

The National Conference Has Helped My Career

By Michel Deschappelles

Note to readers: This article written by an Associate of the Washington-Baltimore Center addresses his attendance and learning at the AKRI National Conference. The author's experience and learning, however, may also suggest what is available to participants at other group relations conferences, residential and non-residential.

Working as a professional manager, I constantly face the problem of business not working the way it is intended to. However, as a pseudo-intellectual, I thought that pursuing academic studies would help me better understand why this is so. My technical training (B.S. in Engineering and an M.S. in Information Technology) taught me that technology is never an impediment to making things work. I then pursued an MBA and learned that there are no commercial binding constraints either. Yet, no distilled theme emerged as the pivot to lead a business to differentiate success from failure. Then in 1998, I attended AK Rice's National Conference and came across the concepts of how group dynamics are so tied to leadership success.

After the Conference, I returned to my job as Marketing Manager for a telecommunication manufacturer. My typical work scenario entails working on teams proposing new technologies in excess of \$100 million to telephone companies. Buyers solicit bids and recommendations from competing vendors and our firm, as a vendor, then responds by trying to sell our ideas to the telecom operator. My role was to help sell our equipment by producing marketing messages, brochures, and presentation stories expounding how great our products were. Since telecom products are large, complex and expensive, groups govern everything that happens long the way, both on the vendor's as well as on the buyer's side. Meetings, consensus and authority play a very important role in every decision. With my learnings from AK Rice I decided to try to apply Group concepts in a conscious and systematic way as follows:

Decrease the Anxiety:

Having experienced Small Group trying to escape anxiety with Bion's three modalities (dependency, fight/flight, & pairing), I learned about the wrong way to address these underlying anxiety currents. Our clients constantly face difficult decisions full of anxiety (i.e. Is this the right technology for tomorrow?). I discovered that the way to get the client to buy was not by telling them how great we were but instead by somehow proactively decreasing their perceived anxiety. I did this by clearly identifying the variables that cause anxiety to the client; then, overtly surfacing them; and finally, explaining how this proposed solution addresses the problems. I consciously crafted stories that presented the theme of "we have the solution to your anxiety". Suddenly, clients fell in a comfort zone and wanted to hear more about our products.

Revel in Anxiety:

Large Group let me experience anxiety in its full force. It presents unbounded chaos, uncertainty, and ambiguity. However, my thinking was that if I could learn to withstand and revel in this experience I would be better prepared to endure the lower strength chaos of the work environment. In other words, train yourself to endure higher levels of stress so that you can function effectively under lower ones. It seems to work. At the office, I find myself acting as a non-anxious presence at times when the environmental chaos is troubling my colleagues. Because of that, I find that people come more often to inquire on my opinions and help reassure them. In a sense, I have become a pillar of informal leadership to some. Although I try to do this consciously, it is not always possible and at times, I too become the cause of cascading anxiety onto others!

Self-Authorize Yourself:

The Leadership Learning Track taught me about how to rise and assume my own authority. However, complex hierarchical organizations rely heavily on the determined authority structure and the currency of meetings is based on your title. Learning that self-authorization is the key to leadership, helped me speak up about my point of view in several occasions when I believed that the authority structure was in error. Everyone seemed amazed at my gall! I had not been authorized to offer my opinion in that manner. Yet the senior leaders realized that I was not attacking them (as a counter-dependent would do) but instead that I had the best interests of the business in mind. Somehow, my comments were analyzed under a new light and much credit was given to this perspective. Peers tell me that they wonder at how I get away with some of the things I say. I tell them to self-authorize themselves, but they have no idea what I'm talking about.

Group-as-a-Whole Talking:

As evident in Small Group, people at times speak for the group instead of voicing individual sentiments. Although

I find this is very difficult to decipher, I tried to take this back to work. When I could identify Group-as-a-whole happening in a meeting, instead of addressing an individual view, I would address group themes. To my surprise, my comments were much better received than in my pre-AK Rice days. I was able to address the issues of concern even when hidden below a lot of noise. Meeting became shorter, more productive and I was included in more important/strategic meetings. Suddenly, I looked like I was saying very intelligent things!

Overt the Covert:

Hidden intentions, secrets, special relationships are prevalent at work as they are at AK Rice. Yet "outing" the hidden agenda does not seem as popular task at work as it is in the Conference. Using the persistent mindset from the Conferences, I conscientiously dig and peel the onion until the true motives can be discovered. As I had already discovered at AK Rice, no one gets upset by TRUTH (not always true!) and groups function better without secrets. My motto has become open, honest and direct communication.

Manage the Four Boundaries:

The first time I attended the Conference and heard people talking a lot about boundaries and I had no idea what is was all about. Only after the second National Conference did I have an inkling of what was meant. Returning to work and seeing how the Internet is creating havoc inside a telecom company helped me understand this concept even further. Although I applied these concepts to my direct reports, the whole extended team was so confused in this new world that it was without purpose and very demoralized. Suddenly I found myself lecturing to my boss that she needed to manage/clarify the four boundaries (task, time, territory & role). She sat in amazement of the clarity by which I took a complex problem and was able to figure out the pressure point in the system. Later that week I heard several presentations by her and her boss delineating the four boundaries for more impactful results to the overall business.

Terms of Engagement across Boundaries:

The IE taught me a lot about how to engage with other groups. This large and complex multi-national firm is managed by having many sub-groups with defined roles. Having learned that one needs to understand the boundary region, the terms of engagement, and currency used in the different groups, I approached the boundary negotiation with a different mindset than my colleagues. Results immediately followed. I was able to get more cooperation across boundaries and thus became more effective. This also helped me extend my informal network across the company.

I work with very talented and competent people. However as groups go, this one is no different. While I have observed many politically astute professionals maneuver around the complexity of this organization by playing well the authority structure, I have tried to take a different approach. I have tried to use the learnings from AK Rice to become more effective and lead those that I work with to focus on THE WORK. Results have been very tangible to my professional career. My productivity improved which quickly lead to my promotion to Senior Manager. I again attended the National Conference in 1999 and I was again promoted, this time to Director of Sales. I find that these conferences offer a solid background to learn how to apply group dynamics concepts to the real world. I believe that part, if not much, of my success is due to my being able to see more clearly what is going on in the Group. Being able to navigate the complexity of a business has taught me that understanding Group is pivotal to the difference between success and failure. It goes without saying that I'm planning to attend the 2000 National Conference once again.