

A Theory of T-group Training
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Ch. 8 Building a Strong Co-Trainer Relationship

A good co-trainer relationship can be a great asset – it can ease the journey and increase productive outcomes. Conversely, a poor one can divert attention and drain energy. A co-trainer’s ability is important, but not nearly as the nature of the *relationship*. That relationship can be developed; how to do it is the subject of this chapter.

The objective is to build a partnership – an alliance where each can be open and direct with the other, raise difficulties and resolve them, and support the other in the service of the group. It is not doing everything right – it is how each handles the situations that aren’t perfect. After all, some of the richest learning occurs in the working through of problems.

Partnerships do not imply equality. After all, there can be “junior partners” and “senior partners,” but that still involves mutual influence not dominance. Dealing with status/power differences is not easy but a topic we will explore later.

Building a partnership starts before the first T-group meeting as the co-trainers meet to discuss how to work together. However, as important as initial agreements are, these will get tested during the sessions. Do they work out glitches during the meeting or afterwards? Not all co-trainer issues have to occur in the group but there are advantages in doing so. Unlike most educational instructional roles, it is not about having the answer – it is about developing the process to find the answer. Seeing the trainers working that out between them is useful modeling for the participants.

Benefits of having a co-trainer

Even though a group can be facilitated by a single trainer, it can be much easier with a partner. As described in previous chapters, the trainer’s role can be daunting. This includes:

- Being aware of each of the twelve participants, listening carefully to what is said, and not said, including choice of words, tone, gestures and other non-verbals is demanding. Johanna has just responded to Jerome’s comment with a slight laugh but there seemed to be an edge to her words. What is going on?

- Noticing others' reactions – Not just Jerome's but did others laugh or was there a taking in of breath; less positive reactions? Did Stella come in again to deflect the discussion?
- Seeing if this relates to past interactions – not just between Johanna and Jerome, but is there a pattern of “drive-by” comments that are not acknowledged or fully dealt with?
- Observing whether there are group level dynamics going on? Are subgroups developing? Have several people withdrawn?
- Finally, being aware of what is going on with me. What am I feeling? Is this tapping into some of my issues?

I consider myself fortunate if I am aware of even twenty percent of what is going on. Being able to make sense of all the personal, interpersonal and group phenomena is a major task. It is not just looking outward, but inward as well. Am I feeling tense, annoyed, or excited? Then taking all that into account and trying to decide whether some comment might be useful – and then reflecting whether I would make that for the group's benefit or am I meeting my own needs?

All of this is much easier if I have a partner. Will they pick up on factors that I have missed or make an intervention that is more appropriate? The entire burden isn't just on my shoulders.

There are additional benefits:

Untangling Issues: Often there are several different issues intertwined. Johanna and Jerome have a history in his group of sniping at each other without full resolution. He tends to stonewall while she backs down too quickly. Compounding this is a tendency for members, when interpersonal conflict arises, to withdraw rather than share their reactions. Which to handle and in what order?

In the untangling of these issues, there are several factors to keep in mind. First, being careful that the trainers not do the members' work. Even if we could raise and resolve problems more quickly and elegantly, there is crucial learning for participants to struggle. There is the second danger of the co-trainers taking up too much airtime if both work on the same issues. Third, if both trainers are both on top of all issues, will they be seen as such a united front that participants think that to take on one requires dealing with both?

Another tiff occurs between Johanna and Jerome. The more pressing need is that this interpersonal issue is dealt with. Because my co-trainer feels more connected with the two of them, she takes that focus. After that is resolved, there is a hiatus with nobody bringing up anything new I might come in to raise the issue of the other members hesitancy to share reactions. If I were the only trainer, I could handle both but moving back and forth between the

interpersonal and group level could make me too central. So much easier with coordinated partner activity.

Member-Trainer Connection : It's important that each member feels a connection with at least one of the trainers. They need to know that if in a difficulty, at least one would be on their side. As the group develops, I work to build that connection with all but at the beginning, I am more drawn to some than to others. After the first couple of meetings, I check with my co-trainer to make sure that at least one of us feels a linkage with each participant. Yes, if working alone, I could force myself to find some connection with all twelve, but it is easier if that emerges over the life of the group.

Handling the Group (When I'm engaged): As a trainer, in addition to paying attention to participants in their interactions and engagement, I also need to be aware on the group level. But how to do that when there is an issue between me and a participant? In that situation, I want to focus on the other person's concerns while also being aware of my own feelings and reactions. I now have less bandwidth to scan the group and see if there are other factors that should be brought in. Also, to do so could be seen as being evasive. Karl has confronted me on a comment I made. To turn to the group and ask, "Do others feel the same way" does not model the most authentic response! I need to temporarily set aside my responsibility for the group.

If I haven't made this agreement ahead of time, I might turn to my co-trainer and say, "You're handling the group now." It may not be necessary for my partner to do anything, and this certainly is not a signal to come to my defense. But it means that I can now focus on what is going on between Karl and myself.

Co-trainer Check: Even though I try to be objective and not let my needs get in the way, I still make mistakes. I might overrespond to some situations or be oblivious to others. It can be so helpful to have a partner to serve as a check. This may be nothing more than asking, "You seem very involved; what's going on?" "What are you feeling?" or "Where are you in this issue?" For this to work, it's important that we have built trust and a common understanding so that I hear these as attempts to help not as attacks.

There are also situations where my comments carry more weight because they come from me. As an older male with the title of "trainer" and being the course instructor, students give me more power than I wish. As much as I try to narrow that power gap and be aware of my comments' impact, there are times when my actions – which would have landed well if from a participant – is a bit too much coming from me. I may not be aware of the full effect and it's useful having my partner ask that member, "How did David's comment land? I'm concerned that it might have felt a bit heavy."

Perhaps the co-trainer is most valuable at times when I just make mistakes but don't fully realize it. I remember an incident when I needed that help. I was growing increasingly bothered by how Doug was in the group. It wasn't that he was dysfunctional – almost the opposite. It was as if he had memorized “how one should be in a T-group.” He didn't appear to me to be real. In sharing my reactions, I stayed with my feelings of annoyance and distrust, and focused on Doug's behavior. But there was no caring in my words or tone. This made my comments cold and clinical causing the feedback to be more painful than it had to be. My co-trainer was puzzled because it wasn't how I usually am. But she didn't say anything.

Only afterwards did I fully realize why I was so bothered by Doug's behavior. T-groups are very precious to me -- they are both my heritage and, at Stanford, my legacy. Their goal is to let people be more authentic and I was seeing Doug's behavior as contradicting that. All of this is my attributions that could have been wrong. But I was hooked and felt violated and deeply hurt.

I didn't understand this at the time and regret this blind spot. If only I had realized what was going on with me, I could have shared the pain of the stronger underlying feelings of hurt and betrayal. We then might have had a more productive outcome with learning for all.

My co-trainer was puzzled by my actions but unfortunately didn't say anything. It might have only taken, “David, what's going on? This doesn't seem like you.” Maybe that would have jarred me to reflect. This is not to shift responsibility because in the last analysis I am responsible for myself. I mention what would have been helpful only to stress the key benefit that a co-trainer can provide.

The Value of Trainer Disagreements

One of the more significant outcomes that participants gain from a T-group experience is learning how to productively deal with conflict. This includes how to raise and resolve disagreements as well as realizing how valuable such disputes can be. Trainers encourage the expression of feelings – even negative ones -- and support the successful resolution of interpersonal difficulties. Trainers also are willing to express when they have problems with participant's behaviors and encourage them to respond in kind.

But what about disagreements trainers have with each other – especially interpersonal ones? Do they deal with them like others in leadership roles do? Managers may disagree on task issues in front of their direct reports, but it is usually considered bad form to publicly confront each other on how they are managing. Likewise, teachers who team-teach often express different concepts in front of students but are loath to complain about the other's teaching style while in the classroom. Those disputes, if raised at all, are done afterwards in private.

Carl was a white male in his 40s co-training with Emma who was about ten years younger and from Asia. Carl recounts:

“I was interacting with Jian who was from China. I was quite energized by the conversation and when I am so involved, I tend to use gestures to emphasize my points. The conversation didn’t seem that productive; Jian was a bit unresponsive. I was perplexed so after the session was over, I asked Emma what she thought was going on.”

“You overwhelmed her being a white male with a strong verbal and gestural approach.”

“As the two of us continued to analyze this situation, we realized that we could have raised this in the group. All it would have taken was Emma saying, ‘Carl, you’re coming on a bit strong’.”

That was a lost learning opportunity. The trainers could have modeled how to give and receive feedback. Jian could have seen how another Asian woman handled that situation. Furthermore, this could have made it easier for others to confront both Carl and Emma.

What keeps trainers from raising their interpersonal issues in the group? It might be difficulty being vulnerable, or concern of losing respect if seen as less competent, or damaging the co-trainer relationship.

But aren’t those the concerns participants have in raising issues with their peers?

Isn’t the power of co-trainers’ disagreement in the group that it can counter those concerns. Participants see that vulnerability can come out of strength, that being able to handle such conflict is a sign of competence and that successfully resolving the situation can actually strengthen a relationship. This also redefines what a ‘mistake’ is. Elliot Aronson has said, “The only mistake a trainer can make is to refuse to learn from his mistakes.” We are back to the issue that it is the process that is central not having The Answer.

I had an experience that illustrated the value of co-trainer disagreement. At Stanford, we conduct a six-day intensive T-group program for 36 executives. Most of the time is spent with them divided into three T-groups but twice a day we hold general sessions for the total group. I was to lead the meeting on Feedback. The staff decided it would be valuable to demonstrate the process. Ed, one of the trainers in another group offered to give me feedback. I liked Ed and readily agreed but had no idea what the content would be.

I have a tendency to kid people – especially those whom I like and respect. For me it is a sign of affection. I do it too much (and after this incident I have tried to decrease its use and be more

direct about my positive feelings). I had been kidding Ed at this program. He was concerned about how participants might interpret my actions – was it a putdown of Ed and a sign of disrespect?

Ed's annoyance had been building over the last couple of days and he decided to use this as the basis for the feedback. It soon became apparent to all that this was not a role-play but was for real. At first, I was a little taken aback. After all, this wasn't just with my group of twelve but the entire thirty-six; two-thirds of whom I had not built a relationship. But here it was and I decided to go with it.

I didn't try to explain or defend myself but focused on fully understanding how Ed was feeling and the full impact of my actions. He did a great job of sticking with his reactions and naming the specific behaviors without making attributions of my motives. He also stood his ground not backing away from his feelings. I fully understood and apologized. I asked if I inadvertently did it again for him to call me on it. I said that I appreciated that he brought it up.

We both were emotional from this encounter. We stood up and hugged feeling closer. The applause from the group was rewarding but the real payoff occurred when the session was over. A member in Ed's group had been resistant in the sessions and dubious of its value. As Ed walked out of the session, this member said to him, "You guys really live this stuff." He then became involved in the group and learned a great deal.

Trainers stress to participants, "don't do group work outside." However, that becomes real when trainers do the same. Only then can members see the full benefit of taking the risk of raising the most troublesome and vulnerable issues in the group.

In the Group or Outside?

Not all issues should be brought to the group. But which ones should be and which ones relegated to a debriefing session afterwards? Clearly conceptual issues dealing with training questions are for afterwards. "I wonder why you made that intervention?" "I wonder if it would have been useful if I would have held off a little longer?" "What do you think the group is struggling with?"

There is also reconciling training style. Each person has their own approach. One may not be superior to another but reflects personal preference. For example, I think that most trainer interventions are far too long. But my colleague might believe that a fuller exploration is preferred. We need to talk about that – but not in the group.

But “I wonder *why the hell* you made that intervention” is clearly for the group. Issues with significant emotions are a clue. This may involve times when you think the other is doing something dysfunctional. (Joan, I’m feeling bothered, This is the third time that you’ve smooth over a disagreement. I don’t think that’s necessary. What’s going on?”) Or it might be something that relates to how the two of you are relating. (“Suzanne, I feel put down by that comment. There have been some others like that.”) Or it could be when there is something going on with me. (“Eva, I’m finding myself feeling competitive with you and it is impacting how I am in this group.”)

Note that these latter issues, because they make us feel vulnerable, are just the ones that we would like to take out of the group. But they are the same sort of issues that participants also want to take out. One has to guard against finding some rationalization that would let me avoid raising these topics.

The distinctions thus far are rather clearcut, but what about those that are more ambiguous. I might say, “Tim curious, Mary. I thought the discussion was heading in a productive direction and you took it off to a new tack.” But am I only curious? Or am I also *frustrated* and maybe *annoyed* because I have been working so hard to help the group deal with something meaningful? So often what gets phrased conceptually, really contains significant emotions.

This need not be a conscious avoidance. We often, in our highly rational world, tamp down our feelings. What we think is only a 3 on a 10-point scale is really a 6 when it’s verbalized. When I hear somebody say, “I am a *little* bothered,” I turn my hand sideways so that there is an inch between my thumb and forefinger and laughingly ask, “only a little?”. Usually the other laughs and says, “actually not” which leads into a rich discussion.

Emotions are a useful guideline but not the only one in deciding whether to raise a co-trainer issue in the group. Are there concerns that participants have of greater or even equal importance? Have we, the trainers recently worked another issue and have consumed enough airtime? This might be the first time I have had a reaction to this particular behavior and I am going to wait to see if it arises again. And if I am going to raise something, maybe it’s enough just to mention it as a pinch (“Ouch, that stings”) rather than a full exploration. The overriding criteria is “will raising this issue help the group?”

Building the Relationship

It is easier to deal with these issues if you have a strong relationship with your co-trainer. Such relationships are not made in heaven but by using the competencies T-groups provide! Not all partnerships can be exceptional, but in my experience, most can be effective. The key basis for developing such a connection is ‘openness to learning.’ (But shouldn’t that be the primary

criteria for being a trainer?) Holding the mindset that a T-group should be a learning experience for all -- not just for participants – would go a long way to building these relationships

Developing such a relationship starts before the T-group program begins. This is important even if the trainers have worked together before. After all, each may have developed further and have different learning goals. Furthermore, this initial exploration serves as the basic structure to build on as the sessions go on.

This initial discussion should include:

- How each sees the trainer role. In that exploration, are there any areas where there might be potential cross-purposes?
- Are there personal issues that might pose difficulties? For example, does one tend to grow defensive when confronted or is there a strong need for member approval.
- When there are disagreements between them, which ones do they want to handle in the group and which issues should be dealt with outside? If dealt with in the group, how to be raised?
- What are each persons learning goals for this T-group; what do they want to work on?
- And what does each need from the other? How can each help the other?

The devil is in the details, so this discussion should be with specific examples not generalities. Even though a thorough exploration goes a long way to prevent dysfunctional co-trainer conflicts, this only sets the stage for later work. Any initial conclusions will get tested in the interactions in the group. Even though this initial discussion occurs outside the group, it is likely that most of the subsequent disagreements should be worked in the group.

In the Stanford program, a guest trainer joins the group for the weekend segment. It is also important that at least a brief discussion with the two co-trainers and that person occur before the weekend session starts. This is to clarify respective roles and responsibilities and decide how disagreements are to be handled. There was an incident in which this was not done. It was only twenty minutes into the initial session when Phil, one of the co-trainers, turned to Steve, the guest trainer and said, “I feel threatened with you here and wish you weren’t our guest trainer!”

Steve felt attacked and as he later said, “I was concerned about being accepted by the group and Phil threw me under the bus.” Phil, on the other hand, had the expectation, based on agreements with his co-trainer, that expressing discomfort with another trainer was part of the arrangement. But Steve and Phil never had that initial agreement.

This initial conflict was not cleaned up and interfered with each of them being able to work together that weekend. More unfortunately, it was a lost learning opportunity. If only the two of them had an initial understanding on co-trainer disagreements, the outcome might have been

much different. Could Steve had been able to overcome his initial defensiveness and expressed his concerns about acceptance and if Phil could have explored why exactly he felt threatened by Steve's presence, both would have been seen as more human and accepted as such.

Co-Trainer Traps

The biggest trap is falling into a *Performance* mindset rather than a learning one. The former makes one too risk-averse seeking to avoid all mistakes and being too concerned with member approval. The second trap is avoiding co-trainer issues either in the pre-session meeting or in the sessions themselves. In addition, there are three other areas to pay attention to.

1. Danger of Splitting Roles

It is too easy for co-trainers to split up areas. One might focus on raising difficult issues whereas the other is more supportive. One could be riskier whereas the other stresses caution. This splitting can partially be caused by participants who want to separate the trainers out of fear of them being a united front.

The problem is that this contradicts one of the core values of aT-group; *How can I increase the complexity I show*. Better to model being both challenging AND supportive, risky AND prudent. Also, how each trainer shows being challenging and supportive is different Compartmentalizing trainer roles does not make use of each trainer's abilities.

2. Trainer Airtime

We mentioned that one advantages of co-trainers is a greater range of perspectives. But this can have the downside of trainers consuming excess airtime. There is no intervention that can't be expanded and if trainers start to become competitive or need validation for their competency it can lead to them building on each other's comments. These additions can all be valid points but it contradicts the value of having participants make sense of what is going on. I return to my point that often the best trainer intervention is silence.

As we have discussed before, when thinking of making a comment, it can be useful to reflect: "Does this substantially add significant value?" and "Why am I raising this? Is this for my needs?" (Am I trying to demonstrate my competence, gain approval, compete with my co-trainer?) "If I didn't raise it, how likely that a participant might do so?" "Will my raising this decrease members raising issues and becoming dependent on me?"

3. Power Differentials

In most co-trainer relationships, there is likely to be a discrepancy in experience and competence. This is especially the case when a senior trainer is in a mentoring role. When a significant power gap, *it tends to make the higher power person deaf and give the low power person laryngitis*. This produces a negative cycle. If the low power person says little, why should the other listen to them? And if the low power person feels ignored, why should they contribute?

These power difference can't be denied but the potential dysfunctionalities can be dealt with. It is not sufficient for the one with greater status to mention in the initial session that "I want you to feel free to speak up," it is important to frequently check in as the meetings go on to see if the lower status person does feel free to. Also, the lower status person has the responsibility not to give away their power.

Fortunately, an advantage of T-groups is the emphasis on feelings. If the lower status person feels *worried, bothered, or confused*, they don't need to understand *what* is wrong or *why* it is wrong. All they need to do is express those feelings. "I am not sure why, but I am feeling uncomfortable/worried/concerned about what is happening." This might free up members to express similar feelings, it gives pause to the other trainer and is likely to cause that person to explain why they are pursuing the direction they are taking. And if that path makes sense, everybody learns. The greater problem is the lower power person shutting down, not disagreeing with their higher power partner and thereby not serving as a useful check.

To conclude: having a co-trainer can be a great asset but it is not something to leave to chance. This takes preparation and a willingness to correct. The good news is much of that can be done in the group and therefore provides important modeling to participants. It is also a way for the trainers to be seen as members because they are playing by the same rules.