

How *Smart* is Your *Group*?



SOMETIMES YOU JUST HAVE TO do things in groups. Or plan, or decide things. And you know what that can be like. It can end up being dumber than if just one person did it. Even though, if you think about it, with the variety of experience in many groups—it should end up being smarter. If the people really put their heads together. But they don't. Can't seem to. And unless you are a total loner, you don't escape this group doing thing. Even just a couple is still a group.

So I want to share with you some surprisingly accurate and useful stuff about how and why group doing goes astray, and how you help it be better. It's based on an excellent bestseller called *Crucial Conversations*. I'll give you an overview here that you can put right to work. But the book has a lot more detail, and I heartily recommend it.

First, we have this elegant definition of the kind of group doings that are the hardest ones. The discussions, the planning, the carrying out are tough when conversations get crucial. That means (1) stakes are high; (2) opinions vary; and (3) feelings are strong. Think about it. Remove any one of those, and it remains more manageable. So if, for example, stakes are high and opinions vary, but we are not that emotional about it—well, we can at least talk clearly and work it out. Stakes high, feelings strong, but opinions are shared—we are cool to go for it. Stakes low—who cares?

What defines the level of collective intelligence achieved by any group?

And remember, we are talking about just you and your buddy or significant other here too—not merely committees. Well your group's IQ, if you will, is measured by the size of the “pool of shared meanings.” How much of the potentially available variety of experiences and approaches in the various members is spoken (or written) about and actually listened to? How much of that richness emerged and became available as options?

If not much emerges, why is that? How can you tell when the pool of shared meanings is getting shortchanged? Well, quite simply, group IQ falls off when people don't feel safe. You can tell this is happening when you start to observe one or both of two behaviors—silence and/or violence. Silence means withholding meanings that members feel are important from the pool. People get passive-aggressive around certain topics, or avoid them entirely, or they stop contributing completely. Violence consists of various verbal techniques for forcing meanings into the pool or keeping others out. From overstating facts, continually shifting away from certain topics, and interrupting, all the way to attacking certain members personally.

If you want to be a catalyst for better plans and decisions in the dyads or larger groups you belong to—what can you do? Well, it takes a little practice, but what to do is pretty straightforward. You start paying attention to not just the content being discussed, but also the conditions of the conversation. How crucial has it become? That is, how high are the

stakes, how varied are the opinions, and how strong are the feelings? As these go up, and group members feel less safe, notice who tends to go towards silence behaviors, and who shifts towards violence. What has to happen then, if the group's process is to be rescued is this: someone has to step temporarily away from the content and deal with the conditions. That means restoring safety to the group.

Crucial Conversations, the book, tells you a lot more about how to do this. What has to be dealt with, typically, is a loss of mutual purpose (we don't have clarity about our goals here), and/or mutual respect (some of us feel we have to defend our dignity). But I've given you a lot here already. Can I suggest you read it over again? Just what's here already can transform your experience of what happens in groups.

What I want to leave you with is this. Take a look at your own style in different stressful conversations first. When your safety feels threatened, are you tending towards silence behaviors, or violence? Then be sure that you are “starting from your heart.” What do you really want—for yourself, the relationship, for the group? And ask yourself—how should I really behave if this is what I really want. ▲