Group Dynamics - Boundary Dynamics of Groups

An Article by Derek Hendrikz © 1999

URL: www.derekhendrikz.com
E-mail: hello@derekhendrikz.com
(T) +27 82 781 4049

INTRODUCTION:

The focus is on the boundaries of groups. This is a very complex dynamic and the boundaries of task, time, territory, identity and authority are explained in a simple and possible way. Time is also spent on explaining the theory of under- and over-bounded systems.

When studying the dynamics of boundaries one will have to look at three boundary concepts, namely; intra-personal, inter-personal and inter-group boundaries.

INTRA-PERSONAL BOUNDARIES:

These are the boundaries that every person has within him/herself. If one just think of the different roles that one individual has to play you can already conceptualise the complex boundary regulation and management that an individual has to constantly maintain. Many psychological disorders like schizophrenia are a sign of an individual not having the ability to regulate his/her intra-personal boundaries.

INTER-PERSONAL BOUNDARIES:

The average person has ± 20 interactions with other people during one day. These interactions differ in nature relative to the people you interact with. You will probably (or should I say hopefully) kiss your spouse goodbye in the morning, greet a friend with the hand, say hi to colleagues at work and only look at people in the lift.

The way that you manage your interpersonal boundaries thus differ in relation to the people you interact with. Personal safety probably plays a big role in the establishment of inter-personal boundaries. Just think of how differently you manage your interpersonal boundaries with different people. With some people you spend only 5-minutes and with others you are prepared to give hours; to some you will only talk about 'safe' issues and with others you share your deepest emotions.

The importance of understanding these boundaries is that it takes up a large part of your life.

INTER-GROUP BOUNDARIES:

As individuals manage their boundaries with interactions with each other, groups also manage theirs. Think of how cultures stick to their identities, and how much time countries spend on boundary regulation with other countries. The Gulf-war is also a good example of how fiercely boundary violations are sanctioned. On smaller scale think of how many times different departments have to interact with each other. This interaction inevitably calls for constant boundary regulation and also the continuous tolerance of boundary violations. The management of inter-group boundaries is definitely one of the big challenges that a middle manager of the SAPS faces. This is especially true if one looks at the large SAPS bureaucracy with its hundreds of faces. This is especially true if one looks at the large SAPS bureaucracy with its hundreds of departments that collectively has to achieve one goal.

THEORY OF UNDER- AND OVER-BOUNDED SYSTEMS:

Credits: All quoted sections are taken from Claton P. Alderfer; *ADVANCES IN EXPERIENTIAL SOCIAL PROCESSES: VOLUME 2;* 1980; Chapter 11; pages 269 – 277

"A system is a set of units with interdependent relationships among them. All human systems are open systems with boundaries to regulate transactions between the system and its environment and to determine what is inside and outside the system. Boundaries are the defining characteristic of systems. Permeability is a crucial property of system boundaries.

Because open systems depend on transactions with their environments for survival and growth, there is an 'optimal' degree of boundary permeability for each system-environment relationship (Alderfer, 1976a, b; Skynner, 1976). 'Over-bounded' systems show *less* boundary permeability than is optimal for the system's relationship to it's environment, and 'under-bounded' systems show *more* boundary permeability than is optimal for the system's relationship to its environment." This looks like complicated theory, and a valid question would be to understand its relevance within SAPS environment. If one looks at the SAPS there seems to be a lot of evidence of it being an extremely over-bounded system. The amount of levels of management, the rank structure, the isolation of components dealing with specific issues only, the amount of rules, laws and regulations governing the organisation; the inability of middle and operational levels to function without clear policy; etc. The SAPS then being a over-bounded system is very much dealing with that which is going on inside the organisation and subsequently losing touch with that which is going on outside the organisation. Alderfer (269, 1980) describes this phenomenon as follows: "The primary threat to over-bounded systems is that they become closed off to their environments and lose the capacity to respond adaptively to environmental changes and to reverse the build-up of entropy. The boundaries of systems are both psychological and physical. The psychological boundaries are harder to determine and tell more about the 'here and now' of the system. There is one characteristic which all systems everywhere in the universe have in common; that is *interdependence.* It is thus not possible for one system to function without influencing and being influenced by the boundaries of other systems. "Consulting work with a variety of under- and over-bounded systems had led to the identification of 11-interdependent variables whose values differentiate under- and over-bounded systems from optimally bounded systems. An applied behavioural scientist may use these indicators rather than hard-to-detect boundary relations in order to determine in which direction, if in either, a system departs from optimal boundary permeability."

The variables are:

(1) Goals

(2) Authority

(3) Economic conditions

(4) Role definitions

(5) Communication patterns

(6) Human energy

(7) Affect distribution

(8) Inter-group dynamics

(9) Unconscious basic assumptions

(10) Time-span

(11) Cognitive work

(1) GOALS:

Miller and Rice (1967) define the primary task (goal) of an organisation as the work the organisation needs to do to survive its environment. "Under-bounded and over-bounded systems differ in their goal structure. Under-bounded systems have neither the clarity nor the degree of consensus in their goal structure that can be observed in over-bounded systems. A sense of 'meaninglessness' is not uncommon in under-bounded systems… Over-bounded systems, on the other hand, tend to show an unequivocal clarity about their goals and their priority…

Increasing the clarity of organisational goals or the degree of consensus about goal priority is associated with decreasing boundary permeability and decreasing the clarity of organisational goals or increasing the disputes about goal priority is associated with increasing boundary permeability.

(2) AUTHORITY RELATIONS:

Many systems-theorists and organisational analysts have described leadership as boundary management. "The nature of the authority available to leaders and/or the effort they must expend to increase their authority depends on boundary permeability…

Authority relations in *over-bounded* systems are typically highly centralised and monolithic. Most resources are controlled from a single locus of authority, usually at the top of the organisation… Authority relations in *under-bounded* systems are typical fragmented and unclear. Instead of a single authority source to which all must ultimately answer, there are multiple authorities and/or none to which some people intermittently report. Responsibility for work may rest with several individuals and groups or with no-one."

(3) ECONOMIC CONDITIONS:

"If the economic condition of a system significantly worsens, its territory and technology will be threatened. It may be less able to attract people, or it may have to eliminate people from the system in order to survive. Conversely, if the economic position of a system improves it has the potential for improving its territory and technology and for heightening its attractiveness to members and potential members. "History has shown that under-bounded systems are more likely to face economic conditions, whether good or bad, than over-bounded systems. "A system unable to organise itself fir sustained work is likely to miss opportunities for economic gain or to waste resources it already has.

A system confronted with economic hardships from outside will find its psychological boundaries threatened as it struggles for survival."

(4) ROLE DEFINITIONS:

"Individuals in organisations develop patterns of role behaviour based on the expectations placed upon them by the organisation modified by their own personal values, believes, abilities, and group memberships (Levinston 1959; Alderfer, 1977a; Katz and Kahn, 1978).

The clarity and consistency of organisation expectations is in part a function of boundary permeability. Role expectations in over-bounded systems tend to be highly precise, detailed, and restrictive. Role expectations in under-bounded systems tend to be unclear and conflicting…

The different dynamics of authority relations in under-bounded and over-bounded systems are directly related to the different kinds of problems with role definition in each type of system."

(5) COMMUNICATION PATTERNS:

Organisations that are functioning sub-optimally will inevitably experience communication problems. For the organisation to fulfil its task effectively it needs to continuously receive and five specific information. Communication problems occur if such information is distorted, withheld or simply not exchanged.

"Typical problems is over-bounced systems arise because people distort the information that is exchanged in order to present their own position in the best possible perspective. Criticisms of one's own position tends to be minimised.

Bad news is withheld from senior officials as much as possible. Communication problems in under-bounded systems arise from difficulties in identifying who should talk with whom, in establishing communication links among key parties, and in bringing people together to discuss issues of common concern."

(6) HUMAN ENERGY:

"The power of a system and of the individuals and groups within a system depends on the state of human energy in the system. System boundaries provide a means for confining or releasing human energy and/or effectively channelling or ineffectually diffusing it.

In over-bounded systems human energy is often confined waiting to be released into well-established channels to do organisational work. In under-bounded systems human energy is more diffuse and difficult to channel towards system goals…

The process of increasing boundary permeability usually takes less energy than the process of decreasing boundary permeability."

(7) AFFECT DISTRIBUTION:

"Individuals and groups, as open human systems themselves and as subsystems within larger organisational system, have affective lives. People have feelings about the conditions in which they find themselves, and they are influenced by the emotions of others with whom they interact…

Although human affairs typically involve a mix of emotions – both favourable and unpleasant – there is usually a detectable balance of feeling within the system…

The balance of feeling within an over-bounded system is typically positive. In part this is because the short-term future of an over-bounded system tends to be favourable. The system is not facing imminent chaos; its survival is not threatened. But a positive affective balance in over-bounded systems is also partially the result of repressive forces within the system. The effect of a monolithic authority structure mutes interval criticism and tends to direct negative affect outward rather than inward. The balance of feeling within an under-bounded system is typically less favourable. Chaos and disorganisation are immediately observable. People usually do not have much confidence in themselves or in the system, and there is often a significant underlying feeling of futility. In general, a decided lack of observable positive feeling is characteristic of under-bounded systems."

Increasing the boundary permeability in over-bounded systems will permit the emergence of negative feelings that have previously been hidden. Decreasing the boundary permeability in an under-bounded system helps positive feelings to emerge. In an optimal system, the system as a whole is one where both positive and negative emotions can be observed.

(8) INTER-GROUP DYNAMICS:

"Inter-group dynamics in an organisation refer to the relations among the various groups within the system, which are generally of two classes: (1) task groups, and (2) identity groups (Alderfer, 1977a). Task groups are defined by the kinds of work they perform (e.g. production, marketing, physician, teacher) and by the level in the hierarchy in which they are located (e.g. foreman, department head, dean, vice president). Identity groups refer to the group affiliations that help individuals to shape their personal identities. These groups consist of generation groups (young, middle-aged, old), gender groups (men and woman), ethnic groups (English, African, Irish, etc.), and others determined by the life experiences of members before they enter the organisation."

Conflict is inevitable where there are different groups functioning together.

In over-bounded systems the primary inter-group conflict exists amongst task groups, and in under-bounded systems in the primary conflicts are amongst identity groups.

"Strengthening the boundaries of identity groups in over-bounded systems provides a useful counter-force to the suppression of group identities in these organisations. Conversely, strengthening the boundaries of task groups in

under-bounded systems permits a clearer sense of purpose to be obtained and a greater degree of task accomplishment to be achieved."

(9) UNCONSCIOUS BASIC ASSUMPTIONS:

(The basic assumptions are discussed thoroughly in Chapter 3; Section 3.3)

"Deriving from the authority structure, basic assumption dependence tends to be prevalent in over-bounded systems. Members act as if they have come together to have their needs gratified by an all-powerful leader. Basic assumptions fight-flight tends to be prominent in under-bounded systems. Members act as if they must flee from the threats they represent for each other or they engage in persistent unproductive conflict. Observers can detect which basic assumption seems to be prevalent in a group by observing their own emotions. Changes in the boundary permeability of a group are accompanied by change in the basic assumption life of the group.

(10) TIME SPAN:

Time span refers to the long- or short-term orientation of systems.

"Because of their more certain authority relations and their more secure economic condition, over-bounded systems tend to have longer time perspectives than under-bounded systems. Because the threat of dissolution regularly confronts under-bounded systems, they tend to have a much shorter time perspective".

(11) COGNITIVE WORK:

"People need a set of beliefs, or a rudimentary theory, to explain what they experience in an organisation, to help them interpret events that occur, and to aid them in deciding how to behave. Without such a framework they would be overwhelmed by confusion and become beset by meaningless… Over-bounded systems are more likely to have a single coherent body of theory (or ideology) that members are expected to master and to use in their work for the system. Typically, new members are taught 'the company line' early in their careers… Innovations in the organisation must be worked through the existing theory or the theory must be modified to allow for innovation…

One way to bring about change in an over-bounded system is to act in new ways and later explain that the system's theory must be changed because 'we actually behave differently around here'… Under-bounded systems often have no theory at all, or else multiple theories prevail without adequate mechanisms for identifying or resolving differences among them. When there is no theory to teach new members, the system lacks an integrating framework ad change may require the development of a coherent statement of mission or policy. When there are multiple

theories, the system needs mechanisms for dealing with the differences in order for greater sense of intellectual understanding to emerge."

TABLE: Properties of over-bounded and under-bounded systems

OVER-BOUNDED SYSTEMS:	VARIABLE:	UNDER-BOUNDED SYSTEMS:
Goals clear; priority unequivocal	*Goals*	Goals unclear, priorities equivocal
Monolithic	*Authority relations*	Multiple and competing
Minimal short-term stress	*Economic conditions*	Impending economic crises
Precise, detailed, restrictive	*Role definitions*	Imprecise, incomplete, overlapping
Difficulties with openness when people meet	*Communication patterns*	Difficulties in determining who can meet and should meet
Constrained, blocked	*Human energy*	Diffuse, exhausting
Positive inside, negative outside	*Affect distribution*	Negative inside, negative outside
Organisational groups dominate	*Inter-group dynamics*	Identity groups dominate
Dependency	*Unconscious basic assumptions*	Fight-flight
Long	*Time span*	Short
Single theory-ideology	*Cognitive work*	Multiple or no theory-ideologies

THE AUTHORITY BOUNDARY:

Credits: This section is taken from THE UNCONSCIOUS AT WORK: Anton Obholzer: page 39-41, Chapter 4. All examples are changed to SAPS perspectives.

IN organisational terms this dynamic refers to the right to make decisions which are binding on others. It also refers to the right to make an ultimate decision.

The authority has various sources. There is authority from above, authority from below and authority from within. The variations of authority are discussed below:

AUTHORITY FROM 'ABOVE':

Authority from above is also known as formal authority. Formal authority is a quality that is derived from one's role in the system and is exercised on its behalf. For example a Provincial Commissioner derives his/her authority from the Commissioner of police and his deputies. The Commissioner and his team make the appointment, hold the Provincial Commissioner responsible for outcomes, and also have the power to sack him or her. The Commissioner in his/her turn is appointed by Government, and thus derives authority from them. Thus, authority derives from a system of delegation, in this case from the Government to the Commissioner of Police, and from the Commissioner to the Provincial Commissioner, etc. Usually there are laws or another formal system that lays down terms of office and other mechanisms for delegating authority. These are human-made systems, agreed through common consent. If the system becomes outdated and is no longer held by common consent, it has to be changed to take the new factors into account.

AUTHORITY FROM 'BELOW':

Members who voluntarily join an organisation are, by definition, sanctioning the system. By the act of joining, they are, at least implicitly, delegating some of their personal authority to those in authority, and in so doing confirming the system. Authority does not, however, derive only from an external structure as outlined above.

It also has internal components which may be explicit and conscious, or unconscious and therefore not available to be worked with. These internal components include the nature and extend of the ambivalence affecting the delegation of authority to those in charge.

For example, a police station commissioner might have full authority delegated to him/her by the authorising body, but there may have been no dialogue or consultation with the station members regarding the appointment. In this case, the latter may accept the concept of management and sanction the authority of the role, but not that of the person in the role.

The withholding of authority from below, in the form of not sanctioning, means that full authority cannot be obtained, and that there is an increased risk of undermining and sabotage. Of course, 'full authority' is a myth. What is needed might be called 'full-enough' authority. This would imply a state of authority in which there would be an ongoing acknowledgement by persons in authority (in their own minds, not necessarily publicly), not only of their authority, but also and equally of the limitations of that authority.

An integral part of this state of mind would be an ongoing monitoring of authority-enhancing and of authority-sapping processes in the institution.

AUTHORITY FROM 'WITHIN':

Authority from within individuals largely depends on the nature of their relationship with the figures in their inner world, in particular past authority figures.

The attitude of such 'in-the-mind' authority figures is crucial in affecting how, to what extend and with what competence external institutional roles are taken up.

For example, and individual might be appointed to a position of authority, sanctioned from below, yet unable to exercise authority competently on account of an undermining of self-in-role by inner world figures.

Such 'barracking' by inner world figures is a key element in the process of self-doubt, and, if constant and evident, is likely to prevent external authorisation in the first place.

A detective, who was perceived by both her peers and seniors as very competent, having gone through all the correct processes, was promoted to branch commander, a move approved by her colleagues. Once that promotion had taken place, her work seemed to falter. She had lost her membership of the office club, and in herself felt she was not really up to the job, and that her former peers were now making rude comments. There was no evidence in reality that this was going on. However, snide remarks were an integral part of her relationship with her father, as a child, she had been both at the giving and receiving end of this process.

The opposite dynamic also exists, with inner world figures playing into a state of psychological omnipotence, which makes for an inflated picture of the self as regards being in authority, and is likely to produce authoritarian attitudes and behaviour.

A police person, appointed at an early age to a station commissioner post, became increasingly pompous, arrogant and hard to bear by staff and public alike. His incapacity to listen, to learn from his own or others' experience, and thus to modify his behaviour, arose from an inner world constellation in which he was mother's only child, her adored companion who could do no wrong. Transferred to outer world behaviour, the consequences were disastrous.

There is an important difference between the terms authoritative and authoritarian. Authoritative is a depressive position state of mind in which the persons managing authority are in touch both with the roots and sanctioning of their authority, and with their limitations.

Authoritarian, by contrast, refers to a paranoid-schizoid state of mind, manifested by being cut off from roots of authority and processes of sanction, the whole being fuelled by an omnipotent inner world process.

The difference is between being in touch with oneself and one's surroundings, and being out of touch with both, attempting to deal with this unrecognised shortcoming by increased use of power to achieve one's ends.

THE IDENTITY BOUNDARY:

Identity defines and it differentiates. From this, one can deduct that identity is the variable that tags the boundary concept. Identity can be divided into two categories, namely Collective identity and Individual identity. These two forms of identity are discussed below:

COLLECTIVE IDENTITY:

Collective identity has a lot to do with survival. People identify with each other since collective survival is easier than individual survival.

The basic assumptions are also easier achieved through collective survival. It would be hard to fulfil the dependency need without other people to be dependent on; fight and flight becomes more effective with numbers, pairing needs more than one, one-ness gives a feeling of safety to people and is done collectively.

Culture is one result of collective identity. Once people have identified with each other, the need to protect this identity is created. The group's collective consciousness is preserved through rituals and symbols. It is so that culture is formed and maintained.

Collective identity plays an extremely important role within organisations. Most of this have already been discussed in previous chapters and purpose of bringing it up here is to point out that when dealing with collective identity in organisations, one deals with boundary dynamics.

It is often seen that groups in organisations strengthen their identity boundary by developing collective mission statements, or even by designing T-shirts or other clothing pieces which displays oneness within the group.

INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY:

There are probably a number of issues that contribute to an individual identity, e.g. frame of reference, background, paradigms, etc. One's identity is usually a display of your highest value and the collective identities that you form part of is usually compatible with these values.

It must however be noted that the more urgent the need for survival, the less important it would be to identify only with those groups that are compatible with ones highest values.

THE BOUNDARIES OF TASK, TIME AND TERRITORY:

In his book 'Seven Habits of Highly Effective People' Steven Covey discusses the ability of people to operate within their circle of influence. This ability is without doubt related to one's ability to manage the boundaries of time, task and space. Short notes on these boundaries are given below:

THE TASK BOUNDARY:

The task of a group or individual should not be confused with the 'task vs. people' concept which is often used in HR fields of study. Task in this context refers to any specific outcome with which a person or group is focussing on during any given point. Once a group or individual starts losing focus on the task at hand and starts spending time on basic assumptions, we can say that the task boundary has been violated.

THE TIME BOUNDARY:

It is a well-known fact that effective people do not work all the time, but rather effectively within time boundaries. Groups and individuals that cannot manage time boundaries effectively will tend to struggle to be effective with their task. Such people or individuals will also find that their boundaries are often violated.

THE TERRITORY BOUNDARY:

The term territory can refer to many things. For one it can refer to the physical place where a specific task takes place. It could also refer to the psychological place where a specific task takes place. Psychologically, the here-and-now is the only place where tasks can be completed effectively. This is so because the here-and-now is the only territory that the group has any influence over.

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