

# Jack Gibb's Theory on Trust Development in Groups

- Robert A. Gallagher, 1978, 2001

Regardless of the type of group you are in, one of the critical issues will be the development of trust. In order to be able to give and receive support, members need to feel comfortable and accepted; to be able to share their feelings and thoughts without embarrassment or threat of disapproval; to be free to decide what they will and will not do as a result of the group's work; to feel confidence in the methods the group likes in its work; to feel committed within themselves to the work of the group, and to be able to work with others in an interdependent, collaborative manner. What follows is based on the work of Jack Gibb's research on trust development in groups.

## Our Own Basic Life Tensions

We each enter a group with our own history. Out of that history we have developed a pattern of "wants" and "fears" related to trust.

<b>I WANT TO.....</b>		<b>I FEAR ...</b>
...trust others and accept them; to belong and feel included	↔	...being rejected and left on the outside
...share myself, my thoughts and feelings. I want to let others know who I am, what I feel and believe. I want to be close to others.	↔	...being "put down" for my beliefs, ideas and feelings. I fear that if I share them they will be used against me in some way; I'll be laughed at, misunderstood, not taken seriously and betrayed.
...have a sense of purpose and direction in my life, to believe in something, to care.	↔	...drifting through life aimlessly, having no roots, caring about nothing, living in chaos.
...have some control over my world and my life. I want to influence others and let myself be influenced. I want to be collaborative and to be interdependent with others	↔	...being controlled by others, manipulated, pushed around, used, exploited. I fear being helpless.

The basic stance we have established gets carried into every group we work with. We find ourselves tending more to one side than the other of the "fears" and "wants". Some of that is based on the dynamics we experience in that particular group. Some is rooted in the learnings we have drawn over time about trust. What has happen in our early childhood, as we grew up, and in our most important relationships has shaped the filters about trust that we carry into a group.

What I'm likely to do as I interact in the group is to prove to myself how my decision is "correct", that is, I'll behave in ways that reinforce my own stance. I'll help myself and others to get included, to communicate, to be clear about goals, and to collaborate; or I may limit my own and others' possibilities in each area by nurturing the fear. Nurturing my fear is a way of keeping my world somewhat predictable and stable. It's also a way of staying trapped. My basic stance is based on the past; it may or may not fit this present experience. My issue in a new group is: "what is appropriate here and now, with these people? What is possible for me and them?"

## What we can do to contribute to the group's development

1. We can deal with our own mistrust. Being aware of, and accepting responsibility for, our own fears and self-protective behaviors can free us to make new decisions based on the present situation we are in.

2. We can recognize that groups have patterns of development. There are issues and stages of group life that are common for any group. Understanding these issues and stages can aid us in our effort to enable trust development. There are many ways of looking at group development. Becoming familiar with any of the available conceptual frameworks can help us be more productive group members.

What follows is a framework based on the work of Jack Gibb.

## Trust...Openness...Productivity ...Interdependence

A group always has the potential to develop and strengthen four basic qualities of its life. These qualities "build" on each other in a sort of hierarchy, those near the bottom forming a "foundation" for the "higher" ones.

4. INTERDEPENDENCE
3. PRODUCTIVITY
2. OPENNESS
1. TRUST

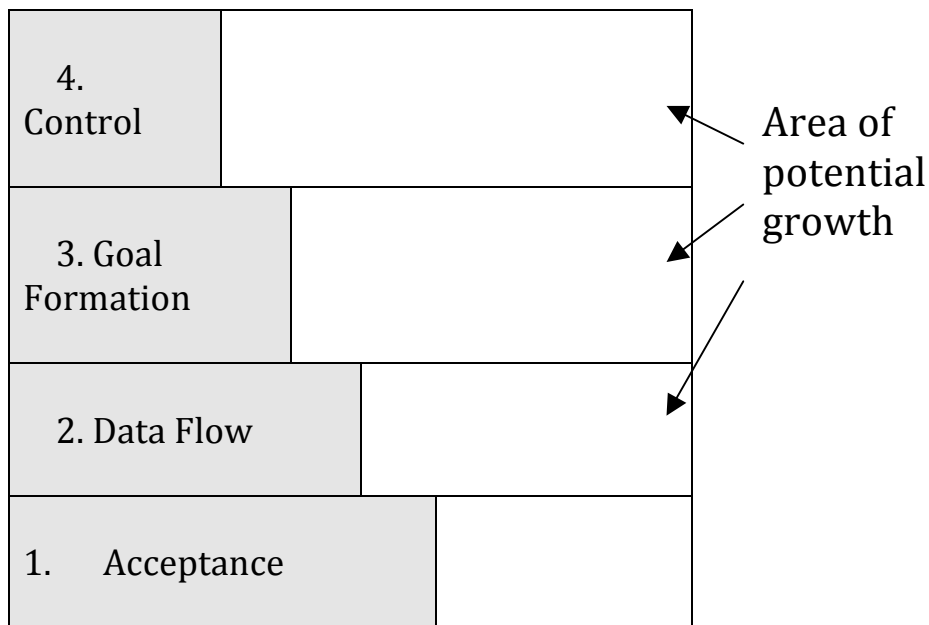
In an early version of the model Gibb called the theory TORI -- Trust, Openness, Realization and Interdependence.

Gibb's thought is that in order to enhance these qualities in a group, certain concerns related to each must be adequately resolved.

### CONCERNS TO BE RESOLVED

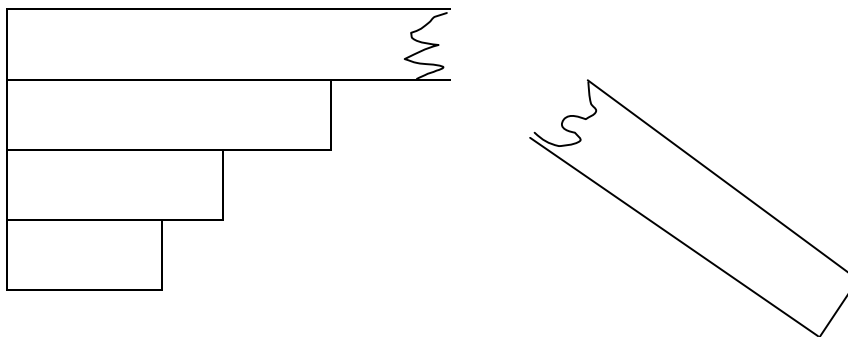
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|-------------------|--|
| 4. CONTROL        | How much influence will members have on each other and how will it be exercised?   |
| 3. GOAL FORMATION | Where is the group going? How are decisions made? Are decisions clear and shared? Are members internally committed to them?                              |
| 2. DATA FLOW      | How much information is being shared by members? What are their thoughts and feelings --both about the group itself and about the specific work at hand? |
| 1. ACCEPTANCE     | How much do people in the group basically affirm themselves and each other as persons and as valuable members of the group?                              |

As the concerns toward the bottom of the list begin to be resolved a base is built for resolving the next levels of concern. We can picture this as building blocks:



To the extent the acceptance concern has been resolved, group members will feel free to open up and share feelings and thoughts about the group and its task. To the extent the group is sharing useful information it will have the base it needs for developing goals and making decisions that are clear and shared by the members. The open flow of information will provide options to select direction from. To the extent members share ownership of the goals and decisions they will find it easier to be interdependent with each other.

When groups try to ignore the need for adequate resolution or "prior" concerns (those nearer the bottom of the blocks) before taking on later concerns, the more likely it will be an unstable relationship. The blocks are likely to topple over!



Suppose, for example, that after three or four sessions of a group's life, two of the members begin to feel impatient, and press the others to meet more frequently. They make a case that this will allow everyone to receive more support and to get to know each other more quickly. Several other members raise concerns about giving more time to the group. They are told that if they were "really committed" they would make the time. Other members are silent. The two who brought up the idea press for a decision, and no one raises further objections. Dates are set, and the meetings become more frequent. But within a month, attendance has dropped off.

What happened? Two members wanted the group to make a decision in favor of more ambitious goals (i.e., more frequent sessions). Their concern falls at Level 3 --Goal Formation. However, the flow of data (Level 2) needed to make that a sound decision was not available. Several members of the group did not speak up at all, and those who did object did not continue to express their feelings. This needed flow of information was most likely cut off when the two initiators of the idea decreased the level of the acceptance in the group (Level 1) by accusing the others of being "uncommitted" if they objected. So, a decision was made with out enough information, and without being freely chosen from among alternatives. This led to low internal commitment among most of the members, and an unwillingness to follow through on the "decision".

The two initiators of the idea had attempted to deal with their own Goal Formation concern, and went beyond what the actual base of trust and openness in the group could bear. (In addition, they handled their frustration in such a way as to further decrease the level of trust.) So, the group took on an unrealistic goal. An attempt to work with unrealistic goals leads to some form of resistance --in this case expressed by members failing to show up.

The key thing to remember is that adequate attention to more "basic" group concerns (acceptance, data flow) enables the group to handle the others (goal formation, control) .An attempt to build higher than the "base" can really support tends to result in a "shaky" group life. To come on "too fast and too hard" about goals and structure can throw a group "off balance", and, as in this example, it can actually decrease trust. If we build from the bottom up, the group can grow and stretch; but it cannot profitably be forced to decisions that require more trust than actually exists.

In its development, the group never reaches some "final resolution" of these basic concerns. Its life is always moving toward to away from its potential. Every time the group gets together again after being apart, there is re-building to be done; and every time some difficult issue is wrestled with, the group must take stock of its base of trust and openness to find out whether it is adequately intact. Potential is not something that is "reached" and then simply "maintained".

One final caution about theory: any conceptual framework for looking at group life needs to be used with care. Such frameworks are tools for understanding, yet they do not tell the full story. There is movement at several levels at once; movement may be by great leaps or in gradual cycles; personal growth and group development are interdependent concerns. The reality is always messier than the model suggests.

There are a number of other models on group development that can complement Gibb's work. There are also models that grow out of the same understandings as what Gibb points to but are applied in other areas, e.g., Gallagher "Trust Development in Organizations" (owes a good bit to Gibb's work but takes into account later experience on organizational culture, OD and empowerment dynamics) and Argris's "Intervention Theory"

On the following pages I have summarized key information related to each "basic concern" in group development. I 'have included some diagnostic hints ("signs of problems") as well as some possible behaviors for facilitating resolution of the concern.