961). Experience in Groups. London: Tavistock

Briar, K. (1988). *Social Work and The Unemployed.* Silver Spring, MD: National Association of Social Work.

Brockner, J. (1988). The effects of work layoff on survivors: Research, theory and practice. In B. M. Staw & L. L. Cummings (Eds.). *Research in organizational behavior.* Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Bunker, B. B. & Alban B. T. (1998). *Large group intervention engaging the whole system for rapid change.* New York: Warner Burke, Pub.

Carr, W. (1993). Some consequences of conceiving society as a large group. *Group, 17*(4), 235–253.

Curry, A., E. (1967). Large therapeutic group critique and appraisal of selected literature. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy* (17), 536.

De Maré, P. (1982). Large group perspective. In M. Pines and L. Rafaelsen (Eds.), *The individual and the group boundaries interrelation.* N.Y: Plenum.

De Maré P., Piper R., & Thompson, S. (1991). *Koinonia: From hate, through dialogue to culture in the large group.* London: Karnac books.

Foster B., & Schore, L. (1990). Job loss and occupational social work. In Ashenberg, Stranssner, Shulamit, & Lala (Eds.), *Occupational social work today*, (pp. 77–95). Haworth Press.

Foulkes, S.H. (1975). Problems of the large group from a group analytic point of view. In L. Kreeger (Ed.), *The large group dynamics and therapy.* London: Karnac Books.

Gladstone, J., & Raynolds, T. (1997). Single session group work intervention in response to employee stress during workplace transformation. *Social Work With Groups, 20*(1), 33–50.

Hopper, E. (1996). The Social Unconscious in Clinical Work. *Mikbatz 2*(2), 7–74.

Kawel Y., & Gechtman V. (1995). Invite for a dream: The future anatomy that exists today here and now. *Human Resources*, 8–22.

Kernberg, O. F. (1993). Paranoiagenesis in organizations. In Kaplan, H.I. & Sadock, B.J. (Eds.), *Comprehensive group psychotherapy* (3rd ed., pp. 45–57). Baltimore: Williams and Willkins.

Klien, E. B. (1993). Large groups in treatment and training settings. *Group, 17*(4), 198–209.

Knoke, W. (1996). *Bold new world: The essential map to the twenty first century.* Harvard Capital group.

Kreeger, L. (1975). *The large group: Dynamics and therapy.* Illinos: Peacock Pub.

Kurzman, P.A., & Akabas, S.H. (1993). *Work and well being: The occupational social work advance*. National Association of Social Workers, Washington, DC.

Lawence, G. W. (1993). Signals of transcendence in large groups as a system. *Group, 17*(4), 254–266.

Lawrence, G. W., Bain, A. & Gould, L. (1996). The fifth basic assumption. *Free Associations, 6*(1), No. 37, 28–55.

Lewis, B. (1997). Occupational social work practice. In Reisch M. and Gambrill E. (Eds.), *Social work in the 21st century*. Pine Porge Press.

Main, T. (1975). Some psychodynamics of large groups. In L. Kreeger (Ed.), *The large group dynamics and therapy.* London: Karnac Books.

Schiff, S., & Glassman, S. (1969). Large and small group therapy in a state mental health center. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy, 19,* 150.

Turquet, P. M. (1974). Leadership: The individual and the group. In Gibbard, G.S. et al. (Eds.). *The large group: Therapy and dynamics.* San Francisco and London: Jossey Bass.

Root, L.S. (1997). Social work and the workplace. In Reisch M. & Gambrill E. (Eds.), *Social work in the 21st century.* Pine Porge Press.

Wax, J. (1965). Analyzing a therapeutic community meeting. *International Journal of Group Psychotherapy 15*(1).