

# Phases of System Development in Organizational Work groups: The Systems-Centred Approach for Intervening in Context<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Systems-centred training (SCT) adds a systems perspective to the literature on phases of development in work groups. SCT conceptualizes work groups as living human systems that move through a predictable sequence of developmental phases. The phase of development is the primary context in which work is done and the primary influence on how work is done. Thus, SCT interventions to work groups are directed to system phase development as well as to support goal achievement. This is especially significant given Wheelan's (2005) findings that greater phase development in work groups correlates with increased productivity.

SCT identifies three major phases in system development: authority, collaboration and integration. Each is characterized by distinctive challenges and dynamics, reflected in identifiable communication patterns and behaviours. Formulating change interventions that are phase-specific maximizes the potential for work while minimizing the frustrations inherent in a change process.

By intervening to the system structure, function and goal orientation, SCT develops the system rather than intervening to individual dynamics. Influencing a systems phase development shifts the work group communication norms and the functioning of the work group and develops emotional intelligence in the system as well as in its members.

We begin with the assumption that all living human systems, regardless of size or complexity, go through predictable phases of development. Living human systems are as small as one individual (system of a person) or a couple or a family or a small group, or as big as an organization or even a nation. It is relatively easy for us to

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think of phases of development with individual people, progressing from infancy to childhood to adolescence to young adulthood to middle-age and to older adulthood. We associate certain challenges with each of the life stages. Knowing someone's stage in life influences our expectations of the person. For instance, we do not expect an adolescent to be able to handle the same responsibilities as a young adult (and as the parents of any adolescent would attest, setting one's expectations too high almost always causes a problem). Living human systems also pass through identifiable phases, though most of us are much less familiar with identifying a system's phase and its distinctive challenges and less clear in our expectations about what a system can and cannot do in each phase. This is unfortunate, since all of us are members in many living human systems: as a member of a couple, a family, a team, a work group, or an organization, or even as a member of ourselves as a living human system.

Our focus in this paper is the organizational work group and applying the theory of living human systems and its systems-centred approach (Agazarian, 1997) to the phases of system development in work groups. It is more challenging to think of phases of development in work groups than it is to think of phases of development with individuals. Yet, for the last fifty years, the idea of phases of development in groups has garnered attention and interest (and even controversy). Numerous theories have been proposed, research collected, and arguments propounded for and against the ideas of phase development. Perhaps best known of the phase models are Tuckman's (1965, 1977) phases – forming, storming, norming, and performing – and whose catchy labels have helped to popularize the idea of group phases. Interestingly, Tuckman's phase model is quite compatible with that of Bennis and Shepard (1956), whose theory of group development related Bion's (1959) basic assumptions to group phases and first propelled the interest on group phases to prominence. Some more recent theorists have added new concepts, e.g., Gersick's (1988) work on punctuated equilibrium theory stresses that group development occurs in alternating periods of inertia and revolution that are context related.

Most recently, Wheelan (2005) has contributed significantly in her research on phases of development in organizational work groups. She developed an integrative theory of group phases in work groups (Wheelan, 2005) and the 'Group Development Questionnaire', a self-reporting instrument that reliably identifies a work group's phase of development (Wheelan et al., 1994; Wheelan and Hochberger, 1996). Wheelan (2005) also provided a wide-ranging review of the literature on phases of development, building on the reviews done by

Arrow (1997), Chidambaram and colleagues (1991), Gibbard and co-authors (1974); and Mennecke and colleagues (1992).

Perhaps most importantly for this paper, Wheelan demonstrated a significant relationship between productivity and work group development (Wheelan et al., 1998; Wheelan and Tilin, 1999; Wheelan and Lisk, 2000; Wheelan et al., 2003; Wheelan and Kesselring, 2005). Across industry groups, she found that work groups with more development evidenced greater productivity, and those with less development, lower productivity. Establishing the relationship between phase development and productivity in work groups underscores the importance of the systems-centred focus on developing change strategies that influence phase development.

Earlier, we proposed viewing emotional intelligence as a capacity of a living human system rather than a property of an individual (Gantt and Agazarian, 2004). We put forth a systems-centred perspective on emotional intelligence that identified the system context as having more influence on the actual emotional intelligence than the individual resources *per se*. We also hypothesized that underdeveloped emotional intelligence in work groups may account for many of the difficulties that work groups have irrespective of the emotional intelligence of the individuals. For example, Thomas and Fink (1961) reported in their study that 65% of forty-four work groups arrived unanimously at incorrect solutions in problem-solving tasks, even though twenty-nine of the forty-four groups had members who had previously demonstrated the correct solutions. We hypothesized that emotional intelligence (understood as a function of development in living human systems rather than a property of an individual) is a significant intervening variable that contributes to this kind of decline in work group functioning.

This idea of emotional intelligence as a systems phenomenon goes beyond the initial work done by Asch (1951, 1952) on conformity to social pressure and Janis's (1972) popularized work on group-think. From a systems-centred perspective, social conformity or group-think at the expense of reality is the failure of the discrimination process that is necessary (though not sufficient) for developing emotional intelligence at all system levels.

In fact, the concept of a systems-centred emotional intelligence is a step in the direction of Abraham's (1999) emphasis on the impact of emotional intelligence in organizational behaviour and functioning. Similarly, Cherniss (2001) called for a broad model for discerning what contributes to group and individual emotional intelligence in an organization by including both individual emotional intelligence and group emotional intelligence as relevant to organizational

effectiveness. Importantly, Druskat and Wolff (2001) have focused on emotional intelligence *per se* in group functioning and introduced a formulation of group emotional intelligence relevant for developing organizational work teams. They proposed that group norms support the awareness and regulation of emotion in groups and viewed the regulation of emotion in groups as the essence of group emotional intelligence. In their formulation, group emotional intelligence relates to how groups manage individuals' emotions, how groups regulate group emotions, and how groups interact with others outside the group boundaries.

The systems-centred approach deliberately develops the emotional intelligence in living human systems by influencing the system variables that relate to how energy/information (both cognitive and emotional information) is organized, goal-directed, and self-correcting. This builds on our earlier hypothesis (Gantt and Agazarian, 2004) that developing the work group emotional intelligence creates the context in which the individual resources can be more effectively utilized. For example, to the extent that a work group does not contain or manage reactivity to difference, not only will it be high on emotionality at the expense of emotional intelligence, but it will also be low on the development essential to building emotional intelligence and common sense that supports productivity.

We build on this idea in this article and propose the map of the phases of system development to guide consultants and managers in developing the emotional intelligence of a work group. Developing the system through its phases of development increases the emotional intelligence of the system and, in turn, influences the emotional intelligence of its members.

#### USING SYSTEMS-CENTRED TRAINING TO INFLUENCE WORK GROUPS

Systems-centred training (SCT) was developed by Agazarian (1997) by operationally defining a theory of living human systems. The theory came first and the practice second. SCT puts systems theory into practice with specific methods for influencing system functioning with change interventions that are paced to the system's phase of development. Importantly, SCT conceptualizes each phase of development as a system context (Agazarian, 1986; Agazarian and Gantt, 2003). SCT change methods are then formulated to influence the system development within each phase context and towards the next phase of development, thus developing the system and its capacity for emotional intelligence.

*Shifting communication norms to influence phase dynamics.* Festinger (1953) noted that how a group functions is a consequence of its process of communication. Similarly, SCT has identified the communication patterns that both identify and maintain a system's phase of development.<sup>2</sup> The normative communication patterns in each developmental phase influence how the system works, and determine what work *is* possible and what is *not* possible. This has important implications for working with work groups. For managers and consultants, recognizing the characteristic communication patterns that identify a phase makes it possible to formulate leadership strategies that influence the communication norms of the phase in the direction of development. It also enables managers to align their expectations with the reality of what work is actually possible in a particular phase, thereby lowering the unnecessary frustration when a work group tries to do work it does not yet have the resources to do.

For example, a consultant aware that a work group is in the initial sub-phase of flight would invite failure by asking the group to make a complex decision. The norm in the flight phase is avoidance: most communications are vague, change the subject, offer speculations, or water down any differences. This makes it difficult to sort out differences or make decisions, as it is very hard to clarify the criteria for a decision when differences are avoided by ambiguous communications. And, it is almost impossible to make a decision when the options are not clear. Few flight communications actually transfer information or contribute to building a structure for work. Changing the flight communications, e.g., from vague to specific, releases the driving forces for development. Only when the flight communications are modified will the work group be able to set a structure for work and to clarify differences in the service of work.

*Recognizing system phase dynamics as an alternative to personalizing.* Training work groups to recognize their phase of development is useful in minimizing the tendency towards a self-centred orientation. For example, someone can make a proposal in a committee meeting and be completely ignored. Yet the very same person can make the same proposal two months later and the committee unanimously praises it. The major difference in these two events relates to the committee dynamics, which reflect the conflicts and challenges of its phase of system development, and is related to a matter of timing, not the style of the personal input. Recognizing the phase dynamics helps people to understand their influence and lowers the tendency of members to take the committee's response to a proposal 'just personally.'

The rest of this article discusses how the systems-centred approach

to phases of system development is applied to work groups. We first summarize the theory of living human systems as it is applied to phases of system development, and then describe the implications of these ideas on intervening with work groups in each of the major phases.

### **A THEORY OF LIVING HUMAN SYSTEMS AND ITS SYSTEM-CENTRED APPROACH TO THE PHASES OF SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT**

Agazarian built on the work of Bennis and Shepard (1956) in developing a systems-centred approach to the phases of development. Bennis and Shepard (1956) developed their theory of group development by linking Bion's (1959) understanding of group dynamics to a developmental sequence of observed phases in group life. Agazarian (1994, 1997, 1999) then translated Bennis and Shepard's theory of group development into a systems framework.

The systems-centred approach identifies three phases of system development in work groups: the authority phase, the collaboration phase, and the integration phase. Though the labels are somewhat different, Agazarian's systems-centred delineation of phases is similar to both Wheelan's (2005) and Tuckman's (1965, 1977) formulations, and compatible with McCollom's (1995) view that phase development is not invariably sequential or linear. In fact, as Wheelan (2005) pointed out in her excellent review, the identification of the specific phases is more similar than different in the hundreds of articles written about phases of development, especially when the phases are understood as guideposts for how systems organize and how this organization potentiates or restricts further development.

Though similar to other phase theories in its delineation of phases, SCT adds a radically different perspective in conceptualizing each phase of development as a *system context*, more similar to the models for complex adaptive systems that complexity and chaos theory articulate (Brabender, 1997) and McCollom's (1995) dynamic contingency model built on open systems theory (Miller and Rice, 1967). Conceptualizing each phase of development from a theory of living human systems defines each phase of development as a 'hierarchy of isomorphic' living human systems that are 'energy-organizing, goal-directed and self-correcting' (Agazarian, 1997). Operationally defining each of these constructs in the theory has provided a theoretical map for influencing phase development. This theoretical map is then linked to application by the SCT methods that operationally define the constructs. We begin by defining the SCT constructs of

hierarchy and isomorphy, and the system variables as related to the phases of system development.

### *Hierarchy*

With the construct of hierarchy, a living human system is never just a system itself in isolation, but always is in the context of the system above it and is the context for the system below it. Thus SCT always works with a system as a set of three systems. This can be illustrated by drawing three concentric circles, where the middle circle exists in the context of the larger circle and is the context for the smallest (Figure 1).

Thus, each phase of development is a set of three nested systems: the work group-as-a-whole, its subgroups, and the roles that members take.

### *Isomorphy*

The second important construct in this theory is *isomorphy*. Systems in a hierarchy are defined as *isomorphic*, meaning similar in structure and function (Bertalanffy, 1968). *Structure* is defined by boundaries

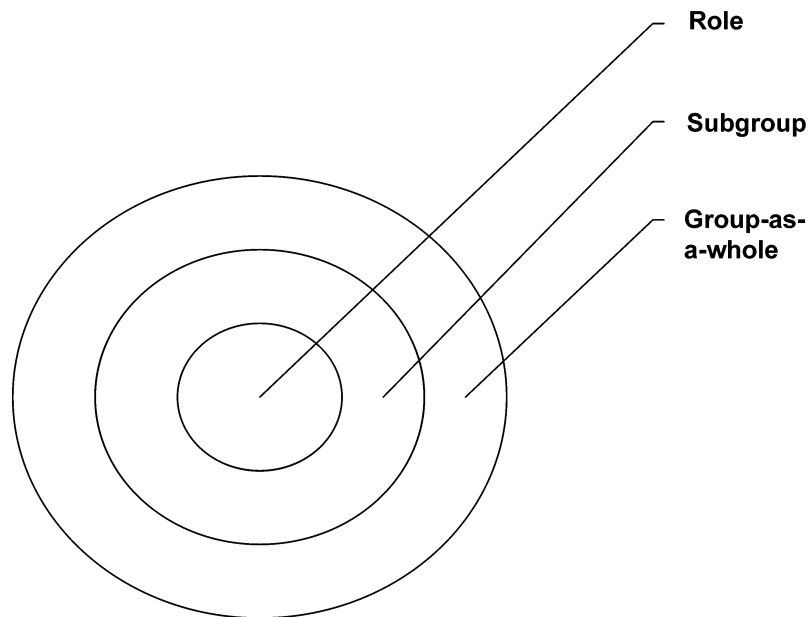


Figure 1. Systems-centred hierarchy in a work group: group-as-a-whole, subgroup, and role.

that titrate the information that comes into or out of a system. *Function* is defined as the process by which a system discriminates and integrates information in the process of surviving, developing, and transforming from simpler to more complex. Structure and function organize system energy. SCT defines energy as information (Miller, 1978).

Thus, as isomorphic systems, the set of three systems, the work group-as-a-whole, its subgroups, and its roles, will be similar in structure and function within each phase. In terms of structure, the boundaries in each phase will be more open to certain information and more closed to other information in each of the three system levels. In terms of function, the system will be better able to integrate information that is congruent with its phase of development. For example, in the flight sub-phase in a work group, the work group-as-a-whole will be low on goal clarity, the subgroups will be oriented to status more than function, and role communications will be vague and personalized so that little goal-oriented information actually comes across the boundaries.

Last, by conceptualizing phases of development using a theory of living human systems, each phase defined as a system context can then be described in terms of the three system variables: *goal-directing* (towards or away from the developmental goal of the phase), *energy-organizing* (titrating the energy that enters or leaves a system, and discriminating and integrating the energy/information within a system), and *self-correcting* (through re-orientating to goal, titrating the boundary to regulate the information that comes in or goes out, or modifying how information is organized). SCT methods effect these three system variables by influencing how the information is directed toward the goals, how information crosses system boundaries, and how the system organizes information. Each of these system variables is discussed in the next section, along with the methods derived from the theory to influence these system variables. A case discussion is interwoven throughout the description of the theory, describing the early phase work with a healthcare team, to illustrate how thinking in terms of these system variables influences the actual practice.

### LINKING THE THEORY TO THE METHODS THAT INFLUENCE SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

#### *Each phase of development is a goal-directed system*

Each phase of development is goal-directed. SCT defines the primary goal of any living human system as survival, development, and

transformation from a simpler to a more complex system (Agazarian, 1997). SCT built on Lewin's idea of a life space (1951) and conceptualized each of the three phases of development as a life space system with an identifiable developmental goal (Agazarian, 1986) in the ongoing process of survival, development, and transformation from simpler to more complex. The developmental goal of the authority phase is to be able to take one's own authority and make a working relationship with the authorities with whom one works. The developmental goal of the collaboration phase is to learn to use the differential resources in a work team and collaborate to build the structures for work. The developmental goal of the integration phase is to apply knowledge and resources in one's role, oriented to the goal of the context.

#### *Healthcare team example*

Diagnosing the development goal and phase of development was an important part of the early work in this consultation. Also essential was the work of the consultant and work group, building a working system together with different roles related to the goals of the consultation.

The work group of six members made arrangements for three days of consultation over a six-month period, to help the team develop in a transition with a new leader and new members. In the first all-day meeting, the consultant focused on influencing the team's functioning by altering its communication pattern. Especially important was linking the idea that changing the communication pattern would actually affect not only how they worked together as a team, but also how they developed their capacity to work together as a team. This was well received by the work group, as they wanted to have a stronger influence in the larger healthcare system (the system above it). This enabled the consultant to link the work group's goal to the developmental goal and introduce the research that demonstrated a relationship between work group development and productivity.

They were also introduced to the idea that integrating differences was a pathway to team development, so that building a communication pattern in which differences could be integrated as resources rather than being divisive was very important. In this work, the work group learned to distinguish between personal and stereotypical differences, such as sexual orientation versus the differences in responses to team issues or in response styles in working that were highly relevant.

It was apparent in this first day that the team had not yet developed

an effective way of working with their new programme director, and would often take a passive and helpless stance, voicing a strong wish for the director to take charge. The director's leadership style was more in the direction of democratic than autocratic.

The wish for the leader to make things better is a predictable issue in the authority phase. It took the form of mild complaints from the staff that projects they saw as hinging on the director were slow in completion, and the staff were primarily passive in relating to their complaints. The members in the work group did not know how to work actively with their own authority. It was also clear that the director actually wanted more help from the team. Thus, from the systems-centred view, the team was working in the phase of authority which contains the challenge of making a working relationship with internal and external authority.

Before continuing this case discussion, it is useful to describe another aspect of the systems-centred theory that has been applied to phases of system development, the deliberate reduction of restraining forces to the inherent drive in system development.

#### *The force field for weakening restraining forces to phase development*

Conceptualizing each phase of development as a life space system with a developmental goal laid the foundation for the next steps in translating the theory to practice. Adapting Lewin's (1951) force field to the phases of system development, Agazarian identified the driving and restraining forces for system development specific to each phase and its developmental goal (Agazarian, 1986, 1999; Agazarian and Gantt, 2003). Driving forces potentiate system development towards its phase goal. Restraining forces oppose development and relate to competing goals (Agazarian, 1988). The competing goals to development are implicit, often oriented to the status quo, and similar to Bion's (1959) idea of the basic assumptions of flight/fight and dependency that compete with work (Figure 2).

SCT shifts the system equilibrium in the direction of more development (towards the goal) by weakening the restraining forces. This releases the driving forces. This again builds on Lewin (1951), who demonstrated that the change strategy of weakening restraining forces was less stressful and more efficient than trying to increase driving forces. SCT posited that weakening the restraining forces specific to each phase of development releases the driving forces that move the system forward to its next phase of development (Figure 3).

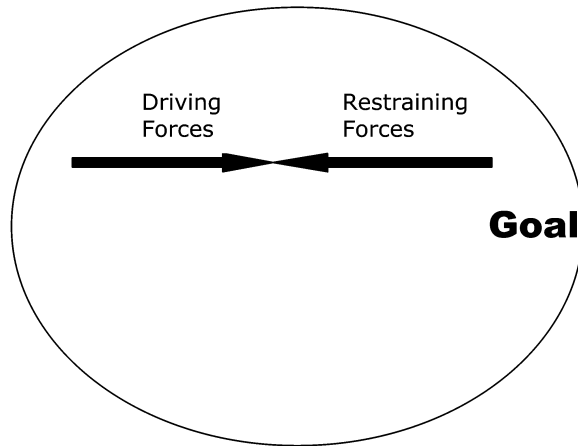


Figure 2. A living human system with driving and restraining forces in relation to the goal.

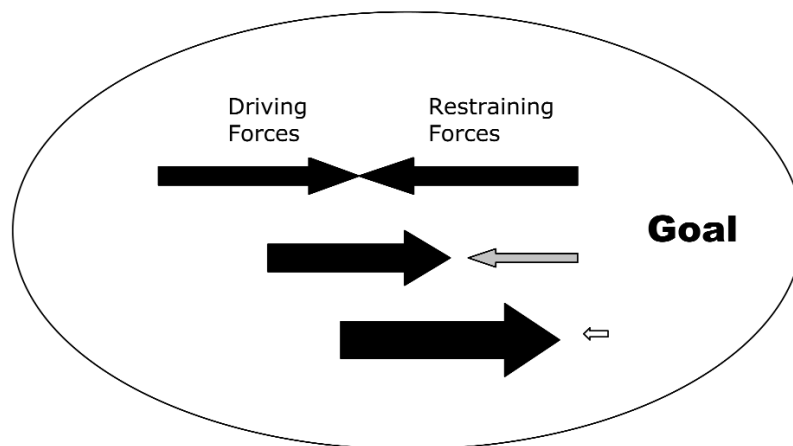


Figure 3. Weakening the restraining forces, which releases the driving forces in the direction of the goal.

Identifying the balance of driving and restraining forces (which Lewin called a quasi-stationary equilibrium) in each phase of development then provides a useful map to guide change strategies to weaken the restraining forces. For example, weakening the restraining force of communicating too much new information too fast across the boundary from a changing work group to its larger context will make it more likely that the changes will come in at a pace that allows them to be assimilated and therefore are more likely maintained.

When the balance has changed enough that the restraining forces specific to the phase no longer predominate, the system has transformed to its next phase or sub-phase, e.g., from flight to fight. The force fields for the three phases of system development for work groups are listed below (Figure 4).

For example, in applying this force field phase model, an e-mail that is specific will be more effective for getting information into a

Phase of Development	DRIVING FORCES	←	RESTRAINING FORCES
<b>Authority Phase</b> <i>Flight Subphase</i>	Developmental Goal: Create reality testing culture →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Don't rock the boat, play it safe</b>
	Forming functional subgroups →		← Maintaining social status communication, personalizing, stereotyped subgrouping
	asking "Anyone else?" →		← Explaining
	Exploring →		← Vagueness, redundancy
<i>Fight Subphase</i>	Specificity, bottom line →		← Speculations
	Data, reality testing →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Do it my way, repel invading differences</b>
	Developmental Goal: Explore differences in context of the work focus →		← "Yes, but" communications
	Subgrouping around differences →		← Complaining or blaming oneself, personalizing frustration
<i>Role Locks with Peers Subphase</i>	Recognizing and acknowledging frustrations →		← Blaming others, reacting to differences or withdrawing
	Collecting data about hesitations →		← Discharging in righteous outrage, indignation, sarcasm
	Making alternative proposals →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Manage issues of dominance and control</b>
	Developmental Goal: Develop functional work role relationships with peers →		← Creating one-up/down relationships
<i>Role Locks with Leader Subphase</i>	Clarifying work role relationships with peers →		← Personalizing language that induces role locks
	Descriptive language →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Sabotage authority, avoid responsibility, maintain status quo</b>
	Developmental Goal: Make a working relationship with one's leader and discover one's own authority →		← Compllying or defying leader instead of task focus.
	Clarifying differential role responsibilities →		← Making a case against the leader or organization
	Learning to work with the leader one has →		← Blaming the leader, overtly or covertly
	Giving and taking authority →		← Denying one's own authority, or one's own competence with leader
<b>Collaboration Phase</b>	Bring in what one knows & negotiate with leader →		
	Developmental Goal: Use differential resources of members while working in an interdependent team →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Personal style at the expense of teamwork</b>
	Contribute to positive work climate while exploring differences in the apparently similar →		← Focus on friendship at expense of work, avoid differences to preserve affiliation
	Exploring similarities in the apparently different and work out a functional collaboration →		← Denial of similarities and insistence on working alone
<b>Integration Phase</b>	Take up team role →		← Go it alone or resist autonomy
	Developmental Goal: Work in role, goal and context with common sense & emotional intelligence →		← <b>Implicit Goal: Self-focus at expense of system-focus, knowledge at the expense of common sense or context</b>
	Working in role and contributing to the goal and climate of the context →		← Blurring roles, ignoring goals & context, or only oriented to self-centered goals
	Using emotional and intellectual intelligence →		← Avoiding reality, resist intuition or reasoning
	Common sense reality testing →		← Losing common sense
	Maintaining a sense of humor →		← Losing perspective, personalizing
	Seeing the bigger picture →		← Self-focused at expense of context
	Using emotional knowledge in decision-making →		← Decisions without heart leading to ill-formed implementation
Using the spirit of the law →		← Legalistic, letter of the law	

Adapted from Agazarian (1997) by Gantt, 2006.  
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Figure 4. The systems-centred approach to development in work groups: a force field depicting the driving and restraining forces in each of the phases of system development.

work group than one that is vague. Specificity contributes to collecting reality data, essential to effective problem-solving. Specificity is then a driving force, while vagueness is a restraining force that supports the implicit flight goal of avoiding differences. Reducing vagueness in communications and requiring specificity shifts a work group from flight and 'playing it safe' to reality-testing.

Though many of the techniques used by SCT to weaken restraining forces will already be familiar to consultants and managers (e.g., asking for specificity), the emphasis on organizing these techniques in a sequence that links to the phase diagnosis and to a systematic approach to facilitating the system's development, and the development of its emotional intelligence, is unique to the SCT approach. This model was central in the work with the healthcare team, further described below.

#### *Healthcare team*

The consultant worked with the team to identify their driving and restraining forces, both in the initial session and again in the second meeting. Starting with driving forces developed a positive context of open boundaries that made the later discussion of restraining forces easier. The consultant encouraged the team to pick the restraining force that was easiest to weaken, thus increasing the potential for success.

As the group discussed their driving and restraining forces, the consultant modified the restraining forces in their communication pattern inherent in the flight phase, e.g., by asking members to be specific when they were vague, going to the bottom line when they were redundant, and introducing exploring as an alternative to explaining (see Figure 4).

As the work progressed, a conflict surfaced about how to hire new staff. How this conflict was addressed is described after first discussing the theory that guided the work with the conflict.

#### *Each phase of development is energy-organizing*

Understanding how systems-centred consultants work with conflict necessitates returning again to the theory. Living human systems organize energy by discriminating and integrating information. Each phase develops from simpler to more complex by discriminating and integrating differences (Agazarian, 1997). Development occurs as the differences and conflicts are explored and integrated in each phase, based on the theoretical assumption that integrating

differences is a sufficient condition for system survival, development, and transformation from simpler to more complex. Thus, discriminating and integrating differences is a driving force for developing within and through each phase of system development.

*Functional subgrouping for resolving conflicts in the service of phase development*

Functional subgrouping is the systems-centred conflict resolution method for discriminating and integrating differences which puts the theory into practice (Agazarian, 1997). SCT uses the method of functional subgrouping (Agazarian, 1992, 1997) to contain and explore the conflicts that arise in work groups in each system phase. Theoretically, functional subgrouping intervenes to the middle of the systems in the set of three.

This is most likely to influence change efficiently in the other two systems as the middle system shares boundaries with each of the other two (see Figure 1). Thus, subgrouping functionally influences both the work group-as-a-whole and the roles.

In practice, functional subgrouping interrupts the familiar human tendency to react with argument or persuasion in response to a different viewpoint (Agazarian and Philibossian, 1998; Agazarian and Gantt, 2005). Instead, functional subgrouping requires all of those with a similar viewpoint to talk with each other first, while those with the other, different subgroup information hold back until the first subgroup has finished their exploration. This interrupts the splitting that occurs with reactions to differences. As each subgroup in turn explores their similarities, the information from both sides comes into the system. As the process continues, first differences begin to emerge within each subgroup, and second, each subgroup begins to identify its similarities with the initially different subgroup. This process leads to integration in the system-as-a-whole.

For instance, the fund-raising section of a large non-profit agency had recently been informed of a new major funding drive that would significantly affect the work-group's work for the next two years. The work-group was working primarily in the sub-phase of fight, where differences create arguments. The work group had been assessing its strategy for implementing a new fund-raising drive. Several members made different proposals for modifying their current organization in order to support the new funding drive. Introducing functional subgrouping interrupted the tendency to respond to the different proposals with 'yes, but' rebuttals. Despite initial resistance, the work group discovered that it was less stressful to explore

one idea at a time without rebutting it. Using functional subgrouping, the group continued exploring all sides, alternating in turn, until everyone was satisfied that the different viewpoints had been explored. The discussion climate changed from one of contention to one of data-collection and curiosity, a better atmosphere for fostering emotional intelligence in decision-making. This process also enabled the work group to increase its capacity for managing the frustrations inevitable in the work, essential for developing a more robust work group with greater emotional intelligence.

#### *Healthcare team*

Returning again to the healthcare team, the method of functional subgrouping was introduced immediately in the initial meeting by asking each member to say 'anyone else?' when they brought in a perspective. This both let members know when the last speaker had finished his or point, and at the same time encouraged others to build on the ideas so that any idea could be explored by the group. As the healthcare team was based in an academic setting, the consultant also introduced some of the research supporting the usefulness of functional subgrouping. Thus, by the time the force field data was collected, and the conflict had emerged over how to secure administrative help, the group already know how to subgroup functionally.

This proved very useful in the group discussion on how to weaken the restraining force of limited administrative help. As the group worked with how to remedy this, it very quickly became clear that most of the group members were in one subgroup and the leader in the other. The consultant guided the group to use functional subgrouping, building first one subgroup and then the other in turn, each side holding a difference that was important for the group to integrate. It was not easy work, yet, by the end, the group had developed a solution that integrated both sides of the conflict and had moved out of what must have been a familiar 'tug of war'. When done, the leader saw his information as a subgroup voice as well as a personal opinion; he was able to avoid the sabotage of his passive compliance when the work group did not go the way he wanted. He was pleased that he had not reverted to this habitual role. When the leader stayed with his request and the criteria for it proactively, the second subgroup discovered a way to address the director's concern. This subgroup recognized that they were also able to avoid their old, habitual role of pleasing and accommodating at the expense of co-operating. The group was pleased to find a creative solution that integrated what was important to both subgroups.

Functional subgrouping was used again in the second meeting, first to collect data about difficulties in working with trainees across different service settings, and next to explore how the group had developed system norms that interfered with fully training the trainees. During the subgrouping process, the consultant continued to weaken the phase-relevant restraining forces. Many of the restraining forces being weakened in this work related to boundary permeability, described in its theoretical perspective below.

*Information filter in each phase of development*

Boundary permeability influences what information gets organized and integrated. Boundaries filter what comes into and out of a system by opening and closing. Systems whose boundaries are too closed limit phase development by blocking the flow of energy/information. Closed systems support the status quo and interfere with the input of differences necessary for system development.

Agazarian built on the work of Shannon and Weaver (1964) in identifying the conditions under which system boundaries open or close in a communication channel. Shannon and Weaver identified an inverse relationship between noise (defined as ambiguity and redundancy) and the probability of information transfer: The less noise in a communication channel, the greater the probability of information transfer. Simon and Agazarian (1967) identified a third source of noise: contradiction or difference that is too different from the existing organization of information, e.g., 'yes, but.' Agazarian then developed methods for lowering the different kinds of noise in a communication channel.

*Reducing the restraining forces of noise in the phases of development*

Each phase of system development has predictable sources of noise. For example, ambiguity and redundancy are major sources of noise in the flight sub-phase. SCT trains work groups in the flight phase to shift from ambiguous communications to specifics, and from redundancies that say the same thing over and over again to the 'bottom line'. The most common redundancy is explanation. Contradictions with 'yes, but' communications are a major source of noise in the flight sub-phase, so SCT develops the norms for using functional subgrouping to explore the 'yes' in one subgroup and the 'but' in another (whenever possible this training happens before the work group develops into the flight sub-phase).

Simon and Agazarian (1967) also developed SAVI (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction), which identifies entropic and neg-entropic communications by classifying communications in a three-by-three grid. The SAVI system is used in communication training with work groups (Byram et al., 2006) to facilitate identifying and changing noisy, entropic communications to neg-entropic. The SAVI grid provides a template for identifying the 'green light' communications (neg-entropic) that make it easy to get information across (low noise leading to open boundaries), the 'red light' communications (entropic) that put noise into a system and function to keep information out (high noise leading to closed boundaries), and the 'yellow light' communications whose impact on system boundaries is contingent on the overall communication flow. Training work groups to use the SAVI grid gives them a tool for changing communication norms, by learning to take noise out of the work group communications. Decreasing noise increases information transfer, which increases the developmental potential of the work group. The SAVI grid has also been used to identify the communication patterns that are prototypic in each phase of a work group's development (Simon and Agazarian, 2000; described in Agazarian and Gantt, 2000).

#### *Healthcare team*

Throughout the work in this first day, the consultant trained the group to move from ambiguity to specificity, to get to the bottom line and to use functional subgrouping whenever a 'yes, but' came into the communication with the understanding that a 'yes, but' signalled a difference that, if explored and integrated, could be a resource for the work group.

In the second meeting, the group was introduced formally to the idea of noise in a communication process, and the ongoing challenge of reducing noise. (Members worked together in triads to 'practise' how to introduce noise and to learn to hear it.) This exercise was very meaningful to some of the members, who continued to reference it throughout the day.

By the end of the second day, the group constructed a force field (Figure 5) that identified the noise that they had reduced during the day that enabled their work to happen, and on their own initiative made a plan to post the force field for all to review before each of their regular meetings.

Driving Forces →	←Restraining Forces
Commitment to work together to support→ each other's authority.	
Bringing in specific data→	←Explaining either personally or theoretically
Seeing things as a system→	←Personalizing, retreat to personal guilt or injury or anger
Recognizing a different present can→ make a different future	←Speculations and negative predictions about the future based on the past, leapfrogging over the present
Choosing to support systems over→ personal preference	
Weakening the personalizing and role→ stereotypes	
Wanting to make room for all→ information	

Figure 5. Force field from healthcare team of driving forces that helped them get their work done and the restraining forces they weakened in the process.

#### *Each phase of development is a self-correcting system*

Returning to the third system variable, each phase of development then self-corrects in the direction of survival, development, and transformation. More specially, work groups self-correct by opening boundaries to information and closing to noise. In work groups, the boundaries of each phase open to information similar to the norms of the phase and close to information that is too different and cannot yet be integrated.

Work groups also self-correct with functional subgrouping in that first discriminating, and then integrating, differences self-corrects a work group in its developmental process. For example, often implicit in a change process is a subgroup eager to move forward, counterbalanced by the cautious subgroup. When both are legitimized, the two subgroups pace the developmental process in the work group.

Last, work groups self-correct by weakening the restraining forces towards the developmental goals. Sometimes it is as simple as clarifying the goal orientation. At other times, weakening the restraining forces that support the competing, implicit goals provides an important self-correction.

Before looking in more detail at how the SCT methods described above are used to facilitate system development within and through

each of the phases, it is useful to revisit the theoretical constructs of hierarchy and isomorphy in relation to work group development.

*The nested systems within each phase*

Returning to the set of three systems that define a work group in its phase of system development, the work group-as-a-whole identifies the goal orientation of the phase, the subgroups contain the developmental conflicts of the phase, and the roles contain the energy/information needed for phase development. If a work group is dominated by implicit goals, the subgroups will stereotype the conflicts, and the roles will stereotype and encapsulate differences, so that development is fixated.

SCT intervenes to fixated work groups with a range of methods that orient to the set of three systems. The SCT method for shifting subgrouping from stereotyped to functional enables the group conflicts to be explored and integrated. Weakening the stereotyped personalized roles and strengthening the functional work roles increases the energy/information that will be available for development and work (Gantt, 2005). Thus, SCT targets interventions to the group-as-a-whole to strengthen goal orientation, to the subgroups to support discrimination and integration of differences, or to the roles to encourage energy/information into the work group. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

*Group-as-a-whole*

When the goal orientation is implicit or unclear, interventions to the group-as-a-whole to clarify goal orientation are always useful. For example, a work group developing a strategic plan together noticed the lack of energy for planning. Several members recognized that they were 'passively withdrawing', a familiar old personalized or habitual role that would sooner or later induce the leader to take charge. Reorientating the work group to the goal, and to their actual interest in being part of the planning, freed members to begin to relate to the goal with more energy and enthusiasm.

*Subgroups*

The subgroups in a work group embody the phase conflicts for the work group-as-a-whole. SCT introduces functional subgrouping for resolving the phase conflicts. In contrast, when the phase conflicts are not contained or resolved, phase development is limited, emotional intelligence is constricted, and productivity impaired. In this same example discussed above with the work group in strategic

planning, functional subgrouping enabled the work group to recognize that the 'passive, withdrawing, bored' subgroup, as they became active, contained the important information that the heart and passion was not yet coming into the planning.

### *Roles*

Roles, too, are systems and can be functional or stereotyped, just as subgroups can. When members are in their work roles and related to goal and context, the roles are functional and adaptive. In contrast, when members contribute from personalized, habitual roles, these roles are a restraining force for work group development. From a systems perspective, personalized roles have relatively impermeable boundaries so that the person in the role rarely hears anything that is different from what she or he already believes and rarely brings in information in a way that the group can use in its development. However, undoing personalized roles releases the information that the roles contained and that the work group had not yet integrated in its development. Returning to this same example, the members who recognized they had retreated to their bored and critical roles were then able instead to shift back to their functional work roles as they reoriented back to the goal.

Another example of a personalized, habitual role occurred regularly in a faculty group where a member persistently presented as 'the one who always disagrees'. Consequently, whatever he contributed was rarely heard or valued as his preface of 'Well, I see it differently' became a redundant and noisy communication which people either reacted to with emotionality or tuned out. In the faculty group, this member's role contained the group conflict over working together as a team, an important conflict to surface in faculty groups.

SCT contrasts personalized, habitual roles with 'member role'. Personalized or habitual roles are restraining forces for development and transformation, and support personal survival at the expense of work group development and transformation. Personalized roles relate to the past rather than to the work context. Member role relates to the present and is oriented to the goal of the context. When in member role, people are able to direct their personal energy towards supporting the work of the work group in context.

### *Healthcare team*

The team members learning how to subgroup early in the first day not only enabled the group to explore its conflicts functionally when

they arose towards the end of the day, but also enabled the group to relinquish the personalized, habitual role responses. As described earlier, a member in each subgroup noted the pull into a personalized, habitual role and was able to use the subgrouping process to avert this habitual responding. Both members reported relief and pleasure in not adhering to the habitual role. Thus, the functional subgrouping enabled both a task to be solved and the group to take a developmental step of integrating a difference rather than reverting to habitual role responses to manage the reactions to difference.

By the end of the first day of work, the team had identified specific next steps with a timeline for implementing their team solution. In terms of the system development, the team had begun weakening the flight restraining forces and also recognizing some of the roles that managed the passive fight in the team between members.

This work continued during the second day, as several members recognized the pull into habitual roles of 'fixer'. When in the 'fixer' role, they intellectualized and 'explained'. This contributed to a closed system, as their team members heard the explanation as overly protective of the trainees, felt frustrated, and ended up in 'passive, complaining' roles. The group recognized that when these reciprocal roles of 'fixer' and 'complainer' were activated, they were completely unable to actually talk through the difficulty. Other members recognized the pull to explain by personalizing or theorizing, both of which contributed to a closed system, while all the members actually wanted an open system.

Identifying these discrepancies was freeing to the whole system, and as the explaining decreased, the group was able to explore the actual data and begin to problem-solve the challenge of how to work with their trainees across different system contexts. The specific difficulties in doing this did, in fact, relate to taking one's authority in one's work role as well as a lack of clarity about how one's role changes as the context changes. Lowering the noise in the communication system freed the group to address these difficulties rather than avoid them.

By the end of the first twelve hours of consultation, the team had modified their communications, learned to ask 'anyone else?' effectively enough that, in a situation of hiring a new faculty, all were active in coming to consensus, a strong departure from previous passive roles. The work group system was less passive, better able to make functional role relationships between the leader and the members and able to process the flow of information as it related to their goals.

### THE PHASES OF SYSTEM DEVELOPMENT

In the rest of this paper, we discuss in more detail how the SCT theory and methods are used to influence phase development. We describe each of the major system phases (authority, collaboration, and integration) and the phase-specific interventions that SCT introduces in each.

Phase development is not a linear process. It is not uncommon to see a work group focused on collaboration phase issues before reducing the restraining forces in the authority phase. When the authority phase restraining forces are not reduced, the energy available for productive collaboration will be limited. For example, one social service work group framed their problem as lack of closeness in the team. Once they were refocused on their work goals, issues around power and control typical of the authority phase emerged. As the team developed through its authority phase, they discovered a different kind of interpersonal satisfaction in working well together, as they were able to use their energy as a driving force towards work instead of being dominated by the restraining force of complaining.

The sequence of these expected phases of system development takes many forms in work groups. Some phases pass so fast as to go almost unnoticed, others remain in place for so long that it gives the impression that the work group is permanently stuck. Being able to diagnose each phase enables consultants and managers to intervene to reduce specific restraining forces relevant to the phase, which then releases the developmental drive.

#### *Authority phase*

For anyone who has worked in an organization, the behaviours typical of the authority phase will sound all too familiar. The major preoccupations are with power and control, and contention with the external authority, whether it is a peer, or the team leader, or supervisor, or the company itself. This preoccupation creates a competitive and political climate as employees vie with one another for the leader's favour or disfavour. This sets up a pattern of dominant-submissive roles with each other and with the authorities typical in almost all organizations since, very often, organizations are stuck in the authority phase. There are four predictable sub-phases in the authority phase.

#### *Recognizing the flight sub-phase*

In the first sub-phase of flight, behaviour is passive. Communications are often vague and ambiguous (high in noise, which closes

the boundary to information). Problem-solving communications are infrequent and avoidance is widespread. Communications are often more focused on gossip than work. The gossip in turn breeds uneasiness, which in turn stimulates more gossip. Differences are often withheld to ensure that the 'boat doesn't get rocked', or are discharged in gossip. 'Yes, buts' are used to disguise disagreements and keep the waters 'apparently' smooth (e.g., 'That's a really good idea, but I think we should consider the other proposal first'). 'Keeping the peace' takes priority over getting the job done. It is as if the goal is to make certain one is not pinned down on anything, which makes it very difficult to get the information that is necessary for work.

*Reducing the restraining forces in the flight sub-phase*

The challenge in flight is to reduce the flight behaviours so that communications become more reality-based. This requires shifting the communication norms.

The first set of restraining forces addressed is the social status communication patterns, typical in organizations. Social status hierarchies restrict the communications between levels in the organizational hierarchy (Festinger, 1953). For example, in a management meeting high status members talk to high status members, low status members look to high status members, and the information contained in the low status subgroup is less likely to cross the boundaries into the meeting, thus maintaining a social status communication pattern. Introducing functional subgrouping, in contrast to stereotyped subgrouping around status, is an important first step in changing this communication norm.

The second important step is to modify the communications that keep information unspoken and unavailable as a resource. The social communications in the flight sub-phase (the noise of ambiguities and redundancies) fail to solve either the problem of how to work, or what work to do (Agazarian, 1968). Instead, these kinds of communications set up stereotypes that replicate the stereotypes in the world outside the organization.<sup>3</sup> SCT reduces the social defences in communications by asking for specificity rather than vagueness, requesting facts rather than opinions and speculations, discriminating data from explanations, and encouraging 'bare bones', bottom-line communications. Interrupting this tendency in the flight sub-phase to speculations and 'smoke screens', or redundant stories that obscure differences, paves the way for the real differences to become more apparent in the next sub-phase of flight.

*Recognizing the fight sub-phase*

As the differences become apparent, frustration inevitably increases. When the frustration aroused around differences goes on too long, it turns to blame. Blame, whether of others, or one's self, characterizes the fight sub-phase. Behaviour shifts to active blaming of others and those in authority. Meetings are often contentious, with arguing and sarcastic put-downs of different points of view, or full of complaining, or sullen withdrawal. Some work groups find a 'trouble maker' or scapegoat to blame, and become convinced that 'fixing' or getting rid of him or her would solve all the problems. This happens with little or no recognition that the 'troublemaker' role contains the trouble for the work group at the cost of fixating work group development (Agazarian, 1993).

Very little information can be integrated when the reactions against difference pre-empt the work of discriminating and integrating the information contained in the difference. This results in impairment in work group development, productivity, and efficiency. Not only does the contention in a fight climate pre-empt development and work, but employee turnover, dissatisfaction and absenteeism often increases.

*Reducing the restraining forces in the fight sub-phase*

Whenever frustration emerges, it is important to normalize the frustrations that inevitably arise around differences or change. Frustration is often misframed in work groups as a problem rather than a natural response to differences. Normalizing and legitimizing the frustration inevitable in work and understanding the reactions to frustration as a function of the phase context goes a long way towards undoing the mismanagement of frustration.

For example, as one work group discussed their frustration, they recognized that the task they were trying to do was not yet clear. Acknowledging the frustration enabled them to clarify their task. When information about the context of the frustration can be discriminated from the reactivity to the frustrating realities, the system's emotional intelligence is potentiated. Legitimizing frustration as a response to difference can also serve as a reorientation to the goal of exploring the differences as resources instead of reacting to them.

*Functional subgrouping as a conflict resolution method*

With contradictions as the major source of noise in the fight sub-phase, often in the form of 'yes, but,' functional subgrouping is the SCT intervention of choice. Establishing the norm of exploring both the 'yes' and the 'but' separately in functional subgrouping interrupts the never-ending back and forth rebuttal or attempts to

convert or extrude the differences. First one side and then the other is explored in functional subgrouping, until the information in each side can be understood. The 'solution' often bridges the two sides, incorporating the concerns of both, and makes more common sense than either side alone. When the subgroup resources are available in this way, the 'opposite' subgroup provides an important ballast so that change proceeds at a pace that the work group is able to integrate. Functional subgrouping also encourages members to take their member roles, contributing information to the subgroup so that the work group can really know all of what it knows. This provides a platform for weakening the redundant personalized roles in the next phase of development.

*'Problem' employees from the systems-centred phase perspective*

It is often in the fight phase that consultants are called for a 'problem' employee. From a systems-centred viewpoint, the phase-specific work group dynamics have a greater influence on an individual employee's behaviour than does the employee's personal dynamics. This is easily seen when the same employee behaves differently in each different phase. The SCT consultant hired to 'fix' a problem employee looks to the system's functioning first, assesses the context as well as the role the person plays in the context, and the developmental phase of the work group. Looking at phases of system development provides a different way of looking at 'problems' that lead to different interventions. 'Fixing' the employee rather than decreasing the restraining forces of the phase often perpetuates a fixation in the work group development. Understanding what the 'problem' employee's role contains for the work group can lead to important information about unresolved system issues.

*Role locks with peers*

It is common, as the frustrations in the fight sub-phase accelerate, for work group members to end up in repetitive, stereotypic personalized roles with each other. SCT calls these 'role locks'. One of the most common is the 'one-up/one-down' role lock. One person routinely takes the role of 'one-up', often with the attitude of 'I know better' and 'how could you be so stupid about this?' The other person takes the reciprocal 'one-down' role, with statements like 'I am sorry I messed it up' and 'I don't know if I will ever get it right'. Such a role lock is a predictable and familiar way of managing issues of power, control, and dominance, though at the expense of both members' resources, and at the expense of the development of the work group and its emotional intelligence.

*Reducing the restraining forces: undoing the one-up/one-down role locks*

Reorienting members to their functional roles weakens the pull to role locks. In addition, simple shifts in language and non-verbal communications from personalized to reality-oriented communications weaken the triggers to personalized roles and role locks. For example, in one work group, Sally reported her dissatisfaction with 'having to' pursue other options in the project, the phrase 'having to' signalled a one-down, personalized victim role, likely to induce others into personalized roles. Tom very quickly took a reciprocal one-up role, and began ardently pushing Sally to do more, and started to give her directives. Needless to say, Tom's behaviour increased Sally's sense of feeling 'put upon' and misunderstood. With coaching, Sally changed her language, and was able to report the reality difficulties without inducing a role, and in a way that the work group could address them and recognize their part in the difficulties.

The SCT approach encourages a shift in the work group from passively supporting a role lock to actively exploring the issues the role lock contains for the work group. In the above example, the work group was asked to see what work issues were being avoided by passively supporting the conflict. Both Sally's reluctance and Tom's pushing were explored by the work group using functional subgrouping to see what information both sides contain. The subgroup identifying with Sally's reluctance started to recognize their restraining force of passivity and complaining. The subgroup with pushing energy recognized their frustration with the project and their impatience. In undoing the role-lock fixation, the work group recognized that the current amount of frustration with the project had led to the personalized roles pre-empting the work roles. They were then able to begin to address the frustrating realities.

*Role locks with authority*

As a work group develops, the role locks with the leader become stronger. Typically these are the role locks of complying with or defying the authority. The defiant role redundantly challenges the leader more for the sake of challenge itself. The compliant role goes along with the letter of the law but sabotages the spirit. Both sabotage work.

The culmination of the role locks with the leader often emerges as a crisis or confrontation as the employees challenge the leader. However difficult, the phase of challenging authority is an important step in development. There may be an eruption in a staff meeting or a delegation sent to the next level up, or a complaint made to

human resources. When it can be contained and understood, the challenge can take the work group into identifying the reality difficulties that are being externalized on to the leader. The fact that the leader shares the same difficulties is impossible for the work group to see when they are making the leader the scapegoat. The earlier work in the flight and fight sub-phase – decreasing speculations, emphasizing facts and data, and exploring the information in the differences – lays the foundation for being able to bring in the challenge and confrontation in a way that the realities and the underlying restraining forces can be addressed. This then enables both the leader and the members to take their own authority.

It is important that the SCT consultant also works with the leader so that the leader does not take the dissatisfactions just personally ('as if' the dissatisfactions are just about him or her). The consultant trains the leader to hear the information the work group is communicating and to see the work group 'flexing its muscle' as a step in its development. The leader often learns more about his or her leadership resources and weaknesses in this process.

When successful, this confrontation frees the work group to bring in differences and make proposals whether or not they differ from those of the supervisor or boss (Murphy, 2006). The work group is then able to recognize the frustrating realities, both in the work context and in the particular style of their leader, and take up the challenge of how to work with the realities of each rather than complaining, blaming, gossiping, or undermining them.

For example, one work group full of complaints about how the team leader took over and dominated began to recognize how members held back from taking initiative in their meetings, leaving the initiative in the leader's role. After recognizing the links between their behaviour and their dissatisfactions about the leader's style, the work group members began to understand how they were part of the problem and increased their participation in the process.

Another example of this occurred in a work group where members were disgruntled with the leader pushing the group to implement a new orientation plan as a way to integrate two teams. The authority issue was apparent in the work of two subgroups. Several members were openly resistant and critical. Others were quiet and passively resistant. With the consultant's help, the work group shifted out of the stereotypic roles with the leader and began to explore the actual difficulty they were having with the leader. In this discussion, they were able to identify that the leader had, in fact, muddled two important issues. The work group recognized the need for an orientation plan as the leader was suggesting. The group also concurred

with the importance of integrating two disparate teams. Once the need for two teams as well as an orientation plan were identified as two separate and important issues, the group was able to get back to work and to bring in its view that unlinking the two made more sense. Importantly, the work group had taken its own responsibility in clarifying the leader's proposal.

Many consultants and managers use a 360° evaluation process, where a leader is evaluated by all those who have contact with him or her – 360° of feedback. It is important to note that if this is introduced in the authority phase, the 360° process very often exacerbates the authority conflicts rather than helping resolve them. If, however, the 360° information is framed not only as feedback to the leader but also as a clarification of the challenges for the work group in working with the particular leader they have, then the 360° process can work in the service of work group development rather than supporting a fixation on the liabilities of the authority. This is a very good example of how understanding the phases of development can influence how management and training tools can be used to support work group development. This contrasts to the often used strategy of promoting leadership development at the expense of work group development and as if leadership development is independent of the work group.

The group's learning to work with its leader as well as discovering how to take its own authority as a work group and in work roles lays the foundation for the work of the collaboration phase.

#### *The collaboration phase*

The collaboration phase marks an important developmental shift. Relationships with colleagues become more important than the relationship to the leader or the authority. Issues of affiliation and friendship for some clash with the issues of others who prefer working alone. Those leaning towards affiliation (Schutz, 1958) find it difficult to disagree with those they like, resulting in a focus on climate at the expense of task. Those who like working alone emphasize their differences at the cost of noticing similarities, and of inclusion, and may tend to focus on task at the expense of building a collaborative climate. Both tendencies can limit development that depends on discriminating and integrating the particular resources and abilities to work together and alone.

#### *Reducing the restraining forces toward collaboration*

The organizational challenge is to build on the skills developed in the earlier phase. This necessitates collecting data from those who

tend to go it alone, whose questions, when directed to work, may help unearth potential problems, and at the same time making room for those high on affiliation who contribute to the group morale and can be useful in looking for ways the project can succeed. The typical restraining forces are twofold: (a) focusing on differences and avoiding similarities ('go it alone' role), or (b) seeing only the similarities with others and not finding any differences ('joiner' role). To the extent that these restraining forces are not reduced, the work group will have difficulty using the different resources contained in these two roles. The now familiar process of functional subgrouping is again the method for working with the differences in this phase. Subgrouping functionally also teaches collaboration, as members learn to work with both their similarities and differences.

Members have different resources. Some members will be stronger on details, others on seeing the bigger picture, and still others consistently reliable on follow-up. Learning to acknowledge these realities as resources is the developmental work in this phase. For example, one work group came to recognize how often they delegated tasks requiring careful follow-up to a member who had good intentions to do so but who was unreliable on follow-up. Acknowledging this reality enabled the work group to organize work assignments that took this reality into account. This readies a work group to move into the integration phase.

#### *The integration phase*

In the integration phase, the developmental step is to learn to work in functional roles contributing to the goal and context (Agazarian and Gantt, 2003). This includes learning to see the bigger picture and the larger-scale goals, as well as the work group's role in relation to the larger-context goals. It is in this phase that members develop a more in-depth understanding of role, the behaviours that implement one's role related to the goal and to developing the context. Learning how to strengthen one's functional role-taking requires discriminating the resources that are relevant to the role in context and leaving out those that are not relevant (Gantt, 2005).

For example, Gladys, the team leader, goes to one meeting where she is a member of a committee where her role is to contribute input to the committee's work. In the next hour she is at a meeting where she is the chair of the committee, where her role is to set the structure so that others can contribute, and then she is off to lunch with peers, where her role is to be herself with her peers. Each of these is a different context with a different goal that requires a shift in role.

The behaviours that go with the role of committee member will be very different behaviours than those required for the role of committee chair and different again from the role of peer. Each role relates to the goal of the context. Learning to negotiate these role shifts is the work in the integration phase.

Orientating to context necessitates taking into account the norms of each context so that the proposals introduced are not too different from the norms – this avoids introducing noise into the communication. Learning to see the context also means learning to recognize the developmental phase and the influence of the dynamics of the phase on what work is possible in the phase and what is not. This is especially important when a work group that has made substantial changes in its own norms is interacting with its larger organizational context, which has a different set of communication norms.

*Reducing the restraining forces in the integration phase*

The restraining forces in the integration phase are the tendency to personalize and take one's experience out of context. The SCT consultant interrupts the tendency to personalize (personal context at the expense of the work context) by introducing the framework of contextualizing (role related to goal and work context). The systems-centred consultant emphasizes clarifying roles, the behaviours that go with the roles, and discriminating the goal and context of each role. Training the work group about role shifts includes interrupting the tendency to act without considering the role, the goal, and the context.

For example, with a work group where a new project had just been introduced, the consultant encouraged explicitly changing roles and contexts by asking questions that structured this: what do you know when you look at the new project just personally (how it affects you personally)?; what do you know when you look at the new project from your role as an employee of the organization?; what do you know when you look at the project from your role as a member of the work group assigned to this new project?; what happens when you see the project from your role as a member of the committee that will be reviewing this new departmental project for viability?; what do you know when you look at the project as a member of the subgroup in your work group that has hesitations and concerns about the new project?; what do you know when you look at the whole work group and see that we have both the subgroup that is concerned and hesitant about the new project and the subgroup that is excited about it and wants to move forward?

The integration phase builds on understandings, developed in earlier phases, that reaching the work goals requires taking one's

authority in the reality of working relationships with differential resources. The additional challenge in this phase is the emphasis on taking up role responsibility in context in relation to the goals of the work. The ongoing work is to shift roles when the context and goal change. This again builds on the earlier work of discriminating when teamwork or working alone makes the most sense for the context and goals. Learning the role flexibility of shifting roles appropriate to the changing context is the ongoing challenge of the work phase.

A dramatic example of role flexibility occurred in a recent athletic event, a ten-kilometre track race. The 'Red' team was noted for its team tactics in running, and the goal of the Red team in this race was to make it possible for Don, their long-established leader in ten-kilometre racing, to win his last race before retiring. The other members of the Red team ran in ways that supported Don's race, sometimes going in front and slowing the overall pace for Don, and other times running in front of his opponents so that they had to slow down or exert more effort to pass him. In the last half-lap of the twenty-six lap race, Don was in first place when he was suddenly passed by a 'Blue' team member. The Red team member who had been running close to Don in the role of supporting his winning, turned, realized that Don could not respond to this challenge and then raced ahead of Don, doing everything he could to beat the Blue team member himself. At that moment, the context had changed (Don no longer had a chance to win), and the goal for someone from the Red team became winning. Don's colleague changed from a supporting role to a 'winner' role. In many work groups, such a split-second change in role is required to respond to an ever-changing context. It is this ability to change roles as the context changes that is the ongoing challenge in a developing and developed organization.<sup>3</sup>

There is an inverse relationship between personalized roles and functional roles. The inflexibility of personalized roles contrasts to the flexibility that is necessary for the creative transformations of functional development that is the challenge of the integration phase.

*The context of the larger organization and crossing the boundaries*

Like any living human system, a work group has its own phase of system development and exists in the context of the hierarchy of other systems of the organization. As living human systems, organizations contain many sub-systems. An organization contains divisions, divisions contain departments, and departments contain members. Each system is in its own phase of development.

Communicating across the boundaries between systems and subsystems is easier when the system phases are similar, not so easy when they are different.

The developmental phase of an organization influences how the organization communicates. When an organization is in the authority phase, relationships to authority throughout the system take as much, if not more, energy than doing the job. For example, one department publishes a monthly report of the current sales figures. Very often, the information in the report is dominated by the concerns around pleasing or rebelling against its team leader. Thus 'doing the job' in the phase of authority is skewed by the internal politics that are typical of systems in the authority phase.

Another issue in organizations occurs when one department is in one phase of system development and others are in a different phases. For example, in the flight phase, there is more concern around avoiding conflicts. Communications from one department to another are likely to be vague, in an attempt to avoid controversy. In contrast, a department in the fight phase is contending around differences and will be quick to blame or criticize differences in other departments.

For consultants, recognizing these phase realities makes it easier to understand the difficulties that particular departments have with each other without personalizing them. Another important factor is recognizing that, for any change within a department to be feasible, it is important to enable the department to communicate across the boundaries into the organization in such a way that the changes are supported rather than attacked or subtly discouraged. Changing the behaviour in a phase actually changes the cultural norms. The communication challenges between systems with different norms are not unlike an American company communicating with a Japanese company. Without an awareness of the cultural norms in each, it would be very easy for either company to violate the norms in a way that closes the boundaries to communications.

*Crossing the boundaries in a change process within an organization*

Attentiveness to the impact of the different phase dynamics within an organization is critically important when working to introduce change in a work group. If a consultant or manager successfully changes the norms of a work group, yet fails to attend to the communication between the work group and other sections in the organization, ultimately the changes will not be sustained (Agazarian and Philibossian, 1998). This is an often neglected issue in that consultants or managers may make a highly effective change intervention to a work group, but fail to do the equally important work with the

group of attending to how to bring their changes to the larger organization so that the changes can be integrated. In enthusiasm and excitement, 'changed' work groups are often unaware of the differences that they now have with the other systems in the organization, and thus communicate across the boundaries in ways that are not only not understood, but are even abrasive. This almost invariably results in the changes being undone.

An example occurred in consulting to a work group (the Orange team). The consultation had enabled the work group to develop from the passivity of flight into the activity of fight. They had developed a norm of exploring differences for the information that they contained that was relevant to the work, and learned to manage these differences without personalizing. An unexpected reorganization occurred in the company. The Orange team was amalgamated with another group of managers (the Blue team). The Blue team was in the flight phase, which was more typical with the norms of the organization-as-a-whole. Unfortunately, the consultant failed to alert the Orange team to the challenges of communicating across the boundaries between teams that were working in different phases. Consequently, when members of the Orange team introduced a difference, Blue team members responded with silence, or by changing the subject. The Orange team's new norms were quickly extinguished in the new context, and flight norms were re-established. This painful failure underlines the importance of seeing a work group in its larger context, and how paying attention to how to import change into the larger context is as essential in an organizational change process as the change with the work group itself.

## DISCUSSION

All work groups are affected by the phase dynamics inherent in living human systems. If productivity and emotional intelligence are to be maximized, the conflicts in each phase must be addressed so that the developmental potential can be released. Each phase is understood as a system with its own developmental goals related to its phase dynamics. The challenge for consultants is to work with the phase dynamics so that the developmental goals related to each phase of development can be achieved, the implicit goals weakened and the productivity of the work group increased.

Using a phase model, the systems-centred approach encourages a work group to focus on aspects of problems that it is equipped to address, rather than on dimensions that it is not yet ready or able to address. Recognizing the reality of what is and is not possible in any

given phase greatly reduces frustration for consultants, managers, and work groups alike.

The SCT approach to organizational change highlights reality-testing at each phase of development instead of focusing on the underlying entropic responses in organizations. Similarly, the emphasis is on remaining goal-focused in the context of each phase at the task level. Yet SCT also recognizes the suction into flight or fight or other phase dynamics, and works with the work group so that these dynamics can be contained and redirected rather than explored or enacted. The systems-centred approach avoids psychodynamic analysis of the individual and instead works to influence the forces that facilitate the development and functioning of the work group as a system which then creates a context in which individuals can work and develop. In turn, the work group development has an impact on the individual. Conceptualizing system dynamics in terms of driving and restraining forces in relation to the work goal avoids scapegoating employees or leaders and makes it possible to formulate strategies to modify the phase-specific restraining forces in the context of the work goals.

What a work group can do is determined by its phase of system development. For consultants responsible for introducing change strategies into work groups, the knowledge of the phases of system development may well be crucial to their success. Organizational work has to compete with the restraining forces that are inevitably aroused in the authority phase. Having the skills to diagnose the phase enables formulating intervention strategies that weaken the restraining forces to development and thus increase the potential for reality-testing and problem-solving. This orients consultants towards developing work groups into working systems that can do the work they have been organized to do.

#### *Increasing the emotional intelligence of the work group*

Understanding emotional intelligence as a system phenomenon rather than as a property of individuals (Gantt and Agazarian, 2004) emphasizes the paramount importance of developing work groups. In effect, the work group itself is the context which develops its members who contribute to developing the work group. This recursive process is in the direction of increasing development at all system levels and underscores the interdependence of all system levels.

Seeing 'organizational emotional intelligence as an emergent system phenomenon that relates to the interaction of the whole' (Gantt and Agazarian, 2004, p. 8) underscores the importance of focusing on work group development. If organizations are to be creative,

flexible, and adaptive in today's rapidly changing world, increasing emotional intelligence in work groups, which links to system development, is essential.

*The theoretical hypotheses*

Conceptualizing phases of development using systems theory has yielded several hypotheses that summarize and guide the systems-centred practice.

- The ratio of noise to information in the communication channel influences the system development potential.
- Weakening the stereotyped personalized roles and strengthening the functional work roles increases the energy/information that will be available for development and work.
- Interventions targeted to the group-as-a-whole strengthen goal orientation, to the subgroups support discrimination/integration of differences and resolve conflicts, and to the roles encourage energy/information into the work group.
- Phase development is potentiated by systematically reducing the restraining forces within each phase in sequence so that the driving forces specific to each phase become available. Releasing the driving forces not only frees resources, enabling work to take place, but also functions as a developmental drive towards the next phase of system development.
- System phase development necessitates conflict resolution and integration.
- Discriminating and integrating differences is a driving force for developing within and through each phase of system development.
- Weakening the restraining forces that are specific to each phase of system development develops the system and its capacity for systems-centred emotional intelligence.

In summary, the systems-centred approach emphasizes the ability of an organization to develop and change in terms of its capacity to discriminate and integrate information and introduces the phase of system development as the goal-oriented context for both development and work. Each phase of development can be conceptualized as a living human system and identified by its system variables. Phase development, then, is facilitated by influencing the system variables in the direction of development by weakening the restraining forces. SCT links the restraining forces to the phase-specific conflicts, in a sequence from simpler to more complex. The systems-centred consultant then formulates interventions that reduce the phase-

specific restraining forces. Reducing the restraining forces in each phase frees the driving forces and potentiates the work group's increasing ability to direct its energy to its work goals. SCT also works actively with work groups in a change process in learning how to communicate across the boundaries to other work groups and to the larger system context so that the work group changes are not undone by the larger context. Influencing system development, then, potentiates productivity as well as work group development and an increasing capacity for emotional intelligence.

#### Notes

1. This paper is dedicated in memoriam to Mary Horton, who regularly offered her support and encouragement to us in submitting this manuscript to *Organisational and Social Dynamics* and whose friendship over many years will not be forgotten.
2. SCT used SAVI (System for Analyzing Verbal Interaction [Simon and Agazarian, 1967]) to identify the verbal communication patterns of a system that characterize each phase (described in Agazarian and Gantt, 2000). SAVI is discussed in more detail later in this paper.
3. This has implications for leadership as well. The leader of an organization in the authority phase may or may not have the skills needed as the organization develops in that the requirements of the role will be different in each developmental phase of the organization.

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