

THE HIDDEN AGENDA

The discussion, somewhat condensed here, took place at a weekend encounter group recently. My comments are added in brackets but kept to a minimum. Two groups of ten people each, mixed men and women about equal numbers, age 25 to 50. Some had met before but most had met for the first time only the previous day.

Let's establish first who we are.

Let's be Tumpararos and kidnap somebody.

No, I don't want to do that.

Before we can do anything with the other group we may need to find out first what they can do for us or what they may need from us.

Or we could do it another way, we could exaggerate our role and play-act. I want to. . .

Don't keep telling me what to do.

All right, you tell me.

I would like to do something that is meaningful to the 'audience', no use doing something that is only useful to the 'actors'.

No, no, we must do something that is useful to us, meaningful to me, then it is bound to be useful to them.

You are getting too intellectual for me.

How about improvising, finding out what the audience wants?

No, we are professionals and we have something to give them.

Tom, you be the sort of reluctant leader that we would have if we needed a leader.

We don't need a leader, we could use a matchbox as automatic chairman.

Oh no - too artificial - unspontaneous....

I want to be the prince.

It takes a lot of time to come to any decisions.

We have not decided yet what we need to make decisions about.

Let's get on with it.

I have to opt out because I have an accent which is wrong for that role. *(I tried to interfere here but was told to buzz off)*

I would like to send someone to the other group to find out about them.

All right, but can you tell us what you are going to tell them?

No he does not need to tell us first! I trust him to give them the right message. It isn't a matter of not trusting. . .

I have come to find out. . . we feel we might change you if we do something as we want to know first what you are like now. Can we come and sit around your group and observe you?

Can you go away so that we can discuss your proposal in privacy? *(goes)*

I think he has a trick up his sleeve, the way he came in. . .

What shall we do about it now?

We can either accept their proposal or reject it.

If they want to find out about us we must be very important to them and obviously the dominant group.

But we haven't decided about ourselves yet, who we are, we should do that first.

We have an organisational problem.

Take a risk. Yes? No?

We invite you to join us.

They seem decent enough.

Sit around us in silence.

We need a leader.

How will you appoint him?

He will emerge.

Can't we all decide? Do we have this person?

(Stella has quite clearly taken on leadership of group B, by silent consent, they listen to her when she speaks and often change their minds readily if she does not agree or when she makes a contrary suggestion)

Our problem is leadership and organisation

(they now discuss and try to solve it instead of asking for help though they had previously agreed that this was their problem with which they could use help from outside)

I don't want these people to sit around and listen to us - it inhibits me.

I must know more about them first. I don't like them sitting here not saying anything.

Ask them.

Will you tell us what you want?

No.

Are there any problems you have you want us to help you with?

No.

They are spying on us.

Send an ambassador.

Why have you come?

To spy on you.

I think we should ignore them and get on with our own problem - we have dire problems of our own, instead of trying to help them.

We should help them.

We need to help ourselves first.

They are hostile. . . they are just having a good laugh at us. . . shall we throw them out?

They are getting bored.

They are going to use us.

I am very suspicious. They are spying on us.

If we knew what they are here for it would spoil it for us and for them. . . they need us as we are, perhaps they are just studying us to give themselves something interesting to do.

May be they want to find out if we are weak or strong. . .they may want to break us. . .if we sit silently, perhaps they will get bored and go away.

I want to know why they are here. *(Group B then turns around outwards and faces the observers)*

Now you have turned around to face us because you are too weak in yourselves, because you have nothing to hold you together.
Not so, we can make one group, come in, join us. I don't want you sitting behind me. (*movement to get the others in and make room, but they all resist except one.*)

Rauni has been kidnapped.
No, she is a time-bomb planted by us.
When is she due to explode?
Do we need to torture her?
Talk, talk!
They want to play roles. (*Group A very agitated having lost Rauni*)
Come back, come back!
If you survive their torture you will be surprised what you can expect from us!
I want to stay.
Do we want her?
You can go if you will spy for us.
No, no. We are not hostile, why should you be different from us? I want the whole house to be one group.

Those experienced in inter-group dynamics will realise that this conversation contains most of the elements found in such situations. First of all there is the primitive tribal fear and territorial hostility between 'us' and 'them'. At other groups this has taken the form of borrowing kitchen utensils and making a raucous din over the heads of the other group. Secondly there is the tendency to merge if pressure becomes unbearable or if the groups have not established themselves separately, that is if individual group loyalties have not had time to mature. These two tendencies seem mutually contradictory in some way but they seem to run parallel and to me they represent a strong conflict inside the individual. On one such occasion I asked during the feed-back session after the exercise if just for once they would act peacefully and like civilised cultured people. They all agreed that they wanted to do the whole exercise again with that brief in mind. But they had great difficulties. The comments I noted time and time again ran something like this:

Let's do so and so...
No we can't do that because we are supposed to be peaceful, remember?

It all took a long time to resolve. In the end they decided, by sending messengers to and fro, to become two Red Indian tribes invaded by a paleface. They united themselves against the invader.
On another occasion one woman decided to be a pacifist when she visited the other group. It took the other group a long time to believe her, that she was genuine. When they were convinced the whole exercise slowly petered out, the energy and excitement began to seep away and the whole thing became dull and listless.

My own conclusion is, though others are equally possible, that it is relatively easy to establish an individual in a group, to develop closeness between individuals, but far more difficult to explore the relationship between groups, to find willingness of one group to become involved in the feelings and territory of another group, however arbitrarily and randomly their members had come together as complete strangers only

