After the Conference is Over

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INTRODUCTION

I have a vivid memory from the first time I was a member of the Leicester conference on 'Leadership, Authority and Organization' sponsored by the Group Relations Training Programme of the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations. Sitting in my room at the end of a long day I had the sudden realization that 'I can't unlearn this', although at that point I could not articulate exactly what 'this' was. I realized however that my understanding of how organizations worked, and how I related to them and to the roles I held within them, was irrevocably changed. This realization was both exciting and frightening because it meant that my way of working and being in those organizations would also change, with unknowable consequences. Sixteen years on from that conference, with considerably more experience both of group relations work and of being in different roles in organizations, including senior management roles, I am aware of how that learning is integral to how I go about my daily business and take up my role in my work situation. And yet, trying to relate exactly how I have used the learning from my conference experiences feels like an elusive and complex task. Nevertheless it is important, when thinking about the development of group relations work, to try to describe how conference members might be able to take their learning back into their organizational worlds after the conference is over.

The membership of group relations conferences is varied, with members coming from business, social services, education, psychiatry and psychotherapy, the church, and the police, to name just some of the professional backgrounds. There is also a growing number of people who are independent or self-employed consultants. In their organizations members may have the roles of consultants, therapists, teachers, advisers, policy makers, or managers. For the purposes of this chapter I am particularly interested in looking at the experiences of those who are managers. My examples are taken from my experience

in social welfare agencies, though I believe that the processes and issues referred to have parallels in most organizations.

THE CONFERENCE AND AUTHORITY

Group relations conferences have now been taking place for approximately forty years, the first Leicester Conference having taken place in 1957. There is now a wide network of organizations, both in the UK and internationally, which sponsor and run conferences based on the 'Leicester Model'. Although there are some variations in design, they share the same theoretical foundations and focus, which is the application of psychoanalytic thought and an open systems approach to understanding organizations. Eric Miller, in his account of the history and development of group relations conferences, describes the Leicester Conference as having 'a specific focus on learning about the nature of authority and the problems encountered in its exercise' (Miller 1989: 8). It is this focus on the nature of authority that will be explored in this chapter.

What all the conferences share is an emphasis on the study of unconscious processes which take place at individual, group, and organizational levels, often also linking this to the societal context within which the conference is taking place. The methodology is to use the conference itself as a temporary educational institution for the object of study. Thus members are given the task of studying their own participation in creating, maintaining, and changing the institution's culture and of understanding their responsibility for what happens within it. Members need therefore to demonstrate a willingness to try to understand their own and others' behaviour at an unconscious as well as a conscious and concrete level. Thus the emotional life of the institution becomes available for examination in such a way that its integral contribution to the concrete behaviour of individuals and groups within their organizational roles can be directly and powerfully experienced. Staff in the conferences take on consultant roles within the various events, but also act as collective management. Management in this case means being responsible for creating the conditions in which members can engage with the task. Members are expected to use their own authority for deciding how to do this. The model of management which is experienced is one of managing boundary conditions rather than people and their behaviour.

The way in which staff members carry out their management responsibility is to create the boundary structures within which members can learn, if they choose to do so, and to stay within and work from the roles they have taken up. This requires staff to be alert to their own experiences within the different events. The feelings which are generated are not seen as a distraction from the task but, to the contrary, provide invaluable data for understanding the unconscious aspects of the organizational behaviour which is emerging. When the staff member is then able to offer an interpretation of this behaviour, as reveal-

ing the unconscious systemic process taking place, members have the opportunity to build on this in furthering their own understanding. This may itself effect a change in the process. In this way staff and membership work together to create a temporary educational institution, where understanding the process of this creation is itself the main task of the conference. A crucial aspect of management by the staff is therefore to maintain the boundaries of the events—that is, of time, territory, and task—and to stay within and work from the staff role. This role is likely to come under various forms of attack, which can be angry and overt, or more subtle through idealization or attempts to seduce into membership. The model of management which is experienced is one of reflection, interpretation, and containment.

Within this context, leadership is exercised when members speak to their here-and-now experience of being in the member role. Others can then link that to their own experiences, building the learning that becomes available. Doing this carries a risk of rejection or envious attack or, on the other hand, of a mindless followership who dependently cling on to an idea—from which they can then dissociate themselves if it does not work. The possibility is that members may use their authority to exercise both positive and authoritative leadership and followership.

In the beginning stages of conferences, the way of working can seem alien and the level of attention paid to unconscious processes can generate anxiety. The conference is seen as a risky place. This often leads to some members (on behalf of the whole membership) questioning the validity of the method, with consultants being experienced as manipulative or speaking a strange psychological language. There are frequently angry statements that this is not the 'real world'. At some point during the conference, however, some members will begin to connect their conference experience with their lives in their outside institutions, even though it might at this stage be difficult to articulate or make rational sense of the connection. There comes a realization that what they are experiencing within the conference are exactly the same processes that take place in the 'real world'.

Towards the end of the conference 'Application' events are held which allow members to think about the connections between their conference experience and their home institutions. It might be expected that being back on familiar territory would make these sessions easier and less anxiety provoking than the here-and-now events. However, they are often very difficult. Members will offer one another highly competent consultations on the work problems which have been raised, but without making direct links with their experiences within the conference. They can equally begin to reflect on and understand some of their conference experiences. However, the link with the outside seems to be felt but hard to articulate or examine. It is not unusual to find in the closing plenaries that members are expressing considerable anxiety about returning to their outside institutions. The conference, which had been so risky, is now seen as home, and the 'real world' to which members are returning is perceived as threatening

and unsafe. Within the final plenary there is often an element of idealization of the conference experience, which is evidence of a need to keep that experience as an idealized object so that it can be kept safe from attack. This might itself be an expression of the anxiety felt about the difficulty of holding on to the learning from the conference back in one's own organization and its fragility in an uncomprehending or hostile environment.

A manager who returns from a group relations conference is therefore returning from a culture where, unlike most work contexts, success in undertaking the task of the organization is seen to depend crucially on understanding the unconscious meaning of behaviour and the exercise of authority in the various roles one takes up.

THE ORGANIZATION AND AUTHORITY

Like most organizations, social welfare agencies in the UK have experienced enormous structural and cultural change over the past ten years. Indeed a process of continuous change within a turbulent environment is now the norm. One of the most profound changes has been the move towards a contractual relationship between purchasers and providers of services. This contract culture is all pervasive. It applies whether the provider is a voluntary charitable or private agency, whose services are purchased by local or central government, or the provider section of a local authority or health board in an internal market. The growing emphasis on value for money and performance measurement, along with the import of concepts like total quality management from business and manufacturing, have produced fundamental changes in the culture of such organizations. In addition, the reduction and tighter control of resources, both in the public and voluntary sectors, has resulted in a much less secure environment for employees. This in turn has required a shift in the ways that management and leadership are understood.

I have suggested elsewhere (Feuchtwang and Ramsay 1995) that social welfare organizations are unconsciously needed to offer total containment of the ambivalent and confused feelings held by wider society about the groups of people with whom they work. In other words, the guilt, rage, and impotence felt towards abused children (or groups such as the mentally ill, demented elderly, or offenders) are projected into the institutions which work with them. At an unconscious level, they are expected to keep these feelings within the organizational system, as securely as the people themselves were once kept in the total institutions which used to be located behind high walls and locked doors.

To be able to do this work on behalf of society, the organization then needs to construct its own internal defence system. We hypothesized that the constructs of the contract culture itself provide this. Thus a fantasy is created, which we describe as

the omnipotent deification of conscious activity where all there is is behaviour which can be changed to the required specifications. The contract or service level agreement which specifies objective outcomes and performance indicators linked to targets can provide the reassurance that something can be done. A quality assurance scheme linked to this provides the containing ritual in specifying activities which involve staff, and often service users, in maintaining a culture of measurable achievement. (Feuchtwang and Ramsay 1995: 15.)

The effect on managers in this kind of culture is an instrumental retreat into technique, where conscious motivation and intent are all. 'Irrational' behaviour or resistance becomes located in individuals who are then seen as problematic or in need of help themselves (possibly through a staff counselling scheme), or as technical problems with a mechanistic solution. This process is not unique to one type of organization. An example is the experience, common in organizations, where persistent and recurring difficulties in implementing a change are seen as being due to poor and inadequate communication.

However, often all attempts by management to improve communication through new ways of distributing information or structural changes, involving people in consultative forums, still fail to achieve commitment to the desired change. A more productive way forward might be for the manager to try to understand and form a hypothesis about what unconscious purpose might be being served by poor communication. This could be a difficult and painful process as it would necessitate owning one's own resistance and fears about change which might be contributing to the sabotage within the system. However, offering this interpretation in a way which acknowledges and legitimizes the anxiety being felt, without either being overwhelmed by it or surrendering one's own management role, could enable unconscious anxiety to be known and therefore addressed. It might then be possible to communicate the real need for change.

In the 1990s there has been an emphasis within organizations and management development training on leadership, as defined in terms of exceptional or charismatic individuals. The management role, on the other hand, is increasingly reduced to a collection of tools and techniques—an off-the-shelf solution for every eventuality. Krantz and Gilmore have written about the resulting split between leadership and management, where one of these aspects is idealized while the other is denigrated. They suggest that this split 'constitutes an attack on the critical function of leadership to link means to ends' and that this is itself a defensive process resulting from the overwhelming anxiety generated by the extent of the changes within both the internal and external environments of organizations (Krantz and Gilmore 1990: 189).

I perceive a similar process underlying how authority is understood within this kind of organizational culture, with the split between personal and organizational authority mirroring that between leadership and management. The concept of personal authority is subsumed into the idealization of the inspirational and motivational leader, whereas organizational authority is associated

with outdated notions of hierarchy and status. This devalues the strength and effectiveness that result when someone operates at a high level of personal competence, in a clear and confident understanding of their role within their work system. Larry Gould offers a useful examination of organizational and personal authority. He defines **organizational authority** as 'the authority that is delegated to roles, and therefore gives the role occupant the right to work', whereas **personal authority** is 'a central aspect of one's enduring sense of self no matter what role one may occupy. It is therefore defined as the "right to be"—that is, the right to exist fully and to be oneself in the role' (L. J. Gould 1993: 51).

If someone is confident in the exercise of his or her personal authority but is unclear about his or her role in relation to the total system, then that person will find it difficult to work in a fully competent way. This does not mean that the person will be totally ineffective, but he or she will be vulnerable as an individual and his or her ideas and actions can be marginalized. Ideas, decisions, and actions have to be connected to and in furtherance of the primary task of the organization, and it is the role that links the individual to that task and legitimizes his or her actions (Larry Gould's 'right to work').

If those in leadership or management roles are clear about their organizational authority but lack confidence in their personal authority, or exercise it inappropriately, they are unlikely to offer leadership in the organization, or may do so in the authoritarian manner which is often confused with real authority. This splitting of personal and organizational authority tends to be accompanied by an idealization of the first and denigration of the latter and so contributes to the split between leadership and management. Leadership becomes a characteristic of charismatic individuals and management a collection of pragmatic problem-solving tools and techniques.

The defensive wish to see processes only in their concrete manifestations, which can be manipulated and changed, is also demonstrated in an increasing trend in organizations to try to improve team functioning by using one of the many exercises which help to identify personality types or styles of working (for example, the Myers–Briggs Inventory, the Belbin Team Roles Inventory, or the Margerison–McCann Team Management System). Although these may be useful in looking at the range of skills and preferences available in a team and in identifying gaps, they rarely offer insight into the unconscious processes which are hindering the effective performance of the task. 'Differences in style' can provide an explanation congruent with the prevalent cognitive culture, in the hope that difficulties can be dealt with through some kind of behaviour modification. Painful and threatening feelings of dependency, rivalry, and envy can continue to be denied and remain unavailable for examination and reflection. The exercise of both the personal and organizational role authority of team members is undermined as the complexity of managing the boundary between one's internal world and one's work role is unrecognized.

FROM CONFERENCE TO ORGANIZATION: MAKING THE LINK

Group relations conferences offer the opportunity both to experience and to reflect on our unconscious anxieties and how these influence our behaviour. However, it is possible for members to move beyond just a better understanding of group and institutional behaviour, valuable though this may be, to developing their competence in taking responsibility for their individual part in that process and using it to enhance the performance of the task. At its most useful the learning becomes integrated into how one perceives, understands, and acts at both a personal and a systemic level.

The risk when returning from a conference to one's own organization, especially as a manager, is that a culture of measurable performance, predetermined outcomes, and management by technique will not provide the necessary containing environment for the continuation of the individual's learning and its subsequent import into the system within which he or she works. On one level the sharing of learning in an organization is currently a widely promoted concept (see Senge 1990). This could be seen as indicative of a willingness in organizations to welcome new ideas, thoughts, and behaviour. However, Long and Newton have taken a psychoanalytic perspective of learning in organizations which sees Senge's ideas as located within that same concrete and rational world to which I have referred above. They describe Senge's idea of a 'learning organization' as one which takes 'a cognitive approach which denies the strength of the unconscious hatred of learning. It is as if we could change any situation if only we could see the broader picture like a map. It is made without exploring or even acknowledging the feelings people have about their dependence before creating new inter-dependencies... Managing uncertainty becomes a question of systems control' (Long and Newton 1995: 7). There is a wish to learn in a way which reframes or manipulates meaning without experiencing one's own dependency, envy, aggression, and so on, and having to take responsibility for how one deals with such feelings.

In these circumstances the risk is that the learning brought back from a group relations conference is used defensively, or becomes locked in the conference experience. In this case, conference learning becomes just another (but still useful) tool to add to the management tool kit, thereby colluding with the split between management and leadership. One might gain a clearer perception and understanding of the unconscious processes being enacted but then use this in a defensive way or in an attempt to protect one's own position, rather than in pursuit of the task. Alternatively, the memory of a similar process from a conference might simply be transferred into the workplace and interpreted in the same way. This might offer an alternative and possibly helpful view but it will remain at a theoretical level and therefore encourage a technical response. By contrast, an interpretation that comes out of one's own direct here-and-now experience is more likely to authentically address the uniquely immediate

process taking place in the system. In this case, the learning from a conference has become integrated into how one understands what is happening at both an instrumental and emotional level.

One fundamental aspect of the conference that managers might bring back into their own workplaces therefore is that of paying constant attention to one's here-and-now experience and using that to contribute to building an understanding of the state of the system one is in and its relationship across the boundary with its external environment. The importance of conceptualizing management as a role on the boundary of a system might seem obvious. However, when management has become a problem-solving and performance-measurement function, the meaning of being a manager on the boundary of a particular system at a particular time remains unexplored. How one is being used in one's role is a significant piece of information which could give important clues about the unconscious dynamics within the organization and between the organization and its external environment. Often, this dynamic process is predominantly about avoiding anxiety by setting up various defence mechanisms. Offering an interpretation of one's experience in the management role can help identify these processes, bring them into conscious awareness, and allow them to be addressed. Once people can acknowledge the anxiety, they can then begin to understand it and find ways of managing it, rather than deny it. Thus, taking a consultative stance from within the management role can enable a shift to take place which could not have been achieved through a technical approach which only addressed the concrete manifestation of an unconscious process. Sharing one's emotional experience is risky, and to do so in a reflective way is to exercise one's personal authority. Moving this from the realm of the personal to the systemic can link it to the authority of the role in a way which furthers the task.

During a conference, members are likely to gain insight into their own personal unconscious anxieties and motivations and how these influence their behaviour, but this is for private reflection. The focus is not on the individual's personality, and consultants will only interpret individual behaviour within the context of how it might be representing an aspect of the unconscious emotional life of the group. It is therefore not possible to explain away difficulties in group functioning by blaming them on personality clashes or incompatibility. It might well be that two members have very different personalities, or a different approach to forming relationships, or opposing views on controversial issues. The interventions of the consultant will attempt to look beyond (or below) this, in order to understand how the conflict or clash is serving the unconscious need of the group.

This is in contrast to the trend referred to above to improve team functioning by identifying personality types and styles of working. Self-knowledge is not the same as taking responsibility for one's own personal psyche which includes, of course, how one is contributing to the group process through managing one's internal world. This is an essential element in the exercise of authority. Self-

awareness and personal insight are inextricably linked to being confident in our personal authority; self-awareness in our role underpins our competence in exercising our organizational authority.

CASE EXAMPLES

The following two case examples are taken from my own experience as manager and as consultant. The first shows how reaching an understanding of the unconscious meaning of an organizational issue enabled significant movement to take place in a process that appeared to be stuck. The second demonstrates how a focus on personality variables and styles of working became a defence against confronting real differences and rivalries in a team.

Example 1: Forms, lists, and tick boxes

In my role as a regional manager within a large childcare organization, I was delighted when there was a significant decentralization of corporate services from national headquarters to the regions. This was accompanied by a downward shift of authority with much wider decision-making responsibility being passed from national to regional managers. Initially, this seemed to be accomplished relatively easily and was a change welcomed by most people in all parts of the organization. After a while, however, my colleagues and I began to notice the increasing number of requests for information which were landing on our desks from headquarters. The purpose of these requests was never very clear and soon they began to expand into checklists and monitoring forms. This was accompanied by a growth in the number of areas where formal policies were requested. For a while, I dealt with this growth in bureaucracy either by providing the information in a perfunctory and minimalist way, accompanied by much complaining, or by ignoring the requests. The level of irritation in the regional management team grew and we started to make angry protests to the national management team. There was an acknowledgement that some of the requests were unreasonable and we were assured that the demands would be reduced. They were for a short while but then built up again.

One day a very large and, to my mind, unnecessary monitoring form arrived at a time when I was particularly busy. My first reaction was to tear it up in irritation. However, I suddenly found myself thinking about the number of phone calls I had made that week to a team which was currently working with a family where there were serious concerns about possible child abuse. I had confidence in the competence of the staff and knew the team manager would contact me if she needed to consult me, and yet I had still not successfully resisted making all those phone calls. Providing services to vulnerable and troublesome children is

by its nature a risky business. Most of the time I was not consciously over-anxious, believing that we had highly competent staff, good supervision systems, and helpful procedures. I was not preoccupied with the knowledge that, despite all this, tragedies can still happen; but at that moment I was suddenly feeling almost overwhelming anxiety and my mind became full of all the things that could possibly go wrong, resulting in disaster.

Eventually these feelings abated and the nagging anxiety, which had been building up for a while and of which I had not been conscious until that point, lessened considerably. I realized that it was the receipt of the 'trivial' and 'unnecessary' monitoring form that had brought these feelings to my conscious awareness. I had successfully projected on to headquarters my deep anxiety about our work, and with it the fantasy that, if I knew more, there was less chance of anything going wrong. I decided that, rather than tear up the form or begrudgingly fill it in, I would describe my experience to the person from whom it had originated. I phoned him and told him about my feelings and consequent reflection when I had received the form. I suggested that, being even further removed from direct service delivery than we were in the regional management team, he must experience anxiety about what could go wrong which must sometimes be very difficult to deal with, to the extent that most of the time it was unconscious. I asked him whether he thought the bureaucratic demands were part of a fantasy that it was possible to know enough to ensure that tragedies did not happen. Clearly the changes that had been made in the devolving of authority might have increased the level of anxiety, as it involved a lessening of control. His response was thoughtful and he acknowledged that he was finding it difficult to adapt to the changes, even though he knew they were necessary and had been active in making them happen. The conversation felt helpful to us both. (We enjoyed a good working relationship and I knew that my comments would not be dismissed out of hand.)

At the next regional management team meeting I asked if we could talk about the risk and danger of some of the work that we did, and how we found the balance between supporting project staff and interfering in their work. How did we contain the anxiety generated without its becoming overwhelming? We realized that we had never overtly talked about that before and it felt tremendously liberating.

The issue of how to manage the anxiety which was inherent in the work that we do became the topic of extensive discussion within the region, between the management team and the different services and between the service teams themselves. It was an energizing process that helped us to acknowledge the excellent work that was done while accepting that the possibility of disaster would always be there. We also made several changes in our reporting and monitoring procedures which resulted in less bureaucracy at the regional level. (In the mirroring process that pervades organizations, our service managers experienced the same irritating bureaucratic demands from us that we complained about from headquarters.) It became possible to have a dialogue with

the national managers about the demands made on us and this began to involve the other regions. The bureaucracy did not disappear (there will always be anxiety in the system) but it certainly dramatically reduced, and concerns and worries could be more openly addressed, with beneficial effects on the quality of work done with children and families.

We had all been caught in an unconscious defensive system and only by recognizing this and consciously addressing the anxiety could anything change. Being reflective about experience and sharing a possible interpretation enabled a significant change in a system.

Example 2: It's all a matter of style

I was acting as a consultant to a senior management team in a local authority social work department whose responsibility was for the residential units and children and family teams within the authority. I knew from other work I had done in the department that there was increasing unhappiness among the heads of the units and teams about the overall management of childcare services. The unit heads felt that the ways in which they were managed varied greatly between the different members of the management team. Some managers were experienced at enabling and allowing the unit and team heads the authority to manage their teams, others were felt to be intrusive and interfering, leaving the unit heads unsure of what authority they had. There was a general unspecified sense of dissatisfaction with the director for not being clear enough about how she felt the section should be managed.

The management team had a clear vision for how they wanted the section to develop and had demonstrable skills in strategic planning. I was struck by the absence of conflict in their meetings. Disagreements were aired in a very rational and adult manner with sensible decisions being reached. The meetings were very task-centred, competently chaired by the director, but there was a sense of flatness about them. I found myself with little to say in the first few meetings and was aware of only having quite bland feelings. After one meeting I found myself thinking, 'It's as if there was no unconscious life in this group'. At the same time, I was aware of the dissatisfaction among the unit and team heads.

In a meeting with the director prior to starting the consultancy, she told me that the team had done quite a lot of work identifying their different styles of working and the roles they tended to take on in the team. They had spent an away-day doing the Myers–Briggs Inventory and had found this very helpful in understanding the differences that sometimes emerged between team members. They were also able to look at the best combinations of people to work together on different kinds of tasks. At another away-day a year later, they had worked with the Margerison–McCann Team Management System which had also helped them to look at the different skills which lay in the team and to

identify their particularly strong and weak areas. Both of these days had clearly been helpful and positive experiences and had enabled them to think quite creatively about how they worked together and how they allocated tasks. However, I began to realize that, having identified and talked abut their different styles, they had now accepted 'style' as the reason for all differences between them. Also, as a 'style' was largely seen as a personal attribute, it became impossible to criticize or comment on how someone carried out their management role as this could be seen as a personal attack. Thus, all styles were seen as equally valid and appropriate, and differences remained at a conscious cognitive level. In this way unconscious feelings such as dependency, rivalry, and envy remained unavailable and therefore unexplored.

At the next meeting, there was a discussion about a difficulty in one of the units. Some of the unit staff had complained about the unit head, saying he was not demonstrating clear leadership, which left them unsure of what was expected of them. Consequently there was no consistency in the way the children who were resident in the unit experienced the expectations of staff. The member of the management team responsible for the unit described how he intended to respond to this and a fairly low-key discussion ensued. The director was silent during this discussion and I began to feel a desperate wish for her to speak.

The discussion was beginning to feel strained, repetitive, and anxious and I was now feeling angry with the director for her silence. I suggested to the group that the anxiety which had crept into the discussion might be because they recognized that the lack of consistency experienced by the children in the unit was mirroring the lack of consistency experienced by the unit and team heads from them as a management team. I said that there might be anger with the director for not telling them which particular management style she thought was best, in the same way that the unit staff were angry with their head. One of the team members agreed with this and said he sometimes felt uneasy about the differences within the team but felt that how colleagues managed their units was not really his business. If the director was happy with it then that was okay. The director became angry at this and said that she felt the team had a collective responsibility for managing the services but that they never expressed disagreement between themselves about how the units should be managed. I suggested that if they moved away from thinking about 'style' and looked at how they saw the management task, differences might not be so threatening, as they became less personal. They were then able to begin to talk about their relationships with their unit heads and how they viewed their respective roles.

In future meetings, competition and rivalries began to emerge and, although this caused anxiety, it was manageable. This, in turn, led to emerging differentiation in their relationships with one another, including with the director. These became available for examination and therefore less frightening than they had been as unconscious fantasies. In a strangely topsy-turvy way, the identification of differing styles of working had allowed the existence of an

unconscious myth that there were no differences between them. All styles were equal and therefore they were all the same. Differences in experience and competence could not be acknowledged and therefore a major area of possible learning was closed off.

Shortly after this, I was no longer able to offer consultancy to this group. This occurred at a time when they were beginning to be able to look at their relationships with their unit heads and to involve the unit heads in this process.

In both of these examples, the real anxieties underlying behaviour were being denied and a great deal of energy was going into maintaining the defensive system allowing this denial. When the real anxieties were identified and the defensive process understood, it was possible to return to authentic engagement with the primary task and for managers to regain their authority and competence.

CONCLUSION

The shape and structure of organizations is changing. Downsizing and delayering may have been the euphemisms of the 1980s and 1990s to deny the sometimes devastating effect of the changes, but there is now hardly an organization in existence which is untouched by them. Rapid advances in information technology have accelerated the pace of our work while changing the framework of social relations in the workplace. Hierarchies still exist, but more fluid networks across more permeable boundaries are as significant as vertical lines of accountability. The anxiety generated by these changes can threaten to overwhelm us, and the defences we then create, while offering an illusion of control, can in themselves undermine our competence, as energy is diverted into the maintenance of the defensive system, rather than engagement with the task of the organization.

Within this context a skilled manager is one who enables others to be confident in the exercise of both their personal and organizational authority. This requires a well-developed capacity to tolerate anxiety, a constant alertness to one's own feelings, reactions, and experiences and to those of others, and the ability to think systemically. Where there are no longer rigid or fixed hierarchies and vertical structures, a reflective, interpretative, and containing management is essential. Leadership can then emerge from the integration of both personal and organizational authority and survive the envious attacks which it will inevitable attract.

Group relations conferences offer important opportunities to learn about these processes and develop these skills. However, their real value comes after the conference is over and members continue the learning back in their organizational roles.