M&Ms

Individual and Group Learning Through Diversity

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Introduction

Over the past seven weeks, we, the members of the M&M group, have been working together to develop the skills and knowledge relevant to engaging in a learning dialogue. Through exercises that challenged our assumptions and identities, and sometimes pushed us beyond our comfort levels, we gradually established a “safe space” of trust and confidentiality. This foundation allowed us to take risks and provide the honest and constructive feedback required for learning. Although we are encouraged by our progress and growth, we acknowledge that we missed opportunities for further learning.

After reflecting on our quarter’s work, we divided our progress into three stages—the “trust building” stage, the “transitory” stage, and the “pushing” stage. In addition, we view our skill and knowledge development as having taken place along four vectors—listening, trusting, risk-taking, and pushing. Our paper will dissect these stages and vectors in relation to both group and individual processes. Finally, we will describe what we will do differently in future collaborative work, based on what we learned from our experiences.

Stages of Group Development

Stage One: Trust Building (inclusive of work during weeks one through three)

During this stage, we focused on developing active listening skills and rarely strayed from the given week’s script. In weeks two and three of the trust stage (during which we completed the stigma and role playing exercises), individuals took significant risks that allowed for the development of trust. Specific evidence of active listening included verbal and non-verbal responses to individual contributions. This process heightened the safety in the group, but did not facilitate deeper learning because of the lack of further probing.
Stage Two: Transitory Stage (includes Week 4)

In many ways, week four was an anomaly. It was the only week in which a member arrived significantly late; it was the only week in which a member was absent; and it was the only week we entertained the company of an outside guest. These factors coupled with some general confusion over the Week 4 script created an unusually convoluted meeting. We feel that Week 4 was the least productive of our meetings; few risks were taken and our guest (Miss Scarlet) led the only significant pushing that took place. Miss Scarlet pinched us individually and as a group to varying degrees. Despite the challenges and lack of productivity during Week 4, it symbolized a significant turning point for our progress. Without realizing it, a paradigm shift had taken place.

Miss Scarlet’s feedback about pushing deeper and spending little or no time talking in the abstract was heard loud and clear. Miss Scarlet also encouraged us to think differently about our roles as group members when she spoke about being “supportive” in class. That is to say, being supportive is not just about being “nice;” it also includes helping others achieve their goals even if that means creating tension by challenging long-held assumptions and beliefs.

Stage Three: Push Stage (inclusive of work during weeks five through seven)

As a result of these messages, our work moved into stage three—the push stage. This stage began during week five and took us through the end of our work together. We pushed each other in ways that we had previously not dared. Our trust and risk-taking continued to grow while our fear of hurting or provoking tension diminished somewhat. We were also less dependent upon the assignment questions Miss Scarlet provided in class to guide our work together. Due to increases in trust and an overall shift in focus, the deepest pushing clearly took place during stage three.
The Four Vectors

Overall, we saw steady development in each of the four vectors, listening, trusting, risk-taking, and pushing, during the seven weeks (See Appendix A: “The Progress of Our Process”). We feel that progress was made along each vector, but we also believe that there are areas where performance was stronger and more consistent than others. We also recognize that additional movement can still be done along all vectors to advance our ability to work with and learn from diversity.

The ability to progress along each vector was established through the strong active listening skills of all group members: knowing everyone was listening and present enabled individuals to gain trust in one another, to gradually feel more confident taking risks, and to subsequently push deeper and respond to being pushed. The movement along each vector was generally linear with the exception of Week 4, which, as mentioned above, was complicated by the absence of one member, the delayed arrival of another member, and the presence of Miss Scarlet. We established a safe space for risk-taking in Weeks 2 and 3, and made significant progress in pushing during Week 5, which was sustained throughout the final two weeks of class. Much of the learning came from individuals having the opportunity to lead by example—serving as models for active listening, working through vulnerability, taking risks, summarizing, refocusing, probing, and pushing. Although it took us a while to get there, by the final weeks the group had reached a point at which the level of trust and respect allowed for the deeper exploration of differences and more constructive critique.

Active Listening

From the beginning, we demonstrated strong active listening skills. We believe that this related to the commitment of the individual group members to their own learning, and to the
respect each person had for the team. We also participated in an in-class active listening exercise early in the quarter, so we were able to start our work already attuned to how our affect is expressed through our body language and eye contact, how that might be interpreted by others, and the centrality of active listening to effective communication across differences. However, we also noted areas where active listening was absent and could be improved.

Throughout the seven weeks we observed several instances of positive active listening behaviors. Individual group members were described as having “great eye contact,” and using “great non-verbal cues,” even in the earliest meetings. The group as a whole was noted as “exhibiting great active listening skills,” and various members were noted as “flanking” the speaker by turning their bodies toward him or her. In particular, observers noted the positive non-verbal signs of active listening exhibited by Sabrina and Cha-Cha. This contributed to the creation of a “safe space” in the group setting, as speakers were given respectful attention.

We observed, however, that there were a number of instances during which group members were not fully present, which detracted from the learning process. In the first week, Colonel Mustard mentioned that there were different levels of attentiveness within the group. Specifically, he said that eye contact was sometimes lacking when someone would reveal a story. Because of this comment, Snoopy stepped forward to reveal that she has Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), thus explaining why she may have appeared to be distracted (scribbling, looking down, etc.) when she was actually fully engaged. The conversation helped us recognize that active listening could take multiple forms, and reassured everyone that all members of the group were, in fact, invested in being fully present.

During Week 6, Tweety indicated that active listening appeared challenging for Jumper. Specifically, she told Jumper that her eagerness to relate a speaker’s comments to her personal
experience did not always convey that she was listening, which sometimes disrupted the flow of
the conversation and prematurely ended the discussion. We concluded that this type of response
limited our ability to effectively listen to the speaker. In retrospect, responses in the form of
personal anecdotes could have been subconscious methods to avoid the more challenging work
of deeply exploring the meaning of our experiences. To some degree, we may have all colluded
in this work avoidance.

**Trust**

By establishing a safe space through active listening, we developed a level of trust which
further facilitated the learning process. A necessary component of all teamwork, trust is
especially critical for groups that aim to learn across differences. Each person brings to the group
certain hopes, fears, and expectations about how his/her ideas and experiences will be interpreted
and affirmed or rejected by the rest of the group. If, as time progresses, expectations are met by
the group members, trust builds and facilitates group exploration of difficult issues. Throughout
the seven weeks, our trust in one another and our group process increased in a linear manner. In
the initial “trust-building stage,” an adequate amount of trust had been developed for courageous
sharing. In retrospect, however, it seems that an insufficient level of trust had been cultivated for
group members to feel comfortable pushing and challenging one another to elicit deeper
understanding.

We established trust during Week 1 by emphasizing the confidentiality clause in the
Learning Contract. This was the only time we discussed confidentiality. We believe that the
lack of further discussion reflects the degree to which individuals felt that everyone was
honoring the Learning Contract, which helped increase trust through the fulfillment of
expectations. As we began to work on digging deeper into the issues that individuals brought to
the table, the increasing level of trust supported greater risk-taking and pushing behaviors. By the final session, a sufficient amount of trust had been established for members to engage in a very frank and deep review of our work.

Trust was also established during Week 1’s introduction and tokenism exercises. During the exercises, group members who shared were met with respectful attention and probed on their experiences in a gentle and curious manner. By not pushing people too quickly, group members gradually became comfortable with one another and felt that they could take risks in a safe and supportive environment.

Individual behaviors also contributed to the development of trust. Throughout the quarter Jumper seemed to always bring a positive, “glass half-full” take on both individual situations (except those concerning herself) as well as overall group progress. This positive attitude combined with the consistent empathy demonstrated by Sabrina and Cha-Cha assisted the group’s progress in developing trust and taking greater risks.

In review, we have mixed feelings about the gradual evolution of trust. On one hand, we feel as though the empathetic and affirming responses to early sharing truly facilitated the development of trust and later the confidence to push deeper. On the other hand, we acknowledge that it was not until week five that we were able to challenge one another in more meaningful ways. Clearly, by demonstrating trustworthiness through empathy instead of critique we missed opportunities to learn from each other’s differences along the way.

**Risk**

Webster's dictionary defines the term *risk* as "danger; peril; hazard" and "to expose to danger and possible loss".¹ In the context of group learning, we define and acknowledge risk as a willingness of individuals to move beyond a comfort zone in our group discussions to

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encourage and uncover deeper learning. It is a risk to divulge information about one’s experience that might contradict one’s public image; however, offering personal stories and beliefs that may prove uncomfortable, or revealing vulnerability may illicit deeper thought and learning. Similar to our analyses of listening and trust, we will now assess both the ways in which we seized opportunities to take risks and the ways in which we avoided them.

The first instance of significant risk-taking occurred during Week 2. We were aware of the importance of discussing sensitive, personal topics on diversity in order to advance the learning process and understood that risking threats to our identities was necessary for these discussions to occur. By “being present” in the meeting, we increased the probability that risk taking would be a constructive, not detrimental action for the individuals who chose to share. Such behavior enabled Tweety to find the courage to speak about the stigma of HIV in a way that was informative and meaningful to the group and not threatening to the individual.

A similar pattern followed in week three, during which Snoopy and Jumper volunteered to share their difficult conversations on topics relating to gender identity and mental health. Snoopy revealed a central aspect of her identity that made her feel vulnerable (Snoopy later reported to us that she felt physically sick from such risky sharing). We discovered that for Snoopy, there was fear that taking the risk could threaten her identity and perhaps her acceptance within the group. The initial foundation of trust, though, provided Snoopy with a sense that the benefits of intimate sharing outweighed the potential costs.

In Week 5, the group had an additional learning opportunity through Tweety’s willingness to share a personal story which left her vulnerable. We discovered that although the details of “what happened” created the issue, there were deeper levels of meaning that had to do with Tweety’s own feelings, identity, and past experiences with family. Tweety had expressed in
the first meeting that it took a long time for her to develop trust with people, so delving this deeply into a personal matter was particularly risky, even in this later stage of the process. There were other instances, however, when the group backed away from risk-taking behaviors and made choices to avoid certain topics that if explored, might have led to valuable learning for the group.

The vector chart (Appendix A) illustrates that trust continued to grow throughout the quarter but that risk taking sharply declined during the transitory stage before returning to previous levels during the push stage. We used Miss Scarlet’s assignment questions to guide a majority of our conversations. However, we avoided following this “script” when it posed a risk that we were not willing to take. For example, during week six, we were asked to give individual feedback, but for the first part of the session we skirted the issue for fear of offending people or creating an uncomfortable environment. Recognizing the missed opportunities to learn, though, Tweety took the risk of providing Jumper with difficult feedback on active listening. Her actions propelled us to complete the meeting with a more honest and direct dialogue on issues of class and privilege.

A second example of risk-aversion was seen through the assertion of confining roles that inhibited personal sharing. From the beginning, Cha-Cha took on a leadership role to help the team stay on track. Cha-Cha corralled us in helpful ways even when she was not the official facilitator. On the face of it, Cha-Cha appeared to be bravely stepping into a leadership role, but upon further inspection we realized that she had extensive experience in this area. Cha-Cha may have unconsciously reverted to a familiar, relatively risk–free role, that of leader and facilitator, which detracted from her opportunity to personally contribute to discussions on difference. It
was not until the last meeting that we discovered that Cha-Cha had not shared some salient aspects of her identity from which we could have learned.

Third, we did not use unfinished conversations from class to initiate group discussion regarding certain issues. For example, Tweety commented in class on the differences between female homosexuality and male homosexuality. Her remarks evoked strong emotional responses from members of the class. Given the contentious nature of the comment, it was clear that the manner in which the classroom discussion ended was not satisfying for Tweety. We could have used this experience to take a risk and investigate the implicit assumptions behind Tweety's thoughts and the reactor’s visceral response. The group did not take this risk, though, and the comment and the topic of homosexuality did not surface again.

Finally, in our summative session, we concluded that the group did not seize all opportunities to learn from our many individual differences. As can be seen on the graph in Appendix B, we never attacked issues concerning religion and ethnicity. Additionally, we avoided taking the risk of engaging in significant conversations concerning race, gender or ability despite individuals’ anecdotal sharing on these topics. Specifically, we missed opportunities to delve into gender issues surrounding the profile of our group: consisting of one male and five females. We also overlooked opportunities to explore race issues raised by Colonel Mustard during the tokenism exercise and by a bi-racial group member. Diversity as it relates to ability also represented a missed opportunity as the group neglected to probe into issues raised by a team member with a learning disability. It is clear that we made choices about which topics to address or confront head-on, and which we would let drop or avoid. We may have chosen to discuss topics that were safer than others for fear of evoking strong emotion or alienating certain group members.
Push

Beyond all else, learning to “push” proved to be our greatest challenge. Although we all agreed to engage in active inquiry at the beginning of our process, it was a true challenge to move past social politesse into asking hard questions about sensitive issues. As we implied earlier, the newness of our group was compounded by our “niceness” and our proclivity toward conflict avoidance. It was not until Week 5 that we were able to be supportive in the way that Miss Scarlet mentioned in class.

In Week 2, sensitive issues were brought forward and people asked probing questions, but not to the extent that raw, uninhibited emotion would emerge. In this session, Tweety gave an example of what she described as a shameful experience while interacting with a member of a stigmatized group (she had been afraid to shake an HIV-positive person’s hand). Tweety mentioned that she was 17 at the time, had recently been confronted with a loved one’s passing due to the disease, and had many questions about HIV and how it afflicted the gay community. Rather than probing into some of these issues, we quickly moved to “feel-good” comments that reinforced Tweety’s reaction to the situation. This was a prime opportunity to push her to think deeply about why she felt anxious, but it was passed over as the discussion shifted to more general observations and anecdotes about how people with AIDS are stigmatized. The norm of pushing and supporting through inquiry, as opposed to affirmation, had not yet been established.

During Week 3, after two challenging and emotionally raw role-plays, our meeting’s note-takers wrote the following observations: “At the conclusion of the dialogue, the observing members gave productive feedback. People were not afraid to push back on the participants and challenge them to reflect on what they said and felt...” The effective pushing was evident during both role-plays. Through one exchange, we pushed Jumper to recognize that the impact of her
word choice would not move her toward her goal. This was the first attempt on behalf of the listeners to push the speaker in a risky manner that led to deeper learning for our group.

Interestingly, the second role-play focused upon issues surrounding a homosexual partnership, and while the group was able to push the initiator of the difficult conversation, nobody inquired of others as to their feelings regarding the issue, and sexual orientation never came up again. Apparently, the group was still not prepared to push one another in such potentially provocative ways.

Another illustration of the group’s struggle with “pushing” stemmed from Miss Scarlet’s visit during Week 4. During this meeting Cha-Cha discussed her public image. She spoke openly about the tension she felt between wanting to be perceived as competent while at the same time wanting to be seen as funny and relatable. Cha-Cha was pushed by us to explore the source of her identity concerns. Miss Scarlet then questioned whether Cha-Cha was being defensive, at which point Cha-Cha became pinched. The conversation then turned to the overall group goals, dynamics and behaviors. After Miss Scarlet departed, the group did not continue to delve into Cha-Cha’s situation, but moved onto other topics. The group’s inclination was to act in a comforting manner by moving away from the conversation as opposed to pursuing it. The group later recognized this missed opportunity for learning.

As we stated in our introduction, we believe that our greatest pushing and consequent growth took place after Week 4 (which we have called the transitional stage). A paradigm shift took place as we reflected on Miss Scarlet’s feedback, retuned our norms and renewed our commitment to learning through the agreed upon group process. This change in group behavior was quite evident during Weeks 5 and 6. During the sixth session, we had a conversation about privilege and identity where Jumper took a courageous step in sharing feelings which were
complex and salient to her current experiences. In this meeting, all other individuals in the group helped “push” Jumper past expressing her feelings to exploring the experiences that led to her current opinions and perceptions. As opposed to previous instances of “pushing,” this was not a dyadic conversation between speaker and inquirer; instead, the entire group actively supported Jumper’s exploration.

Our group started out with a norm around relatively strict turn-taking and time-keeping which we eventually realized did not allow us to dig deep into any one issue or to focus on any one individual. As a result, opportunities for pushing were minimized. Clearly, it took time for the group to grasp and feel comfortable in replacing “support through reassurance” with “support through pushing.”

Conclusion

In retrospect, we are aware that there are instances where we did not take risks and push one another in a manner which would have facilitated learning through differences. We were held back to some degree when individuals were not engaged in active listening. We were held back regularly by our fear of making each other feel uncomfortable or threatening each other’s identities, especially during the trust-building and transitory stages. We do feel that we made gradual progress in all areas, though, and we began to probe each other more deeply, give more constructive feedback, and have more challenging dialogues in the final stage of the class. We feel that we concluded the class at a point where we could more confidently engage in difficult conversations and learn from each other’s differences.

Based on what we learned, we would incorporate the following principles and behaviors into future collaborative work:
• Establish a more comprehensive Learning Contract which includes group norms and goals. Group norms should allow flexibility in the discussion topics which would enable the group to utilize topics of difference that arise from group members or from class discussions.

• Emphasize the importance of having one of the weekly facilitators keep tabs on the depth of conversations and encourage people to dig beyond surface-level responses.

• Emphasize the importance of having one of the weekly facilitators keep the group focused and not allow the group to collude in work avoidance.

• Formalize a check-in process which addresses progress toward group goals at the beginning of every meeting.

• Engage in more role-playing. This is an effective tool for delving into uncomfortable topics and keeping the group on task.
Use of diversity to facilitate discussion